

A Class Divided 1970

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Abstract

This research paper includes research, results, and summary of the psychological experiment called “A Class Divided” that Jane Elliott conducts on her third grade class. Elliott’s ingenious experiment shows how innocent and intelligent third graders can change into nasty and discriminating children in one day. After giving her class a short lesson on racism and how it is viewed by the average American citizen, Elliot introduced an activity to her students to teach them more about racism. Instead of dividing the children based on the color of their skin, Elliot separated the blue-eyed children from the brown-eyed children, stating that the blue-eyed children are dominant. At first, the blue-eyed people defended the brown-eyed people, denying their superiority. Over time, the class slowly fails to tolerate one another. Elliot successfully convinces her students of their place in hierarchy and proves that racism can be instilled in anyone for any difference.

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The Reasoning

The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. inspired Jane Elliot to explain the severity of racism to her third grade students in a way that they would understand. Jane Elliot understood that “there was no [easy] way to explain this [shooting] to little third graders” (Peters, 1985). Her students had become numb to the subject of racism because it is a topic that had been taught to them “since the first day of school” (Peters, 1985). However, when her students had come into class the day after Martin Luther King Jr. was killed, they wanted to know why someone would ever shoot someone like that. She knew that her lesson needed to be impactful. Elliot wanted her students to “understand the forces that [we]re dividing the United States” at that time (Elliott, 1970). When she was preparing for the lesson, she thought of a Native American prayer that states “O great spirit, keep me from ever judging a man until I have walked in his moccasins” (Peters, 1985). At that point, she decided that “for the next day, [she] knew that [her] children were going to walk in someone else’s [shoes], like it or lump it” (Peters, 1985). Ultimately, Elliot “deal[t] with this [experiment] in a concrete way” by “instantly [creating] a microcosm of society in a third grade classroom” (Peters, 1985).

The Experiment

Jane Elliot’s first lesson on racism was conducted in 1968, the day after Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. The experiment that was recorded and entitled “A Class Divided” took place in 1970 during Jane Elliot’s teaching of a third grade class. The day started off “business as usual” with their lessons, but Elliott believed that “part of education is having a child learn something about living beyond the text book” (Elliott, 1970). She began her lesson on racism by

talking about the meaning of National Brotherhood Week and what it means to “treat everyone as though he was your brother” (Peters, 1985). However, she changed the direction of the conversation when she began discussing how African Americans and Native Americans were not treated like brothers. To begin the exercise with her class, Elliott segregates the brown eyed children from the blue eyed children, insisting that they wouldn’t know how it felt to be treated to be judged by the color of your skin. She quickly establishes the blue eyed children’s superiority over the brown eyed children, stating that “the blue eyed people are the better than brown eyed people” (Peters, 1985). She also gives the blue eyed children special treatment by giving them five extra minutes at recess, allowing them to drink from the drinking fountain, and not allowing the brown eyed people to play with them. She also gives them navy blue pieces of cloth to tie around their collars so that they are easily distinguishable from the blue eyed people. Throughout the day, she remarks on the lack of intelligence and superiority of the brown eyed people. This form of ridiculing not only puts unsure expressions on the faces of her students, but also encouraged the blue eyed people to join in this unfair treatment. In fact, a student suggests that Mrs. Elliot can use a ruler “for when the brown eyed people get out of hand” (Peters, 1985). During lunch, Elliot lets the blue eyed people go first for lunch and does not allow the brown eyed people to go back for seconds. This experimental lesson essentially brainwashed her students into conforming to the prejudice that exists in society. Her innocent students quickly established their superiority in the classroom environment that she had created, treating those that were different as if they were “sub-human” and acting in a ways that was “so arrogant, so condescending, and so un-godly” (Peters, 1985).

The Results

This experiment shows that prejudice and racism can be instilled in the minds of even the most innocent people. This prejudice is not only based on differing skin colors, but for differences that might set someone apart from the norm such as eye color. The brown eyed people realized that “when [they] were down on the bottom, it [felt] like everything bad was happening to [them]” (Peters, 1985). The children who were mistreated noticed differences in behavior from even their best friends. Two boys even got in a fight because one boy “called [the other] names, so [he] hit him in the gut” (Peters, 1985). When engaged in arguments, the blue eyed people spoke to the brown eyed people with a tone of mockery, making fun of them for their eye color. As the day progressed, brown eyed children even began to believe the accusations and criticisms that had been made against them. The next day, Elliott declared that brown eyed people were better than blue eyed people. This not only gave blue eyed people a chance to experience the same oppression that the others had the day before, but allowed brown eyed people to thrive in an environment where they were viewed as superiors. At some point during the two-day experiment, both the brown eyed and blue eyed children get to experience that discrimination “is not funny... not fun... not pleasant” (Peters, 1985). They felt “like a dog on a leash... like you’re chaining [someone] up into prison and you’re throwing the key away” (Peters, 1985). In a time span of two days, Elliott “watched what had been marvelous, cooperative, wonderful, thoughtful children turn into nasty, vicious, discriminating little third graders” (Elliott, 1970, Peters, 1985). She “learned more from the superior children... than [she] did from the people that were considered inferior because their personalities changed even more

than the others did, whether this is what they'd like to be or that society inhibits them" (Elliott, 1970).

The Influences

The experiment influenced many things about the attitude towards discrimination. Elliott was able to teach her students that "the color of some other person's eyes [or skin] should [not] have anything to do with how [they] treat them" (Peters, 1985). This experiment influenced the way that her students thought and acted throughout National Brotherhood Week. She tells her students that her students will have the same attitude towards discrimination "today, and [that] week, and probably all the time [they are] in [her] room" (Peters, 1985). She teaches her children that they should not make fun of anyone because of the color of their skin because that is not what decides whether a person is good or not. Her students learn that "the color of the eyes that [someone] has [doesn't] make any difference in the kind of person that [they] are" (Peters, 1985). Fourteen years later, Elliott met with the students of that third grade classroom to see what they had learned. Her students had felt "demoralized, humiliated," but they realized that "the learning [was] worth the agony" (Peters, 1985). They talked about how they with they could "whip out that collar from [her] pocket and put it on them" so that they can feel what it's like (Peters, 1985). Today, Elliott's grown students "get this burning feeling and sensation to... put [people] through what [black people] went through" (Peters 1985). They realized that "everyone acts the same way, but it's the way of thinking" towards the color of their skin "that makes all the difference" (Peters, 1985). Her students learned not to "judge people by how they look, [but to]

judge people on what's on the inside and not the outside," a lesson that they will carry with them for the rest of their lives" (Peters, 1985).

References

Elliott, J. (Performer) (1970). *Eye of the storm* [Web]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FjSHOaugO-0>

Peters, W. (Producer) (1985). *A class divided* [Web]. Retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/divided/>