

National Level Conference on Transformative Higher Education: Skills, Equity & Innovation (THE-SEI 2026)

Collaboratively Organized By:

Dnyan Ganga Education Trust's College of Education (B.Ed.), Thane, Maharashtra &
SSRMT'S SSR College of Education, Saily, Silvassa, UT of NH & DD

Shadows of Bias: A Qualitative Exploration of Students Lived Experiences with Skin-Tone Discrimination

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Abstract

Exclusion and discrimination based on skin tone are common in Indian schools. Often dismissed as teasing, this is rarely addressed and leads to no corrective action. This colour-based discrimination, much like its counterpart in Western countries, has become more visible in recent years. In India, however, it appears in complex ways, linked with caste, class, language, and religion. With India being a diverse nation, these factors largely impact the experience & expression of discrimination, along with the preconceived notion of darker skin-tones' association with social disadvantage. This study uses an Arts-based-research approach along with semiotic analysis to examine student's lived experiences of colourism in the everyday school atmosphere. Thus, the high-risk zones are identified based on the visual representation by them. Semiotic analysis revealed symbolic representations of power, emotional responses, and resilience. This uncovered social hierarchies and student coping mechanisms. It provides a visual framework for educators to address colourism in anti-bullying policies. The text also emphasises art-based methodologies to help students voice their needs and promote inclusive educational practices.

Keywords: colour-based discrimination, high-risk zones, social hierarchies, semiotic analysis.

Introduction

Human perception of fairness, being synonymous with beauty has largely been attributed to media representation and societal expectations^[1]. In spite of fairness being an intrinsic entity of human physiology, people are subjected to innumerable insults based on it. It is an undeniable fact that it has been one of the most crucial factors that has contributed negatively towards an individual's self-worth and social stigma. Even the noble landscapes of the educational institutions have been a constant breeding ground for these, biasness.^[8] This study examines the effect of biasness based on the skin tone and also aims to understand the different coping mechanisms adapted by an individual within a school set up.

Rationale

The obsession with fairness or lighter skin tone is not a new thing with respect to media representations or matrimonial ads. Both prefer lighter-skinned models over the darker-skinned ones, irrespective of the gender. They are the ones who are preferred to endorse the beauty creams and thus remain glorified^[9]. With an estimated 450 million USD market size for fairness creams, India has witnessed a steady growth rate of about 15-20% annually. (Mishra, 2022) This obsession has rewired the human brain into accepting this kind of discrimination as a common norm, and people hardly stand against it.

Problem statement

Although anti-bullying and anti-racism principles have been extensively incorporated into school curricula, discrimination based on skin tone is still not addressed. The goal of this project is to bridge the gap between students' lived realities and policy integration.

Theoretical framework:

The present study views color discrimination through the lens of social constructivism (Vygotsky). This lens offers the most coherent and actionable explanation to this experience of color discrimination among children. Social constructivism (Vygotsky) explains color-based biases for skin tone preferences. Even class specific stereotypes & caste-linked colorism can be understood keeping in mind the socially constructed classroom interactions, teacher student interactions, peer-talks, cultural stories and most importantly media influences rather than biologically fixed or individually discovered experiences. In a particular class the students build shared meanings regarding concept of color. Generalizing ideas like "dark is inferior" or "fair is beautiful" are formed by negotiating the identities in group interactions better understood through Vygotskian social scaffolding. It can be argued that color discrimination occurs due to collective meaning-making and not because of isolated cognitive error. We can view the issue of color discrimination through the understanding of social constructivism theory so as to provide a hopeful path for equity-driven transformative education.

Color discrimination as a phenomenon can be understood through Social Identity Theory (SIT)(Henri Tajfel & John Turner), as well as its extended theory of Social Identity Complexity Theory(Roccas and Brewer, 2002). The theory claims that color discrimination in the existing classrooms is a direct outcome of social identity process and not merely due to the prejudices at individual level. (Roccas and Brewer, 2002)

Students categorize themselves and others as desired in group members and devalued outgroup members based on their skin color. This further works on their self-esteem and group status. The students belonging to in groups experiences are more positive and the out group students face derogatory language, harassment by the members of the in group. It makes sense to believe that schools need to disrupt social identity mechanisms and create superordinate inclusive identities through well planned contextual interventions.To sum up Social Identity Theory provides the clearest pathway for understanding and transforming the harmful classroom dynamics. (Roccas and Brewer, 2002)

Literature review

Research strongly asserts the impact of skin based discrimination within the educational set-up, on the overall academic and social experiences of a student. The instances of emotional distress, marginalization and lower participation as found very commonly among students with darker skin tone as per the review by Crutchfield et al(2002).Recent Indian research findings also stresses on the fact that biasness based on the skin colour results in low self esteem, produces stigma and brings in a feeling of social exclusion among youth.(2024), It cannot be purely just interpersonal as it also impacts employment opportunities and social mobility (Vijaya & Bhullar, 2022). Colourism being linked to the societal caste hierarchies proves society constructs skin colour as a symbol of power and purity (Jidugu, 2024). Thus it can be categorized as a socio-cultural phenomenon which is deeply influenced by media, economy and institutional practices. All these researches were either based on the lived experiences of an adult spanning areas like employment, marriage or media representations but not enough work is done on analyzing

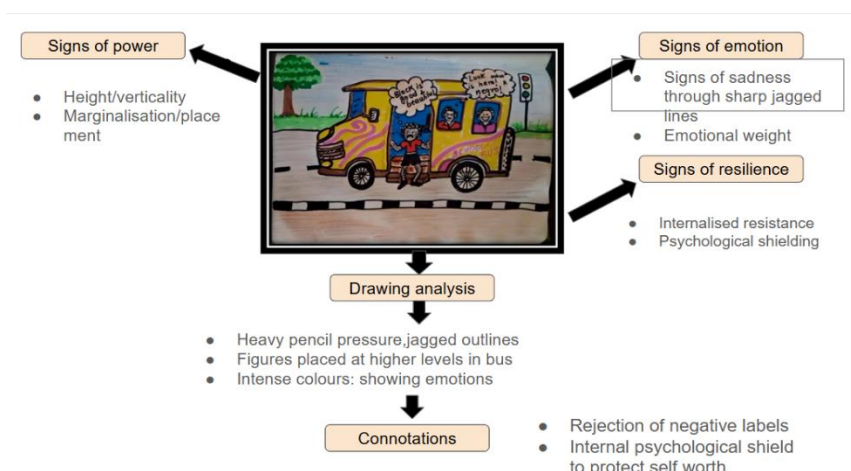
the coping mechanisms adopted by students within a school environment. There is a growing need to focus on art-based methodologies which incorporate emotional and symbolic dimensions to analyze the lived experiences of students and therefore this study strongly attempts to understand the emotional turmoil faced by students in Indian school contexts through an art based and semiotic approach

Methodology

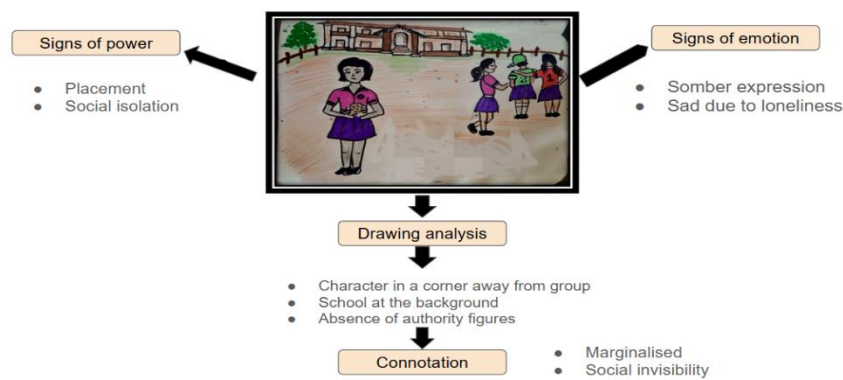
The present study makes use of Art-based research as a methodology that integrates artistic creation processes such as painting and installation with qualitative inquiry to investigate colour discrimination through embodied knowledge. When fused with semiotic analysis it treats colours as dynamic signs whose denotative hues and connotative associations reveal cultural codes of inclusion, exclusion and bias. Researchers generate original artworks using palettes that deliberately contrast skin tones or symbolic shades to visually map perceptual and social discrimination experiences. Semiotic decoding then examines how these colours function as signifiers of power hierarchies, identity markers and emotional responses within the created pieces. The artistic act itself becomes data collection allowing reflexive documentation of how colour choices evoke participant narratives of discrimination. Iterative cycles of making critiquing and re-making artworks uncover layered meanings inaccessible through text alone. This hybrid approach privileges aesthetic knowledge over conventional metrics fostering empathetic insights into colour-based prejudice. Ethical rigour ensures artworks authentically represent lived chromatic experiences without reinforcing stereotypes. Analysis of visual semiotics ultimately transforms abstract discrimination concepts into tangible expressive forms. Thus the methodology offers a transformative non-linear pathway for understanding and challenging colour discrimination in visual culture.

Research Question

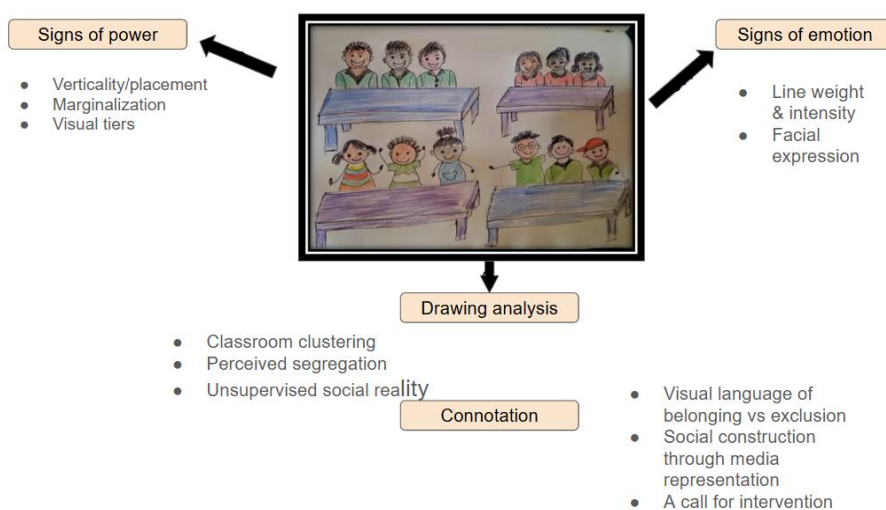
R Q .How do students experience ,interpret and cope up with skin-tone discrimination within the school setting?



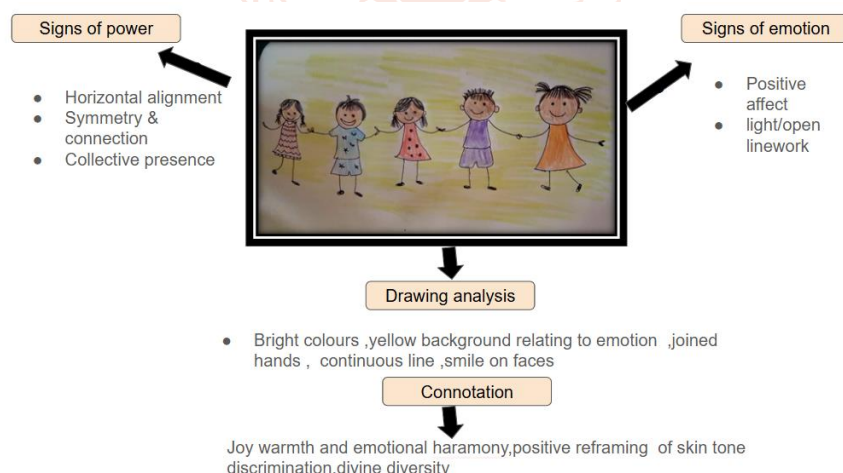
The drawing depicts a school bus scene where differential positioning and height of figures clearly indicate a hierarchy of power, with some students occupying elevated, dominant positions while others appear marginalised. The use of heavy pencil pressure, jagged outlines, and intense colours strongly signifies emotional distress, particularly sadness and exclusion experienced within this social space. Simultaneously, the presence of internal dialogues and composed figures suggests psychological resilience, indicating the student's effort to construct internal resistance and protect self-worth despite experiences of discrimination.



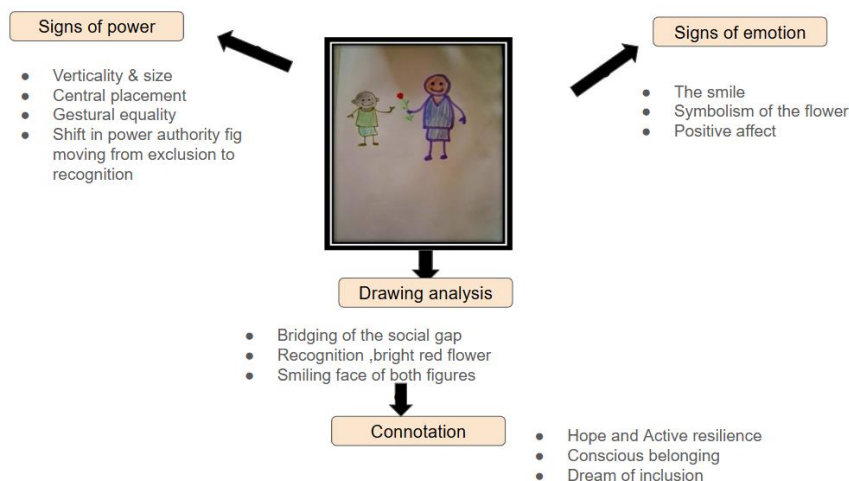
The drawing illustrates a playground scene where a group of students surrounds a darker-skinned child, possibly engaging in teasing or exclusion. The central placement of the group and the peripheral positioning of the individual strongly suggests social dominance and collective power. The exaggerated expressions and bold lines used around the group indicate aggression, while the smaller, withdrawn posture of the darker-skinned student reflects vulnerability and distress. This visual narrative strongly conveys emotional experiences of fear, humiliation, and rejection. The image supports Social Identity Theory by demonstrating in-group versus out-group dynamics, while also reflecting socially constructed beauty hierarchies internalized by children.



The drawing aims to showcase the positive impact of acceptance among students which avoids self made clusters or groups in their classrooms. This clustering can only be minimized with strong adult supervision and involvement



This picture implies a feeling of belongingness and social acceptance among different classes of society.



The drawing depicts a darker-skinned student alongside comforting elements such as pets, thought bubbles, or affirmations. These symbols function as signs of resilience and coping mechanisms. Despite experiences of exclusion, the presence of these elements indicates emotional adaptation and self-soothing strategies. The contrast between negative social interactions and positive internal spaces highlights the dual experience of discrimination and resistance. This supports the study's focus on resilience and aligns with Social Constructivism by showing how students actively reinterpret their experiences.

Findings and Conclusion

The "shadows of Bias" project proves that skin tone based discrimination is not an issue that needs to be brushed aside but it is an experience which every soul shudders to think of. By being vigilant these discriminations can be checked and a safe environment can be made for everyone in the society. These perceptions and feelings, though temporary, tend to linger on for a longer duration and deter an individual from realising their true potential. This research also proves that art is a powerful medium to give voice to the ones who cannot rely on verbal expression. Decoding the semantic signs, teachers can work towards a better inclusive classroom. There is an immediate need to address these issues as such perceptions hamper the cordial experiences of the students at school.

Expected Outcomes & Recommendations

- New policy formation- Consideration of skin tone based discrimination as a part of the anti-bullying training.
- Change in classroom culture: Teachers should discourage segregation and any kind of isolation within the classroom.
- Increased art based activity- More use of art based methods ensures a non-verbal expression which would in-turn encourage children to come out their personal shell.

Recommendations for Educators: Transforming the "Shadows": Based on the visual narratives collected, the following strategies are recommended to address skin-tone discrimination (colorism) in the school environment:

- Acknowledge the "Shadow Spaces"^[9]: Increase supervision in the liminal spaces and ensure that adult supervision is available at all places. Include monitors who will provide help in this regard if needed.

- Inclusion of colorism into the anti-bullying campaigns- The distinction between colorism and racism should be made clear. Any kind of discrimination should be strictly dealt with so that they adhere to the rules.
- Have inclusive classrooms- No visible segregation should be encouraged in the classrooms and they should be encouraged to accept everyone
- Imbibe diversity as a culture- Varied representations of achievements can be projected to move the focus from skin colour to latent talent.
- Look out for coping mechanisms- Check if some children are seeking comfort in external objects and are being isolated. Teachers need to be observant for any behavioural change.
- Implement Arts-Based Reporting: Continue using drawing and visual storytelling. It allows students to communicate "Shadows of Bias" that they might feel uncomfortable reporting verbally.

Limitations of the research

- Even though this research provides valuable insights from the semiotic analysis of visual representation, there are certain limitations that cannot be sidelined.

Methodological Limitations (Arts-Based Research) (McNiff, S, 2008)

- Subjectivity of the researcher- Perspectives of individuals can vary based on their own experiences and beliefs and hence the semiotic signs can be interpreted in different ways by different researchers.
- Ability to draw- Not all children are blessed with the skill of drawing and hence a child might find it difficult to visually represent his feelings through art if he is not confident with drawing.
- Possible biasness- The researcher can form an interpretation based on his own thought processes which can be biased at times.
- Small sample size- It being a qualitative research, only 5 students were selected as a sample which is a very small number to represent a large sample.
- Generalisability of context- The findings of the study might not apply to all schools and thus cannot be generalized.
- Hesitation of the participants- Many children might hesitate to draw what they experience. Rather, they

would prefer to draw something that the society perceives

protocol for a randomized controlled trial. Body image.

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