



## WHAT SESAME PLACE CAN TEACH US ABOUT FIGHTING IMPLICIT BIAS



In the video, the two little Black girls eagerly wait along the parade route at the Sesame Place theme park in Langhorne, Pennsylvania. Their arms were outstretched to the mascot representing the popular children's character Rosita. But the Rosita meet-and-greet was not to be. The furry, teal-costumed mascot high-fived a White mother and child, then gestured "no" in the direction of the Black children, passing them by.

A video of the encounter went viral last month, setting off a flurry of news coverage after the girls' mother posted it on social media. Soon, other Black parents came forward, sharing their own experiences with amusement park snubs, some of which dated back to their own childhoods.

The 42-year-old Sesame Place theme park initially characterized the interaction with the two little girls as a "misunderstanding," then **subsequently pledged** to "conduct training for [their] employees so they better understand, recognize and deliver an inclusive, equitable and entertaining experience to [their] guests."

That's all good and fine, writes **NEPC Fellow Shaun Harper** of the University of Southern California in *Forbes*. But the devil will be in the details. Drawing on his recent work with companies, he cautions that "one-time implicit bias trainings do very little to actually disrupt implicit (or unconscious) bias. [Yet most] companies start and stop with a single workshop on the topic." He adds:

[Implicit bias] training is especially susceptible to ineffectiveness if it is delivered in a generic 'sit, passively watch, click, and quiz' asynchronous module offered only during new employee orientation. It has to be multidimensional and inclusive

of concrete examples that are directly relevant to that particular business context. It is plausible that a well-designed bias workshop may raise theme park workers' consciousness about what implicit bias is and a few ways that it broadly shows up in human interactions. That's insufficient.

Harper's diversity, equity, and inclusion work has included multiple high-profile engagements with organizations including the Hollywood Foreign Press Association, which awards the Golden Globe awards, with multinational companies such as Google and Nike, and with multiple educational institutions.

Here's how Harper recommends that organizations address implicit bias work:

A better multi-session professional learning series would make space for employees to identify and reflect on their own unconscious biases; discuss personal and shared discoveries with teammates; and determine ways to help hold each other accountable for recognizing and confronting those biases when they emerge in the workplace. Additionally, the series should make use of the . . . videos [of mascots snubbing Black children] to illustrate to trainers, managers, and workers who perform character mascots how implicit bias shows up along parade routes and elsewhere in theme parks. Seeing the actual videos and unpacking why and how racialized snubbing of kids occurs would be helpful. Amusement park snub stories that Black people and families shared via social and digital media should also be included in the series. This will help employees more deeply understand the impact their implicit biases have on racially diverse customers.

Although Harper is writing here about amusement parks, it is not difficult to see how his advice might apply to schools. Regardless of the type of organization, he recommends professional development that is ongoing, multifaceted, and inclusive of real-world examples that are directly relevant to the organization's work.

But even such comprehensive implicit bias training may not be sufficient, [NEPC Fellow Ann Ishimaru](#) of the University of Washington and her colleagues write in an *Educational Researcher* article about addressing inequities in K-12 schools:

Addressing individual educator bias has become a popular equity intervention in schools, but a narrow focus on implicit bias can obscure organizational and institutional dimensions of injustice. Individual remediation and interventions targeting a single context or level – as in individual students or teachers, a classroom, or even a grade-level content area – adhere to the dominant technical rational logic of linear processes to realize standardized aims but often do little to alter the complex overlapping mechanisms of inequity.

Ishimaru and her colleagues propose “a theory of change that aims to bridge individual educator and classroom-level practice with ongoing, iterative district-level capacity building and coordination across the system.”

NEPC Resources on Diversity: Race, Ethnicity, Class,  
Culture, and/or Gender

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