

Lesson 2 - Colorism

NGSS connections: **Practices:** Asking and Defining Problems; Engaging in Argument from Evidence;

Starting point for instructors

- Do [Unit 0 - Setting the Stage](#) before this, and review norms if needed.
- We recommend teaching [Unit 1 - Data Analysis & Representation](#), [Unit 2 - Systemic Racism](#), and [Unit 2 - Stereotype Threat](#) before this lesson.
- [Race as a construct](#) in the USA is an [evolving idea](#) - it may help to review the most current terminology each year!
- Colorism discussions can bring some unique challenges. Your preparation needs to be specific to you, your racial identity and skin tone, and your students - a mostly-white class would need different facilitation than a mostly-people of color class. This is true of all URC lessons, but is especially true here. The context of your school & community population, as well as the experiences of your students, will introduce multiple perspectives even among the same racial identity. *Some specific things to think about:*
 - **Do not make assumptions about your students' racial identities based on their appearance.**
 - This discussion can be polarizing for students and teachers (both white and non-white): some may have experienced colorism, some may have experienced colorism without being aware of it, and some may not have heard of colorism. In particular, this topic can be sensitive for students who are of mixed race because they may have experienced discrimination from both people with lighter and darker skin than their own.
 - Colorism manifests differently in different racial communities: colorism in the Vietnamese-American community, for example, may not be the same in the Black community and may also vary geographically and generationally.
 - If your class has many white students, be prepared to help them see that they need to center the experiences of nondominant communities.
 - As a society, we treat lighter skinned people differently. A lighter skinned person will benefit from societal biases and preferences (e.g., more likely to be hired, promoted, assumed to be competent). For example, this may be enacted differently *between* people in the same racial group who have different skin tones and *between* a group composed of people from multiple racial identities.

Pre-Lesson Student Exploration / Bell-Ringer

Before coming to class/at the start of class, students need to:

- Learn about skin color by watching this [TED talk](#) by URC Editor Angela Flynn.
- Participate in a fantastic activity [for learning about Colorism](#) developed by Learning for Justice. We strongly encourage instructors to use this toolkit and lesson as a starting point for teaching their students about colorism. (In brief, students read a [graphic novel](#) and answer prompts.)



Unless otherwise noted, The [Underrepresentation Curriculum Project](#) pages are licensed under Creative Commons [Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International](#). Due to the ever-changing nature of these topics, these lessons require constant updating. Please send suggestions to underrepSTEM@gmail.com. Last updated on 1/19/2022.

In-Class Discussion

Divvy Up and Analyze: What is Colorism? [20-30 minutes]

Divide your students into small groups and give each group two examples of colorism from this list ([Supporting Materials](#)) to read. Ask students to work within their small groups to write a description of colorism based on the examples they were given. Each group can then share out its definition and the instructor can support the class as it works toward consensus. Be sure to check that the definition complements/aligns with the following:

- [Colorism](#): “A practice of discrimination by which those with lighter skin are treated more favorably than those with darker skin.... Colorism exists within all communities of color. Colorism is not something that white people experience.”
- Ibram X. Kendi: “A powerful collection of racist policies that lead to inequities between Light people and Dark people, supported by racist ideas about Light and Dark people.” [How To Be An Antiracist – IXK](#).
- *Possible Extension*: If your class is prepared for a more challenging conversation, you can also discuss the nuances associated with the fact that tanned (darker) skin is perceived as more attractive in whites (e.g. , but among people of color darker skin is often considered less beautiful.

How Colorism affects STEM [30-40 minutes]

- *Individual Connection Making*: Based on what we have learned about representation in STEM, draw a diagram comparing and contrasting how [Biracial fraternal twins](#) with different skin tones might experience the following in a STEM classroom:
 - [Systemic Racism](#)
 - Sense of belonging, or feeling like a part of the group and that you belong there ([What is Sense of Belonging?](#))
 - Passing vs. showing true self, or feeling pressure to hide your racial identity ([What Does it Mean to Pass for White?](#))
 - [Stereotype threat](#)
 - [Implicit bias](#)
- *Small group*: Ask students: How might colorism contribute to the systemic disparity in representation in STEM we saw in [Unit 1 - Data Analysis, Underrepresentation](#)? Possible responses include:
 - a. Pale(r) skinned people receive preferential treatment (often unconsciously)
 - b. Colorism affects STEM career trajectories: admissions, hiring, promotions, raises, publicity, etc.
 - c. Colorism sways how competent STEM instructors appear: Same lesson taught, higher rating for pale(r) skinned instructors
 - d. Colorism has manifested in our technology and research: AI is often not accurate for darker skin (e.g., [Facial Recognition Software](#) and [Soap Dispenser Skin Identification](#))
- *Whole class “share out” (if desired)*: Share something that came up in your small group discussion of Colorism. Did anything surprise you? What questions do you have?



- *Individual Reflection:* Have you ever noticed colorism enacted around you (e.g., in your STEM classes)? Do you know of an experience when you were chastised or complimented for your skin complexion by people within your racial group? How did you feel about that? Were you comfortable expressing this experience to others for support? If so, or not, why?

Discussion: One-Drop Rule and Biological Connections [40-60 minutes]

[Write/Pair/Share](#) about the one drop rule:

- *Read:* What is the one drop rule? Choose one of the following pieces that is appropriate for your students.
 - [Secondary](#)
 - [Post-secondary](#)
 - [Post-secondary](#)
- *Write:* What are your thoughts on the one-drop rule? How does Colorism and color privilege affect perceptions of yourself and/or others?
- *Pair:* What similarities and differences did you and your partner come up with? Did anything surprise you?
- *Share:* Open discussion on colorism and the one-drop rule. Consider using this routine: [Random Share Out Using Cards](#)

Optional General Extensions: Three examples of mixed-race in the USA

Ask students to work in small groups to consider these three examples:

1. In 2008, the USA elected Barack Obama as President. Obama was considered the first Black president by most Americans. Biologically he is of mixed race: Obama's father was born, raised, and spent most of his life in Kenya, where he was a member of the Luo ethnic group; Obama's mother is a Kansas-born white American woman with primarily Anglo-Saxon ancestry.
2. In 2020, the USA elected [Kamala Harris](#) as Vice-President. Harris is recognized as the first Black Vice-President. Similar to Obama, Harris is of mixed race (father - Black and white; Mother - Indian).
3. The one drop rule can be contrasted with [Native American experiences](#) and how people can only “dilute” their heritage, while often being required to prove their ancestry in order to gain tribal membership.

Discussion Prompts:

- Do you think there are socio-political impacts on adopting the one drop rule?
- Who is impacted? Who does it benefit?

Instructor Note:

- This discussion may be particularly awesome for biology classes who teach genetics! Check out the biology-related articles included in the Resources linked at the bottom of this lesson plan.



Post-Lesson Homework

Reflection



Unless otherwise noted, The [Underrepresentation Curriculum Project](#) pages are licensed under Creative Commons [Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International](#). Due to the ever-changing nature of these topics, these lessons require constant updating. Please send suggestions to underrepSTEM@gmail.com. Last updated on 1/19/2022.

Below are additional resources on colorism. Choose one (or all) and ask students to watch the video(s) and record moments that resonated with or challenged their ideas. These reflections could include sharing moments that students have experienced, witnessed, and/or have been told from others (family, friends, colleagues) about aspects of colorism.

- Video: [Dr. Yaba Blay on CNN](#)
- Video: [50 Shades of Black: My Experiences with Colorism, by Amaya Allen](#)
- Video: [Colorism, by Pratyusha Pilla](#)

Write: Below your notes about the videos, please reflect on this lesson as a whole. You may answer any or all of the following:

1. What do these videos bring up for you about your own experiences?
2. What have you learned about colorism?
3. What do you still wonder?
4. Describe what you think some actionable steps might be for you (or society) to reduce the impact of colorism on people's lives. Note: if these ideas are new to you, what could you do to further educate yourself about this form of oppression?

Resources

[Lesson Plan Resources](#)



Unless otherwise noted, The [Underrepresentation Curriculum Project](#) pages are licensed under Creative Commons [Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International](#). Due to the ever-changing nature of these topics, these lessons require constant updating. Please send suggestions to underrepSTEM@gmail.com. Last updated on 1/19/2022.