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### “A Class Divided” Reflection

During the Sixties, Martin Luther King Jr., an incredibly necessary and influential Civil Rights activist, was shot and killed, and the reaction of one teacher was unlike any other. She took an experimental approach many would deem unethical. Jane Elliott, a third-grade teacher in a small, Iowa town, told her students that melanin was what determined intelligence. She went on to tell them that blue-eyed people are better in virtually every way than people with brown eyes. This information affected everything that happened in class that Friday. Students weren't supposed to play with children of the other eye color at recess; the brown eyed weren't even allowed to use the play structure at all. Having blue eyes came with perks (five additional minutes on the playground) and having brown eyes had extra drawbacks (having to use paper cups instead of the water fountain). Some children were encouraged and praised while others were publicly criticized the the teacher they all trusted and looked up to. Although the exercise was and still is so controversial, the issues raised and impact on the participants is absolutely imperative in beginning to understand discrimination.

When discussing the activity Jane Elliott first tried with her third grade students, many people respond negatively, proposing that the experiment was unethical and unfair to the children. In actual scientific experiments, ethics are always a concern. One point is that before the exercise began, a student asked why Martin Luther King Jr. was killed. Elliott asked if the

students wanted to know what his experience as a person of color was like, she wanted her all white students to get a glimpse at what discrimination could feel like, and all the students agreed. Another approach necessary when determining whether an experiment is ethical or not, the pros and cons are weighed. How important are the results and how much harm would it do? When asking participants after the fact and much later on, everyone involved declares how wildly important the exercise was and they're all so appreciative of it. The learning experience and perspective shift that came from the exercise is more important than the discomfort the children experienced for only a day, especially when people of color and other minorities experience that discrimination and more acts of oppression on a daily basis spanning their whole life without any say at all.

Something I found interesting—and honestly refreshing—was how vocal the children were against the injustice. When the exercise was performed with adults, the supposed inferior group was quiet; rarely did someone speak up or step out of line, and if or when someone did, the rest of the members of that group remained submissive. The young students were much more naive and hadn't yet learned why people remain silent (safety in numbers, fear of consequences) so they complained and pointed out what was wrong and why in such innocent and straightforward ways. If something felt unfair, they expressed that.

However many of the children took the provided superiority to such a dramatic degree, overcome by the new sense of power and confidence. Later, when reflecting on the experience, one of the former students said that all of the built up anger towards whatever person had become justified; this new title became an outlet for expressing any negative feelings that had developed for any other individual. During school that day, if a brown eyed student made a

mistake (as everyone did), it was said to be because of their eye color—they were called out for being just a stupid brown eyes. This phenomenon absolutely reflects what happens every day where the only things that are acknowledged are actions that support someone's preconceived identity of someone else based on their image, reinforcing those ideas. Rather than seeing individuals as individuals, people are seen only as members of a certain group, recognizing only the things that are in line with traits associated with that group. The confidence boost that came with being superior or not also affected performance of the students dramatically. Children who had once been outgoing or had no problem with multiplication had suddenly become defeated, submissive, hesitant, and stumbled over things. Self-fulfilling prophecies were implemented in a dichotomized, segregated way, mimicking those outside this small classroom.

The exercise has been tried numerous times after this first classroom experience, proving to be impactful every time. The children involved in Jane Elliott's class undoubtedly learned something about what prejudice feels like, what the taunting and teasing is like, what's it's like to be judged based only on one arbitrary trait. The next Monday, the activity was done in reverse, with the class being told that their teacher had originally lied, in fact brown eyes were much better. The brown eyed children were definitely mean to the now inferior group, of course eager to show them what it's like, however Elliott reported that they weren't nearly as mean as the blue eyes had been first, most likely because they knew how deeply hurt it had made them, not wanting to inflict it on others. If the activity these children were put through for a couple days is unethical, then how minority groups are treated absolutely is too, arguably much more so. After experiencing firsthand even a taste of how real racism is and can feel day to day, people are

much less judgemental, understanding the injustice that comes with viewing things only in line with an image or specific idea, more empathetic to people facing different circumstances.