

A class divided



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A CLASS DIVIDED

Thirty years ago Jane Elliott taught the third grade in the white, Christian community of Riceville, Iowa. The day Martin Luther King Jr. was killed she planned an exercise that wouldn't just show her students what racism is - rather, it would give them first-hand experience of what it felt like to be oppressed for something out of their control.

Elliott divided her class by the color of their eyes, marked them with armbands and proceeded to treat one group as if superior in capabilities to the other. The superior students performed better than they ever had before, while the inferior students' performance dropped. The next day, the third graders traded ranks and their performance reversed in accordance to their groups' status.

What did the children learn? How did the experience affect them later in life? Clips from her original classes and interviews with former students confirm that Jane Elliott's workshops make them permanently more empathetic and sensitive to the problem of racism.

Sandy is the one who said, when we did our reunion five years after they graduated from high school - I asked Sandy whether, having had this exercise when she was in third grade, had changed her life at all. She is the one who said " Yeah, now when I hear one of those bigoted remarks, I wish I had one of those collars in my pocket and I could take it out and I could put it around that person's neck and I could say: Now, you wear that for two weeks and see how you'd like to live that way for a lifetime." Rex is the

one who said " I have that collar in my pocket for the rest of my life, I can't get that collar out of my pocket". (INTERVIEW WITH JANE ELLIOT)

<http://www.newsreel.org/transcri/essenblue.htm>

The children learned that discrimination has a tangible affect on their performance in everyday activities. Elliott has gone on to do the exercise with

numerous adults and almost without exception the participants' abilities, such

as reading and writing, are grossly affected.

Jane Elliott's approach is especially relevant today. It demonstrates that even without juridical discrimination; hate speech, lowered expectations, and

dismissive behavior can have devastating effects on achievement. Black members of the blue-eyed group forcefully remind whites that they undergo similar stresses, not just for a few hours in a controlled experiment, but every

day of their lives. Although these concepts are food for thought they are merely preludes to the main course. The most important lesson to be learned

here is that just one person can make a difference.

Next we join a group of 40 teachers, police, school administrators and social workers in Kansas City - blacks, Hispanics, whites, women and men.

The

blue-eyed members are subjected to pseudo-scientific explanations of their inferiority, culturally biased IQ tests and blatant discrimination. When the

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inevitable resistance by a blue-eyes surfaces, Elliot cites the outburst as an example of their inability to work in a group or follow basic directions. The utter failure of the offender pre-empts any future resistance. In just a few hours under Elliott's withering regime, we watch grown professionals become despondent and distracted, stumbling over the simplest commands. Growing up in northern California shielded me from all but the most trivial discrimination growing up. At 19 I moved to Hawaii and received a reality check. The local population, which was predominantly Polynesian, generally disliked outsiders, especially Caucasians. Situations developed that were uncomfortable to say the least. Eventually, familiarity with the environment enabled me to avoid the more dangerous faux pas; unfortunately, without changing my skin color, I would never be anything but an outsider. Later I moved to Richmond California and was again the minority. Though I made some good friends, I could never quite overcome the barrier associated with my skin color. Perhaps some day, through the efforts of people like Jane Elliott, discrimination will exist only in the annals of history. In the meantime, we would do well to follow her example.