Favoritism in the Physical Education Classroom: Selected Reflective Experiences

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Abstract

Having a teacher show interest or concern may greatly influence, and encourage student learning; as well as fostering life-long positive behaviors, attitudes, and self-esteem. However, it is noted teachers have a tendency to select ‘favorites’ among their students (Cooper & Good, 1983; Tal & Babad, 1990; Aydogen, 2008); with physical education not immune to this practice. Thus, the purpose of this study was to better understand individual’s (i.e., former students in k-12 physical education) perspectives regarding their reflective experiences of teacher favoritism in physical education during their time in school physical education. Participants were 318 college-aged students from a private university located in the western United States, utilizing a 13-question survey instrument. Data analyses, particularly participant qualitative responses, revealed favoritism in PE was common and viewed negatively by students through a negative lens. The results from this study should give current physical educators pause to reflect on their teaching behaviors.

Key Words: Favoritism, physical education, Appropriate Instructional Practice, Attitudes
Students of all ages appreciate having a teacher, or teachers, that care for and are interested in them personally. Unfortunately, some teachers show unequal favoritism with selected students in their classroom. Among students, this has been termed as the “teachers’ pet”. In the education literature this has been termed “favoritism”. Teacher favoritism has been defined as “…the inclination to favor some person or group not for their abilities but for some irrelevant factor such as a characteristic they possess, or their personal contacts, or merely out of personal preferences” (Employee Favoritism, 2006, p.159). Literature has found young students can detect when a teacher shows favoritism (Cooper & Good, 1983), that teachers do not feel they have favorites among students and female students tend to be teacher favorites (Tal & Babad, 1990), and showing favoritism gives an undue advantage to those students receiving favorable treatment from a teacher (Aydogen, 2008). As well, the occurrence of teachers’ showing favoritism towards certain students has been found in over 80% of classrooms (Tal & Babad, 1990).

Education literature has shed light on the effects of teacher favoritism towards students in the classroom. Chiu, Lee, and Liang (2011) studied the effect of teachers’ favorites’ and its effects on non-favorite students, popular favorite students, and unpopular favorite students. Results indicate teachers’ favorites’ indirectly increases classroom conflict and maladjustment among students. Because of this, the ability of these students to learn may be negatively affected. In addition, life-long behaviors, attitudes, and self-esteem may also be impacted.

Teachers showing favoritism has also be found in the content area of physical education (PE). Figley (1985) studied the potential causal determinants of students’ attitudes towards their physical education experience. The researcher identified positive
and negative determinants affecting students’ attitudes towards physical education.

Identified positive determinants were: the teacher, curriculum, classroom atmosphere, student perceptions of self, and peer behaviors. Identified negative determinants were: the curriculum, the teacher, classroom atmosphere, peer behaviors, and student perceptions of self. During the course of this study the researcher discussed with the students negative determinants; those negatively affecting student attitudes towards physical education. The following negative teacher behaviors were showing favoritism to their termed “teacher’s pet” and “jocks”. Students felt these two groups were given preferential treatment in their physical education classes. The researcher concluded physical education teachers have control over this aspect of their teaching and, by having proper interactions (positive or corrective feedback and appropriate conversations) with students, there is a greater likelihood of students having positive experiences in physical education class. Furthermore, a negative experience in physical education classes can potentially impact an individual’s self-esteem and long-term attitudes and behaviors related to overall health, wellbeing, and exercise habits.

Barney, McGaha, and Christenson (2013) investigated the role of the physical education teacher and middle school student’s attitudes towards physical education. Researchers surveyed middle school students regarding how the physical education teacher treated students, if more skilled students were treated differently, and the types of physical education teacher-student interactions. Study results revealed a majority of students felt the physical education teacher did not treat students who excelled at PE differently. Overall, students felt the physical education teacher did not have favorites or
show favoritism to any group of students in physical education classes. Thus, middle school students’ attitudes towards PE were deemed favorable.

Physical education teachers have a pronounced responsibility to provide a positive physical education experience. One-tool physical education teachers have at their disposal to provide meaningful experiences are the Appropriate Instructional Practice Guidelines documents. The Appropriate Instructional Practice Guidelines are three separate Appropriate Instructional Practice documents: elementary (2009a), middle school (2009b), and high school (2009c). The purpose of these documents are to:

Give specific guidelines for recognizing and implementing developmentally appropriate physical education activities and practices… practices that are in the best interest of children (appropriate) and those that are counterproductive (inappropriate) need to be identified for the benefit of the student. (NASPE, 2009, pg. 7)

Within each document, five categories are specific to appropriate and inappropriate instructional practices in physical education. As written, the five categories are: Learning Environment, Instructional Strategies, Curriculum, Assessment, and Professionalism. Within the Learning Environment and Instructional Strategies categories, teacher favoritism is addressed. Statements specific with favoritism in physical education were:

“Only highly skilled or physically fit students are viewed as successful learners”,

“Teacher and peers overlook and/or ignore students who are not highly skilled or physically fit”, and “The physical education environment supports highly skilled students more fully than students with less skill development” (NASPE, 2009b, pg. 9-10).

Statements from Instructional Strategies were: “Physical educators inadvertently promote
exclusion by allowing student captains to pick teams (e.g., “popular” or highly skilled students are chosen first and cliques are evident) or by separating students by gender (boys v. girls) or skill level (high- v. low-skilled)”, and “The physical educator teaches as if all students are at identical skill and physical fitness levels, using a single standard for all students, which leads to frustration, boredom and/or misbehavior” (NASPE, 2009b, pg. 13 & 15). These statements illustrate inappropriate instructional practices in physical education. These inappropriate teaching behaviors have the potential of negatively affecting the class climate, thus affecting student learning; as well as overall health and wellbeing.

To further explore teacher favoritism in physical education and its effects on students, investigating past students’ experiences with teacher favoritism in physical education may be beneficial for both Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) faculty and PETE majors. Thus, the purpose of this study was to better understand individual’s (i.e., former students in k-12 physical education) perspectives regarding their reflective experiences of teacher favoritism in physical education during their time in school physical education.

**Methods**

**Participants**

Participants for this study were 318 college-aged students (205 males and 113 females) from a private university located in the western United States. Participants were comprised of undergraduate (48 freshman, 68 sophomore, 84 junior, 107 senior) and graduate (11) students.

**Instrumentation**
A review of literature failed to identify an instrument specific to addressing favoritism in physical education. Therefore, for this study, investigators developed a 13-question survey instrument (See Table 1). The survey consisted of four “yes/no” questions, one “yes/no” with open-ended follow-up question, six open-ended questions, and two demographic questions. To establish content validity, investigators had college-aged students, academic colleagues, and other professionals with a physical education pedagogy knowledge-base, review survey questions for clarity and understanding. For reliability, the instrument was further pilot-tested on college-aged students that did not participate in the subsequent study.

**Procedures**

Nonprobability sampling was employed to collect study survey data. The researchers placed themselves in locations with heavy student traffic (e.g., student union building and dormitory cafeterias). Surveys in paper format were distributed, with instruction given prior to completion, to 318 subjects. Approximate completion time for each survey was 10 minutes. Prior to any survey distribution and data collection, university Institution Review Board (IRB) granted approval to conduct the study.

**Data Analysis**

Analyses were performed on student responses to the survey instrument. Quantitative data analysis consisted of Chi-squares ($\chi^2$); as well as measures of central tendency and dispersion. Chi-square was conducted to compare question responses between genders. Significance was established at the $p < 0.05$ level. Means, standard deviations, Chi-square, levels of significance, and Cramér’s V measure of association ($\phi_c$) were reported for all significant effects. Responses to questions, defined by gender,
were presented as percentages; with means and standard deviations. Descriptive statistics were calculated and thematic content analysis performed on open-ended responses. Referencing qualitative analysis, researchers read and re-read the data until common themes became evident for each pertinent survey question (Mueller & Skamp, 2003).

Results

Participants for this study were 318 college-aged students and young adults ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.113$), from a private university and local community located in the western United States. Participants were comprised of undergraduate (48 freshman, 68 sophomore, 84 junior, 107 senior) and graduate (11) students ($M = 1.36$, $SD = .479$).

Insert Table 2 Here

Quantitative Analysis

Table 2 depicts participant responses in percentages by question response. Significant differences were reported for two (questions 3 and 10) of the five scaling questions when compared to gender.

Responses to the following question (“yes” or “no”), Did you witness your PE teacher show favoritism to students in your PE classes?” (question 3) indicated an association by gender, with males ($M = 1.40$, $SD = .492$) and females ($M = 1.27$, $SD = .474$); $\chi^2 (1, N = 318) = 5.398$, $p > .05$. Cramer’s V measure of association for question 3 computed to $\phi_c = 0.130$, representing a no or negligible relationship. Responses to the following question (“yes” or “no”), “Did your PE teacher let the highly skilled students dominate in games and activities during class?” (question 10) indicated an association by gender, with males ($M = 1.40$, $SD = .491$) and females ($M = 1.29$, $SD = .454$); $\chi^2 (1, N =$
318) = 6.018, \( p > .05 \). Cramer’s V measure of association for question 10 computed to \( \phi_c = 0.138 \), representing a no or negligible relationship.

### Follow-Up Questions Analyses

Additional data consisted of short-answered responses from the participants seven questions comprised of thematic analysis and findings reported below.

Seven survey questions asked participants to explain and expound their responses from the quantitative portion of the survey. Participants were asked (question 3) if they witnessed their PE teacher showing favoritism to students while in their PE classes. A majority of participant responses witnessed favoritism and viewed it in a negative context; thus associated with favoritism. For example, one participant stated, “The students that were good at sports were often highlighted in front of the class”. Another participant stated, “He (PE teacher) chose the same two or three people to demonstrate every time we learned a new skill. However, one positive statement was noted “Everyone was treated equally. Super nice guy.” A final survey statement from a participant was, “I was his favorite. I could sit by him to count the laps of others instead of run the mile.”

The participants were asked (question 5) what types of behaviors (i.e., things) the PE teacher did for their favorite students. The following were behaviors (i.e., things) the PE teacher did for their favorite students. They were “captains of teams”, “let them be tardy without being held responsible”, “skip class”, “did not discipline them the same way”, and “let them slack off.” Another question (question 6) participants were asked, whom the PE teacher showed favoritism in class. Overwhelming, athletes were shown the most favoritism from the PE teacher. Question 7 asked participants how they felt
when they witnessed their PE teachers showing favoritism. Many of the participants expressed being “angry” and “jealous.” Participants stated, “it made me annoyed and unmotivated to do the tasks”, “I felt a step below”, “Like what do you see in them”. Finally one student stated, “I was angry. I resented the PE teacher”.

Participants were also asked (question 9) if their PE teacher gave more praise to their favorite student or to other students. Participant responses revealed a large majority felt self-identified favorite students received more praise than other students in the same class. Participants were further asked (question 12) when their PE teacher showed favoritism, if it affected their attitude toward physical education class. Such statements as “Kind of. I was an athlete, so he liked me. But I felt a little bad for those people who didn’t play sports”, or “It made me resent it (PE) because I felt like I wasn’t valued because I didn’t play football, volleyball and basketball”. Another participant stated, “Yes, it made me not want to come to class.” Finally, participants were asked (question 13) what suggestions they have for PE teachers to avoid showing favoritism. The participant responses were numerous and direct. For example one student stated, “Praise everyone and give everyone attention.” Other parallel statements identified were, “Treat everyone the same”, “You are setting the stage for physical activity for the rest of their lives. Making students feel left out or not a favorite will lower their motivation”, and “Don’t let kids suck up and sweet talk the PE teacher”.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore individual (i.e., former students in k-12 physical education) perspectives regarding their reflections of teacher favoritism in physical education during their time in school physical education. Results from this
study indicated participants did not particularly like or enjoy any aspect when their PE teacher showed favoritism to students in their classes. Results from two survey questions (questions 4 & 8), focused on attention given by the PE teacher to skilled and less skilled students. Referencing question four, a majority of participants (63%) felt their PE teacher paid attention to those students that were not as skilled. Yet, interestingly, for question eight, 83% of the participants felt their PE teacher paid more attention to the skilled students. Barney, McGaha, and Christenson (2013) studied factors (PE teachers) affecting middle school student’s attitudes towards PE. Researchers found that 82% of middle school students felt PE teachers in their study did not pay more attention to those students that were more skilled then other students. Yet, Babad (1995) found teachers showed more attention to those students that were identified as academically good students. The results from this study, as well as in the literature are conflicting, yet PE teachers were shown to show favoritism to those students that were more skilled, resulting in participants having negative attitudes and experiences in PE.

Another point of discussion are participants witnessing favoritism (question 3), what types of behaviors (favoritism) the PE teacher showed to students (question 5), and how did the participants feel when they witnessed favoritism (question 7). Results indicate that 64% of the participants witnessed a form of favoritism.

Review of the qualitative data, for questions five and seven helped to form a better understanding of these aspects of favoritism. For question five, types of favoritism witnessed were letting students skip class to run errands for the teacher, not being held responsible for lateness to class, and not disciplined for misbehavior. For question seven participants felt “frustrated”, “angry”, “annoyed”, and “irritated” when they witnessed
favoritism. Once again the results were similar in the literature (Figley, 1985). Results indicate favoritism did take place in the physical education class.

A final point of discussion focused on the PE teacher letting highly skilled students dominate class games and activities (question 10). Results revealed 59% of study participants felt the PE teacher exhibited this specific behavior of favoritism in class. When reviewing the Appropriate Instructional Practices Guidelines (2009a, 2009b, & 2009c) documents, it clearly states as an inappropriate instructional practice the following, “Highly skilled students are allowed to dominate activities (e.g. athletes or boys are always picked as team/squad leaders or are permitted to go first in team games or play the dominate positions). Findings from this study indicate students negatively viewed PE teacher favoritism to certain students. These teacher behaviors have the potential of negatively affecting student attitudes towards PE and possibly negatively affecting attitudes towards lifetime physical activity. Furthermore, a negative experience in physical education classes can potentially impact an individual’s self-esteem and long-term attitudes and behaviors related to overall health, wellbeing and exercise habits.

Implications for Physical Education Programming

Data analyses, particularly participant qualitative responses, revealed favoritism in PE was common and viewed by students in a negative light. The results from this study should give current physical educators pause to reflect on their teaching behaviors, while also noting research (Aydogen, 2008) indicating teaching favoritism in PE classes. Physical educators must keep in mind, with the potential to favor certain students; they cannot let it override such teacher behaviors such as fairness, empathy, and honesty.
The question may then be asked, what can physical educators do to manage displaying favoritism to certain students? For starting reference, the Appropriate Instructional Practice Guidelines documents (NASPE, 2009a, 2009b, & 2009c). For example, fair and consistent classroom-management practices, create an inclusive and supportive class environment, all students have equal opportunities to participate and interact with the teacher, and physical educators pair and group students in ways that are fair, equal, and socially beneficial. With the limited amount of research specific to favoritism in physical education, there is significant room to expand the current body of knowledge.
References


Employee Favoritism (nd) Favoritism in affects on employees. Available at: 

http://anonymousemployeecom/csssite/sidelinks/employeefavoritism.php


Table 1

Favoritism in PE Survey

1. What is your academic year? Fr  Soph  Jr  Sr  Grad Student

2. Sex: M  F

3. Did you witness your PE teacher show favoritism to students in your PE classes? Please explain your answer.
   YES  NO

4. Did your PE teacher pay much attention to those students that were not as skilled as other students?
   YES  NO

5. What types of behaviors (things) did your PE teacher do for their favorite students? Please explain your answer.

6. In your PE classes, who were the PE teachers’ favorite students (e.g. athletes, boys or girls, principals’ kid).

7. How did it make you feel when you witnessed your PE teacher showing favoritism? Please explain your answer.

8. Did your PE teacher pay much attention to those students that were more skilled?
   YES  NO

9. Did your PE teacher give more praise to their favorite students, then the other students in class? Please explain your answer.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10. Did your PE teacher let the highly skilled students dominate in games and activities during class?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Did your PE teacher have his/her favorites come to the front of the class and serve as captain to pick teams?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. When your PE teacher did show favoritism towards certain students, how did it affect your attitude towards your PE experience? Please explain your answer.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. What suggestions do you have for PE teachers to avoid showing favoritism? Please explain your answer.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

*Participant Responses in Percentages by Gender*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question #</th>
<th>Total Population (n=318)</th>
<th>Male (n=205)</th>
<th>Female (n=113)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes (%)</td>
<td>No (%)</td>
<td>Yes (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Total population Mean and Standard Deviation for question responses (1.36±.480).