

PLAYING FAVORITES?



Even occasional favoritism can hurt your students. Here's how to spot it and stop it. **By Eric Butterman**

Charlotte* always thought she treated every student in her Highland, New Jersey, classroom equally. Now she's not so sure. Last year, she taught a little boy whom she describes as "brilliant." He was working on his own in math, but, to push him further, Charlotte invited the boy to help tutor some of his classmates.

He did such a great job that she began to include him in some of her lessons as an "assistant." That's when a few of her students—and their parents—accused Charlotte of playing favorites. "They resented the extra attention," says Charlotte. "But I'm only one person. And this little boy needed a challenge."

Most teachers consider themselves

above favoritism. Few actually are. That's a good thing, says child psychologist Adele Brodtkin. "Teachers are human, so of course they are going to be drawn toward certain children," she says. It's normal to feel a kinship with the redhead who reminds you of your nephew or the reader who loves *Harriet the Spy* as much as you did. "As long as you acknowledge those feelings to yourself, and are careful not to treat favorites in any special way, there is no harm done," says Brodtkin.

But how exactly do you ensure your feelings don't come through? And what if, like Charlotte, a parent, student, or colleague accuses you of favoring one child over another? Favoritism can be such a sensitive topic that some of the teachers we interviewed for this article asked that we identify them by pseudonym. These vets owned up to the kids they feel drawn to and what they do to conceal those feelings in the classroom. And the experts chimed in, too—on where favoritism comes from, the harm that it can cause, and what can be done about it. Here's what they said.

WHERE FAVORITISM COMES FROM

Surprise: You may have chosen favorites before the first bell rang. Studies show that we make up our minds about people within seven seconds of meeting them. So if Sean tipped over the trash can and spilled paint before circle time, you may have a tough time getting that image of him out of your head, says Dr. Bert Diamant, child psychologist and lecturer at Florida Atlantic University.

Gender is often a factor. "Girls are usually more favored than boys because they act out less," says Diamant. Laura Daub, a Fairfax, Virginia, teacher agrees. Girls tend to be more verbal and stronger participants in class discussions—making them more likely to connect with teachers.

"I feel like I do sometimes favor girls," admits Tara*, a second-grade teacher in Tenafly, New Jersey. "It's the girl-power thing. I've been known to choose book after book with strong female characters, like *Matilda* and *Judy Moody*. I have ➤➤

to remind myself to throw a *Henry Huggins* in there every once in a while!”

Finally, the hard truth is that you may feel “most comfortable around people you perceive to be most like you,” says Paul C. Gorski, assistant education professor at St. Paul, Minnesota’s Hamline University. “We’re socialized to relate to each other on the basis of race, class, and so on.” As a result, you may unconsciously distance students who don’t have the same skin color as you, those who live in a different neighborhood, or those who don’t speak your language.

Of course, most teachers have no intention of treating kids differently based on these factors, but sometimes subtle differences make their way into classroom practice. “You may make assumptions or read educational-research articles about how African-American students learn or how Latino students learn,” says Gorski. “Of course there are no articles about how white people learn because it’s taken for granted that all white students don’t learn alike.”

Does that all add up to blatant bias in the classroom? Not necessarily. But teachers “need to reject any suggestion that we can know anything about the culture of a student based on a single dimension of his or her identity,” says Gorski.

WHAT’S THE HARM?

Favoritism based on race and class is obviously wrong, but what about inviting a kid who you know loves ballet to a performance? Is that troublesome? Maybe not, says Dr. Brodtkin. “In some cases, with kids who have not done well in the past or who have learning or emotional difficulties, a teacher who believes in that child is a lifesaver,” she says. “Being especially encouraging or offering extra help can’t be a bad thing.”

That’s all Charlotte was trying to do last year—encourage her bright student. But somewhere things took a wrong turn. The key is not to “ignore or pass over” other children, says Dr. Brodtkin. That’s what causes damage. Charlotte didn’t think that was happening in her classroom, but her students’ parents disagreed.

ARE YOU SEEING IT?

Take a look around your classroom. What’s on the walls? Eva McKeon, a first-grade teacher in New York City (who confesses it’s easy to dote on gifted students) notes that what you display may say more about you than about your kids. “I’ve seen classrooms where teachers only put up the best students’ work,” McKeon says. “It makes the other kids feel left out.”

Next, consider your seating arrangement. Are the desks positioned in a way that makes you more likely to call on certain students?

Finally, be honest with yourself. When you go home, do you always tell your husband about the cute thing Micah said that day? Do Zoe and Rachel hang out with you on the playground? “A huge mistake I see is teachers who only invite certain students to have lunch with them,” says McKeon. “You either have to take turns so all students have a chance, or you shouldn’t do it.”

Concerned? “Find a teacher you trust to discuss some of your worries, and ask them to give you insight,” says

Who Are Your Favorites?

We asked teachers to tell us the truth.

THE BUSY BEES: “I like students who are smart and work hard—especially students who show pride in their work.”

THE CLASS CLOWNS: “I always connect with kids who have a quick wit. The ones that get my jokes and sarcasm. I make them laugh and they make me laugh.”

THE GIRLS: “My mom always told me I could be anything I wanted to be. It’s a message I try to pass on—probably more so to my girl students.”

THE STRUGGLERS: “The ones who really warm my heart are the ones who struggle so hard to learn. I have to invest a lot of myself to get them going.”



Dr. Diament. Invite him or her to observe you for an hour on “favoritism watch,” then offer to do the same.

TEACHERS SHARE SOLUTIONS

McKeon has a simple strategy to help stay balanced. “I find something special about every student,” she says. “I ask myself what it is about them that makes them shine, and try to concentrate on that. It’s not always easy,” she admits. But it works. In addition, McKeon always arranges her desks in a circle. “If you see every student clearly it allows you to remember to call on them and makes them feel closer to you,” she says.

Another swears wooden sticks are the answer. “Right off, I have each student write his or her name on a large tongue depressor,” says Luanne Nelson, a fourth-grade teacher in Grant, Michigan. “I keep them all in a cup on my overhead cart and use them whenever I call on students to respond, to read aloud, and to give their opinions.”

Stopping favoritism starts by identifying your own tendencies. Gina van der Vliet, who teaches at PS 226 in New York City, recognizes that she’s often willing to give more time to the kids who need the most help, the ones who “tug at my heartstrings.” But Van der Vliet doesn’t want to be unfair to her more advanced children, either. For her, a solution is to “keep track of the amount of time I give them and ask myself if other students are getting the short end of the stick.”

And what about the kind of bias that stems from gender, race, or class? Obviously, this requires more thinking and revising of your teaching practice. Tara, the teacher who says she occasionally favors her girls, makes it a point to monitor her reading list for a balance of heroes and heroines. She also alternates between calling on boys and girls. “It’s always on my mind,” she says.

Gorski’s advice is that we need to think deeply about how we’ve been socialized. “We need to understand racism instead of just trying to understand the African-American or Asian-American culture,” he says. “We need to

understand classism, sexism, and so on, so we know how they’re affecting our students and how we may be contributing to them, even unconsciously.”

Luanne Nelson observes a truth for many of us. “There will always be some especially sweet kids who are just automatically loveable, whatever the reason,” she says. For her, the solution is

not to avoid those children or stop favoring them. Instead, she strives to bring her affection up to the same level for all of her students. “It’s hard not to show favoritism,” she concludes. “So my goal has become to have every child believe that he or she is my favorite.” □

*SOME TEACHERS’ NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED FOR THIS ARTICLE IN ORDER TO PROTECT THEIR PRIVACY.

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