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## The Influence of School Leaders' Bias on Teacher Behavior: Shaping Teacher Motivation and School Environment

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### ABSTRACT

Bias in educational institutions has been the subject of extensive research, with studies conducted across a variety of cultural and organizational contexts. Much of this research investigates favoritism in school leadership, with an emphasis on principals, administrators, and management techniques. The importance of this topic also lies in its ethical and governance dimensions, and it directly affects teachers' motivation, school ethos, and overall learning environment. The research indicates that, in educational institutions, favoritism by the school head towards specific teachers is a growing concern in schools. This study used a qualitative methodology and an action research approach; hence, no formal experimental treatment used. Sixteen individuals from different educational institutions participated, eight male and eight female teachers. An interview was conducted with individuals from both genders; the sample size was N=16 (8 males and 8 females) to achieve a balanced approach. Data collected through semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions. Interviews were conducted through face-to-face and online Zoom. The interview was later transcribed, and used thematic analysis to identify patterns across the dataset. The study found that persistent bias, lack of recognition, and feelings of exclusion often become decisive factors in teachers' decisions to resign. This conclusion carries profound implications for schools, as the loss of experienced teachers disrupts continuity dimensions, institutional memories, and creates additional challenges.

**Keywords:** Leaders. Motivation, Innovation, Professional Isolation, Career Decision

## INTRODUCTION

Favoritism in educational institutions is a critical issue that affects teachers' motivation, colleagues' collaboration, and the overall school culture. In many schools, the Head of the School/Principal plays a central role in shaping professional opportunities, recognition, and workplace dynamics. When favoritism occurs, it creates unequal access to resources, leadership support, and growth opportunities, leading to feelings of exclusion and demotivation among teachers. The characteristics of favoritism, notably in coordination and evaluation, significantly predict fear and risk in instructors. Furthermore, the assessment dimension of favoritism emerges as a significant predictor of organizational silence, demonstrating how favoritism can stifle teacher voice and foster a culture of silence (Aydın, A., 2021). The purpose of this study was to examine how the head of school's favoritism affected teachers' professional motivation, collaboration, emotional well-being, and long-term career decision. Although the study focuses on teacher-student favoritism, the findings are relevant: favoritism reduces trust in teachers and has a detrimental impact on performance and motivation. This is consistent with how favoritism by head of school/principal can reduce teacher morale and external trust. (Quraishi, U., Munir, F., Afzal, H., & Saeed, S. (2021).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Favoritism, defined as unfair preferential treatment based on factors such as personal relationships, gender, or political views, undermines educational fairness. In Pakistan, favoritism by school heads, particularly principals, towards certain teachers is a growing concern. Such biases can harm teacher motivation, trust, and organizational commitment, as school leaders may use favoritism or intimidation to manipulate teacher behavior (Mahamutoglu, C., Celep, C., & Kaya, A., 2025). Leadership biases in Pakistani schools negatively influence teacher performance and retention (Shah, S., & Ahmed, M., 2023), thereby affecting teachers' behaviour and the school environment.

### **Significance of the Study:**

The findings will help management and head of school/principals to understand that negative consequences of favoritism on teachers' motivation, well-being, and physical and mental health. As a result, they can quit the job and school will lose the experienced teachers. It can guide them to adopt more transparent, inclusive, and fair leadership practices, fostering a healthy school culture.

By highlighting the impact of favoritism, the study empowers the teachers to voice their concern and seek a more fair-handed work environment. It can also promote the awareness how emotional distress and feeling of isolation affect job performance and mental health.

The research can improve policy decisions related to teacher evaluation, leadership training, and school culture development. A positive, fair, and collaborative teaching environment directly enhance teaching quality and students' outcomes.

### **Research Objectives**

- To explore how HOD biases affect teachers' motivation to innovate.
- To examine how favoritism influence teachers' isolation, teamwork, and school culture.
- To investigate the emotional and professional responses of non-favored teachers and reasons for their attrition.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do Head of Schools biases affect teachers' motivation to innovate in their teaching methods?
2. In what ways does favoritism impact teachers' isolation, teamwork, and the overall school culture?
3. What are the emotional and professional responses of non-favored teachers, and why do they leave their jobs after long-term service?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Favoritism by school heads, particularly principals recognized as a significant factor influencing teachers' professional behavior, motivation, and school culture. Several studies have explored the role of leadership biases in shaping teachers' work environments. According to Shah and Ahmed (2023), favoritism in Pakistani schools often demotivates non-favored teachers, affecting their job satisfaction and engagement with students. The research found that teachers who felt excluded from decision-making processes reported higher levels of stress and frustration, which negatively influenced their teaching effectiveness and long-term career decisions (Shah et al., 2025; Aurangzeb et al., 2024). Furthermore, biases in leadership contribute to the creation of in-groups and out-groups within the teaching staff, which undermines collaboration and fosters a culture of mistrust (Hamid, 2025; Khan & Raza, 2022).

According to Dagli & Akyol (2021), how often school leaders shows favoritism and which form are most visible to teachers. Using a random sample of 22 public secondary schools with 376 teacher and the Favoritism in the School Management Scale, they mapped everyday preferential practice relevant to heads (task assignment, schedule leniency, access to resources). Teachers reported favoritism occurred "sometimes," with patterns clustering around staffing and recognition decisions that middle manager control. (Dagli, A. & Akyol, Z. (2021). Favoritism behaviors of school administrators: Teachers' perceptions of the secondary schools in Turkey. *Dinamika Ilmu*, 21(1), 121–138.)

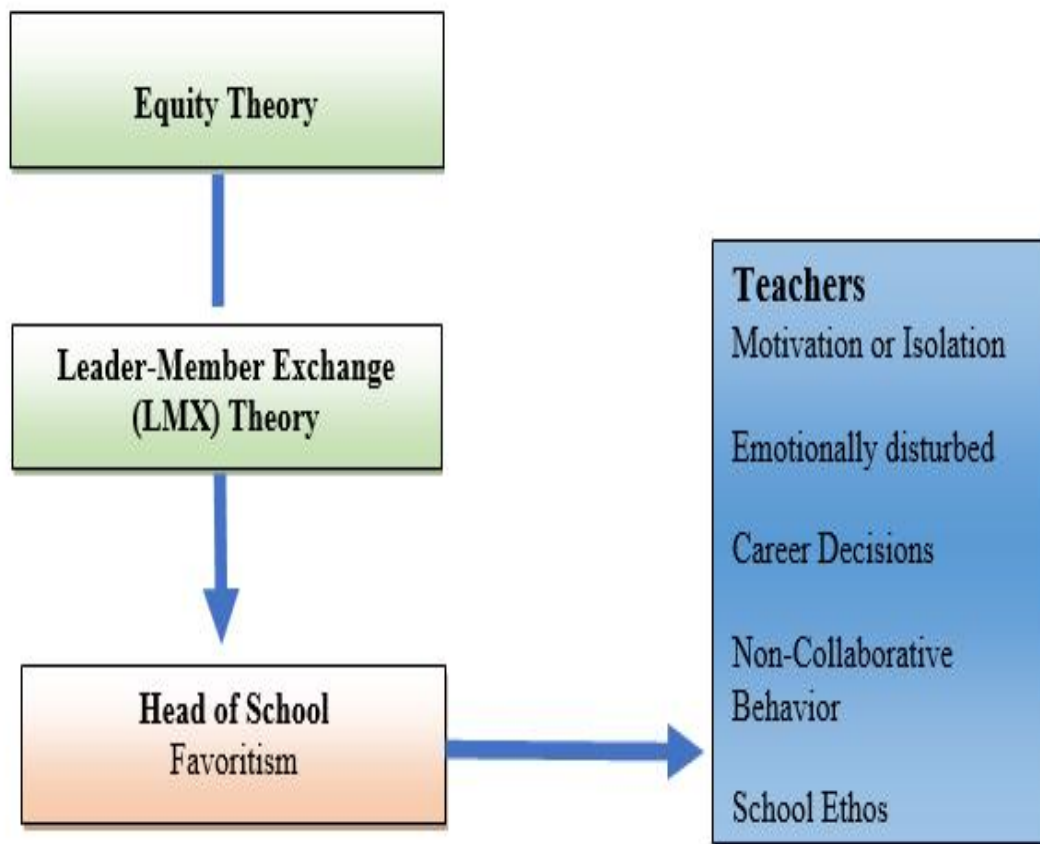
Globally, the influence of school leaders' favoritism widely studied across different educational systems. Research by Mahamutoglu, Celep, and Kaya (2025) indicates that favoritism in educational leadership, particularly by principals, can lead to a range of adverse outcomes, including reduced teacher motivation, a toxic school culture, and lower levels of staff collaboration (Hsu & Huynh, 2025; Iqbal et al., 2025). In countries such as the US and the UK, favoritism show to create disparities in career advancement opportunities for teachers, with favored teachers often receiving professional development and promotions (Blase & Blase, 2004; Hamid & Abbas, 2025). This unequal treatment can undermine teachers' sense of fairness and affect their commitment to the school's mission.

In Australia, a study by Hallinger (2018) emphasized the importance of equitable leadership practices in fostering a collaborative school culture. The findings support the argument that leadership behaviors are crucial in shaping the school climate and influencing teachers' professional experiences.

The local, regional, and global literature highlight the detrimental effects of school leaders' favoritism on teachers' motivation, collaboration, and overall school culture (Hamid & Awhinawhi, 2025; Masih et al., 2025). The evidence suggest that favoritism leads to professional isolation, diminished innovation, and increased teacher attrition. To address these challenges, the literature calls for equitable and transparent leadership practices that promote fairness, inclusivity, and professional growth for all teachers.

#### **Theoretical Framework:**

This research is closely linked to two key theories: Equity Theory and Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory. According to Equity Theory, individuals are motivated by fairness in their relationships and work environment. When teachers perceive favoritism, it creates a sense of inequity, leading to decreased motivation, job dissatisfaction, and potentially higher attrition rates. This theory helps explain how biased treatment can negatively affect teachers' emotional well-being and commitment to their profession. Additionally, the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory emphasizes the varying quality of relationships between leaders and their subordinates. Favoritism in school leadership results in in-groups (favored teachers) and out-groups (non-favored teachers), which disrupts collaboration, creates division, and weakens the overall school culture. Both theories provide valuable insight into how favoritism affects teachers' motivation, professional growth, and long-term career decisions.



## METHODOLOGY

The research indicates that, in educational institutions, favoritism by the school head towards specific teachers is a growing concern in schools. This study used a qualitative methodology and an action research approach; hence, no formal experimental treatment used. Sixteen individuals from different educational institutions participated, eight male and eight female teachers. An interview was conducted with individuals from both genders; the sample size was N=16 (8 males and 8 females) to achieve a balanced approach. Data collected through semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions. Interviews were conducted through face-to-face and online Zoom. The interview was later transcribed, and used thematic analysis to identify patterns across the dataset. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative research method that involves identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach allow the study to systematically address its research goals and provide meaningful insights.

### **Ethical Considerations.**

Ethical considerations strictly followed throughout the study. Informed consent obtained from all participants, ensuring that they are fully aware of the study's purpose, their role in the research, and how their data used. Confidentiality maintained, and the participants' privacy respected throughout the research process. The ethical guidelines ensure transparency and trust, and participants has given the option to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence (Bryman, 2016)

### **Data Analyses:**

The study explore multifaceted impact of favoritism by head of the school/principals on teachers' professional and emotional experiences. The findings organized into five key themes which are, "Impact of Favoritism on Teachers' Motivation and innovation", "Professional Isolation and Exclusion", "Collaboration and School Culture", "Emotional and Professional Response of Non-Favoured Teachers", and "Teacher Attrition and Long Term Career Decisions. "Together these themes provide a comprehensive understanding of how favoritism shapes individual behavior, professional relationships, and the overall school environment.

#### **Theme: 1-Impact of Favoritism on Teachers' Motivation and Innovation**

As per the findings, favoritism by head of school directly influences teacher's willingness to innovative. However, non-favoured teachers often overlook and fell less motivated to adopt new teaching methods, while favoured teachers gain more recognition and opportunities for professional growth. This unequal treatment limits creativity and discourages risk-taking pedagogy. The female participant said, "Recognition from the head of school acts as a strong motivator. When acknowledged, teachers feel valued and are more willing to try new methods. Lack of recognition, however, may discourage teachers from stepping outside their comfort zones, as they fear their efforts may go unnoticed".

Such as, one male teacher said, "When the head of school appreciates my effort, I feel valued and motivated to try new teaching strategies. However, when my efforts go unnoticed, I start questioning, "Why should I even bother?" Lack of recognition slowly kills my enthusiasm for innovation".

Recognition from the head of school is a strong motivator for teachers, making feel valued and encouraging teachers to try new methods. Without recognition, teachers may fear their efforts will go unnoticed, leading to reluctance in stepping outside their comfort zones. This matters because fostering a culture of recognition can motivate teachers to innovate, improving both their teaching and student outcomes.

#### **Theme: 2- Professional Isolation and Exclusion**

The study reveals that teachers who are not favoured frequently experience professional isolation. They may be excluded from decision-making and collaborative projects, which reduce their sense of belonging. Overtime this isolation weakens teachers' morale and undermine a supportive professional community. The study finds that exclusion from decision-making makes teachers feel undervalued.

According to one of the male teacher, " Teachers who feel excluded from decision-making processes due to favoritism may feel undervalued, isolated, and less committed to departmental goals, while included teachers may feel more invested and valued".

According to female teacher, "Being excluded because of favoritism feels humiliating. It makes me think that my opinion does not matter, even if I have valuable ideas. It creates a wall between me and the leadership".

Teachers excluded from decision-making due to favoritism may feel undervalued and less committed, leading to disengagement and lower performance. In contrast, included teachers feel valued and motivated, thereby enhancing collaboration and improving educational outcomes.

#### **Theme: 3-Non-Collaborative Behavior and School Ethos**

The research identify that favoritism gradually erodes trust and collegiality among staff. It often creates divisions or cliques, that leading to unhealthy competition rather than cooperation. A culture of bias foster perception of unfairness weakens unity, and damage the shared vision necessary for positive and productive environment and school culture.

One of female teacher' "I think, favoritism damages trust and weakens open communication among teachers, because some feel silenced while others are over-empowered".

A male teacher, "Favoritism breeds mistrust. I start doubting colleagues' intentions, wondering if they are being genuine or just playing politics. Communication becomes guarded instead of open".

This highlights the emotional toll of being overlooked and undervalued, showing that when teachers' efforts go unrecognized, their enthusiasm and effectiveness diminish. Compared to teachers to feel supported and appreciated, non-favored teachers likely to feel alienated. Teachers who feel valued tend to have higher morale and job satisfaction, which in turn leads to improved performance. This matters because the emotional struggles of non-favored teachers result in higher turnover rates, lower-quality education, and negative impacts on student outcomes.

#### **Theme: 4-Emotionally and Professional Responses of Non-Favoured Teachers**

The study finds that non-favoured teacher response in varied ways, including feelings of stress, demotivated, and frustrated. Professionally they may withdraw, reduce participation in school initiatives and adopt coping strategies. These responses revealed hoe favoritism not only effect emotions but also shapes teachers' professional conduct.

Such as; according to one of the female teacher, “Non-favored teachers often feel stress because their efforts go unnoticed, frustration when hard work is not rewarded, and demotivate as they lose interest in giving their best”.

Non-favored teachers feel stressed, frustrated, and demotivated due to unrecognized efforts and lack of rewards, leading to disengagement and negatively affecting both their performance and student outcomes. Addressing these issues is crucial for improving teacher retention and student learning.

According to male teacher, “Non-favored teachers might experience stress, frustration, and demotivated, affecting their well-being and performance”.

Non-favored teachers may experience stress, frustration, and demotivation, which negatively influence their well-being and performance.

### **Theme: 5-Teachers Attrition and Long-Term Career Decision**

The findings discovered that persistent favoritism contribute significantly to teacher attrition even among long-serving staffs. Teachers described leaving because of unmet professional aspirations, lack of recognition, and accumulated frustration. Favoritism often serve as a tipping point where loyalty to the profession is exceeded by a toxic workplace environment.

Such as, one female teacher, “The tipping point comes when frustration outweighs passion. When the thought of walking into school feels heavier than inspiring students, that’s when loyalty breaks, and resignation starts to look like relief”.

According to male teacher, “Teachers resign when unfair treatment outweighs loyalty to the job”.

Teacher resignation is often driven by frustration and perceived unfair treatment. The negative emotional toll of these factors outweighs a teacher's passion and loyalty; it leads to burnout and ultimately resignation. This issue is crucial because it influence on teacher retention, which is directly linked to the quality of education. Teachers who feel undervalued or unfairly treated likely to disengage and high turnover rates disrupt student learning and add to schools' costs. Addressing these concerns an important for maintaining a motivated and effective teaching force, which is vital for student success and institutional stability.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of the study highlighted the significant influences of favoritism by

head of the school/principals on teachers' emotional and professional experiences and growth. Favoritism revealed as a significant element influencing teachers' motivation, teamwork, and general involvement with their professional jobs. The findings, which are consistent with previous research on workplace equity in educational leadership, indicate that unequal treatment and biased recognition have an impact not only on individual instructors but also on the overall school culture. (Sakçak, A., Arslan, Y., & Polat, S. 2023) Teachers who were preferred by head of school reported receiving more recognition and support, which frequently translated into a willingness to innovate in their teaching approaches. Those who felt marginalized, on the other hand, indicated apprehension about implementing new techniques, citing a lack of support and recognition. This is consistent with earlier research that has emphasized the importance of recognition and equitable treatment in developing creativity and innovation among instructors.

Another key issue involves professional isolation. Teachers who viewed themselves as unfavored frequently reported excluded from decision-making processes, collaborative initiatives, and leadership roles. This type of professional isolation was both structural and psychological, as non-favored instructors felt disconnected from their colleagues and undervalued in the school community. (Dagli, A., & Akyol, Z. 2019). These experiences are consistent with research showing that exclusionary policies lower teacher morale and diminish a sense of belonging, affecting overall school productivity. Such isolation also has an impact on student learning, since demotivated teachers are less likely to engage in collaborative behaviors that improve instructional quality.

Favoritism had a significant impact on teamwork and school culture. The data indicate that biased treatment generates divisions and cliques among employees, frequently leading to mistrust and unhealthy competition rather than cooperation. Instead of cultivating a culture of fairness and inclusivity, favoritism appeared to foster a fractured environment in which unity and common goal were endangered. This conclusion is crucial since school culture is widely considered as a key component of excellent educational institutions. Favoritism hinders the capacity for joint improvement and innovation, increasing school-wide inequities.

The emotional and professional responses of non-favored teachers emphasize the negative repercussions of partiality. Many teachers reported stress, irritation, and demotivation, while others voiced powerlessness and resignation. Professionally, some people responded by withdrawing from departmental activities, while others used coping methods like resilience or avoidance to maintain their well-being. These findings reflect the larger psychological costs of unethical leadership practices, mirroring previous research linking favoritism to job unhappiness and burnout. (Karaca. Güzel, F., & Göksoy, s., 2023). Importantly, the results show that these emotional and professional responses affect not only individual issues but also the overall functioning of schools.

Finally, the issue of teacher turnover arose forcefully. Long-serving instructors who had showed dedication to their institutions said that repeated favoritism and a lack of appreciation frequently prompted them to depart. The choice to leave was not made suddenly, but rather after years of frustration and unfulfilled professional goals. This result emphasizes the long-term ramifications of favoritism for maintaining experienced instructors, whose departure not only results in a loss of human capital but also disrupts school stability and continuity.

In conclusion, the debate emphasizes that partiality by head of school has far-reaching repercussions on numerous dimensions, including teacher motivation, professional inclusion, teamwork, emotional well-being, and retention. The findings indicate the importance of equitable and open leadership approaches in maintaining teacher morale, cultivating a healthy school culture, and assuring educational institutions' long-term viability. Addressing favoritism is thus not merely a question of fairness, but also a strategic imperative for increasing teaching quality and institutional performance.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this study reveals that favoritism by school heads has far-reaching consequences for both teachers and schools. It negatively influence teachers' motivation, fosters professional isolation, damages collaboration, and contributes to emotional distress, ultimately leading to higher teacher attrition. Favoritism hinders innovation, as favored teachers are more motivated to try new methods, while non-favored teachers often refrain from taking risks due to a lack of recognition. Moreover, it erodes school culture, creating division and mistrust among staff, and undermines a collaborative, inclusive work environment. The study highlights the critical need for school leaders to adopt transparent, equitable practices to foster a healthy, supportive atmosphere that retains talented educators and ensures the long-term success of the institution.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the study's findings, several recommendations made to reduce the negative impact of favoritism and foster fairness, diversity, and professional growth in schools:

1. School leaders adopt clear decision-making processes for tasks, performance evaluations, and promotions, ensuring fairness through written policies and regular communication.
2. Schools establish clear codes of conduct that explicitly prohibit favoritism, with defined consequences and reporting procedures, boosting teacher confidence in the leadership.
3. School leaders undergo ongoing training in leadership, ethics, equity, emotional intelligence, and collaborative decision-making to support balanced leadership.

4. Teachers are acknowledged for their achievements based on objective criteria such as classroom performance, innovation, and student success, fostering a culture of continuous professional development and morale for all staff.

#### **Future researchers**

- 1- Conduct longitudinal research to investigate the long-term impacts of favoritism on teacher retention, motivation, and advancement.
- 2- Expand the study to include multiple schools or districts to compare how favoritism manifests itself in various educational environments.
- 2- Use a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies to capture both statistical patterns and teachers' personal experiences.
- 4- Investigate the relationship between partiality and student outcomes, as teacher morale and teamwork may have an indirect effect on student learning.
- 5- Examine cultural disparities in how favoritism is perceived and managed in schools across different areas or countries.
- 6- Examine favoritism through the lens of head of school to better understand their arguments, demands, and leadership issues.

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