

Critical Action Case Study*



Melanie was an exceptionally hard-working and critically reflective White fifth grade student. In the last parent-teacher conference, Mrs. Duman, a White teacher who had been at the school for over 7 years, noted that Melanie was thriving in her class. Mrs. Duman's class was based on a year-long curriculum exploring critical reflection and activism. It was March and students were just beginning to work on their final projects which was always a major highlight for the upper elementary students. Students chose their own topic, crafted the design of their project, and presented it to the entire fourth, fifth, and sixth grade student body, as well as many parents who chose to attend the final presentations. The last three months of school were spent working on these projects that ranged from research papers to experiments to multimedia creations. Melanie strongly felt that her final project should educate her fellow students and teachers; she wanted to bring awareness about a current issue that was rarely discussed at her school.

Almost every night after dinner Melanie and her parents would watch the nightly news together. One night Melanie watched a report on the death of Tamir Rice, a 12 year old African American 7th grade student, as a result of the actions of two White male police officers. Tamir had been at a neighborhood park playing with an Airsoft replica gun. Another person at the park called 9-1-1 reporting that someone, likely a juvenile, was pointing a gun at people and the caller noted that the gun was probably fake. Within two seconds of the police officers arriving on scene, one of the police officers shot Tamir and he died the next day.

Melanie could not believe that there were so many people who defended these police officers for their immediate use of deadly force against a 7th grader and that they would not face any charges. She decided that the alarming amount of deaths of Black men and women and students at the hands of police officers and the shocking lack of indictment or charges was what she wanted to focus on for her final project. Melanie felt that a multi-media project would be the best way to educate, engage, and hopefully move people to outrage and action. She spoke to her parents about the project and they supported her commitment to reporting the facts and realities honestly and openly through visual images and video clips. The next day, Melanie expressed her project topic and design to Mrs. Duman who was very supportive and interested to see how this project would develop.

*These cases studies are based on real scenarios; identifying details have been changed.



Over the next two months, Melanie's project blossomed. Using iMovie and other online programs, she mixed images, news reports, video clips, various reports and her own narration to create a powerful and graphic critique of the murders of Black people by predominantly White police officers. Mrs. Duman was extremely impressed at Melanie's commitment to activism and her refusal to gloss over or minimize the horrifying realities as well as holding police departments and the United States responsible for these deaths. She had even reached out to a nearby Black Lives Matter chapter to interview the activists and featured their voices throughout the mini documentary. Yet Mrs. Duman had some concerns in regards to sharing this with the rest of the class and the larger school community. There were some students at the school with parents who were police officers, including one of Melanie's fellow classmates.

Mrs. Duman was also concerned about student reactions to the graphic images/videos as well as how some White students may treat the few Black students who attended the school after the presentation.

The date for the final presentations was right around the corner. For the following week students would be working in pairs to practice their presentations. Melanie's project was by far one of the most extensive, well-researched, and elaborate projects in the class. Yet Mrs. Duman was torn about whether Melanie should be allowed to present her project to the school community. While she knew that this was true critical action and it should be shared with a wider audience, she wasn't sure how other students and parents would respond. Not allowing Melanie the opportunity to present would be silencing her activism and robbing other students of the knowledge that Melanie had thoughtfully and purposefully gathered. At the same time, parents wielded a lot of influence and Mrs. Duman was worried about how they might respond to Melanie's project, possibly calling for the end to this assignment or the public presentations.