

**Ethical Dilemma**

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As a third-grade teacher in a small town in Iowa, Jane was already aware that bias was tangible in America. This is shown as she explained that her Blue-eyed, Brown-eyed project was something she had considered for a while before she decided to try it. The town had a population of around 1000, all white, all Christian. As Richert (2012) points out, context matters in teaching. Jane knew that these children had very little or no understanding of what living as a colored person in America was like—the night of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr, and more specifically, the coverage by the white male broadcasters, convinced her that it was time to try it.

The next day, and for years after, Jane took her third-grade class and divided them by eye color. She created a scenario where the blue-eyed children were “on top,” and the brown children were below. The blue-eyed children had privileges, and the brown were verbally beaten down all day. The next day, she switched. She watched how the children (who immediately became mean and cruel to those who were their friends the day before) behaved. After the two days were over, they debriefed, allowing Jane to help these children truly understand what bias and bigotry do to people and feel like for those it is against.

Jane’s dilemma was that the context of her classroom, the school, and the town surrounding it meant that these children had no way to process what bias and bigotry did to people and why it was wrong. She brought her values to the classroom and took a risk in facilitating this experience with the children. This risk was highlighted in the reaction of 20% of the town, who, to this day, still disagree with her actions and the treatment of herself and her children in the years following her choice. Richert (2012) shares that, unlike identifiable and fixable problems, dilemmas are situations with no clear answer. While Jane knew what she

wanted to achieve, she knew it might not be well received in this community. And after the first year, she continued to do it, knowing it wasn't well received by many.

Jane chose to act upon her conviction that there was a great injustice in America and that it would never change if someone didn't stand up and do something about it. She has repeatedly put herself in harm's way, trying to make that difference. Unlike her college professor, who taught her that a teacher should only teach values that are harmonious with the community you are serving, I agree with Jane, who feels that every time you step into a classroom as a teacher, you bring your values to the fore. What Jane chose to do that morning, and so many mornings since, was brave, risky, and all the more impactful for being both. I am not sure I would have had the insight or the courage to do what she did, but I would hope so.

As educators, sharing our values that help make the world a better place is or should be why we do what we do. And that will often mean pushing our learners beyond the familiar because we want to prepare them for a better future world, not a world that stays the same. That does not mean railing against the teachings of their parents or shame of the choices of the community; it means to begin where they are and help guide them to see the world around them and beyond with an analytical, critical eye that allows them to grasp better the what and the why of the world in a way that enables them to be agents of change.

Watching the video, I felt inspired by Jane and her students. I was impressed by her lesson, her confidence, and her conviction. However, reading the following interview and frequently asked questions, I felt disheartened as she shared the reality of the adverse reaction of many in the school and the town and some participants of various lectures along the way. This is why dilemmas hold no "right" answer; whichever choice you make, there are consequences.

## References

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