

Exploring the Role of Moral Leadership in Ensuring Educational Equity among Student Teachers



Rubab Ali	MS Scholar, Department of Education, GC Women University Sialkot, rubabshahid187@gmail.com
Zulaikha	MS Scholar, Department of Education, GC Women University Sialkot, zoyamehar464@gmail.com
Dr. Muhammad Jamil	Lecturer, Department of Education, GC Women University Sialkot, m.jamil@gcwus.edu.pk

Abstract: *The study explored the conceptions of moral leadership among student-teachers and the way these conceptions influence the perceptions of the student-teachers about educational equity in a Pakistani state university in Sialkot. A qualitative phenomenographic design was employed. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 BS Education student-teachers and the analysis was done by using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. The analysis produced one major theme with three sub-themes. Initially, respondents conceptualized moral leadership as ethical and value-based leadership based on accountability, integrity, empathy, courage, and role modelling. Second, they considered moral leadership as a way of achieving educational equity based on fair policies, inclusion, anti-favouritism, and help for disadvantaged learners. Third, the respondents separated equity and equality, as they considered fairness to be the support of the need, not the support of all learners. Fourth, they found structural and contextual impediments, such as crowded classrooms, resource scarcity, cultural bigotry, political pressure, and gaps in professional education, which inhibit moral leadership and equity practices. The research finds that student-teachers have emerging but significant ideas of moral leadership as an instrument for enhancing equity and inclusion. Nevertheless, such insights need to be reinforced by the institutions in teacher education programs. The results indicate that moral education, social justice, inclusive education, and equity-based leadership education should be strategically incorporated into teacher education to equip future teachers with morally responsive and equitable teaching.*

Keywords: Moral Leadership, Educational Equity, Phenomenography, Qualitative Research.

Introduction

1. INTRODUCTION

Equity in education is a leading concept in the formation of justice in education that is fair, inclusive, and social. It is a concept that all students, irrespective of their background, socioeconomic status, identity, disability, or personal circumstances, must be able to access the opportunities,

resources, and support to achieve academic and social success (Lemieux, 2022). Educational equity has been a growing issue over recent years due to the ongoing presence of inequality in educational institutions, due to the lack of equality between various demographic groups. With the increasing diversity of societies, teachers and educational leaders will be required not only to be aware of these inequalities but

also to deal with them using ethical choices, inclusive practices, and commitment on a policy level (Mehmood et al., 2024).

Social justice is one of the aspects of educational equity. In an educational context, it involves equitable allocation of resources, opportunities, and support to diminish disadvantages that are faced by underrepresented and marginalised groups (Arar & Saiti, 2022). It does not suggest that the issue of equity is merely about treating the students equally. Instead, it is about acknowledging that there are students who need extra assistance due to the higher obstacles to learning and involvement. The students with lower socioeconomic backgrounds, racial or cultural minorities, and students with disabilities might require special academic, emotional, and institutional assistance to make sure that they can fully engage in the educational process (Hadi & Hill, 2024).

The increasing focus on equity points to the necessity of inclusive educational cultures. As educational leaders, it is their task to establish school conditions in which every learner can feel respected, acknowledged, and valued (Saddique & Raja, 2023). These involve the diversification of the content of the curriculum, the challenge of bias in the practice of teaching, and the elimination of policies that reproduce unequal access to resources and opportunities. Equity is aimed at equalizing the educational level so that students would not be discriminated against due to their initial position or social status (Saddique & Raja, 2023). Nevertheless, equity is not an easy task to attain in systems that are influenced by profound socioeconomic, cultural, and structural disparities.

Inequality in education can manifest itself in the form of inequitable access to quality education, learning resources, learning facilities, support services, and academic achievement (King et al., 2025). Such disparities are not just associated with the capability of a particular student but are highly affected by systemic issues like poverty, poorly funded schools, cultural prejudice, and unequal distribution of resources. Low-income students might also

study in schools with less technology and fewer extracurricular activities and have fewer specialist teachers (Mehmood et al., 2024). These circumstances may establish a disadvantageous cycle that limits the academic performance and personal growth of students.

Moral leadership thus plays a role in the issue of educational equity. It aims at ethical principles of fairness, justice, care, responsibility, and respect. Moral leaders in schools are supposed to notice inequalities and intervene to lessen the systemic obstacles that do not allow marginalised students to succeed (Mahmoud, 2023). This kind of leadership transcends administrative management since it involves leaders making decisions that are not only effective but also morally acceptable. Moral leadership advocates those policies and practices that address the needs of all learners, especially the most disadvantaged (Goehring-Juhasz, 2020).

Educational equity is influenced by cultural and structural barriers, too. Discrimination, stereotypes, prejudice, and low expectations can influence the way students are treated by teachers and school staff (Simmie & Sheehan, 2026). Unfair discipline, lack of empowerment, or low academic expectations can be imposed on marginalised students, adversely impacting their learning experiences (Arar & Saiti, 2022). The leaders in the education sector should thus foster respect, inclusion, and diversity and oppose the practices that reproduce inequality (Lemieux, 2022).

The student teachers can influence their future classroom practices due to their knowledge of moral leadership. When moral leadership is perceived by student teachers as related to equity, fairness, and care, they might be better equipped to assist in inclusive learning environments (Simmie & Sheehan, 2026). The paper thus examines conceptions of moral leadership among student teachers and how they

understand moral leadership in the context of equity in education. It is relevant to its focus since future teachers will be directly involved in establishing classrooms that would provide meaningful experiences to all students to learn, participate, and succeed.

Research Objective

1. To explore how student teachers understand the role of moral leadership in promoting educational equity.

Research Question

1. How do student teachers understand the role of moral leadership in promoting educational leadership?

Literature Review

Educational settings have a high level of moral leadership significance, as this leadership influences the school climate, teacher conduct, student experiences, and school culture. When leaders are fair, honest, and considerate, they contribute to the establishment of a positive environment in which ethical standards are upheld, and students and teachers feel appreciated (Brown & Treviño, 2006). This kind of leadership can boost trust, motivation, satisfaction, and commitment of the followers with the overall importance of leadership in an educational setting (Arif et al., 2023; Ghaffar et al., 2025; Jamil et al., 2024; Resick et al., 2006).

Empirical studies also relate moral leadership to positive organizational results, such as heightened effort and satisfaction with leadership (Toor & Ofori, 2009). Moral leadership is related to honesty, justice, fairness, respect, and the inclusion of all in decision-making in schools. It urges school leaders and teachers to think not only about academic success but also about the emotional, social, and moral welfare of students (Hadi & Hill, 2024).

Moral leadership studies in education have grown considerably in the last several decades as a trend toward values-oriented leadership methods, which accord fairness, justice, and human dignity

paramount importance. It is a well-known theoretical truth that moral leadership is essential to create positive school climates and enhance the performance of teachers and to spread equitable practices (Ahmad et al., 2023). The researcher discovered that moral leadership promotes the quality of the institution by increasing fairness, transparency, and respect at all levels of education, and research in Pakistan also found that moral leadership increases teacher motivation and helps to establish a positive school climate (Mehmood et al., 2024).

However, despite the awareness of the Pakistani research on the significance of moral leadership, the current literature focuses on teacher motivation, school climate, or administrative practices in general (Saddique & Raja, 2023). These results underline that moral leadership is not an incredible dream but a realistic need of schools that aim at providing fair learning processes. Reflecting on their personal experience and thinking about the way they would like to help create a more equitable and inclusive classroom, the student-teachers have a better idea of the complexities of moral leadership and the skills they would need to gain in order to resolve inequities in their future classroom. Furthermore, the reflective practices provide the chance to pursue professional growth continuously, as the educators can keep expanding their knowledge on moral leadership during their careers (Mahmoud, 2023).

Another revealed that kindergarten educators in Jordan who practised moral leadership that manifested itself through empathy, fairness, and ethical behaviour made a considerable difference in the quality of their teaching and classroom relationships. In China, there is also evidence of the increasing appeal of moral leadership in early childhood and primary schools (Mahmoud, 2023). Moral leadership index of kindergarten directors based on Delphi methodology and discovered four key dimensions: humanitarian care, fairness and justice, professional morality, and moral quality. These dimensions proved to be

crucial elements of successful school leadership, as they provided an impactful framework through which the translation of moral principles into school leadership practice is possible. Their work further contends that moral leadership has become integral in modern educational systems, especially as schools manage the demands of society at large about accountability, equity, and ethical conduct (Lemieux, 2022).

The cultural norms of collectivism, benevolence, and moral self-cultivation are of group importance in the moral leadership frameworks of China, which translate into multidimensional systems that employ both the trait and behavioural elements. Meanwhile, ethical decision-making, democratic participation, and social justice are predicted in Western models, especially in the United States and Europe (Simmie & Sheehan, 2026). This difference indicates that moral leadership is universal in nature as well as contextual, dependent on cultural, institutional, and societal forces.

Moral leadership and educational equity are two terms that are closely related since moral leaders are supposed to make decisions that are guided by justice, care, dignity, and respect. It is argued in the literature that school leaders who employ ethical decision-making have a better chance of introducing inclusive policies, confronting systemic injustice, and building school cultures where every student feels supported (King et al., 2025). Moral leadership promotes equity as it remedies favouritism, discrimination, prejudice, unequal allocation of resources, and exclusionary schooling. It also helps teachers embrace just classroom practices and address the various needs of learners. Teachers and school leaders modelling ethical behaviour can enhance the likelihood of students feeling that school is a safe and conducive place (Lemieux, 2022).

Disincentives to moral leadership and educational equity are also noted in the literature. Those are institutional resistance, cultural prejudice, insufficient professional training, political influence, shortage of resources, overcrowded classes, and

insufficient support systems (Simmie & Sheehan, 2026). The hierarchical systems and traditional practices in most schools might not allow the leaders and teachers to question unjust structures. Accountability pressures, standardized testing, and performance-based policies might also diminish the focus on moral and social development (Lemieux, 2022). Even morally dedicated leaders in underfunded schools might not be able to offer equal opportunities, as they have limited resources, special staff, technology, and extracurricular activities (Mahmoud, 2023). This demonstrates that the change of moral leadership should be enabled by institutional and policy-level change.

Research Methodology

The study used a qualitative approach to explore student-teachers' views about moral leadership and educational equity. This method was suitable because the study focused on meanings, perceptions, and lived experiences rather than numerical data. A qualitative interpretive phenomenographic design (Umanilo, 2019) was used to examine how student-teachers understand moral leadership, fairness, inclusion, and equity. The population included BS Education student-teachers from a public university in Sialkot, Pakistan. The sample consisted of 10 student-teachers. Purposive sampling was used (Patton, 2015) to select participants who could provide relevant views on moral leadership and educational equity. Semi-structured interviews were used. The interview protocol was developed by the researchers based on previous literature and the study's purpose. The researchers conducted 30-minute interviews with 10 participants, recorded them with consent, transcribed the data, and analyzed the responses. Reflexive Thematic Analysis was used for data analysis. The researchers followed Braun and Clarke's six phases and identified four major themes. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, peer debriefing, expert review, audio recordings, verbatim transcription, and detailed contextual description. Written consent, voluntary

participation, confidentiality, anonymity, secure data storage, and ethical approval were ensured.

Findings

Based on the objective, the following theme was extracted from the data.

Theme: Moral Leadership as a Pathway to Educational Equity

The theme is related to the research objective, which aimed at exploring how student teachers perceive the role of moral leadership in facilitating educational equity. The respondents had a strong and consistent association between moral leadership and fairness, inclusion, and equal opportunity. They defined the connections between moral leadership and equity in three ways: developing equitable institutional policies, actively combating favoritism, and providing tangible support for needy learners. These reactions show that the student teachers regarded moral leadership as a concept rather than an abstract moral virtue, but as a collection of practices that could be observed and promoted equity.

Sub-theme 1: Moral Leadership Creates Fair and Inclusive Policies

Participants described that moral leaders convert ethical values into institutional policies and classroom practices. They claimed that in the absence of moral leadership, equity is a mere rhetorical commitment and not a reality. Participant No. 2 narrated it in the following words:

In any good school or foundation, you can say, without moral leadership, equality is just a name. It's just a word. It's just a poster. Nothing more than that. But if a leader is more integral or morally empathetic with the people, and he can understand his people, and he's very courageous to take the major decisions about the teachers and students — you need a leader who feels the moral burden of the institute and of the students

or teachers to ensure that the poorest or weakest students in the school should not be left behind.

Participant No. 3 defined moral leadership as the institutional source of fairness:

According to the author, moral leadership plays a crucial role in ensuring equity in education by promoting policies and practices that are fair and inclusive. The example is a school leader who makes sure that all students have equal access to resources and motivates teachers to use inclusive approaches to teaching. It fosters a culture of fairness and respect in the institution.

Participant No. 10 connected moral leadership to the curriculum design and significance of contextually relevant and equitable educational structures:

Moral leadership is significant in this sense: in order to have a fair educational context, we discussed the educational systems and curriculum designers. Unless we learn about moral leadership, or we do not pay attention to it, how do we know that we can claim that our educational environment can be regarded as a fair place?

Sub-theme 2: Resisting Favoritism as a Moral Leadership Practice

Participants found favouritism as one of the most apparent and harmful types of inequity. They claimed that ethical leaders should be on the frontline to oppose favouritism when it comes to academic success, family background, sex, and wealth. Participant No. 1 related the concepts of justice and fairness to the removal of favoritism at all levels of the institution in the following statement:

In case a school leader is a strong believer in justice and equality, then he would ensure that the same is applied at the school level. For example, the teachers will be graded fairly. There will be no favoritism. And when it comes to domestic staff, every teacher will be seen as a human being, as an individual. There would be no preferences based on looks, money, or financial background.

Participant No. 2 gave a rich classroom example of differential treatment based on seating position:

Yes, if a teacher is teaching a certain subject and he is only making eye contact with the first benchers, the people sitting in the last bench will feel left out. They will feel excluded. This creates a grudge in the students. Another one, if a student is making any excuse for not being able to perform well on a test, the teacher listens to him and treats him with leniency. In comparison, if a last bencher is coming and he is giving excuses, the teacher doesn't listen to him. So, it creates a sense of competition and the feeling of not being seen.

Participant No. 8 described a school-based example where seating arrangements reproduced inequity:

Inequity, for example, when we were on observation in the government school, I observed that the students who sit in the front and the students who sit in the back — teachers have created a lot of differences between those who sit in the front and back. The students who sit in the front feel that the child is always likeable, and the students who sit in the back feel that the child is not likeable. If the teacher

plays a positive role and circulates the students, then it will play the role of equity.

Sub-theme 3: Supporting Disadvantaged Learners through Moral Leadership

Participants provided concrete examples of moral leadership in action through direct support for economically and academically disadvantaged students. These examples ranged from individual teacher initiatives to institution-wide programs. Participant No. 2 shared an account of a principal who created a food-sharing program for students who could not afford lunch:

If you talk about my principal, my school principal, who found out certain students were skipping their lunch boxes because they couldn't afford them for a few reasons, maybe some family reasons — instead of ignoring it, our principal started a food program. So, students were sharing their lunch. Those who were skipping their lunch were also getting lunch through the sharing activity. So, students were not feeling embarrassed either. Students were also learning and sharing.

Participant No. 8 described a teacher who provided scholarships and personal financial guidance to needy students:

There was a teacher in our semester who used to see that the children who were very dull and weak — she used to focus more on them and encourage them. Such children who were needy were basically in charge of scholarships. She used to conduct interviews for such scholarships. She used to support those children financially — to facilitate them properly, help them with the required documents. The best thing is that she was not only supporting the children in

the educational context, but she was also solving their issues if they had any other needs or financial problems.

Participant No. 7 framed scholarships and material support as a direct moral leadership responsibility:

Many needy students can dream of studying in a good school, but can't afford the fee, as well as the expenses.

All parents want their children to study in a good school. But they cannot afford to buy books, to pay fees, or to buy uniforms for their children. So they should arrange scholarships for those needy children who have financial issues to face. They should provide books and uniforms for the needy children. A moral leader should promote these things.

Conclusion

This study has explored the conceptualizations of student-teachers about moral leadership and how it is relevant to the issue of educational equity. The results revealed that student-teachers perceived moral leadership as ethical and value-based guidance, based on integrity, accountability, empathy, fairness, courage, and role modelling. They perceived moral leaders as people who make responsible choices, treat students respectfully, and behave in accordance with moral values even when faced with difficult circumstances. The study has also established that student-teachers had a strong relationship between moral leadership and educational equity. They thought that ethical leadership may foster fairness, such as curbing favouritism, aiding poor learners, fostering an integrative classroom, and making sure that students are given aid as per their personal requirements. The participants separated equity and equality by stating that equal treatment is not necessarily treating all the students equally; instead, equity or fair treatment is a differentiated treatment of students

depending on the circumstances of the students. However, the research also revealed that there were various impediments to moral leadership and equity practice, which include overcrowded classrooms, insufficient resources, cultural bias, political interference, and ineffective training of professionals. These issues indicate that moral leadership must not be a matter of individual ethical dedication alone, but institutionalized and enhanced teacher-education training.

Discussion

The participants had a strong and consistent association between moral leadership and educational equity. They understood equity not as an ideal, but as a series of observable, everyday leadership behaviors that comprise equitable policy-making, redistribution of resources, and the removal of favouritism. Moral leadership can profoundly influence teacher work culture and provide institutional conditions that support inclusive practice (King et al., 2025). It is especially noteworthy that the participants cited favoritism as the main problem that undermines the educational equity at their respective schools. Other studies on ethical leadership within Pakistani secondary schools also identified favouritism, unfairness in the distribution of resources, and unfair treatment of students as key ethical issues in school leadership. Mehmood et al. (2024) also discovered that ethical head teacher leadership enhances teacher motivation and positive school climate - a finding that substantiates the perception of the student teachers that moral leadership leads to a better educational climate by all parties involved. This connection was further cemented by UNESCO (2024), which observes that good educational leadership has to be built on equity and quality learning as its core pillars, especially in socioeconomically diverse settings.

The practical examples provided by participants, such as a principal arranging food sharing for hungry students and a teacher helping needy learners to get scholarships, are the operationalization of

moral leadership as described by King et al. (2025) as an ethically responsive type of leadership, responding to systemic inequalities by engaging in direct and community-based practices. These are aligned to international research studies that show that ethical leaders focus on the resources of disadvantaged students, apply culturally responsive instruction, and develop community partnerships to meet the comprehensive needs of students.

Recommendations

- Moral leadership should be a subject of teacher education programs to ensure that student-teachers are aware of ethical decision-making, fairness, accountability, empathy, and justice before they join the teaching profession.
- Educational equity, social justice, and inclusive pedagogy courses need to be reinforced to enable future teachers to understand the distinction between equality and equity.
- Institutions of teacher training should organize workshops, seminars, and reflective practices on moral leadership, anti-bias teaching, and inclusive classroom management.
- Schools should make clear policies against favoritism, discrimination, and unequal treatment.
- School leaders are supposed to facilitate a positive and inclusive school climate, where the students feel safe, respected, heard, and supported.

References

- Arar, K., & Saiti, A. (2022). Ethical leadership, ethical dilemmas and decision making among school administrators. *Equity in Education & Society*, 1(1), 126-141.
- Arif, R. Jamil, M. & Naseer, B. (2023). Challenges of instructional supervision faced by primary school heads. *Pakistan Journal of Law, Analysis and Wisdom*, 2(3), 189-196.
- Brown, M. E., & Treviño, L. K. (2006). Ethical leadership: A review and future directions. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 17(6), 595-616.
- Cansoy, R., Parlar, H., & Türkoğlu, M. E. (2021). The effect of school principals' ethical leadership on teacher job satisfaction: The mediating role of school ethical climate. *International Journal of Psychology and Educational Studies*, 8(4), 210-222.
- Goehring-Juhász, C. (2020). *Perceived school leader improvements in equitable practices resulting from equity in education: Why leadership matters: A phenomenological case study*. Wilkes University.
- Ghaffar, R., Urooj, T., & Jamil, M. (2025). 21st century leadership skills of higher education faculty in Punjab, Pakistan: Perceptions, gaps, and development needs. *Research Journal for Social Affairs*, 3(5), 155-163.
<https://doi.org/10.71317/RJSA.003.05.0314>
- Hadi, L. A., & Hill, C. (2024). Leadership and teachers' perceptions of moral education: The case of implementing moral education as curriculum innovation. In *interdisciplinary approaches for educators' and learners' well-being: transforming education for sustainable development* (pp. 93-106). Springer.
- Jamil, M., Sewani, R., & Muhammad, N. (2024). Leadership practices of head teachers: Primary school teachers' perspective in public schools of Punjab. *Research Journal for Societal Issues*, 6(1), 83-92.
<https://doi.org/56976/rjsi.v6i1.178>
- Kanungo, R. N., & Mendonca, M. (1996). *Ethical dimensions of leadership* (Vol. 3). Sage.
- King, J., Uleanya, C., & Naidoo, P. M. (2025). A hybrid ethical leadership model for township schools: Integrating classical, contemporary,

- and African leadership perspectives. *Perspectives in Education*, 43(4), 4-24.
- Lemieux, C. G. (2022). *Educational equity in independent schools: A phenomenographic study of school-wide equity practices, barriers, and leadership behaviors necessary to achieve diversity, inclusion, and cultural competence*. Pepperdine University.
- Mahmoud, A. N. (2023). The impact of ethical leadership on educational excellence among kindergarten teachers in public schools affiliated with the ministry of education in Jordan. *Dirasat: Educational Sciences*, 50(2), 1-18.
- Mehmood, T., Mussarat, S., Ishtiaq, T. A., & Akhtar, N. (2024). Investigate the relationship between head teacher ethical leadership style and teacher's motivation at secondary level. *International Research Journal of Management and Social Sciences*, 5(2), 856-867.
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Resick, C. J., Hanges, P. J., Dickson, M. W., & Mitchelson, J. K. (2006). A cross-cultural examination of the endorsement of ethical leadership. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 63(4), 345-359.
- Saddique, F., & Raja, B. I. (2023). A Study of leadership styles of administrators and its perceived impact on morale of elementary school educators in Pakistan. *Research Journal of Social Sciences and Economics Review*, 4(1), 38-45.
- Simmie, G. M., & Sheehan, C. (2026). The positioning of moral leadership in primary education: perspectives and contextual understandings of school principals in Ireland. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 29(1), 22-38.
- Toor, S.-u.-R., & Ofori, G. (2009). Ethical leadership: Examining the relationships with full range leadership model, employee outcomes, and organizational culture. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 90(4), 533-547.
- Umanailo, M. C. B. (2019). Overview of phenomenological research. *Frenxiv Papers*