

# Blue Eyes Brown Eyes

*Turning the Tables  
on Prejudice*

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*An experiment carried out by a teacher on her students in a small Iowa town 45 years ago gave them a taste of what it feels like to be discriminated against and persecuted by others, teaching a lesson that remained with them for a lifetime. That watershed experiment soon became famous across the nation and remains both highly popular and highly controversial to this day.*



It was the morning of April 5, 1968, and in a classroom in Riceville, Iowa, a third grade boy marched in with a question. His face pale, he challenged the teacher in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear, "They shot that King yesterday. Why did they shoot the King?"

The "King" the boy was referring to was Martin Luther King, Jr., the charismatic leader who spearheaded the civil rights movement. The day before, he had been assassinated, and this boy had overheard adults discussing the news. Now the boy wanted to understand what had happened... and why.

The teacher, Riceville native Jane Elliott, scanned the shocked, confused faces of her students as she considered how to respond. How could she help these small-town eight-year-olds—all of them white—understand racial prejudice? Suddenly she had a brainstorm.

"Children," Elliott asked, "do you know what it feels like to be a Negro child? It is hard to imagine what a Negro feels unless you know what discrimination feels like. Do you want to know what it feels like to be discriminated against?"

The class responded "Yes, yes!" enthusiastically.

The teacher began by dividing the class into two groups. The children with blue eyes were placed on one side of the room while those with brown eyes were placed in the other. Those with blue eyes were given armbands that she made from construction paper and ordered to wear them. "The people with brown eyes are the better people in this classroom," Elliott announced. "They are cleaner and smarter."

Of course such a bold statement would require some sort of explanation if she wanted the children to accept it. She quickly came up with one that would satisfy her space-age third graders.

"Eye color, hair color and skin color are caused by a chemical," Elliott went on, writing MELANIN on the blackboard. Melanin,

she lied, is what causes intelligence. The more melanin, the darker the person's eyes—and the smarter the person.

"Brown-eyed people have more of that chemical in their eyes, so brown-eyed people are better than those with blue eyes," Elliott said. "Blue-eyed people sit around and do nothing. You give them something nice and they just wreck it."

An experienced teacher, Elliott could sense the deep divide that had suddenly formed within her class. The two groups of students eyed each other uneasily. She asked, "Tell me, children: Do blue-eyed people remember what they are taught?"

"No!" the brown-eyed students answered, more or less in unison.

The teacher instituted new rules that day. One required students with blue eyes not to drink directly from the water fountain. They had to use a paper cup instead. "Why?" one of the children wanted to know.

"Because we could catch something from them," a brown-eyed boy replied for the teacher. Elliott just nodded in agreement.

Elliott said that blue-eyed children must leave late to lunch and to recess. Blue-eyed children were not to speak to brown-eyed children. Blue-eyed children were troublemakers and slow learners.

Within 15 minutes, Elliott observed her brown-eyed students morph into youthful supremacists and blue-eyed children become uncertain and intimidated.

Throughout that day the brown-eyed children ridiculed their blue-eyed counterparts. When one blue-eyed student did not know the answer to a math question a brown-eyed called out, "What do you expect from him? He's a bluey!"

Finally, the obvious question was asked. "Teacher, how come you're the teacher if you have blue eyes?"

Yikes! Elliott was stunned, but fortunately one of the other students came to her aid. "Genius, if she wouldn't have blue eyes she would be the principal or superintendent of the school!"



King during his "I Have a Dream" speech on August 28, 1963, delivered to over 250,000 civil rights supporters from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. The speech was a defining moment of the American Civil Rights Movement.

## Surprising Effects

During lunch break Elliott mentioned to the others in the teacher's room what she was doing in class that day. Her experiment was working far more successfully than she had imagined. Some of the previously shy brown-eyed students had suddenly been transformed into outspoken class leaders.

When Elliott returned to class she discovered that her experiment had taken on a life of its own. A clever blue-eyed child who always knew all of the answers suddenly began making mistakes. He slumped down in resignation. On the other hand, the brown-eyed children listened enthusiastically to every word the teacher uttered. They had suddenly become the smartest students in the class.

As Elliott herself recalls, "Brown-eyed children became domineering and arrogant and judgmental and cool. And smart! Smart! All of a sudden, disabled readers were reading. I thought, 'This is not possible, this is my imagination.' And I watched bright, blue-eyed kids become stupid and frightened and frustrated and angry and resentful and distrustful. It was absolutely the strangest thing I'd ever experienced."

The teacher observed three brown-eyed children gang up on one of the blue-eyed students. "You'd better apologize for getting in our way," they said, "because we're better than you are!" The boy with the blue eyes apologized meekly.

When the students came back from their

weekend break the next Monday, Elliott reversed the experiment. Now the brown-eyed students heard how foolish and useless they were. The blue-eyed children were given priority treatment, including first rights to the water fountain and washroom and an extended recess. Elliott noted that the blue-eyed students did not lord it over the others as much as the brown-eyed students had the previous week. Apparently, they had felt the pain of discrimination and could not bring themselves to mistreat their classmates to the same extent.

When the teacher announced that the experiment was over some of the children cried. Others hugged each other. Elliott reminded her class that the purpose of the exercise had been to understand the King assassination. She asked each of the students to write what they had learned over the past few days. One student wrote, "I have brown eyes. I could do whatever I wanted to the children with blue eyes, the first day. I got recess for five minutes longer. I was so happy with myself. The following day when everything turned over I thought I could not bear it. I wanted to leave school and never come back. That is how it feels when someone discriminates against you."

## Kicking Up a Storm of Controversy

Elliott came home that day and described to her mother what she had done. Her mother shared the students' essays with the editor of a local newspaper who published them under the headline, "How Discrimination Feels." From there the story of the classroom exercise reached the offices of the *Associated Press* and it was soon publicized around the nation. Within a week the entire national media was talking about it.

But the wide coverage of the exercise brought a counter-reaction with it. Hundreds of parents wrote letters in protest, underscoring how shocked they were at what Elliott had done. "How dare she subject white children to