



# Colorism 101

An Easy Reference & Resource  
for Educators



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# Introduction

## Definition

In 1983, Alice Walker used the term colorism to describe “prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color” (p. 290). Since then other scholars have studied this phenomenon using a variety of terms like “skin color bias” or “color complex” (Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992). Colorism is also associated with prejudice based on other physical traits, such as hair texture, eye color, and shape or size of nose and lips (Blair, Judd, Sadler, & Jenkins, 2002; Maddox & Dukes, 2008; Hordge-Freeman, 2013).

## History

The origins of colorism have been linked to European colonialism, American slavery class hierarchies in Asia, and white supremacy in general (Hunter, 2007, p. 238). Margaret Hunter (2007) explains the relationship between white supremacy and colorism this way: “The maintenance of white supremacy (aesthetic, ideological, and material) is predicated on the notion that dark skin represents savagery, irrationality, ugliness, and inferiority. White skin, and thus whiteness itself, is defined by the opposite: civility, rationality, beauty, and superiority. These contrasting definitions are the foundation for colorism (p. 238)

## Purpose

The main objectives for this resource are to give faculty, staff, and other educational stakeholders a basic introduction to colorism, to demonstrate how it might affect students, and to offer possible strategies for creating a school and classroom culture free of colorism.



# Possible Effects

## Social

- Adolescents are aware that others make assumptions about them based on skin color, and that awareness in turn affects their own self-perception (Elmore, 2009).
- African Americans with more Caucasian features are perceived as more intelligent (Lynn, 2002).
- Many African American teens (especially males) prefer dating partners with light skin and straighter hair (Stephens & Few, 2007).
- Dark and very dark skinned blacks continue to experience educational disadvantages well after the Civil Rights era (Loury, 2008).
- Very light skin increases likelihood of attending college and finding full-time employment (Ryabov, 2013).
- Girls with very dark skin tones are three times more likely to be suspended from school than girls with very light skin tones (Hannon, DeFina & Burch, 2013).

## Psychological

- Dark skinned adolescents more likely to have lower body image and lower self esteem (Breland-Noble, 2013).
- Dark skin has been linked to higher rates of depression and lower overall health (Veestra, 2011)
- Light skinned individuals often report painful awareness of privilege that results in “survivor’s guilt,” or alienation/antagonism from their own community (Cunningham, 1997).



# Recognizing Colorism

## Language

- Notice labels such as: light bright, yellow, high yellow, red, red bone, caramel, jigaboo, blackie, darky, burnt, blue-black, charcoal, etc. (Wilder, 2010)
- Notice evaluative comments such as:
  - \* “Pretty for a dark-skinned girl”
  - \* “I’m not black, I’m brown.”
  - \* “Black and ugly”
  - \* “Pretty light skinned girls”
  - \* “Acting light skin”
  - \* “Nose/lips too big”

## Actions

Identifying colorism as the motivation for certain actions is more difficult than recognizing language cues because such actions—like forming cliques, exclusion, rejection, harassment, fighting, or bullying—may be caused by any number of issues or prejudices. These behaviors, however, are likely to be on faculty and staff radar anyway.

Other behavioral cues might include excessive attention to personal appearance, avoiding direct exposure to sunlight, playing with a classmate’s hair, excessive grooming of one’s own hair, attempts to alter or minimize certain facial features, and any signs of insecurity or unnecessary aggression.

Finally, when it comes to identifying colorism as the motivation for various behaviors, it’s important to look for patterns.



# Strategies

## Classroom & Schoolwide

- Address colorism when and where you see it. Don't condone colorism by ignoring it or remaining silent. If a public display of colorism occurs in your presence, make an immediate effort to publically address and counteract it. Consider it a "teachable moment." Silence condones, validates, and sustains colorism, especially in the eyes of young people.
- Provide targeted counseling and mediation. Acknowledging colorism as one distinct source of common adolescent issues like low self-esteem, anger management, depression, or self-destructive behaviors can be more effective than merely addressing these issues generically.
- Provide ongoing mentorship. Researchers have found that positive experiences and conversations with role models can be an effective intervention for students dealing with colorism (Monroe, 2013; Stephens & Few, 2007).
- Monitor school and classroom discipline (Monroe, 2013; Hannon, DeFina, & Bruch, 2013). Check for colorism bias in patterns of both punishment and reward. Consider including mentorship, mediation, or counseling along with punitive discipline.
- Commit to culturally relevant curriculum, pedagogy, and programming (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Stephens & Few, 2007). Because whiteness is affirmed by default throughout American society, educators must not be afraid to proactively center and affirm other colors and ethnicities (Asante, 1991).



# Notes





# Notes





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