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### FAVOURITISM IN THE CLASSROOM: A BARRIER TO EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

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### ABSTRACT

Educators are responsible for helping students achieve both academic and character development success. However, in the real world, teachers may sometimes display both positive and negative behaviors. One such negative behavior is favoritism. This report discusses the definition and concept of favoritism in educational settings. Favoritism shown by educators towards certain students can cause others to feel neglected, confused, and demotivated, which may lead to negative effects on their academic performance and emotional well-being. The study also examines several factors that contribute to favoritism, including students' physical appearance and their social and economic backgrounds. Hence, this report also provides recommendations on how to address and reduce favoritism in schools and higher education institutions.

**Keywords:** Favouritism, Teacher behavior, Student motivation, Academic Performance, Emotional Impact, Social background

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Schools and higher education institutions provide formal environments for student development, led by individuals known as educators. An educator, whether a teacher or lecturer, is someone who delivers educational programs, evaluates student participation, and provides leadership in the learning process. They are also seen as second parents who care about their students' future. In modern educational settings, teachers are no longer mere transmitters of knowledge; they have evolved into good friends of students. This transformation encourages students to actively participate in class discussions, express their opinions, and interact with both teachers and peers, thereby enhancing their academic engagement and performance (Wang, 2024). As emphasized by Zurina Zakaria and Ashraf Ismail, educators, particularly Muslim teachers, are expected to embody noble character traits such as fairness, sincerity, and responsibility (Ismail, 2023). Favoritism contradicts the ethical principle of justice, which is a fundamental element in Islamic teacher personality. Although education has gone through many positive developments, challenges remain, including the issue of favoritism by teachers or lecturers towards certain students.

Favoritism means to give undue honor to a person or to show favor to him/her in a matter for which he/she does not have the required abilities and potential. Favoritism leads to the promotion of some incompetent people who are, then, employed in various walks of life (Employee favoritism, 2006). In an educational setting, this could mean a teacher or lecturer offering extra attention or praise to certain students regardless of their actual performance. These actions can make other students feel discouraged, lead to jealousy, and foster an inequitable classroom environment. Over time, favoritism can also reduce honesty in learning and make students less motivated.

Furthermore, favoritism and unfair treatment in education have become a concern both in Malaysia and around the world. For instance, according to Berita Harian (Hasim, 2023), unfair treatment in schools can stop students from reaching their full potential and can create an unfair learning environment. This problem is not only found in schools, but also in universities, where a study by (Uzma Quraishi, Hina Munir, Afrina Afzal, Maryam Saeed, 2021) showed that some teachers and lecturers give special treatment, such as more attention or better marks to students based on their looks or family background. This kind of favoritism can damage the relationship between teachers and students, reduce trust, affect students' motivation, and hurt academic honesty. It also causes inequality and lowers the overall quality of learning. These findings show why favoritism must be taken seriously and handled properly in education.

Thus, this report will discuss the meaning and concept of favoritism in educational settings, describe its effects on students who experience it, explore the possible reasons behind such behavior, and suggest several recommendations to help reduce the issue.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 The Definition of Favoritism

Definition of favouritism: According to Merriam-Webster, the term "favouritism" is defined as "the showing of special favor" or "partiality." This means giving unfair preferential treatment to one person or group over others. It often occurs in situations where personal relationships, biases, or preferences influence decisions, rather than fairness or qualifications.

The Oxford Learner's Dictionaries define "favouritism" (American English) as "the act of unfairly treating one person better than others because you like them more." Both American and British entries emphasize the unfair treatment element.

According to the Islamic perspective, which is Al Iftaa' Jordan, favouritism involves using influence to gain an unfair advantage. Favouritism severely undermines justice, equality, and merit, core values essential for societal progress.

Definition of favouritism in Educational Settings: Teacher favouritism can be defined as a teacher who favors or gives special treatment to a student. A teacher's pet is someone who has won the teacher's favor and thus gets special treatment. While they are remarkably similar, there are very distinct differences between the two.

From the Journal of Social Research Development that written by Khizer Ahmed Zaki, favouritism is a common trend in classrooms as teachers give special treatment to a few students despite not providing their best work, instead because of other reasons, like personal preferences and liking/disliking.

Muhammad et al. (2023) from the Journal of Management Practices, Humanities and Social Sciences define “favouritism is essentially a term associated with inequality, rights, and fairness that are not consistently granted to individuals. Teachers often engage in favouritism through special actions or preferential treatment for selected students.”

Basically, teacher favouritism is a form of educational bias where instructors provide selective and unequal attention, resources, or rewards to particular students based on subjective or personal factors rather than academic performance or fairness. This practice often results in psychological distress, demotivation, and inequality in learning opportunities for other students.

## **2.2 The Concepts of Teacher Favouritism**

### **2.2.1 *Favouritism as Human Bias***

From a psychological perspective, favouritism is often an expression of human nature. Teachers may be naturally drawn to students who resemble them in personality, background, or interests. One school psychologist, for example, noted that athletes often show favouritism because they contribute to school pride and success in extracurricular activities. While such behavior may seem benign, it contributes to an educational environment that values personal alignment over academic fairness and consistency.

### **2.2.2 *Forms and Prevalence of Favouritism***

Teacher favouritism manifests in various forms, often rooted in characteristics unrelated to students’ academic capabilities. Educators may show preference based on gender, ethnicity, previous performance, political beliefs, wealth, family ties, behavior, or even physical appearance. Such biases can be conscious or unconscious and are often influenced by cultural norms and social expectations. For instance, in many public sector universities and classrooms, teachers might favor students with strong family connections or higher social status. These preferences are frequently justified under the guise of classroom rapport or shared interests, but ultimately reflect an inequality that erodes fairness.

### **2.2.3 *Psychological Mechanisms Behind Favouritism***

Favoritism can also be explained by well-documented psychological phenomena. The Pygmalion effect explains how high expectations from teachers can positively influence student performance, while the Golem effect shows how low expectations can hinder it. In addition, halo and horn bias, where teachers’ perceptions of one trait influence their overall assessment of a student, play a significant role in reinforcing favoritism. This bias can cause teachers to misjudge students’ abilities, giving undue praise to some while unfairly criticizing others.

## **2.3 The Effects on Victims**

Favouritism is, without doubt, a poor method of administration. Thus, it destroys hatred among employees, lowers student morale and makes it harder to motivate people to work hard (Tsai, 2022). Thus, it is present in practically all organizations, including education institutions where we work. In other words, it may impact the learning environment in the classroom and students’ learning (Rafiq, Afzal & Kamran, 2022). This could also be brought on by a tendency to gain popularity. In this connection, some students are gifted with the teacher’s kindness and happiness in different circumstances because they are bright, intellectual, as well, and behave nicely (Dagli & Akyol, 2019).

Favouritism in educational settings is not a new phenomenon, but it has received increased attention in recent years as research has shown that it can have negative effects on students’ academic achievement, motivation, and self-esteem (Hussain, Rafiq & Malik, 2020). Studies have shown that students who experience favouritism are likely to have lower grades and less motivation to learn and may also experience negative effects on their self-esteem, leading to poor mental and emotional well-being (Sadique, 2012).

The practice of favoring certain individuals over others based on their connections or unrelated qualities rather than their skills is known as favouritism. Students will be focused and productive if there is a good relationship between teacher and student (Kamran, Afzal & Rafiq, 2022). How a teacher interacts with students both within and outside the classroom can impact how motivated they are to learn (Dagli & Akyol, 2019). Most of the time, teachers are affected by their students’ successes and failures.

A teacher's responsibility is to maintain a conducive classroom environment for learning. When teachers engage in favouritism among students, it negatively impacts classroom management. This favoured behaviour leads to a lack of student participation, resulting in deficiencies in their social skills (Usman, 2019). Teacher actions, such as providing extra favours to specific students, contribute to favouritism. Such activities create a demotivated, unproductive, and unpleasant learning environment, which is undesirable for effective classroom management (Ali, Ashraf & Shuai, 2019).

Additionally, a teacher's non-verbal attitudes, attempts, and behaviour directly influence the classroom climate, a significant factor in classroom management (Johnson, 2009). Students closely connected to teachers socially receive positive attitudes, leading to higher motivation compared to others and impacting classroom management (Mazer, Murphy & Simonds, 2007).

Teachers' positive behaviour towards students creates a conducive environment for performance, while an uninterested attitude makes students inconsistent in their studies (Ulug, Ozden & Eryilmaz, 2011). Equal attention to all students is essential to prevent feelings of stress, anxiety, and an inferiority complex among students, which can negatively impact their psychology (Ali, Ashraf & Shuai, 2019). Teachers must understand student scenarios, stay positive, and influence students positively for better results (Shah, 2009). Discriminatory behaviour by teacher's changes students' behaviour, leading to unfavourable outcomes like depression, anxiety, stress, and meaninglessness (Jiang & Dong, 2020).

A case study through a survey technique on the students of all public sector universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Pakistan) was conducted. Students confirm that the effects of teachers' favouritism on students include mutual trust, mutual respect between student and teacher, boldness, work for favouritism instead of hard work, and an effect on the whole education system. It is also concluded that favouritism affects the academic achievement of the student, as the study reveals that favouritism affects the marks of the hardworking students. The opinions of male and female students regarding different causes and effects of favouritism were similar. In other words, they were agreed with the characteristics and behaviour during instruction and assessment (Ali et al., 2018).

In this era, favouritism is rapidly increasing in the educational sector. Many studies show the positive effect of favouritism on students' psychology. However, there are several studies that don't cover the entire framework. The negative impact of favouritism obliterates students' skills and motivation for study. favouritism is destructive to any student's life, and they may behave strangely with whomever they encounter. Therefore, educational institutes bear the responsibility to understand their students, conduct surveys to know their opinions, treat students fairly, avoid favouritism while grading, and provide equal opportunities for students to showcase their abilities and encourage participation in various activities (Muhammad et al., 2023).

## 2.4 The Reasons and Factors Behind the Favouritism

**Student Success:** Building a positive relationship between teachers and students helps students become more successful and have increased motivation (Al-Houli, 1999; Bhushan, 1985). A teacher's relationships with students both within and outside the classroom affect their attitudes towards and motivation for that class (McGarity & Butts, 1984). However, teachers are sometimes affected by student success or failure. More precisely, teachers may criticize less successful students more harshly and have less contact with them, thus breaking their motivation to learn. On the other hand, they may perceive certain other students as more successful and hence develop a more positive attitude towards them, which ultimately supports them in gaining more success (Jussim, Smith, Madon & Palumbo, 1998).

**Social and Economic Status:** Another influential factor in teacher favouritism is the social class to which students belong. Students from a middle-class background are observed to be better favored than those from a lower-class background (Jussim et al., 1998). In studies conducted on primary school teachers, it was found that whenever teachers were knowledgeable about students' socio-economic background, they were also behaving in favor of those from higher social classes (Ozturk, Sahin, and Koc, 2002). Sprinthall and Sprinthall (1990) state that in cases where students belong to a lower social class than the teacher, the result may be teacher favouritism for students who come from a similar background to themselves.

**Physical Appearance:** Starting from pre-school, teachers have been observed to evaluate student talent relying solely on their physical features. At the very least, they build their first impression on students' physical appearance and favor those who are better-looking (Jussim et al., 1998; Dusek and Joseph, 1983). A correlation has been reported in the literature between the perceived attractiveness of a student by the teacher and perceived academic intelligence (Tauber, 1997). Investigating with 17 teachers and 400 middle school students whether physical attractiveness-based teacher expectations are reflected in student grades, Felson (1980) found that physically attractive students were thought to be

more talented and thus assigned higher grades, and further, he concluded that physically unattractive students were openly discriminated against (Tauber, 1997). Similarly, in a different study conducted on female primary school, high school, and college students, physically attractive students were found to get better grades (Ritts et.al., 1992).

**Gender:** Gender is an inborn and easily understandable characteristic. Sometimes teachers may be influenced by the gender of a student. Female teachers may tend to favor male students, and male teachers may favor female students. The opposite, that is, favoring the students of the same gender, is also a common tendency. Various psychological or social reasons may underlie such teacher behavior. Unconsciously or not, we cannot deny the fact that teachers usually tend to give special attention to boys. What is worse, boys somehow seem too notice that and start to assume a controlling attitude, interrupting girls and demanding more from teachers (Vicente, 1999).

**Familiarity between Student and Teacher or Student's Family and Teacher:** Teachers may sometimes be the guardian, relative, or family friend of the student. favouritism is highly probable in such cases. In her paper, Mechtenberg (2006), states "I consider a one shot cheap talk game with two different type of senders (biased teachers and fair teachers), two types of receivers ("normal" and "special pupils") and uncertainty about the sender type on the side of the receiver. I demonstrate that the group of pupils who, in expectation, get either too much or too little encouragement will have less top achievers and a lower average achievement than the group of pupils who get a more accurate feedback message, even if the prior talent distribution is the same for both groups of pupils". I assume that the discriminatory behavior has its roots in the preferences of those who exhibit this behavior. I personally think that "special pupils" are either favorites or victims of discrimination. Their talents may blur with being the teacher's favorite.

**Paralleism between the Ideology (Political or Religious) of students or Their Family and The Teacher:** Teachers may favor certain students with whom they share a certain political view, religion, or sect. In such circumstances, they may give better grades to those who share their view, or they may give worse grades to those who support another view or belong to a different religion or sect. It is believed that in the Middle Eastern countries, favouritism and nepotism are regarded as part of everyday life. According to a survey done by the Coalition for Accountability and Integrity (AMAN), 32 % of those surveyed indicated that they were asked to intervene, or one of their family members or their friends was asked to intervene, so that somebody could acquire a job (The Coalition for Accountability and Integrity, 2004)

### 3 RECOMMENDATIONS

#### A. Recommendations based on research findings

Drawing upon the findings from various scholarly studies, several comprehensive measures are recommended to address the issue of teacher favouritism among university students. These measures aim to reduce the negative psychological, academic, and social effects that favouritism imposes on students in higher education environments.

Firstly, universities and other higher learning institutions must implement continuous professional development programs focused on unconscious bias and fair treatment practices for educators. As highlighted by Arshad (2023), favouritism significantly damages students' intrinsic motivation towards academic engagement. Teachers who unconsciously or deliberately favour certain students based on personal preferences, gender or social status contribute to an imbalanced learning environment. Therefore, bias-awareness training should be made a mandatory part of faculty development to help lecturers reflect critically on their classroom behaviour and decision-making processes.

Secondly, institutions should establish confidential, anonymous and easily accessible feedback systems for students to report experiences of unfair treatment. Arshad (2023) also recommends that academic departments actively seek feedback from students regarding classroom favouritism which could be collected through semesterly surveys or digital platforms. This will not only empower students to voice their concerns without fear of retaliation but also provide valuable data for administrators to address recurring issues and improve teaching practices.

Furthermore, the creation and enforcement of clear institutional policies against favouritism are essential. Ali et al. (2018) argued that favouritism in the classroom can erode students' sense of trust and motivation and even harm peer relationships. A well-documented anti-favouritism policy should define inappropriate conduct, provide guidelines for equitable teaching and outline consequences for violations. These policies should be visibly communicated to both faculty and students to foster a transparent and fair academic culture.

Finally, student evaluations of teachers' performance should incorporate specific indicators that assess fairness and inclusivity. Zaki et al. (2023) emphasized the need for objective data to identify possible patterns of discrimination. Classroom observations, peer reviews and anonymous student ratings can be used in combination to ensure that teachers are held accountable to equitable standards of teaching. By integrating these tools into institutional monitoring processes, schools can proactively identify problematic behaviours and take corrective actions where necessary.

## **B. Suggestions for further research and additional perspectives**

While the recommendations are grounded in current research findings, there are additional aspects that have been relatively underexplored and deserve further investigation in future academic inquiries.

One such aspect is the role of parents and guardians in supporting fair and inclusive values in educational settings. While most studies primarily focus on the teacher-student dynamic, little attention is given to how attitudes instilled at home may influence students' expectations and perceptions of fairness in the classroom. Further research could explore the extent to which parental attitudes toward competition, social bias and authority affect how students experience favouritism.

Secondly, the concept of peer monitoring could be introduced as a means of creating collective responsibility in maintaining fairness. While most studies focus on teachers, empowering students to safely report unfair treatment among peers may be an effective strategy in building a culture of equity.

Lastly, comparative studies on favouritism across different cultural and educational contexts would be valuable. As Dağlı and Akyol (2019) and Hussain et al. (2019) noted, perceptions of favouritism may vary based on societal norms, institutional policies, and leadership approaches. Cross-cultural research could shed light on how favouritism is perceived and addressed globally.

## **4 CONCLUSION**

To conclude, favouritism among teachers or lecturers is a serious issue that can affect students in many ways. It can reduce their motivation, make them feel left out, and even harm the learning environment. Arshad (2023) found that there is a strong link between favouritism and lower motivation to learn. When students feel they are not being treated fairly, they may stop trying their best in class.

Ali et al. (2018) also explained that favouritism can "kill the spirit" of a class, meaning it can damage teamwork and the sense of trust among students. This shows that favouritism is not just a small problem, but one that can affect the whole classroom experience.

Because of this, schools need to take steps to reduce favouritism. These include giving training to teachers, setting up feedback systems, creating clear policies, and monitoring teaching practices. Everyone, including teachers, students, parents, and school leaders, has a role to play in making the learning space fair and welcoming.

If we all work together, we can create an environment where every student feels valued, supported, and treated equally.

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## **6 CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in the paper.

## 7 AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Author 1 contributed to the conceptualization, research design, and writing of the original draft.

Author 2 was responsible for data collection, analysis, and validation of the results.

Author 3 provided supervision, critical review, and editing of the final manuscript.[]

## 8 ETHICS STATEMENT

[This research was conducted by the ethical standards of Universiti Poly-Tech Malaysia and adhered to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethical Board under reference number **[not applicable]**. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided written informed consent prior to participation. Participants' privacy and confidentiality were strictly maintained, and data collected were used solely for academic purposes. ]

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