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# ***Black Like Me, Just Like Me:*** **Enhancing Response to** **Literature through** **Student-Generated Cases**

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In *Black Like Me*, John Howard Griffin, a White man, tells the story of his attempt to understand the lives and experiences of African Americans in the late 1950s and early 1960s by having his skin chemically darkened and living as a Black man. Griffin's account of the oppression, danger, and prejudice he experienced while disguised as an African American helped to open the eyes of the nation to the plight of people of color in the United States. Nearly fifty years after its initial publication, *Black Like Me* remains an important book, especially because so many in our society seem to be convinced that the struggle for Civil Rights is over, that *segregation* and *oppression* are words reserved for museum exhibits. As Tatum has argued, many White students in this country believe that race should no longer be considered an important factor in human relationships and that racial oppression is a thing of the past. We have certainly found such attitudes to be prevalent among our own White students. Indeed, the belief that there are no more wrongs to right—Michigan's constitution was recently amended to render Affirmative Action illegal—has been a serious impediment to students' understanding of Griffin's important work.

In this article, we tell the story of how creating and discussing their own case studies focusing on discrimination helped our students to reconsider their previously-held beliefs about oppression and enhanced their understanding of *Black Like Me*.

## **"This Dude is a Phony"**

We recently had the opportunity to team-teach in a highly homogeneous, rural community (see Haberling and White 54-61)—Hudsonville High School's student body is nearly 100 percent White. However, when we surveyed the students in our junior-level literature course, we found that over ninety-five percent of them either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, "Hudsonville is a very diverse community." Unfortunately, many of our students fit the profile Tatum describes. During discussions of literature and current events, they frequently expressed their belief that "color shouldn't matter any more." Although they acknowledged the United States' painful, racist past, they were convinced that "that's over now." Like many of us, they found it difficult to "get behind the eyes" of people who might be different from themselves in important ways; they struggled to understand the experiences of people of color and of other victims of oppression and discrimination.

We thought that reading *Black Like Me* with the students might help them to understand more of the impetus behind the Civil Rights movement and might also open a discussion about instances of oppression, racial and otherwise, in modern society—even in Hudsonville. Unfortunately, our team-teaching arrangement came to an end just before it was time to teach *Black Like Me*; so Jennifer, with Brian serving as a collegial sounding board and planning partner, introduced the book by providing some extensive frontloading activities focusing on intolerance and the plight of people of color in the middle of the twentieth century. Before we began to read *Black Like Me*, we explored historical instances of intolerance through poetry like "We Wear the Mask" by Paul Laurence Dunbar and through non-fictional texts like Lawrence Otis Graham's "The Black Table is Still There" and "I Have a Dream" by Martin Luther King, Jr. We also looked at and discussed the labels and stereotypes that many students in Hudsonville use to draw distinctions between cliques and groups within their own student body.

As we discussed and analyzed these works, students began to relate historical instances of intolerance that they were familiar with from history classes to the themes of racial intolerance evident in the texts. They talked about the Japanese internment camps in the North American West during World War II, discrimination against Jews throughout history, and the “Trail of Tears.” Because students were making these important connections, Jennifer thought that the pre-reading exercises had done a good job of helping the students to retrieve the background knowledge they would need to understand Griffin’s story. But when the class was about halfway through *Black Like Me*, Kristiana, one of the students, walked into class and announced, “This JHG dude doesn’t know what he’s talking about. He’s a fake and a phony. He can’t possibly know what it is like to be Black. He’s just pretending.”

Although there is truth in Kristiana’s assessment—Jennifer had been careful to explain to the class that Griffin, a White man “in disguise,” could at best approximate the experiences of people of color. Jennifer was shocked by Kristiana’s blunt and harsh analysis of Griffin and his account. After all, even if we discount Griffin’s personal experiences because of the “phoniness” of his disguise, can we discount the experiences of others, the instances of hatred and oppression he observed first hand? Didn’t his experiences in disguise give him (at least) a somewhat more realistic view of the day-to-day lives of people of color in the South? Until Kristiana’s emphatic announcement halfway through the text, she had seemed empathetic to the plight of the people Griffin highlighted in his account. When Jennifer asked her to explain what she meant, Kristiana indicated that, because of his disguise, Griffin was an unreliable reporter. She felt that because Griffin was really a white man in disguise, she could not trust that his report was typical of the kinds of discrimination that were reality to many people during that time. Evidently, she saw no connection between Griffin’s account and real life, either the real life of the ‘60s or the real life of the twenty-first century.

Emergency measures were in order. Kristiana was an influential student who had rightly emphasized a potential problem with Griffin’s account. Jennifer wanted Kristiana to be free to speak her mind and to encourage

her insightful, independent thinking, but Jennifer certainly didn’t want Kristiana to shut down the discussion or to provoke her classmates to dismiss the book out of hand. She also didn’t want anybody to miss the truths Griffin had observed from his camouflaged position.

As discussion proceeded that day, however, Kristiana gained an audience and a following. Other students chimed in to say that the book was okay so far as history goes, but that racial discrimination had been “solved” when the Civil Rights Bill was signed. The more the students talked, the more confident Jennifer was that the kids were missing a very important piece of the puzzle: the connections between the kinds of oppression detailed in Griffin’s story and the kinds of oppression found in modern society. But how can these connections be illuminated? One way is to do student-generated case studies.

### **Taking a Chance on Student-Generated Case Studies**

In order to help the students see the relationships between the instances of discrimination and oppression in *Black Like Me* and the lives of modern-day citizens of Hudsonville, we decided to use case studies. Teachers in many disciplines, from law and medicine (e.g. Toney) to information systems management (e.g. Sirias) to teacher education (e.g. Campbell; Griffith and Laframboise; Johannessen and McCann; Roeser; Shapiro and Stefkovich; Shulman; Strike and Soltis) have found that discipline-specific case analysis, “facilitates problem solving, decision-making, critical thinking, self-directed learning, self-evaluation, and interpersonal communications as well as the retrieval, access, and use of information” (Toney 34).

Johannessen and Kahn note that case studies can be especially helpful for students of literature because a carefully crafted literary case:

provides data to help them connect with [the character’s] problem in the text and activates their prior knowledge so that they develop a deeper understanding of the issue the... character confronts. It is designed to prepare students to think hard about the moral choices the [character] has to make in the novel and to get them to consider some of the consequences of having to make such a moral choice. (109; see also White and Haberling)

Johannessen and Kahn present some excellent examples of cases used to enhance students' responses to difficult literary texts; but like others who have taught us how to use teacher-created case studies in the literature classroom (e.g. Smagorinsky; Smagorinsky, McCann, and Kern), they emphasize the importance of using cases at the pre-reading stage. The students in Jennifer's classroom were already halfway through the text—way past pre-reading. Besides, we wondered about the wisdom of creating our own cases and giving them to the students. They already seemed convinced that the instances of oppression highlighted in Griffin's text had nothing to do with Hudsonville, so why would they think that our cleverly created cases were more relevant? We could have written a set of hypothetical cases dealing with real-world issues of oppression and discrimination, but we knew the students would connect in a deeper, more personal way if they had to think about real life in the world with which they were familiar. If they were going to forge connections between the text and their lives, we knew they would have to do so themselves. That was when our planning took an interesting turn.

Campbell and others (e.g., Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, and Shulman; Johannessen and McCann; Mastrilli and Sardo-Brown) not only give their students carefully designed cases to analyze, but they also ask their students to write their own cases. Johannessen and McCann provide solid guidelines for teaching students to write their own cases in teacher education classes (113-114). We wondered what might happen if we were to ask Jennifer's students to write their own cases as a way of responding to *Black Like Me* and as a way of convincing them that the book is really not so different from their own lives and experiences. The students' main criticism of the book was that it was "phony" or "unreal." We reasoned that if the students could write what they considered to be "realistic" case studies paralleling the situations Griffin records in his book, the students would be better able to see the ways in which the text could speak to modern-day Hudsonville—and they could no longer argue that they couldn't relate to the book.

Since the students had read over half of the text, they were familiar with the situations of discrimination and intolerance Griffin had observed and experienced. The plan was to have them reexamine a number of those specific

situations and to write their own parallel case studies which included a similar type of intolerance, but in a setting more closely related to the students' own experiences.

### **Using Student-Generated Cases to Enhance Understanding**

#### ***Preparing students to craft case studies***

The next day, when students entered the classroom, the desks had been rearranged; instead of being placed in rows, they faced each other in pairs. Between each set of desks was a laptop computer, although our activity would have worked just as smoothly with paper and pencils. To introduce the collaborative case writing activity, Jennifer handed out the assignment page that outlined the requirements and their choices as follows:

#### ***Black Like Me Parallel Case Assignment***

##### **Here is your job...**

Choose one of the scenes below and write your own case for this situation, but using a parallel situation which could really happen today and in our region of the world (whether you define that as Hudsonville, this part of our state, our entire state, the Midwest, the United States-- however you see things). Create a similar set of circumstances that get at the same kind of intolerance, but in a realistic, modern situation. Your words will be different, your situation will be different, but it will be the same type of intolerance.

##### **Here are your choices:**

page 25	Young woman on the bus
page 37-39	Stalker
page 47-48	Bus driver
page 53-54	Hate stare and the bus station
page 62-64	Restroom break on the bus
page 85-86	Outhouse
page 100	Job in factory
page 105-106	Store at night
page 126-127	White man and turkeys
page 128-129	Bus incident

##### **Once you have committed to and reserved a scene, here is what you will do:**

1. Create a parallel, real-life situation.

2. Include named characters.
3. Carefully devise details to create a realistic scene.
4. Craft a situation which we, as a class, could write about and talk about in order to determine what the character(s) should do next.
5. Type it up (don't forget to proofread).
6. Once you are sure your case is carefully crafted and exactly as you would like it, add the guiding questions we agreed upon as a class. Then print a copy and hand it in before you leave today.

To model the kind of writing Jennifer hoped the students would create, she showed them the following model case study and follow-up question on the overhead:

**Model Case Study**

*Dr. Louanne Kaminsky is an engineer for one of the "big three" auto makers. She received a bachelor's degree and a master's from Stanford University's prestigious mechanical engineering program; then she received a Ph.D. in automotive design and engineering from the University of Frankfurt in Germany. Mercedes Benz of Europe offered her a high paying job, but she wanted to return to the United States to work. She has been on the job as a research engineer in Detroit for almost 10 years, and many of her designs have won international awards. She has saved the company millions of dollars by catching and fixing difficult design flaws prior to production, and she has made the company millions more by improving the appearance and performance of the automaker's more popular designs. Although she has received a substantial raise every year, she has never been promoted to the rank of Senior Researcher or Project Director. She has applied for promotion several times, and each time, other, less capable male engineers have been promoted. Last week, Louanne went to see her supervisor to discuss her record of achievement and to ask why she keeps getting passed over for promotion. Her supervisor, a man in his 50's, smiled at Louanne and said, "Louanne, your record*

*is very strong, as strong as just about any other engineer in this company. But we've been a little concerned about bringing you onto the leadership team; we're concerned about the chemistry of the group. The men on the team form a very tight-knit circle, and it's crucial that we be able to work together effectively. Adding you to the team could, well, change the way we all relate to one another." Louanne was struggling to understand what her boss was saying--and then he said, moving a bit closer to her, "Of course, Louanne, sometimes we just need to know how badly you WANT to be promoted. Would you be willing to do, say, just about anything to see that your case would be given more serious consideration next time?"*

***What do you think about the way Dr. Kaminsky's company and, specifically, her boss are treating her? How do you think Dr. Kaminsky should respond?***  
(Haberling and White 54-61)

Together the class talked through the features of an effective case study (see Johannessen and McCann 113-114), focusing on the details that made the model case come to life. Jennifer emphasized the realistic nature of the details; if the features of the situation were at all improbable, the entire case would lose its authenticity. Lastly, the class discussed the guiding questions for readers to consider and respond to at the end of each case. As a class, we decided that the guiding questions for our parallel cases would be: "What do you think this person should do next? How do you think this reaction will change the situation?"

With the model as a guide and their interest activated, the students began brainstorming a parallel situation to craft into an authentic case. The assignment page provided students with a list of scenarios and page numbers from *Black Like Me* to consider. Students could choose from situations in the text that ranged from a time when Griffin misinterpreted a white woman's sympathetic glance on a bus only to be spoken to harshly, to an incident when the White man at a custard stand directed an uncomfortable Griffin to an outhouse fourteen blocks away when relief was clearly visible on the property. In order to fulfill the assignment, each pair of students had to choose

one situation from the text, brainstorm potential real-life scenarios together, and write a case that explored a type of discrimination or intolerance similar to that exhibited in their chosen scene.

The classroom came alive with conversation. Students began discussing experiences of their own with bullying, news headlines which focused on racial differences in the wake of September 11, emotional scars from elementary school playground traumas, brushes with homelessness, and methodical exclusion from social groups due to differences in appearance or socio-economic class. Their paired discussions were surprisingly, emotionally intense. They were listening to one another, they were providing suggestions to improve the cases, and they were connecting to one another even more deeply than Jennifer had hoped or anticipated.

Crafting the cases took all hour. Students eagerly revised and edited their cases, perhaps because they knew their classmates were going to be reading and discussing them. They added twists and details to ensure that each case did not have a clear-cut, "right" response, making the cases more authentic and more ethically challenging. They read aloud and compromised readily in order to make their cases the best they could be. Before they left for the day, they were to add the guiding questions to the end and be sure Jennifer had a printed copy of their case. They walked out the door discussing the ins and outs of the cases they had crafted, comparing with one another and already commenting on possible responses.

### ***Engaging students across case studies***

The next day, Jennifer selected ten of the cases to photocopy on colored paper, assigning each case a different color. Jennifer was careful to include a variety of scenarios to help students recognize that the kinds of intolerance shown in *Black Like Me* are not confined to any one time period, geographic region, or societal arrangement. She was also careful to choose cases which did not overlap in setting or focus and which were "contentious" enough to provoke discussion. When students arrived on day two of the exercise, each received a case written by one pair of their classmates. They were instructed to read over the case and to respond in writing to the guiding questions

at the end of the case. After about ten minutes of reading and writing, Jennifer instructed the students to trade with another classmate, making sure they didn't get the case they originally composed or the one they had just read. They read the new case and the response that one of their peers had just written, but this time they responded in writing by generating another, alternative way the characters of the case could react to the situation and discussing what might happen if they were to take this new course of action.

Normally, a handful of students respond to tasks such as these quickly and without much thought, hoping to carve out a bit of class time for a note to a friend or daydreaming, but that was not the case this time. These cases gave students the opportunity to share their own writing in a very real way with a very immediate audience. They were anxious to read what their peers had written and to hear what their colleagues had to say about their cases.

After students had swapped with each other and responded to the second case, Jennifer moved the students into small groups according to the page color of the case they currently held (everybody holding a red case assembled in a group, and so on). Each small group's task was to make a list of all of the possible responses to the case they were holding. If they finished before the time was up, their job was to brainstorm and discuss other possible, but not as likely, responses to the situation (for example, most did not initially consider slugging someone as a viable solution to any of the cases they held; however, violence was a possible response.) Their goal was to provide at least five different responses to each case. We were not expecting the wide range of responses they discovered together through their conversations. We expected their responses to be similar to the responses of Griffin in the novel. After about ten minutes of sharing, Jennifer asked the groups to determine which response from their lists seemed most likely to solve the problem in the best way. Knowing this was a judgment call for her students, she asked them to consider which response they might follow and why, taking into consideration the consequences that could result. They discussed and argued over the possibilities, eventually starrng their top choice on their lists, preparing to discuss their reasoning with the class. For a few groups this discussion did not end with consensus, which gave the group members plenty to bring

to the class discussion that followed.

At this point, we were about halfway through the class hour, and students were interested in hearing about the other cases. Armed with their lists and cases, students reconvened as a large group to share some of the preferred responses to the situations they had read about and discussed, explaining the details of the cases as necessary. Since they had each crafted one case and read two other cases, most were able to speak with authority about three of the cases; however, since there were ten cases total, some explaining was necessary. Those who had read the case presently under discussion added their ideas and insight. Those who had not read the case often asked questions and related the ideas to Griffin's experiences in *Black Like Me* or to their own experiences. Our discussion took a winding road, jumping from one case to another, from the text to real life, from the characters of the cases to the characters in the text, but throughout it all, students were discussing and considering how best to respond to intolerance and oppression.

Student's cases addressed topics ranging from ageism and homophobia to electronic bullying (for a detailed list, see Appendix). Through it all, Jennifer was the recorder, listing their ideas for responses to intolerance on the whiteboard and keeping track of whose turn it was to talk. Students also recorded new ideas regarding how to respond to intolerance on their lists. The hour was quickly coming to a close, even though the discussion was far from done.

### ***Making the connections visible***

The next day, day three of the exercise, students returned with their already-compiled lists of responses and the cases from the previous discussion. The whiteboard was still covered with the ideas they had had after their initial reading and discussion of the cases; however, Jennifer felt the students still were not seeing the connections between today and the 1960s, between Griffin and themselves, between Hudsonville and the Deep South. We started the hour by revisiting their lists of responses to oppression. On their own lists, students were to circle all responses John Howard Griffin had explored in his journaling. That circled list is where we began discussion on the third day. This time, we considered how each response Griffin considered could help or exacerbate the situation in the cases we had generated

and in the "cases" he actually lived through. The focus of discussion centered on what would be the most effective response for Griffin or anyone one else in such situations.

Jennifer started the dialogue by asking, "Which of the responses from your lists do you think would be most effective for Griffin? Why?" Students wrestled with tough questions. For example, if Griffin were to lash out physically, wouldn't that just prove that he was as violent and unruly as the Whites wanted to believe? Wouldn't he just be proving them right? But what were his other options? If he were simply to stand there and take this harsh treatment, wouldn't he also be endorsing it? What about the Whites who said the treatment was wrong but did nothing to stop it? Weren't they just as much a part of the problem? How does this fit in with the treatment of those who seem different in a classroom or school setting? Students began asking the questions and providing the responses on their own while Jennifer stood back and watched them converse with one another. They were not looking for her idea of the right answer. They had their own ideas and were competently expressing and reconsidering them with one another. Jennifer wasn't really looking for any consensus, but rather thoughtful, independent ideas based on evidence and experience. And some of their experience was very personal indeed, as you will see in the following descriptions of some of the collaborative pairs and of the cases those pairs generated.

### **"Different, Like Me" and "Homeless, Like My Stepdad": Real Characters, Real Cases**

Matt and Kylee were an unlikely, collaborative pair during the writing stage. Kylee was successful in school and athletics, very popular. Matt suffered from some mental health challenges and often found himself on the outside of social groups. People generally avoided him because of his inappropriate outspokenness and frequent rants. Kylee and Matt never sat at the same lunch table at school and they were rarely at the same social events. They would not have worked with one another had they not been assigned to. As Jennifer observed their paired discussion from a distance, she was surprised to see the two of them speaking so earnestly to one another. Moving nearer, she noted that Kylee was listening intently to Matt as he presented the

outline for a potential case, and that Kylee freely shared her own views regarding his statements. They often turned the computer screen so that both of them could read and edit their evolving case. It was a true collaboration. The fruit of their cooperative efforts was a case which dealt with a young man who often found himself in rough waters—a barely concealed retelling of a situation from Matt’s life. Together they wrote:

*Imagine a place where you know you will not be safe, even though those in charge maintain that everyone has a right to be respected and valued in this place. Now imagine if this place were a part of your every day life. To most people, school is place to come to hang with friends and grow up confident, nurtured, and respected. Not for Miguel. Since he was a young child, Miguel struggled to make himself heard through his stuttering speech. He had many important things to say and contributions to make to every class, but often his speech overshadowed the validity of his thoughts and emotions. Because of the teasing and under-their-breath comments from his classmates, Miguel came across as angry and resentful. In class, if he was trying to convey his thoughts, he often changed his tone to stress the importance of his ideas. The other students in his classes took this as obstinance and a challenge. They didn’t realize that he wanted to fit in with them more than anything. One day while Miguel tried to contribute to the discussion in World Studies, Luke began a barely-audible repetition of the stuttered words Miguel struggled to express. Other students joined in. The substitute teacher that day didn’t quite know how to respond. Normally the others didn’t have this opportunity to victimize Miguel so openly. By the time Miguel had completed one sentence, he was nearly in tears. He had important ideas to share; why couldn’t his classmates be patient and compassionate? As Miguel left the room that day, Luke and his friends followed, mocking Miguel all the way down the hall.*

**What do you think Miguel should do next? What do you think will happen if he does this?**

When the class began to discuss this case, Matt was on the edge of his seat. He had first-hand knowledge of rough treatment from his peers. Jennifer watched the discussion unfold as many previously silent classmates shared that they disagreed with how some students treat others, and listened as those students asked aloud whether they were just as guilty if they did nothing to protect those who were treated poorly. The class eventually agreed that the way many of them had treated others (as perpetrators and as silent bystanders) was a part of the problem. Students were building bridges all across the room. Matt’s perspective and experiences were finally honored by his classmates that day.

In several instances, like Matt and Kylee’s, the stories on the page were all-too-true. But because the characters and situations in the cases were regarded as “made up,” the students could speak from their hearts about the difficulty of the dilemmas without making themselves too vulnerable. In another example, Anne, a boisterous senior who was retaking the class, was passionate about the story she and her partner had crafted about a homeless man who was treated poorly just because of his appearance. Here’s what they wrote:

*William was a man of the street, used a box as a blanket, slept in his little hole in the side of the bridge and enjoyed his time searching through the trash. When people would drive or walk by, they normally pointed and just stared-- some even ran into poles or other cars because they were surprised that there was a “bum” in their own little town. William was the only bum on the street; he had no family that anyone knew of and he had no friends in this little town. No one knew anything about this man because they never took the time to try. In this little town, there was a cafe on down the road from the bridge where William lived, and he enjoyed a nice cup of coffee and a donut every once in awhile, like everyone else. When he walked through the door, though, everyone would stop what they were doing and stare, dropping the donuts they were dipping or knocking their coffee off the table.*

*Every time William came in here, the manager was at the desk and would be serving the customers. Since William made such a disturbance, the manager*



would give him a hard time, so almost always William would have to leave the store and go across the street to the gas station just to get something small to eat and drink. Today, though, there was a woman at the register, taking orders and delivering everyone's morning wake up calls. William was surprised! He walked to the counter and asked for his normal: "Coffee black with a glazed donut please," he always said with a kind voice. The woman looked at him and smiled, punched in the order on the computer and then pulled some money out of her purse. Andrea was a college student at the state university a few minutes outside of town and she, too, was struggling with money. She was just happy to have this job so she could pay her rent and live comfortably while she attended college. She knew she could never survive without this job, so she had a soft spot for William.

The manager saw what Andrea was doing and asked to speak to her in the back room. When she opened the office doors, the manager handed her a pink slip and asked her to never return to the cafe again. As Andrea gathered her things to leave, she saw William enjoying his coffee and donut at the table nearest the door.

***What do you think Andrea should do next? What do you think will happen if she does this?***

What Jennifer knew that others in class did not was that this man was really Anne's stepfather. Anne's mother, a waitress in the local diner, had seen beyond the ragged jacket and guarded disposition of the man who begged for a cup of hot coffee each morning. Anne was unusually focused and considerate during the class discussion. The other students were compassionate in their responses to the case. Previous discussions of homelessness in this class had included some unkind comments about the poor, but this time there was no apathy or harsh judgment. Everyone was purposefully engaged in the discussion at hand, focusing on the plight of this homeless man—and by doing so, the students were also preparing to respond to a related incident in *Black Like Me*, when Griffin enters a service station late at night hoping to get something to eat and drink.

Other, similarly personal cases gave rise to similarly intense discussions. Here's another example:

*Shaney Felop was an ordinary, 14-year-old girl living in Atlanta, Georgia. She loved her friends, family, and especially her computer. One day Shaney was innocently IM-ing her friends online when she received a strange IM from an unknown screen name. When she opened the message, a trembling welled up in the pit of her stomach. She knew exactly where it had come from. In her third hour geometry class, a group of five girls had begun teasing her about her less-than-designer wardrobe and constantly mocking her whenever she tried to participate in the class discussion. Recently she had stayed after class to talk with her teacher about why her grades were suddenly suffering a tailspin, hoping to have the opportunity to mention her stresses about the girls to him as well.*

*After thinking it over and receiving three subsequent IMs in the next hour, Shaney simply wrote three words in response: "LEAVE ME ALONE!" The next response she received chilled her to the bone. The girls' response told her that they were clearly taking this as seriously as she was. "Wait until tomorrow..." the response read. Shaney wasn't sure she would have the courage or the strength to face them in third hour tomorrow.*

***What do you think Shaney should do about the situation? What do you think will happen if she does this?***

When discussing this case involving harassment via technology, students heard the anguish in their classmates' crafted stories, which certainly hinted at reality for some who discussed with vigor and passion. What had once seemed a harmless form of teasing took on a much more dangerous aspect. Through their discussions, students heard how this kind of oppression, which might seem harmless to the teaser or could be viewed as typical teenage behavior, was perceived much differently by those on the other side of the teasing when students who had been victims of online harassment shared how it affected them. The students came to the mutual conclusion that this

form of harassment is cruel and inappropriate, no matter the intent. And when they connected on-line harassment to the “hate stare” that Griffin and other Blacks endured in *Black Like Me*, students reconsidered the ways in which distant, supposedly impersonal cruelty can harm both victim and perpetrator. By modernizing the context and situation, students were able to better connect their lives to the life and experiences of John Howard Griffin, of the African Americans he lived among and wrote about, and of other victims of oppression throughout the world—even in Hudsonville.

As the discussion on the third day was winding down, Kristiana spoke again. She had been eerily quiet during the better part of the three days of discussion. She hadn’t appeared to be disengaged, but she was clearly keeping her opinions and feelings private. She finally let the rest of us into her thoughts: “This is just like today! Even though we all are White and don’t really have to deal with issues of color differences, we are just like JHG. History just keeps repeating itself over and over again.” Kristiana was seeing that Griffin’s experiences in the South related to her world today. It wasn’t just about color barriers, but about the barriers all of us tend to erect between one another. She was able to use Griffin’s text and the texts she and her classmates had created together to see her reality more clearly; and she wasn’t the only one forging these kinds of connections. We were back to the book and it was finally hitting home for these students.

Though racism was not our primary focus as we discussed the kinds of injustice central to the students’ case studies, we weren’t in any way trying to minimize attention to race or distract students from issues of race—in fact, race remained a central topic of discussion. But we found that we couldn’t get them into the discussion of race until we had gotten them to connect to other forms of injustice, especially from their own experiences. Because students came up with their own examples from what they knew of the world and their experiences, they were able to look more closely at the remainder of Griffin’s work and

see that his disguise did not prevent him from experiencing the harsh realities of racism. He was no longer labeled a “phony” or a “fake” in their eyes.

*During our Black Like Me unit, our students engaged in creative conversation, negotiated and compared with one another in respectful ways, and valued one another’s work and responses as we used their texts as the texts of our classroom.*

### **Pay It Forward**

The use of student-generated case studies can create a rich forum for thoughtful discussion and can help students to build bridges between their own lives and the lives of seemingly distant and difficult literary texts. During our *Black Like Me* unit, our students engaged in creative conversation, negotiated and compared with one another in respectful ways, and valued one another’s work and responses as we used their texts as

the texts of our classroom. Because the strategy was so successful, we have used it at other grade levels with other texts and have found it to have similarly beneficial effects every time.

As successful as student-generated cases have been in our classrooms, we are just as excited about the ways in which the strategy seems to reap rewards in students’ lives beyond the halls of our schools. These discussions don’t just fall dead as students walk out of our doors; they are carried along and reverberate through their lives long after they graduate. Recently, almost four years after Kristiana graduated from high school, Jennifer had the pleasure of running into her in the local grocery store and then keeping in touch via e-mail over the course of the next several months. After learning that Kristiana was working her way through the decision whether to go to law school or enter the Teach For America program, Jennifer brought their conversation around to the lessons Kristiana might have learned through the time they spent together in that eleventh grade English class. Although Jennifer didn’t mention *Black Like Me* in particular, Kristiana began her e-mail reply with:

*Black Like Me—ahhhhg! Well, where do I start!? Even though I still disagree completely with what Griffin did, I do think that the book could be used as a valuable resource. If there is debate and discussion about his actions, and students are*

able to formulate their own opinions of this man's decisions, it is a beneficial resource. This is what you pushed us to do, Mrs. H. You made us look at how we can influence our own world for the better by jumping off from Griffin's experiences and applying them to our own lives.

Other students have returned to tell us how our discussions of *Black Like Me* and the student-generated cases have influenced their views and changed their approaches to various situations as they have grown. Their reflections on our time together and their stories about the lasting results of our *Black Like Me* unit are gratifying. From the beginning, we hoped that each of our students would begin to see John Howard Griffin, the African American he lived and wrote among, and each of our neighbors in Hudsonville (and beyond) as "human, like me." We are pleased to say that we have found exactly that to be the case.

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#### **schools**

- dress code
- school bullies
- cliques and social groupings
- status symbols
- treatment of those who have outwardly different appearance (blue hair, goths)
- athletic discrimination (height, physical disability)
- being a new kid

#### **teens**

- and shoplifting
- and restaurants
- and church
- and retail establishments

#### **technology**

- I-M harassment (text messages, cell phones)
- e-mail harassment (chat rooms, etc.)

## **Appendix**

### **List of Parallel Cases Topics social issues**

- homelessness
- race relations (Hispanics, Iraqis, Indians)
- religious intolerance
- treatment of those who have outwardly different appearance (physical handicap, mental handicap)
- homosexuality
- employment
- sexual harassment
- ageism

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