

A Guide to *THE EYE OF THE STORM*

In *The Eye of the Storm* a classroom situation is deliberately created to teach third graders how it feels to be on the receiving end of discrimination.

This documentary explores the nature of prejudice in a dramatic third-grade classroom experiment conducted in a small Midwestern town in the United States - a town without Ghettos, blacks or campus unrest. It demonstrates how quickly wholesome, friendly schoolchildren can be infected with the ugly virus of discrimination that leads to frustration, broken friendships and vicious behavior.

Synopsis

Jane Elliott, a teacher in the nearly all-white farming community of Riceville, Iowa, is deeply disturbed by the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. When one of her third grade students remarks "They shot a King. Why did they shoot a King?", Mrs. Elliott decides to help her students experience the pain of discrimination.

She divides the class into two groups, based on eye color – the blue-eyed children and the brown-eyed children. She explains that blue-eyed children are more intelligent, better behaved, quicker to learn, and in every way superior to brown-eyed children. To call attention to the "inferior" brown-eyed children, the blue-eyed youngsters are told to place a collar around the neck of each brown-eyed child in the class. The brown-eyed children must wear these collars all day.

The "superior" blue-eyed children enjoy the exclusive privileges of sitting at the front of the class, using playground equipment, drinking from the fountain (brown-eyes must use paper cups), going to recess first, eating lunch first, etc.

This unjust treatment causes striking behavior changes in both sets of children. Happy to be on top, the blue-eyed children act superior and aggressive. The brown-eyed children become unbelieving, unhappy, and finally want revenge.

The next day Mrs. Elliott explains that she had lied the day before. Blue-eyed children aren't really superior; the brown-eyed children are. After all, Mrs. Elliott has blue eyes herself, and she admitted to lying. The children accept her explanation, and collars are placed around the necks of the blue-eyed children. Behavior becomes more vicious, leading to name-calling and a fistfight between a blue-eyed boy and a brown-eyed boy.

At the end of the second day, Mrs. Elliott confesses to the children what she has done and why. She then leads them in a discussion of their experiences. When the class understands what happened, relief gushes out. The children become animated, friendly, and happy. They join in singing a song, their arms around their friends – but one boy stands over the wastebasket, emotionally involved in tearing up his collar.

During the experiment, Mrs. Elliott learns more from the "superior" children, whose behavior she classifies as "ghastly". She notes that ability to perform in the classroom

changes according to whether the children are “superior” or “inferior” on that day. Children wearing collars take twice as long to read phonic materials from a card pack. Afterward they explain they “couldn’t concentrate” on schoolwork when they were so unhappy.

The class is freed from the prison of prejudice, but this is a lesson they will never forget. Fourteen years later, the children return to discuss how this exercise has affected their entire lives – this session is filmed in *A Class Divided*. While the children are easily freed from the prison of prejudice, countless other people remain in that prison – the bitter, enduring lesson of *The Eye of the Storm*.

Facilitator’s Notes for *The Eye of the Storm*

- Introduce yourself and welcome participants (if you don’t already know each other)
- Set the context and explain the objectives
- Let the participants introduce themselves
- Establish groundrules to create a supportive learning environment
- Introduce and show *The Eye of the Storm*
- Discuss the video and draw parallels with racism and other “isms”
- Consider action to challenge discriminatory treatment
- Introduce yourself and welcome participants (if you don’t already know each other)

Objective:

To recognize discrimination and understand the ways it affects those who discriminate as well as those who are discriminated against.

Materials:

“The Eye of the Storm” or “A Class Divided” video

Method:

Large group viewing

Small group work

Large group discussion

Before Viewing

Depending on objectives, you might introduce the film to your participants with questions such as:

- Do children instinctively hate people different from themselves?
- Can a society be taught to hate? Can you think of some examples of this in history? In our society today?
- Do you think that some races of people are biologically superior to others? Explain.
- What is prejudice? Is it learned? Who teaches it? If you think it is taught, why is it taught?

Explain to the participants that they are about to view a film of an actual classroom exercise where children are taught to be prejudiced. Suggest they note especially how the behavior of the children changes. Divide the participants into three groups.

- Ask the first group of participants to focus on the body language, words and behavior of the children when they are encouraged to discriminate;
- Ask the second group of participants to focus on the body language, words and behavior of the children when they are discriminated against;
- Ask the third group of participants to focus on the role of the teacher during the exercise.

To further focus their viewing, you can ask the participants to focus on a particular child and follow her/his reactions throughout the exercise.

If you need to save time, start the video as the children “Pledge allegiance to the flag...” and stop it after “dog on a leash”.

After Viewing

Discussion topics include:

- The body language, words and behavior of the children when they are encouraged to discriminate;
- Most of the children believed what the teacher told them
- They accepted that they should be treated differently as they were “superior” and others “inferior”, eg, have an extra 5 minutes for recess; “leave the yardstick on your desk” (to use should the ‘brown eyes’ get out of hand)
- ‘Brown eyed’ became a derogatory term.
 - Russell is asked whether he is using the term “... to be funny or to be mean” (“I was only joking” is sometimes given as an explanation/excuse by people using offensive language)
 - Roy is asked “What’s wrong with being called ‘brown-eyes?’” He replies “It means that we’re stupider and – well, not that...” “Oh, that’s just the same as other people calling black people ‘niggers!’”
- All the children performed better in the test when they were in the superior group because, as their teacher had told them they were “...better and smarter” they were more confident about themselves and their abilities. They lived up to her expectation of them. The way they performed when they were in the superior group is the way they should have been performing all the time.
- One of the children, Brian, did not believe what Jane Elliott said because his father was brown-eyed. However, she “sowed the seeds of doubt” by reminding him that his father had kicked him in the past whereas blue-eyed fathers did not do such things, as several of

his classmates testified, quickly aligning themselves with the teacher. He was thus marginalized and silenced.

- While several of the children in the ‘superior’ group vocally supported the teacher, thus aligning themselves with the ‘power’, the majority chose to stay quiet and Brian got no support. (Compare with ‘whistleblowers’- which has become weighted negatively in a similar way to the ‘brown-eyed’ on the first day of the exercise – who highlight bad practice but can then find they are isolated because everyone else is either voicing support for the power group or ‘carpet gazing’ to avoid drawing attention to themselves and avoid being associated with ‘trouble’).

- Note the body language, words and behavior of the children when they are discriminated against:

- They lost confidence when in the ‘inferior’ group and performed badly on the test;

- John hit Russell for taunting him as a ‘brown-eyed’;

- On the second day, when, in frustration, Brian, who was then in the ‘inferior’ group, banged his elbows on his desk, the teacher used this as yet another illustration of poor behavior typical of people in his group.

- Comment on the speed with which the children took on the roles assigned to them – 15 minutes. They were not role playing. They became the “...nasty, vicious, discriminating little third graders...” and/or “withdrawn unhappy and unable to perform academically”. Some participants may be concerned that children were experimented on in this way. It was not an experiment but an exercise which had long term positive effects on the children, not only in their understanding of racism and equity issues but also in terms of their own self-esteem and self-belief. After the exercise they had a new-found confidence in themselves and their overall performance improved. This was confirmed using data gathered from their scores in pre and post-exercise tests. Jane Elliott notes that Philip Zimbardo of Stanford University posited this conclusion, but as there was no control group, the conclusion could not be considered research.

Sometimes participants say that putting children through an exercise which introduces discrimination where it had not previously existed, is cruel and that it should not have been allowed.

- Remind them that for the children in the video it was an exercise for two days that, they acknowledge themselves, taught them a valuable lesson. That lesson has stayed with them all their lives and had a positive impact not only on their behavior but also on the way they have raised their children. For some children that exercise is their whole life. What are the participants doing about that?

- Jane also considers the exercise ‘an injection of the live virus of racism’. Many parents vaccinate children against serious illnesses knowing that doing so may make them ill for a short time to protect them in the future. Participating in the blue-eyed, brown-eyed

exercise allows people to understand and recognize racism and its negative effects so that they can challenge it and other 'isms' more confidently whenever they encounter them in the future.

Also, point out that, at the time, Riceville was all white and all Christian. Despite that, the children knew who was treated unfairly in society. They knew that 'brotherhood' meant: "Treat everyone the way you would like to be treated. Treat everyone as though he was your brother". Yet in response to the teacher's question "Is there anyone in the United States we do not treat as our brothers?" they immediately responded with "black people" and "Indians". This, it is not necessary for black people to be present for racism to be an issue.

The Role of the Teacher

- The teacher set up the system and its parameters at the outset;
- To support and illustrate her argument that "...blue-eyed people were better...", she asks them to think about the color of eyes of a "hero". She specifically selects one with blue-eyes, George Washington, as this reinforces her message of superiority;
- She frequently highlighted the actions or characteristics of a specific child in line with their assigned status, inferring that they indicated a broad generalization throughout that 'group', eg, "Everyone ready? Everyone but Laurie." Another child is heard to say "She's a brown-eyed." The teacher then adds "You'll find we spend a lot of time waiting for brown-eyed people." Speaking to John after she has coached him until he can write neatly on the blackboard: "That's beautiful writing. Brown-eyed people learn fast, don't they?"

Summarize

The exercise clearly shows the 'anatomy of prejudice'. Jane Elliott, the authority figure, used her position as teacher to:

- Identify a group of children by a characteristic over which they have no control – eye color;
- Discriminate against them and lower her expectations of them;
- Force them, by her discriminatory treatment, to look and act inferior;
- When they behaved negatively because of the discriminatory treatment, blame their poor behavior on their eye color and refused to recognize it as a reaction to the discriminatory treatment;
- Despite the fact that the majority of the children were passive throughout the exercise, use the examples of negative behavior to stereotype the 'group' and justify further discriminatory treatment;

- Deny that she was discriminating against them;
- Racism – and other ism’s – works in the same systematic way. In this society, white people and black people are conditioned to the myth of white superiority and, by definition, to the myth of the inferiority of those who are other than white. Laws and policies support the system.
- People’s prejudices can be hurtful but it is their discriminatory behavior that maintains racism in society. Negative behavior in response to such treatment is sometimes used in stereotypical ways to reinforce prejudices and justify further discriminatory treatment.
- Make clear to participants that **negative behaviors are not the result of a genetic predisposition!** Even scientists agree that there are more differences within any of the so-called ‘races’ than between them. **This video shows that it is discriminatory treatment that leads to the negative behaviors that are often cited to characterize people in less powerful groups.**
- In fact **there are as many differences in any group as there are in any other group, including your own, however you choose to define your group.** It is easier to recognize stereotypes about our own group as stereotypes because we are fully aware of the diversity within it. Where we have little personal experience or knowledge of a particular group that may not be the case and therefore our views are more likely to be influenced by specific experiences from which we may make broad generalizations, or information from other sources, ie media, etc., which may be selective and subjective.
- Still in large group, ask for and answer any questions.
- Ask participants to draw parallels between the eye color exercise in the video and the skin color exercise (and other ‘isms’) in their organization and society. What can they do to challenge discriminatory treatment?
- Share a few examples (depending on time available) and encourage them to commit to at least one action point to make a positive difference.

Discussion topics include (if you have time):

- Do you sometimes make judgments about others that you think are really prejudiced?
- Can you suggest ways to reduce prejudice?• What do you think should be done in to encourage appreciation of others as individuals, without prejudice because of race, religion or nationality?
- Why did Mrs. Elliott claim she learned more from the “superior” children?
- What are the implications of being under emotional stress while trying to learn or to work? What is the responsibility of schools and corporations in this regard? Of the church? Of the family?
- Do you agree with Mrs. Elliott’s claim that “Children have to find out ... They have to be involved... They have to know how it feels to be stepped on.” Why?

- What do you think will happen if prejudice and discrimination continue unchanged in our society?
- Jane Elliott believes that discrimination is institutionalized racism, and that those without power cannot discriminate. Do you agree with this, or do you believe that minority groups can discriminate against majority groups? If so, explain how discrimination works from your point of view.

Follow Up Activities

- Make a list of examples of prejudice that your participants i) have experienced themselves; or ii) have learned about from radio, TV or reading.
 - Read “Lord of the Flies”. Discuss the possibility that without rules of a society to guide and protect them, young children would become savage, cruel and primitive.
 - Role Playing: Act out the following roles: i) Black policeman trying to break up a crowd of white demonstrators. ii) White policemen doing the same with black demonstrators; and iii) situations invented by your participants to reveal attitudes and emotions about discrimination.
- Divide your participants into groups by religion, color, sex, nationality. Ask each group to list the five things they most want in life. Compare the lists of the groups. Do they have anything in common? What?**