

Fairer is better? That's not fair!

No one should be treated badly because of his or her skin colour.

A class is working on a mural. The students draw and fill outlines of themselves on the wall. Their self-portraits match their real skin colours almost perfectly. It is not hard to do this because they are using people-colour crayons. These crayons come in as many as 24 shades of brown. Mrs Dass, their teacher, is happy to see everyone so immersed in this project.

As she observes her class, Mrs Dass has flashbacks of her own childhood. She feels sad as she remembers: no one wanted to partner her when they lined up; a student borrowed her eraser but would not touch her hand to take it; a teacher told the class that they would become as dark as she was if they didn't have proper baths; and she had to colour all humans peach to get an "A" for art. Because of her skin colour, many of her classmates and even that one teacher shunned her. Their cruelty had made her feel ugly and rejected as a young child. Although it was long ago, the memories are still painful.

Now, here she is, a caring teacher helping her students to see the diversity of skin colours as a beautiful part of multi-ethnic Singapore. Because she experienced it first-hand, she does not want any child to suffer racial discrimination (say "rayshel dis-krimi-nay-shun").

Sadly, being mean to

dark-skinned people just because of their colour is a common form of racial discrimination. This kind of racism is called colourism. Skin colour says nothing about the kind of person an individual is. That is why we should never judge people by the way they look — their physical appearance. Almost everyone will agree with this statement. Yet, human society has not been able to get rid of the age-old racist belief that fairer is better.

Colour prejudice is very difficult to change because we are surrounded by pictures and words that say fair is better than dark. Look around and you will see colour bias. Advertisements for beauty products, airlines, cars, and even tuition centres show mostly light-skinned models. As long as most images say fair is better, discrimination against dark-skinned people will go on.

Fortunately, there are more efforts now to fight colourism. Like Mrs Dass, there are teachers and parents helping children to appreciate one another. Toy makers are producing dolls with a variety of skin colours. Crayons, paint, and even play dough now come in real skin colours. Movies are more likely to have dark-skinned heroes, unlike in the past when all the good guys were fair and the villains dark. These moves are a good start.

Why the bias?

Infants are not born racist. Rather, they pick up grown-ups' wrong thinking about dark skin. Here are three myths that help produce colourism:

1. In places that were colonised by western countries, the rulers taught the locals that whites were superior. Colonialism is gone but its racist

values are still around.

2. Farmers who are out in the hot sun tend to be darker. Wealthier people who looked down on such workers

then associated dark skin with being inferior.

3. Many things look darker when dirty. People jump to the ridiculous conclusion that darker skin is dirtier than fairer skin.

When we realise that the reasons for colourism are so silly, we can teach ourselves to overcome discrimination against dark-skinned people.

VOCAB BUILDER

diversity (say "dai-ver-si-tee"; noun) = a good variety.

prejudice (say "pre-je-dis"; noun) = a strong negative feeling against someone without any reason.

SKIN SCIENCE

Your skin colour is affected mainly by your genes and exposure to sunshine. Cells in your skin produce a pigment called melanin to protect you against ultraviolet radiation from sunshine. It is melanin that makes skin darker. Communities that live nearer the equator tend to be darker-skinned because they need more melanin to protect them from the strong sunshine.

What you can do

- When humans feature in your artwork, use a variety of real skin colours. Share storybooks that show dark-skinned kids and adults being as much a part of regular life as everyone else.

- Pay attention to words. Don't say "dark but beautiful" (as if dark is usually not beautiful!). When someone says mean words about skin colour, say something like "That's not nice!" or "I disagree.". Don't laugh when racist jokes are cracked.

- If you are treated badly at school or in your neighbourhood, tell a trustworthy adult about it. Do the same if you observe someone else being bullied.

- Like the skin you are in! And, help your friends and siblings to do the same. No one can put you down about your looks if you are 100% sure that you are beautiful.

— By MARY GEORGE



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