

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Impact of perceived discrimination on students' behavioural changes: Role of cultural background and societal influence

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Abstract: Student behaviour is substantially influenced by discrimination in educational settings. The specific impact of teacher discrimination on students' behavioural shifts remains underexplored despite it being increasingly acknowledged in research. The present study used the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) to examine students' behavioural changes being influenced by their perceptions of teacher discrimination and whether this relationship is affected by societal and cultural factors. Questionnaires were used for a survey in rural and urban areas in Krishnagiri district Tamil Nadu, India, and subsequently gather data from 215 students studying in grades 8 to 10. The data was analysed via partial least squares-structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). It was found that students' behaviour was significantly influenced by their perceptions of teacher discrimination based on caste, creed and socioeconomic status. Societal influence did not significantly influence the impact of perceived discrimination on behavioural changes, whereas cultural background played a vital role in moderating this relationship.

Keywords: Cultural background, Family background, Perceived discrimination, Societal influence, Students' behavioural changes

Introduction

Supportive teaching environments are closely linked to positive student interactions. However, perceived discrimination remains widespread in educational settings (Hagiwara et al., 2017) and contributes to disparities in student engagement and behaviour, particularly along the lines of caste, creed and other social divisions (Mittal, 2020). Perceived discrimination refers to the belief that individuals or groups are treated differently or excluded based on personal traits, such as appearance, gender, race or other social factors. (Giurgiu et al., 2015). This perception is associated with a range of negative outcomes, including declines in mental and physical health, as well as strained social relationships (Brondolo et al., 2009). When teachers display discriminatory attitudes, students may feel less connected to their school community, become disengaged in class and experience disruptions in their behaviour and academic performance (Kidger et al., 2016). The impact of discrimination is shaped by cultural and societal contexts, with students from different backgrounds experiencing and responding to discrimination in varied ways (Sisask et al., 2014; Banerjee et al., 2018). For example, studies in India have documented caste-based exclusion from extracurricular activities and discrimination based on socio-demographic factors, such as family background and age (Wu et al., 2015; Yasui et al., 2015). The perception of discrimination among students is shaped not only by caste and creed, but also by the interplay of cultural background and societal context (Assari and Lankarani, 2017). Studies have documented that in some regions, such as Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, students from lower castes are denied opportunities in sports and cultural events, highlighting the persistence of

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exclusionary practices (Dongre, 2017). Discrimination is not limited to caste alone; factors such as age, family background, and parenting styles also influence students' experiences of exclusion, as reported in primary schools in places such as Mangalore, India (Joseph et al., 2021).

Although some research has explored the link between teacher-student relationships and students' perceptions of discrimination, a comprehensive investigation into how perceived discrimination by teachers directly affects changes in student behaviour is still required. While perceived discrimination is widespread among students (Rosenbloom and Way, 2004), studies examining how cultural background and societal factors influence the impact of teacher discrimination on student behaviour remain limited (Bryan et al., 2018). Studies with larger sample sizes are required to better understand how these moderating factors affect the relationship between perceived discrimination and behavioural outcomes. Thus, to address these gaps, the present study set out to examine the influence of perceived teacher discrimination on students' behavioural changes and to determine whether cultural background and societal influence affect this association.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

Integrated theoretical frameworks that clarify mechanisms and causal relationships are essential for understanding and improving academic performance, especially when considering how individual and environmental risk factors shape student outcomes. The Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) (Spencer, 1997) provides a valuable lens for examining how social, cultural, and familial contexts influence youth development (Spencer, 1999). PVEST emphasises the importance of contextual influences and highlights how risk factors, such as caste-based discrimination can lead to negative outcomes for students (Spencer et al., 2003). The impact of perceived discrimination by teachers on students in investigated using the PVEST and this experience is conceptualised as a form of total stress involvement.

Discrimination refers to the unequal treatment of individuals based on factors, such as race, religion, caste, creed or economic status (Smart Richman and Leary, 2009). In India, educational institutions have unfortunately become common sites for various forms of student discrimination, including those based on caste and religion (Desai and Kulkarni, 2008). Jain and Narayan (2011) highlighted that students from marginalised castes often face exclusions, such as being denied participation in classroom activities or extracurricular events. Ramachandran and Naorem (2013) pointed out the students were sometimes not allowed to sit with students from higher castes. Discriminatory attitudes from teachers and peers can lead to social isolation, emotional distress, and negative behavioural responses among affected students (Sitlhou, 2017). Rueger and Jenkins (2014) highlighted that students' mental and physical health deteriorates due to discrimination. Despite the existence of policies aimed at promoting inclusion, the lived experiences of students from marginalised backgrounds reveal persistent exclusion and prejudice, which can hinder academic performance and reinforce social inequalities (Ali et al., 2019). Based on this discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Perceived discrimination of students by teachers based on caste, creed and economic backgrounds has a significant impact on students' behavioural changes

Researchers have observed that cultural background is rooted in social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), which suggests that a strong identification with one's cultural group can sometimes buffer the negative effects of perceived discrimination (Phinney, 2003). However, in educational settings, this identification may also lead to negative outcomes, as students become more aware of negative stereotypes and may not benefit from positive societal influences on their cultural identity (Oyserman, 2008; Wildhagen, 2011). For example, in a longitudinal study by Cheng and Klugman (2010), students from minority cultural backgrounds often report feeling less connected to their schools. Banerjee et al. (2018) highlighted that teacher discrimination based on cultural background can further impact learning outcomes. While perceived discrimination can occur in various contexts, each form poses unique risks to different aspects of social identity, influencing behavioural changes in students (Verkuyten et al., 2019). Based on these insights, the following hypotheses are proposed.

H2: Cultural background moderates the effect of perceived discrimination by teachers on students' behavioural changes

H3: Societal influence moderates the effect of perceived discrimination by teachers on students' behavioural changes

A conceptual framework was established based on the previously stated hypotheses (Figure 1). In this model, teacher discrimination against students – based on caste, creed or socioeconomic status – was identified as the independent variable directly influencing students' behavioural changes, which served as the dependent variable. Additionally, cultural background and societal influence were included as moderating variables, potentially affecting the relationship between perceived discrimination and behavioural outcomes.

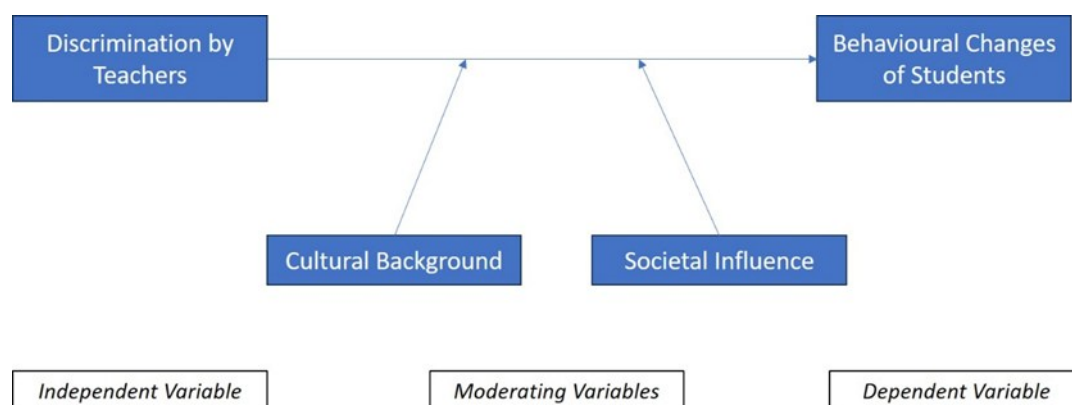


Figure 1: Conceptual model

Methodology

A deductive approach was adopted and quantitative methods were utilised. Data were collected from 215 students in grades 8 to 10, attending both rural and urban schools in Krishnagiri district, Tamil Nadu, India, using a random sampling technique.

A structured questionnaire was utilised to gather the primary data. The questionnaire included 30 items designed to assess five key variables in the study. To evaluate students' perceptions of discrimination, eight items were adapted from Fox and Stallworth (2005), Gelisli (2007) and Ali et al. (2019). Six items, adapted from the study of Ali et al. (2019) measured changes in student behaviour. Societal factors and cultural background were assessed using six and three items, respectively, based on a study conducted by Soric (2011). All responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

SPSS software was used to analyse the data. Demographic information was summarised by using descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages. Partial least squares-structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) was employed to test the hypothesised relationships among variables. This approach allowed for the examination of latent constructs and hypothesis testing. The statistical significance of the model's path estimates was determined using a bootstrapping method with 10,000 sub-samples to enhance precision. The study outcomes were generated via data analysis conducted using IBM SPSS and SmartPLS.

Results

Demographic characterization of participants

A total of 215 students participated in the present study. Of these, 116 were male (54.0%) and 99 were female (46.0%). The majority of the participants (63.3%) were between 16 and 18 years of age. In terms of academic level, most students were from Class 10 (52.5%), followed by Class 9 (27.0%) and Class 8 (20.5%). Regarding the occupation of the family head, 30.7% of students reported their family head as a skilled worker, 27.9% as farmers, 20.7% as unskilled workers, 18.1% as government employees and 2.8% as unemployed. The detailed demographic distribution is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	116	54
	Female	99	46
Age (years)	Below 16	79	36.7
	16-18	136	63.3
Class level	Class 8	44	20.5
	Class 9	58	27
	Class 10	113	52.5
Occupation of Family Head	Skilled workers	66	30.7
	Unskilled workers	44	20.7
	Farmers	60	27.9
	Government Employees	39	18.1
	Unemployed	6	2.8

Reliability and validity analysis

The measurement model was assessed to ensure relevant reliability, composite reliability and construct validity of the scales used (Table 2). Composite reliability (CR) of the variables was above the threshold of 0.70 and it ranged between 0.78 and 0.81 (Hair et al., 2017). It can be inferred that constructs had high internal consistency for items associated with each variable. Most of the item loadings for constructs used were above 0.7, indicating strong individual contributions. The convergent validity was evaluated by determining the average variance extracted (AVE) values for constructs (Engellant et al., 2016), with recommended thresholds of 0.5 or higher (Ahmad et al., 2016). In this study, the AVE values exceeded 0.5, thus highlighting their robust convergent validity.

Table 2: Construct reliability and validity

Latent constructs	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
Perceived teachers' discrimination	0.65	0.81	0.59
Cultural background	0.60	0.80	0.66
Societal influence	0.60	0.78	0.54
Students' behavioural changes	0.60	0.78	0.54

Note: CR=composite reliability; AVE=average variance extracted

Discriminant validity was assessed for all construct variables in the model. The analysis presented in Table 3 showed that the AVE square root values of each construct were higher than the multiple correlation values for the respective constructs, which demonstrated the discriminant validity of all construct variables in the model (Hair et al., 2017). The Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) criterion was also used to assess discriminant validity. Findings revealed that the HTMT values were below 0.90, thereby confirming the absence of any issues on discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

Table 3: Discriminant validity

Construct	BCS	CB	DS	SF
Behavioural changes	0.73			
Cultural background	0.45	0.81		
Perceived teachers' discrimination	0.64	0.37	0.77	
Societal influence	0.70	0.34	0.62	0.74

Hypotheses testing

The level of perceived students' discrimination can be explained by 61.0% variation in students' behavioural changes, thereby explaining nearly moderate to high variance (Chin, 1998). The PLS-SEM allows for in identifying the direct relationships between the variables (Table 4). Based on PLS-SEM procedure of direct effects, it is established that the direct effects (cultural background → students' behavioural changes: $\beta = 0.18$, $t = 3.39$; societal influence → students' behavioural changes: $\beta = 0.43$, $t = 7.86$; family background → students' behavioural changes: $\beta = 0.13$, $t = 2.01$) were significant.

Table 4: Bootstrapping direct effects at 95% confidence intervals

	β	Sample Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics	P Values
Cultural background -> Behavioural changes	0.18	0.05	3.39	0.00
Family background -> Behavioural changes	0.13	0.05	2.01	0.04
Societal influence -> Behavioural changes	0.43	0.05	7.86	0.00

Further, the PLS-SEM allows for identifying the significance of the relationships between the variables (Table 5). In considering their effect on each other, the association between students' behavioural changes and perceived discrimination showed a highly (0.29) significant effect in the model, thereby confirming H1. Concerning the influence of moderating variables on the association between dependent and independent latent variables, the results showed that cultural background significantly but negatively moderated the effect of perceived students' discrimination on behavioural changes ($\beta = -0.12$, $T = 2.13$, $p < 0.001$), implying that cultural background can significantly reduce the effect of perceived students' discrimination on their behavioural changes. However, societal influence did not significantly moderate the effect of perceived students' discrimination on their behavioural changes ($\beta = 0.03$, $t = 0.70$, $p > 0.05$) (Table 5).

Table 5: Structural paths and related indicators

DV	IV	Hypothesis	Path estimates	t-Value	Significance (result)
BCS	DS	H1	0.29***	4.47	Supported
	DS*CB	H2	-0.12*	2.13	Supported
	DS*SF		0.03	0.70	Not supported

*** $p < 0.001$, * $p < 0.05$

The moderating roles of cultural background and societal influence in the relationship between perceived discrimination and students' behavioral changes were examined. Effect sizes for each predictive model were evaluated using Cohen's f^2 criteria. The findings revealed that the models incorporating the direct effect and the interaction term for cultural background as a moderator demonstrated comparatively higher effect sizes than other conditions. Specifically, the model including cultural background as a moderator yielded an f^2 value of 0.12, indicating a small effect size. This result provides partial support for Hypothesis H2.

Discussion

This study investigated how students' behavioural changes are affected by their perceptions of discrimination by teachers, based on caste, creed and socioeconomic status. It also explored whether the relationship between school-based discrimination and student behaviour was moderated by societal influence and cultural background. Focusing on an Indian context, the research found that perceived discrimination from teachers significantly influenced students' behavioural changes, with higher levels of discrimination linked to more pronounced negative behaviours. Alfaro et al. (2009) proposed similar arguments by stating that students experiencing discrimination were less likely to participate actively in class and showed reduced interest in learning. Smalls et al. (2007) found that teacher discrimination can lead to disengagement and absenteeism among students. Ramachandran and Naorem (2013) highlighted that practices such as segregated seating based on caste could result due to discrimination. However, the present study outcomes differ from the findings by Bibi and Karim (2015) and Ali et al. (2019) that found no significant impact of perceived teacher discrimination on students' learning outcomes or psychological well-being.

This study provided empirical evidence that cultural background significantly, but negatively, moderated the relationship between perceived discrimination and students' behavioural outcomes. This result aligns with previous research suggesting that cultural socialisation can buffer the negative effects of discrimination on students' academic performance and behavioural adjustment, as cultural background shapes how students interpret and respond to discriminatory experiences (Banerjee et al., 2018). Assari and Caldwell (2018) reported that cultural socialisation has been found to reduce the risk of adverse behavioural changes in students who experience discrimination in classrooms. The interaction between individual and

environmental factors is crucial for understanding how discrimination influences student behaviour (Chavous et al., 2008), as cultural background influences both socialisation processes and the quality of teacher-student interactions (Brown and Harris, 2012). While students may encounter negative perceptions due to discrimination based on caste or creed, a strong cultural background can lead to positive outcomes (Banerjee et al., 2018). Both family background and socioeconomic status can influence how individuals experience and respond to perceived discrimination (Assari and Caldwell, 2017; Hudson et al., 2012). Factors such as cultural identity determine how ambiguous or challenging situations are interpreted, with cultural identity affecting the prominence of culture in these encounters. (Assari et al., 2015; Beatty Moody et al., 2016; Sellers et al., 2006). However, the current study's findings differ from some previous research that found cultural background did not moderate the relationship between students' academic outcomes and perceived discrimination by teachers based on caste or creed (Neblett et al., 2006). Additionally, societal influence was not found to be a significant factor in this sample, which may be due to the participants sharing similar local and ethnic backgrounds.

Conclusion

The present study examined how students' perceptions of teacher discrimination, based on caste, creed and financial status, affect their behavioural changes by using survey data from students in classes 8 to 10 in rural and urban schools in Krishnagiri district. The results showed that perceived discrimination by teachers had a significant impact on students' behaviour. Additionally, the study found that cultural background moderated the direct relationship between perceived teacher discrimination and changes in student behaviour.

However, this study has several limitations. The research focused solely on students' perspectives regarding teacher discrimination and their own behavioural responses. Future studies should include the viewpoints of teachers and parents to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of perceived discrimination and to reduce potential bias from self-reported data. Another limitation is that the present study did not account for individual or organisational factors that might contribute to perceptions of teacher discrimination. Future research could explore additional influences, such as institutional policies, that may affect the link between teacher discrimination and student behaviour. Furthermore, the cross-sectional design of the study limits the ability to generalise the findings, as it only captures a snapshot in time. Therefore, longitudinal studies are recommended to better understand how perceived teacher discrimination related to caste, creed and financial background influences student behaviour over time.

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