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Colorism Among African Americans: A Focus on Education

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Abstract

Black students with darker complexions experience a disproportionate application of exclusionary practices within educational settings (Crutchfield et al., 2022). This review seeks to highlight colorism's impact on the Black community in the education system by examining the historical context of colorism, the connection between colorism and racism, and how colorism is manifested and perpetuated in contemporary society in the United States. "Antiblackness" is an enduring trait of the United States that has rooted and fixed itself to its school structures (Coles & Powell, 2019). Schools are inherently political in that they adhere to and perpetuate the dominant ideologies of society (Picower & Mayorga, 2015), essentially functioning as a microcosm of society. Colorism functions as an extension of antiblackness in its perpetuation of prejudice and discriminatory behavior against darker-skinned individuals and those with more African phenotypes. Black students are mandated by state-driven compulsory education laws to attend school but may receive differential treatment on the basis of skin tone, facial features, and hair texture variations with the ethnic group. Exclusionary practices restrict students' access to the school environment and may lead to a diminished academic identity, a sense of invisibility, feelings of invalidation, and limited access to future opportunities. In this review, the need for interventions addressing colorism in educational settings will be discussed. Recommendations for future directions of colorism research are also discussed.

Keywords: colorism, education, intervention, methodology

Colorism Among African Americans: A Focus on Education

Colorism is defined as “the unequal treatment and discrimination of individuals on the basis of the lightness or darkness of their skin tone” (Landor & Smith, 2019). Based in the enduring legacies of white supremacy, colorism is a system that privileges those whose features more closely approximate whiteness. As such, colorism may be based on favoritism towards those with lighter skin, as well as other features typically associated with whiteness including thin body size, thinner nose shape, and straight hair texture (Wilder & Cain, 2011). Author Alice Walker defined colorism as being the internalized favoritism among Black people for having light skin, European features, and “good hair” (Walker, 1983). The impact of colorism is found not only in the United States, but can be seen across various countries globally where the legacies of European colonization took root, including in India, China, and Latin American nations (Hunter, 2005; Strmic-Pawl et al., 2021). Although the effects of colorism can be seen across many cultural communities, this review focuses on Black people¹ in the United States.

Colorism impacts individuals through a variety of direct and indirect societal mechanisms including institutional policies, acts of discrimination, and microaggressions (Crutchfield et al., 2020; Hall & Crutchfield, 2018). Colorism’s effects are broad and can impact various aspects of life including one’s education, income potential, prison sentencing, occupation, stereotypes, and well-being (Crutchfield et al., 2020; Hannon et al., 2013; Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Tabler & Painter, 2023). There are also gender differences embedded within colorism that produce discrepancies in social expectations and beliefs (Hunter, 2016). As we discuss in this review, colorist ideologies occurring both within the Black community and between various ethnic/racial

¹The term Black people refers to any individuals who consider themselves of African heritage and can include not only African Americans who have ancestry in the United States dating back to the period of enslavement, but also immigrants from Africa, the Caribbean, and other parts of the world who are living in the United States.

groups can have deleterious effects on self-beliefs, peer group dynamics, and outcomes from childhood through adulthood (Abrams et al., 2020; Adams et al., 2020; Hunter 2016). Thus, the presence of colorism complicates an already complex relationship between Black people and the United States. Further, those with lighter skin or more European features may have fewer negative outcomes in mainstream society due to their more “acceptable” appearance; nevertheless, their appearance and/or the privileges that come with it may negatively impact their connection to the larger Black community. Despite the fact that colorism offers some respite to Black people with more European features, it causes division among Black people, impacts self-beliefs, reinforces bias, and blurs the ability to see how racism impacts all of the Black community. Colorism continues to have a significant impact on the life trajectory of many Black youth, particularly influencing their education, but with the implementation of more effective research methodology, interventions can be developed to address colorism and ameliorate its negative effects.

The Current Study

The current study examines colorism’s impact, particularly among Black people in the United States within the education system. We endeavor to connect the history of colorism with the current state of the Black community in the U.S. and further consider how we can lessen the negative effects of colorism in the future. Researchers must strive to expand knowledge of colorism as it is not just a derivative of racism but is a separate concept with a powerful interracial and intraracial impact. Colorist ideals are not just perpetrated on Black people by other racial groups; they are also perpetrated by Black people onto other Black people. This insidious method of disrupting Black solidarity can only be eradicated with knowledge and

effort. We examine colorism's role throughout the education system, ways that the impacts of colorism can be reduced, as well as gaps and problems with the study of colorism.

History and Foundations of Colorism

Divisions among Black people in the Americas due to skin tone emerged during chattel enslavement when White males regularly impregnated enslaved Africans. The biracial offspring typically earned additional privileges than those with more African features (e.g., darker skin, a broader nose, fuller lips, and coarser hair), often working in the home instead of having to labor outside and being more likely to obtain training in skilled labor (Wirth & Goldhamer, 1944). Black people who could “pass” for white could legally purchase land and freedom in some states such as Louisiana, granting those with lighter skin and more European features privilege (Aslakson, 2012; Hunter, 2005). The extent to which one had European and African ancestry was considered important such that terminology was developed in Louisiana to describe individuals' ethnic make-up. For example, those who had a Black and a White parent were considered mulatto, while those who had a mulatto and White parent would be considered quadroon and one who had a mulatto and Black parent would be considered sambos (ya Azibo, 2014). According to ya Azibo, these classifications were the foundation for colorism, as greater privileges were given to those who had more European heritage (e.g., a quadroon would have more privileges than a mulatto or sambo due to their proximity to whiteness).

Throughout the antebellum United States, Black people of darker skin tones and with more African features experienced greater amounts of discrimination and had to fight harder to earn respect and equal treatment (Bell, 2019). Further, once their enslavement ended, Black people with more European features represented a “buffer class” between Black and White people due to being more likely to be skilled and educated. As the buffer class, Black people

with visible European heritage were treated better by White people and often viewed as the Black elite by the rest of the Black community (Hughes & Hertel, 1990). These privileges were perpetuated by marriage choices in which lighter-skinned, elite African Americans were more likely to marry others of the same status, who were also often light-skinned. It has been suggested that children of these lighter-skinned Black people were more prosperous than many other Black people due to their head start in life because of the privilege and education that their parents were given, often due to their light skin, more European features, and biological connection to White people (Frazier, 1957).

These manifestations of colorism continued from enslavement to today, though they were not legally sanctioned as they were in the past (Ortega-Williams et al., 2021). During the 1900s, skin color was sometimes measured using the “paper bag test” in which those who were lighter in color than a paper bag would have access to greater privileges and categorized as the Black elite (Kerr, 2005). Black people used the “paper bag test” among themselves, often within social organizations such as fraternities and sororities, to keep membership exclusive to those who had lighter skin (for a review of the paper bag test, see Kerr, 2005; 2006). Even in the last 20 years, lighter-skinned Black people have continued to receive benefits from colorism; for example, they often are more educated (Monk, 2014) and have been overrepresented among leadership positions in many careers (Gullickson, 2005). Those Black people with lighter skin and more European features continue to reap many benefits of their privilege though they may also have undesirable outcomes such as a weaker connection to the Black community (Harris, 2021; Oyserman et al., 2006), while those who are darker-skinned and have more African features experience greater bias from inside and outside of their ethnic-racial group resulting in a myriad of negative effects related to education and work outcomes (Monk, 2014).

Manifestation of Colorism

Colorism, though different from racism, has similar roots in white supremacy. Racism focuses more broadly on subjugating those not in the dominant ethnic-racial group of European descent. Racism is complex and focusing on the various different types of racism or effects of racism is beyond the scope of this review; Miller and Garran (2017) provide a thorough review. Yet, it is important to note that the hierarchy structured by racism is based on socially constructed understandings of difference, not on substantial or meaningful biological differences (Yudell, 2011). Colorism is also based on mere external differences with no indication that those of different skin colors or other markers of physical appearance differ from each other. Colorism is a mechanism of racism such that it places a hierarchy within various ethnic-racial groups wherein those who look more like the dominant group are more accepted and viewed more positively. Those with ethnic features more distinct from European Americans are viewed more negatively, not just by those outside of their group, but often by members of their own group. While racism places a hierarchy across ethnic groups, for example between White people and Black people, colorism manifests a hierarchy within ethnic groups such that those who are closer to European in their appearance are higher in the hierarchy than those who are more African in their appearance. Likely as a result of this intraracial hierarchy, lighter-skinned Black people report being treated better by White people than darker-skinned Black people (Hersch, 2006). Further, members of the same ethnic-racial group may be unaware of their colorist bias just as those who are racist may have little understanding of their racism and how it impacts themselves or others (Glazer & Liebow, 2021). Therefore, colorism can be even more dangerous and debilitating than racism as it works to create division among oppressed and marginalized ethnic-racial groups.

One area of research in which the overlap between racism and colorism becomes evident is in doll study research which began with the classic Clark and Clark studies in the 1930s and 40s (see Clark & Clark, 1939a; 1939b; 1940; 1947). The goal of this research was to examine the racial preferences and ethnic/racial identity development of Black children by asking them questions about White and Black dolls such as “which one is good” and “which one looks like you.” Clark and Clark reported that Black children were more likely to have self-esteem issues than White children as a result of the Black children often showing preference for the White doll over the Black doll. The original studies were used as evidence to support the need for educational desegregation, as Clark and Clark concluded that Black youth had this low self-esteem due to their unequal treatment in the schools (Phillips, 2000). Since this time, many have attempted to replicate the study; Byrd (2012) reviews this work. There have been concerns about the methodology and particularly the color of the dolls. It was noted that in the original study, only dolls with dark skin were used, and children were only offered a forced choice to show a preference for a White doll or a Black doll. Recent research has sought to address these critiques of the early Clark and Clark studies. For example, Jordan and Hernandez-Reif (2009) expanded the original two doll design to include additional shades of computerized cartoons and options for children to indicate preferences for all dolls or none. With the increased choices of skin tones to choose from and expanded response options, children did not show any skin tone preference. However, when children were only presented with two doll options, Black children still showed a pro-White bias. More broadly, research indicates that children often do not show consistency in their racial preferences using the doll paradigm, and it is not considered a meaningful assessment of ethnic/racial identity for young children (Byrd, 2012). Though the Clark and Clark study was

not about colorism, it was foundational in desegregation and led to future doll studies that began to highlight some of the impact of colorism within the education system.

To better understand how colorism continues to impact the Black community and others, we must consider how colorism has persisted throughout history. Ortega-Williams and colleagues (2021) propose the colorist-historical trauma framework which examines how colorism has been critical in maintaining historical trauma, particularly among those with dark skin. They suggest that though the impact of colorism began hundreds of years ago, the trauma has been passed down through the generations and is particularly harmful to those who are darker skinned. Through their theory, they argue that the impact of colorism has been widespread, touching the lives of people of color since the time of enslavement in terms of their physiology (those with lighter skin are typically physically healthier), psychosocial health (due to division among those of different skin tones), legally (Jim Crow laws differed by skin tone), and environmentally (enslavement/imprisonment based on skin tone). Ortega-Williams and colleagues suggest that those with lighter skin tones experience less of this historical trauma than those with darker skin tones.

Skin tone has historically had a prominent role in the development of social norms, biases, and values in the United States (Hunter, 2005; Wirth & Goldhamer, 1944). These societal schemas can contribute significantly to individuals' beliefs and actions toward self and others often due to the propagation of biased and stereotypical societal messages (Adams et al., 2020). Beliefs regarding one's ability to succeed, social status, and beauty may also be filtered through values and biases related to skin tone (Abrams et al., 2020; Allen et al., 2000). Such values and biases include endorsing lighter skin as more attractive than darker skin (Abrams et al., 2020); favoring less prominent African phenotypic features over those that are more prominent (i.e. a

smaller nose); assuming that individuals with darker skin primarily reside in low-income areas while individuals with lighter skin live in affluent communities; and linking aggression to skin tone with the perception that individuals with darker skin are more aggressive than their lighter-skinned counterparts (Abrams et al., 2020; Maddox, 2004; Parmer et al., 2004). These biases may be held by oneself or others and can lead to the manifestation of colorism through prejudice and discrimination. These effects are subtle and challenging to trace through research because they are often embedded into social systems such as schools and families.

Colorism may manifest within the Black family in the form of social status, external pressure, and stereotypes. These implications are complex and multifaceted. Within this context, African American family members with lighter skin are given preferential treatment and are perceived as having a higher social status than those with a darker complexion. For centuries, this has created tension within the family construct. These tensions can lead to low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy, as well as a reduction in their likelihood of success (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Within African American families, colorism is often a hidden bias with substantial mental health impacts on individuals and future generations (Keyes et al., 2020). This cycle of mental health challenges has been well-documented. Anxiety, depression, and feelings of inferiority have been reported by individuals who have experienced colorism (Perry et al., 2012). The most severe consequences were reported by darker-skinned African Americans (Perry et al., 2012). While the Black family is a source of strength for many, it can be the source of detrimental beliefs passed down through generations.

Perpetuation of Colorism

One challenge of addressing colorism within the African American family is the subliminal implications of these biases (Monk, 2021). Colorism is not often openly discussed

and can be perpetuated without people being aware, yet Wilder and Cain (2011) suggest that the family is the most influential force in teaching individuals about colorism. For example, when a grandmother says to one of her grandchildren, “look at this pretty, light-skinned child,” this sends messages to others that light skin is pretty and, by default, dark skin is not. This lack of awareness or openness makes it difficult for individuals and families to address the culture of silence around these issues. Families can also disrupt messages about colorism by embracing Black people of all phenotypes and avoiding comments about features such as skin tone and hair texture that can give implicit messages about one’s worth or value. Families often unconsciously teach youth about colorism and must be aware that in every comment about staying out of the sun or having good hair, the message that is reinforced to Black youth is that *it is better to look like a White person than to look like a Black person.*

It is important to recognize the existence of colorism and actively work to address and eliminate it in all of its forms. This can include promoting positive representations of all skin tones and actively working to overcome internalized biases and preferences (Perry et al., 2012). The biases and preferences that are maintained within families can shape individuals' preferences for romantic partners, often leading to a preference for individuals with lighter skin tones (Monk, 2021). These realities can make it challenging for individuals with darker skin tones to find love and acceptance within their relationships. A study that analyzed the effect of color on major life outcomes for African American women showed that women with lighter skin were more likely to marry high-status men than darker-skinned women (Stephens & Thomas, 2012). This research is consistent with the other findings where light skin is usually privileged in romantic relationships (Moore et al., 2021; Hamilton et al., 2009). These findings about marriage and colorism are complicated in that colorism’s effect on marital relationships perpetuates from

within the Black community. Further, as light-skinned Black people continue to privilege and marry other light-skinned Black people, colorism is perpetuated and division within the Black community continues.

Media. Beyond family, media has a significant role in perpetuating colorist ideologies through its varied representations of Black people. Within media representations, Black people are categorized based on their skin tone with darker complexions receiving less privilege and lighter complexions receiving more prestige. Norwood (2015) reports that Black women with lighter skin are represented more than darker-skinned Black women in advertising materials (e.g., magazines, billboards), popular culture (e.g., love interests in music videos), and acting roles. Further, an analysis of commentators' discussions of male college basketball players found that lighter-skinned men were discussed more for their mental abilities or performance (leadership or ball passing) in the game while those who were darker-skinned were discussed in terms of their physical characteristics such as height or athleticism (Foy & Ray, 2019). These findings suggest that the ways skin tone is represented in media can impact perceptions of individuals, thereby reinforcing stereotypes and further perpetuating colorist biases.

One tactic used by the media to reinforce colorism is whitewashing. This practice seeks to lighten Black women's skin tone to be more in line with Eurocentric standards of beauty. When done to a darker-skinned Black woman, it can reinforce the message that people of darker skin tones are inferior and it can also perpetuate additional bias against darker skin. Several Black celebrities have been subjected to whitewashing in magazine covers or advertising campaigns including Lupita Nyong'o, Naomi Campbell, Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, Gabourey Sidibe, Kerry Washington, and Halle Berry (Gordon, 2015). While these are likely the editorial decisions of the companies that produce the final products, the edited images are often what

remain in the minds of consumers. Harrison and Thomas (2009) note that whitewashing in the media negatively impacts the self-confidence of women with darker skin tones as there is less opportunity to see themselves accurately depicted.

Even though light- and dark-skinned Black celebrities have both been subject to whitewashing, it is likely that some darker-skinned women experience feelings of devaluation beyond what lighter-skinned women experience. This may be particularly relevant because lighter-skinned women like Beyoncé and Halle Berry, who have both privilege and prestige, benefit from the advantage of having lighter skin regardless of whether their skin has been whitewashed for a product or campaign. Mathew Knowles, Beyoncé's father, believes that her skin tone has held some influence over the remarkable success that she has achieved in her career (Quinn, 2019). Knowles also acknowledges the significant impact of colorism by noting that his daughter's success would likely have been negatively impacted if she were born with a darker skin tone.

Colorism is as damaging to the Black community as systemic racism. In the era of social media, researchers have found that Black people who watch more advertisements and television tend to have negative attitudes toward individuals of color (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005). These findings illustrate the significant impact that the media can have on the beliefs and attitudes of Black people. In limiting opportunities for accurate representations of darker-skinned individuals, the media contributes to the spread of prejudice by maintaining the harmful belief that lighter skin is more beautiful or more desirable than darker tones. Perpetuating colorist ideals is harmful, even if the act is unintentional. The normalization of these ideologies makes it difficult to actively address colorism as it has become deeply ingrained in social structures and has led to unconscious biases and discrimination (Hunter, 2002). The media's role in

perpetuating colorism can also make it challenging for individuals to recognize and challenge their own biases, and for society to promote inclusivity and equity. Individuals often do not even realize the messages that they are unconsciously internalizing.

Colorism and Educational Impacts

Within an educational context, beliefs and values derived from colorism insidiously influence student/teacher interactions, disproportionate enforcement of exclusionary practices, and the relationships of students of color with their schools (Blake et al., 2017; Hannon et al., 2013; Hunter, 2016). Students are mandated to attend school and while adhering to this mandate, most Black students are unaware of the differential treatment that they may experience on the basis of skin tone. They may be even less aware of how this treatment may systematically work to prevent them from achieving their academic goals and also impact their life outcomes. In addition, schools and school personnel are also often unaware of how their policies and behaviors may be fueled by colorism. Often, the effects of colorism in the school are challenging to identify as they regularly overlap with racism and are perpetrated at an unconscious level. Despite the unintentional way in which colorism may impact education, research suggests that those with lighter skin may have higher college GPAs (Byrd et al., 2014) and are more likely to obtain higher levels of educational attainment than those with darker skin (Allen et al., 2000; Gullickson, 2005; Hersch, 2006; Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Monk, 2021). Colorism insidiously disrupts the academic achievement of darker-skinned Black students through its impact on the attitudes and behaviors of the students—this includes self-beliefs such as expectations about how well they can perform in school and general feelings of self-esteem, as well as the attitudes and behaviors of teachers and other school personnel.

Coles and Powell (2020, p. 128) maintain that “antiblackness is a permanent and endemic feature of America” and note that it is “structurally embedded within schools” meaning that the focus must shift from denying the existence of racialized agendas within the educational school system to moving toward fostering accountability for the ways in which school institutions uphold anti-blackness. These effects seem to be more ingrained in the K through 12 system and have less of an effect in college as suggested by research that finds factors such as self-efficacy (belief in one’s ability to achieve one’s goals) and ethnic-racial identity (strength of connection to one’s ethnic-racial group) may buffer the effects of colorism in older students (Adams et al., 2020; Oyserman et al., 2006; Rodriguez, 2013). Yet, among younger students with fewer internal resources, colorism functions as an extension of antiblackness and racism in its perpetuation of prejudice and discriminatory behavior against darker-skinned individuals and those with more African phenotypes. In examining differences in treatment between Black students with varying skin tones, education literature has identified a disproportionate application of exclusionary practices that impact students with darker complexions (Blake et al., 2017; Webb, 2019).

Educational institutions are inherently political in nature in that they exist to produce members of society who conform to the dominant values, beliefs, norms, and standards (Mayorga & Picower, 2015); while Black students expect to learn information from state-mandated curriculums, they are likely not expecting to receive additional messaging that centers around colorism within their ethnic-racial group. Further, they likely do not notice this message. This messaging often comes in the form of differential treatment for light- and dark-skinned students and tends to reinforce ideologies from the period of United States enslavement which conceptualized lighter skin as superior to darker skin (Hunter, 2016; Rosario et al., 2021; Webb, 2019). Bound by attendance laws and few viable education alternatives, it is often the students

who are left to navigate a space that was never intended for them with the added obstacle of colorist ideologies causing division within the ethnic-racial group and possible exclusion from other ethnic-racial groups as well.

Intersectional Contexts

It is impossible to understand the effects of colorism without considering its intersectional contexts. Colorism is not only a racialized ideology, but it is also gendered. Intersectionality influences how colorism manifests and is experienced differently among Black women compared to Black men. The features valued within colorist biases favor not only phenotypes that approximate whiteness (e.g., lighter skin, thin nose), but specifically feminine features stereotypically associated with White women (e.g., long, straight hair). Further, colorism impacts Black men and women differently as distinct biases are related to skin tone based upon gender. Considering intersectionality, an idea originally proposed in critical race theory by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1988), is key to our knowledge of colorism because one must consider the combined effects of skin tone and gender to understand colorism's impact on people of color. Intersectionality refers to the reality that identity is complex and that individuals may have different experiences based upon unique combinations of identity that do not just add effects one on top of the other (i.e., identifying separately as a woman, a light-skinned person, and as a Black person), but mix together to create a completely new identity (i.e., a light-skinned Black woman). Therefore, understanding how identity may impact a person takes more than just considering each unique identity separately, but requires an examination of the intersectional identity.

One mechanism through which colorism impacts the education system is through biases related to physical attractiveness and dangerousness; these biases are intersectional (influenced

by the combined effects of skin tone, physical appearance, and gender). Hannon and colleagues (2013) discuss how physical attractiveness impacts access to opportunities and resources, identifying how, within a Eurocentric framework, lighter-skinned women and girls are considered to be more physically attractive than their darker-skinned counterparts. They also note how this elevation in status on the basis of attractiveness leads to more permissiveness from school administration when applying school discipline policies to female students with lighter complexions (e.g., in the form of providing second chances or presuming innocence in the presence of doubt). The association between skin tone and physical attractiveness has been linked to increased suspension rates for darker-skinned female students (Hannon et al., 2013). Hannon et al. report that, when compared with their lighter-skinned peers, Black girls with darker complexions are 3.4 times more likely to be suspended. For male students, darker skin and African features have been associated with increased societal perceptions of criminality and Black boys with darker complexions are 2.5 times more likely to be suspended than their lighter-skinned peers (Hannon et al., 2013). The societal perceptions of criminality that darker-skinned Black men experience have contributed to subjective biases against these individuals (Hannon et al., 2013), yet these stereotypes are also attributed to lighter-skinned Black men just because they are Black. For example, Finkeldey and Demuth (2021) found that when comparing Black youth with white youth, Black youth of any skin tone were at a greater risk for being arrested as adults than white youth. Though those Black youth with the darkest skin were at the highest risk of incarceration, their risk was not significantly different from the lightest-skinned Black youth. Even though this study also included women, which may have impacted the results, it helps us to understand that some stereotypes may be more firmly ingrained in Blackness in general and less in color. In this case, being Black was a more important determinant in deciding arrest risk than

skin color. Nevertheless, colorism impacts both Black male and female students, but the mechanisms through which their actions work are different.

Despite gender differences in how colorism impacts education and discipline for Black people, there may be significant negative effects for students with darker skin. The creation and enforcement of “zero tolerance” policies have created an avenue through which Black students have been targeted for removal from school grounds (i.e., through suspension and/or expulsion) in disciplinary cases that do not contain illegal or violent behavior; these exclusionary discipline practices are more common among those with darker skin (Crutchfield et al., 2022). Due to the presence of racial biases, Black students are disproportionately disciplined for nonviolent offenses that are subjectively categorized as disobedient or defiant by school personnel (Wun, 2016). In being suspended or expelled from school, these students are inherently pushed out of the school environment which may lead to a diminished academic identity, a sense of invisibility, feelings of invalidation, and limited access to future opportunities. This plays a role in outcomes such as high school graduation rates, college graduation rates, and income as students who are excluded from school are likely to have worse outcomes in these areas (Abrams et al., 2020). Exclusion from school wreaks havoc on the careers of students by making it more likely that they will experience future exclusions (Fisher et al., 2022). Patterns of excluding darker-skinned Black students from schools reinforce the negative effects of colorism creating a self-fulfilling prophecy in which darker-skinned Black people are less successful in terms of education and career.

While negative biases against dark-skinned Black people decrease positive educational outcomes for this group, it is likely that positive biases for those with light skin increase their positive educational outcomes. Hunter (2016) discusses the fact that a color-based halo effect

may influence the educational outcomes of lighter-skinned Black students such that teachers will favor them. This is considered a halo effect because biases that connect light skin to physical attractiveness become generalized to other factors such as academic potential and intelligence (Hunter, 2016). Further, lighter-skinned girls often have more positive peer interactions within the school, adding to the beneficial experiences that they experience within schools. The combination of being treated better by one's teachers and peers likely has a positive effect on one's self-image, resulting in a cascade of positive outcomes for lighter-skinned Black people.

Colorism influences the education of Black youth through various means including how they are perceived and treated by teachers, other school personnel, and peers as well as how they view themselves. For those with darker skin tones and more African features, colorism can reduce their academic potential which significantly influences their future lives including physical health, career, and well-being (Tabler & Painter, 2023). In order to improve outcomes for many Black people, interventions must be developed to reduce the effects of colorism.

Colorism Reduction Interventions

Colorism negatively impacts student academic outcomes and well-being. Studies show that students with darker skin, who experience colorism are more likely to experience a decrease in their motivation and lower self-confidence (Monk, 2021). These students are also more prone to mental health and substance abuse problems, which can also negatively impact academic achievement (Crutchfield et al., 2022). In turn, this widens the achievement gap while limiting access to financial stability. Colorism reduction interventions are necessary to create equitable learning environments where students feel included and supported regardless of their skin tone and features. Additionally, promoting equity and inclusion through colorism reduction may have broader societal impacts that negate the damage perpetuated by the media. Educational

interventions may consist of teacher training and student interventions around awareness raising and media literacy that may also include parents.

Diversity and inclusion training for teachers is a successful intervention that most schools have already integrated into their current professional development plans that may help lessen the impact of colorism in the schools. Bezrukova and colleagues (2016) support that diversity and inclusion training is effective in reducing bias. Similarly, Breese and colleagues (2023) report that incorporating field experiences and discussions within multicultural teacher preparation programs were instrumental in producing positive results. Successful interventions included increasing opportunities for contact with underrepresented students, stereotypical response awareness and replacement activities, fact-gathering exercises to obtain information about members within minoritized groups, and perspective-taking. Crutchfield and colleagues (2022) reported increased academic achievement among African American students when educators were trained to include ethnic and identity development in their curriculums. Note that these studies focus more on issues of diversity and not specifically on colorism. To date, we have not found any teacher-focused intervention that targets colorism specifically that has been implemented in a scientific manner. However, findings noting the effectiveness of interventions that focus on issues of diversity and ethnicity-race are encouraging. Though none of these strategies directly address colorism, content focused on colorism can easily be added to these trainings, addressing the historical development of colorism, how it is maintained in society, its effects, and how to alleviate the effects are all topics that should be clearly addressed in teacher trainings. Integrating the concept of colorism within the multicultural education program could help better prepare teachers to work with Black and other student of color populations. Many teachers may not be aware of the issues of colorism and how it might impact their behavior.

They may not know how to respond if they hear colorist ideals being espoused in their classrooms. Targeted training can help not only to bring teacher awareness to issues of colorism, but it can also provide them with tools to address and reduce colorism in the school environment.

To the best of our knowledge, there are no empirical studies to support student-focused colorism interventions; however, research suggests that interventions that address self-beliefs and knowledge of colorism may reduce the negative impacts of colorism for youth. Byrd and Chavous (2011) found that students experiencing discrimination and exclusion were less motivated or engaged in academics. Higher regard for their racial identity was demonstrated to mediate this negative effect (Byrd & Chavous, 2011). This suggests that educating students about ethnic-racial identity and understanding of colorism may indirectly have a positive impact on their academic achievement. Various studies note the protective aspect of ethnic-racial identity with educational outcomes for Black youth. For example, in their meta-analysis, Miller-Cotto and Barnes (2016) found that college students with positive ethnic-racial affect (i.e., having positive feelings and pride in one's ethnic group) and ethnic-racial exploration (i.e., examining the meaning of one's ethnic group) were more likely to have higher academic achievement. Strategies to reduce colorism should focus on cultural awareness and developing positive ethnic-racial identity in African American students. Ortega-Williams and colleagues (2021) suggest that colorism interventions for youth should incorporate lessons about historical trauma and resistance in the past as well as include action-oriented coping that allows students to feel empowered as they rebel against colorism. Further, because adolescence is when identity development occurs, curriculums focused on deconstructing negative self-beliefs would be ideal. Ethnic-racial identity development is a protective factor that may mediate the negative effects of

discrimination (Dotterer et al., 2009) and would likely be critical to an intervention designed to combat the effects of colorism.

Theories such as the Nigrescence theory put forth by Cross (1991; 1995; 2012) highlight the importance of ethnic-racial identity as a protective factor for Black people and a potential intervention target. This theory identifies the context of how African Americans shape their identity in relation to the majority White culture. This theory states that colorism forms when the individual rejects their Afro-centric culture for the favored and dominant White culture (Bridges, 2011). Individual identities are developed within the Internalization stage where individuals accept their cultures while also accepting and valuing other cultures, traditions, and beliefs. As a colorism reduction strategy, some researchers suggest cultural awareness and identity development (Stevenson, 1995) which may be integrated into social studies, history, or English curricula. In addition to ethnic-racial identity development, research supports positive ethnic-racial socialization as a protective intervention. Ethnic-racial socialization is the process in which children learn about their cultural traditions, ethnic-racial identity, and how to cope with discrimination. When parents educate their children about their history and culture, they are transmitting cultural pride messages (Smalls, 2009). Although research supports this as a protective factor (Stevenson et al., 1997), parent education must be included to serve as a colorism reduction strategy. By educating students and parents on issues of ethnic-racial identity and socialization, intervention programs can offer protection from the deleterious impact of colorism.

To overcome the negative effects of discrimination among African Americans, teachers should also engage parents when developing the cultural identity and awareness of their students. Parent engagement strategies may include colorism bias awareness and replacement activities,

fact-gathering exercises to obtain positive and potentially biased beliefs within family groups, and perspective-taking. The individual responsible for implementing the engagement activities must be mindful of respecting existing cultural beliefs while being careful of revealing bias. Research is needed to investigate the effectiveness of proposed interventions in reducing colorism, however; strategies that target teachers, students, and parents are ideal.

Discussion

Colorism is a construct born out of colonialism that has played a role in the subjugation of those whose appearance is most different from a European set “ideal.” Colorism impacts people of color in various ways. One particularly insidious way in which colorism impacts Black people in the United States is through its influence on various elements of the education system resulting in poorer academic performance and achievement by those who have darker skin and more African features. These effects arise due to biases in teachers and other school personnel, self-views that have been impacted by societal ideals, and other structural elements related to racism. As such, it is imperative that the impact of colorism on Black youth be ameliorated. This can be done through the implementation of intervention programs targeted to shift views so that colorism, which yields its power over Black people from both within and outside of the Black community, can be identified, examined, and dismantled. However, there is a great need for additional studies of interventions that can lessen the effects of colorism. Further, our understanding of colorism has been limited due to inconsistencies in the research and too few experiments to examine the effectiveness of interventions for this concern. Before we can develop effective intervention strategies, we must continue to build the research literature which will help us to understand how colorism wields its negative influence over some, who is most at risk, and the best targets for intervention.

State of Colorism Research

Colorism research is not a new area of focus; however, this research topic is replete with issues such as inconsistent measurement of skin tone, lack of examination of the impact of skin tone versus other African features, and methodology concerns such as too heavy a reliance on quantitative methods, yet too few experiments. Research has given us hints at the power colorism has on life outcomes among Black people, but changes to the strategies used in this research will improve our understanding of colorism.

Various methods have been used to rate skin tone in colorism research, but there is not an agreed-upon paradigm; this inconsistency may play a role in varied results in the colorism literature. Studies focused on colorism have typically either allowed an interviewer to rate the research participant or have asked for a self-rating, while some studies have requested both. In a study by Oyserman and colleagues (2006) both interviewer and self-scores were requested; they found the scores to be correlated at .65, therefore they created a mean score from the two reports to use for analysis. Combining the two scores may be a best practice strategy as it is unclear who is a more accurate rater of skin color. However, if only one score is provided, which reporter is best may differ depending upon the goals of the research. For example, if the study is about self-analysis or internal constructs such as perceptions of their own beauty, the use of self-ratings may be ideal. However, if the study is about external forces on an individual such as treatment by teachers, then a rating from an external evaluator may be ideal. Because many studies will want to examine both perspectives, it is likely a best practice to have the participant and an evaluator both rate skin tone using the same system.

Ratings of skin color are typically done with some type of visible skin color scale, but there is a lack of consistency in what type of scale is used. Often, a color palette with 5 to 11

levels is used from very light to very dark skin tones (Allen et al., 2000; Hannon et al., 2013). The use of a color palette is preferred over the mere use of ratings with category names such as medium brown. The palette at least offers a visual anchor for these subjective responses. Nevertheless, the colors chosen are often not consistent and various scales have been used. Research should be done to further elucidate whether a scale with 11 points offers information that is more useful than a 5-point scale, for example. Currently, we do not have empirical evidence as to which types of scales are best. Basic agreement on skin tone measurement is necessary to move the colorism research field forward.

In addition to discrepancies in the measurement of skin tone, colorism research is also marked by a hyper-focus on skin color while often ignoring other elements of colorism such as facial features, hair texture, and body type. These factors may be particularly important as we consider how these features may work together to perpetuate stereotypes. For example, a dark-skinned Black man is more likely to be considered dangerous if he also has a large body type in comparison to a smaller one. Light-skinned Black women are more likely to be judged as attractive if they also have more European facial features and hair with a looser texture. More nuanced examinations of the various aspects of colorism along with an agreed upon standard of measurement would help researchers to understand who is at greatest risk of experiencing the negative impacts of colorism.

In terms of the methodology used in colorism research, there are too few experiments and qualitative studies. Much of the research conducted on colorism is quantitative, yet there are few true experiments. We can gain a better understanding of the causal role of colorism by engaging in more experimental methods. These studies may focus on what individuals believe about others based on skin tone and other physical features. In one such example, Wilson's (2021)

experimental study indicated that Black adolescents judged an animated male character with darker skin and African features as being more aggressive and having lower academic potential than a male character with lighter skin and European features. By comparing reactions to those with different phenotypes, but the same ethnic-racial background, we will begin to gain a better understanding of colorism. Though qualitative studies are not as rare in this research area as in some others, a greater number of these methods are needed as well. Qualitative methods are particularly important for new and under-researched areas as they allow for discovery. These methods do not limit what researchers will learn by prescribing how participants must answer. Qualitative methods allow participants to tell their own stories and therefore would assist researchers in understanding why colorism is so important and how it impacts individuals' lives.

Conclusion

In addition to the methodological research concerns noted above, the literature examining colorism needs to continue to grow more broadly. There should be a greater examination of intersectional ethnicity/race and gender issues, further differentiation between the impact of colorism and racism, and an exploration of related topics that should be examined as intervention targets such as ethnic-racial identity, satisfaction with appearance, and self-esteem. It is clear that colorism impacts Black male and female youth differently (Hannon et al., 2013), but the extent and reason for these differences remain to be explored fully. Researchers have also struggled to tease apart the effects of colorism from racism (Thompson & McDonald, 2016), likely due to the predominance of Black-White comparative studies that do not adequately explore heterogeneity among Black people. Research needs to shift to examine how colorism works among Black people, exploring how colorism may moderate relationships between racism and negative outcomes. Finally, it is clear that colorism may be influenced by various constructs that can

disrupt its potentially negative effects. While some studies have shown potentially negative effects of having a strong Black ethnic-racial identity in relation to colorism (Mena et al., 2020; Townsend et al., 2010), these findings are not in line with other research areas that suggest a strong beneficial effect of ethnic-racial identity on various outcomes for Black people (Ajibade et al., 2016; Lee & Ahn, 2013; Medina et al., 2020). Unexpected findings such as these require additional examination. Further research would help us to understand the particular circumstances and individual characteristics that might impact relationships between colorism and other variables related to strength and resiliency among Black youth.

Stemming from the history of enslavement, economic inequalities, and United States politics, colorism has a long and complex legacy within the Black community. It is clear that colorism impacts Black people in the United States in various areas of their lives including their careers, education, and self-image. In order to better understand the experiences of the Black community, colorism must be considered more frequently in effective and thorough research. Though some studies suggest the impact of colorism is decreasing (Gullickson, 2005), few other studies have suggested that colorism does not have real-life impacts on Black people. Colorism likely has implications for various elements of Black life and with strengthened research practices, effective interventions can be developed to assist with reducing colorism's impact on the education of Black youth.

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