



Effects of teacher favouritism on the academic performance and overall motivation of learners in the classroom setting: An exploratory study

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how teacher favouritism affects learners' engagement, motivation, classroom dynamics, psychosocial development and academic performance in secondary school. Teacher favouritism affects learner motivation and academic performance, as it involves preferentially treating some learners over others in terms of praise and attention and has been recognised for quite some time as a subtle but powerful factor in classroom dynamics. Using a methodology of systematic review of literature, this study integrated empirical research and theoretical frameworks of education, sociology and pedagogy. Qualitative designs were used to gain deeper ideas about the experiences of students and teachers. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 20 participants: 12 learners and 8 teachers. Theme analysis was used to identify repetitive laws and perspectives. The results showed that favouritism manifests itself in a variety of ways, particularly biased towards class participation, selective praise and discriminatory disciplinary practices. Learners who were granted preferences were reported to increase motivation, confidence and academic support, while those who had been excluded felt discouraged, experienced loss of self-esteem and poor performance. Overall, this study reinforces the idea that one of the most significant implications of teacher favouritism is a consequence for the equity of education and the development of learners. The study recommends that teachers participate in professional development on equity in schools, while schools may write policy expectations that teachers should consider the equitable implications in the classroom. The findings suggest a need for schools and teachers to be conscious of the social and academic ramifications of favouritism and its impact on learners generally and particularly in South Africa.

Keywords: Teacher Favouritism, Learner Performance, Learner Motivation, Academic Performance.

INTRODUCTION

The relationships between teachers and learners are fundamental to the educational process and have a substantial impact on academic performance. One facet of these interactions that has received scholarly attention is teacher favouritism, which refers to the preferential treatment of some learners over others

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in areas such as classroom engagement, evaluation, discipline, and access to opportunities.¹ While teachers may not be fully aware of their own prejudices, learners are often quick to identify and interpret them. As a result, the classroom climate is uneven, with some learners feeling motivated and respected and others feeling excluded and demoralised. Education is more than passing exams; it is also a matter of changing learners' perceptions of themselves and their environment. Teachers do much more than present information; They also influence trust, push and the idea that each learner can be successful. In each class, the way a teacher deals with learners brings strong relationships with those who are appreciated, competent and deserve attention. In South Africa, the diversity of classrooms in terms of language, culture, and socioeconomic background underscores the significance of fairness and equity. Djefalia argued that teachers are frequently under pressure to achieve positive results in large, overcrowded classrooms, which can lead to favouritism.²

Learners who are strong achievers, opinionated, or have cultural commonalities with teachers may be encouraged more than others. This creates an environment in which not all learners have the same opportunities to achieve. Such trends undermine the democratic norms of justice and inclusion that education is supposed to promote. Despite the emphasis on equitable teaching in South African education policy, many learners continue to experience classrooms where favouritism is present.³ Favoured learners often benefit from increased expectations, attention, and support, which improves their performance. On the other hand, learners who feel neglected or unfairly treated may lose interest, withdraw from participation, and perform poorly.⁴ Over time, such experiences can result in achievement gaps, peer resentment, and a hostile classroom environment. The problem is that teacher favouritism has a direct and indirect impact on learner performance, but this topic is understudied in many schools. Highlights gaps in teachers' awareness of their own biases and how these can influence learner expectations and treatment. Supports the argument that teacher favouritism is often unconscious but significant.⁵ Studies have shown that favouritism (by means of teacher expectations) is unevenly distributed across gender and minority groups, resulting in unequal academic self-concepts and outcomes.

According to Brandmiller, Schnitzler and Dumont, teachers' views of engagement and motivation have also been connected over time to learner accomplishment, emphasising that a teacher's expectations and interactions with learners influence outcomes.⁶ Furthermore, a lack of teacher knowledge of expectation bias shows that many teachers may not realise their behaviour favours certain learners over others. In South African schools, where educational inequalities are already prominent, teacher favouritism has the potential to widen achievement gaps between learners of diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Limited teacher understanding of bias contributes to the problem because many educators may not recognise the effects of their actions on learner performance and motivation. Despite increased recognition of this issue in worldwide research, there has been little empirical investigation in the South African setting, particularly in secondary schools, when learners' academic self-concepts and future goals are being formed.⁷ As a result, the issue at hand is that teacher favouritism undermines fairness in the classroom, affecting both academic achievement and overall motivation of learners. Addressing this issue is critical to encourage inclusive teaching practices, equitable learning environments, and holistic development for all learners.

¹ Erkan Göktaş and Metin Kaya, "The Effects of Teacher Relationships on Student Academic Achievement: A Second Order Meta-Analysis," *Participatory Educational Research* 10, no. 1 (2023).

² Ghennam Anissa Djefalia Lamis, "Investigating Teachers' and Pupils' Attitudes towards Favoritism as an Influencing Factor on Pupils Academic Achievement," 2020.

³ Ismail Bayram et al., "An Investigation of Teachers' Perspectives on Favoritism in Schools: Implications for Educational Policy and Practice," *Educational Process: International Journal* 13, no. 4 (2024): 102–14.

⁴ Anam Arshad, "Effects of Teachers' Favouritism on Students' Motivation towards Learning at University Level," *Bulletin of Business and Economics (BBE)* 12, no. 3 (November 20, 2023): 935–42, <https://doi.org/10.61506/01.00421>.

⁵ Lewis Doyle, Peter R Harris, and Matthew J Easterbrook, "Quality and Quantity: How Contexts Influence the Emergence of Teacher Bias," *Social Psychology of Education* 27, no. 4 (2024): 1855–82.

⁶ Cornelius Brandmiller, Katharina Schnitzler, and Hanna Dumont, "Teacher Perceptions of Student Motivation and Engagement: Longitudinal Associations with Student Outcomes," *European Journal of Psychology of Education* 39, no. 2 (2024): 1397–1420.

⁷ Rune Lomholt, "What Is 'Teacher Awareness' and Can Teachers Use It to Overcome Their Expectation Bias?—A Thematic Analysis of Research," *Social Psychology of Education* 28, no. 1 (2025): 29.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher favouritism is a complicated, multidimensional concept that goes beyond personal preference. Babad defines it as "a pattern of sustained, unjustified differential behaviour that benefits a select group of learners (in-group) while disadvantages others (out-group)."⁸ Affective TDB includes nonverbal communication such as warmer body language, more smiling, and a more encouraging vocal tone for preferred pupils.⁹ Functional TDB entails academic exchanges such as calling on preferred learners more frequently, allowing longer wait times, and asking more difficult questions. Evaluative TDB is expressed as evaluation biases, in which teachers grade equivalent work more leniently for preferred learners.¹⁰

The Causes of Teacher Favouritism

Teacher-initiated factors

Teacher-initiated factors are the personal characteristics, attitudes, and psychological predispositions that educators bring to the classroom, which influence their ability to favouritise.¹¹ These characteristics influence both conscious and unconscious interactions between teachers and learners, as well as the dynamics of relationships.

Implicit Bias and Subjectivity

Implicit bias is one of the most common teacher-initiated factors, in which teachers unconsciously provide preferred attention to learners whom they see as more favourable. These prejudices can be based on perceived intelligence, discipline, participation, or even physical appearance. According to Zaki, Rafiq and Afzal, teachers frequently devote more time, praise, and academic help to learners they believe are capable, while ignoring others who are thought less competent.¹² This unconscious prejudice amplifies differences by giving preferred learners greater attention and instruction while leaving others behind. Over time, unequal treatment creates a cycle in which some learners benefit while others suffer.

Teacher Expectations

The Pygmalion Effect, which is closely related to implicit bias, states that teachers' expectations have a direct impact on student performance.¹³ Teachers who expect specific learners to excel frequently provide them with additional support, feedback, and opportunity. In contrast, low expectations lead to lower levels of support and involvement. According to Arshad, instructor expectations become self-fulfilling prophecies, with learners internalising the roles assigned to them.¹⁴ Favoured learners internalise positive expectations, resulting in increased confidence and performance, whereas unfavourable learners may disengage and lose motivation.

Personal Preferences and Teacher-Learner Similarities

Favouritism among teachers is also heavily influenced by personal preferences. In diverse classrooms, educators may automatically connect with learners who have similar beliefs, languages, or cultural origins. Olawale observes that in South Africa, where classrooms are multicultural and multilingual,

⁸ Elisha Babad, *The Social Psychology of the Classroom* (Routledge, 2009).

⁹ Rhona S. Weinstein, "Overcoming Inequality in Schooling: A Call to Action for Community Psychology," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 30, no. 1 (February 2002): 21–42, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1014311816571>.

¹⁰ Babad, *The Social Psychology of the Classroom*.

¹¹ Gang Li and Yan Ma, "Exploring the Influencing Factors of Teacher Beliefs and Their Impact on Teacher Behaviors," *BMC Psychology* 13, no. 1 (2025): 993.

¹² Khizer Ahmed Zaki, Shahid Rafiq, and Ayesha Afzal, "Impact Of Teacher-Student Favoritism On Students' learning Outcomes At University Level," *Journal of Social Research Development* 4, no. 1 (2023): 1–14.

¹³ Alena Friedrich et al., "Pygmalion Effects in the Classroom: Teacher Expectancy Effects on Students' Math Achievement," *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 41 (April 2015): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2014.10.006>.

¹⁴ Arshad, "Effects of Teachers' Favouritism on Students' Motivation towards Learning at University Level."

teachers frequently build stronger ties with learners who represent their own identity or viewpoint.¹⁵ Although these connections may develop strong relationships, they can also generate a sense of injustice, as learners from different cultural or language groups may feel excluded or marginalised.

Classroom Management Practices

The way teachers enforce rules and manage discipline frequently indicates patterns of favouritism. Favoured learners may obtain leniency for misbehaviour, but others may face harsher punishment for comparable behaviour. Tsai discovered that uneven disciplinary policies not only weaken justice but also cause anger and conflict among learners.¹⁶ This inconsistent treatment not only breaks classroom cohesion but also has an impact on learners' sense of justice, leading to academic disengagement for those who feel abandoned.

Unequal Distribution of Opportunities

Another element initiated by the teacher is the distribution of classroom time. Teachers may repeatedly select the same learners for leadership positions, class participation, or group representation. Usman emphasises that when teachers frequently select favoured learners for conspicuous positions, they boost those learners' confidence and skills while marginalising others.¹⁷ This selective allocation of chances adds to unequal leadership and academic growth, expanding the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged learners.

Emotional Investment and Support

Teachers provide varying amounts of emotional support and encouragement. Johnson and Smith discovered that teachers who emotionally invest in specific learners promote higher academic engagement and drive for those learners while accidentally distancing others.¹⁸ When learners feel undervalued or invisible, their confidence suffers, leading to low academic performance. Emotional favouritism, while less evident than disciplinary or academic bias, has long-term consequences on learners' self-esteem and sense of belonging in the classroom. These activities, whether intentional or unintended, profoundly influence learners' experiences and outcomes. Favoured learners frequently excel academically and socially, but those who are excluded suffer from obstacles to performance, confidence, and drive. Addressing these teacher-driven reasons requires conscious reflection, bias-awareness training, and equitable classroom procedures to ensure that all learners are treated fairly.

Learner-initiated Factors

Although teacher-initiated factors play an important part in shaping classroom favouritism, learners can also influence how teachers distribute attention, encouragement, and praise. Learner-initiated factors are behaviours, attitudes, and qualities that result in preferred treatment from teachers. Understanding these elements is critical because favouritism is more than just a teacher-driven phenomenon; it is an interactive process influenced by learners' actions and responses.

Academic Performance and Participation

Academic performance is one of the most influential elements initiated by learners. Teachers are more likely to pay attention to learners who consistently perform well, complete assignments on time, and actively participate in classroom activities. High-achieving learners frequently receive additional praise, support, and opportunities to take on difficult assignments. According to Zaki Rafiq and Afzal, teachers engage more with learners who show academic promise, sometimes overlooking disadvantaged

¹⁵ Babawande Emmanuel Olawale, "Teacher Quality and Learner Achievement in South African Schools," in *Academic Performance-Students, Teachers and Institutions on the Stage* (IntechOpen, 2023).

¹⁶ Yung-Yu Tsai, "Does Undue Preference Lead to Unfairness? The Impact of Teacher Favoritism on Teacher Treatment and Student Achievement," *Journal of Behavioral and Experimental Economics* 101 (2022): 101941.

¹⁷ A. Usman, "Teacher Favoritism and Its Effect on Classroom Management," *International Journal of Education and Practice* 7, no. 5 (2019): 123–30.

¹⁸ D.W Johnson and R Smith, "The Impact of Teacher Bias on Classroom Dynamics," *Journal of Educational Research* 115, no. 2 (2022): 123–34.

learners.¹⁹ This technique promotes existing achievement gaps, as preferred learners continue to flourish while others receive little assistance. Class participation also influences instructor attention. Learners who often answer questions, participate in conversations, or volunteer for chores tend to receive more attention and feedback. Active learners are viewed as motivated and capable, which encourages teachers to give them more opportunities to succeed.²⁰ Learners who are quiet, introverted, or reluctant to contribute may be overlooked, not because of their abilities, but because they are less evident in classroom interactions.

Behaviour and Conduct

Learner behaviour has a great influence on instructor impressions and, as a result, favouritism. Teachers are more likely to choose learners who indicate discipline, respect, and adherence to classroom rules. Positive behaviour indicates to the teacher that the student is responsible and cooperative, requiring additional attention and assistance.²¹ In contrast, learners who demonstrate disruptive, inattentive, or demanding behaviour may be seen negatively, receiving less support and, in some situations, harsher disciplinary consequences. Such behavioural biases help to foster favouritism in the classroom.

Personality Traits and Social Skills

Personality factors also influence learner-initiated favouritism. Learners who are self-assured, charismatic, or proficient in social situations often receive teacher attention and support. Their ability to communicate effectively, build relationships, and demonstrate leadership skills increases their chances of being noticed and praised.²² emphasises that teachers, deliberately or unconsciously, gravitate towards learners whose personalities match their own expectations or inclinations. This dynamic can marginalise less extroverted or introverted learners, regardless of academic competence.

Effort and Initiative

Learners who show effort, perseverance, and initiative are often rewarded with teacher attention. Teachers respect learners who take responsibility for their own learning, ask questions, seek explanations, and demonstrate a desire to improve. Johnson and Smith observe that such proactive learners frequently receive additional feedback and assistance, which reinforces their engagement and drive.²³ In contrast, learners who look lethargic or unwilling to request assistance may receive less teacher support, resulting in differences in learning results.

Learner-Teacher Relationship Building

The quality of the learner-teacher interaction also influences favouritism. Learners who actively engage in positive relationships with teachers, show respect, or display common interests are more likely to be favoured. Emotional connection is subtle but important: learners who are viewed as "likeable" frequently receive extra attention, assistance, or encouragement.²⁴ On the other hand, learners who struggle to establish a relationship or fight with teachers may be neglected, affecting both their motivation and academic performance. These factors show that favouritism is caused not only by instructor bias, but also by the interactions between learners and teachers. Although high-achieving or proactive learners may benefit from more assistance, learners who are quieter, struggling, or less socially skilled may be unintentionally marginalised. Recognising these relationships is critical to developing equitable teaching practices that ensure that all learners have equal possibilities for success.

Systematic and Contextual Factors

Teacher favouritism cannot be understood purely by considering individual psychological variables; it is heavily influenced by the institutional and policy contexts in which teachers work. Accountability

¹⁹ Zaki, Rafiq, and Afzal, "Impact Of Teacher-Student Favoritism On Students' learning Outcomes At University Level."

²⁰ Arshad, "Effects of Teachers' Favouritism on Students' Motivation towards Learning at University Level."

²¹ Usman, "Teacher Favoritism and Its Effect on Classroom Management."

²² Usman, "Teacher Favoritism and Its Effect on Classroom Management."

²³ Johnson and Smith, "The Impact of Teacher Bias on Classroom Dynamics."

²⁴ Olawale, "Teacher Quality and Learner Achievement in South African Schools."

regimes and high-stakes testing provide perverse incentives that promote favouritism for specific student groupings. Bushra found that teachers in test-focused environments strategically focus resources on "bubble learners" - those perceived to be on the cusp of proficiency benchmarks - while effectively neglecting both high-achieving learners and those far below standards.²⁵ This systemic pressure converts favouritism from an interpersonal preference to an organisational response to policy demands. The structural conditions of education favouritism tendencies. Overcrowded classrooms, limited resources, and little planning time make the distribution of balanced attention logistically difficult. As Inana-Kaya has shown, teachers in big courses invariably participate in assessment, focusing limited attention on learners who are either the most difficult or rewarding to educate.²⁶ This systemic constraint creates certain forms of favouritism, a largely unavoidable outcome of resource constraints, rather than a completely individual shortcoming. School culture and leadership can either reduce or increase favouritism. Schools with strong collaborative cultures, clear equity-focused professional development, and systematic reflection processes have a lower prevalence of favouritism.²⁷ On the contrary, environments that emphasise competitiveness, individual teacher accountability, and superficial success metrics may unintentionally increase favouritism as educators focus on kids who are most likely to improve performance markers. Leadership that fails to address equity issues or model inclusive practices provides conditions for favouritism to thrive uninterrupted.

Intersectional Dynamics and Social Reproduction

Additionally, teacher favouritism acts as a tool for social reproduction, preserving existing social hierarchies through educational practices. Teachers, being products of their cultures, often unconsciously favour pupils who represent dominant cultural capital, including language patterns, behavioural standards, and interaction styles associated with privileged groups.²⁸ This desire for cultural alignment means that favouritism frequently follows existing societal fault lines of race, class, gender, and aptitude, systematically benefiting already-privileged learners while disadvantageously affecting marginalised groups. Considering the intersectionality of these prejudices, kids who suffer various forms of marginalisation are frequently at a disadvantage. As Van den Bergh and colleagues²⁹ revealed, a teacher's racial biases can intersect with perceptions of socioeconomic position to produce very pronounced favouritism patterns. These intersectional dynamics position teacher favouritism as an educational process that reproduces and legitimises greater societal inequities, rather than a psychological phenomenon in isolation.

Understanding this diverse causality is critical to creating effective therapies. Rather than attributing favouritism solely to individual teacher shortcomings, this comprehensive perspective acknowledges the complex interplay of psychological, professional, and systemic factors that must be addressed through multi-level strategies aimed at individual awareness, school culture, and educational policy. Only by addressing these underlying reasons can educators establish truly equal learning environments in which all learners receive the support and opportunities they deserve.

Psychological Foundations: The Cognitive Underpinnings

At the most fundamental level, teacher favouritism originates from basic human psychological processes. The similarity-attraction paradigm explains why people gravitate towards those who have

²⁵ Friedrich et al., "Pygmalion Effects in the Classroom: Teacher Expectancy Effects on Students' Math Achievement."

²⁶ H. Inan-Kaya, "The Psychological Effects of Teacher Favoritism on Learners," *Educational Psychology International* 39, no. 5 (2022): 300–317.

²⁷ Tsai, "Does Undue Preference Lead to Unfairness? The Impact of Teacher Favoritism on Teacher Treatment and Student Achievement."

²⁸ Anneke C Timmermans and Christine M Rubie-Davies, "Gender and Minority Background as Moderators of Teacher Expectation Effects on Self-Concept, Subjective Task Values, and Academic Performance: Gender and Minority Background as Moderators of Teacher Expectation Effects on Self-Concept, Subjective Task Values, and Academic Performance," *European Journal of Psychology of Education* 38, no. 4 (2023): 1677–1705.

²⁹ Linda Van den Bergh et al., "The Implicit Prejudiced Attitudes of Teachers: Relations to Teacher Expectations and the Ethnic Achievement Gap," *American Educational Research Journal* 47, no. 2 (2010): 497–527.

similar qualities, values, or backgrounds.³⁰ In educational settings, this manifests itself as teachers inadvertently select learners who reflect their own communication styles, interests, or cultural references. This instinctive attachment creates an invisible barrier for learners from diverse backgrounds, resulting in what Babad refers to as "affinity bias" - a preference for specific individuals based on perceived resemblance rather than pedagogical concerns.³¹ Cognitive biases enhance this inherent predisposition. Confirmation bias causes teachers to seek evidence that confirms their first views of learners while ignoring contrary facts. A teacher who first considers a pupil as capable will notice and recall occurrences that support this belief, while ignoring moments of difficulty. Similarly, the halo effect causes one good feature (such as physical attractiveness or prior academic performance) to impact a student's overall opinion of their ability across domains.³² These cognitive shortcuts, while useful for understanding complicated classroom contexts, routinely disadvantage learners who do not elicit positive first impressions or who have qualities that correspond to teachers' implicit prototypes of "ideal learners."

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on an integrated theoretical model that views teacher favouritism as a cyclical process. The Pygmalion Effect establishes that teacher expectations create a self-fulfilling prophecy; high expectations for an "in-group" of learners manifest as preferential treatment, whereas low expectations for the "out-group" result in neglect.³³ Learners process this differential treatment through the perspective of Social Comparison Theory.³⁴ Learners continually examine and compare their teacher's interactions with them to those of their classmates. Non-favoured learners who engage in upward contrastive comparison internalise a sense of inferiority, undermining their academic self-concept.³⁵ This perspective immediately activates the ideas of Equity Theory, as learners evaluate the fairness of their inputs (effort) and products (grades, praise) in comparison to others.³⁶ Perceiving a significant disparity in which favoured peers obtain higher rewards for the same or less effort causes psychological distress. To restore a sense of equity, non-favoured learners are encouraged to lower their contributions, resulting in strategic disengagement and decreased academic effort. As a result, this poor performance supports the teacher's initial low expectations, sustaining a vicious cycle that consistently affects the academic performance and psychological well-being of those in the out-group.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

According to Creswell, research methodology consists of strategies and processes that cover the phases from general hypotheses to specific techniques for collecting, analysing, and interpreting data.³⁷ Bloomberg and Volpe assert that the choice of research approach is related to the research topic and objective.³⁸ This study was qualitative in nature. Interviews and careful classroom observation were two ways the researchers interacted with participants. Beyond collecting data, this method reveals the finer points and nuances that statistical analysis often overlooks. The researchers gave depth precedence over metrics and measurements alone. They focused on the actual feelings, attitudes, and driving forces that influence how teachers and learners interact.

³⁰ Bayram et al., "An Investigation of Teachers' Perspectives on Favoritism in Schools: Implications for Educational Policy and Practice."

³¹ Babad, *The Social Psychology of the Classroom*.

³² E.L. Thorndike, "A Constant Error in Psychological Ratings," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 4, no. 1 (March 1920): 25–29, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0071663>.

³³ Friedrich et al., "Pygmalion Effects in the Classroom: Teacher Expectancy Effects on Students' Math Achievement."

³⁴ Leon Festinger, "A Theory of Social Comparison Processes," *Human Relations* 7, no. 2 (1954): 117–40.

³⁵ Herbert W Marsh, "Students' Evaluations of University Teaching: Research Findings, Methodological Issues, and Directions for Future Research," *International Journal of Educational Research* 11, no. 3 (1987): 253–388.

³⁶ J. Stacy Adams, "Inequity In Social Exchange," 1965, 267–99, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(08\)60108-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60108-2).

³⁷ John W Creswell and J David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Sage publications, 2017).

³⁸ Linda Bloomberg and Marie Volpe, *Completing Your Qualitative Dissertation: A Roadmap from Beginning to End* (2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks California 91320 United States : SAGE Publications, Inc., 2008), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452226613>.

Additionally, the qualitative method fits within the interpretivist paradigm that recognises that reality is subjective and that the viewpoint of an individual matters; the researchers were attempting to interpret what participants meant personally and not to fit them into predetermined categories, and the open-ended questions and flexible interviews allowed participants to share their experiences freely so that the researcher could identify common themes and patterns about favouritism in the learning environment.³⁹ The approach also enabled contextual interpretation, which is essential for educational research in South African schools with the socio-economic and cultural diversity that influences teacher–learner relations, as in the Capricorn Circuit in Limpopo Province; the qualitative approach captured contextual influences and connected them to more generalized patterns of classroom behaviour, motivation, and fairness. The qualitative approach was suitable for the study goals, as it allowed a holistic, human-centred understanding of the impact of teacher favouritism on learner motivation and performance.

Research Design

A case study research design was used in this study to investigate the effects of teacher favouritism on learner performance and motivation in selected secondary schools in the Capricorn Circuit, Limpopo Province. This case study design was appropriate as it is an in-depth investigation of a phenomenon in its natural setting, and the case study focused on the impact of teacher–learner relationships, perceptions of fairness, and differential treatment on learner attitudes, academic engagement, and overall performance.⁴⁰ A case study allowed for detailed and context-rich information gathering in a particular setting, providing insight into the complex social dynamics of the situation, such as in this study in which the Capricorn Circuit was the case or microcosm of South African schooling (with its diverse cultural, socio-economic, and educational factors), to gain more in-depth information about classroom interactions to reveal patterns of behaviour and experiences that would not be visible through quantitative surveys.⁴¹ The case study design also enabled the use of multiple data collection methods, such as semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations, to triangulate the data sources to ensure credibility, exhaustiveness, and applicability of the findings, and to provide rich, first-hand, and contextualized insights into participants' feelings and perceptions of favouritism (interviews), and how favouritism plays out and affects learners in real classroom settings (observations).

Research Paradigm

This study was driven by the interpretivist research paradigm, which is based on the assumption that reality is socially constructed; that is, individuals perceive and interpret their world based on personal experiences, interactions, and social contexts (e.g., teacher favouritism is perceived by learners in different ways based on how they are perceived by teachers, what their classroom experience is like, and their own internal beliefs about fairness).⁴² Given that teacher favouritism is a social and psychological phenomenon that influences learners in various ways, the interpretivist paradigm was suitable for this study as it facilitated an examination of how learners and teachers make sense of favouritism in their educational environment. The interpretivist paradigm places more emphasis on context than on generalization; instead of measuring variables or testing hypotheses, it seeks to understand the meanings and interpretations that participants attach to their experiences.⁴³ For example, in the favouritism study, the researchers conducted interviews and observations with learners and teachers to understand their lived experiences with favouritism, which enabled them to understand

³⁹ Mark N K Saunders, Philip Lewis, and Adrian Thornhill, "Research Methods for Business Students (Eighth)," *Harlow: Pearson Education Limited*, 2019.

⁴⁰ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications*, 6th ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2018).

⁴¹ S. B Merriam and E. J Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th ed, 2016.

⁴² Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion, and Keith Morrison, *Research Methods in Education* (London: Routledge, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315456539>.

⁴³ Nguyen Cao Thanh and T T Le Thanh, "The Interconnection between Interpretivist Paradigm and Qualitative Methods in Education," *American Journal of Educational Science* 1, no. 2 (2015): 24–27.

complex emotional and behavioural patterns that quantitative approaches may miss, and their own perspectives on how favouritism influences motivation, engagement, and performance.

Population and Sampling

This study had a target population of learners and teachers from a public secondary school in the Capricorn Circuit, Limpopo Province, South Africa. This school was selected because it is representative of a typical secondary school environment, with diverse teacher–learner interactions and moderate class sizes, which could be used to explore classroom dynamics such as favouritism. The sample consisted of 25 participants: 20 learners from Grade 10 and 5 teachers who teach various subjects, to create a balance of perspectives on how favouritism can be seen in teaching practices and how it can impact learner motivation and academic performance. Identifying an appropriate population is crucial to ensuring that participants have relevant experiences or knowledge of the phenomenon of interest; in this case, both teachers and learners were engaged in the classroom and, therefore, were both appropriate informants for the phenomenon of interest (teacher favouritism), and the cross-validation of their perspectives increased the credibility of the findings. The study participants were purposively sampled, enabling the researchers to select individuals with characteristics or experiences related to the research questions.⁴⁴ The Life Orientation teacher helped identify learners who had experienced or witnessed differential treatment by teachers and teachers who had taught for longer periods of time and were directly involved in classroom management. These participants were chosen so that they would be able to provide rich and meaningful information about how favouritism impacts academic engagement, performance, and motivation. The sample size of 25 participants was deemed adequate for a qualitative study because it provided the opportunity to explore experiences in depth without overwhelming the data analysis process (qualitative studies often have smaller sample sizes, as the number of participants is less important for the quality and richness of the information collected than for the numerical representation of the data).⁴⁵ The sample size of this study was adequate to establish recurring themes and patterns of favouritism and keep the data collection and analysis procedures manageable.

Data Collection Methods

Qualitative data collection methods in this study included semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations, as these are more aligned with the qualitative and interpretivist approach of the study, which is aimed at understanding lived experiences and perceptions of teacher favouritism, and are more appropriate for exploring meanings, emotions, and social interactions in depth. Multiple methods were used to provide triangulation, which increases the credibility and validity of the findings by capturing multiple viewpoints on the same phenomenon.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Five teachers from the study were interviewed semi-structurally, which enabled the researcher to gather comprehensive information while remaining flexible to probe deeper responses.⁴⁶ Questions were designed to explore teachers' understanding of favouritism, how they perceived it in the classroom, and whether they thought it had an impact on learner motivation and academic performance. Interviews lasted about 30–45 minutes, were conducted in a quiet room on school premises, were audio-recorded with consent, and were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Focus Group Discussions

Two focus group discussions of 10 learners in Grade 10 were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the learner experience. The focus group method allows participants to voice their feelings and

⁴⁴ Ilker Etikan, "Comparison of Convenience Sampling and Purposive Sampling," *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics* 5, no. 1 (2016): 1, <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ajtas.20160501.11>.

⁴⁵ Greg Guest, Emily Namey, and Mario Chen, "A Simple Method to Assess and Report Thematic Saturation in Qualitative Research," *PLOS ONE* 15, no. 5 (May 5, 2020): e0232076, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0232076>.

⁴⁶ Hanna Kallio et al., "Systematic Methodological Review: Developing a Framework for a Qualitative Semi-structured Interview Guide," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 72, no. 12 (2016): 2954–65.

opinions in a group setting, often leading to rich discussions and group dynamics.⁴⁷ Learners were invited to share their experience of teacher favouritism in their classrooms, how it impacts their motivation, participation, and confidence, and how it impacts their academic performance, using open-ended guiding questions to encourage discussion and keep the discussions on track with the research objectives. The discussions were held in English, the language of instruction, and each session lasted approximately one hour and was audio-recorded and transcribed to identify recurrent themes and patterns in learner experience.

Classroom Observations

Classroom observations were also carried out to supplement the data, offering direct first-hand evidence of teacher–learner interaction and behavioural patterns related to favouritism; observations focused on teacher communication styles, allocation of attention, feedback patterns, and participation opportunities during lessons, and were systematically recorded using a structured observation checklist to document behaviours and incidents relevant to the study aims, with each classroom observed for about 45 minutes in regular teaching sessions, and field notes taken immediately after each observation to record contextual details and nonverbal cues not captured in the audio data to validate the findings and ensure that what teachers and learners reported aligned with actual classroom practices.⁴⁸

Data Analysis

In this study, data analysis was based on a thematic analysis approach, a popular qualitative research method that identifies, analyses, and interprets meaning patterns in textual data, which was an apt approach as it facilitated the researchers to make sense of the participants' experiences, perceptions, and feelings regarding teacher favouritism and its effect on learner motivation and academic performance.⁴⁹ All interview and focus group audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the researchers read through the transcripts several times to become familiar with the content, making notes in the margins of initial impressions and reflections, and then conducted open coding of meaningful phrases, sentences, and segments associated with favouritism, motivation, fairness, and performance, which were grouped into categories representing broader concepts. After coding, related categories were clustered into themes, and examples of the major themes identified were perceived teacher bias, the emotional effects of favouritism, impact on learner engagement, and teacher–learner relationships. The researchers checked for internal consistency and that each theme was sufficiently different from the others and then interpreted the themes in relation to the research questions and the theoretical framework, which included the Pygmalion Effect, Social Comparison Theory, and Equity Theory. The researchers utilised NVivo qualitative data analysis software to organise and code the large amount of data, which enabled the researchers to code and retrieve excerpts systematically, providing a level of transparency to the analysis, and then to interpret and report the themes with illustrative quotes from participants, which gave voice to their experiences, thus reflecting the interpretivist paradigm and ensuring that participants' meanings and subjectivities were prioritized over statistical generalizations, which would have led to a less rich, less contextualized understanding of the impact of teacher favouritism on learner motivation and academic performance in the Capricorn Circuit.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

⁴⁷ David L. Morgan, *Basic and Advanced Focus Groups* (2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks California 91320 : SAGE Publications, Inc., 2019), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071814307>.

⁴⁸ Jaap Nieuwenhuis, "Neighborhood Social Capital and Adolescents' Individual Health Development," *Social Science & Medicine* 265 (November 2020): 113417, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2020.113417>.

⁴⁹ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Reflecting on Reflexive Thematic Analysis," *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 11, no. 4 (August 8, 2019): 589–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>.

Thematic analysis revealed major themes that explained how favouritism happens in secondary school classrooms, its affective and educational impact on learners, as well as learners' and teachers' coping and reaction to such dynamics.

Manifestations of Teacher Favouritism

The observations and testimony of the participants also revealed numerous expressions of favouritism. Teachers provided certain learners with more time and attention, whom they perceived as compliant learners, high-achievers, or exhibiting favourable behaviour. Table 4.1 also describes behaviours labelled as favouritism from interviews and observations. Learners echoed this, noting disparities in teacher responsiveness and encouragement.

Table 1: Common Teacher Favouritism Behaviours Reported

Behaviours of Favouritism	Frequency (Learners)	Frequency (Teachers)
More individual attention	15	5
Preferential feedback	12	4
Leniency in discipline	9	3
Public praise	11	4
Informal teacher-student bonding	10	3

Impact on Learner Motivation and Emotions

The impact on motivation was two-fold. Favoured learners reported increased confidence and motivation, while unfavoured learners reported being ignored, frustrated, and lacking motivation. Observation notes revealed emotional disengagement with less participation in some learners. Teacher favouritism has significant effects on student motivation and emotional well-being, with profound implications for performance and psychosocial health. The data reveal that learners who perceive themselves as unfavoured exhibit negative emotional responses of rejection, frustration, and decreased self-esteem. Consistent with the findings of Mazer, Murphy and Simonds, these negative emotions result in decreased motivation to engage in activities in class, less effort, and increased absenteeism.⁵⁰ They are usually said to experience hopelessness and disengagement and feel that their ability is not noticed or recognized, which greatly jeopardizes their studies. On the contrary, favourite learners tend to receive more favourable comments, compliments, and assistance from teachers, which increases their confidence and natural drive for knowledge. However, this advantage comes with a double-edged sword. While the learners are more likely to experience improved academic performance because of higher assistance, they are also subjected to higher pressure to maintain their teacher's favour and maintain the high rate of achievement, hence experiencing anxiety or stress.⁵¹ This subtle emotional impact upon favoured learners has been less remarked upon but is crucial to an understanding of the total effects of favouritism. The non-verbal cues by teachers, such as body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice, also play a determining role. Learners are sensitive to these unspoken cues and interpret them as reinforcing their inclusion or exclusion.⁵² Evidence indicates that disfavoured learners perceive abrupt or dismissive teacher behaviour as rejection on a personal level, further contributing to emotional suffering and demotivation.

Classroom Climate and Peer Relations

Table 2: Classroom Climate Effects of Teacher Favouritism

Impact	Learners (%)	Teachers (%)
Increased peer rivalry	60	80
Reduced collaboration	55	70

⁵⁰ J.P. Mazer, R.E. Murphy, and C.J. Simonds, "The Classroom Communication Climate and Student Motivation," *Communication Education* 56, no. 1 (2007): 1–17.

⁵¹ Mujeeb Hussain, "Causes of Teacher's Favoritism and Its Effects on the University Students: A Case Study," *Global Social Sciences Review*, 2018.

⁵² Johnson and Smith, "The Impact of Teacher Bias on Classroom Dynamics."

Social exclusion of some peers	45	65
Tensions between favoured/unfavoured groups	50	75

Coping Strategies and Teacher Awareness

Teachers in the present research showed varying degrees of awareness of their own biases and behaviours that could reinforce favouritism. Some teachers discussed their ignorance of their preferential behaviours and reported reflective teaching practices of observing and modifying their classroom interactions. These findings are consistent with Wang's research that reflective teacher practices play a significant role in recognizing and alleviating implicit biases.⁵³ Some teachers actively sought professional development opportunities that focused on equity and inclusive pedagogy. Cultural competence, awareness of bias, and training on equitable classroom management brought participants more attuned to their actions and led to intentional steps to facilitate fairness.⁵⁴ These teacher narratives reinforce the importance of sustained institutionally facilitated growth in developing bias-aware instructional practices.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study clearly illustrate that teacher favouritism is an omnipresent phenomenon in secondary school classrooms and has far-reaching consequences on learners' academic motivation, emotional well-being, and classroom social dynamics. Aligning with previous studies by Irwin and Kanwal et al., this study confirms that perceived unfairness arising from teacher favouritism diminishes motivation among unfavoured learners, leading to frustration, disengagement, and lower academic achievement.⁵⁵ The study expands existing knowledge by highlighting that even favoured learners, while benefiting from additional attention and encouragement, may experience increased psychological pressure to maintain teacher approval, an area often overlooked in favouritism research.⁵⁶ The emotional divide created by favouritism disrupts classroom cohesion, fostering peer rivalry and social tension that undermine collaborative learning and a positive classroom climate. These social disruptions compound the educational disadvantages experienced by unfavoured learners and create a cyclical pattern of decreased participation and academic performance. Moreover, the study revealed that teacher self-awareness and reflective practices play a crucial role in mitigating the harmful effects of favouritism. Echoing the findings of Günyederli and Aypay, teachers who consciously engaged in recognising their biases and actively sought professional development to promote equitable classroom management demonstrated more balanced interactions with learners.⁵⁷ However, structural challenges such as large class sizes, time pressures, and insufficient administrative support often constrain teachers' ability to fully implement equitable practices, reinforcing the need for systemic interventions alongside individual teacher efforts.⁵⁸ The study's qualitative depth also illuminates effective coping strategies employed by learners, including peer support and intrinsic motivation, albeit with variable success depending on the classroom environment. This underscores the importance of comprehensive approaches that address emotional, social, and institutional dimensions to effectively counteract the negative impacts of teacher favouritism on learner outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

⁵³ Y. Wang, "From Silence to Expression: Conceptual Transformation and Creative Innovation of Cultural Relics Programs in the New Media Environment," *Journal of Northwest Normal University (Social Sciences)* 60 (2023): 118–25.

⁵⁴ Susan C Weller et al., "Open-Ended Interview Questions and Saturation," *PloS One* 13, no. 6 (2018): e0198606.

⁵⁵ Sarah J Irwin, "Recent Hispanic High School Non-Traditional Graduates' Perceptions of the Influence of Teacher-Student Relationships on Persistence" (Brenau University, 2025); Fasiha Kanwal et al., "Clinical Care Pathway for the Risk Stratification and Management of Patients with Nonalcoholic Fatty Liver Disease," *Gastroenterology* 161, no. 5 (2021): 1657–69.

⁵⁶ Bayram et al., "An Investigation of Teachers' Perspectives on Favoritism in Schools: Implications for Educational Policy and Practice."

⁵⁷ burçin Gündeyerli and Ahmet Aypay, "Okul Yöneticilerinin Kayırmacı Tutum ve Davranışlarına İlişkin Öğretmen Görüşleri," *Anadolu Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi Dergisi* 6, no. 3 (July 31, 2022): 251–76, <https://doi.org/10.34056/aujef.1028012>.

⁵⁸ Wang, "From Silence to Expression: Conceptual Transformation and Creative Innovation of Cultural Relics Programs in the New Media Environment."

For Teachers

- **Engage in Reflective Practice:** Teachers should regularly reflect on their classroom interactions to recognize and challenge any unconscious biases or tendencies towards favouritism.
- **Developing self-awareness** is critical to promoting equitable treatment of all learners.
- **Adopt Equitable Teaching Strategies:** Employ structured techniques such as random student selection for participation, equitable distribution of feedback, and rotating roles during class activities to ensure balanced attention.
- **Foster an Inclusive Classroom Environment:** Teachers should cultivate positive relationships with all learners, valuing diversity and encouraging respectful peer interactions to reduce social divisions exacerbated by favouritism.

For School Administrators

- **Provide Professional Development:** Facilitate ongoing training programs focused on bias awareness, cultural competency, and equitable pedagogical practices to equip teachers with the skills necessary to reduce favouritism.
- **Implement Monitoring and Feedback Systems:** Develop mechanisms such as classroom observations and learners' feedback surveys to monitor teacher behaviour and provide constructive feedback aimed at fostering equity.
- **Promote Supportive Policies:** Establish clear policies and guidelines condemning favouritism, emphasising fairness and inclusion as core school values.

For Policymakers

- **Integrate Equity in Teacher Education:** Mandate the inclusion of training on equity, bias recognition, and inclusive teaching in teacher certification and professional development requirements.
- **Fund Equity-Focused Educational Initiatives:** Allocate resources to interventions and research that target favouritism and promote inclusive educational practices.
- **Encourage Research and Evaluation:** Support longitudinal and intervention-based studies to assess the effectiveness of anti-favouritism strategies and their impact on learner outcomes.

For Learners

- **Develop Peer Support Networks:** Encourage learners to build supportive peer groups that provide emotional and academic reinforcement, helping to mitigate the psychological effects of perceived unfairness.
- **Promote Self-Regulation and Motivation:** Provide learners with skills and strategies to enhance intrinsic motivation and resilience in the face of unequal treatment.

CONCLUSION

This study has provided a detailed examination of teacher favouritism and its significant impact on learner motivation, academic performance, and classroom climate. It confirms that favouritism, often unconscious, manifests itself in an unequal distribution of teacher attention, feedback, discipline, and praise, shaping learner experiences in profound ways. Unfavoured learners frequently endure negative emotional outcomes such as frustration, reduced self-esteem, and disengagement, leading to lower academic achievement, while favoured learners benefit from boosts in confidence and encouragement but may face pressure to maintain approval. The resulting social divisions and peer tensions undermine classroom cohesion and collaborative learning, further exacerbating educational inequities. Furthermore, the study highlights that teacher awareness and reflective practices are critical in mitigating favouritism. Teachers who actively monitor their interactions and engage in bias-reduction professional development demonstrate more equitable behaviour, though systemic barriers, such as class size and limited administrative support, persist. Coping strategies by learners, such as seeking peer support and

fostering intrinsic motivation, are important but insufficient without institutional commitment to equity. Ultimately, the findings emphasize the urgency of comprehensive interventions that include teacher training, policy reform, and school leadership to foster inclusive classrooms that promote fairness and nurture all learners' potential. This study contributes valuable insights for educators and policymakers striving to create equitable educational environments where every learner can succeed.

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Declaration of Interest

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