

Name: _____ Class: _____

The Blue-Eyed, Brown-Eyed Exercise

By CommonLit Staff
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After the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in April of 1968, a third-grade teacher named Jane Elliott decided to try a social experiment to help her students understand prejudice. As you read, take notes on how the teacher performed the experiment, and what its results meant for her students.

- [1] On April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated. On April 5, Steven Armstrong was the first child to arrive in Jane Elliott's third-grade classroom in Riceville, Iowa. He immediately asked why "that King" (referring to Martin Luther King, Jr.) was murdered. After the rest of the class arrived, Elliott asked what they knew about black people. She then asked the children if they would like to try an exercise to feel what it would be like to be treated the way a person of color is treated in America. Jane Elliott decided to make the exercise based on eye color instead of skin color to see what segregation would be like. The children agreed to try the exercise.



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On that first day of the exercise, she designated the blue-eyed children as the superior group. Elliott provided brown fabric collars and asked the blue-eyed students to wrap them around the necks of their brown-eyed peers as a method to easily identify the minority group. She gave the blue-eyed children extra privileges, such as second helpings at lunch, access to the new jungle gym, and five extra minutes at recess. The blue-eyed children sat in the front of the classroom, and the brown-eyed children were sent to sit in the back rows. The blue-eyed children were encouraged to play only with other blue-eyed children and to ignore those with brown eyes. Elliott would not allow brown-eyed and blue-eyed children to drink from the same water fountain, and often chastised the brown-eyed students when they did not follow the exercise's rules or made mistakes. She often exemplified the differences between the two groups by singling out students and would use negative aspects of brown-eyed children to emphasize a point.

At first, there was resistance among the students in the minority group to the idea that blue-eyed children were better than brown-eyed children. To counter this, Elliott lied to the children by stating that the melanin, responsible for making children blue-eyed, was also linked to their higher intelligence and learning ability. Shortly thereafter, this initial resistance fell away. Those who were deemed "superior" became arrogant, bossy and otherwise unpleasant to their "inferior" classmates. Their grades also improved, doing mathematical and reading tasks that seemed outside their ability before. The "inferior" classmates also transformed – into timid and subservient children who even during recess isolated themselves, including those who had previously been dominant in the class. These children's academic performance suffered, even with tasks that had been simple before.

The next Monday, Elliott reversed the exercise, making the brown-eyed children superior. While the brown-eyed children did taunt the blue-eyed in ways similar to what had occurred the previous day, Elliott reports it was much less intense. At 2:30 on that Wednesday, Elliott told the blue-eyed children to take off their collars. To reflect on the experience, she asked the children to write down what they had learned.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: In paragraph 3, what does the word “subservient” mean?
 - A. More important; high-class
 - B. Overriding; loud
 - C. Equal to; balanced
 - D. Less important; subordinate

2. PART B: Which TWO details from the text best support the answer to Part A?
 - A. “...they did not follow the exercise's rules or made mistakes.” (Paragraph 2)
 - B. “...arrogant, bossy and otherwise unpleasant...” (Paragraph 3)
 - C. “...linked to their higher intelligence and learning ability.” (Paragraph 3)
 - D. “...during recess isolated themselves...” (Paragraph 3)
 - E. “...previously been dominant in the class...” (Paragraph 3)
 - F. “...it was much less intense.” (Paragraph 4)

3. Which of the following best explains why the “superior” group of students performed better academically than the “inferior” group?
 - A. Melanin, which determines eye color, also determines intelligence and learning ability.
 - B. The “superior” group was praised and told they were more gifted, which increased their self-confidence.
 - C. The teacher, Jane Elliot, inflated the “superior” students’ grades as part of her experiment.
 - D. The “superior” students were given easier tasks to complete than the “inferior” students.

4. How do the results of the experiment contribute to Jane Elliott’s lesson to her students?
 - A. After being treated like a member of the “inferior” group, students were less inclined to treat their peers that way.
 - B. Students preferred being part of the “superior” group over the “inferior” group.
 - C. After being part of both the “superior” and “inferior” groups, students were able to better reflect on how prejudice negatively impacts individuals.
 - D. After becoming aware of their differences, students became more likely to self-segregate into their own groups.

5. What elements of Jane Elliott's exercise paralleled the experiences of African Americans during the Civil Rights Movement?

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. What are your reactions to this experiment?
2. Do you believe this experiment was ethical? Why or why not?
3. Why is it significant that this experiment was conducted with third-grade children? Explain your answer.
4. Do you believe the experiment would have turned out the same way if it had been performed with adults?
5. How does prejudice emerge? Use evidence from this text, your own experience, and other art or literature to answer this question.
6. What are the effects of prejudice? Use evidence from this text, your own experience, and other art or literature to answer this question.