anti-racism case study: Danielle: racial bias in academic assessment

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Danielle: racial bias in academic assessment

Setting: Nursing education; graded oral presentation assessment.

Context

Danielle is a second-year Black British nursing student of Jamaican heritage. She is academic, hardworking and receives positive feedback in clinical placements.She is known for strong patient communication skills and professionalism.Emily is a White British nursing student in the same cohort. Emily and Danielle often study together and usually achieve similar academic results

What happened

Both students prepare for a graded 15-minute oral presentation worth 40% of a clinical practice module. They are assessed against a rubric requiring clinical reasoning, communication skills, evidence-based practice, professional reflection and presentation delivery. Danielle and Emily independently choose similar patient safety topics and present during the same assessment week. Danielle delivers a confident, well-structured presentation, references current NHS guidance and academic literature, and answers questions accurately and thoughtfully. Several peers comment afterwards that her presentation was engaging and clear.

During the assessment, however, one lecturer repeatedly interrupts Danielle and asks her to “slow down”, despite other students presenting at a similar pace. After the presentation, Danielle overhears a lecturer describe her as “quite aggressive at times”. Danielle is shocked, as she remained professional throughout and had not raised her voice. Emily’s presentation covers similar material but includes fewer academic references, less detailed analysis and more limited responses during questioning. Emily is described as confident, professional and a natural communicator.

Emily receives 72%, while Danielle receives 58%. Danielle’s written feedback includes vague comments that her communication style could be perceived negatively, that her tone was occasionally confrontational and that she needed to appear calmer under questioning. Danielle compares feedback informally with Emily and becomes concerned that similar behaviours were interpreted differently –confidence in a White student was viewed positively, while assertiveness in a Black student was interpreted as aggression.
Danielle later learns that previous Black students had raised concerns about inconsistent grading and biased feedback in oral assessments.

Impact

Danielle loses confidence in her academic ability. She becomes anxious during future presentations, avoids speaking up in seminars and begins to question whether she belongs on the course.

Her academic tutor notices a change in her participation and wellbeing. The experience also reduces her trust in the fairness of the university’s assessment processes.

What anti-racist practice should look like

Assessment feedback should be specific, evidence-based and linked to clear criteria. Concerns about potential racial

bias should trigger fair review, moderation and learning, rather than being treated as an individual sensitivity. Universities should monitor assessment outcomes by ethnicity, review patterns of differential attainment and awarding gaps and create safe routes for students to raise concerns.

Key learning points

- Stereotypes can affect how confidence, assertiveness and professionalism are interpreted
- Black students may experience communication styles being judged more negatively than those of their White peers
- Subjective oral assessments are vulnerable to bias unless criteria, moderation and feedback are robust
- Feedback should be objective, specific and free from racialised stereotypes
- Differential attainment and awarding gaps should be understood as a potential indicator of systemic and institutional issues, not individual deficit
- Students must be able to raise concerns about discrimination without fear of detriment
- Anti-racist education requires ongoing monitoring, accountability and institutional action.