

Exploring Teacher–Student Favoritism in University Classrooms: A Qualitative Inquiry into Students’ Learning Experiences

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore teacher favoritism and its impact on students’ learning outcomes at the university level from the perspectives of students. Teacher favoritism, manifested through preferential treatment based on personal liking, disliking, or subjective preferences rather than academic merit, is a prevalent issue in higher education classrooms. The study sought to understand how students perceive teacher favoritism and how such practices influence their academic engagement, emotional well-being, and learning experiences. The research was guided by an interpretivist paradigm and employed a qualitative research approach to gain in-depth insights into students’ lived experiences. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in public sector universities in Multan. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who had experienced or observed teacher favoritism in university classrooms. The collected data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and meanings. Findings revealed that teacher favoritism negatively affects students’ learning outcomes by fostering feelings of insecurity, dissatisfaction, reduced self-confidence, and emotional distress. Participants reported that favoritism creates a biased and demotivating classroom environment, leading to conflicts among students and decreased academic participation. Moreover, perceived unfairness in assessment and classroom interactions weakened students’ trust in teachers and hindered their overall learning process. The study concludes that teacher favoritism undermines equitable learning opportunities and adversely affects the academic and emotional development of university students. It recommends that university teachers adopt fair, transparent, and inclusive instructional practices to promote a positive classroom climate and enhance student learning outcomes.

Key Words

Teacher–Student Favoritism, University Classrooms, Students’ Learning Experience

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How to Cite

Saleem, A., & Akhtar, Z. (2025). Exploring Teacher–Student Favoritism in University Classrooms: A Qualitative Inquiry into Students’ Learning Experiences. *The Knowledge*, 4(4), 120-133. <https://doi.org/10.55737/tk/2k25d.44111>

Introduction

There is a widespread problem of favoritism between teachers and students, known as teacher bias, particularly in university settings. The term bias refers to the practice of educators treating certain students more favorably than others, often based on factors such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, and personal relationships. Favoritism can adversely affect the learning outcomes of students who are not favored by their teachers. This study examines

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the impact of teacher-student favoritism on the learning outcomes of students at the university level. According to this study, teacher-student favoritism in universities is prevalent, it takes many forms, and it negatively impacts student performance. The practice of favoritism is, without a doubt, a poor method of administration. The result is a decrease in employee morale, a decrease in student motivation, and a more difficult time motivating individuals to work hard (Murad & Anwar, 2024). Therefore, it is a prevalent problem within almost all organizations, including educational institutions where we work. There is also the possibility that it may have an impact on the classroom learning environment as well as on student learning (Zaki et al., 2023). There is also the possibility that this is the result of a tendency to gain popularity. Teachers' kindness and happiness are gifted to some students in different circumstances because they are bright, intelligent, and behave well (Tsai, 2022).

It is only their teachers who are able to see what other students are doing. There is no doubt that favoritism is not a new phenomenon within educational settings, but it has received increased attention over the past few years due to research showing that it may negatively affect students' academic achievement, motivation, and self-esteem (Zaki et al., 2023). According to studies, students who have experienced favoritism tend to have lower grades and less motivation to learn, as well as reduced self-esteem, which can lead to poor mental and emotional health (Ali et al., 2018). The issue of teacher-student favoritism is a contemporary problem in the Pakistani educational environment, and one of the factors that contribute to the phenomenon is the high student to teacher ratio in the country, as well as the lack of resources that supported the development of the given problem. In addition, sociocultural factors, such as family affiliations and socioeconomic status, can also contribute to the increased use of preferential treatment.

Favoritism occurs when people are given favoritism on the basis of their connections or other extraneous attributes and not on merit. Empirical evidence shows that a positive teacher-learner relationship leads to the increased focus and effectiveness of learners (Mostafaei Alaei & Alaei, 2023). Motivation among learners in and outside the classroom is also determined by the character of interaction between the teachers and the students (Hein, 2012). The outcomes of students, therefore, often have a drastic impact on the teachers.

Teachers tend to warning students with lower cognitive levels, which undermines their motivation to learn. They also believe that some students are capable and adopt supportive approaches towards them, which leads to increased success for these students. There is also evidence that social class influences favoritism in classrooms (Khan et al., 2023). Low socioeconomic students, for example, receive less attention than high socioeconomic students. There is no preference given to students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds by the teachers in these connections. A teacher gives preference only to students with similar backgrounds to his or her own. Favoritism is also significantly influenced by gender. According to Bayram et al. (2024), teachers tend to prefer students of the opposite gender. In contrast, female teachers tend to favor male students, and male teachers tend to favor female students. Students of the same gender are also frequently preferred by teachers. Social and psychological factors also influence the conduct of students. There is a growing trend among teachers to prefer guys over girls. This has led to boys developing an authoritarian attitude toward girls and demanding more from their teachers (Cömert & Ergör, 2025).

Teachers may also take into account the student's characteristics when evaluating them exclusively. First, they judged people by their outward appearance, and then they began to prefer certain students and continued to do so. It is common for them to give priority to students who are attractive in particular. Considering the limited examples from certain books, it is clear that favoritism is a serious problem in our educational system. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to determine whether any findings are consistent with these previously discovered facts (Erdem et al., 2020). Moreover, teachers tend to dislike athletes in their schools due to the fact that it is obvious that athletes are also common students like others (Muhammad et al., 2023). There are many aspects to gender inequality. It is

necessary to work on the basis of equality in order to resolve the issue. A teacher's ethics are governed by a set of ethical principles. Most teachers are instructed to obtain basic information regarding school rules and discipline. It is common for ethical dilemmas to arise in these situations. (Moral code ethics, ethics educators). Behavioral characteristics are described in terms of their ability to benefit diverse classes in society (Mostafaei Alaei & Alaei, 2023). The behavior that a person exhibits when choosing a group in a society is implicitly directed towards their in-groups and more strongly directed against their out-groups. Cultures around the world have a tendency to display more favoritism towards members of their own in-group (Rasheed & Sittar, 2025).

Students' learning outcomes are negatively affected, education quality is negatively affected, and academic progress of students is hampered as a result of favoritism in Pakistani universities. Favoritism toward particular students based on relationships or other factors other than academics undermines fair and equal educational opportunities for all students. As a result, academic standards have declined and students are less motivated. It is common for individuals to be treated differently based on their gender. Race may also be a factor in determining whether a person is favored or treated differently. Racial discrimination may result as a result of unequal treatment in school, grades, and marks. . It undermines the values of justice and equality and forms a social rift wherein the instructors give special treatment to the pupils due to their religious or cultural affiliation, thus generating disparities in the access to support and opportunities. The effects of such a policy are not limited to division, but also to the poor academic results and general quality of education. Favoritism in the academic world is an antithesis to the principles of equal opportunity and fairness, and it may produce a long-term adverse impact on the well-being of students and their academic performance. The universities in Pakistan should deal with this dilemma so that they can have a just and equitable educational system among all the students.

Research Questions

- Q1: Have you ever observed or experienced favoritism from a teacher? Can you describe the situation?
- Q2: How do you define or recognize "favoritism" in the classroom?
- Q3: In your opinion, what behaviors or actions by teachers indicate favoritism?
- Q4: Can you share any experience where favoritism positively or negatively affected your learning?
- Q5: How does favoritism influence your relationship with peers or the classroom environment?
- Q6: Does favoritism affect your confidence in learning or academic abilities?
- Q7: What do you think teachers can do to ensure fairness in the classroom?
- Q8: How can students cope with situations where they feel unfairly treated?
- Q9: Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience or views on teachers' favoritism?

Literature Review

A person who belongs to an in-group feels safe. The abuse suffered by Spears athletes and their poor mental health contributed to their feeling of insecurity at colleges. There may be a feeling of unease among students if there is a lack of communication. There was an evident sense of unease among students as a result of the distance between the teacher and them. There is an inquiry regarding students' lack of confidence in him that teachers should be aware of. It is possible to reach this conclusion through a simple class discussion. It may be necessary for the teacher to speak with students to remove any reluctance on their part. There is evidence indicating that favoritism can have long-term negative effects on the psychological well-being of a child or student, particularly in children who may be suffering from mental disorders (Mostafaei Alaei & Alaei, 2023). A young person's psychological impact caused by favoritism will always last a long time. It is imperative to understand that a toddler's perspective is everything, as he interprets things according to the way he perceives them. Sadness, frailty, and low self-esteem may be more prevalent among those who are less privileged. There is a tendency for students to be depressed

because they do not have the opportunity to develop their personalities or establish their reputations. As a result, if a child appears unhappy, it may be due to the fact that they have been given the opportunity to achieve goals they had previously dreamed about but had not been able to achieve (Sakçak et al., 2023).

Despite the fact that some teachers admit to favoritism when questioned, it is up to the students to decide how the teacher's secret compartment is perceived by them (Cömert & Ergör, 2025). Due to the fact that Chinese's basic message is that a good-looking individual has more possibilities in life, it is imperative that we know all the information and desires that students convey to us. Classroom management begins with the teacher's attitude and manner. Students appreciate teachers' attitudes, feelings, and actions. Both students and teachers know favoritism in certain situations, and it is a concern that has significant consequences for students' behavior (Muhammad et al., 2023). As a young child, it develops relatively early. Despite having good marks and grades, I was the teacher's favorite, but other students did not see it that way (Barney et al., 2019). It is well known that in the classroom, partiality is manifested when teachers extend due dates for tasks to accommodate their preferred students. This was demonstrated by his teaching colleague's actions. She repeatedly referred to him as the most attractive person in the class and clearly showed favoritism towards him.

Favoritism may result in a department or class losing its spirit, making it difficult for the team to work together effectively. Favoritism destroys teams of individuals who have previously worked together to break records. Favoritism has a significant impact on students who share the teacher's background (Bünyamin, 2023). The influence of gender on favoritism is also important to consider, as it is a significant factor in the determination of productivity and outcomes. Systemic disfunction contributes to demotivated teamwork, resulting in dysfunctional teams as a result. Superiors' preferences are intended to maintain a balance within the organization rather than to maintain individual preferences within it. Dynamic personalities are crucial to the successful functioning of a team. The legislation may undermine equality, and a large number of people may suffer harm based on their religion, location, or any other factor. Both teachers and students are aware of the importance of the attitudes, feelings, and actions of their teachers. There is a concern about favoritism that has a significant impact on how students behave, and both parties are aware of this problem. It is also common in this situation for instructors to favor their students, resulting in poor relationships and an inability to collaborate (Shafi et al., 2024).

The term gender discrimination refers to the practice of giving one gender preferential treatment over the other. There is no difference between men and women when it comes to the effects of this negative factor. There has been a long history of gender inequality which has resulted in discrimination against women and favoritism towards men. There is now a diligent approach being taken to resolve the issue (Bayram et al., 2024). Teachers may also be affected by gender in certain circumstances. A male teacher tends to favor female students, whereas a female teacher tends to favor male students. On the other hand, it is possible to observe the opposite trend. It has been found that children who are three years of age prefer to spend time with peers of the same gender under a variety of circumstances. It is more common for them to play with other people of the same gender in these relationships than it is for them to play with people of different genders. The results of previous studies show that all teachers and students were correctly tagged, and that the majority of students were male, while the majority of staff were female (Fatima & Miran, 2023).

The Hispanic population has historically had a higher dropout rate than other groups, suggesting that race may play a role in the educational favoritism experienced by Hispanics. In this regard, prejudice may occasionally be characterized as a psychological phenomenon, as perpetrators may be unaware that their actions are discriminatory (Bayram et al, 2024). Prejudice is strongly influenced by a student's social background and class. Students from higher levels are given preference over students from lower levels. This study was conducted in primary schools where teachers have a greater understanding of students' backgrounds (Bünyamin, 2023).

The teacher has an ethical responsibility to ensure that students are treated fairly and equally in the classroom, regardless of gender, social class, or ethnicity. Despite adhering to all of these moral rules, favoritism remains prevalent in our society. Favoritism refers to the process of favoring one person over another for irrational reasons, such as language, location, nationality, or religious beliefs. Therefore, it poses the threat of undermining equality and harming a large number of individuals, regardless of their religion or place of residence. According to Aristotle, equals should be treated equally and unequal ought to be treated unequally. The same teacher may be assigned to students of different ethnic, religious, social, or linguistic backgrounds, but they cannot be considered exceptional students (Rasheed & Sittar, 2025). Teachers are responsible for selecting students who are most interesting to them. Kuppens & Langer (2022) states that they tend to favor children who are from the same neighborhood, region, religion, socioeconomic class, and sect as themselves.

Methodology

For the conduct of this study, the researcher followed Saunders' Research Onion. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives of university students regarding the impact of attire on teaching performance, an interpretive philosophical approach was adopted. Through an inductive methodology, qualitative data was collected to develop a theory as a result of the research process. In order to gain a deep understanding of how attire affects teacher performance at the university level, the researcher used an interview strategy. The study was cross-sectional and took place over a clearly defined period of time. A content validity test and an inter-rater reliability test were used to ensure the validity and reliability of the interview. In this study, women universities (WUMs) and Bahauddin Zakariya University (BZU), Multan have served as the participants of this study. A purposive sampling strategy was used to make sure that the people sampled were rich, relevant and diverse in the insights that they had on the research questions. The interviews with the students of both institutions were carried out and were 20 individual interviews. There were seven open-ended questions in each interview that were aimed to provide deeper data. The researcher conducted personal interviews with the students of both universities after which the data have been analyzed using NVivo. Moreover, a word cloud was created to provide a graphic depiction of the text information.

Results of the Study

Q1: Have you ever observed or experienced favoritism from a teacher? Can you describe the situation?

Figure 1

Word Cloud for Observed or Experienced Favoritism from a Teacher



Figure 1 illustrates the perceptions that respondents have as well as their experiences in relation to teacher favoritism. Prominence, magnitude and frequency as illustrated in the word cloud is associated with the frequency the participants mentioned specific concepts and experiences.

The salient words used in the word cloud are students, teacher, favoritism and participate / participation. They are very prominent and it shows that respondents perceive favoritism as a teacher induced phenomenon that has

a direct effect on student involvement in the classroom. Selective participation is often associated with favoritism as some students are given more chances to speak, more preferential treatment in responding to questions, or more of being given a chance to participate in classroom activities in comparison to the other pupils.

The reiteration of words like preferred, favored, giving, opportunities, praise and attention shows that favoritism is known to be rampant. According to the respondents, teachers are seen to reward specific students with more generosity than others regardless of their objective performance measures. Clearly, favoritism can be realized in terms of assessments and on a daily basis of pedagogical relations.

They feel that they are being treated unfairly, because they have been given leniency on the grading, given extra time or given flexibilities on assignments hence discarding evaluations based on merit.

Such favoritism triggers psychological and academic negative effects as indicated by the use of words like negative, confidence, discouragement, mistakes and performance. Students who are treated unfairly perceive that they are being discouraged, and their self-confidence is destroyed, and developed unwillingness to commit mistakes. On the other hand, popular children are likely to receive overvaluation.

Besides, students consider favoritism as institutional and not incidental, which is indicated by words such as: personal, frequent, group and academic. Favoritism can be used to provide benefits to a unified group of students over a period of time based on personal tendencies, familiarity and personal relationships.

Collectively, students define teacher favoritism as a repetitive, visible event in the classroom that involves unequal chances of participation, bias attention and biased academic treatment. Favoritism at the university level is considered a salient factor of classroom equity, student motivation and student learning outcomes. In order to foster a sense of equality and mistrust in the learning environment, the instructors should embrace transparent, inclusive, and objective pedagogies.

Q2: How do you define or recognize “favoritism” in the classroom?

Figure 2

Word Cloud for Recognizing Favoritism in the Classroom



Word cloud depicted that students who receive more academic opportunities, encouragement, and attention than others are consistently favored. Favoritism is often observed through unequal distribution of tasks, group work, and classroom involvement through words like assignments, opportunities, class, and activities. The terms frequent, always, and consistently demonstrate that students recognize favoritism through repeated patterns of biased behavior, not isolated events. Teachers may overlook the errors of favored students while being stricter on those who aren't favored, and fail to acknowledge the efforts of those who aren't favored. Students also associate favoritism with lowered motivation and feeling undervalued through words like feel, negatively, and confident. According to the word cloud, favoritism affects both academic and emotional outcomes in a classroom and is perceived as consistent, noticeable preference.

Q3: In your opinion, what behaviors or actions by teachers indicate favoritism?

Figure 3

Word Cloud for Indication of Teachers' Favoritism

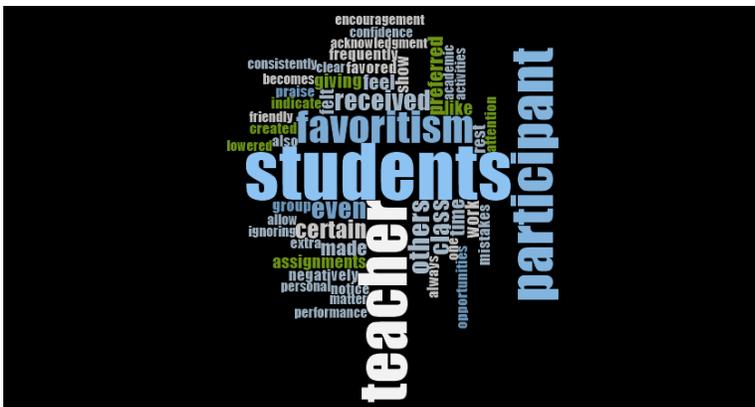


Teachers' favoritism is associated with students' unequal treatment, as indicated by the word cloud. Teachers, students, participants, and favoritism are the most prominent terms used to highlight that favoritism is primarily understood as biased teacher behavior. Participants view favoritism as teachers giving special attention, opportunities, or positive acknowledgment to select students while neglecting the rest through words like preferred, favored, certain, and others. There are terms like assignments, opportunities, group, class, and activities that suggest favoritism is visible through unequal academic advantages, like easier tasks, more participation opportunities, or extra help. Those participating in the study interpreted favoritism by overlooking mistakes of favored individuals or frequently praising them while ignoring mistakes of others. Favoritism affects students' self-esteem and classroom experience through emotions such as feeling, confidence, and negativity. A word cloud shows that participants identify favoritism through repeated inequalities among teachers.

Q4: Can you share any experience where favoritism positively or negatively affected your learning?

Figure 4

Word Cloud for Positive or Negative Affect of Favoritism on Learning



Students' experiences of favoritism are strongly influenced by terms such as favoritism, teacher, and participant. Teachers' behavior shapes participants' emotional and academic experiences with favoritism. Those who were positively treated and those who were overlooked are clearly distinguished by certain, others, preferred, and favored. Their lack of favoritism had negative effects on their emotions and academics, such as demotivation, low confidence, ignoring, and mistakes. Praise, encouragement, and acknowledgement may also boost students' confidence or motivation. Assignments, groups, classes, and opportunities were influenced by favoritism. Students' confidence and participation are negatively affected by unequal treatment by teachers.

The results from Q2 and Q3 further illustrate that students recognize favoritism through consistent patterns of biased behavior over time, such as overlooking mistakes of certain peers or granting them unjust academic privileges, rather than through single events. This is consistent with broader literature on teacher bias which suggests that individual teacher predispositions and classroom management decisions can systematically advantage some students over others. (Bayram et al., 2024).

Regarding emotional and academic outcomes assessed in Q4 and Q6, students reported diminished confidence, reduced motivation, and decreased class participation when experiencing unfavorable treatment. These outcomes are consistent with findings from university-level studies that link teacher favoritism to diminished student self-confidence, increased dissatisfaction, and poorer learning outcomes (Zaki et al., 2023).

The influence of favoritism on peer relationships and classroom climate, as shown in Q5, further aligns with research suggesting that biased teacher behaviors do not only affect individual students but also disrupt collaborative learning processes and collective engagement. When students feel overlooked, they withdraw from group activities, consistent with the broader impacts of bias on social dynamics within learning environments (Johari et al., 2025).

Students' recommendations in Q7 for ensuring fairness—such as equitable opportunities, transparent practices, and balanced teacher interactions—reflect the emerging emphasis in educational research on equity-oriented teaching practices and the role of teacher expectations in shaping student outcomes (Basree & Malik, 2025).

The coping strategies identified in Q8, including respectful communication with teachers and seeking institutional support, indicate student agency, but also underscore the emotional burden that student's shoulder when navigating perceived unfairness. Educational research advocates that structural and instructional interventions, rather than student coping alone, are crucial to mitigating the effects of bias and fostering inclusive learning environments.

Finally, responses to Q9 confirm that favoritism significantly shapes students' long-term perceptions of both their instructors and their own academic identities. Students noted that favoritism often stems from unconscious preferences related to personality traits or preconceived impressions, highlighting the need for greater teacher self-awareness and reflective practice supported by professional development and institutional policy (Johari et al., 2025; Basree & Malik, 2025).

In sum, these findings align with current scholarship showing that teacher favoritism is more than an interpersonal issue; it is an equity concern that affects academic motivation, self-efficacy, peer relations, and classroom climate across diverse educational settings. Addressing such bias requires intentional pedagogical strategies, professional development focused on equity, and institutional commitment to transparent, fair teaching practices.

Conclusion

The present study concludes that teacher favoritism is a salient, multifaceted, and impactful issue within university classrooms. Students consistently perceive favoritism as a pattern of unequal treatment manifested through participation opportunities, attention, praise, assessment flexibility, and academic support. These practices significantly affect students' confidence, motivation, engagement, peer relationships, and overall learning experiences.

The findings indicate that favoritism undermines principles of fairness and meritocracy, leading to emotional distress, reduced self-efficacy, and disengagement among non-favored students, while simultaneously creating

imbalance and division within the classroom environment. Importantly, students view favoritism as largely preventable through conscious instructional practices grounded in transparency, inclusivity, and consistency.

This study highlights the critical role of teacher self-awareness and reflective pedagogy in fostering equitable learning environments. By adopting objective evaluation criteria, ensuring equal participation opportunities, and maintaining balanced interactions with all students, educators can minimize favoritism and promote trust, motivation, and academic success.

In conclusion, addressing teacher favoritism is essential for enhancing classroom equity, strengthening student–teacher relationships, and improving learning outcomes at the university level. Institutional support, professional development, and reflective teaching practices are recommended to ensure that all students feel valued, supported, and fairly treated in the learning process.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the research, the researcher suggested that comprehensive methods and policies be developed to minimize the level of favoritism. Teachers should be highly trained in order to be fair to the children and maintain control in stressful situations.

- ▶ There should be an end to favoritism by accepting a variety of social classes and by implementing mandatory training and counseling to rehabilitate socially separated teachers and students who were at risk of favoritism or its behaviors at the beginning of the school year.
- ▶ Students should be closely monitored in classrooms, universities, and other educational settings where they remain engaged and learn social behaviors. Besides controlling conflicts resulting from favoritism among students and peers, it is also recommended that a general body or teacher association be established.
- ▶ It is widely acknowledged that favoritism contributes to restlessness and confusion in students' minds, which inhibits their competitiveness and learning capabilities, as well as encouraging them to engage in violent behavior. To help and support learning possibilities, researchers advise putting in place interactive, social, personal counseling, self, and teacher evaluation plans or activities.
- ▶ Students and teachers may benefit from favoritism for a brief period of time, but favoritism is the major cause of the breakdown of positive relationships between the two. The nature of their roles as partners in learning activities must therefore be understood by teachers and students. It is imperative that students understand the importance of teachers' support in their academic endeavors, and teachers should be aware of their genuine obligations with regard to students' educational pursuits.

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