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## Favoritism in the Physical Education Classroom: Selected Reflective Experiences

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2

3 **Abstract**

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

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20 Key Words: Favoritism, physical education, Appropriate Instructional Practice,

21 Attitudes

22

23

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

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

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

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

62 Barney, McGaha, and Christenson (2013) investigated the role of the physical  
63 education teacher and middle school student's attitudes towards physical education.  
64 Researchers surveyed middle school students regarding how the physical education  
65 teacher treated students, if more skilled students were treated differently, and the types of  
66 physical education teacher-student interactions. Study results revealed a majority of  
67 students felt the physical education teacher did not treat students who excelled at PE  
68 differently. Overall, students felt the physical education teacher did not have favorites or

69 show favoritism to any group of students in physical education classes. Thus, middle  
70 school students' attitudes towards PE were deemed favorable.

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

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

82 Within each document, five categories are specific to appropriate and inappropriate  
83 instructional practices in physical education. As written, the five categories are: Learning  
84 Environment, Instructional Strategies, Curriculum, Assessment, and Professionalism.

85 Within the Learning Environment and Instructional Strategies categories, teacher  
86 favoritism is addressed. Statements specific with favoritism in physical education were:  
87 "Only highly skilled or physically fit students are viewed as successful learners",  
88 "Teacher and peers overlook and/or ignore students who are not highly skilled or  
89 physically fit", and "The physical education environment supports highly skilled students  
90 more fully than students with less skill development" (NASPE, 2009b, pg. 9-10).

91 Statements from Instructional Strategies were: "Physical educators inadvertently promote

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

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

## 108 **Methods**

### 109 **Participants**

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

### 114 **Instrumentation**

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

#### 124 **Procedures**

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

#### 131 **Data Analysis**

132 Analyses were performed on student responses to the survey instrument.  
133 Quantitative data analysis consisted of Chi-squares ( $\chi^2$ ); as well as measures of central  
134 tendency and dispersion. Chi-square was conducted to compare question responses  
135 between genders. Significance was established at the  $p < 0.05$  level. Means, standard  
136 deviations, Chi-square, levels of significance, and Cramer’s V measure of association  
137 ( $\phi_c$ ) were reported for all significant effects. Responses to questions, defined by gender,

138 were presented as percentages; with means and standard deviations. Descriptive statistics  
 139 were calculated and thematic content analysis performed on open-ended responses.  
 140 Referencing qualitative analysis, researchers read and re-read the data until common  
 141 themes became evident for each pertinent survey question (Mueller & Skamp, 2003).

## 142 **Results**

143 Participants for this study were 318 college-aged students and young adults ( $M =$   
 144  $2.89$ ,  $SD = 1.113$ ), from a private university and local community located in the western  
 145 United States. Participants were comprised of undergraduate (48 freshman, 68  
 146 sophomore, 84 junior, 107 senior) and graduate (11) students ( $M = 1.36$ ,  $SD = .479$ ).

147 *Insert Table 2 Here*

### 148 *Quantitative Analysis*

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

152 Responses to the following question (“yes” or “no”), *Did you witness your PE*  
 153 *teacher show favoritism to students in your PE classes?”* (question 3) indicated an  
 154 association by gender, with males ( $M = 1.40$   $SD = .492$ ) and females ( $M = 1.27$ ,  $SD =$   
 155  $.447$ );  $\chi^2(1, N = 318) = 5.398$ ,  $p > .05$ . Cramer’s V measure of association for question  
 156 3 computed to  $\phi_c = 0.130$ , representing a no or negligible relationship. Responses to the  
 157 following question (“yes” or “no”), *“Did your PE teacher let the highly skilled students*  
 158 *dominate in games and activities during class?”* (question 10) indicated an association by  
 159 gender, with males ( $M = 1.40$ ,  $SD = .491$ ) and females ( $M = 1.29$ ,  $SD = .454$ );  $\chi^2(1, N =$



160 318) = 6.018,  $p > .05$ . Cramer's V measure of association for question 10 computed to  $\phi_c$   
161 = 0.138, representing a no or negligible relationship.

### 162 *Follow-Up Questions Analyses*

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

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

176 The participants were asked (question 5) what types of behaviors (i.e., things) the  
177 PE teacher did for their favorite students. The following were behaviors (i.e., things) the  
178 PE teacher did for their favorite students. They were "captains of teams", "let them be  
179 tardy without being held responsible", "skip class", "did not discipline them the same  
180 way", and "let them slack off." Another question (question 6) participants were asked,  
181 whom the PE teacher showed favoritism in class. Overwhelming, athletes were shown  
182 the most favoritism from the PE teacher. Question 7 asked participants how they felt

183 when they witnessed their PE teachers showing favoritism. Many of the participants  
184 expressed being “angry” and “jealous.” Participants stated, “it made me annoyed and  
185 unmotivated to do the tasks”, “I felt a step below”, “Like what do you see in them”.  
186 Finally one student stated, “I was angry. I resented the PE teacher”.

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

## 202 **Discussion**

203 The purpose of this study was to explore individual (i.e., former students in k-12  
204 physical education) perspectives regarding their reflections of teacher favoritism in  
205 physical education during their time in school physical education. Results from this

206 study indicated participants did not particularly like or enjoy any aspect when their PE  
207 teacher showed favoritism to students in their classes. Results from two survey questions  
208 (questions 4 & 8), focused on attention given by the PE teacher to skilled and less skilled  
209 students. Referencing question four, a majority of participants (63%) felt their PE  
210 teacher paid attention to those students that were not as skilled. Yet, interestingly, for  
211 question eight, 83% of the participants felt their PE teacher paid more attention to the  
212 skilled students. Barney, McGaha, and Christenson (2013) studied factors (PE teachers)  
213 affecting middle school student's attitudes towards PE. Researchers found that 82% of  
214 middle school students felt PE teachers in their study did not pay more attention to those  
215 students that were more skilled than other students. Yet, Babad (1995) found teachers  
216 showed more attention to those students that were identified as academically good  
217 students. The results from this study, as well as in the literature are conflicting, yet PE  
218 teachers were shown to show favoritism to those students that were more skilled,  
219 resulting in participants having negative attitudes and experiences in PE.

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

224 Review of the qualitative data, for questions five and seven helped to form a  
225 better understanding of these aspects of favoritism. For question five, types of favoritism  
226 witnessed were letting students skip class to run errands for the teacher, not being held  
227 responsible for lateness to class, and not disciplined for misbehavior. For question seven  
228 participants felt "frustrated", "angry", "annoyed", and "irritated" when they witnessed

229 favoritism. Once again the results were similar in the literature (Figley, 1985). Results  
230 indicate favoritism did take place in the physical education class.

231 A final point of discussion focused on the PE teacher letting highly skilled  
232 students dominate class games and activities (question 10). Results revealed 59% of  
233 study participants felt the PE teacher exhibited this specific behavior of favoritism in  
234 class. When reviewing the Appropriate Instructional Practices Guidelines (2009a, 2009b,  
235 & 2009c) documents, it clearly states as an inappropriate instructional practice the  
236 following, “Highly skilled students are allowed to dominate activities (e.g. athletes or  
237 boys are always picked as team/squad leaders or are permitted to go first in team games  
238 or play the dominate positions). Findings from this study indicate students negatively  
239 viewed PE teacher favoritism to certain students. These teacher behaviors have the  
240 potential of negatively affecting student attitudes towards PE and possibly negatively  
241 affecting attitudes towards lifetime physical activity. Furthermore, a negative experience  
242 in physical education classes can potentially impact an individual’s self-esteem and long-  
243 term attitudes and behaviors related to overall health, wellbeing and exercise habits.

#### 244 **Implications for Physical Education Programming**

245 Data analyses, particularly participant qualitative responses, revealed favoritism  
246 in PE was common and viewed by students in a negative light. The results from this  
247 study should give current physical educators pause to reflect on their teaching behaviors,  
248 while also noting research (Aydogen, 2008) indicating teaching favoritism in PE classes.  
249 Physical educators must keep in mind, with the potential to favor certain students; they  
250 cannot let it override such teacher behaviors such as fairness, empathy, and honesty.

251           The question may then be asked, what can physical educators do to manage  
252 displaying favoritism to certain students? For starting reference, the Appropriate  
253 Instructional Practice Guidelines documents (NASPE, 2009a, 2009b, & 2009c). For  
254 example, fair and consistent classroom-management practices, create an inclusive and  
255 supportive class environment, all students have equal opportunities to participate and  
256 interact with the teacher, and physical educators pair and group students in ways that are  
257 fair, equal, and socially beneficial. With the limited amount of research specific to  
258 favoritism in physical education, there is significant room to expand the current body of  
259 knowledge.

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320 Table 1

321

322 *Favoritism in PE Survey*

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

326

327 2. Sex: M    F

328

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330 3. Did you witness your PE teacher show favoritism to students in your PE classes?

331 Please explain your answer.

332            YES                            NO

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336 4. Did your PE teacher pay much attention to those students that were not as skilled as  
337 other students?

338            YES                            NO

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340

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

342 Please explain your answer.

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

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

352 Please explain your answer.

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356 8. Did your PE teacher pay much attention to those students that were more skilled?

357            YES                            NO

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362 9. Did your PE teacher give more praise to their favorite students, then the other students  
363 in class? Please explain your answer.

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366 Table 1 Continued

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368 *Favoritism in PE Survey*

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370 10. Did your PE teacher let the highly skilled students dominate in games and activities  
371 during class?

372 YES NO

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375 11. Did your PE teacher have his/her favorites come to the front of the class and serve as  
376 captain to pick teams?

377 YES NO

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380 12. When your PE teacher did show favoritism towards certain students, how did it affect  
381 your attitude towards your PE experience? Please explain your answer.

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386 13. What suggestions do you have for PE teachers to avoid showing favoritism? Please  
387 explain your a

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400 Table 2

401 *Participant Responses in Percentages by Gender*

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Question #	<u>Total Population (n=318)</u>		<u>Male (n=205)</u>				<u>Female (n=113)</u>			
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)	M	SD	Yes (%)	No (%)	M	SD
3.	64%	36%	60%	40%	1.40	.492	73%	27%	1.27	.448
4.	63%	37%	65%	35%	1.35	.479	59%	41%	1.41	.493
8.	83%	17%	81%	19%	1.20	.397	89%	11%	1.12	.320
10.	59%	41%	55%	41%	1.45	.499	66%	33%	1.35	.533
11.	48%	52%	49%	51%	1.51	.501	48%	52%	1.52	.502

416

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

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