Teacher Bias and Its Impact on Teacher-Student Relationships: The Example of Favoritism

Student-teacher relationships develop over the course of the school year through a complex intersection of student and teacher beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and interactions with one another. Forming strong and supportive relationships with teachers allows students to feel safer and more secure in the school setting, feel more competent, make more positive connections with peers, and make greater academic gains. In contrast, conflict with teachers may place students on a trajectory of school failure in which they are unable to connect to academic and social resources offered within classrooms and schools.

<div align="right">Hamre, Pianta, Bear, & Minke</div>

It is easy to list out a set of ideals related to what students and school staff would like their experiences in the classroom and school-wide to be. Such a list encompasses being welcome, safe, included, respected, cared for, guided and supported in learning, and treated fairly. These qualitative features are seen as enabling openness, trust, engagement, participation, and enhancing the "fit" for effective learning and positive growth. Pursuing these ideals in an equitable manner requires that teachers develop effective working relationships with all their students.

Relationships at school exert a powerful influence on student and staff perceptions of each other and on engagement in learning and on outcomes. Teachers and students are human beings and it should surprise no one that unintentional and intentional biases affect their relationships with each other. Such biases contribute to favoritism for some and neglectful and prejudicial actions toward others.

Biases can become barriers to effectively working together. Such barriers arise from negative attitudes related to sociocultural and economic background, current lifestyle, primary language spoken, skin color, gender, power, status, intervention orientation, and on and on.

In addition, interfering dynamics often arise as teachers and students interact. Examples include excessive dependency and approval seeking, competition, stereotypical thinking and judgmental bias, transference and counter-transference, rescue-persecution cycles, resistance, reluctance, and psychological withdrawal and psychological reactance.

All this can have significant impact on what happens in the classroom and beyond. As an example, this resource briefly highlights the matter of teacher favoritism.

Teacher Favoritism

Teacher favoritism can be defined as the act of giving preferential treatment to someone or something; the tendency to favor a person or group for factors "such as a characteristic they possess, or their personal contacts, or merely out of personal preferences" (Aydogan, 2008). At school, think about a "teacher's pet."

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Teacher Favoritism

For the most part, research suggests that teacher favoritism is not manifested as blatant and obvious favors. Subtle cues include nonverbal behavior that conveys a preference (or dislike) toward another person (e.g., facial expressions, length of eye contact, body movements). A teacher may not even be aware of giving preferences or investing more in one student and slighting others. A sad example that researchers have highlighted is that teachers often favor some students (intentionally or unintentionally) when punishing misbehavior (Brown & Dobbins, 2004; Tirri & Puolimatka, 2000).

A widely recognized type of favoritism is seen in "teacher pet" relationships. Badad (2009) defines such relationships as "a phenomenon of a special emotional relationship (often a love relationship) between the teacher and a particular student (or two) in the classroom"). Trusz (2017) defines pets as "students favoured by teachers because they have actual and/or alleged characteristics that are highly valued by teachers, but not necessarily by classmates."

Factors that Cultivate Teacher Favoritism

According to Urhahne (2015), teacher expectations and judgments related to student achievements can play a huge role in whether or not a teacher favors a student. He defines teacher expectations as "inferences that teachers make about students' future academic achievement" while teacher judgments are defined as "estimates of students' current academic achievement."

As we noted in our introduction, many factors can influence such expectations and judgments (e.g., sociocultural and economic background, current lifestyle, primary language spoken, skin color, gender, and on and on). However, as intersectionality research highlights, delineating the impact of these variables is complex. For example, some studies suggest that teachers' perceptions of students' academic achievements are generally independent of student demographic characteristics – with the exception that teachers tend to overestimate some academic abilities of girls, especially in terms of language abilities (Sorhagen, 2013).

Multiple studies have shown that teacher expectations are more likely to be influenced by student behavior in classrooms as opposed to student demographic characteristics (Sorhagen, 2013). For example, teachers may develop expectations that a socially competent student is also an academically competent student and view troublesome students as less competent (Hinnant, O'Brien, & Ghazarian, 2009).

Correlational Studies of Teacher Favoratism

Aydogan (2008) studied teacher favoritism in Turkish classrooms. The variety of correlates with teacher favoritism were: student success, student's socioeconomic status, gender, physical appearance, familiarity between teacher and student or student's family, and parallelism between political or religious ideology of the student and the teacher. Examples: Teachers tended to favor students who they perceived as more successful, from middle class as contrasted to lower class backgrounds, and those who came from a similar background to themselves. Physically attractive students also tended to be more favored. In terms of student gender, both male and female teachers tended to give special attention to boys.

Earlier, Tal & Babad (1990) studied teachers' pets in Israeli classrooms. They reported that: *Pets tended to be girls rather than boys, of Ashkenazi rather than Sephardi origin, very good (but not necessarily the best) students academically, and perceived as charming, socially skilled, and compliant. Teachers who had pets were found to hold somewhat more authoritarian attitudes than teachers who did not have pets, and the rate of occurrence of the pet phenomenon was higher in religious than in secular schools. Students' affective reactions to their teachers were more positive in classrooms without pets, and most negative in exclusive-pet classrooms. Potential favoritism in assigning teacher grades to exclusive pets was also investigated: No overall favoritism was found, but a trace of favoritism by more authoritarian teachers was discovered*

Some of the Negative Effects of Teacher Favoritism

Besides direct studies of teacher favoritism, the negative effects of such favoritism have been extrapolated from a larger body of research focused on the impact of inaccuracies and bias in teacher expectations and judgments. Possible negative effects have been discussed for students and teachers and for classroom climate. Concerns also have raised about the potential impact at home As can readily be seen from an internet search, the following concerns are widely mentioned:

- Favoritism in the classroom is seen as fundamentally unfair and contributes to inequities that affect student success and failure.
- Such favoritism can have a negative impact on a teacher's reputation; students who are not favored are likely to develop negative attitudes toward the teacher and perhaps toward the school. Trust between the teacher and these students declines, with obvious implications for relationship building.
- Favored students may be resented. They may become targets for hostile acts by peers, including rejection and isolation.
- Students who are not favored may perceive the teacher's attitude toward them as a negative judgment and develop negative attitudes about themselves related to classroom learning. And the situation may exacerbate the problems of those with already negative attitudes. Students may become angry and act out or withdraw.
- All this can undermine a teacher's effectiveness and runs counter to developing a positive classroom climate.
- Beyond school, negative effects at home can arise when those who are favored adopt a sense of privilege, and those who are not favored internalize the negative image they perceive from the teacher's behavior toward them.

Although preferential treatment and favoritism may not be conspicuous, the existence of a teacher's pet in a classroom is enough to produce negative effects

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A Couple of Studies Discussing Negative Effects

Babad, E. (1995). The "teacher's pet" phenomenon, students' perceptions of teachers' differential behaviour and students' morale. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 87*, 361–374. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ517160

> Reports finding that the intensity of the teacher's pet phenomenon was related to perceived teachers' differential behavior, which, in turn, was negatively related to student morale. Stronger perceptions of teacher differential treatment were directly related to assumed favoritism, preferential treatment, and unfairness and less overall satisfaction, more negative reactions to the teacher, and a more negative classroom climate. The findings were strongest when the pets were unpopular with other students. Implications for the negative attitudes expressed by students include students ignoring or resisting teacher leadership and developing negative or angry attitudes towards the teacher's pet and the teacher himself/herself because of the perceived preferential treatment.

Chiu, S.-I., Lee, J., & Liang, T. (2013). Does the teacher's pet phenomenon inevitably cause classroom conflict? Comparative viewpoints of three pet-student groups. *School Psychology International, 34*, 3–16. http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0143034311421270

> **Article abstract:** *Although most studies reveal a relationship between the teacher's pet phenomenon with classroom conflict, it does not necessarily cause classroom conflict. This study confirms the model fit for teacher authority, the existence of the teacher"s pet phenomenon and its relationship to classroom conflict and students" self-adjustment, as well as testing the different viewpoints of three pet-student groups. Participants in the study comprised 407 5th through 8th grade students from 12 schools in Taiwan. The findings indicate that the estimated model fits the observed data; teacher authority directly affects the teacher"s pet phenomenon and indirectly affects classroom conflict and students" self-adjustment. Non-pet students, popular-pet students, and unpopular pet students have different viewpoints of the variables. Three sub-models reveal different path effects; the inclusion of popular-pet students does not lead to classroom conflict.*

Concluding Comments

As McGrath & Van Bergin (2015) suggest:

> *a positive relationship with a teacher can protect against numerous other negative influences including maladaptive behaviour, negative life events, poor quality child–parent relationships, and referral to special education settings. It can also predict a range of behavioural and academic outcomes: not just within the school years, but perhaps also in adulthood. For example, those with negative student–teacher relationships may be more likely to be unemployed in adulthood, whereas those with positive relationships may experience a higher degree of success. The predictive and protective functions of the student–teacher relationship suggests that one positive relationship may be sufficient to alter the trajectory of a student at risk of negative outcomes.*

In extolling the virtues of positive teacher-student relationships, few doubt that teacher biases can lead to some profound negative effects. Clearly, countering bias and facilitating establishment of positive teacher-student working relationships for all is an essential facet of school improvement efforts. In addition to what can be done through a direct focus on reducing bias as part of the agenda for continuing professional education, the matter can be addressed in developing a personalized approach to both instruction and special assistance (see *Improving School Improvement* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html .

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