

CASE STUDY 2.1



Teaching Implicit Bias in Public Education

Richard Gregory Johnson III

DR. ACE JONES HAS BEEN teaching at Lavender University in Seattle, Washington, for the past 20 years. Specifically, he teaches a cross section of diversity and social justice courses in the Public Education Master of Arts program. As part of the M.A. curriculum, he teaches a class that addresses implicit biases. This class gives graduate students an opportunity to examine biases embedded in U.S. culture through television, the media, and sports. Dr. Jones is a tenured associate professor and immediate past department chair at Lavender University. During his time at the university he has published books, articles, and commentaries on social justice and diversity. Georgetown University Press published his latest book, which addresses the ally community and its relationship to various social movements throughout the United States. He has also consulted with hundreds of K–12 public schools and public sector and nonprofit organizations throughout the United States and other countries, including Japan, Canada, and South Africa. Topics for his implicit bias trainings address gender, social class, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues in public sector organizations and higher education.

Dr. Jones is biracial, with a Caucasian father and Jamaican mother. He identifies as a person of color and was raised by both parents in London, England. Dr. Jones came to the United States in the early 1990s to pursue a doctoral degree from Johnson C. Smith University and graduated in 1995 with a doctorate in cross-cultural studies. He was hired to teach in the Department of Educational Policy at Lavender University in 1996. He is currently the only faculty member of color in a department of 15 full-time professors. The department also has only two female professors, one of whom is the program director. The program recently added a mandatory 3-hour diversity course that students must pass before graduation. It took the department 2 years to reach a consensus on the course's content and to begin enrolling students. However, no thought was given to who would provide course instruction,

even though the department was under pressure to begin offering the course fairly soon.

The Educational Policy Department Chair requested volunteers to teach the diversity course. However, most faculty members felt uncomfortable teaching it, as they had little practical or educational experience with diversity. Therefore, the department chair asked Dr. Jones to teach the course, since his background appeared most appropriate. Dr. Jones agreed to teach the course despite apprehension on his part for several reasons, the primary one being that his experience showed him that faculty of color are often expected to do the heavy lifting regarding all topics of diversity, while racial majority members receive a pass. The second reason Dr. Jones was apprehensive was that this course would be in addition to his already heavy teaching load without additional compensation. Still, his doctoral degree and research interests made Dr. Jones the best fit to teach the course in his department.

Dr. Jones inaugurated the course on implicit bias in Spring 2018. He was very excited about it and prepared for the entire semester before the course started. However, during one class session, he led a PowerPoint presentation on implicit bias that drew an unfavorable response from an Asian student, who stated that her son attended a magnet school with some African American students who she believed were unprepared to be there. Her comment provoked massive criticism from her classmates.

Professor Jones proceeded with his presentation, showing an iconic slide that depicted a well-dressed African American man standing in an elevator next to a Caucasian woman clutching her purse and looking fearful. The students seemingly understood the significance of this slide and had few comments. Two days later, Dr. Jones received an angry email from a female Caucasian student who demanded that he take the above-mentioned slide out of his presentation, as it made her feel uncomfortable. The student wrote that she had been assaulted by Black and White men, and the slide was a trigger for her. Dr. Jones was taken aback by this student's response. Interestingly, the student had already spoken to the program director, a Caucasian woman, as well. The program director spoke to Dr. Jones about the matter and could provide no relevant information on what the student reported. Dr. Jones was dumbfounded by this sequence of events and was unsure what to do next.

Questions:

1. What are the consequences for Dr. Jones of being the only department faculty teaching diversity and implicit-bias courses?
2. Should only women and faculty of color be expected to teach diversity and implicit bias courses? Why or why not?
3. How should Dr. Jones have handled the situation with the student who became upset?
4. Why did that student contact the program director, and what should the program director's role have been after hearing the student's complaint regarding the slide?
5. What leadership lessons did you learn?