

A CLASS DIVIDED—JANE ELLIOTT'S FAMOUS LESSON



1 On the day after Martin Luther King Jr. was **murdered** in April 1968, Jane Elliott's third-graders from the small, all-white town of Riceville, Iowa, came to class confused and upset. They recently had made King their "Hero of the Month," and they couldn't understand why someone would kill him. So Elliott decided to teach her class a **daring** lesson in the meaning of discrimination.¹ She wanted to show her pupils what discrimination feels like, and what it can do to people.

2 Elliott divided her class by eye color—those with blue eyes and those with brown. On the first day,

¹ **discrimination**: the practice of treating one group of people differently from another in an unfair way

the blue-eyed children were told they were smarter, nicer, neater,² and better than those with brown eyes. Throughout the day, Elliott praised³ them and allowed them **privileges** such as taking a longer recess⁴ and being first in the lunch line. **In contrast**, the brown-eyed children had to wear collars around their necks, and their behavior and performance were criticized by Elliott. On the second day, the roles were **reversed**, and the blue-eyed children were made to feel **inferior**.

(continued on next page)

² **neater**: more organized

³ **praised**: said publicly that someone has done something well

⁴ **recess**: a time when children are allowed to go outside to play during the school day

3 What happened over the course of the **unique** two-day exercise **astonished** both students and teacher. On both days, children who were assigned to the inferior group took on the look and behavior of inferior students, performing poorly on tests and other work. In contrast, the “superior” students—students who had been sweet and **tolerant** before the exercise—became mean-spirited⁵ and seemed to like discriminating against the “inferior” group.

4 “I watched what had been marvelous, cooperative, wonderful,

⁵ *mean-spirited*: angry and unpleasant

thoughtful children turn into nasty,⁶ **vicious**, discriminating little third-graders in a space of 15 minutes,” says Elliott. She says she realized then that she had “created a microcosm⁷ of society in a third-grade classroom.”

5 Elliott said that after this exercise, when the pain was over and they were all back together, that the kids said they felt like a family. “They found out how to hurt one another and they found out how it feels to be hurt in that way and they refused to hurt one another in that way again.”

⁶ *nasty*: very mean, cruel

⁷ *microcosm*: a miniature copy of something

COMPREHENSION

A Main Ideas

Circle the correct answer.

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|--------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Elliott's third-graders | a lot about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. |
| 2. Elliott decided to have her class | discrimination. |
| 3. Elliott's lesson lasted two | |
| 4. The children | the collars were treated badly. |
| 5. The third-graders | behaved in a positive way before the lesson. |
| 6. The children | how it felt to cause and experience pain. |

B Close Reading

Complete the sentences by matching the two columns. Compare answers with a partner.

- | | |
|--|--|
| _____ 1. The children wearing the collars | a. got more time to play. |
| _____ 2. The children <u>not</u> wearing the collars | b. feel less intelligent. |
| _____ 3. The collars made the children | c. like a family again after the lesson. |
| _____ 4. The children's behavior | d. were treated unfairly by Elliott. |
| _____ 5. The children felt | e. changed very fast. |