

# Influence of perceived discrimination by teachers on students' academics based on ethnicity, gender, religion, and appearance: a review of selected studies

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## ABSTRACT

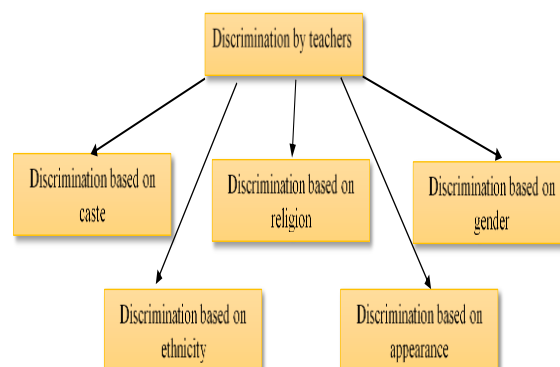
Incidents of discrimination based on distinctive social identities (e.g., ethnicity, gender, religion, etc.) or appearance cause harm and are likely to foster severe trauma for adolescents, such as poor physical and mental health, poor academic performance, and societal maladjustment. The forming of judgements is based on stereotype-related processes when individuals lack the inclination to judge objectively and when a person belonging to a distinctive social identity displays behavior that matches with the stereotype. This review selects recent from India and many countries and attempts to present the nature of experiences of discrimination by teachers and its impact on the academics of young people with an aim to help addressing discriminatory treatment in educational institutions

## Introduction

Perceived discrimination relates to unfairly treating a specific group of individuals or members of a specific class as endured in everyday life (Banks et al., 2006). This includes actions in which, compared with others, the targeted persons receive treatment which is less courteous or respectful, get inferior service or lesser opportunities, are seen to be corrupt, of low character or dangerous, and are disgraced or persecuted (Williams et al., 1997). Perceived discrimination is commonly observed across the globe. Discrimination has been a well-researched risk factor leading to several health consequences, both physically and mentally (e.g., Banks et al., 2006; Utsey et al., 2008; Ong et al., 2009), while causing many negative outcomes (e.g., Assari et al., 2015; Broudy et al., 2007; Otiniano Verissimo et al., 2014). When discrimination is perceived, undesired emotions, e.g., anxiety, depression, and misery (Assari et al., 2015), behaviour-based tendencies, e.g., suicide (Gomez et al., 2011), substance abuse (Visser et al., 2017), and obesity (Sutin and Terracciano, 2013), paranoia (Brondolo et al., 2008), and societal isolation (Broudy et al., 2007). Perceptions of discrimination by teachers are predictors of poor academic performance (Chavous et al., 2008), along with school dropout (Tripp, 2016).

Even though all age brackets of ethnic minorities perceive discrimination (McLaughlin et al., 2010), those who begin their racial and social identity development could sense increased discrimination (Seaton et al., 2011). Even gender influences both perceiving and sensing of discrimination (Ifatunji and Harnois, 2015). More discrimination is reported by minority men than women (Swanson et al., 2003). Sex, too, changes the harmful influences of discrimination (Brodish et al., 2011). Women are more prone to obesity and binge eating resulting from discrimination, whereas men are more prone to psychological misery, depression, and substance abuse (Assari, 2018). Thus, mere ethnicity and race do not shape susceptibility and sensitivity towards discrimination, but the combination of sex and race with ethnicity do.

Discrimination based on factors like race, gender, religion, etc. can result in negative outcomes for young people (Russell et al., 2012). When such discrimination occurs in schools and colleges by teachers, mental health, school engagement, and academic performance is affected (Wong et al., 2003). The analysis of discrimination by teachers is therefore a topic that needs to be taken up so that such concerns are addressed in a proper manner. Most of the body of research in this direction has a focus on racial or ethnic prejudices (e.g. Schmitt et al., 2014), or on gender bias (e.g. Manzi, 2019), but a study on the various types of discrimination faced by students and their effect on them yet remains to be studied. To this end, a review of the literature was carried out for discrimination perceived by students across the world. This type of review was selected to study contextual effects behind discrimination. The purpose of the study is to present the nature of experiences of discrimination with an aim to help addressing of discriminatory treatment in educational institutions. It was observed that the research works on discriminations could be classified into the following broad categories: ethnicity/race, gender, religion, caste, and appearance (obesity) (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Classification of studies on discrimination by teachers

## Discrimination by teachers: the Indian context

Discrimination, in general, based on caste is highly prevalent in India, particularly in North India. The Indian society is extremely layered in terms of hierarchy of caste, religiosity, linguistic variety, and regional allegiance, of which the caste issue has the deepest historical origins. Conventionally, the Hindu people belong to hundreds of castes, cutting across disparities concerning society, economy, education and culture. Of late, caste-driven social classes have evoked strong emotions politically. The government of India recognizes three key socio-economic classes as follows: Forward Castes, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Castes (Chauhan, 2008).

### **The caste system in India**

The caste system is essentially a Hindu concept; but again, it could be of relevance for a miniscule proportion of people from non-Hindu religions, too, who might have converted or have caste-specific trades and wish to remain eligible for beneficiary schemes. The Brahmin community is seen as the uppermost class, and the next is the Forward class which is ineligible for beneficiary schemes. The subsequent two classes (Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Castes) are not too far away by way of societal hierarchy, but have eligibility for beneficiary schemes all the same (Shaikh et al., 2018). As an instance, scheduled castes earlier were 'untouchables', whereas the scheduled tribes are those deprived socially and economically (Deshpande, 2000). The last group is all the rest who do not belong to any of these castes.

The caste system originated in ancient India, and it was given different shapes by different ruling communities during the medieval periods to the present, particularly the Mughal rule and the British rule (De Zwart, 2000; Bayly, 2001). Today, in India, the system forms the basis for beneficial action programmes. The injustice meted out to the backward castes in India has been termed by some researchers as 'India's concealed apartheid' (Human Rights Watch, 2007). Those rebutting the allegation point to the significant enhancements in the lot of backward classes in the India after independence, as a consequence to the rigorous implementation of the privileges and rights laid down in the Indian Constitution, as enforced by the civil rights act of 1955 (Bakshi and Kashyap, 1982). Despite all these provisions, caste-based discriminations exist. Alarming, it is a fact that teachers who must be the primary drivers for ensuring justice, carry out caste-based discriminations, thus continuing the traditions of an obsolete Hindu order which violates basic human dignity. The following sub-sections discuss certain key studies on caste-based discriminations by teachers, along with gender-based and religion-based discrimination, which are other malaises in the Indian society.

### **Discrimination by teachers in India**

Segregation, i.e., seating Dalit (lower class) children away from the other children is seen to be a common form of discrimination in many parts of India (Arivanatham, 2012; PACS India, 2020; Ramachandran and Naorem, 2013;

IDSN, 2017; Nambissan, 2009), in spite of the Indian constitutional provisions against such practices (Bakshi and Kashyap, 1982). It is time that educationists and law enforcement need start seriously taking cognizance of exclusion-inclusion in schools and work towards bringing in sweeping changes (Ramachandran and Naorem, 2013). Discriminating, excluding and humiliating lower castes in educational institutions is yet another unfortunate type of discrimination (Kumar, 2016; Dostie and Jayaraman, 2006; Malik, 1999). Girls and lower caste students are often stereotyped as being less proficient and not worthy (Kurien, 2015; Ralhan, 2017). However, Hanna and Linden (2012) observed that there was little evidence of discrimination based on gender, but the higher castes in India were more favorably graded. Discrimination based on religion, too, is an unfortunate reality, involving prejudice and planned discrimination (Jain and Narayan, 2011).

### **Discrimination based on ethnicity/race in other countries**

Inherent bias has its mediation through a pathway of cognition that is implicit. Implicit cognition occurs in a person's external conscious focus of attention (Greenwald and Krieger, 2006). There are two kinds of implicit cognition concerning ethnicity: implicit outlooks (a trait of liking or disliking people of an ethnic group) and stereotyping (associating an ethnic community with a particular behavior) (Greenwald and Krieger, 2006). Such outlooks and stereotypes could activate automatically in person's consciousness, resulting in prejudiced attitudes or judgments (Devine, 1989; Greenwald and Krieger, 2006). In this manner, individuals exhibit bias implicitly even while not consciously supporting the latent stereotype or behavior (Dovidio et al., 2002). Many teachers treat their pupils differently based on their ethnicity, and such differential handling negatively affects their learning process. This sub-section presents studies on discrimination by teachers on students in different parts of the world based on ethnicity. Most countries see themselves as very tolerant and color-blind, where racism does not exist, and life chances are not affected. But significant variations in educational achievements between native and non-native students in these countries portray a different picture. In this study, examples of such variations were noted in Sweden (Hinnerich et al., 2015), Brazil (Botelho et al., 2015), Germany (Wenz and Hoenig, 2020), and the UK (Burgess and Greaves, 2013) because of unfair grading practices against non-natives. Racial discrimination by teachers are reported more for African American youth in the US than for other races (Butler-Barnes, 2018; Banerjee et al., 2018). Such acts of racial discrimination, such as disproportionate disparaging and disciplining by teachers (Weiner, 2016) and giving lesser attention to non-native students, lead to feelings of academic futility and delinquent school behaviour (D'hondt et al., 2016; 2016). Denying access to higher education is yet another form of discrimination by teachers (Bruneau et al., 2020).

### **Discrimination based on gender in other countries**

A teacher's judgment affects a student's learning process and outcomes (de Boer et al., 2010), and also has far-reaching repercussions for their future academic choices. Hence, the skill of judging a student's performance correctly is a key aspect of a teacher's job profile (Ready and Wright 2011). Südkamp et al. (2012) in their study observed that a teacher's characteristics or stereotyped expectations moderate perceptions and judgments. Stereotypes have been known to influence judgments of various social group members (Biernat and Manis 1994). A popular stereotype which affects a teacher's judgments and perception is the gender stereotype that male students are more proficient in mathematics than female students (Fennema et al. 1990). This sub-section gender presents studies on discrimination by teachers on students in different parts of the world based on gender.

Disrespecting and not acknowledging calibre of girl students is a common form of discrimination in the US (Assari and Caldwell, 2018; Robnett, 2016; Bell and Juvonen, 2020). Such discriminations determine the academic performance of girls more than boys and result in lesser women in math-intensive subjects. Unfair grant funding practices in favour of male students (Witteman et al., 2018) and attitude bias are again forms of discrimination observed, where attitude bias sometimes leans in favour of female students (Kleen and Glock, 2018).

Bias while evaluating students is yet another form of discrimination (Boring, 2017; Carlana, 2014; Hofer, 2015; Protivínský and München, 2018; Cornwell et al., 2013; Bell and Juvonen, 2020; Holder and Kessels, 2017; Terrier, 2015; Terrier, 2020). Girls appear to lag behind when assigned to biased teachers in mathematics as researched earlier, but in France, this discrimination appears to favour girls (Terrier, 2015; 2020). However, Hinnerich et al. (2011) and Hanna and Linden (2012) reported no evidence of gender bias in Sweden and India.

### **Discrimination based on religion in other countries**

The foundations of a culture of dominant majority are deep rooted in most national histories of various countries, and such deep-seated traits of oppression and power are seen typically in white people of Caucasian descent, particularly in Christian men (Sue, 2010). These patterns and values exhibited by the dominant culture are all pervasive in our society. Those not of the dominant culture are seen as 'others', and are viewed as inferior and different (Young, 2009). Those of the non-dominant groups face stereotyping and marginalizing. An important dimension of cultural individuality is religion which may differ from a dominant culture, and thereby result in diminished status for many in different countries (Dupper et al., 2014). This sub-section presents studies on discrimination by teachers on students in different parts of the world based on religion.

Display of implicit and explicit discriminatory behaviour by teachers is a way of marginalizing the 'other' students (Ghaffari and Çiftçi, 2010; Lowe et al., 2019). Religious bullying and microaggression is also another way, and often, it is the teacher who is the perpetrator (Dupper et al., 2014). In Turkey, those not belonging to the majority religion face

insults and are ignored and mocked (Toker Gökçe, 2013). Lowe et al. (2019) observed that perceived discrimination results in major depression and generalized anxiety disorder.

### **Discrimination based on appearance (obesity) in other countries**

Many research works in social psychology have indicated that physically good-looking persons are viewed to be having more social skills, intelligence, warmth and sociability (Feingold, 1992). Contrastingly, there are widespread negative views about heavier persons in Western communities. Obese people are perceived as being lazy, sloppy, and incompetent, and having poor self-discipline and lesser intelligence for both men and women (Puhl and Heuer, 2009). According to Puhl and Latner (2007), these stereotype beliefs are prevalent in many surroundings, such as schools, and seem to be maintained even by parents and teachers of children. This sub-section presents studies from different countries on discrimination by teachers on students based on appearance (obesity).

Studies have shown that overweight children tend to be evaluated more harshly than those who are not overweight (Burmeister et al., 2013; Black and de New, 2020; Zavodny, 2013; MacCann and Roberts, 2013; Queally et al., 2017). Biased attitudes have been seen in teachers towards obese students (Fontana et al., 2013; Kenney et al., 2015; Glock et al., 2016). This can affect their entrance to programs for higher learning (Burmeister et al., 2013), interest in mathematics and languages (Zavodny, 2013; MacCann and Roberts, 2013; Queally et al., 2017). Surprisingly, Queally et al. (2017) observed that the BMI of a pupil's mother could influence perceived ability more than the pupil's BMI. They noted that teachers tend to stereotype pupils based on an evaluation of the obesity of their mothers. However, Shackleton and Campbell (2014) reported that no evidence existed that teachers judged student ability based on their weight. In fact, Müller et al. (2017) suggested that pre-school teachers judged obese students as being academically superior compared to those with normal weight.

### **Perception of discrimination and its influence on young people**

Research on discrimination across the world has indicated that a large number of students are mistreated and victimized by their teachers and peers in school and in other settings (for instance, Huynh and Fuligni 2010; Verkuyten and Thijs 2002). These adverse episodes have been associated with a wide extent of academics-related outcomes. Young people who are persecuted typically develop pessimistic beliefs regarding their academic abilities and rewards of attending school/college (Hill and Werner, 2006), present poor motivation for studying, persisting, and being curious (Alfaro et al. 2009), and display delinquency at school (Smalls et al. 2007). Further, they could show inferior academic achievement (Huynh and Fuligni 2010), and become school dropouts (Martinez et al. 2004). This section presents important studies regarding the effect of discrimination on academic performance.



In this study, the students' general experience of discrimination was considered, instead of a specific type, e.g., racial discrimination, religious discrimination, etc. According to research, perceived discrimination has been linked to several adverse outcomes, such as inadequate psychological and school adjustment (Rueger and Jenkins, 2014; Bayram-Ozdemir and Stattin, 2014; Totura et al., 2014; Schmitt et al., 2014), and inferior academic performance (Rüppelet al., 2015). Perceived discrimination is linked with reduced levels of wellness (Schmitt et al., 2014) and increased anxiety and depressive symptoms (Rueger and Jenkins, 2014). Perceived could result in significant detrimental influences on the mental health of youngsters since it could worsen the effect of several normative stressors linked to changes in development during those years (Rueger and Jenkins, 2014). Also, changes in physiology and cognition could result in youngsters becoming more and more perceptive to social feedback, and more and more distressed by discrimination (Peper and Dahl, 2013; Blakemore & Mills, 2013; Sebastian et al., 2010). Perceived discrimination is also linked to diminished academic achievement (Bayram-Ozdemir and Stattin, 2014). A youngster's psychological and school adjustments are positively related (Rüppel et al., 2015). In particular, psychological maladjustment is linked to negative views of school, diminished teacher-student relations, poor engagement of students, poor opinions of school belonging, continued absenteeism, and negative behaviour in classrooms (Ingul et al., 2012; Bayram-Ozdemir and Stattin, 2014; Rueger & Jenkins, 2014). Hishinuma et al. (2012) observed that past depressive traits can predict future academic performance, not vice versa. Student absenteeism has a negative association with academic performance (Ingul et al., 2012). Discrimination creates internal responses (dejection is directed inward, thereby burdening their psychological state) and external responses (dejection is focused outward, thereby affecting school interactions) (Vaillancourt et al., 2013). Table 6 provides a summary of the relevant studies.

## Conclusions

Discrimination by teachers has been shown to be of many overt and covert forms in many parts of the world. In the Indian context, the discrimination by teachers based on caste appears to be most prevalent and most studies addressed this concern. Despite there being an act in the Constitution of India making untouchability a punishable offence, this discrimination unfortunately persists in the form of segregation in schools, unfair grading, etc. Gender bias appears to be the next most prevalent form of discrimination. Male students are given more attention and are graded better. There was just one study on religious discrimination, indicating that religion may be a basis for discrimination, but is not much researched. Also, the influence of the economic status on the teachers' attitude is also not much researched. Future work could evaluate the teachers' attitude towards students based on caste, creed and economic status and understand if the discrimination by teachers affects the students' behaviour in the Indian context.

Across the world, discrimination by teachers is based on ethnicity, gender, religion, and appearance. Students experience ethnic/racial discrimination in many ways, e.g., denying access to higher education, biased grading in tests, giving lesser attention, disrespecting, not acknowledging calibre, showing fear, and under-assessing students. Discrimination based on gender takes forms of evaluation bias, not acknowledging calibre, and denying funding. Religious discrimination takes forms of religious bullying, microaggression, insulting, mocking, ignoring, and bias in assessments. Appearance based discrimination manifests as grading bias and general dislike. All these influences need to be researched in the Indian context. Studies on the outcomes of perceived discrimination validate its association with many negative outcomes, like inadequate psychological adjustment, poor school adjustment, reduced levels of well-being, and absenteeism, all leading to diminished academic achievement.

Future research that differentiates between actual acts of discrimination and those which are based on perception is required. Future research needs to also test how sex is a determinant of discrimination by teachers against minorities. Additionally, studies employing multi-observation longitudinal data with are required. Research needs to examine whether heightened discrimination sensitivity in boys results from long-term exposure to bias that changes alertness, ethnic identity, and enduring, or its enactment by teachers is a reality.

Future research can include racial/ethnic groups with variations of migration backgrounds or periods of stay, thereby allowing researchers to assess how these determinants affect the dynamics of race and host national identity. Studies on the health-based implications of gender-related discrimination by teachers at school could also look at transgender students, since they are disciplined harshly in schools. Levels of discrimination reported by teachers, peers, and even parents could present varying discrimination levels among youth. Future research could consider the inclusion of additional parameters, e.g., teacher's views, peer recommendations, etc. for obtaining an even more accurate overview of student distress..

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