

Students of Color and International Education: Addressing Host Country Unethical Behavior While Abroad

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Tags

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Setting

This case takes place during a two-week study abroad program for United States (U.S.) rising high school juniors and seniors. A third-party provider partnered with a language school in Seville, Spain where students studied Spanish and engaged in cultural immersion activities. During their time in Seville, the language school provided vetted homestay lodging for students. Two to three students lodged per homestay family.

The program consisted of 12 students, 10 identify as Black/African-American and two identify as Hispanic/Latinx, two group leaders and one chaperone, all three of whom identify as Black. For all students, this was the first time they studied abroad, and for most of them this was the first time they had been outside of the U.S. Prior to the start of the program, the group leaders and chaperone participated in training on duty of care, incident response, and COVID-19 facilitated by a skilled risk and safety manager.

The students participated in pre-departure workshops that covered health and safety, benefits of studying abroad, and cultural differences between the U.S. and Spain, but did not focus on an understanding of race/ethnicity in each context. The program leaders/chaperones were aware that racially motivated incidents

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may occur during the program, but this was not explicitly stated to students prior to traveling. Students participated in a range of activities (i.e. kayaking, flamenco dancing, cultural tours, etc.). Students received daily, three-hour Spanish language and cultural study classes. The program organizers sought to immerse students into the culture by intentionally planning activities that offered cultural, historical, and linguistic awareness.

Case

On the tenth day of the program, the group and one representative from the partner language school were on their way to tour the Plaza de España. Students were excited and talking amongst themselves as they approached the plaza. Suddenly, two strangers, a man and a woman, approached the group. The man walked up to one of the students, Michael, as he spoke in Spanish to the woman and handed her his phone. As he handed over his phone, he said, “Saca una foto de nosotros. ¡Siempre quería verme como un rasta!” (“Take a photo of us. I’ve always wanted to look like a rasta!”). Michael, along with his brother who was also a participant, have long dreadlocks. The man then proceeded to reach for Michael’s hair to place it over his head. Michael and his brother have never had haircuts. When the program leader later spoke to Michael’s mother about the incident, she shared that for their family and culture hair is very important.

As the man was posing for the photo, a group leader jumped in to stop the photo. He exclaimed, “Absolutely not!” The group leader was assertive and moved Michael aside, leaving the man behind. As the group leader gathered the group to move along and walk away, the man seemed agitated and confused as to why his behavior was unacceptable. The man became defensive and yelled, “No dije nada racista, ni los llame monos ni algo así!” (“I didn’t say anything racist and didn’t call them monkeys or anything like that!”). As this was happening, the students had no idea what was going on. The man continued trying to justify his actions and the group leader stopped the man from speaking and said, “Quieres seguir hablando, o quieres que yo te lo explique?” (translation: “Do you want to continue talking, or do you want me to explain it to you?”).

The group leader explained to the man that 1) Michael is a minor and touching a minor is unacceptable and 2) there is a cultural misunderstanding - one should never unsolicitedly reach out to touch a Black person’s hair. The man’s response was as a flamenco dancer, people always want to take photos with him unexpectedly. The group leader clarified that Michael was not working and that he was simply walking down the street. Eventually the man seemed to understand and invited the group to attend one of his flamenco shows. The group leader shook his hand and said, “Adios.” (“Bye.”).

The group leader recognized that he had a responsibility of modeling the correct behavior. He modeled 1) assertiveness so the other party understood the inappropriateness of the action and 2) advocating for personal space and setting boundaries, especially as a Black traveler. After the man left, the group leader gathered the group and shared with them the full extent of the exchange. The group leader expressed that these types of situations are not uncommon and the importance of advocating for personal space and communicating boundaries. He reassured them that his role as a group leader was to ensure their safety and security was at the forefront of the adults’ minds. This allowed an opportunity for the students to recognize how they were being supported during their program experience.

After the incident, Michael was confused about what had just occurred. He reached out to his mother and briefly shared what had happened. The group leader did not communicate the incident to Michael's mother during their time in Spain. When the group returned to the U.S., the group leader reached out to Michael's mother to recount the incident that occurred in Seville. Michael's mother was appreciative of the group leader's response and at this moment shared about the importance that hair has for their culture.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- Given the fact that Michael is a minor, do you think the group leader handled the incident correctly? Why or why not? How would you support Michael and the other students?
- Should have the group leader reached out to Michael's mother immediately after the incident to notify her of the situation? Why or why not?
- Did the group leader respond adequately to the man who reached for Michael? Why or why not?
- How can the third-party provider and language school prepare students, group leaders, and chaperones before, during, and after to address similar incidents?
- Should the language school have been involved in the response to the incident? Why or why not?
- Should this incident be reported to the Spanish authorities? Why or why not?
- How should follow up with students be conducted when the group returns to their home country?