

Racism in the Dominican Republic: Black Americans Face Discrimination Abroad

Lindsay Nelson

M.Ed, Kent, Ohio, United States

Email: l.nelsont@gmail.com

Tags

Crisis-Management; Cross-Cultural Issues; Education Abroad; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; Experiential Education; Language Education; Primary and Secondary Education; Program Design; Professional Training

Setting

Jennifer and Ivy are working over the summer for a reputable third-party provider of international education abroad in the Dominican Republic. They are co-leading a group of 20 high school students who have traveled from all over the United States to participate in a month-long language immersion program where they will live with host families, take Spanish courses taught by Dominican professors, and enjoy several weekend activities. Jennifer and Ivy are both white women, educators, fluent in Spanish, and have years of experience working with high school students. About half of the students participating in the program are students of color.

The Dominican Republic's complex relationship to race and ethnicity are present in its everyday culture. For example, many people choose to straighten their curly hair because it is often viewed as unprofessional in the workplace and at school. Similarly, there are many cultural complexities surrounding skin tone, especially as it relates to light-skin privilege and abject colorism. This dynamic tends to be exaggerated when looking at relations between the Dominican Republic and its neighboring country, Haiti, where the majority of the population is Black. A thirty-year dictator who favored "European" features, along with the current day impacts of colonialism, has created an atmosphere ripe with racial bias and anti-Black sentiment.

Prior to departure, Jennifer and Ivy attended a mandatory two-day pre-training where all staff that would be departing that summer were trained on academic expectations, crisis management, and the student experience.

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They received a two-hour training on diversity and equity and talked about topics like racism abroad and its impact on students. Beyond this two-hour session, they were not specifically briefed on the Dominican Republic, nor were they informed of students having received any prior information specifically related to race and ethnicity.

A few days after they arrived on site, the team, including the students, attended a presentation given by a Dominican historian about the historical and present-day role of race and colorism in Dominican culture. Jennifer feels glad that both during the pre-departure training and now on site the topic of race and racism is being so openly discussed and feels that the third-party provider has done more than many prior institutions in addressing the issue so openly.

Case

The group is on a bus traveling to a cultural event a few hours away, outside of the city where they were residing. Four Black students are sitting in the back of the bus together where the bus seat is slightly raised above all of the other seats. A few hours into the trip, the Dominican police stop the bus to do a routine bus check. While not uncommon in the Dominican Republic, routine stops by armed guards are not common in the United States, and the students had not been previously advised that this stop may occur. The Dominican counterpart on the trip opens the door to the police officer and tells him that they are a group of American high school students on a study abroad program on their way to an educational outing. As he glances over the bus, his eyes land on the back row at which point he asks to see the passports of all of the passengers. The Dominican trip leader assures him that they are all American students and states that they are not traveling with their passports, as it is a short day-trip inside the country. The police officer begins to gesture toward the back of the bus and asks the trip leader in Spanish if they “are trafficking any Haitians,” implying that the students in the back of the bus are Haitian. The trip leader is able to convince him that the students are American and after another few minutes, he gets off the bus but not without distressing the four students in the back of the bus.

Recognizing the impact this has had on the students, particularly those of color, Jennifer heads to the back of the bus to ask how they are feeling. Shortly thereafter, the bus arrives at its intended destination at which two of the four targeted students get off and two stay behind, breaking down in tears and stating that they do not wish to attend the activity. One student states, “I wish I would have never come to this racist country. I’ll never be back.” Ivy enters the activity while Jennifer stays behind to console the students who remained behind. The in-country director approaches the students and Jennifer as she was traveling in another bus. Jennifer explains what happens and the director states that police stops are routine as is looking for Haitian immigrants and encourages them to come inside. Eventually, all three join the activity. Jennifer is unsure about how to follow up with the students.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- How can providers prepare Black, Indigenous, (and) People of Color (BIPOC) students for potential racial discrimination?
- What resources could be made available to students who face discrimination abroad?

- As the co-leaders of the trip, what could Jennifer and Ivy have done better in this situation? What kind of follow up would you recommend?
- How could the provider have better prepared leaders of the program to handle incidents of racial discrimination abroad?
- How could the in-country program director have responded differently to the situation?
- Should the provider continue to send high school students to the Dominican Republic?
- How might this situation affect the relationship between the provider and the host community?