

WHEN LEADERSHIP BECOMES UNEQUAL: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF FAVORITISM AND ITS CONSEQUENCES IN SCHOOL ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract

School principals play a pivotal role in shaping school culture, teacher motivation, and organizational effectiveness; however, they face complex leadership challenges that may undermine equitable practices. This qualitative study explores the challenges encountered by school principals, with particular emphasis on favoritism and its consequences for teachers and school ethos. Using an action-oriented qualitative approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with twelve participants, including six school principals and six teachers from educational institutions in Karachi, Pakistan. Thematic analysis revealed three major themes: the role of school heads, challenges faced by school heads, and favoritism and its consequences. Findings indicate that limited resources, heavy administrative workloads, and institutional pressures often constrain principals' leadership practices, sometimes leading to preferential treatment in recognition, workload distribution, and professional opportunities. Teachers perceived favoritism as a significant source of demotivation, professional isolation, and weakened trust, ultimately affecting collaboration and school climate. The study concludes that favoritism represents a systemic leadership challenge rather than an individual shortcoming and highlights the need for transparent, inclusive, and ethically grounded leadership practices. Addressing favoritism is essential for fostering equitable professional growth, strengthening collegial relationships, and sustaining a positive and collaborative school culture.

INTRODUCTION

School principals face multiple challenges in managing schools effectively, including limited resources, increasing administrative workload, favoritism, diverse student needs, and the responsibility of maintaining a positive school culture. As central figures in educational institutions, principals significantly influence professional opportunities, recognition, and workplace relationships. When leadership challenges persist, they often lead to unequal access to resources, limited leadership support,

and restricted professional growth for teachers. Such conditions can result in feelings of exclusion, reduced motivation, and emotional distress among teaching staff. Research suggests that favoritism, particularly in coordination and evaluation processes, predicts fear, risk avoidance, and organizational silence among teachers, thereby suppressing teacher voice and weakening school climate (Aydın, 2021).

The purpose of this study is to explore the major leadership challenges faced by school principals,

including inadequate resources, excessive administrative responsibilities, limited professional training, restricted autonomy in decision-making, and favoritism, and to examine how these challenges influence teachers' motivation and classroom performance. The study adopts a qualitative research approach and employs purposive sampling to select school principals and teachers who possess direct experience of the phenomena under investigation. A sample represents a subset of a population selected for systematic observation and analysis (Kerlinger, 1986).

Previous research indicates that the challenges encountered by principals not only hinder effective school management but also have direct and indirect effects on teachers' motivation and professional engagement. Principals frequently confront issues such as ineffective communication, teacher neglect of duties, resistance to change, and limited collaboration (Kara-Koşe et al., 2024). Conversely, leadership that emphasizes instructional focus and supportive working conditions has been shown to positively influence student learning outcomes (Bayar, 2016). However, structural constraints such as overcrowded classrooms, inadequate facilities, and multiple teachers within a single school often restrict principals' ability to monitor instruction effectively, leading to teacher dissatisfaction and reduced instructional quality (Alzamil, n.d.).

Although educational leadership theories such as instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership emphasize ideal leadership practices and positive outcomes, they often fail to capture the complex, context-specific challenges principals face in everyday practice, including resource scarcity, favoritism, emotional demands, excessive workload, and their consequences for teachers. This limitation reflects a theoretical gap in the literature, which arises when existing frameworks do not adequately explain real-world phenomena or have not been sufficiently applied within specific contexts (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). When principals experience persistent leadership challenges, teachers may suffer from low morale, inadequate professional support, weak communication, and diminished motivation.

Empirical evidence highlights time constraints, financial limitations, lack of continuous professional development, and weak pedagogical leadership skills as major obstacles to effective school leadership (Uğurlu, 2025). Furthermore, administrative pressures often limit principals' ability to prioritize instructional leadership, underscoring the importance of ongoing professional development in enabling principals to address complex and evolving leadership demands (Bukhari et al., 2021).

This study is significant because it contributes to a deeper understanding of how leadership challenges, particularly favoritism and structural constraints, affect teachers' motivation, well-being, and classroom performance. The findings are expected to inform school management and principals about the negative consequences of unfair leadership practices, including reduced teacher morale, emotional distress, and increased turnover intentions, which may ultimately undermine school effectiveness. By highlighting these challenges, the study encourages the adoption of transparent, inclusive, and equitable leadership practices that promote a supportive school culture. Additionally, the findings can support teachers by validating their experiences and encouraging constructive dialogue within schools. At the policy level, the study may guide decisions related to leadership training, teacher evaluation systems, and school culture development. Ultimately, by fostering fair and collaborative school environments, the study has the potential to enhance teaching quality, improve student learning outcomes, and provide a foundation for future research on school leadership, motivation, and organizational culture.

2. Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded in the framework of the *learning organization* as conceptualized by Kools and Stoll (2016). Learning organization theory emphasizes continuous collective learning, reflection, and collaboration within educational institutions. According to this perspective, schools function most effectively when all members of the school community including teachers,

administrators, and leaders—work collaboratively toward a shared vision. However, the presence of favoritism within schools represents a substantial barrier to such collaboration. School administrators may employ political influence strategies, including favoritism, intimidation, or coalition formation, which can undermine trust, weaken teachers' organizational commitment, and erode collective learning processes (Mahmutoglu, Celep, & Kaya, 2025).

Within the context of leadership challenges faced by school principals, favoritism not only damages professional relationships but also undermines principals' credibility as fair and ethical leaders. Favoritism is commonly defined as preferential and unjust treatment of individuals or groups based on personal relationships, gender, political beliefs, or union affiliation, thereby compromising principles of equity and fairness in educational settings (Bayram et al., 2024). Such practices directly conflict with the core principles of learning organization theory, particularly the development of a shared vision. A shared vision requires collective commitment, trust, and alignment toward common goals. When favoritism prevails, it weakens teachers' sense of belonging and shared responsibility, thereby obstructing collaborative learning and organizational growth. Principals who adopt transparent, inclusive, and participatory decision-making practices are more likely to foster collaboration and positively influence teaching and learning outcomes (Parveen et al., 2022). Applying learning organization theory to the challenges faced by principals reveals that favoritism significantly inhibits the development of collective learning and shared vision. Consequently, schools seeking to function as effective learning organizations must prioritize fairness and inclusivity to ensure that all members feel valued and equally responsible for continuous improvement.

School leadership plays a critical role in creating a learning environment in which teachers feel respected, supported, and motivated to contribute to institutional goals. Research indicates that principals' leadership behaviors, particularly their commitment to fairness and justice, significantly

influence teachers' innovative work behaviors and professional engagement (Khaola & Oni, 2020). Principals are responsible for establishing a clear vision, ensuring effective teaching and learning, and creating conditions that support both teachers and students. Leadership has been identified as the second most influential school-related factor affecting student learning, surpassed only by classroom instruction, with its impact being especially pronounced in challenging contexts where guidance and stability are most needed (Leithwood et al., 2008).

Despite the importance of leadership, school principals face numerous challenges that constrain their effectiveness. A persistent challenge is the lack of resources, including financial support, instructional materials, and qualified staff, which limits schools' ability to maintain educational quality. Effective school leadership influences student achievement by setting high expectations, fostering supportive learning environments, and implementing strategic plans; however, these efforts are often compromised by structural and resource constraints (Li Jun & Chun Te, 2024). Principals also struggle to balance administrative responsibilities with instructional leadership, as bureaucratic demands frequently reduce the time available for improving teaching and learning. Additionally, principals must manage teacher performance and motivation while ensuring fairness and collaboration among staff. They are also required to address student behavior, parental expectations, and community pressures, all of which contribute to emotional and organizational strain. These complex responsibilities demand strong communication, problem-solving, and ethical leadership skills to sustain school improvement and student success (Leithwood et al., 2008).

Favoritism in educational institutions has emerged as a critical issue influencing teachers' motivation, collegial relationships, and overall school climate. As key decision-makers, principals significantly shape professional opportunities, recognition, and workplace dynamics. When favoritism occurs, it creates unequal access to resources, leadership support, and professional growth opportunities, leading to feelings of

exclusion and decreased motivation among teachers. Favoritism often emerges as a response to leadership challenges when principals struggle with workload pressures, staff relationships, or maintaining authority. However, such practices undermine the fundamental principles of learning organizations by restricting shared vision and collective learning, discouraging open communication, fostering divisions among staff, and weakening organizational trust (Kools & Stoll, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2008).

Empirical studies provide substantial evidence regarding the prevalence and consequences of favoritism in schools. Dagli and Akyol (2021) examined teachers' perceptions of favoritism in secondary schools using a sample of 376 teachers from 22 public schools. Their findings indicated that favoritism occurred "sometimes," particularly in areas such as task assignments, scheduling flexibility, and access to resources—decisions often controlled by middle-level leaders such as heads of departments. Similarly, Erden, Aytaç, and Gönül (2020) investigated the relationship between teachers' perceptions of administrators' favoritism and organizational distrust among 242 public elementary school teachers. The results revealed a significant, positive, and moderate relationship, indicating that perceived favoritism increases teacher disengagement and distrust within schools.

Qualitative research further highlights the lived experiences of teachers affected by favoritism. Sakçak, Arsalan, and Polat (2021) employed a descriptive phenomenological design to explore teachers' perceptions of principals' favoritism through in-depth interviews with 15 middle school teachers. The findings identified political affiliations and personal relationships as primary causes of favoritism, with consequences including reduced perceptions of justice, strained school climate, and weakened professional relationships. Teachers emphasized that assignment and evaluation decisions were the most prominent areas in which favoritism was experienced.

Additionally, Okçu and Uçar (2016) examined the relationship between school principals' favoritism behaviors and teachers' organizational commitment using a correlational survey design.

Their findings demonstrated that favoritism significantly predicted lower levels of organizational commitment, particularly teachers' identification with their schools. This effect was closely associated with everyday leadership practices related to recognition, workload distribution, and professional support. Collectively, these studies underscore that favoritism represents a significant leadership challenge that undermines fairness, trust, and collaborative learning, ultimately weakening schools' capacity to function as effective learning organizations.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design; therefore, no experimental or intervention-based treatment was employed. Qualitative methodology was considered appropriate for exploring participants' lived experiences and perceptions regarding leadership challenges and their influence on school culture. A total of twelve participants were recruited from selected educational institutions, comprising six school principals/heads and six teachers. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with all participants to identify leadership challenges that may negatively influence school leadership processes and overall school ethos.

Throughout the interview process, the researcher maintained a neutral and non-directive stance, avoided leading questions, and provided participants with sufficient opportunity to express their views freely. This approach aligns with qualitative research principles emphasizing systematic inquiry, clarity, and coherence. As noted by King, Keohane, and Verba (1994), qualitative research shares inferential logic with quantitative methodologies through rigorous design and transparent analytical procedures.

Participants

In research, a population refers to the complete set of individuals, objects, or events about which a researcher seeks to draw conclusions. Given the exploratory nature of this study, twelve participants six teachers and six school

principals/heads—were selected from educational institutions in Karachi. Karachi was chosen due to its diverse educational landscape and representation of varied school contexts. A population is defined as a group of individuals who share one or more characteristics relevant to

the research inquiry (Best & Kahn, 2006). The selected participants possessed direct experience and professional involvement relevant to school leadership and instructional practices.

Table 1.
Profile of Participants

Participant	Gender	Total Experience (Years)	Experience in Current School (Years)
T1	Female	10	8
T2	Female	16	7
T3	Female	8	1
T4	Female	14	10
T5	Female	4	1
T6	Female	12	3
P1	Female	13	6
P2	Female	16	5
P3	Female	10	3
P4	Female	8	4
P5	Female	12	10
P6	Female	3	1

Sampling

Sampling is a critical component of qualitative research, as it influences the credibility, relevance, and transferability of findings. A sample is defined as a small proportion of a population selected for observation and analysis (Kerlinger, 1986). Given the large and diverse geographical context of Karachi informally divided into East, West, North, and South regions it was neither feasible nor appropriate to employ probability sampling techniques.

Therefore, purposive sampling was used to select participants based on their professional roles, experience, and direct involvement with school leadership processes. Twelve participants six principals/heads and six teachers—were deliberately chosen to ensure rich, information-dense data relevant to the research objectives. Purposive sampling enables researchers to select individuals who can best contribute to an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under

investigation (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018).

Research Setting and Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in naturalistic settings familiar to the participants, thereby promoting comfort, openness, and authenticity during data collection. Research settings were carefully selected to protect participants’ privacy, minimize potential harm, and ensure adherence to ethical standards (Orba, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden). Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee prior to data collection.

Informed consent constituted a central ethical consideration. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were provided with detailed information regarding the study’s purpose, procedures, data handling, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequences. Informed consent was treated as an ongoing process rather than a

single event, consistent with established ethical guidelines (University of Bath, n.d.; CIOMS & WHO, 2016).

Face-to-face interviews were conducted in quiet, private rooms to minimize interruptions and safeguard confidentiality. Particular care was taken to avoid power imbalances, especially given that the study involved participants from workplace settings. Prior to each interview, the study objectives were reiterated, and consent was reconfirmed. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. Respect for participant autonomy and dignity was maintained throughout the research process (Mandal & Parija, 2014).

Research Instrument

Data were collected using semi-structured interview protocols, allowing for consistency across interviews while also enabling flexibility to probe emerging themes. Semi-structured interviews were selected to capture participants' perspectives in depth and to explore complex leadership experiences within school contexts. All interviews were conducted face-to-face, recorded with consent, and transcribed for systematic analysis. Qualitative interviewing is grounded in the assumption that individuals' perspectives are meaningful, accessible, and capable of generating valuable insights into social phenomena (Patton, 2002).

The literature review highlighted that school leaders and principals face multiple challenges that hinder effective leadership, particularly shortages of financial resources, instructional materials, and qualified staff. These insights informed the development of the interview protocol, which focused on leadership roles,

resource constraints, and favoritism-related practices. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with secondary school heads from different schools to capture diverse perspectives and to reduce bias associated with a single institutional context. Each interview lasted approximately 35–45 minutes and was conducted in a natural, confidential setting; some interviews were conducted through online platforms to accommodate participants' availability. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. To enhance trustworthiness, member checking was employed, allowing participants to review and verify their interview transcripts. Data collection continued until saturation was achieved, defined as the point at which no new themes or insights emerged from subsequent interviews (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

4. Findings

The findings reveal the multifaceted challenges faced by school heads and their implications for leadership practices, teacher experiences, and school culture. Data analysis resulted in three overarching themes: (1) the role of school heads, (2) challenges faced by school heads, and (3) favoritism and its consequences. Together, these themes provide a comprehensive understanding of how leadership challenges shape professional relationships, motivation, and the overall school environment.

Table 4.1 below summarizes the major themes derived from thematic analysis, supported by representative interview excerpts from principals and teachers.

Table 4.1
Thematic Analysis

Theme	Key Finding	Participant Excerpts	Interpretation
Role of School Heads	School heads significantly influence teachers' professional experiences through their leadership involvement, allocation of opportunities.	<p>"When the principal is involved in classroom matters and listens to teachers, we feel supported. Otherwise, teachers feel ignored." (T1)</p> <p>"The school head controls opportunities such as training and leadership roles. If the principal is fair, teachers grow." (T4)</p>	Principals' engagement and fairness shape teachers' perceptions of support, recognition, and inclusion, reinforcing their central role in school culture and motivation.
Challenges Faced by School Heads	Principals face structural and organizational constraints that limit effective leadership and contribute to compromised decision-making.	<p>"Managing parents, teachers, students, and administration at the same time is emotionally exhausting." (P4)</p> <p>"Because of pressure and workload, fairness is sometimes compromised." (T2)</p>	Administrative overload, limited resources, and emotional demands restrict principals' ability to practice balanced and equitable leadership.
Favoritism and Its Consequences	Favoritism negatively affects teacher motivation, collaboration, and school climate.	<p>"Some teachers always get lighter workloads and appreciation, while others remain invisible." (T3)</p> <p>"Favoritism creates groups within the school and damages teamwork." (P3)</p> <p>"After repeated exclusion, teachers lose motivation and consider leaving the school." (T6)</p>	Favoritism undermines trust, weakens collegial relationships, and contributes to demotivation and potential teacher attrition.

Role of School Heads:

Participants emphasized that principals play a central role in shaping professional opportunities, recognition, and workplace dynamics. When principals demonstrate instructional leadership and provide emotional and professional support, teachers perceive them as mentors. Conversely, limited engagement in instructional matters leads teachers to view principals primarily as administrative authorities. Principals identified challenges such as budget constraints, staffing shortages, student mental health concerns, parental communication, technology integration, behavior management, safety, and work-life

balance as factors influencing their leadership roles. Teachers highlighted that unequal access to professional development and leadership support, often linked to favoritism, resulted in feelings of exclusion and reduced motivation among non-favored staff.

Challenges Faced by School Heads:

School leaders reported significant difficulties related to administrative processes and the distribution of scarce resources. Limited funding, increased parental pressure, and communication demands were frequently cited as constraints on effective leadership. These challenges often

resulted in unequal access to resources and, in some cases, discriminatory practices. While some principals described preferential treatment as “positive discrimination” intended to protect school functioning, teachers perceived such practices as unfair and politically influenced. Teachers further noted that balancing staff expectations while maintaining impartiality was particularly difficult due to personal relationships, seniority, and institutional politics.

Favoritism and Its Consequences:

The findings indicate that favoritism gradually erodes trust, collegiality, and collaboration among staff. Participants reported that favoritism fosters divisions and cliques, encouraging competition rather than cooperation. Teachers described professional isolation, reduced morale, and diminished trust in leadership when preferential treatment influenced workload distribution, recognition, or advancement opportunities. Such practices weakened the shared vision necessary for a healthy and productive school culture. Both principals and teachers acknowledged that favoritism negatively affects teamwork and undermines collective responsibility.

5. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that leadership challenges faced by principals and heads of departments have a significant impact on both leadership effectiveness and teachers’ professional experiences. Among these challenges, favoritism emerged as a particularly influential factor affecting teacher motivation, professional inclusion, and school culture. Consistent with prior research on equity in educational leadership, the study shows that shortages of resources including funding, teaching materials, and qualified staff compound leadership difficulties and contribute to unequal treatment within schools. The study further reveals that principals struggle to balance administrative responsibilities with instructional leadership, as paperwork and managerial demands often limit their ability to focus on teaching and learning. In response to these pressures, some principals prioritize long-term school improvement by allocating leadership

support and development opportunities to experienced or trusted teachers. While such decisions are often framed as strategic, they inadvertently create exclusion and demotivation among non-favored teachers.

Additionally, teachers who were favored by principals reported greater access to recognition, support, and professional growth, which encouraged innovation in instructional practices. In contrast, non-favored teachers experienced both structural and psychological isolation, feeling excluded from decision-making, collaboration, and leadership roles. This pattern aligns with existing research demonstrating that exclusionary practices reduce morale, weaken professional identity, and negatively affect school productivity. Over time, favoritism contributed to teacher turnover, particularly among experienced teachers who reported prolonged frustration and lack of recognition. Such attrition represents a significant loss of institutional knowledge and disrupts school continuity and stability. Overall, the findings highlight that favoritism has far-reaching consequences for leadership effectiveness, teacher motivation, collaboration, emotional well-being, and retention. Addressing leadership challenges is therefore not merely an ethical concern but a strategic necessity for improving instructional quality and sustaining positive school cultures.

Conclusion

This study concludes that school principals face interconnected challenges in managing staff, fostering a positive school culture, and ensuring institutional sustainability. Among these challenges, favoritism emerged as a systemic leadership issue rather than an individual bias, with direct implications for teacher motivation, teamwork, emotional well-being, and long-term retention. Principals are often required to confront the consequences of such practices while simultaneously managing administrative responsibilities and accountability demands. Ensuring fairness and equity in recognition and professional opportunities remains a critical challenge. Favoritism undermines creativity and risk-taking among non-favored teachers, while biased recognition

practices make it difficult for principals to motivate all staff equally. Moreover, favoritism-prone environments weaken trust, foster divisions, and create competitive rather than collaborative school cultures. These findings underscore the importance of ethical leadership, transparency, and consistent decision-making in shaping healthy and resilient school environments.

In sum, school principals must address favoritism and its consequences to promote equitable professional growth, strengthen collaboration, support teachers' emotional well-being, and reduce attrition. Leadership approaches grounded in justice, inclusivity, and accountability are essential for sustaining effective schools and long-term institutional success.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends that educational authorities and school management bodies establish clear ethical leadership frameworks that emphasize transparency, fairness, and accountability. Principals should be required to follow standardized protocols for teacher evaluation, workload allocation, promotions, and professional development to minimize subjective decision-making and prevent favoritism. Ongoing professional development should be provided for principals, focusing on instructional leadership, emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and unbiased supervision. Schools should also promote shared leadership by involving teachers in decision-making through committees and collaborative forums, thereby enhancing ownership and reducing perceptions of bias. Teacher evaluation systems should be criteria-based, transparent, and consistent, emphasizing constructive feedback rather than control. Furthermore, principals should actively cultivate open communication, mutual respect, and equitable recognition to strengthen trust and collaboration. Educational authorities can support these efforts by reducing non-instructional workloads or providing administrative assistance, allowing principals to focus on instructional leadership and school climate improvement.

Future research should adopt mixed-method approaches or combine interviews with surveys

and focus groups to gain deeper insights into favoritism, political influence, and ethical dilemmas in educational leadership across diverse contexts.

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