Ethical Challenges in Addressing Educational Stratification: Implications for Social Work Practice

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Abstract

The study examined the ethical challenges in relation to educational stratification and its implications for social work practice. The null hypotheses of the study posit that there is no significant impact of educational stratification on professional responsibilities and ethical decision making. A quantitative survey research design was employed, with data collected from 400 respondents from a population of 4,125 PSTs (3657 Public sector, 467 private sector) in District Bhakkar, Punjab, Pakistan. Using stratified random sampling, proportional representation was given to the tehsils and gender. A structured questionnaire adapted from validated scales was used to gather data and its reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha. The results shows that social workers within the education sector in Pakistan have enduring ethical dilemmas that are based on institutional, structural, and policy inequity levels. Scarcity of resources, unclear policy settings and the presence of unclear professional roles proved to be the most significant barrier to fair practice. Meanwhile, the fear of backlash also becomes another obstacle to justice advocacy in stratified school systems. The result of the regression (R = 0.545, R 2 = 0.297, p < 0.001) indicates that there is a medium-but-significant correlation between stratification and professional responsibilities, and as such, inequitable environments do not only limit resources, but also influence moral agency and occupational identity. Even though practitioners are resilient and adaptive, the way they practice equity is still limited due to the systemic barriers and the lack of institutional support It is possible to build a more inclusive and ethically responsible framework of addressing marginalized learners in the variety of schooling systems in Pakistan by embedding anti-oppressive and social justice models in both educational policy and practice.

Keywords: Ethical Challenges, Educational Stratification, Social Work

Introduction

Education is the well acknowledged fundamental human rights, as well as a potential instrument of social change. However, the stratification of education often undermines the realization of this promise(Lusaka, 2024). Stratification separates children into unequal groups and thus defines life opportunities, recreating class structures over a generational cycle. (Reay, 2018). For social workers, who are expected to uphold the principles of fairness and justice, this situation presents a significant ethical dilemma when they must assist individuals and confront the issue of systemic inequities. Stratification is a persistent global issue, affecting both

developed and developing countries. Lack of equity in school funding and early tracking contributes to the privilege of superior groups in many Western nations (Reamer, 2018). The privatization of education, along with inadequate state school systems, in the Global South only exacerbates disparities between elite and marginalized students. Lev (2024) studied that equity policies often hide greater injustices, but Irving and Malik Liévano emphasize that the market-based education makes giving fair advice and access more difficult. These studies demonstrate that stratification is not only structural and ethical, but also questionable in terms of justice that extends beyond national boundaries. Stratification is particularly pronounced in Pakistan, especially in Punjab. State schools are often under-equipped in terms of infrastructure and teaching staff, while private and high-end schools provide high-quality education but are not accessible to the general public (Mangi et al., 2021). Granting opportunities to economically disadvantaged groups, Madrasas restrict access to modern curricula, which further entrenches these disadvantages in the long run. According to Zulfiqar et al (2019), children, in particular, girls are often not allowed to attend school due to economic issues and patriarchal values and norms. Similarly, Ashraf (2020) discovered systemic exclusion among children with disabilities because of the inaccessibility of infrastructure and teacher bias. These facts suggest that stratification in Punjab is institutional and social, thus creating stratified inequities. To social workers, such inequalities present them with dilemmas about whether to fulfil immediate needs or promote structural reform. Practitioners can provide psychosocial support in underfunded schools, although systemic underinvestment has yet to be addressed. (Reamer, 2018). They also have to balance the respect for cultural inclinations, such as religious education, with the rights of children to a thorough education. These dilemmas are aggravated by resource scarcity in Punjab, which forces one to make difficult choices regarding how the scarce support should be allocated. (Iqbal, 2021). Although there has been an increased awareness of the issue of inequality, a gap remains in the literature on addressing the ethical dilemmas that social workers face in education. The majority of Pakistani literature deals with enrollment and resources, yet the international literature tends to assume a situation with a stronger social work system. (Dominelli, 2018). This research gap is the reason why this study is justified, as it will explore how practitioners in Punjab work with stratified systems to address ethical dilemmas.

Research Objectives

1. To identify key ethical challenges faced by social workers in addressing educational stratification within the Pakistani educational context.
2. To find how educational stratification influences the professional responsibilities and decision-making of social workers engaged in educational settings.
3. To explore strategies and ethical frameworks that can guide social workers in promoting equity and social justice within stratified educational systems.

Literature Review

In recent years, there has been an increasing recognition of the various ethical dilemmas confronting social workers, who frequently struggle to fulfil their moral and professional responsibilities to clients due to organizational limitations and restraints(Gómez-García et al., 2022). This research aims to enhance the understanding of ethical dilemmas, moral action, and moral discomfort in social work, while suggesting further avenues for qualitative and quantitative research to broaden scholarly insight into these elements and their interrelations. Enhancing research understanding of moral conduct in social work may aid in formulating organizational and professional strategies to address ethical difficulties within the profession. (Lev, 2024). Mangi et al (2021) Studied and examined educational stratification and its impact on the nation-building process in Pakistan. A study reveals that the education system is significantly deficient in cohesive ideology and ethical instruction. The inadequate education system is adversely impacting nation-building in Pakistan by fostering public distrust,

discrimination, and regionalism.(Khan et al., 2020). The findings of this study may help establish a unified educational system that provides learning opportunities to every child, regardless of caste, religion, language, economic status, political affiliation, or ethnicity. (Hadi Chaudhary & Panjwani, 2022). The social work students' encounters with ethical issues and dilemmas during their field placements, and to comprehend how addressing these dilemmas can impact the framework of social work education (Jönsson & Lian Flem, 2022). The results identified four principal themes related to ethical dilemmas: macro-level structural conditions, insufficient knowledge and experience, difficulties in direct engagement with service users regarding values and viewpoints, and issues stemming from organizational relationships (Kesen et al., 2021). The study emphasized that field assignments should be viewed as open learning environments where students can reflect, engage in discourse, and develop both professional and personal competencies beyond theoretical understanding.(Eriksen & Gradovski, 2020). The systematic placement of learners into different schooling systems based on socioeconomic status, unequal school funding, and sectoral division has long been identified as one of the key aspects by which society continues to be unequal. Empirical research at the international scale confirms that this stratification hinders upward mobility and establishes privilege and social disintegration. (Blossfeld & Shavit, 2019). The coexistence of a public, private, and madrasa system of education in Pakistan, and more specifically, in the Punjab province, has created significant scholastic divisions. These segregations not only perpetuate class differences but also create unfair opportunities for students from rural and low-income families. (Malik & Javed, 2019). These realities are complex ethical issues for practitioners in the social work field. On the one hand, the professionals are required to meet the urgent needs of children when deprived of resources; on the other hand, they must fulfil an ethical requirement, as they must be the champions of systemic changes that will correct structural inequities in the education sector. (Reamer, 2018). Social workers in Punjab face distributive justice and cultural sensitivity issues in an area where the divide between wealthy private schools and poorly funded government schools is most pronounced. These obstacles are exacerbated by the educational norms prevailing in specific locations that contradict the universal principles of child rights. (Iqbal, 2021). The implications for the social work practice are, therefore, immense. On an international level, researchers believe that promoting educational equity must be viewed as a component of social justice practice, and the necessary actions to achieve this goal should include both direct support and advocacy, as well as policy-making. (Dominelli, 2018). In Pakistan, where gaps in the system exist, social workers can play a crucial role in filling those gaps by collaborating with schools, communities, and policymakers, thereby ensuring that marginalized populations in Punjab receive equal access to high-quality education. (Ashraf, 2020).

Material and Methods

A structured questionnaire titled *"Ethical Challenges in Addressing Educational Stratification" was employed as the primary* data collection tool. The instrument consisted of four main sections. Section A assessed ethical challenges experienced by social workers and was adapted from Reamer's (2018) work on ethical standards in social work practice and Dominelli's (2002) anti-oppressive social work theory. Section B1 measured perceptions of educational stratification using constructs derived from Blossfeld and Shavit's (1992) cross-national model of persistent educational inequality. Section B2 evaluated professional responsibilities and ethical decision-making behaviours, incorporating selected items inspired by Wilczenski's (1992) Attitudes Toward Inclusive Education Scale (ATIES), appropriately contextualized for social work settings. Finally, Section C explored strategies and ethical frameworks to promote social equity, drawing conceptually on Reamer (2018) and Dominelli (2002). The instrument consisted of 29 closed-ended statements, rated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Content validity was confirmed through expert review by six specialists in social work, ethics, and education. A reliability analysis using

Cronbach's alpha revealed coefficients above 0.70 for all subscales, indicating acceptable internal consistency. Data were collected through both online and physical survey forms. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. Of the 400 questionnaires distributed, 361 were returned completed, yielding a response rate of 90.2%, which was deemed adequate for quantitative analysis. Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. The study adhered to ethical guidelines consistent with the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2018) Code of Ethics. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained. The data were used solely for academic purposes. The methodological rigor and ethical integrity of this study ensure its reliability, replicability, and contribution to both social work scholarship and policy development.

Results and Discussion

Table 1   Ethical Challenges Faced by Social Workers

	Please indicate how often you face the following ethical challenges	N	R	S	O	A	Total	
		%	%	%	%	%	M	St. D
A1	Institutional resistance to equity initiatives.	12.5	28.2	10.5	20.8	28.0	3.24	1.44
A2	Limited resources (funding, staffing, infrastructure) to support disadvantaged schools.	4.0	9.0	7.2	42.3	37.5	4.00	1.08
A3	Cultural norms that reinforce class-based educational stratification.	29.0	39.3	16.5	12.3	3.0	2.21	1.08
A4	Conflicts between professional ethics and organisational policies.	29.8	39.8	9.5	15.3	5.8	2.27	1.20
A5	Fear of backlash for advocating equity in education.	3.0	11.3	16.8	40.8	28.2	3.80	1.06
A6	Lack of clear policy guidance on addressing educational inequality.	2.5	15.5	17.0	41.8	23.3	3.68	1.07
A7	Ambiguity in role definition for social workers within school systems.	2.5	9.3	7.0	46.3	35.0	4.02	1.01
A8	Ethical dilemmas in balancing respect for culture with rights to education.	22.5	37.8	11.8	21.0	7.0	2.52	1.24

*Scale: (1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Always)

The research results show that social workers face heterogeneous levels of ethical challenges related to educational stratification. In item A1, the ratings were moderate in terms of institutional resistance to equity programs (M = 3.24, SD = 1.44), and 48.8% of the respondents reported occasionally or often experiencing institutional resistance to equity promotion. Regarding limited resources, funding, personnel, and infrastructure were the most significant issues reported by item A2, with 79.8% of respondents responding affirmatively (often or always) that these factors hinder

the delivery of support to disadvantaged schools (M = 4.00, SD = 1.08). In item A3, 68.3% of the participants answered in the negative (never, rarely), and the overall average (M = 2.21, SD = 1.08) showed that cultural norms that perpetuate the education stratification according to classes are rarely considered to be a significant ethical concern. Likewise, item A4 presented a disagreement rate of 69.6, with a mean of 2.27 (SD = 1.20), which indicates that a conflict between professional ethics and organisational policies is not a frequent occurrence among social workers. On the contrary, item A5 had the highest rate of agreement (69.06 often or always) and the mean of 3.80 (SD = 1.06), meaning that the fear of backlash because of promoting equity in education is often or always felt. In item A6, the majority (65.1% of the participants) said that lack of clear policy guidance is an issue, as indicated by a mean of 3.68 (SD = 1.07), indicating that most of the respondents are frequently confused due to unclear institutional instructions. The highest agreement rate (81.3%) was achieved in item A7 with a mean of 4.02 (SD = 1.01), which showed that the disambiguation of the roles of social workers in the school systems is often viewed as an ethical problem. Lastly, item A8, which has had a 60.3 % disagreement and a mean of 2.52 (SD = 1.24), shows that respondents' ethical dilemmas that relate to conflict between cultural respect and educational rights are not very frequent or sometimes not encountered.

Table 2   Educational stratification perceived by Social Workers

	Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements	SD	D	N	A	SA	Total	
		%	%	%	%	%	M	St.D
B1	Educational opportunities in my region depend largely on socioeconomic background	7	13	20	45	16	3.50	1.12
B2	Schools serving low-income families receive fewer resources than elite schools.	4	12	11	43	31	3.83	1.11
B3	Government education policies favor urban or private institutions.	14	31	9	34	13	3.01	1.30
B4	Stratification in education is a key barrier to social mobility.	4	12	10	43	32	3.86	1.11
B5	Educational quality is uneven across public, private, and religious schools.	3	9	8	46	36	4.03	1.00
B6	Stratification reduces equitable access for girls and marginalized groups.	14	26	29	20	12	2.90	1.21
B7	Community awareness about educational inequality remains limited.	24	43	13	17	4	2.35	1.13

*Scale: (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

The data indicate that respondents held varying perceptions about educational stratification in the Pakistani educational system. In the case of B1, 61% (agree and strongly agree) of the participants felt that access to education opportunities in their area was largely determined by their socioeconomic status, with a mean of 3.50 (SD = 1.12), indicating that social class frequently influences access to quality education. B2, 74 % reported that schools with low-income families have fewer resources compared to the elite ones, as the mean of the answer is 3.83 (SD = 1.11), and there is a high level of agreement among people that the existing disparity in resource distribution remains. The result of B3 was not consistent, with 47% disagreeing

(strongly disagree and disagree) and 47% agreeing and the mean of 3.01 (SD = 1.30) was moderate, indicating that there was a divide in opinion whether policies in the government favor urban or private institutions. B4 75% of the respondents said educational stratification is a significant obstacle to social mobility, with a mean of 3.86 (SD = 1.11), showing that social workers believe inequality in education is a serious hindrance to social mobility. Similarly, B5 had the highest agreement of 82 and a mean of 4.03 (SD = 1.00), indicating a strong consensus that the educational quality in public, private, and religious schools remains uneven. Meanwhile, B6 had 40 % agreement and 40 % disagreement, having a mean of 2.90 (SD = 1.21), which indicates that there is a split in opinions on whether stratification diminishes equitable access of girls and marginalized groups. Finally, the B7 demonstrated that 67% of respondents did not agree (strongly disagree or disagree), and the mean of 2.35 (SD 1.13) is low, which implies that community awareness regarding educational inequality remains low.

Table 3 Professional responsibilities and ethical decision-making in relation to educational stratification

	Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements	SD	D	N	A	SA	Total	
		%	%	%	%	%	M	St.D
B8	Educational inequality limits my professional growth as a social worker.	6	11	11	46	26	3.74	1.15
B9	I adapt my practice strategies to address inequities in different school settings.	11	10	11	44	24	3.60	1.26
B10	Resource disparities create moral distress in my professional role.	19	33	10	29	10	2.77	1.31
B11	I feel less empowered to implement equitable interventions due to systemic barriers.	9	10	12	42	28	3.71	1.22
B12	My ethical decision-making is influenced by socioeconomic differences among students.	4	17	10	41	28	3.73	1.16
B13	Organizational hierarchies restrict my ability to advocate for justice in education.	7	17	8	41	28	3.67	1.23
B14	I require additional ethical training to effectively manage stratification-related dilemmas.	27	39	12	19	4	2.33	1.17

*Scale: (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

The outcomes prove the effect of educational stratification on the professional duties and judgment of social workers. B8, 72 % (agree and strongly agree) of the respondents admitted that educational inequality was a limitation to their professional responsibilities, with a mean of 3.74 (SD 1.15), showing that educational inequality tends to lead to a lack of opportunities to develop skills and advance professionally. In the case of B9, 68% responded that they changed their practice strategies to accommodate inequities in different school settings, with a mean of 3.60 (SD = 1.26), indicating that social workers tend to change their strategies to meet the differing educational requirements. In B10, there was agreement (disagreement and strongly disagree) on 52 %, and a mean score of 2.77 (SD 1.31) indicates that resource inequalities are sometimes problematic and not always evenly spread among respondents. In the context of

B11, 70% agreed (agree and strongly agree), with a mean of 3.71 (SD = 1.22), demonstrating that social workers do not necessarily feel more empowered to take equitable actions due to systemic barriers. Equally, B12 received 69% concurrence and a mean score of 3.73 (SD = 1.16), indicating that socioeconomic disparities among students tend to influence the application of ethical decision-making. In B13, 69 % of the participants concurred that organisational hierarchy limits their promotion of educational justice, with a mean of 3.67 (SD = 1.23), indicating that structural constraints tend to hinder proactive social work activities. Lastly, B14 showed 66% disagreement and a low mean of 2.33 (SD 1.17), meaning that no respondent feels like he/she should receive further ethical training to handle stratification-related situations, which may be because they are confident enough or have been exposed to ethical guidelines in the past.

Table 4 Regression analysis for the impact of Educational stratification on professional responsibilities & ethical decision-making

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.545a	.297	.295	.476

		ANOVA				
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	38.141	1	38.141	168.142	.000b
	Residual	90.283	398	.227		
	Total	128.424	399			

		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	1.634	.167		9.756	.000
	Educational stratification	.226	.059	.198	3.846	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Educational Stratification
b. Predictors: (Constant), Professional responsibilities and ethical decision-making

This model exhibits a moderately positive correlation (R = 0.545) between educational stratification and professional responsibilities. The model has a statistically significant value (F = 168.142, p < .000), with educational stratification explaining approximately 29.7% of the variation in professional responsibilities (R^2 = .297). According to the results provided in the ANOVA, the regression model is statistically significant (F = 168.142, p = .000), which indicates that educational stratification has a significant impact on the process of professional responsibilities. A comparison of the regression sums of squares (38.141) and the residual sum of squares (90.283) reveals that the predictor variable explains a significant portion of the variance in professional responsibilities. The obtained results of the coefficient suggest that there is a strong and positive impact of educational stratification on professional responsibilities (B = .520; b = .545; t = 12.967; p = .000). To this end, one unit of increase in educational stratification is estimated to foresee a growth of professional responsibilities of 0.520 units. The constant (1.619) represents the expected number of professional responsibilities at a level that is constant across educational stratification.
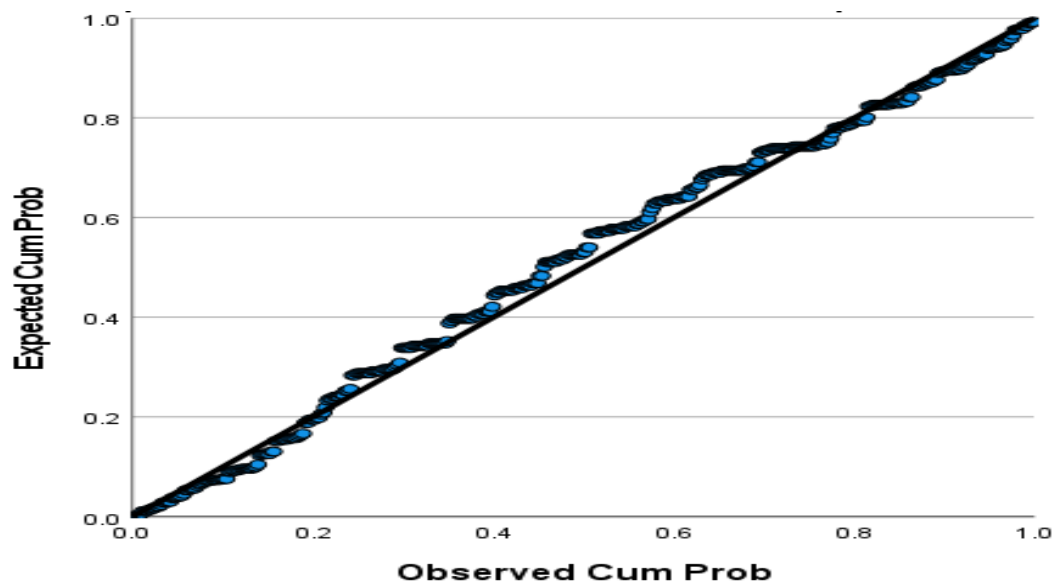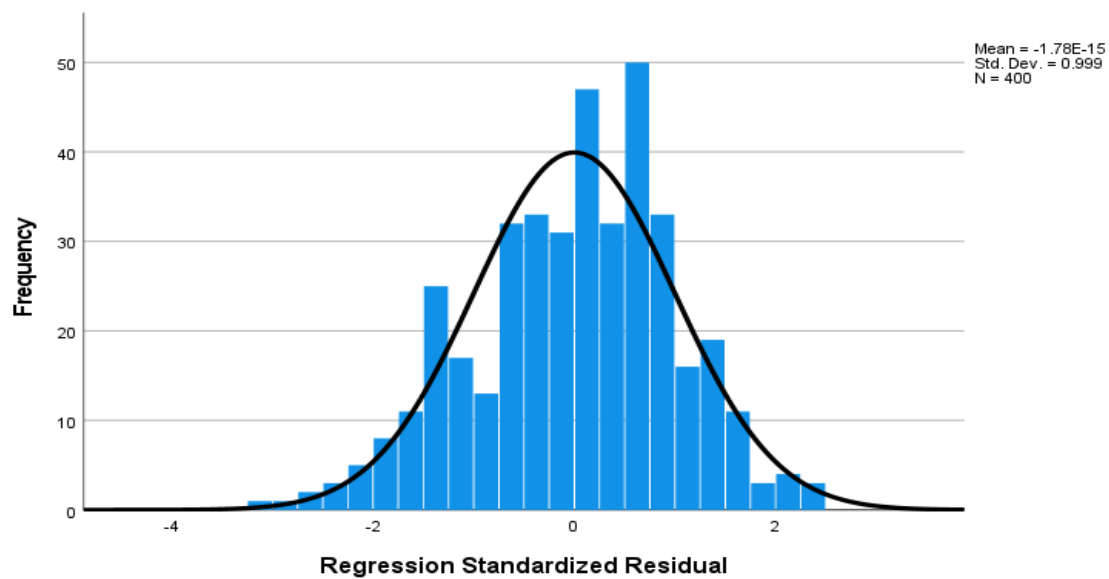
Table 5 Strategies and Ethical Frameworks for Promoting Equity

Please rate the effectiveness of the following strategies in addressing educational stratification.	NE	SE	ME	E	HE	Total	
	%	%	%	%	%	M	St.D
C1 Policy advocacy at local and national levels.	15.5	53.0	12.5	14.2	4.8	2.40	1.06
C2 Community engagement and awareness programs.	21.8	36.5	19.0	16.8	6.0	2.49	1.18
C3 Resource reallocation toward underprivileged schools.	26.8	44.5	9.3	14.8	4.8	2.26	1.15
C4 Training programs on ethics and social justice for educators and social workers.	9.3	28.0	12.3	22.0	28.5	3.33	1.38

C5	Partnerships between public and private schools for resource sharing.	26.8	37.3	6.5	22.3	7.2	2.46 1.29
C6	Legal reforms to ensure equitable education opportunities.	19.3	40.3	5.0	21.5	14.0	2.71 1.37
C7	Integrating anti-oppressive frameworks in school social work practice.	17.3	42.8	11.5	21.3	7.2	2.58 1.20

*Scale: (1 = Not Effective, 2 = Slightly Effective, 3 = Moderately Effective, 4 = Effective, 5 = Highly Effective)

In the case of C1, 15.5 % of the respondents rated the item as not effective, 53.0 % as slightly effective, 12.5 % as moderately effective, 14.2 % as effective, and 4.8 % as highly effective, with a mean score of 2.40 and a standard deviation of 1.06. In the case of C2, the frequency of the rating not effective was 21.8, slightly effective was 36.5, moderately effective was 19.0, occasionally effective was 16.8, and highly effective was 6.0, with a mean and a standard deviation of 2.49 and 1.18, respectively. In C3, 26.8 % indicated it to be not effective, 44.5 % slightly effective, 9.3 % moderately effective, 14.8 % effective, and 4.8 % highly effective, with a mean of 2.26, SD of 1.15. In the case of C4, 9.3 % of the respondents indicated that it was not effective, 28.0 % indicated that it was slightly effective, 12.3 % indicated that it was moderately effective, 22.0 % indicated that it was effective, and 28.5 % indicated that it was highly effective yielding a mean of 3.33 with a standard deviation of 1.38. In C5, the not effective stood at 26.8, slightly, moderately, effective at 37.3, 22.3, respectively and a mean of 2.46 and a standard deviation of 1.29. In the case of C6, it was found that 19.3% was not effective, 40.3% slightly effective, 5.0% moderately effective, 21.5% effective, and 14.0% highly effective, which gave an average of 2.71 and a standard deviation of 1.37. Lastly, C7 provided that 17.3% were not effective, 42.8% moderately and slightly effective, 21.3% effective, and 7.2% highly effective, with a mean of 2.58 and a standard deviation of 1.20.

Findings
Aligned with the first objective, the study identified multiple ethical challenges that social workers face in addressing educational stratification in Pakistan. Institutional resistance to equity initiatives was moderate (M = 3.24), while limited resources—particularly in funding, staffing, and infrastructure—were the most pressing challenge (M = 4.00). Although conflicts between professional ethics and organizational policies (M = 2.27) and cultural norms reinforcing class-based hierarchies (M = 2.21) were less frequent, the fear of backlash for promoting equity (M = 3.80), lack of policy clarity (M = 3.68), and role ambiguity within school systems (M = 4.02) emerged as major ethical concerns. Consistent with the second objective, findings indicated that educational stratification significantly shapes social workers' professional responsibilities and ethical decision-making. Respondents widely agreed that access to education remains influenced by socioeconomic background (M = 3.50) and unequal resource distribution across school types (M = 3.83), while stratification was viewed as a strong barrier to social mobility (M = 3.86) and quality parity (M = 4.03). Regression results confirmed a significant positive relationship between educational stratification and professional responsibilities (R = 0.545, R² = 0.297, p < 0.001), demonstrating that systemic inequities directly affect the professional growth and ethical agency of social workers. Most participants reported adapting their practice strategies to diverse educational contexts (M = 3.60). They acknowledged systemic barriers to implementing equitable interventions (M = 3.71), whereas few expressed the need for further ethical training (M = 2.33). Addressing the third objective, the study found limited confidence in current strategies for promoting educational equity. Respondents rated ethics and social justice training as the most effective

approach (M = 3.33), while policy advocacy, community engagement, and resource reallocation were viewed as only slightly effective (M < 2.5). Overall, the findings reveal that ethical practice in stratified educational systems is constrained primarily by resource scarcity, unclear institutional directives, and role ambiguity, underscoring the need for structured ethical frameworks and systemic reforms to strengthen social workers' capacity for equitable education advocacy.

Discussion

The results of study highlight the complex ethical dilemmas faced by social workers who have to work in a learning environment with structural injustices and unequal distribution of resources. The average degree of institutional resistance and the common lack of funding, staff, and resources are confirming the fact that social workers are working in a limited system that tends to negate their ethical calls to advance social justice (Dominelli, 2018). These findings are consistent with the claims made by Reamer (2018) that the moral tension in professional practice is usually created by systemic barriers, and not an individual failure. On the same note, the saliency of the constraint of resources (M = 4.00) can be traced to the findings of Malik and Javed (2019) where the authors discovered a continuation of social divisions and access to education hindering marginalized students in Punjab through unequal school funding. It was also found that fear of backlash of promoting educational equity and lack of clear guidance policy are also one of the most recalcitrant ethical issues. This result aligns with the results reported by Iqbal (2021), who stated that Pakistani social workers often feel institutional ambivalence and low administrative support in a situation of fighting deep-seated patterns of schooling based on classes. The fact that the role ambiguity is the most rated (M = 4.02) supports the results of Eriksen and Gradovski (2020) who identified that the lack of clarity in professional boundaries within school systems contributes to moral distress and inability to implement proactive ethical decisions. Taken altogether, these findings suggest that structural ambiguity and bureaucratic inertia, as opposed to cultural factors alone, are the key issues in ethical strain in educational social work. In line with the second goal, the findings are that educational stratification plays a crucial role in how social workers behave professionally and think ethically. The result of the regression (R = 0.545, R 2 = 0.297, p < 0.001) indicates that there is a medium-but-significant correlation between stratification and professional responsibilities, and as such, inequitable environments do not only limit resources, but also influence moral agency and occupational identity. This is consistent with the analysis by Mangi, Shah, and Malik (2021), implying that educational stratification puts pressure on coherent professional values and increases the distance between social principles and institutional facts. Comparable findings by Blossfeld and Shavit (2019) in their cross-national study also established that structural inequality in education perpetuates professional and ethical dilemmas in welfare systems. Moreover, the significant proportion of respondents acknowledging that socioeconomic differences affect their ethical decision-making (M = 3.73) resonates with Lev's (2024) work, which documents the link between moral distress and institutional inequity across social service contexts. The divided opinions regarding government favoritism toward private and urban institutions (M = 3.01) suggest contextual complexity and a recognition of uneven reform implementation rather than uniform disillusionment. However, widespread agreement that stratification impedes social mobility (M = 3.86) echoes Mifsud's (2024) argument that unequal schooling perpetuates generational disadvantage. Limited community awareness (M = 2.35) further reveals a gap in public understanding of educational injustice, highlighting the importance of collaborative advocacy efforts.

Aligned with the third objective, the results show that while social workers value ethics and social justice training (M = 3.33) as an effective response, they express less confidence in

policy advocacy, community engagement, and resource redistribution initiatives (M < 2.5). This suggests that most practitioners perceive internal professional responsibilities as more achievable than systemic reform. Such trends are consistent with findings by Ashraf (2020) and Rosvall (2020), who argue that individual advocacy often remains limited in scope and sustainability without institutional support and stakeholder collaboration. On the whole, the results indicate that the mediation of ethical practice in the stratified educational system of Pakistan is promoted by systemic inequities, institutional ambiguity and lack of autonomy. The accumulation of local and international evidence (including that of Reay, 2018, Dominelli, 2018, and Iqbal, 2021) indicates that these issues are not only structural but also moral and, therefore, have to be addressed at multiple levels. In order to advance ethical decision-making and equitable education, social workers should be enabled by defining their roles, participating in the policymaking process, and maintaining professional support systems with a long-term perspective. Moreover, the integration of anti-oppressive and justice-based paradigms into the practice of school social work would help close the gap between policy ideals and real-life experiences, which would eventually empower the role of social work in academic equity.

Conclusion

The study concludes that social workers within the education sector in Pakistan have enduring ethical dilemmas that are based on institutional, structural, and policy inequity levels. Scarcity of resources, unclear policy settings and the presence of unclear professional roles proved to be the most significant barrier to fair practice. Meanwhile, the fear of backlash also becomes another obstacle to justice advocacy in stratified school systems. Stratification in education has been discovered to play a crucial role in determining professional accountability and ethical decision-making and the ability of the social worker to adjust the intervention in an unequal society. Even though practitioners are resilient and adaptive, the way they practice equity is still limited due to the systemic barriers and the lack of institutional support. Its findings highlight the essentiality of professional guidelines, specific policy changes, and ongoing ethics-oriented training to enhance the capacity of social workers to deal with inequality. It is possible to build a more inclusive and ethically responsible framework of addressing marginalized learners in the variety of schooling systems in Pakistan by embedding anti-oppressive and social justice models in both educational policy and practice.

Recommendations

1. Educational departments and school administrations should develop clear ethical and professional guidelines for social workers to reduce role ambiguity and ensure consistent decision-making in addressing educational inequality.

2. Government and educational policymakers should enhance funding and provide targeted ethics and social justice training programs to equip social workers with the skills and resources needed to promote equity within stratified school systems.

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