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# Colorism as a Salient Space for Understanding in Teacher Preparation

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## Abstract

In this article, the authors posit the salience of colorism as an important aspect of race in the knowledge construction and preparation of teachers. Although many more teacher education programs across the United States (U.S.) have begun to infuse aspects of race into their curricula, there is sparse literature about the role of colorism in teacher preparation and its potential impact. This article explicitly focuses on darker-skinned students, who experience trauma in ways that are different from those experienced by lighter-skinned students. This research chronicles the particular experiences of African American female students who endure deep-seated biases and attitudes regarding their skin color, both outside of and within school environments. The authors argue that teacher education programs should include learning opportunities on construction of race as a phenotype (the physical construction of skin tone, hair texture, facial features, and body physique) as an influence on the thinking, beliefs, and consequent practices of teachers in P-12 classrooms. The article concludes with an explicit recommendation for teacher education programs to prioritize colorism in the preparation of teachers.

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## Abstract

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In this article, the authors posit the salience of colorism as an important aspect of race in the knowledge construction and preparation of teachers. Although many more teacher education programs across the United States (U.S.) have begun to infuse aspects of race into their curricula, there is sparse literature about the role of colorism in teacher preparation and its potential impact. This article explicitly focuses on darker-skinned students, who experience trauma in ways that are different from those experienced by lighter-skinned students. This research chronicles the particular experiences of African American female students who endure deep-seated biases and attitudes regarding their skin color, both outside of and within school environments. The authors argue that teacher education programs should include learning opportunities on construction of race as a phenotype (the physical construction of skin tone, hair texture,

facial features, and body physique) as an influence on the thinking, beliefs, and consequent practices of teachers in P-12 classrooms. The article concludes with an explicit recommendation for teacher education programs to prioritize colorism in the preparation of teachers.

This article offers a nuanced perspective on an understudied aspect of racism, namely, colorism. We define colorism as a hierarchically based skin tone bias, one that poses a psychological obstacle for various racial groups, specifically with regard to variances within racial groups (Glenn, [2009](#)<sup>13</sup>. Glenn, E. (Ed.). (2009). *Shades of difference: Why skin color matters..* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)). We postulate that teachers who better understand colorism can advocate for the development of critical consciousness among students of Color for them to resist hurtful phenotype-associated ideologies and messages and can provide a psychological safe space in which to form and sustain positive racial and academic identities. We stress the importance offering curriculum and experiences that allow teachers to not only develop a greater understanding of race, but colorism as well, as it is a central component of how race operates in schools. This research begins with the narrative of Black female high school student, whose perceptions and emotions raise uncomfortable questions about learning and other educational experiences and their deleterious effects for students like her with darker shades of skin. The article attempts to capture the insidious ways in which colorism is a subtle manifestation of today's racism and segregation that is grounded in the historical reality of the founding of this country. Finally, we offer suggestions for building awareness and training around colorism in teacher education programs.

## Race, Gender and Colorism in Practice at Schools

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I don't wish to be White. I just wish I was much lighter [skinned]. All the light-skinned kids at my school are smart! – Tasha

This quote emerged from a study by McGee ([2013](#)<sup>36</sup>. McGee, E. O. (2013). Young, Black, gifted, and stereotyped. *High School Journal*, 96(3), 253–263.

[\[CrossRef\]](#)

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)), conducted on Black<sup>1</sup>

1. The terms Black and African American will be used interchangeably throughout this article. [View all notes](#)

high school students in an urban city. Tasha was a mathematically high achieving sophomore at the time of the study. She was responding to the following question in the interview protocol: Do you think that your skin color plays a role in how you are treated at your school? Tasha answered this question by

describing herself, in part, based on how she perceived society, her teachers, and peers viewed her dark-skin. For Tasha, having a dark brown complexion gave rise to negative assumptions and educational challenges associated with her skin tone. In this same study of 36 high-achieving high schools students, 8 of 16 teenage girls self-identified as brown-skinned or dark skinned, and of these eight, a shocking seven characterized their educational experiences similarly to Tasha's marginalization. In part, because of their darker complexions, these female students experienced compounded stress as they believed and stressed that their physical features were not only devalued, but their skin tone was also linked to negative stereotypes and perceptions (Capodilupo & Kim, [2014](#)<sup>4</sup>. Capodilupo, C. M., & Kim, S. (2014). Gender and race matter: The importance of considering intersections in Black women's body image. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 61, 37.

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[View all references](#); Thompson & Keith, [2001](#)<sup>49</sup>. Thompson, M. S., & Keith, V. M. (2001). The blacker the berry: Gender, skin tone, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. *Gender & Society*, 15, 336–357.

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They went on to express the desire for lighter skin because the lighter-skinned girls seemed to her to achieve academic and social advantages. For example, Black female teenage students at their schools with lighter skin appeared to enjoy an elevated social status (e.g., proms queens, school leadership positions), were considered attractive and were highly sought after for romantic relationships by the Black and Latino males, and benefited from teachers' positive perceptions of their academic abilities. Overall, their reflections suggests that some girls who self-describe their skin tone as “dark” associate their skin color with physical, academic, and social inferiority; thus, a lighter skin tone would minimize issues of misrepresentation (Maxwell, Brevard, Abrams, & Belgrave, [2014](#)<sup>35</sup>. Maxwell, M., Brevard, J., Abrams, J., & Belgrave, F. (2014). What's color got to do with it? Skin color, skin color satisfaction, racial identity, and internalized racism among African American college students. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 1–24, DOI: 0095798414542299.

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[View all references](#)). It is not surprising that girls in this study who described their skin as “dark” desired to emulate the girls whose looks were associated with greater social standing and capabilities (Russell, Wilson, & Hall, [2013](#)<sup>47</sup>. Russell, K., Wilson, M., & Hall, R. E. (2013). *The color complex: The politics of skin color among African Americans*. New York, NY: Random House LLC.

Open URL

[View all references](#)). They confirmed that the politics of skin color and skin color hierarchies has shaped their schooling and life experiences regarding what it means to be not just a Black girl but a dark-skinned Black girl.

## Colorism and Its Importance in Teacher Education

Although much of the skin color stratification literature (more recently known as colorism) denotes light skin as a type conducive to societal privilege, little attention has been paid to how skin color operates differently in the lives of students of color. We use these girls' experiences with skin color to describe a phenomenon that is more systemic, has a close relationship with educational experiences, and a historical past that seems to be under-recognized and underexplored. Colorism is not simply skin color stratification. Beyond denoting light to dark shades of skin tone it is a form of oppression that is expressed through a hierarchical treatment of individuals where typically favoritism is demonstrated

toward those of lighter complexions while those of darker complexions experience rejection and mistreatment in areas such as income, education, and housing (Jackson-Lowman, [2013](#)<sup>28</sup>. Jackson-Lowman, H. (2013). An analysis of the impact of Eurocentric concepts of beauty on the lives of African American women. In H. Jackson-Lowman (Ed.), *African American women: Living at the crossroads of race, gender, class, and culture* (pp. 155–172). San Diego, CA: Cognella Academic Publishing.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)).

In this article, we stress the importance of the need for teachers to be educated and provided with experiences that allow them to not only understand race but colorism as a central component of race. We are specifically focused on students of color who suffer the most devastating consequences because of their color: those whose skin has greater amounts of melanin. Throughout the numerous pigmentocracies<sup>2</sup> 2. The term “pigmentocracy” has recently been adopted by social scientists to describe societies in which wealth and social status are determined by skin color. There are numerous pigmentocracies throughout the world, and they all have the remarkable characteristic that invariably the light-skinned peoples have the highest social status (Lynn, 2008).[View all notes](#)

around the world and in the US, it has been argued that lightest-skinned peoples have the highest social status, followed by the brown-skinned, and the darker brown-skinned who are at the bottom of the social hierarchy (Hunter, [2011](#)<sup>22</sup>. Hunter, M. L. (2011). Buying racial capital: Skin-bleaching and cosmetic surgery in a globalized world. *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 4(4), 142–164.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)). To understand colorism in depth, one has to go to research in sociology, psychology, anthropology, and history. Russell, Wilson, and Hall's ([2013](#)<sup>47</sup>. Russell, K., Wilson, M., & Hall, R. E. (2013). *The color complex: The politics of skin color among African Americans*. New York, NY: Random House LLC.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)) research on colorism argue that skin color and the dynamics associated with it, are measurable and a visible attribute that can cause, at its greatest impact, life-threatening consequences. Because of the complexities of skin color, there are challenges in translating descriptions such as: brown-skinned, dark brown complexion, fair-skinned, and many other designations establishing skin color stratifications. The breadth of this literature reveals that skin color is a marker for racial discrimination, and it can complicate the positioning of an established argument that deeper-hued students of color are discriminated against in educational contexts (Hannon, DeFina, & Bruch, [2013](#)<sup>18</sup>. Hannon, L., DeFina, R., & Bruch, S. (2013). The relationship between skin tone and school suspension for African Americans. *Race and Social Problems*, 5, 281–295.

[\[CrossRef\]](#)

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#); Hunter, [2013](#)<sup>23</sup>. Hunter, M. L. (2013). *Race, gender and the politics of skin tone* New York, NY: Routledge. New York, NY: Routledge.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#); Monroe, [2013](#)<sup>42</sup>. Monroe, C. R. (2013). Colorizing educational research: African American life and schooling as an exemplar. *Educational Researcher*, 42, 9–19.

[\[CrossRef\]](#), [\[Web of Science®\]](#)

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#); Walker, Spohn, & DeLone, [2011](#)<sup>50</sup>. Walker, S., Spohn, C., & DeLone, M. (2011). *The color of justice: Race, ethnicity, and crime in America*. Belmont, CA; Australia: Wadsworth Thomson Learning.

[Open URL](#)

[View all references](#); Weiner, [2014](#)<sup>52</sup>. Weiner, M. F. (2014). Confronting White educational privilege in the classroom: Theoretical and empirical foundations and models. In Kristin Haltinner (Ed.), *Teaching race and anti-racism in contemporary America* (pp. 43–54). Dordrecht, NL: Springer.

[Open URL](#)

[View all references](#)). We argue that teachers in teacher education need to understand these students' experiences in order to support or at least be able to identify and refer students to someone who understands when students are experiencing challenging situations related to colorism.

## Brief History of Colorism in the United States

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While colorism is a worldwide phenomenon, in the United States skin color stratification has its roots in slavery. However, when the first Africans arrived in Virginia in 1619, there was no racial classification of “white” (Allen, [2012](#)<sup>1</sup>. Allen, T. A. (2012). *On The Invention of the White Race, ‘White Privilege,’ and the Working Class*. New York, NY: Verso Books.

[Open URL](#)

[View all references](#)). Racial classification came 60 years later by America's ruling classes who created the category of the “white race” as a means of social control. Since that early invention, White privilege has enforced the myth of racial superiority, and thus began the preferential treatment to enslaved people with lighter complexions. It is often presumed that slave-owners were partial to light-skinned slaves because they were often family members. Slave-owners frequently raped and engaged in sexual intercourse with enslaved women, and light-skinned offspring were the visible offspring of these unions. This in part gave rise to members of the ruling class maintaining their domination by establishing a hierarchy of shades of complexion as one of many oppressive strategies for social, financial, and political control. While slave-owners did not officially recognize their own children of color as blood, yet some offered advantages to them; social control was implemented by pitting lighter-skinned relatives above their darker skinned-relatives – even allowing lighter-skinned Black slaves to work inside of the slave master's house while darker skinned Black slaves worked in the fields. Accordingly, light skin came to be viewed as an asset among some of the enslaved communities and, subsequently, the emancipated Black community.

For example, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, African Americans used the “brown paper bag test,” referencing a practice of certain Black sororities and fraternities who would ban any Black person whose skin tone was darker than a paper bag (Kerr, [2006](#)<sup>30</sup>. Kerr, A. E. (2006). *The Paper Bag Principle: Class, colorism, and rumor and the case of Black Washington*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)). The notion of light-skinned superiority increasingly became commonplace wisdom, reflected in sayings such as, “If you're black, get back. If you're brown, stick around. If you're light, you're alright”. In 1951 Big Bill Broonzy, a prolific African American Chicago blues singer and songwriter, recorded “Black, Brown, and White,” which contain the original lyrics in the popular saying above (RagtimeDorianHenry, [200945](#). RagtimeDorianHenry. (2009, April 2). ‘Black, brown, and white’: Big Bill Broonzy (1951) Blues guitar legend, Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=55w0DwZROjY>).

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)). We argue the hierarchical way that skin tone permeates our society continues to make “light alright” (Inniss [201024](#). Inniss, J. P. (2010). Colorism: The Hierarchical nature of skin tone that makes “light alright.”. Everyday Sociology Blog, Retrieved on February 13, 2015 at <http://www.everydaysociologyblog.com/2010/01/>).

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)). Skin color dynamics are engrained within our society. Children learn very early on in their development that lighter skin tones are widely viewed as more favorable than darker hues from multiple sources —peers, media, and adults (Clark & Clark, [19405](#). Clark, K. B., & Clark, M. K. (1940). Skin color as a factor in racial identification of Negro preschool children. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 11, 159–169. [[Taylor & Francis Online](#)]

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#), [19506](#). Clark, K. B., & Clark, M. P. (1950). Emotional factors in racial identification and preference in Negro children. *Journal of Negro Education*, 19(3), 341–350. [[CrossRef](#)]

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#); Glenn, [200913](#). Glenn, E. (Ed.). (2009). *Shades of difference: Why skin color matters..* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#); Milner, [201537](#). Milner, H. R. (2015). *Rac(e)ing to class: Confronting poverty and race in schools and classrooms.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)). Even before the Clark and Clark studies, Du Bois (1935) discussed the realities of White skin, beyond its economic and political benefits, as a public psychological perk that enables Whites and those who can pass for White to negotiate a social status distinct from that of Black people (Du Bois [19359](#). DuBois, W. E. B. (1935). Does the Negro need separate schools? *Journal of Negro Education*, 4, 329–335.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#); Khanna, [201031](#). Khanna, N. (2010). “If you're half Black, you're just Black”: Reflected appraisals and the persistence of the One-Drop Rule. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 51, 96–121.

[[CrossRef](#)], [[Web of Science ®](#)]

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)). However, Du Bois admitted that even as he termed himself a Negro scholar (and sometimes used the term Black), he too benefited from his fair complexion, biracial heritage, and straight hair as shades of skin color privilege are evident in his appearance, mannerisms, and language.

# Race in Society and Teacher Education

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Race continues to be an important area of study in education (Gooden & O'Doherty, [2015](#)<sup>15</sup>. Gooden, M. A., & O'Doherty, A. (2015). Do you see what I see? Fostering aspiring leaders' racial awareness. *Urban Education*, 50(2), 225–255.

[\[CrossRef\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#)

[Open URL](#)

[View all references](#); Grooms & Williams, [2015](#)<sup>16</sup>. Grooms, A. A., & Williams, S. M. (2015). The reversed role of magnets in St. Louis: Implications For Black student outcomes. *Urban Education*, 50(4), 454–473.

[\[CrossRef\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#)

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[View all references](#); Jackson, Sealey-Ruiz, & Watson, [2014](#)<sup>27</sup>. Jackson, I., Sealey-Ruiz, Y., & Watson, W. (2014). Reciprocal love: Mentoring Black and Latino males through an ethos of care. *Urban Education*, 49(4), 394–417.

[\[CrossRef\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#)

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[View all references](#); Petchauer, [2015](#)<sup>44</sup>. Petchauer, E. (2015). Starting with style: Toward a second wave of hip-hop education research and practice. *Urban Education*, 50(1), 78–105.

[\[CrossRef\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#)

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[View all references](#)) as it is and will continue to be a salient and permanent issue in the United States (Bell, [2004](#)<sup>2</sup>. Bell, D. (2004). *Silent covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the unfulfilled hopes for racial reform*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

[Open URL](#)

[View all references](#)). Based on our observations, the 2008 election of Barack Obama to the presidency led many people in the US and abroad to believe that his presidency transcended centuries of racism, oppression, marginalization, and discrimination. White Americans and those from other racial and ethnic groups, including some Black Americans, proclaimed what seemed to be a modern day cliché: that it was “a new day” in US society. Some believed that we as a country had arrived at some post-racial, post-oppressive, post-discrimination era because White voters had obviously helped elect an African American president. We argue this position does not allow educators to recognize the pervasiveness of race, racism, skin color stratification, and other more general forms of discrimination and prejudice. Thus, while individual educators may not (consciously at least) commit racist acts, broader policies and practices are often rife with racism (Milner, [2013](#)<sup>38</sup>. Milner, H. R. (2013). Analyzing poverty, learning, and teaching through a critical race theory lens. *Review of Research in Education*, 37(1), 1–53.

[\[CrossRef\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#)

[Open URL](#)

[View all references](#), [2015](#)<sup>37</sup>. Milner, H. R. (2015). Rac(e)ing to class: Confronting poverty

and race in schools and classrooms. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)). Accordingly, educators, and for the purposes of this discussion, teachers, who do not view themselves as racist individuals, can have difficulty recognizing how racism works and how it can manifest in broader, systemic, and institutionalized structures and forms to prevent certain groups of students from succeeding in the classroom and beyond (Milner, [2007](#)**41**. Milner, H. R. (2007). Race, culture, and researcher positionality: Working through dangers seen, unseen, and unforeseen. *Educational Researcher*, 36(7), 388–400.

[\[CrossRef\]](#)

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#), [2010](#)**39**. Milner, H. R. (2010). Start where you are but don't stay there: Understanding diversity, opportunity gaps, and teaching in today's classrooms. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)).

In the name of “diversity,” the field of teacher education has attempted to address and build a knowledge base related to race. Although race is sometimes coalesced with broader notions of diversity, the field has gained traction in emphasizing the importance of race (Milner, [2010](#)**39**. Milner, H. R. (2010). Start where you are but don't stay there: Understanding diversity, opportunity gaps, and teaching in today's classrooms. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)). However, in the field of teacher education to date, we argue few empirically rich or conceptually comprehensive studies investigate how skin color impacts educational processes for students and their teachers. Although not situated in teacher education per se, one empirically robust study has implications for teacher education in helping teachers more deeply understand the salience of color stratification. Hannon, DeFina, and Bruch, ([2013](#)**18**. Hannon, L., DeFina, R., & Bruch, S. (2013). The relationship between skin tone and school suspension for African Americans. *Race and Social Problems*, 5, 281–295.

[\[CrossRef\]](#)

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)) examined the relationship between skin tone and school suspension for African Americans. Examining a national sample of over 3,500 young African American males and females from 12-16 years of age from The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, logistic regression analyses indicated that darker skin tone significantly increased the odds of suspension for African American adolescents. Further inspection of the data revealed that this overall result was disproportionately driven by the suspension rates of African American females, and that the odds of suspension were about three times greater for the African American females with the darkest skin tone than they were for African American females with the lightest skin. The findings of this study strongly suggest that skin shade matters regarding the likelihood of suspension, and the effects of skin darkness appear to intersect with race and gender, with Black female students suffering the most disadvantage. Thus, a more comprehensive understanding of how African Americans are disadvantaged by school punishment needs to address both inter- and intra-racial and gender variation (Hannon, DeFina, & Bruch, [2013](#)**18**. Hannon, L., DeFina, R., & Bruch, S. (2013). The relationship between skin tone and school suspension for African Americans. *Race and Social Problems*, 5, 281–295.

[\[CrossRef\]](#)

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)).

Research has revealed the need for teachers to be taught to meet the changing racial demographic shifts they will encounter in PreK-12 classrooms (Milner, [2010](#)<sup>39</sup>. Milner, H. R. (2010). *Start where you are but don't stay there: Understanding diversity, opportunity gaps, and teaching in today's classrooms*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)), which could potentially lead to greater skin color stratifications within classrooms. Because White teachers and students of color, in many ways, possess different racialized experiences and repertoires of knowledge and experience both inside and outside the classroom (Milner, [2008](#)<sup>40</sup>. Milner, H. R. (2008). *Disrupting deficit notions of difference: Counter-narratives of teachers and community in urban education*. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24(6), 1573–1598.

[\[CrossRef\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#)

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)), racial incongruence and dissonance may serve as a roadblock for academic and social success for students (Irvine, [2003](#)<sup>25</sup>. Irvine, J. J. (2003). *Educating teachers for diversity*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#); Milner, [2013](#)<sup>38</sup>. Milner, H. R. (2013). *Analyzing poverty, learning, and teaching through a critical race theory lens*. *Review of Research in Education*, 37(1), 1–53.

[\[CrossRef\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#)

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#); Petchauer, [2015](#)<sup>44</sup>. Petchauer, E. (2015). *Starting with style: Toward a second wave of hip-hop education research and practice*. *Urban Education*, 50(1), 78–105.

[\[CrossRef\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#)

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)). While it has been established through solid empirical research that teachers from any ethnic, cultural, or racial background can be successful with any group of students when teachers possess (or have the skills to acquire) the knowledge, attitudes, dispositions, and beliefs necessary to meet the needs of their students (Gay, [2010](#)<sup>12</sup>. Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#); Hammerness & Matsko, [2013](#)<sup>17</sup>. Hammerness, K., & Matsko, K. K. (2013). *When context has content: A new case study of new teacher induction in the University of Chicago's Urban Teacher Education Program*. *Urban Education*, 48, 557–584.

[\[CrossRef\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#)

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#); Ladson-Billings, [2009](#)<sup>32</sup>. Ladson-Billings, G. (2009). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#); Milner [2010](#)<sup>39</sup>. Milner, H. R. (2010). *Start where you are but don't stay there: Understanding diversity, opportunity gaps, and teaching in today's classrooms*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)), teacher education programs provide minimal training on the salience of skin tone and its important intersections with race and gender, and its relationship in unequal and inequitable distribution of students' schooling experiences. Thus, as an essential feature of assisting teachers in understanding race, we argue that race has to be understood not only as a social construction but as one that has skin pigmentation at the core as well.

# What Dark-Skinned Youth Endure in our Society

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Researchers have long shown that the mythical norm in America is the White, slim, able-bodied, heterosexual, Christian, financially secure, and family- and career-orientated male (Feagin, & O'Brien, [2004](#)<sup>10</sup>. Feagin, J. R., & O'Brien, E. (2004). *White men on race: Power, privilege, and the shaping of cultural consciousness*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#); Solomona, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, [2005](#)<sup>48</sup>. Solomona, R. P., Portelli, J. P., Daniel, B. J., & Campbell, A. (2005). The discourse of denial: How white teacher candidates construct race, racism and "white privilege". *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 8(2), 147–169. [\[Taylor & Francis Online\]](#)

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)). Amid such standardized concepts that translate into advantage, darker-skinned youth may experience social stigma based exclusively upon skin tone. Youth may understand that skin color is a physical characteristic, yet it is also imbued with sociopolitical and socially constructed meanings (Robinson & Ward, [1995](#)<sup>46</sup>. Robinson, T. L., & Ward, J. V. (1995). African American adolescents and skin color. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 21, 256–274. [\[CrossRef\]](#), [\[CSA\]](#)

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)). While adolescents might not know the historical context in which lighter skin has become favored over darker skin, they can certainly observe differences about the people around them and make inferences. One such readily available observation is that colorism potentially influences their educational experiences and outcomes. Students of color may witness that lighter-skinned youth are perceived and treated comparatively more favorably by significant individuals within the educational system. As a result some darker-skinned youth experience skin complexion dissonance and because they do not possess the skin color that is considered preferable, they become vulnerable to experiencing negative psychosocial outcomes (Fegley, Spencer, Goss, Harpalani, & Charles, [2008](#)<sup>11</sup>. Fegley, S. G., Spencer, M. B., Goss, T. N., Harpalani, V., & Charles, N. (2008). *Colorism embodied: Skin tone and psychosocial well-being in adolescence. Body in mind, mind in body: Developmental perspectives on embodiment and consciousness*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#); McGee, 2012). As darker-skinned youth move toward adolescence and become more cognizant and sensitive about their appearances and those of others, it can be a troubling task to develop a stable educational experience when distracted by the onus of discrimination correlated to their color. In this context, we argue the very act of forming a positive academic identity is often performed in resistance and opposition to both mainstream and cultural values and ideals that consistently

denote that darker skin is not valuable.

## Our Dark Girls: Embracing and Resisting Gendered Messages

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### About Physical and Academic Attractiveness

Skin color stratification particularly may have a deleterious effect on women and girls of color who have darker complexions. Lighter skin tones in this and many other societies translate to and is interpreted as beauty, making it a poignant form of social capital for them. There is a clear relationship between human skin tone and levels of achievement in education. Students with lighter skin tones achieve higher levels of education and employment on both personal and family bases (Keith, [2009](#)<sup>29</sup>. Keith, V. M. (2009). A colorstruck world: Skin tone, achievement, and self-esteem among African American women. In E. N. Glenn (Ed.), *Shades of Difference: Why Skin Color Matters* (pp. 25–39). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)). Advantages and disadvantages of skin tone relative to a particular group or individuals within a society can be based on perceived ideas of beauty and status and their associated connotations. The advantages of having lighter skin can be passed down through family networks, as children receive the privileges of the structure they are born into. Physical appearance has been constructed as more of an important status characteristic for females than for males, although males are increasingly becoming a part of the appearance debate (Hunter, [2002](#)<sup>21</sup>. Hunter, M. L. (2002). “If you're light you're alright”: Light skin color as social capital for women of color. *Gender & Society*, 16, 175–193.

[\[Web of Science ®\]](#), [\[CSA\]](#)

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#); Wallace, Townsend, Glasgow, & Ojie, [2011](#)<sup>51</sup>. Wallace, S. A., Townsend, T. G., Glasgow, Y. M., & Ojie, M. J. (2011). Gold diggers, video vixens, and jezebels: Stereotype images and substance use among urban African American girls. *Journal of Women's Health*, 20, 1315–1324.

[\[CrossRef\]](#), [\[PubMed\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#)

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)). For example, Mexican American females are plagued with persistent skin color stratification that could influence such dimensions as educational attainment, childhood socialization, adult acculturation, intergroup relations, and reaction to psychological stress (Montalvo, [2005](#)<sup>43</sup>. Montalvo, F. F. (2005). Surviving race: Skin color and the socialization and acculturation of Latinas. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, 13, 25–43.

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[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)). Similarly, the skin bleaching obsession with Indian females (in 2010, the Indian skin-lightening market was worth over \$435 million; 50% of Filipina females use a skin lightening product both in the US and abroad (Russell, Wilson, & Hall, [2013](#)<sup>47</sup>. Russell, K., Wilson, M., & Hall, R. E. (2013). *The color complex: The politics of skin color among African Americans*. New York, NY: Random House LLC.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)), along with growing populations of Africans and African Americans are grounded in their perceived and perhaps reality potential to receive measurable benefits, resulting from lighter skin.

Thus, students of color who have lighter skin could have access to increased social capital that can convert into educational and economic capital (Goldsmith, Hamilton, & Darity, [2006](#)<sup>14</sup>. Goldsmith, A. H., Hamilton, D., & Darity, W. (2006). Shades of discrimination: Skin tone and wages. *The American Economic Review*, 96(2), 242–245.

[\[CrossRef\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#)

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)). The social construction of standards of beauty is highly racialized and informed by ideals of Whiteness established since the times of slavery and colonialism. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that these often unspoken standards of beauty will have some impact on female students of color, particularly as they reach stages in their human development where intense significance and consequences are placed upon who has access to beauty capital and who do not (Hunter, [2002](#)<sup>21</sup>. Hunter, M. L. (2002). “If you're light you're alright”: Light skin color as social capital for women of color. *Gender & Society*, 16, 175–193.

[\[Web of Science ®\]](#), [\[CSA\]](#)

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)).

For example, an awareness of an overall preference towards light skin tone has led to a noticeable responsiveness on the part of some males' preference for light-skinned females (Lewis, [2011](#)<sup>33</sup>. Lewis, M. B. (2011). Who is the fairest of them all? Race, attractiveness and skin color sexual dimorphism. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 50, 159–162.

[\[CrossRef\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#)

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)). This can translate into some darker-skinned females being embarrassed and/or ashamed, and can result in lower self-esteem because of how their appearance is judged. Although educational experiences and outcomes have more recently included the learning and participation that happens inside the classroom, matters of colorism can explain some of the classroom group dynamics, conflicts, and allegiances. Russell, Wilson, and Hall ([2013](#)<sup>47</sup>. Russell, K., Wilson, M., & Hall, R. E. (2013). *The color complex: The politics of skin color among African Americans*. New York, NY: Random House LLC.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)) further explained that African American girls who are typically considered to be physically attractive tend to gravitate toward each other, establishing friendships and bonds based on their perceived similarity. Thus, dark-skinned girls may have a difficult time penetrating “light is right” cliques. As discussed, in educational contexts these groupings have great potential to impact educational experiences. Lighter-skinned female students are more likely to gain access to academic capital than their dark-skinned female classmates.

The devaluing of the bodies of dark-skinned students has the potential to harm their academic well-being.

Keith (2009). Keith, V. M. (2009). A colorstruck world: Skin tone, achievement, and self-esteem among African American women. In E. N. Glenn (Ed.), *Shades of Difference: Why Skin Color Matters* (pp. 25–39). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)) found that female students with lighter skin tones achieved higher levels of education and employment, providing powerful social messages, behavioral norms, and patterns of thought within the classroom. This same study showed that some teachers judged students with perceived greater attractiveness to also have greater levels of intelligence. Those of lighter skin tones were perceived as more attractive than their darker peers, and teachers had higher expectations for the former, giving them greater encouragement, higher marks, and other preferential treatment (Keith, 2009). Keith, V. M. (2009). A colorstruck world: Skin tone, achievement, and self-esteem among African American women. In E. N. Glenn (Ed.), *Shades of Difference: Why Skin Color Matters* (pp. 25–39). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)). However, it is important to note that not all female students of color accept this color hierarchy. Light-skinned and dark-skinned females alike resist and challenge these static notions of beauty (Berry & Duke, 2011). (Directors), Berry, D. C., & Duke, B. (2011). *Dark Girls*. [Motion Picture] United States: Urban Winter Entertainment & Duke Media.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)). Additionally, boys are more likely to compete in sports and many other areas where issues related to color may not be as salient. However, teenage boys and girls struggle with colorism as it relates to being unfairly judged as violent in and out of school (Hannon, DeFina, & Bruch, 2013). Hannon, L., DeFina, R., & Bruch, S. (2013). The relationship between skin tone and school suspension for African Americans. *Race and Social Problems*, 5, 281–295.

[\[CrossRef\]](#)

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)).

## Next Step for Supporting Teachers in Understanding Colorism in Teacher Education

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Based on this established discussion, we discuss a next step for teacher education programs interested in preparing teachers to more deeply understand colorism as an essential element of their learning about

race, teaching, and students..

As discussed in previous sections, issues of colorism continue to be central to the schooling experiences of those in the U.S., more generally. Yet they continue to be infrequently incorporated into the training of teachers and rarely addressed in teacher education programs. Many who are committed to addressing issues of race and racism tend to be silent in recognizing discriminatory treatment based on skin color (Hochschild, [2006](#)<sup>20</sup>. Hochschild, J. (2006). When do people not protest unfairness? The case of skin color discrimination. *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 73(2), 473–498.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)). From a teacher training perspective, we argue theories of race and racism in education seldom confront underlying philosophical assumptions about the role of colorism in influencing educational outcomes for students and teachers of color. This omission is no small matter, as basic underlying assumptions about whose skin color is more valued are crucial considerations when it comes to the potential of diverse learners.

Dating back to DuBois ([1903](#)<sup>8</sup>. Du Bois, W. E. B. (1903). *The souls of Black folk*. New York, NY: Bantam Classic.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)) and Woodson ([1933](#)<sup>53</sup>. Woodson, C. G. (1933). *The miseducation of the Negro*. Washington, DC: Associated Publisher.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)), researchers and theorists have attempted to unravel and understand the salience of race in education, as race is not a myopic, linear, simple construct. For as long as discussions have focused on race and education, scholars have been attempting to figure out just what race is and how it can be studied and conceptualized to improve educational experiences for those who have historically been marginalized and undereducated in systems not developed for their benefit. But many of these examinations have been completed from a theoretical standpoint. Teachers, too, need to grapple with the interrelated nature of race and education with its explicit implications for their practices – that is, their instruction.

According to many scholars, race is physically, socially, legally, and historically constructed. The meanings, messages, and consequences of race are developed and constructed by human beings, not by some predetermined set of laws or genetics. Because of the complexities of skin color, there are challenges in translating descriptions such as: brown-skinned, dark brown complexion, fair-skinned, and many other designations establishing skin color stratifications. Thus, teacher education programs need to provide teachers with a reflective repertoire of critical questions to reflect on and examine their thinking (and consequent practices) with or about pre-K-12 students.

Although teachers may learn about multiculturalism (and other race- and ethnicity-related initiatives) during their teacher preparation coursework and student teaching, many of them are not prepared to confront their racial and interracial perceptions about skin color, an essential step in teaching students of color (Milner, [2015](#)<sup>37</sup>. Milner, H. R. (2015). *Rac(e)ing to class: Confronting poverty and race in schools and classrooms*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)). Hochschild ([2006](#)<sup>20</sup>. Hochschild, J. (2006). When do people not protest unfairness? The case of skin color discrimination. *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 73(2), 473–498.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)) explains the skin color paradox as follows: “Blacks' commitment to

racial identity overrides the potential for skin color discrimination to have political significance (pg. 644).” We argue for the potential of all teachers being engaged with posing critical questions, not only about their teaching techniques and skills, but those linked to colorism. Questions such as the ones listed in bulleted form below can help foster a more profound awareness of how colorism can influence how teachers teach.

- What experiences and knowledge do I have about individuals whose skin tones are darker than mine?
- What biases may I have against students who have darker skin tones than mine?
- Do I unintentionally privilege lighter-skinned students over darker-skinned students?
- What assumption may I have for students that share my same skin tone?
- How can I work to redress the potential negative effects of skin color stratification in my classroom?
- What kinds of coping strategies do I employ to resolve skin color stratification dynamics in the classroom?
- How will/could I incorporate the experiences of my students in ways that do not perpetuate colorism?
- What types of students do I tend to ignore, accommodate, or spend significant time with?
- Are my biases of darker-skinned students impeding some of my students' educational experiences to receive the same pedagogical treatment as the rest of the students in my classroom? How do I know?
- As a teacher, how can I build knowledge about colorism and develop tools to combat the negative potential effects of it?

These questions serve as a starting point for more robust examinations of colorism in teacher education and can assist in developing and expanding teachers' knowledge and awareness about their own skin color and how skin color can influence their interpretation of their students' academic and racial identities.

## Conclusions

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Teachers who better understand colorism can advocate for the development of critical consciousness among students of color in resisting hurtful phenotype-associated ideologies and messages. Teachers could model and teach ideologies to combat skin tone bias and establish coping mechanisms for students of color experiencing colorism. Delpit (1995). Delpit, L. (1995). *Other people's children: Cultural conflicts in the classroom*. New York, NY: The New Press.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)), referring to teaching in multicultural contexts, contended that it is necessary “to really see, to really know the students we must teach (p. 183).” Fundamentally, in order to better serve students of color, teachers need to understand the nature of their students' identities within their cultural contexts, as well as their own identities, values, and beliefs, and how these shape them as teachers of students of color (Milner, 2010). Milner, H. R. (2010). *Start where you are but don't stay there: Understanding diversity, opportunity gaps, and teaching in today's classrooms*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

[Open URL](#) [View all references](#)).

In general, we are stressing that teacher education programs should be committed to addressing race with teachers who work with increasingly diverse students. In particular, we are advancing learning opportunities for teachers in teacher education that address colorism as a salient dimension of understanding race. Indeed, skin color is a salient part of students' racial identities and how they are perceived. In order for teacher education programs to implement content/curriculum /experiences in programs that interrogate the impact of colorism in teaching and learning contexts, more research is necessary on the influence of colorism and how this concept informs teacher current and future practice.

## Notes

1. The terms Black and African American will be used interchangeably throughout this article.
2. The term “pigmentocracy” has recently been adopted by social scientists to describe societies in which wealth and social status are determined by skin color. There are numerous pigmentocracies throughout the world, and they all have the remarkable characteristic that invariably the light-skinned peoples have the highest social status (Lynn, 2008). Lynn, R. (2008). *Pigmentocracy: Racial hierarchies in the Caribbean and Latin America*. *The Occidental Quarterly*, 8(2), 25–44.

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