The Role of School Administrators in Promoting Ethical Practices through Moral Audits in Public Secondary Schools of Southern Punjab

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ABSTRACT: Routine school monitoring can confirm whether registers are complete and personnel are present, but it may reveal little about the fairness of decisions, the safety of complaint mechanisms, or whether corrective action changes conduct. This study examines how administrators understand the transition from compliance inspection to moral audit in public secondary schools in Southern Punjab. The qualitative strand comprised semi-structured interviews with 66 administrators: three chief executive officers, three district education officers, and 60 school heads. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). Four themes were developed: ethical leadership as operational stewardship; limitations of compliance-centred monitoring; sociocultural negotiation and unequal voice; and a three-level, learning-oriented architecture for moral audit. The analysis conceptualises moral audit as a structured governance process that establishes ethical standards, triangulates documentary and experiential evidence, protects confidential reporting, provides remedies, and verifies change. Administrators reported that their role was important but constrained: they could explain and document fair decisions, yet lacked effective assessment instruments and follow-up mechanisms, while fragmented responsibilities and informal influence weakened accountability. The findings indicate that adding ethical indicators to existing inspection processes is insufficient unless protected reporting channels, clear case ownership, context-responsive criteria, and independent verification are also established. Accordingly, the study proposes a practical division of responsibility across school, district, and system levels. It offers a context-sensitive account of moral auditing as a process of accountability and organisational learning rather than a punitive checklist.

KEYWORDS: School Administration, Ethical Leadership, Moral Audit, Accountability, Public Secondary Schools, Southern Punjab

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Introduction

Within an education system, a school may satisfy formal inspection requirements yet fail to meet ethical standards. Attendance records may be current while vulnerable learners are treated inconsistently; complaint books may exist while students and parents are discouraged from using them; and expenditure may be documented while the rationale for allocating resources remains unclear. This distinction is substantive rather than semantic. Compliance asks whether a prescribed action occurred, whereas ethical governance examines how authority was exercised, whose interests were protected, what harms were identified, and whether action was taken to restore trust (Brown et al., 2005; UNESCO, 2023). These concerns converge in public secondary-school administration because principals and district officers make policy-guided decisions about discipline, assessment, staffing, resources, access, and redress.

International scholarship increasingly presents school leadership as a contextually situated practice rather than merely a set of individual characteristics (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2024; Massouti et al., 2024). The Global Education Monitoring Report 2024/5 highlights the importance of leadership at multiple levels of education systems for learning and inclusion (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2024). Similarly, UNESCO's Recommendation on Education for Peace and Human Rights embeds justice, non-discrimination, equity, gender equality, democracy, and the rule of law within the aims and organisation of education (UNESCO, 2023). Such commitments cannot remain aspirational; institutional processes are required to demonstrate whether these values shape routine decisions.

Ethical leadership provides one basis for institutionalising these principles. Brown et al. (2005) defined it as normatively appropriate conduct expressed through personal actions, relationships, communication, reinforcement, and decision-making. Their social-learning model clarifies the importance of administrators: staff infer what is acceptable by observing the conduct leaders attend to, reward, excuse, or sanction. Later research has associated ethical leadership with ethical climate and positive employee attitudes, although findings vary across cultural and educational settings (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Ahmed, 2025; Özdoğru, 2024). In Pakistan, Khan et al. (2020) found that teachers' moral motivation responds to leaders' ethical cues, while Hameed et al. (2023) identified a persistent gap between the ethical leadership expected by public-sector employees and the leadership they experience.

Monitoring is the administrative link between aspiration and evidence and how it is designed is critical. Punjab has invested in infrastructure for information, monitoring and complaints in the schools, thus developing a solid foundation for administrative visibility (Punjab School Education Department, n.d.). But, visibility doesn't necessarily translate to improvement. The results of recent experiments in Punjab also highlighted the limits of command and control in which agents are not given the conditions or incentives to improve, as higher de facto punishment had negligible impacts on school and student outcomes. Previous school-service-delivery evidence also highlighted the importance of target setting and monitoring, and the lack of preparation by the principal (Geven, 2019). So the issue of the policy problem is not that it is not observed. It is the smaller issue of what is seen, what evidence is used to interpret it and if there is feedback does it result in verifiable and supported change.

The term moral audit is used in this article to refer to a formal process of checking the consistency of the use of authority in a school with the ethical principles it has stated and whether the weaknesses are addressed. It does not mean that the term is used to police private belief, or to score individuals for their moral beliefs. It refers to an institutional investigation of practices that are visible – fairness of assessment and discipline, dignity of relationships, inclusion, integrity of resource use, safety of reporting, voice of stakeholders, reasoned exception, follow-through. Designed with this in mind, moral audit can be used alongside financial, administrative and academic audit and can help to highlight the ethical gaps in each.

This is a significant region in which to explore this question, namely southern Punjab. Public schools are present in all of the above-mentioned communities including metropolitan, agricultural, remote and climate exposed.

Formally equal treatment can be substantively unequal due to poverty, transport, gendered mobility, literacy, local influence and digital access. It is therefore the responsibility of the administrator to balance general rules with context and need while ensuring that accommodation does not allow for favouritism. This is where moral audit can be helpful, as it requires the officials to state the criteria, document the exceptions, listen to the groups involved, and test whether seemingly neutral processes are fair in distributing burdens.

The study addresses the following research question: What role can school administrators play in conducting moral audits to promote ethical practices in public secondary schools in Southern Punjab? Existing research largely examines ethical leadership as an individual attribute or relates it to employee attitudes, while offering limited explanation of the administrative processes through which ethical standards are evidenced, reported safely, acted upon, and verified in Pakistani schools (Ahmed, 2025; Khan et al., 2020; Özdoğru, 2024). This study bridges that gap by analysing administrators' accounts across school, district, and system levels. Its contribution is threefold: it places administrators, rather than ethical slogans or isolated misconduct, at the centre of the audit process; distinguishes documentary compliance from evidence of fairness, dignity, voice, and remedy; and develops a tiered governance process in which school leaders, district officers, and system executives have distinct but interconnected responsibilities. Safe reporting, explainable decisions, and visible corrective action are therefore treated as the most credible administrative mechanisms for promoting ethical practice.

Research Gap

Research on ethical leadership in education has expanded, but systematic reviews show that evidence remains concentrated in particular countries and commonly examines associations between ethical leadership and teacher attitudes rather than the administrative mechanisms through which ethics is governed in schools (Ahmed, 2025; Özdoğru, 2024). Pakistani research demonstrates the importance of leaders' ethical cues and the gap between ethical ideals and organisational practice (Khan et al., 2020; Hameed et al., 2023), yet provides limited guidance on how school and district leaders should gather evidence, protect reporting, assign accountability, provide remedies, and verify improvement. The present study addresses this practical and contextual gap by analysing administrators' accounts of moral-audit processes across school, district, and system levels in Southern Punjab.

Literature Review

Ethical Leadership as Administrative Practice

There are two types of ethical leadership research: being viewed as a morally regarded person and being an active manager of ethics. While honesty and caring are important, staff also know what they are expected to do, how decisions are made, which resources are used and what the consequences are (Brown et al., 2005). This is a very significant difference, particularly in schools. A good principal can lead a bad school, as complaints can be dropped, similar cases treated differently, or key players can circumvent standard processes. Ethical administration is thus not only in the character but also in routines.

The educational studies point this institutional issue. Arar and Saiti (2022) found that there was a positive relationship between moral sensitivity, caring and culture and the way administrators deal with moral dilemmas in their work, which is based on the ethical leadership. Frick and Pazey (2024) defined moral reckoning as a process of deliberation that can go from a surface-level appraisal to a more engaged process of considering conflicting obligations. Da'as (2025) indirectly linked ethical school leadership with students' aggressive attitudes, via authoritative school and classroom climates. Combined, these studies suggest that administrators influence ethical behavior in two ways: directly, by their own decisions; and indirectly, by the climates, procedures, and interpretive habits that they create for others to make decisions.

The difference also guards against heroics in the leadership. A principal is not going to be able to fix all structural issues and district administrators cannot glean a school's moral climate from periodic visits. Ethical leadership is spread out at various levels and limited by resources, policy, authority and local legitimacy. The recent studies on women's school leadership in the Arab world also indicate that the practice of leadership is intertwined with socio-cultural aspects (Massouti et al., 2024). A helpful description of the role of administrators needs thus to be both agential and of governance arrangements that enable ethical action.

From Inspection to Moral Audit

Audits are a set of questions, evidence, judgements and consequences of norms. The traditional approach to school inspection tends to focus on the more easily verifiable aspects of school: enrolment, attendance, facilities, records, visits and results. These are good indicators but ethical quality is in part relational and procedural. Humiliation of a learner, the ability of a parent to challenge an allocation or staff's belief about the safety of reporting will not consistently be reflected in a register. Moral audit thus needs to be triangulated with experience, and case trajectories, which are kept confidential.

Triangulation is not necessarily the "more the better" approach to data collection. It involves testing a claim by means of sources which fail in various ways. A complaint log can include only the complaints that are reported; an interview can only show what the person is willing to share; a dashboard can only show what is reported favourably; an external visit can only show what is performed for the visitor. These sources, when read together, do not pose a problem, but are evidence of discrepancies. For instance, a school with no complaints could be a great school or an out-of-the-way school. The question of the audit is what supports the interpretation?

The accountability literature warns against pressuring and equating it with change. When centralized authorities can't induce or enable better performance, a big jump in punishment doesn't necessarily result in much change in performance, as Gulzar et al. (2025) demonstrate. When it comes to moral audit, the message is obvious: "If you're being graded harshly, you're going to try to look good, or you're going to try to look good in a way that you don't really be. Ethical audit needs to maintain proportional responsibility for misconduct, and to differentiate between intentional misconduct and a lack of capacity, and to link the audit with technical assistance. It does not just identify fault, it is to minimize reoccurrence.

Voice, Context, and Community Accountability

Stakeholder theory expands the evidential field to include the fact that institutions have to consider groups that are impacted by their decisions (Freeman, 1984). The knowledge and exposure to risk of students, teachers, parents, support staff, school councils and district officials are different in a school. But, a committee does not necessarily imply inclusion. Voice is only meaningful if the participants are able to speak without retaliation, understand the issue, how their input was taken into account and challenge conflicts of interest.

As the evidence from Pakistan shows, there is potential and challenge. Asim and Riaz (2020) evaluated community meetings and anonymous communication, as ways to link communities with schools in rural areas of Sindh. The existing School Management Council (SMC) system in Punjab also offers a platform for involvement and supervision (Government of the Punjab, 2025). These mechanisms can help to reinforce moral audit, provided they are representative, case confidentiality is maintained and community influence is not substituted for due process. Community legitimacy and administrative impartiality must be created to complement each other.

What fairness entails is also context dependent. A consistent due date could be a burden for a flood victim student, a student who lacks a device could be disadvantaged with a digital assignment, and a blended class could be a challenge for women in a conservative community. It's not an exception to the rule. It is an objective, clear and consistent criterion for reasonable accommodation, which is periodically reviewed. Equity of effect should, therefore, be measured by moral audit, along with equality of rule.

Criteria for Ethically Meaningful Indicators

An indicator is ethically meaningful if it relates a value to an institutional practice that is observable, but does not claim to be comprehensive with respect to the value. For instance, 'fairness' is not measurable by a single score, but can be explored in terms of the consistency of treatment, the rationale given for any deviations from this, differences in outcomes and the ease of appeal. Disciplinary, confidentiality, language and the voice of those who have been exposed to authority are all ways to engage with “Dignity.” It's not to take the moral evaluation out of the measurement. To discipline judgement with the imposition of public criteria and relevant evidence.

Good indicators differentiate signal from target as well. When a measure has high stakes, there is a reason for officials to “game” the value recorded, as opposed to the actual condition. The numbers of complaints give a good indication of the problem – a decrease could be due to better behaviour, a disincentive to complain, or reclassification. Thus, a moral-audit dashboard should include counts, access, response time, recurrence, appeal, stakeholder confidence, and qualitative case review. Interpretation should not be lost in what seems like the accuracy of a number, but should continue to be a part of the audit.

Lastly, indicators need to be "operational" at the level at which they are applied. School leaders should be reminded of evidence to look for and how to address cases; district leaders should be reminded of evidence to verify and support; and system leaders should be reminded of evidence of trends for policy, resourcing and independent investigation. The problem with asking all actors to gather the same data is that it is burdensome and there is no accountability. A tiered design provides evidence to the official who has the authority to act on it, and establishes a chain of command to follow if the official is involved or is unable to respond.

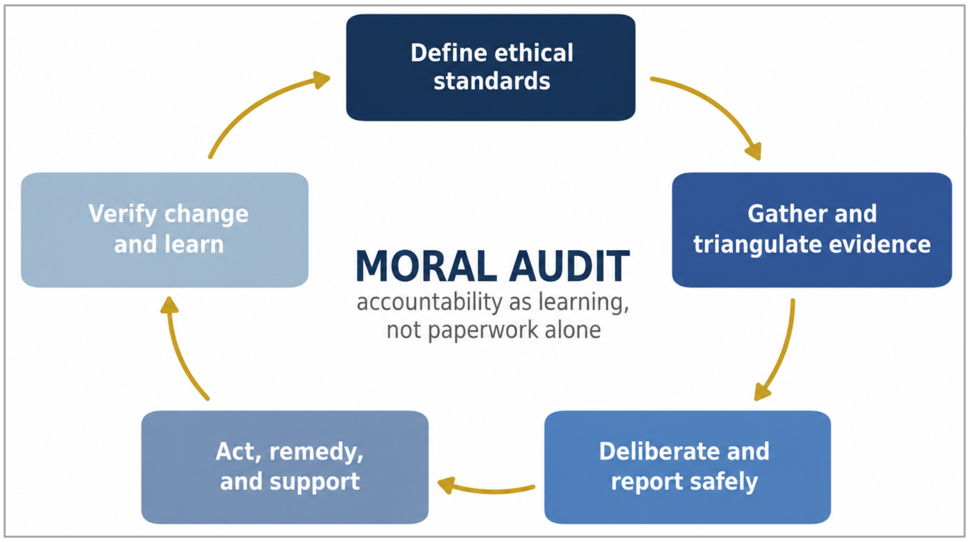
Conceptual Framework: Moral Audit as an Ethical Governance Cycle

The framework integrates ethical leadership, stakeholder accountability, and organisational learning. Ethical leadership explains the conduct and reinforcement expected from those in authority (Brown et al., 2005). Stakeholder accountability draws on Freeman's (1984) seminal stakeholder theory to identify whose experience should count as evidence, while organisational learning transforms audit from episodic fault-finding into a process of correction, verification, and prevention. Together, these perspectives form a five-stage cycle: establishing standards; collecting and triangulating evidence; deliberating and reporting safely; taking proportionate action through remedy, support, or sanction; and assessing whether conditions changed.

There are three safeguards included in the cycle. First, there are observable indicators which ground moral language in practice. Justice can be shown by treating people equally, or by having clear reasons for exceptions and easy avenues for appeal; dignity in the way they are treated, and how they are disciplined, if necessary, in a way that is not humiliating; trusteeship in the way resources are used, so that there is transparency in the stewardship. Secondly, protected voice avoids the situation where only official records are the only record of reality. Third, closed-loop follow-up is followed by ownership, deadlines and verifications. If the last two are missing, moral audit is a story-telling exercise and if the first two are missing, it is a compliance checklist.

Figure 1

A Closed-loop Model of Moral Audit for Public Schools



Note: The model is an original conceptual developed for this study from ethical leadership, stakeholder accountability, and organisational-learning perspectives (Brown et al., 2005; Freeman, 1984). It treats accountability and learning as mutually reinforcing.

Method

Design and Setting

This article reports the qualitative administrator-interview component of a larger convergent mixed-methods study of the moral ecology of public secondary schools in Southern Punjab. A bounded qualitative design was used because the research question required an in-depth examination of administrators' interpretations of responsibility, constraints, evidence, and reform within a shared provincial governance system. The unit of analysis was the administrator's account, and the qualitative sample included chief executive officers, district education officers, and school heads. Data were generated through individual semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach (2006, 2021). Evidence from students, teachers, and parents was not combined with the administrator dataset; references to stakeholder voice were analysed only as administrators' perceptions. This analytic boundary preserved alignment with the study objective concerning administrators' role in moral audits.

The setting included public Secondary schools and Education offices of Multan, Dera Ghazi Khan and Bahawalpur divisions. The interviews took place in November – December 2025. Public-sector institutions were analytically appropriate as they share the same governance, monitoring and accountability systems at the provincial level, but vary by district and rural-urban location in terms of implementation conditions.

Participants and Sampling

The qualitative sample comprised of 66 administrators namely three chief executive officers, three district education officers (secondary education), 30 headmasters and 30 headmistresses. Twenty-two people from each division were present. School heads were spread out in rural and urban areas and district/ divisional officers were at headquarters. The number of participants were 35 men and 31 women. The layered sample was designed to allow system, district and school perspectives to be in the same analytic field.

Figure 2

Administrator Interview Sample by Role

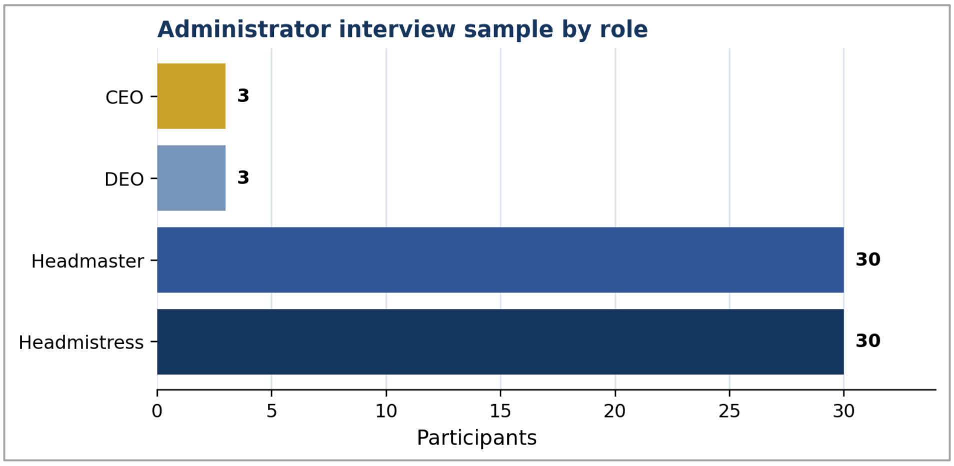


Table 1

Characteristics of Administrator Participants

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Role	Chief executive officer	3	4.5
Role	District education officer	3	4.5
Role	Headmaster	30	45.5
Role	Headmistress	30	45.5
Division	Multan	22	33.3
Division	Dera Ghazi Khan	22	33.3
Division	Bahawalpur	22	33.3
Gender	Male	35	53
Gender	Female	31	47

Note: Percentages may not total 100 because of rounding.

Interview Protocol and Data Collection

The interviews were conducted individually, and lasted about 60 minutes, with consent, in Urdu and were audio-recorded. Verbatim transcription and translation into English was carried out by a bilingual researcher. The guide shifted from administrators' responsibility to the responsibility of existing oversight, noted dilemmas, strengths and weaknesses of monitoring, gaps in the structure, influence of socio-cultural factors, design of the framework and community participation. This series enabled the participants to start with practice prior to any thought of reform.

Table 2

Interview Domains Aligned with the Research Question

Question	Analytic domain	Primary focus
Q1	Administrative role	Responsibility for the school's moral environment
Q2	Current practice	Existing mechanisms and satisfaction with them
Q3	Ethical challenges	Dilemmas and difficult cases
Q4	Monitoring	Strengths, weaknesses, and meaningful evidence
Q5	System gaps	Policy, responsibility, resources, and case follow-up
Q6	Socio-cultural context	Power, family networks, gender norms, and religious expectations
Q7	Framework design	Components, indicators, governance, and moral principles
Q8	Stakeholder role	Community and parental participation with safeguards

Analysis

Interview data were analysed through Braun and Clarke's six-phase reflexive thematic-analysis process: familiarisation, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition and naming, and analytic writing (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). Coding combined deductive attention to ethical leadership, evidence, voice, accountability, and context with inductive attention to how administrators connected these concerns in their own accounts. The analytic focus was not simply the frequency of terms, but the relationship among an administrative problem, the explanation offered for it, and the remedy proposed.

Records of interviews were read multiple times and coded at each administrative level and compared across roles and divisions. A sub-sample of transcripts were independently analysed and any discrepancies in coding discussed and the thematic structure was developed. Four of the administrator participants were member checked. The original thesis has a coding agreement of $\kappa = .81$ by the administrator on 20% of the transcripts. Thematic trustworthiness is based on clear analytic choices, rather than just a coefficient (Nowell et al., 2017).

Reflexivity and quality safeguards

Administrators were considered to be knowledgeable actors, but not necessarily that their accounts were necessarily neutral descriptions of institutional reality. There are a variety of ways in which officials can defend the current set-up, be aspirational, or interpret the same event in different ways, as they have different roles. Analytic response was to maintain role differentiation, to search for the tensions between claims and proposed evidence, and to not accept repetition as evidence. These safeguards support credibility and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethics and reporting integrity

Information was given to the participants in Urdu language, written consent was taken from the participants and they were free to withdraw without any penalty. Audio files were encrypted and transcripts were anonymised and role-based identifiers were used in place of names. The ethical body of the University has given ethical approval. Reporting was structured according to COREQ to facilitate the visualisation of the positioning of researchers, the recruitment of participants, data generation, analysis and quoting of the data (Tong et al., 2007).

Findings

Administrators' accounts were grouped into four interlocking themes. The first was about the administrator's personal ethics and the transformation of values to decisions. The second revealed a disconnect between what was seen as compliance and the less tangible aspects of feeling safe, feeling treated fairly and feeling treated with dignity. The third was a negotiation of community legitimacy with unequal influence and unequal voice by the administrators. The fourth has changed from diagnosis to a tiered audit system that includes self review, independent feedback, documented remedy and system learning.

Table 3

Thematic Structure

Theme	Subthemes / codes	Interpretive proposition
1. Operational stewardship	Modelling; explained decisions; consistent exceptions; visible follow-up	What leaders do repeatedly teaches the institution what counts.
2. Compliance–ethics gap	Document-heavy visits; weak relational evidence; reporting risk; unfinished cases	Presence of records cannot establish fairness, dignity, or changed conduct.

3. Context and unequal voice	Local influence; gendered participation; poverty and distance; legitimate accommodation	Context can support ethical action or distribute voice and burden unequally.
4. Tiered moral audit	Self-review; district verification; protected feedback; remedy; public learning	A credible audit closes the loop across school, district, and system levels.

Ethical Leadership as Operational Stewardship

Administrators' role was not limited to giving moral advice. They found ethics in the staffing, discipline, assessment, allocation of resources, complaints and treatment of exceptions. They were always from personal example to institutional trace: a decision should be explainable, comparable with similar cases, and visible in what followed. This transformed leadership into a way of working, instead of a statement about personal goodness.

A CEO expressed this dual responsibility: “I would be responsible for not only compliance, but also the intangible aspect of experience of fairness, dignity, reporting safety” (CEO, Multan). A headmistress also spoke of the need to be judicious in the application of authority: “An administrator should explain and document exceptions to difficult decisions, and rectify unintended harm, not just exercise authority” (Headmistress, Dera Ghazi Khan).

There were three practices that provided an administrative substance for stewardship. Firstly, leaders expressed expectations in terms of decisions, not slogans. Secondly, they recorded reasons, particularly where there was a contextual hardship, which justified an exception to a general rule. Thirdly, they went back to the concerned stakeholders with an action report. The last practice was essential as it enables the institution to determine whether reporting is important, and sanctioning is fair without explanation.

The emphasis was shifted in the role but the proposition remained the same. School heads voiced the most comments with regard to disciplinary issues, attendance difficulty, and family communication. Schools and escalation routes need to be consistent, district officers said. Chief executives set up ethical governance as a system responsibility which needed to be connected with standards, evidence and public credibility. Administrators' authority was characterized as legitimate at all levels when it was reasoned, subject to review and focused on the educational good and not on the convenience of the administrator.

The Compliance–ethics Gap

The second theme related to a disjuncture between what monitoring could easily count and what administrators felt they should know in order to be able to act ethically in governance. The importance of attendance, record and facility checks were recognized. They said that such checks could be substitutes for the entire moral climate. Trust, embarrassment, and fear of repercussions, and the differential impact of a rule, were still hard to observe.

The headmistress of one school said that “current monitoring is good for administrative compliance but it is not as good for measuring trust, dignity and behavioural change” (Headmistress, Dera Ghazi Khan). One headmaster expanded on this with regard to digital systems: “Digital dashboards can make a difference in terms of timeliness, but there is a risk of distortion in reporting due to poor connectivity and pressure to report favourably” (Headmaster, Multan). These accounts did not challenge administrative data, but rather questioned its adequacy and the incentives that were involved in its production.

Administrators suggested using the following to triangulate: complaint records, assessment samples, attendance patterns, resource decisions, stakeholder testimony, and evidence of completed action. In particular, they took the lack of complaints as ambiguous. It could be a sign of a safe, well-governed school but it could also mean that pupils, teachers or parents did not want a response or risk being identified. Official confidence was therefore offered as a test, not a satisfaction exercise, of independent sampling of stakeholder experience.

Closing the case proved to be the weakest link. Participants reported that there was a lack of responsibility, unclear escalation, and visits were made without checking for behaviour change. They suggested the following things should be required for each concern: a responsible officer, a date for a response, a status, an appeal process, and a record of outcome (not identifying). Monitoring would then look at recurrence and overdue action and not just how many inspections had been carried out.

Socio-cultural Negotiation and Unequal Voice

Administrators did not consider socio-cultural context as a barrier to be overcome nor as a tradition to be followed blindly. Respectful elders, religious language and community networks could validate and authorise fairness, enlist support and render decisions comprehensible. These networks could also decide who's complaint is heard first, make exceptions, or deter women and poorer families to speak. Ethical administration thus meant navigating through local trust forms, and keeping written criteria and protected procedures.

One headmistress captured the dynamic: “Socio-cultural values can validate ethical policy, if it is explained in familiar language, but local power can also call for exceptions” (Headmistress, Dera Ghazi Khan). A headmaster stated the issue of participation more directly, “Biradari obligations, patriarchy, poverty and respect for authority impact on participation and who feels safe reporting” (Headmaster, Multan).

Voice was practically available in a way that was influenced by gender, distance, work, literacy, and access to digital. Administrators offered alternative meeting times, summaries in Urdu to make them easier to understand, and confidential channels, and arrangements for women and marginalised families to speak directly. These were not offered as a compromise for low participation, they were offered as evidence requirements. An audit that listens only to those who can make it to a formal meeting, is an exclusion it is trying to evaluate.

Decisions on attendance and assessment also came into play in the context of the decisions. Some learners may not be able to meet formally compliant expectations due to flooding, extreme heat, seasonal employment, disability, mobility issues and/or household poverty. Participants identified the difference between accommodation and favouritism as being that there were clear criteria, similar cases were treated in the same way, that there was a documented reason, and that there was a review process. This is an account of equity which was not about treating everyone the same, but rather about exercising disciplined discretion.

A Tiered, Learning-oriented Architecture for Moral Audit

The last theme brought together the administrators' recommendations and developed a hierarchical structure. At school level, leaders would undertake a self-evaluation based on documentary evidence and confidential stakeholder evidence which would be brief. Trained reviewers at district level would check a sample and investigate unresolved cases and look for trends between schools. Chief executives would set standards, safeguard escalation, provide support and report on trends (not confidential) at the system level. The participants opted for a simple set of indicators that were used in earnest rather than an elaborate checklist that was completed in a ceremonial fashion.

Headmistress, Bahawalpur, suggested “a tiered system of school self-audit, district verification, protected reporting and public reporting of non-confidential trends annually.” A headmaster stated that indicators should be linked to the Qur'anic principles, constitutional rights, professional duties, and measurable governance practices and should include fair assessment, dignity, inclusion, resource use, voice of stakeholders, reporting safety, and verified follow-up (Headmaster, Dera Ghazi Khan).

The plan was to have a balance of support and accountability. Training and resources were needed for a capacity deficit – lack of reporting tool. The deliberate hiding of information, retaliation, discrimination, and/or misuse of authority had to be proportionately investigated and sanctioned. This was significant as a purely punitive reaction might encourage schools to cover up issues, and a purely developmental reaction might result in those harmed having no recourse.

Administrators also insisted on safeguards in order to have community participation. School councils would monitor trends and agreed upon improvements and not have control over confidential individual cases. Participation could become accountable governance by having membership diversity, orientation, conflict-of-interest statements, attendance records and documented responses to recommendations. Student voice needed a separate, age appropriate pathway, to not be the only interpreters of school experience, as adults.

Table 4

Allocation of Moral-audit Responsibilities

Actor	Core responsibility	Principal safeguard needed
School head	Define local procedures; conduct self-review; protect immediate reporting; document reasons and remedy.	Conflict of interest; normalization of local practice; workload
District officer	Verify samples; hear escalation; compare patterns; coach schools; monitor overdue action.	Infrequent access; inconsistent interpretation; administrative burden
Chief executive/system	Set standards; authorize safeguards; resource capacity; review trends; ensure independent investigation	Centralized pressure; distance from lived experience; metric distortion
School council/stakeholders	Identify risks; contribute experience; review non-confidential trends and improvement.	Elite capture; retaliation; exclusion; breach of confidentiality

Discussion

The analysis identified administrators as ethical translators who convert general commitments into criteria, records, exceptions, reporting channels, and follow-up. This extends ethical-leadership theory by locating moral influence within the administrative structures surrounding a decision. The finding supports Brown et al. (2005), who distinguish personal conduct from active moral management, but also extends their account by showing that moral management is distributed across a public-school system. Principals can explain and document fairness, districts can provide independent review, and system authorities can establish standards, resources, and protection. An ethical example without an escalation structure remains vulnerable to local power, while centralised rules without school-level deliberation risk being insensitive to context.

The analysis was centered on the tension between the visible compliance and lived experience of ethics by the administrators. It helps to account for the lack of effectiveness of increased monitoring in enhancing institutions. Gulzar et al. (2025) detected minimal outcome impacts of a dramatic rise in punishment in the centralized accountability regime in Punjab. Moral audit would be as weak if it merely put new moral indicators on the same vertical pressure. The other is a closed loop where evidence is used to identify differentiated action remedy for harm, action sanction for deliberate violation, and support for capacity gaps, and subsequent checks are used to determine if conditions changed.

This interpretation also helps to clarify what should be considered as evidence. Ethical climate studies tend to be based on perception measures, and administrative systems tend to focus on records. Both sources alone are not adequate. Records provide trace and consistency; confidential accounts provide experience and silence; comparison across cases provides evidence of unequal treatment; follow-up provides evidence of an effective response as opposed to an announced response. Thus, the framework is tolerant of disagreement among sources, and sees it as analytically productive. A positive dashboard and a negative stakeholder statement do not cancel each other out, but are a governance message that should be investigated.

The socio-cultural theme indicated that administrators' work is a negotiated legitimacy. This is consistent with the research that showed that the culture and social relations in the school influence leadership (Massouti et al., 2024) and Arar and Saiti (2022), which highlight the importance of ethical sensitivity and culture in handling dilemmas. Public procedure cannot be replaced with familiar religious concepts, although in Southern Punjab, these concepts like justice and trusteeship may make ethical expectations intelligible. It is the translation that is the key: justice is comparable treatment and appeal is accessible; trusteeship is transparent stewardship and answerability; care is reasonable accommodation without hidden preference.

The analysis warns of a caution to community-accountability arguments. Based on the experimental work in Pakistan, community participation can help to enhance information and local ownership (Asim & Riaz, 2020). But moral audit is about instances where the local condition can be a part of the issue. Community actors should thus be involved in the identification of risk, the interpretation of patterns, and the monitoring of improvement; and there should be rules of confidentiality and due process to protect confidential cases. It is not enough to increase attendance to maximize participation; it is increased when the testimony of more people is safe and consequential.

Administrators' focus on documented exceptions indicates a fruitful relationship between equality and equity. Ethical governance does not mean that all learners will have the same answer in different situations where there is different material. It must be relevant, applied to all similar situations, subject to review, and limited in scope. It is an approach that is good for climate disruption, disability, gendered mobility, poverty and digital inequality. It also helps to guard against favouritism using context as a rhetorical cover.

The results help in three ways in the design of moral-audits. First, they see the case (not the visit or indicator) as the unit of accountability. A case has an allegation/concern, evidence, a point of ownership, a reasoned response, a point of appeal, and a point of verification. Secondly, they render the reporting of safety a condition for audit. Users need to understand the channel; there is realistic confidentiality; there is monitoring of retaliation, and there is visibility of response to make a channel safe. Thirdly, they use recurrence as a signal of the system. If the incidents continue, it may be an indication that there is an incentive, capacity or policy ambiguity that only individual discipline can't fix.

The suggested tiered model is not intended as a hierarchy or chain of command. Proximity is provided by school self-review, comparison and independence is provided by district verification, authority and resources are provided by system review, and experience is provided by stakeholder participation. If there is weakness at any level, then it impacts the other levels. If it is a self review, there is a risk of self-protection if it is not verified. When there is no local ownership, then external review results in performance for inspectors. The public reporting of complaints without confidentiality can result in the exposure of complainants. While it is important to maintain confidentiality, it is also important to maintain aggregate transparency, which can prevent systemic failure from being hidden.

Lastly, the study challenges the idea of an administrator's having or not having ethical leadership. They play an agentic and a limited role. They make consequential choices but these choices are made in the context of workloads, reporting incentives, political relationships, transport constraints and split mandates. Similarly, Hameed et al. (2023) also found a gap between the ethical ideals and practices of public sector. A credible reform agenda must therefore not only question the ethics of the leaders, but the ethics of the system – whether it allows ethical action, makes unethical discretion visible and provides correction.

Implementation Challenges and Safeguards

Moral audit brings tensions which cannot be engineered out, but have to be governed. While transparency can help to build trust, over-transparency can lead to the identification of complainants. Standardization allows for comparison, but can also be a misreading of context. Independent review decreases self-protection, but far away reviewers might not be knowledgeable about the area. Community involvement provides legitimacy but local hierarchies can become involved with participants in the audit. A strong design makes these tensions explicit and provides safeguards, such as: public reporting of the aggregate, confidential handling of cases, contextual evidence fields, reviewer calibration, conflict-of-interest rules, and routing outside the immediate administrative chain.

Burden is an ethical problem, too. An approach that takes up time for teaching, support, and remedy is counter-productive. Data collection should thus be done on the basis of minimum sufficient evidence. Where lawful, information should be shared and used more than once, for example, information collected in attendance, assessment, finance, safeguarding and complaints systems should be used more than once if it is necessary to do so. Sampling can be used in place of exhaustive review and deeper inquiry is stimulated by risk, discrepancy, recurrence or stakeholder concern.

The framework should also not be tempted to have a composite moral score. Mixing different domains in a rank can lead to false precision, and could mask a serious safeguarding failure in a strong performance in other domains. Profiles of domains, case narratives, overdue actions and verified improvements are more defensible. Patterns and response should be reported publicly, detail should be kept confidential for due process. It's not about moral league tables, it's about disciplined judgement.

One other strain is that of independence. While it may seem like a dream come true to be completely removed from the education administration, an outside entity without access, authority or operational knowledge can come up with recommendations that no one owns. Full internal control, on the other hand, puts audit in a hierarchy and under the control of self-evaluation. Functionally independent verification is a workable arrangement, in which reviewers have the protected authority to sample evidence, to make confidential contacts with stakeholders, to declare conflicts, and to report matters outside the immediate line of command that are not resolved, and designated education officials are responsible for remedy. This can be reinforced by cross-district review and published overall responses periodically. The criteria for independence are therefore the ability of evidence and conclusions to move freely when they call into question the authority of the reviewer, not just the label of the reviewer's organization. This principle also helps to maintain the due process. Allegations should not be seen as findings, there should be a fair chance for the accused to respond and complainants should be protected from retaliation. A moral audit which does not follow due process in the name of morality undermines the very concept of moral audit. There should be clear thresholds which differentiate between routine improvement, formal investigation, emergency safeguarding and referral to competent authorities. These boundaries enable the audit to be honest while at the same time being supportive, and not arbitrary.

Implications for Policy and Practice

A pilot moral audit should start with a small number of observable domains: fair assessment and discipline; dignity and safeguarding; inclusion and reasonable accommodation; integrity of resource decisions; stakeholder voice; reporting safety; and verified corrective action. Acceptable evidence should be identified for each domain without dictating to schools where they will obtain this evidence. A brief checklist is less likely to be stable and to cause reflection and similar learning than a small instrument.

The responsibility should be clearly stated. Ownership of self-review and immediate remedy should be at the school level, verification of samples, escalation and coaching of improvement at the district level, and maintenance of standards, resources and independent investigation at the chief executive level. An owner, due date, status, appeal process and verification point should be identified for every case-management process. The number of complaints/visits should not be the only measure of closure quality and recurrence reported on aggregate dashboards.

Training should be based on dilemmas in the context instead of only on lectures. There is a need for administrators to develop their skills in differentiating between accommodation and favouritism, confidentiality and secrecy, community participation and case interference, and capacity failure and deliberate misconduct. Reviewers also require calibration, that is, the same evidence is not interpreted differently from district to district. Urdu language-protected reporting, alternative participation arrangements, and student channels (appropriate for age) should be considered as basic infrastructure.

The implementation should be done in stages and be assessed individually. Burden, clarity, reporting safety, interrater consistency, and persistence of corrective actions could be assessed in a pilot that would be conducted across a diversity of rural and urban schools. Monitoring should be done to track unintended consequences, such as under-reporting, retaliatory transfer or discipline, symbolic compliance, and exclusion of less powerful families. Moral audit will only be legitimate if it enhances the experience of justice and does not just add to the documentation.

Limitations

It is a study of the administrators' accounts and thus it reflects professional interpretation of ethical practice, not directly observed. Senior officers and school heads may have varying degrees of experience of the day-to-day life of the school and role expectations may lead to socially desirable representations. Culturally-specific meanings may also be lost in the process of translation from Urdu to English. The layered sample does not provide for statistical generalization, but does provide for contextual comparison. Future research should include interviews, case-file review, and confidential stakeholder evidence and follow-up observation of corrective action.

Conclusion

Moral audit starts where the ordinary inspection stops with moral issues. Records, visits, and dashboards can provide administrative visibility, but they can't on their own indicate if authority is fair, voice is safe, or harm has been remediated. Administrators are the key players in the process of linking policy to the decisions that students, staff and families experience the state through.

The results indicate that the administrators are aware of this as a stewardship function that is enacted at multiple levels: school administrators explain and document decisions; district administrators verify, compare, and support; and system administrators set standards, protect escalation, and resource correction. They also say that when monitoring is conducted without the necessary influence at the local level, unequal participation, pressure to complete the metrics, divided responsibilities, and lack of follow-up can make monitoring a paper exercise.

A credible moral audit is not a morality checklist then. It is a closed governance cycle whereby standards are turned into evidence, evidence is put into deliberation, deliberation results in proportionate action, and action is subsequently verified. Its success should not be measured by the number of forms that schools fill out, but rather by whether similar cases are treated defensibly, voices that have been excluded are consequential, retaliation is prevented, and there are fewer recurring failures. That's the institutionalization of ethical aspiration via administrative work.

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