

Favoritism in The Classroom: A Barrier to Educational Equity

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ABSTRACT

Teacher favouritism remains a significant issue in educational settings because it can affect students' academic experiences, emotional well-being, and perceptions of fairness. This narrative review examines teacher favouritism, its contributing factors, and its implications for educational equity. The review synthesised relevant literature from educational and social science contexts thematically to explore the psychological, social, and institutional dimensions of favouritism in classrooms and higher education. The review identifies several contributing factors, including students' academic performance, physical appearance, socioeconomic background, gender, familiarity with teachers, and ideological similarities. The findings further indicate that favouritism may negatively affect student motivation, classroom Participation, emotional health, academic achievement, and teacher–student relationships. In addition, the review highlights how favouritism can weaken trust, create unequal learning opportunities, and contribute to an unhealthy classroom climate. This paper also discusses several recommendations to reduce favouritism, including bias-awareness training, transparent institutional policies, student feedback mechanisms, and equitable teaching practices. Overall, the study emphasises the importance of fairness, inclusivity, and professional ethics in fostering a supportive educational environment that promotes equal opportunities for all students.

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 educators. An educator, whether a teacher or lecturer, 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 viewed solely as transmitters of knowledge but also as facilitators of supportive and student-centred learning environments. This evolving educational role encourages greater student engagement, Participation, and academic interaction (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). Teacher favouritism contradicts the principles of fairness, professional ethics, and educational equity. Although education has undergone many positive developments, challenges remain, including 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 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 discourage other students, spark jealousy, and foster an inequitable classroom environment. Over time, favoritism can also undermine honesty in learning and reduce students' motivation.

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, and 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 favoritism can damage teacher-student relationships, reduce trust, affect students' motivation, and undermine 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.

Accordingly, this paper uses a narrative review to examine teacher favouritism in educational settings, analyse its effects on students, explore the contributing psychological and social factors, and discuss strategies to reduce educational inequality and promote fairness in the classroom.

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 when 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 element of unfair treatment. From the Islamic perspective of 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 is when a teacher 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, the two differ in important ways. According to the Journal of Social Research Development, Khizer Ahmed Zaki notes that favouritism is common in classrooms, as teachers give special treatment to a few students despite not receiving their best work; instead, they do so for other reasons, such as 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." Existing literature consistently conceptualises teacher favouritism as a form of educational inequality characterised by preferential treatment based on subjective or non-academic factors. Previous studies have linked this behaviour to fairness concerns, classroom bias, and unequal learning opportunities (Muhammad et al., 2023; Zaki et al., 2023). Teacher favouritism is a form of educational bias in which 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 leads to psychological distress, demotivation, and unequal learning opportunities for other students.

2.2 The Concepts of Teacher Favouritism

2.2.1 Favouritism as Human Bias

From a psychological perspective, favouritism often reflects 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 takes many 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 biases, in which 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. It destroys trust 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 educational institutions where we work. In other words, it may affect the classroom learning environment and students' learning (Rafiq, Afzal, & Kamran, 2022). This may also stem from a tendency to gain popularity. In this context, some students benefit from the teacher's kindness and favour in various circumstances because they are bright, intellectually capable, and behave well (Dagli & Akyol, 2019).

Favouritism in educational settings is not new, but it has received increased attention in recent years, as research shows it can negatively affect 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).

Favouritism is the practice of favouring certain individuals over others based on connections or unrelated qualities rather than skills. 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 inside and outside the classroom can affect their motivation to learn (Dagli & Akyol, 2019). Teachers are often 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 who are socially connected to teachers show more positive attitudes and higher motivation than those who are not, which affects classroom management (Mazer, Murphy & Simonds, 2007).

Teachers' positive behaviour towards students creates a conducive environment for performance, whereas an uninterested attitude leads to inconsistent study among students (Ulug, Ozden & Eryilmaz, 2011). Equal attention to all students is essential to prevent stress, anxiety, and an inferiority complex, which can negatively affect their psychological well-being (Ali, Ashraf & Shuai, 2019). Teachers must understand students' situations, remain positive, and positively influence students to achieve better results (Shah, 2009). Discriminatory behaviour by teachers changes students' behaviour, leading to unfavourable outcomes like depression, anxiety, stress, and meaninglessness (Jiang & Dong, 2020).

A case study using a survey technique was conducted among students of all public sector universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Pakistan). Students confirmed that the effects of teachers' favouritism include a lack of mutual trust and respect between students and teachers, boldness, working for favouritism rather than hard work, and an effect on the whole education system. It is also concluded that favouritism affects students' academic achievement, as the study reveals that it lowers the marks of hardworking students. The opinions of male and female students regarding different causes and effects of favouritism were similar. In other words, they 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, several studies 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 institutions are responsible for understanding their students, conducting surveys to gather their opinions, treating students fairly, avoiding favouritism in grading, and providing equal opportunities for students to showcase their abilities and to participate 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 achieve greater success and 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 the 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, which can break their motivation to learn. On the other hand, they may perceive certain students as more successful and develop a more positive attitude toward them, which ultimately helps them achieve greater success (Jussim, Smith, Madon & Palumbo, 1998).

Social and Economic Status: Another influential factor in teacher favouritism is students' social class. Students from middle-class backgrounds are observed to be favored more than those from lower-class backgrounds (Jussim et al., 1998). Studies with primary school teachers found that when teachers knew students' socio-economic backgrounds, they also favored those from higher social classes (Ozturk, Sahin, and Koc, 2002). Sprinthall and Sprinthal (1990) state that when students belong to a lower social class than the teacher, the result may be teacher favouritism for students from a similar background.

Physical Appearance: From pre-school onward, teachers have been observed to evaluate students' talent solely on their physical features. At the very least, they form first impressions based on students' physical appearance and favour those who are better-looking (Jussim et al., 1998; Dusek & Joseph, 1983). The literature reports a correlation between a student's perceived attractiveness to 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 among female primary school, high school, and college students, physically attractive students earned higher grades (Ritts et al., 1992).

Gender: Gender is an inborn and easily understandable characteristic. Sometimes, teachers may be influenced by a student's gender. 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 factors may underlie this behavior. Whether consciously or not, we cannot deny that teachers tend to give special attention to boys. Worse, boys seem to notice this and begin to adopt 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 student's guardian, relative, or family friend. Favouritism is highly probable in such cases. In her paper, Mechtenberg (2006) states, "I consider a one-shot cheap talk game with two different types 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 be overshadowed by 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).

Although previous studies have extensively discussed the causes and effects of teacher favouritism, limited narrative reviews have synthesised these findings within broader discussions of educational equity and institutional ethics, particularly in higher education contexts.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 Recommendations based on research findings

Based on the findings synthesised from previous studies, several measures are proposed to address teacher favouritism in higher education settings. Several comprehensive measures are recommended to address 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 Arshad (2023) highlights, favouritism significantly undermines students' intrinsic motivation to engage academically. 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 student feedback on 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 administrators with valuable data to address recurring issues and improve teaching practices.

Furthermore, creating and enforcing clear institutional policies against favouritism is 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.

3.2 Suggestions for further research and additional perspectives

While the recommendations are grounded in current research findings, additional aspects remain underexplored and warrant 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 how parental attitudes toward competition, social bias, and authority affect students' experiences of favouritism.

Second, the concept of peer monitoring could be introduced to create collective responsibility for 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 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 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 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.

All authors have read and approved the final version of the 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 of the study's purpose and provided written informed consent before participating. We strictly maintained participants' privacy and confidentiality, and used the collected data solely for academic purposes.

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