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An Investigation of Teachers' Perspectives on Favoritism in Schools: Implications for Educational Policy and Practice

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Abstract

Background/purpose. In the literature, favoritism is often discussed as a form of corruption and an unethical practice. Studies related to favoritism in educational organizations have found that favoritism negatively impacts educational institutions. This study aims to investigate how teachers defined and perceived favoritism at school as well as their views on preventing such acts by the school principal.

Materials/methods. A qualitative, phenomenological approach was used in the study. Data was collected from forty-five teachers who had previously been exposed to acts of favoritism using a semi-structured interview form. Participants were selected using a purposive, criterion-based sampling method. Data was analyzed using descriptive and content analysis.

Results. The results indicated that teachers defined favoritism as preferential and unfair treatment of people based on personal interests, friendship, gender, kinship, political views, union affiliation, teaching subject, professional experience, or race. The participants reported that school principals practiced favoritism through their choice of adjustments to class schedules and duty days, unfair distribution of extra duties, unfair response to leave requests, being unfair in tolerating mistakes, allowing for flexible class entry and exit times, or modifications to class assignments. To prevent such practices, the teachers suggested that the criteria for becoming a principal be regulated to ensure merit-based appointments and democratic management in addition to providing in-service training and supervision. They also suggested that school principalship should be subject to rotation to avoid acts of favoritism.

Conclusion. These results indicate that school principals should be appointed using more objective criteria so that factors such as union affiliation and political views are not prioritized over merit. Teachers and school principals' awareness of favoritism and its negative results could also be raised by providing in-service training and explicit norms to support justice in schools.

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1. Introduction

Favoritism refers to providing jobs, contracts, or resources to individuals belonging to one's social group (Bramoullé & Goyal, 2016). It involves the act of a public official granting special privileges to individuals within their inner circle (Aydın, 2021) as well as engaging in biased treatment or special privileges toward specific individuals or groups, contrary to the principle of impartiality (İlğan, 2021).

In any case of favoritism, individuals are positioned differently based on language, religion, sect, gender, physical appearance, or race, preventing them from accessing their rights or having those rights revoked (İlğan, 2021). Therefore, favoritism leads to inequality or unjust treatment of people, thus causing significant harm.

Favoritism is a phenomenon that can be observed in almost every area of social life. Relationships such as kinship, friendship, associations with spouses, classmates, military comrades, professional ties, sectarian affiliations, membership in religious communities, local or regional connections, and neighborhood relationships all provide support in various aspects of one's daily life, economic and political interactions, as well as within bureaucratic and organizational structures (Özkanan & Erdem, 2014). Research also shows that favoritism is common in developing, one-party, or tribal-led countries (Genç, 2012). Favoritism in such environments, often termed "political favoritism," "political spoils," or "political plunder," refers to the practice of allocating public resources as political rewards and creating partisan staffing networks. In practice, this system not only involves political favoritism in hiring and promotions but also leads to the misuse of public resources, political reward systems, and the creation of partisan bureaucracies (Güran, 1980).

Practices like favoritism, nepotism, and partisanship cause significant problems in organizations and hinder the modern implementation of personnel functions (Açıkalın, 2016). The practice of favoritism, where individuals appoint their political allies to management positions, starkly contrasts with a merit-based system, where individuals are assigned roles based on impartial evaluations. Systems where both favoritism and merit are simultaneously applied are even more dangerous than systems that rely on favoritism, as they lead to increased personnel numbers and unnecessary employment (Özkanan & Erdem, 2014).

In the literature, favoritism is often discussed as a form of corruption and an unethical practice (Bayrakçı, 2000; Çamur & Aydın, 2021; Çelik & Erdem, 2012; Çevikbaş, 2006; Çoban, 1999; Karakose & Tülübaş, 2024; Özel, 2021; Özer, 2012; Turan et al., 2019; Yavuz & Tülümce, 2022). Studies investigating favoritism in educational organizations have found that favoritism negatively impacts educational institutions (Argon, 2016; Ayal & Kahveci, 2023; Ayas & Atmaca, 2023; Demirbilek, 2018; Demirtaş & Demirbilek, 2019; Gider & Okçu, 2022; Gülay, 2018; Güner, 2019; Günyederli & Aypay, 2022; İşlek & Gül, 2022; Kahraman, 2020; Karademir, 2016; A. Kaya, 2022; Keskin, 2018; Kolukırık, 2019; Meriç & Erdem, 2013; Ozdemir & Cakalci, 2022; Ozdemir & Gunduz, 2019; Polat & Kazak, 2014; Sancak, 2021; Tabancalı, 2018; Uysal, 2022). Therefore, it is crucial to increase our understanding of the act of favoritism in schools so that necessary steps can be taken to diminish its adverse effects on educational organizations. In this regard, this study aims to identify how favoritism is perceived by teachers who have experienced it, to explore the nature of school principals' acts of favoritism, and to determine ways to prevent such behaviors. The study mainly addresses the following research questions in light of teachers' views on principals' acts of favoritism:

1. How do teachers define favoritism?
2. How do school principals practice favoritism at school?
3. What steps can be taken to prevent favoritism at school?

2. Literature Review

Favoritism manifests in various forms within organizations. Factors such as personal relationships, such as familial ties, or acquaintances contribute to the prevalence of favoritism in organizations (Karakose, 2014). In their review of the literature, Özkanan and Erdem (2014) categorize favoritism into two main groups: individual favoritism and political favoritism. They further break down individual favoritism into nepotism (family-based favoritism), cronyism (friendship-based favoritism), tribalism, and localism while classifying political favoritism into patronage, clientelism, and service-based favoritism.

2.1. Individual favoritism

Individual favoritism is universally recognized as a form of misconduct, often seen in societies where democratic institutions are underdeveloped. This condition is linked to a lack of organizational awareness in society, where individualism naturally emerges in the absence of collective action, and success often depends on securing the support of powerful individuals (Tarhan et al., 2006). Individual favoritism can also emerge in political decision-making processes, referring to preferential treatment given unjustly or outside established rules and norms.

The most often cited forms of individual favoritism in the literature are nepotism, cronyism, and tribalism. Nepotism is defined as employing family members within the same organization or using familial influence to secure jobs in different organizations (Abdalla et al., 1998). Nepotism occurs when individuals are employed in state positions solely because they are relatives of politicians, bureaucrats, or other public officials, irrespective of their skills, abilities, or qualifications. This favoritism is typically found in countries where traditional ties and relationships are more deeply ingrained. Some authors argue that public officials engage in nepotism not for financial gain but to gain social status or recognition (Özsemerci, 2003).

Cronyism, on the other hand, is a type of favoritism where personal relationships, such as those with friends or acquaintances, are prioritized over merit in public employment. Unlike nepotism, which involves family ties, cronyism favors individuals who are friends, acquaintances, or allies. Local favoritism, where individuals from the same region or hometown are given preferential treatment, is also considered an act of cronyism (Aktan & Acar, 2021). Cronyism has a broader implication than nepotism, which involves creating a system where close friends and allies benefit. In situations such as hiring or awarding contracts, preference for those seen as "close" to the decision-makers leads to the misuse of public resources and is seen as a form of corruption (Karakaş & Çak, 2007).

Tribalism, as another type of individual favoritism, refers to the act of a person in power favoring individuals from the same geographical region or tribe. In this favoritism system, rooted in ethnocentrism, individuals prefer working with people from their own culture, region, or tribe, often perceiving these groups as superior. This leads to discriminatory practices in the workplace, with negative attitudes directed at those who do not belong to the same cultural or tribal background (Baş, 2019).

2.2. Political favoritism

Political favoritism refers to the practice of political parties, once in power, granting privileges to their supporters during election periods, thus providing them with unfair advantages (Tarhan et al., 2006). Political leaders' favoring their party members is also known as political cronyism or partisan politics (Aktan & Acar, 2021). Partisan favoritism is pervasive in local government bodies, such as municipalities, where public services are carried out. When political affiliations influence decisions, it leads to the politicization of the public sector, often resulting in corruption (Özkanan & Erdem, 2014). The three most cited types of political favoritism in the relevant literature are patronage, clientelism, and pork-barreling.

Patronage, as a form of political favoritism, occurs when political power changes hands, often leading to the removal of senior bureaucrats based on ideological, nepotistic, or cronyistic motives (Tarhan et al., 2006). Excessive favoritism, which involves appointment powers and political favors, can lead to a corrupt system that undermines public sector efficiency and fairness. In some cases, this type of favoritism leads to unchecked power, enabling politicians to appoint allies to positions of power without accountability (TÜSİAD, 1995).

The concept of clientelism, on the other hand, originated in Ancient Rome, where a client was someone under the protection of a Roman patron, obligated to provide services in exchange for support. Clientelism is a system in which political power brokers provide material support, services, or resources in exchange for political loyalty. In this system, public resources intended for the general population are often used to secure political advantage for the ruling party, rewarding supporters and punishing detractors (Yuvalı, 2018).

Pork-barreling, another type of political favoritism, occurs when the ruling party allocates public resources, such as budgetary funds, to specific regions to gain electoral support in the next election. This leads to the concentration of investments and services in politically favorable regions to the ruling party, undermining the principle of equal distribution of public resources (Tarhan et al., 2006). In this system, the slush fund, a discretionary budget allocation that can be used without oversight, mainly facilitates corrupt spending by allowing funds to be spent freely, without scrutiny (Yıldırım, 2013).

Any favoritism significantly harms people and societies, breaking the norms of equity and justice. Considering that people working under a just system tend to be equally or more motivated (M. Kaya & Koçyiğit, 2023; Sultoni & Gunawan, 2023), in environments dominated by acts of favoritism, employees lose their motivation and their commitment to their job/organization. Therefore, in such work environments, employees lose their creativity and ambition to contribute to the organization (Kwon, 2006). Similarly, in organizations characterized by acts of favoritism, employees develop lasting feelings of fear and negative expectations toward their work. This eventually results in a loss of self-belief and alienation, with employees feeling disconnected from the organization and perceiving themselves as unnecessary or worthless. Furthermore, favoritism erodes the foundations of teamwork, creating a toxic organizational culture driven by intrigue, hostility, and mobbing (Safina, 2015).

3. Methodology

This study was designed as qualitative research. It used the phenomenological approach to understand how teachers exposed to acts of favoritism in their workplace made sense of this experience and how these experiences influenced their attitudes and perceptions of their work. In phenomenological studies, the goal is to understand the essence of a particular experience by exploring how individuals perceive, describe, remember, and talk about this experience, as well as identifying their feelings and ideas surrounding these experiences (Patton, 2014). Therefore, the phenomenological approach fits well with the purpose of the current study.

3.1. Participants

The study employed a criterion sampling method, a purposive sampling technique, in which all cases meeting pre-determined criteria are selected for inclusion in the research (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021). The inclusion criterion for this study was that participants must have experienced acts of favoritism. The study participants were 45 teachers from various levels of education: preschool, primary school, secondary school, and high school. Twenty-three of the participants were female, and 22 were male. Twenty-one participants had less than 10 years of teaching experience, while 24 had 10 years or more. The group included 26 secondary school teachers, 15 high school teachers, three primary school teachers, and one preschool teacher.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

In phenomenological research, data is typically collected through semi-structured interviews with individuals who have directly experienced the phenomenon (Patton, 2014). Semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility during the interview process, enabling the researcher to adapt and modify questions based on the responses and the direction of the conversation (Ekiz, 2020) and help gain in-depth information regarding the experience under investigation.

Data for this study was also collected using a semi-structured interview form. The interview questions were developed after conducting a literature review and were then reviewed by an expert in educational sciences to ensure their relevance and clarity. The researcher conducted the interviews face-to-face, and the responses provided by the participants were transcribed after the interviews. Participants were then asked to confirm that the transcription of their responses was accurate and complete.

The data collected in this study were analyzed using content analysis and descriptive analysis methods. Content analysis is used to identify words, concepts, themes, expressions, characters, or sentences within the text and to quantify these elements (Kızıltepe, 2021). After categorizing the data, the next step involved separating subcategories and themes. On the other hand, descriptive analysis presents the data as it is, without any detailed analysis or interpretation (Sönmez & Alacapınar, 2019). In this study, the transcriptions of the interviews were analyzed using content analysis. First, he most frequently mentioned and emphasized that words were identified to develop both abstract and concrete codes. Similar or related codes were then grouped under overarching categories. Frequency counts for each code were also provided. In the final stage of the analysis, the responses to the interview questions were presented verbatim as part of the descriptive analysis. The findings were supplemented with these direct quotes to support the data and add depth to the results.

3.3. Validity and reliability

Internal validity refers to the degree to which the researcher's interpretations reflect the actual reality of the studied phenomena. It is also concerned with whether different researchers would interpret the same data in the same way and reach similar conclusions (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021). External validity, on the other hand, pertains to the ability to generalize the findings to similar settings, contexts, or situations (Akar, 2019). To ensure both internal and external validity, the study's design, participant characteristics, sampling methods, data collection procedures, and data analysis processes were thoroughly explained in the relevant sections of the research.

4. Results

The content analysis results were organized into themes, categories, sub-categories, and relevant codes. The first theme was regarding teachers' definition of favoritism and included how they viewed acts of favoritism at school. The results regarding this theme are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Teachers' definition of favoritism

Theme	Categories (*teachers' views regarding favoritism*)	Frequency
Teachers' Definition of Favoritism	Favoring certain individuals	28
	Being unfair	8
	Acting based on friendship, gender, kinship, political views, union affiliation, subject, professional experience, race, etc.	6
	Acting based on personal interests	4
	Tolerating certain behaviors	4

As presented in Table 1, most participants defined favoritism as favoring certain individuals over others (n=28), while some participants underlined that it was related to being unfair (n=8). Other participants defined favoritism as an act based on friendship, gender, kinship, political views, union affiliation, subject, professional experience, race, and personal interests (n=10). Some participants underlined that favoritism included being tolerant of certain behaviors by specific individuals (n=4). The following excerpts from the interviews exemplify the participants' views.

"I believe favoritism in school management means providing privileged opportunities to a specific group of staff or students." (T1)

"It means treating some teachers differently than others, giving them special privileges." (T15)

"It means the school management is failing to ensure equality and justice among staff and teachers." (T8)

"It is when school principals behave in a way that supports certain individuals based on friendship, kinship, religion, sect, union, neighborhood, political views, etc., avoiding the norms of justice or ethics." (T20).

"It involves granting extra tolerance to certain individuals." (T42).

The second theme that emerged from the content analysis was related to teachers' views on school principals' acts of favoritism they often encountered at school. The theme comprised seven different acts of favoritism that school principals frequently engaged with. Teachers' views regarding this second theme are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Teachers' views regarding school principals' acts of favoritism

Theme	Categories (*teachers' views regarding principals' acts of favoritism*)	Frequency
School Principals' Acts of Favoritism	Adjusting the class schedule	25
	Unfair distribution of extracurricular tasks	18
	Adjusting extra duty days with course schedules	17
	Unfair treatment of leave requests	13
	Tolerating mistakes	9
	Flexibility with class start and end times	4
	Adjusting class assignments	4

As shown in Table 2, the most frequently mentioned act of favoritism by school principals was their adjusting the class schedules of some teachers as they wished (n=25), which was followed by an unfair distribution of extracurricular duties (n=18) and adjusting the extra duty days with course schedules (n=17). Teachers also mentioned that school principals were engaged with favoritism by not treating leave requests fairly (n=13), tolerating mistakes of their favorite teachers (n=9), showing flexibility regarding teachers' class start and end times (n=4), and adjusting their favorite teachers' class assignments (n=4). The following quotes by the participants exemplify some of these views well.

"For example, the science teacher with 28 hours of classes gets one day off, while the math teacher with 22 hours must come to school five days a week. A colleague who wanted the day's first class free to drop off their child had their schedule adjusted, but another teacher with the same request had been denied. The teachers who had their requests approved were close friends of the principal." (T26)

"When a project or task is available, those who are favored are not even offered the work, while those who are quiet or compliant are forced into it." (T27)

"Not being fair in assigning extra lessons and assigning more lesson hours to certain teachers." (T3)

"I had an issue with my breast-feeding leave. The principal accepted one teacher's request for early leave, but my request was rejected even though I had similar reasons." (T29)

"I have seen teachers who smoke being tolerated, even though they take longer to return to class after breaks compared to others." (T33)

The third theme that emerged from the content analysis was related to teachers' views on preventing acts of favoritism at school. The theme comprised seven suggestions the participants provided, and they are all presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Teachers' suggestions for preventing acts of favoritism at school

Theme	Categories (*teachers' suggestions for preventing favoritism*)	Frequency
Preventing Acts of Favoritism at School	Revisiting conditions for becoming a school principal and prioritizing merit	19
	Providing school principals with in-service training	11
	Close monitoring of principals' acts of favoritism	11
	School principals' being subject to rotation	8
	Teachers should evaluate principals	7
	Principals should be free of union affiliations	7
	Decisions should be made by involving all or a committee of teachers	3

As listed in Table 3, most teachers suggested revisiting the conditions for becoming a school principal and prioritizing merit in any conditions (n=19). Participants also underlined the significance of providing school principals with in-service training (n=11), and upper levels of management should closely monitor their acts of favoritism (n=11). Teachers also suggested that rotation could help prevent acts of favoritism (n=8) because it might limit school principals' time to establish closer ties with particular teachers. Some participants suggested that allowing teachers to evaluate principals could decrease favoristic acts, while some underlined that acts of favoritism sometimes result from sharing union affiliations, so having school principals be free of any union affiliations could be a means of preventing favoritism at school (n=7). Few teachers pulled attention to the significance of shared decision-making at school. They suggested that decision-making involving all or a committee of teachers could help prevent school principals' acts of favoritism (n=3). Some of the significant suggestions from participants for preventing favoritism in school management can be exemplified by the following quotes:

"The key to preventing favoritism is having a system of assigning fair, experienced, and qualified individuals as school principals." (T14)

"Merit should be the primary criterion. Too often, individuals who cannot manage to teach properly end up becoming principals." (T30)

"School principals could be educated and monitored on issues related to favoritism." (T11)

"School principals should be provided with training about the negative effects of favoritism, and they should be monitored as needed." (T20)

"Principals should not remain in the same school for too long to avoid power consolidation and ensure fairness." (T16)

"Teachers should be allowed to evaluate the school administration, possibly with the coordination of the Ministry of Education." (T22)

"Appointments should not be influenced by union or personal affiliations." (T15).

5. Discussion

This study investigated teachers' perspectives on school principals' acts of favoritism at school. The content analysis of data revealed three major themes in response to the three research questions addressed by the study: teachers' definition of favoritism, teachers' views regarding school principals' acts of favoritism, and teachers' suggestions for preventing acts of favoritism at school.

Regarding teachers' definition of favoritism, most participants stated that it was related to favoring certain individuals over others and thus engaging in unfair treatment of teachers. It was underlined that favoritism was often manifested by acting based on friendship, gender, kinship, political views, union affiliation, professional experience, race, or personal interests, as well as by tolerating mistakes or certain behaviors by the favorite ones. These findings are consistent with results presented by previous research (Argon, 2016; Ayas & Atmaca, 2023; Aydogan, 2009; Cetin et al., 2024; Demirtaş & Demirbilek, 2019; Günyederli & Aypay, 2022; Kahraman, 2020; Karakose et al., 2024a; A. Kaya, 2022; Papadakis et al., 2024a). These researchers revealed several acts of favoritism at school. For instance, Argon (2016) noted that school principals' acts of favoritism resulted from their social ties based on political affiliations, family, gender, and union affiliations, as well as their own interests. Similarly, Kahraman (2020) found that school principals tended to favor their friends, union affiliates, and those who share their views over other teachers at school. In another study, Kaya (2022) highlighted that cronyism and clientelism were the most common forms of favoritism. Ayas and Atmaca (2023) observed that informal relationships, political or religious views, localism, and union affiliations are common causes of favoritism in schools.

On the other hand, studies by Demirtaş and Demirbilek (2019), Karademir (2016), and Polat and Kazak (2014) found that favoritism behaviors are reported at very low levels in schools. Meanwhile, Güner (2019), Uysal (2022), Sancak (2021), Karakose (2024), Keskin (2018), Gülay (2018), Meriç and Erdem (2013), Ozdemir and Gunduz (2019), Papadakis et al. (2024b), İşlek and Gül (2022), and Gider and Okçu (2022) indicated that favoritism behaviors were present but at a much rarer level. In contrast, Tabancalı (2018) and Kolukırık (2019) found that "no favoritism" occurred in school, which is contradictory to the findings of several studies in the literature, including the current one.

Regarding prevalent acts of favoritism at school, participants highlighted that school principals' adjusting the class schedule of their favorite teachers was the most common act of favoritism at school. They also underline that favoritism manifested itself by the unfair distribution of extracurricular tasks, by adjustment of extra duty days with course schedules, unfair treatment in leave requests by favorite and unfavorite teachers, tolerating mistakes by favorites, showing flexibility regarding class start and end times as well as adjusting class assignments for favorite teachers. The results of Aydogan's (2009) study, which identified favoritism concerning leave requests, adherence to class times, clothing regulations, and participation in professional development activities, lend support to current findings. Similarly, Güner (2019) found that the three most frequently mentioned forms of favoritism by teachers were related to unfair class scheduling, assignment of additional duties, and class distribution, while Demirtaş and Demirbilek (2019) reported acts of favoritism concerning class schedules, leave requests, extra duties, task assignments, rewards, course assignments, and weekend duties. Ayal and Kahveci (2023) and Karakose et al. (2024b) noted that while favoritism behaviors in class distribution, weekly schedules, and duty assignments were rare, they still occurred in school management practices.

Participants made several suggestions regarding how principals' acts of favoritism could be prevented or eliminated, most related to school principals' training, assignments, and monitoring. Participants emphasized that merit should be the primary criterion when assigning school principals, and the effect of such factors as shared social or political ties, union affiliations, or personal interests should be considered. Teachers also considered that providing school principals with ongoing training

on the negative results of favoritism, as well as allowing teachers to evaluate their performance in this regard, could decrease their tendency to engage in such acts of favoritism. The practice of shared decision-making and rotation were also suggested as two possible means of preventing favoritism at school. Similar suggestions were also provided in other studies in the literature. For instance, in Kahraman's (2020) study, it was recommended that offering training programs to reduce favoritism and using objective criteria, class assignments, and scheduling could help prevent favoristic acts of principals. Similarly, Kaya (2022) proposed merit-based appointments, creating a climate of justice and trust as well as transparent monitoring to prevent favoritism. Günyederli and Aypay (2022) suggested several measures, including merit-based selection of principals, limiting the influence of union affiliations on rights-related matters, implementing rotation, allowing teachers to evaluate principals' practices, training school principals on the harmful effects of favoritism, periodic monitoring, and the introduction of sanctions for principals engaged with the acts of favoritism. The participants in the current study also echoed these proposals.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study revealed that teachers are likely to encounter several acts of favoritism at school, and these acts could damage teachers' feelings of justice and equity to a significant extent. Teachers also underline that several precautions must be taken to prevent favoritism and its harmful effects so that schools can become effective teaching and learning sites.

The results of the current study indicate that assigning school principals using objective criteria based on merit is crucial. The current interview-based selection of school principals should be revisited to ensure that political affiliations, union membership, and personal relationships do not influence the selection and assignment of school principals.

One significant means of diminishing acts of favoritism at school could be increasing school principals' awareness of what favoritism is and how it harms the healthy functioning of schools. This could be achieved by providing school principals with ongoing training before and after their assignment as principals.

As evidenced by the current study as well as the existing studies in the literature, many acts of favoritism are related to the unfair assignment of classes and teaching schedules, unfair allocation of extra duties or resources, and unfair treatment of teachers' requests or mistakes based on family, friendship, political or union ties. These results imply that the Ministry of National Education should take immediate action regarding these issues at schools. They could, for instance, issue guidelines to standardize these internal practices, ensuring that they are carried out in a way that prevents favoritism. They can also consider implementing rotation for school principals as well as closely monitoring acts of favoritism by principals. In the same vein, teachers should not be assigned as principals in the same school where they previously worked since this seems to cause conflicts of interest and bias. These measures could help reduce the occurrence of favoritism in school management and promote a more equitable and effective educational environment.

Declarations

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