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Why Jane Elliott's Blue Eyes/Brown Eyes Racism Exercise Is So Powerful

By: [John Donovan](#) | Jul 1, 2020



Educator Jane Elliott has been using her Blue Eyes/Brown Eyes exercise to teach about racism for more than 50 years.

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For the past 52 years, teacher and diversity trainer [Jane Elliott](#) has been constantly cuffing people about the head — figuratively speaking — on the subject of racism. It's not pretty when the straight-talking Midwesterner launches into her from-the-heart harangue on the evils of racial discrimination. It can be uncomfortable, even — squirm-in-your-seat, stare-at-your-shoes uncomfortable — when she subjects someone to the very same exercise she first unleashed on third graders more than a half-century ago, designed to expose racist thinking. Some think her method can get [downright mean](#).

But, again: The subject is racism. Nothing about it is pretty.

"You think that's traumatizing?" Elliott says of her in-your-face educational methods, which have been alternately vilified and celebrated through the years. "Try living that way for a lifetime."



Many of the students from Elliott's Riceville, Iowa, third-grade class say that original experiment left a profound impact on them.

JANE ELLIOTT

Blue Eyes, Brown Eyes Exercise

Elliott came to prominence when, the day after the assassination of [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) in 1968, she took her classroom of all-white third graders in Riceville, Iowa, and decided to teach them what it was like to face discrimination. She separated the kids into two groups — those with brown eyes and those with blue — and proceeded to proclaim the brown eyes the "superior" group. She allowed the group extra privileges (more time at recess, seats in the front of the room). They were told they were cleaner. Smarter. More talented.

How the children reacted to this newfound pecking order was startling. The brown-eyed group immediately began to wield their dominance. The blue-eyed almost immediately slipped into the role of subordinates. Anger flared. Disputes popped up.

After switching roles a few days later, which gave both sides of the classroom a taste of being the "lesser" group, the exercise ended. Many parents, after reading about what happened in Elliott's classroom through student essays printed in the local paper, complained. A month or so later, Johnny Carson invited Elliott to appear on his late-night talk show. She became a national story.

Many praised her efforts at opening her students' eyes. But not everybody. From a 2005 story in [Smithsonian Magazine](#):

Hundreds of viewers wrote letters saying Elliott's work appalled them. "How dare you try this cruel experiment out on white children," one said. "Black children grow up accustomed to such

behavior, but white children, there's no way they could possibly understand it. It's cruel to white children and will cause them great psychological damage."

Elliott taught for years before she decided to take her anti-racism lesson out of the classroom and into corporate America. She's also led the exercise for the U.S. Department of Education and other governmental groups. She's appeared before numerous church and school assemblies. She often faces uncomfortable, sometimes angry, reactions.

She was on Oprah Winfrey's TV show several times. In June 2020, she appeared on [The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon](#). Her goal, as it has been for the past 52 years, is education. It's the best weapon against racism, she says.

Education on Racism

But good education about racism and race is hard to find.

"Because the educators believe the same thing that they were taught, and they were taught the same thing that I was, which is that there are three or four different races and you can tell what a man's intelligence is by the color of his skin or the shape of his head," says Elliott from her home in Iowa. "You can't lead people out of ignorance if you're still teaching that Columbus discovered America and we came here to civilize these savages.

"We need to teach the three Rs of Rights, Respect and Responsibility," she says, barely taking a breath. "If teachers would respect the rights of those students to learn the truth, and be held responsible for seeing that they present them with the truth, we could kill racism in two generations. There's not a doubt in my mind that that could be done."

For all of her life, Elliott, 87, has seen America grapple with racism. She's marked major mileposts in the struggle over the past 50 or so years: the [Civil Rights movement](#) and the assassination of King in the '60s. The race riots in [Miami's Liberty City](#) in 1980 and in Los Angeles after the Rodney King beating in 1992.

Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014 (the killing of Michael Brown). Baltimore (Freddie Brown) and Charleston, South Carolina, (a church massacre) in 2015. There are many others.

But the problem she has been relentlessly attacking, Elliott says, goes far beyond the occasional race-based flareup. For people of color in the U.S., facing down racism is an everyday fight. Every minute of every day. It's exhausting.

"It's only been going on with me for 52 years," Elliott says. "I know black women who have been doing this for 89 years, and their mothers did and their grandmothers did and their great-grandmothers did. And their daughters and their granddaughters and their great-granddaughters are going to have to do it unless we get off our polyunsaturated fatty acids and do something about this.

"I get paid to talk about it. They aren't even allowed to talk about it."



Jane Elliott, seen here, is the recipient of the National Mental Health Association Award for Excellence in Education for her work exposing prejudice and bigotry.

JANE ELLIOTT

Challenges to Ending Racism

One of the biggest hurdles in educating people about racism in the United States, Elliott says, is that most everyone knows it exists and knows that it's harmful, but few are motivated to change it. She has stood in front of classes and asked who among the white people in the room would want to switch places with a Black person. No one ever volunteers.

But in 2020, after a lifetime of trying to teach people that humans are one race, that all human life springs from Africa, and that the separation of humans into races **has no biological basis** and is used only for various (often nefarious) societal reasons, Elliott sees some small signs of promise, maybe a faint sign of movement.

"I think the killing of George Floyd forced people of the pale-faced variety to recognize that the things that Black people have been describing as happening to them every day were finally real for us. Finally," she says. "It was in their face, and they finally had to admit that they have been denying, or ignoring, or justifying what has happened to Black males all these years."

But in the next breath, Elliott cautions that recognizing the problem is only the first step. Correcting it still must be done. And with the current racial tensions in the United States, exacerbated (she believes) by the current president, things could get even worse.

"Those who forget the mistakes of the past are doomed to repeat them.' And we are repeating. We are repeating," she says. "I'm seeing this happen, I watch the news, and I go downtown, and oh my god, they're replicating the blue eyes, brown eyes exercise in the national sphere. I can't believe it."

Still, Elliott is nothing if not persistent. She will continue to educate "for the next 50 years," she says. She will push her mantra of "[one race](#)." And she says, she will urge people to get out and vote this November in the hope of electing leaders who will attack racism, as she has, head on.

"There'll be hope after the November election," she says. "That's the only hope we have right now."

A Class Divided (full documentary) | FRONTLINE



Now That's Interesting

The biggest words on Elliott's website are the top headline: [One Race](#). The science behind the simple words is clear. According to the National Human Genome Research Institute, your genome — the body's blueprint that contains all of your DNA — is [99.9 percent the same](#) as every human around you.

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