Drawing the Line: Keeping Colorism Out of the Classroom

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Abstract: Colorism in the classroom impacts learning outcomes. Student motivation to learn, progress socially, and interact with faculty are all examples of influences on classroom dynamics. The problem investigated here is how colorism affects students' mental health, academic performance, and their ability to seek out institutional available assistance as needed. Findings from this study may identify steps toward more inclusive teaching practices, avenues for reducing potential faculty practitioner biases, and approaches for facilitating greater positive classroom rapport.

Background and Purpose

Colorism, also referred to as "skin-tone stratification" by Crutchfield et al. (2022), is a persistent societal problem that often results in stigmatization and "othering" (Hirschauer, 2023). Colorism is a societal problem that affects African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and others from ethnic groups in which their skin tones and/or features are considered non-white. In the classroom, this can involve implicit and explicit biases faced by students based on the color of their skin, hair type, and texture, etc. (Holler, 2023). The purpose of this paper is to offer a brief overview of the colorism literature in an effort to provide

a contextual basis, demonstrate the pervasiveness of this issue, and discuss strategies that educators may employ to diminish this persistent societal problem in classrooms.

Literature Review

A pervasive issue impacting numerous communities worldwide, colorism entails the differential treatment of individuals within the same racial or ethnic group based on skin tone. Historically, these biases can be related to slavery as well as the superiority and ideology of European features that blue eyes and blonde hair are equated to higher status (Staples, 2008). This phenomenon, deeply ingrained in societal structures, merits thorough investigation alongside racism, particularly within educational environments (Hunter, 2016; McGee et al., 2016). The exploration of colorism in educational settings is crucial for confronting and mitigating skin color-based disparities that significantly affect members of racial groups, notably Latinx and African American students possessing darker skin tones (Massey, 2005; Spencer et al., 1999; & Steele, 1988). Empirical evidence consistently highlights the disproportionate challenges faced by these students, including but not limited to lower academic achievements, diminished employment prospects, heightened mental health issues, and an increased likelihood of engaging with the criminal justice system (Harrison, 2010; Hunter, 2016; & McGee et al., 2016).

Findings shared by Crutchfield et. al (2022) explore implicit colorism in the classroom via tools such as the Implicit Association Test (IAT) and the Skin Tone IAT. Data revealed by Crutchfield and their team shows that bias in the classroom related to skin tone impacts learning outcomes for students. While a greater need to understand these biases, the researchers explained that greater awareness of the existence of these biases was an unexpected outcome of their study. Specific examples of implicit biases in the classroom included a hesitance to discuss or include mention of skin color in coursework, favoring of lighter-skinned students, and an increased “halo effect” (i.e., viewing students as more intelligent, nicer, etc.) toward lighter-skinned students. Peterson et. al (2016) adds to this information, explaining that implicit bias is often fueled by pre-existing prejudices and stereotypes held by educators. Peterson et. al (2016) explain that explicit biases shape expectations of students held by professors. These will differ based on the perceived ethnic appearance of a student. Data gathered from the IAT in their work identified that if the biased expectations held by teachers favored a given student's ethnic presentation, the student's performance was deemed more successful in the classroom.

By elevating awareness among educators about the implications of colorism, there lies a potential pathway toward rectifying the long-standing biases and inequalities that have shaped the experiences of countless Latina and African American individuals with darker skin. Such awareness fosters a more inclusive and equitable educational climate, empowering educators to implement strategies that acknowledge and address the nuanced dynamics of colorism.

Method

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of students regarding colorism in virtual postsecondary education. Phenomenology deeply explores participants' perceptions of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). This study examines the needs of students affected by colorism, focusing on their mental health, academic performance, and access to institutional resources. These concerns will be addressed through the following research questions:

- How does colorism impact doctoral students in their educational experiences?
- How does colorism impact doctoral students’ mental health as they navigate their coursework?
- How does colorism impact doctoral students’ mental health as they navigate their search for work beyond?

The target population is students in virtual postsecondary education programs. Participants are recruited through purposive sampling to represent diverse perspectives. Inclusion criteria are being a self-identified student in a virtual postsecondary program and willingness to share experiences of colorism.

The target sample size is 12-15 participants, which aligns with the qualitative research principle of achieving data saturation. Semi-structured interviews serve as the primary method of data collection and allow for flexibility in exploring participants' experiences while ensuring consistency in key topics.

Prior to conducting interviews, informed consent is obtained from each participant. Interviews are conducted virtually via video conferencing platforms. The interviews are audio-recorded to ensure accurate data capture.

Thematic analysis is employed to identify patterns, themes, and meanings within the interview transcripts. The analysis process involves multiple iterative stages, including data familiarization, coding, theme development, and interpretation. The researchers maintain reflexivity throughout the analysis to acknowledge and mitigate potential biases.

Ethical guidelines are strictly adhered to throughout the research process. Participants' confidentiality and anonymity are ensured using pseudonyms and secure data storage.

Preliminary Results

One would be hard-pressed to argue that colorism and racism are things of the past, as research tells another story. Despite the argument being made by some that “the country is moving away from the blunt-force racism that once banished black people to the other side of the Jim Crow line… to a period of secondary discrimination — or “colorism” — that will be difficult to overthrow” (Staples, 2008), all is not lost because educators can draw the line and take some steps to keep colorism out of classrooms to ensure that every student receives equal education opportunities regardless of their skin tone. The ultimate goal for educators is to check for “patterns of behavior” that are consistent with the separation of individuals based on skin tone, as this is a “teachable moment” for everyone (Webb, 2016).

As with correcting any problem, the first thing educators can do is acknowledge that colorism exists, as evidenced in the literature presented in this paper. Divisive social issues often go unacknowledged unless they directly affect someone. Educators should encourage collaboration among students to avoid favoritism or bias based on skin tone (Keith & Monroe, 2016). Diversity in teaching materials and encouraging a rich classroom dialogue can provide students with the opportunity to ask questions and identify any biases.

The second thing educators can do is to be fair and equitable in the amount of time and attention given to each student. Light-skinned students may have experienced privilege due to colorism compared to their dark-skinned peers. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that they may have a greater level of confidence to interact more with their professors both in and out of the classroom. The result of this could ultimately be some dark-skinned students not receiving an equitable amount of time or attention from their professors because they do not speak up as much during class discussions or lack the comfort level to reach out to their professors outside of class.

It should be made clear that the idea is not for educators to intentionally treat dark skinned students differently (or better) as that would essentially be reverse colorism, which is as equally unfair. Rather, educators should strive to create inclusive classroom environments in which all students feel empowered to participate and contribute. This may require revisiting lecture/discussion materials and topics to ensure that all students can relate. The classroom climate, whether online or in-person, is also important as it should be welcoming to help put apprehensive students at ease.

Last, but certainly not least, educators should adopt a variety of engagement strategies and techniques to draw more students into classroom activities and discussions. Often, outspoken students dominate classroom activities. To involve everyone, educators can: divide the class into small groups to encourage quieter students, interact with all students equally, and engage fewer vocal students directly in a non-threatening way. This list is by no means exhaustive, as the goal is to convey the necessity to be creative in pulling more students into class activities and discussions, because more engaged students tend to do better at their coursework.

Recommendations: Focus on Faculty and Practitioners

Literature on colorism is available in social, economic, and workplace contexts. However, further exploration is needed regarding colorism in academia. Not so much as to whether colorism exists in academia because the answer to this is known (e.g. see Shoenfeld, 2007; Harrison, 2010; & Jacobs, 2015), but rather the impact of colorism on student engagement, learning, and outcomes. Valuable insight can be gleaned from additional studies in these areas because that knowledge may provide clearer insight into how to best support students within the groups that are impacted by colorism, improve retention efforts, and ultimately graduation rates.

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