

A Guide to *A CLASS DIVIDED*

A Class Divided is the classic documentary on third-grade teacher Jane Elliott's "blue eyes/brown eyes" exercise, originally conducted in the days following the assassination of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968. This guide is designed to help you use the film to engage participants in reflection and dialogue about the historical role of racism in the United States, as well as the role of prejudice and stereotyping in participants' lives today.

Because the film deals with racism and prejudice, it may raise deep emotions for both you and your participants. Some participants may be confronted with privilege for the first time while others may see an affirmation of a lifetime of discrimination. As you see in the film, frustration, anger, and pain are not uncommon responses to being confronted with bias and inequity. To prepare yourself, plan to spend some time viewing and reflecting on the film by yourself or with trusted colleagues, family, or friends before teaching it. That way you won't be processing your own raw emotions while also trying to help participants deal with their own potentially intense reactions.

A NOTE TO FACILITATORS:

It is not essential, but it would be helpful if participants were familiar with the historical context in which Jane Elliott first conducted the blue eyes/brown eyes exercise. Depending on your participants' prior knowledge, this could take a few minutes or an entire class period.

- Review the events surrounding the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. What were the key political divisions and issues in the U.S. in 1968? What were the central demands and divisions of the civil rights movement? What role did Martin Luther King Jr. play?
- Compare census reports from 1970 and 2000. What changes have occurred in the racial make-up of your community, your state, and the United States? (Note: Census information is available at <http://www.census.gov>.)

Participants should also be familiar with the dictionary definitions of the terms below. Discussions or debates about these definitions can be conducted after viewing.

discrimination

merit

prejudice

*privilege

race

*racism

stereotype

- Here are some **definitions and discussion prompts** for these * words.

Some people argue that racism is primarily a belief or attitude and that anyone who unfairly judges another based on race is racist. Others argue that racism is about action and systemic discrimination, so only those with the power to act, and not those who are the targets of discrimination, can be racist. Which argument do you find convincing and why? Is there a difference between racism and prejudice? If so, what is the difference?

Consider the following definitions. What are the differences between them? How do they compare with the dictionary definition of "racism"? How might some people benefit and others be hurt from the use of one definition over another?

"Racism couples the false assumption that race determines psychological and cultural traits with the belief that one race is superior to another."

--A World of Difference project of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai Brith

"Racism is any attitude, action, or institutional structure which subordinates a person or group because of skin color."

--U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1970

"We define racism as an institutionalized system of economic, political, social, and cultural relations that ensures that one racial group has and maintains power and privilege over all others in all aspects of life. Individual participation in racism occurs when the objective outcome of behavior reinforces these relations, regardless of the subjective intent."

--Carol Brunson Phillips and Louise Derman-Sparks in *Teaching/Learning Anti-Racism: A Developmental Approach*, (Teachers College Press, 1997)

One of the goals of the civil rights movement was to ensure equal opportunity for every U.S. citizen, irrespective of race. When the civil rights movement began, the legal system did not grant the same rights to blacks and other minorities as it did to whites. Today, those laws have been changed, leading some to argue that the U.S. has achieved a level playing field for all. Is the field level? Is success based exclusively on merit and luck, or is race-based "privilege" still a factor? How was affirmative action policy crafted to

address issues of privilege? Has it been successful?

Consider the following definitions. What are the differences between them? How do they compare with the dictionary definition of "privilege"?

- "unearned power conferred systemically"

(Source: Peggy McIntosh, 1995)

- **white privilege** (hwait 'privilidz), *social relation*, [ad. L. *privilegi-um* a bill or law in favor of or against an individual.]

- 1. a.** A right, advantage, or immunity granted to or enjoyed by the class of white persons beyond the common advantage of all others; an exemption in many particular cases from certain burdens or liabilities.
b. In extended sense: A special advantage or benefit of white persons; with ideological reference to divine dispensations, natural advantages, gifts of fortune, genetic endowments, social relations, etc.

- 2.** A privileged position; the possession of an advantage white persons enjoy over non-whites and white individuals enjoy over non-white individuals.

- 3. a.** The special right or immunity attaching to white persons as a social relation; prerogative.

- b.** *display of white privilege*, a social expression of a white person or persons demanding to be treated as a member or members of the socially privileged class.

- (Source: [The Monkeyfist Collective](#))

VIEWING THE DOCUMENTARY:

The film includes three major segments. The footage of the original documentary of Jane Elliott's third-graders (approximately 20 minutes), the reunion of those third-graders 14 years later (approximately 7 minutes), and the training exercise with prison staff (approximately 20 minutes). You can view the film in its entirety, or view the first two segments in one class period and the third segment in the next class.

To encourage active viewing, you may want to give participants a specific task to do during the film. For example, you might ask them to listen for a particular issue or the answers to a set of questions, or take notes in preparation for one of the post-viewing activities.

You may also wish to make participants aware that the film shows segments of Elliott leading her class and prison staffers through the exercise. These segments contain key information that is not necessarily highlighted by pauses, editing, or comments from the narrator. It might be especially helpful to have students watch for these key moments and instruct you to briefly pause the tape when they think they've seen one. Key moments might include noticing peoples' body language,

Elliott's de-construction of her students' fight, or the change in participants' performance on their flashcard exercise. Pause just long enough for them to describe what they have seen; save extended discussion for later so you don't unduly interrupt the flow of the film.

AFTER VIEWING THE DOCUMENTARY:

Participants will be afforded the opportunity to reflect on the issues raised in the film.

Time: Flexible.

In a journal free-write or discussion immediately following viewing, ask participants to consider any or all of the following:

General Reactions

- What did you learn?
- What scene or scenes do you think you'll still remember a month from now and why those scenes?
- Did any part of the film surprise you? Do you think someone of a different race, ethnicity, or religion would also find it surprising?

Following Up on the Pre-Viewing Questions

- How was the exercise that Elliott designed a response to the children's question, "Why would anyone want to murder Martin Luther King?" Did the film provide an answer to the question? Can you answer the question?
- Census categories have changed over time to reflect the complexities of American demographics and identities. Consider how some of the following groups experience racism differently:
 - People who are bi- or multi-racial.
 - People who have black skin, but are from very different places (e.g., a 13th generation descendant of African slaves, a recent immigrant from Jamaica, a third generation Cuban, a political refugee from Somalia, etc.).
 - People "of color" who are not black (e.g., Asians, Pacific Islanders, Latino/as, etc.)

Impact of Discrimination

- What did the children's body language indicate about the impact of discrimination?
- How did the negative and positive labels placed on a group become self-fulfilling prophecies?
- In the prison seminar, one of the white women asserts that all people face some kind of discrimination. Another woman challenges her, claiming that whites can't really know what it's like to face discrimination every minute of every day. What do you think?
- Both Elliott and her former students talk about whether or not this exercise should be done with all children. What do you think? If the exercise could be harmful to children, as Elliott suggests, what do you think actual discrimination might do?

Looking at the Structures that Nurture Bias

- What features did Elliott ascribe to the superior and inferior groups and how did those characteristics reflect stereotypes about blacks and whites?
- How did Elliott's discrimination create no-win situations for those placed in the inferior group? How did she selectively interpret behavior to confirm the stereotypes she had assigned?
- It's easy to understand why third-graders might not refuse to obey their teacher, but when the exercise is done with the prison guards, why don't any of the adults object?

Looking for Answers

- At recess, two of the boys from different groups get in a fight. Elliott asks the one who was teased if responding with violence made him feel better or made the teasing stop. What does the answer suggest about the use of violence as a political strategy? At the time, who was using violence for political purposes and why?
- How is the blue eyes/brown eyes exercise related to the Sioux prayer, "Help me not judge a person until I have walked in his shoes"?

Participants will deepen their understanding of privilege and assess where they stand in relation to privileges granted to white-skinned people in a racist society.

Time Estimate: 80 minutes

Briefly review the kinds of privileges that Jane Elliott created for her third-graders. Things like extra recess time, getting to go back for seconds at lunch, and being first in line were fitting rewards for her 8 year olds. To explore what kinds of privileges exist in the adult world, assign participants to read Peggy McIntosh's classic article "**Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack**," available at http://www.departments.bucknell.edu/res_colleges/socjust/Readings/McIntosh.html.

Instruct them to pay special attention to McIntosh's checklist and to use the checklist as self-reflection, asking "Can you count on this?" A "yes" answer scores 1 point. For a "no," subtract 1 point. Score nothing for "does not apply to me." The higher the score, the greater the degree of privilege one has in the context of living in the United States today.

(Note: The checklist was written for an adult audience. You may want to edit or delete items that could not apply to students.)

After participants have read the article and scored themselves on the checklist, encourage them to share their reactions. Were they surprised by their score, or did it confirm what they already knew? Why is privilege normally invisible and what does it feel like to make it visible? If you have an integrated group, was the exercise different for white participants than for participants of color? For black participants than for Asian, Indian, Latino/a participants, or other participants of color?

Continue the discussion by asking for opinions on McIntosh's argument that the word "privilege" is misleading.

Conclude the discussion by relating what McIntosh says to Jane Elliott's explanations in the documentary of why she created the blue eyes/brown eyes activity. How are they connected? How are they different?

As an extension, you might want to have participants examine how white privilege has influenced and continues to influence life in other countries. Places that have been colonized by whites, such as South Africa or India, would be good places to begin.

Ask participants to summarize McIntosh's article in one or two sentences and add one of their own conditions to McIntosh's checklist.

Participants will understand the prerequisite conditions for meritocracy and assess whether or not those conditions exist (or have ever existed) in the U.S.

Time: 30 minutes

Introduce the term "meritocracy" and explain that through much of American history, schools, churches and the government have promoted the notion that anyone who works hard enough can achieve the American dream. Ask participants to evaluate this notion in light of the testing results they see in the film, where third-graders perform better on a phonics task when they are in the group labeled superior than when those same students are in the group designated as inferior.

Then ask participants to compare and contrast, either in writing or as part of class discussion, the quote below with the mythical rags-to-riches heroes of Horatio Alger's novels, whose perseverance, hard work, and integrity were always rewarded with financial success.

"An understanding of racism as a system of advantage presents a serious challenge to the notion of the United States as a just society where rewards are based solely on one's merits." Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Harvard Educational Review* (Spring 1992, p. 6)

Conclude the discussion with a review of historical instances in which groups of Americans have been prevented from achieving Horatio Alger-style success (e.g., forcible removal of Indians onto reservations, slavery, internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, red-lining neighborhoods to keep out Jews or people of color, etc.). Ask participants to think of examples in their own school or community.

As an extension, you might want to have participants use what they learn about meritocracy to conduct a debate on current laws governing affirmative action, the movement to require passing a standardized test to be promoted to the next grade or graduate from high school, or the use of tracking in schools.

Participants should be able to define "meritocracy," and use what they know about racial,

religious, and ethnic discrimination to make a case that the United States is or is not a "meritocracy."

Participants will:

- think about the impact of word choice;
- consider whether or not racism is embedded in the phrases they use, hear, or read.

Time: 30 minutes

Share with participants the following quote:

"Cultural racism is racism that is so much a part of the mainstream culture that it looks 'normal.' It outlives any single individual and pervades the thinking, speech, and actions of whole groups of people. In the English language, for example, many of our positive definitions and connotations of the word white and negative connotations of the word black reinforce notions of white superiority and black inferiority." Source: BURGEST, 1973, cited in Frances Kendall, *Diversity in the Classroom*, 1996)

Divide participants into small groups and assign them to test the author's assertion by brainstorming a list of words and phrases that includes the words "black," "dark," "white," and "light," and then sorting the list into "positive," "negative," or "neutral" columns. Examples might include things like "blacklisted," "black market," or "white lie."

If time allows, participants might investigate the origins of the words and phrases on their list. For additional background, you might have students read and discuss Robert B. Moore's article, "Racism in the English Language" in *Beyond Heroes and Holidays*.

Ask participants to discuss the power of language and the choice of words and whether or not they think that continuing to use things on their "negative" list is racist.

Ask each group to share their list and compile the results into one large list. A group's ability to generate examples of words and phrases should be considered evidence that they understand the concept of subtle meaning.

Participants will:

- see that they have the capacity to do something to combat racism;
- choose one or more actions to try;
- learn what others are already doing in their community.

Time: 40-60 minutes, more if you choose to bring in a guest speaker, plus an additional 80 minutes for evaluation if you have participants present their work to one another.

The final chapter of "One America in the 21st Century," the 1998 report of President Bill Clinton's Initiative on Race, chaired by John Hope Franklin, lists **10 things that every American should do to promote racial reconciliation**. Review the list with your participants. Add anything they think is missing.

Use the Internet, phone book, and/or community or campus diversity specialists to help participants identify which actions are already being taken in their school or community and to facilitate participants' volunteering for organizations of interest to them. If time allows, you might want to invite guest speakers from relevant groups to describe what their group does. Ask each participant to check off those things they think they could do and to commit to try at least one item in the list.

Ask participants to report on what they did, how it felt, whether or not they think they were successful (and why), and whether they think the impact will be lasting (either on themselves or on others). Reports can be given only to you or to the entire group, depending on time constraints. Consider allowing for flexibility in reporting format, e.g., written, oral, videotape, webpage or multimedia report, etc.

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