

# When the rules are fair, but the game isn't.

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Fifty years and more than two generations after a court ruling (*Brown v. Board of Education*) that called for making education equal, public education remains largely unequal. Since the Brown decision changed the rules to include everyone in education, the common assumption now is that the “game” is fair and equal. Is it?

Although the rules now provide for equal opportunity, the actual “game” of education is far from equal. The situation of desegregation without meaningful integration has created a deeper race crisis. Teachers and administrators view the educational situation today, and the race crisis, with some kind of blinders or at least with one-dimensional vision. We propose a simple game activity that has been tried for three years in graduate diversity courses to help educators perceive another dimension, the historical and cumulative social dimension, to the crisis in education.

The core issues of educational inequality are related to matters of race, social justice, democratic equality, and the diversity curriculum. Many of these issues are only marginally understood or accepted as legitimate by most teachers, teacher educators, and administrators (of any race)

who are entrusted with the equal education of all children.

Based on their own experiences, most White teachers are blind to issues of racial inequity, and often refuse to recognize differences that separate races. They believe that society is fair and just. In fact they believe that the United States was built on principles of fairness, justice, and equality. For most Black teachers, on the other hand, race is a concept that they cannot ignore. It is a concept they have to reconcile with on a daily basis, and many of them understand institutional racism at a gut level, but are reluctant to articulate it. This classroom activity provides a visceral experience in helping remove those blinders.

We present findings and insights culled from teaching a constantly redesigned graduate level course in diversity issues, a required course for all graduate students in education. This course is being taught at a historically black university with a classroom composition of 60% Black teachers and 40% White teachers. About 80% of course participants tend to be teachers in surrounding schools.

The majority of White teachers hold fairly ethnocentric views of the world, and a good majority of the Black teachers also tend to hold much the same Eurocentric views of education. Many Black graduate students in the class often can be included in first-generation college students. Also, as teachers, they tend to come from a variety of schools including Title I schools, magnet schools, charter schools, private schools, and public schools serving affluent students.

Because the course typically includes teachers in the classroom who are working on their graduate degrees in elementary and secondary areas, the insights, activities, and ideas shared here can be used effectively in professional development activities for inservice teachers and for teacher educators and other faculty in higher education.

Although *Brown v. Board of Education* opened the school's front door to all children, it is no secret that schools are now more separate than ever (Orfield, 2001). There have been instances where magnet school programs located in predominantly Black communities have separate parts of the building set aside for the neighborhood Black children and the magnet White children. In one blatant incident that has been called to our attention, Black children from the neighborhood section were called upon to pick up trash from the White children in the magnet program.

In other instances, even without magnet programs, the division of children into various types of exceptional classes has effectively segregated classrooms where those with gifted and talented programs tend to be mostly White and those with emphasis on learning difficulties or emotional and behavioral problems remain overwhelmingly Black. These divisions have been defended as either being the natural result of innate differences in the aptitudes of the children or the result of inadequate experiences in the home—an analysis that is coupled with a plea for additional funds for earlier intervention.

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At other times, some of these policies of separation are defended as what is necessary to keep White children in the schools and maintain the appropriate racial balance. Those who were engaged in the original struggles that led to and resulted from the *Brown* decision would be shocked to see how its implementation has left so much of the educational inequity that was at the core of the struggle unaltered.

Schools that educate minorities and immigrant children are historically understaffed and underfinanced, and the changing demographics of the nation call for a tremendous shift in focus on the needs of these diverse children. At the same time that the student population is increasingly made up of African Americans, Hispanics, and other people of color, the teacher population is becoming increasingly White (Lewis et al., 1999). Research shows that teachers who are knowledgeable about the cultural histories of their students and are responsive to their needs contribute to higher achievement among culturally diverse students (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

To improve the chances for success for minority students, many educators suggest that equity issues be defined, clarified, and discussed. Darling-Hammond (1997) suggests that teacher-education institutions must revise courses required for teacher certification to include new conceptualizations of cultural development in the pedagogy, and include parents and communities in decision-making roles to make education more democratic. Without this revision of worldview, teachers are bound to continue teaching from the deficit model that is widely prevalent in teacher education programs (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

Critical race theory has been used as a framework to observe and analyze conversations, dialogues, and insights from the diversity course (Delgado, 1995; Crenshaw et al., 1995). The game activity used for research is especially relevant to the importance of race and property rights in the context of inequality in the United States (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Engaging teachers in the game activity provided participants with a simple but deeply analytical metaphor to understand the inequities in schooling as well as society.

## About Us

Because the practice and worldviews referred to in the article are anchored in deeply personal issues of race and identity, we would like to introduce ourselves. The authors of this paper include an East Indian married to a white person whose

children participate in largely segregated gifted programs and whose grasp of race issues is rooted in India's colonial experience as well as involvement with a diverse community based group while designing curriculum material for teacher education linked to the local social conditions; a long-time black community activist, born and raised in the South who is an autodidact and newspaper columnist; and a white magazine editor who grew up on a Midwest farm and conceived of the game described here while reading "Price of the Ticket" (Baldwin, 1985).

## Is It Safe To Play? *Checking for Slick Spots*

A great deal of deconstruction of the texts in equal education is necessary in the diversity classroom before teachers can actually understand the meaning behind the "game" that we are about to explain. Without this deconstruction through shared experience, classroom discussions are likely to hit the "slick spots" that we identify, and undermine the simple effectiveness of the game.

Our experiences and insights are gathered from teaching about race and equity issues to a racially mixed group of teachers in one of the largest school districts in the country. The district schools and issues are often divided along race lines and the schools operate with blatant racial disparities in their classrooms. Teaching about race, equity, and social justice issues is best characterized as a daunting uphill journey with one step up and many slides back down to the bottom. We have identified the following as major "slick spots" that must be addressed before teachers can make meaning of the paradoxical nature of education today where the rules are equal, but the game is unfair.

- ◆ Both white and black teachers tend to lack even a rudimentary knowledge of the history of the education of minority cultures, inequity in education, and affirmative action policies aimed at correcting that inequity.

- ◆ Teachers often lack shared experiences with discrimination that could be catalysts for conversation, understanding, and change.

- ◆ Most White teachers believe that the foundations of our society are fairness, equality, and justice. On the other hand, Black teachers tend to understand racism, inequity, and institutional racism at the gut level, but are reticent about articulating their feelings

and have often bought into the same paradigm as their White coworkers.

- ◆ White teachers, reflecting a sentiment widely held in our society, often close the door to exploring race issues with their heart because of the fallacy of the slippery slope: If we accept the unjust foundations of society, then we may have to give up our privileges that are built exactly on those foundations of domination, oppression, and exploitation.

- ◆ White teachers are also inclined to close the door to accepting the reality of racism because of the pain, suffering, and sense of guilt that such an acceptance brings when not properly processed.

- ◆ Many White teachers (and often Black teachers too) bring numerous stereotypes and simplistic explanations about the achievement gap, race issues, institutional racism, and social issues to the classroom.

- ◆ White teachers have generally never had to consider what it is to be White, and therefore find it difficult to understand and accept the focus on race issues.

- ◆ Teachers of both races simultaneously fear and trust the system.

It is our belief that many, if not all, of these "slick spots" in the thinking of teachers are also "slick spots" that exist more broadly in society, and that all the resources devoted to addressing the "achievement gap" will serve as "Band-Aids" at best unless all teachers understand them. Although we've identified these potential sources of confusion and intellectual hesitancy separately, the ways in which we address them are integrated. We have therefore, attempted to explain our process too, as an integrated whole, instead of isolating each one and explaining how we address each issue.

In its standards for accreditation, the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) devotes an entire standard (diversity, standard 4) to the need for preparing teachers who can acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and disposition required to help ALL students learn. In its supporting explanation, NCATE provides statistics (the existence of increasingly diverse student populations whose needs are addressed by less than 15% minority teachers) and arguments for teachers who are prepared to teach from multicultural and global perspectives that draw on the histories, experiences, and rep-

resentations of minority students. The “slick spots” mentioned above are clearly connected to the goals and standards of NCATE.

### Deconstructing the “Slick Spots”: *The Right Question Is the Right Answer*

Teachers have a tendency to codify their lived and learned experiences on race issues in education through texts on school behavior, discipline and suspension practices, outcomes on standardized tests, achievement gap, tracking, “language” used by marginalized children, and poverty. One of the reasons for the grave situation of low teacher morale can be attributed to an unexamined worldview that is constructed through contact with racist institutions that commonly use euphemistic race-based language like “free and reduced lunch” children and “Title I” schools.

Here is a simple exercise: The first go-around, where teachers share their own personal strategies to address stress, breaks the ice and gets them comfortable about sharing and bringing out a part of themselves that they don’t generally share. The prompts for the second go-around, “What is the one factor that causes the most stress in your professional life?” always draws out comments and concerns that are directly connected to student motivation, parental involvement, teaching to the test, lack of prerequisite knowledge, parental support, and indirectly connected to issues of race, economic poverty, and stereotypical views of both.

We’ll take two of the common issues to demonstrate how we deconstruct them for teachers. We first pose the question about parental involvement: What is it? What does it look like? What does it sound like? Responses from teachers range from physical presence in schools, participation in PTA, to organizing “fun” activities, helping the child with homework, staying in touch with teachers, to volunteering in school activities. Interestingly enough, there is seldom any difference between the responses of teachers from Title I schools and affluent schools.

We then ask them to describe what they know about the lifestyles of their school parents. Although there is real unevenness in how much teachers know about what goes on in low-income communities, our goal in the end is to turn the idea of parental involvement on its head. We ask them whether it’s fair to say that parental involvement is the same for everyone. For low-income parents with three jobs, or living with the stress of searching for jobs, isn’t struggling to take care of the necessi-

ties for the family also an important part of parental involvement, particularly in lieu of showing up at school and neglecting those family responsibilities?

Although it represents a simple shift in thinking, this exercise works well and both Black and White teachers have commented how helpful it has been to view their school parents with this altered perspective. More importantly, it helps them shift their perspective from one of “laying blame” to analyzing power and poverty in their communities. A helpful follow-up exercise is to have teachers conduct action research in their communities. In doing this they might analyze such issues as the distinguishing qualities of economically poor neighborhoods, the strengths and positive values of “poor” neighborhoods, the now illegal practice of redlining, and the power that those communities offer others.

It is often common to find teachers stumble through and try to understand the meaning and definitions as well as the social connotations of terms like “public housing,” “projects,” “ghettoes,” “barrios,” “inner-city,” “underclass,” “poor,” etc. in this discussion. In a recent conversation, teachers felt a bit sheepish and surprised to discover that many of us actually make a living through the lives of the economically poor by way of Title I funds, intervention programs, labeling programs, social services, etc.

The second major stress factor for teachers is the lack of motivation among their students. We usually start with the question: Have you ever seen a child of any racial background, say one or two years of age, even eight months old, who is not curious and eager to explore the environment around them (under normal circumstances)? We’ve never had an answer in the negative, but eyes begin to get reflective at this point. The discussion gradually heads in the direction of “what do we do to them to make them lose their curiosity and interest?” or better still “is the curriculum *that* boring to them?” and “does the curriculum not connect them in any way to themselves and their communities?”

A lesson we’ve learned in diversity courses is to steer teachers (and ourselves) toward the right questions and not the right answers. Based on this lesson, we require teachers to bring two questions to class each evening based on the readings. It is no exaggeration to say that we can run the entire evening on those questions and provide valuable shared experiences while evaluating the teachers at the same time!

## What Is Race?

As teachers begin to see the tie between race and their “stress factors” we nudge them to engage in an open discussion about race: What is “race”? Who came up with the concept of race? What and/or who do the racial definitions serve? Is it based on genetics? Can we decide race through a blood test? A bone test? An appearance test? What race would people tend to call you? Why? How are origins of the race concept tied to academic definitions of intelligence and racial superiority? If racial superiority is the weight on one end, can racial inferiority be the weight on the other end in order to maintain the balance of power? How are both feelings manifested? What happens to the spirit of people who have internalized feelings of inferiority or superiority? What are the manifestations of this internalized racism that is talked about so eloquently by the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond in their *Undoing Racism* training sessions?

The “slick spot” that’s best addressed through readings is this one: Both White and Black teachers lack even a rudimentary knowledge of the history of the education of minority cultures, inequity in education, and affirmative action policies aimed at correcting that inequity. Joel Spring’s book, *Deculturalization and the Struggle for Equality: A Brief History of the Education of Dominated Cultures in the United States* is our favorite text on the subject because it’s a brief but compelling history that includes the history of the education of Native Americans, Hispanic and Latino Americans, Asian Americans and African Americans. More importantly, it explains lucidly the foundation of deculturalization, linguistic racism, segregation, desegregation without integration, and institutional racism.

After five weeks of addressing the “slick spots,” it’s time to play a game and discuss the myth that “Bad things happened in the past, but all things are equal now” or “If Oprah can make it, so can every other Black person.” Because success is measured in terms of the acquisition of objects and positions in capitalist cultures, we chose the capitalist game of Monopoly™.

## Playing the Game Together

Although the class is built on many shared activities and discussions among the students, the “Monopoly” activity is particularly powerful in its metaphorical explanation of issues of racism, institutional racism, and White privilege. It is important that the game is played AF-



TER an exposure to the history of the education of dominated cultures (Spring, 2004). The only materials required are a game of Monopoly™ and perhaps some reward for the winner. Ask for volunteers who enjoy playing a game of Monopoly™. A minimum of six teachers/players works well for the activity. In addition, you need two volunteers. One volunteer serves as the banker and is responsible for running the game, making sure that the players get their start-up money, that properties are sold fairly, etc. Another volunteer serves as the observer and does not participate in the game. The observer's role is to watch how the game is played, observing the reactions from the player, their comments, body language, and other non-verbal communication. Only the observer is told to view the game as a metaphor to racial equality, issues of affirmative action, and privilege.

The other volunteers are split in three groups depending on the time available. Our diversity course runs for three hours in the evenings, and this is the best window to complete the activity. The course usually has 20 participants, and at least a couple of other group activities keep the rest of the participants involved in related issues. At this point, we have decided that it's best to involve everyone in the classroom in different games of Monopoly™. We say this since it's the teachers who actually play the game that express the most profound insights.

### Seeing Beyond the Rules

Monopoly™ is then played by the ordinary rules of the game, except for one slight alteration. The players are staggered in regards to when they enter the game. Two players from Group 1 start the game. Two players from the next group start the game only after the first group has played the game for 30 to 40 minutes or completed seven rounds. A player from group three begins 30 to 40 minutes after group 2 or after they've completed five rounds. Typically, there's not much time to include another group at this point although in a recent activity, we were able to include the 6<sup>th</sup> player for two rounds.

We usually videotape the game since this becomes a sort of keystone experience for the teachers throughout the course. The raw videotape is then edited to show the dramatic addition of groups to the game, to capture the camaraderie of the shared experience among Black and White teachers, and to visually explain the metaphorical meaning in the activity. Teachers always play the game with great enthusi-



asm, attention, and engagement. The obvious goal for them is to win.

In the three years that we've played the game, these are the consistent results:

- ◆ The group that begins the game first always produces the winner.
- ◆ Winners typically are in the same sequence as the order of the players entering the game.
- ◆ The subsequent groups seldom build assets that equal those of the first group; the initial stages are very frustrating for late-entering groups.

◆ Discouraged by their inability to get a lead in the game, the groups that start late often roll their die wishing to land in jail, so they could just "be" and not have to pay out.

◆ Groups that start later often lose their motivation to continue to play the game.

Once the game is completed, teachers come back to the large group to share their experiences in playing the staggered game of Monopoly™. The observer first shares details of the following:

1. Who came first? Who came last?
2. How did the enthusiasm and motivation differ among the students?
3. Describe the process of the accumulation of capital. Who had it? Who didn't?
4. What were some of the comments from the players?
5. What were some spending and buying patterns in the group?

The players then get to share their experiences. The following are prompts used during this presentation:

1. When did you start? What chance did you have to win the game?
2. How did you feel about starting first or having to start the game later?
3. How did you learn the rules of the game in comparison to others?
4. How motivated were you when you started? What happened to your motivation as the game moved on?
5. How much skill is ordinarily involved with Monopoly™? How much with these altered rules?

The casual comments, excited outbursts, and animated expressions often have chilling parallels in society and education.

**Group 1 player:** "We had seven rounds to ourselves, and so even before the others started the game, we had plenty of money since we got \$200 for going around each time, and we had bought many of the properties."

**Group 2 player:** "By the time we got there, they had bought a lot. Every time we rolled, we landed on their property and had to pay up. Then we got to pass 'Go' a couple of times, and 'Chance' and 'Community' helped. It took quite a while and we made some, but we certainly didn't make as much money as Donald Trump here did (laughter)."

**Group 2 player:** "It was very frustrating for me because I thought I'm going to land on some good property and buy constantly. I was landing on their property and having to pay them since I couldn't buy the first round, and they were landing on those that weren't bought, and then I landed myself in jail and I had to sit there."

**Group 2 player:** "Like they said, I didn't



mind landing in jail. I didn't have to pay anybody any money in jail. They were feeding me."

**Group 1 player:** "Not only did they start to play after us, but they had to go around once before they could buy anything. Every time we rolled, we could buy. It took them a long time to get through, it was tough for them, and groups coming later had it even worse."

**Group 3 player:** "When I started, these people had their houses and cars and

were making fans out of their money. There was no way I could get a lead and I lost interest. The only time I made any money was when I landed on 'Free parking' and I had all the money. Then I went to jail and wanted to stay there since I could keep my money."

**Group 4 player:** "By the time I started, they didn't even have a game thingy for me to call my own. I had to find a penny and start my game with it. I

was dishing out money the entire time. I tried to negotiate. I told them that I'd buy a house and put it on their land and when someone landed on the property, they could take the money for the land, and I'd take the money for the home, but they wouldn't negotiate with me. I enjoyed playing the game, but I knew I wouldn't ever win."

Observer (about a group 1 player): "She was holding on to her money and refused to buy any property during the first seven rounds. When two others started the game, she got motivated to buy property since she could get money when they landed on her property. Even though she was tight-fisted and hung on to her money (compared to a Group 2 player who was extremely motivated), she did come in second in the game."

Banker: "I was starting to see this game a little differently. I was beginning to compare it to what happens in my classroom. The kids who are always there in the beginning—they get the best things. And then the children who come during the year might get the messed up books or not get a book at all. They might get a handout. I related those two to this game."

Observer: "It's too hard to play catch up if you start late. None of them did."

### The Metaphor of Monopoly: *Cleat for the Slippery Slope*

We then encourage teachers to shift from viewing it as a game that they enjoyed to seeing it as a metaphor for racial inequities keeping in mind all that they had read from the Joel Spring text. The impact of this exercise on their thinking is profound. The comparisons that are offered grow more and more powerful as time for deeper contemplation passes. This can be seen in the comments and insights that are shared throughout the remainder of the course, sometimes at the most unexpected times even after the course! The shared experience in understanding the metaphor behind the game of Monopoly™ became a cleat on that slippery slope that we only discovered by accident.

Participating in the game gives teachers a different way of looking at the children in their classrooms. It gives them a deeper insight into the role of history and the consequences of cumulative privilege. It helps them understand that what they see (viewed outside the context of its development) is not the total truth. To the

observer, or to anyone else watching the game once all the players have staggered in, the game seems fair because all players are given the capital, the rules are clear, and the game is being played by the rules that are the same for everyone. At any given time, the game, on the surface, seems fair. One might even say that this altered game of Monopoly™ is even more fair than the historical realities since the players are given the same amounts of working "capital" (although at different times) while historically, Blacks in this country were not

given capital to begin their struggle for freedom and independence after slavery.

But to those who've engaged in this staggered game, it just doesn't seem fair. The appearance of fairness is seriously undermined by the frustration of the players and the fundamental unfairness is confirmed by the outcome when only those who started the game first get to win. At a later discussion on the curriculum and how distant and "boring" it often is to a diverse learner, Joan (pseudonym), one of the White teachers in the course said, "What is it? Is



it the way we teach? Is it too abstract? Do we need more hands on? I keep going back to the experience of playing Monopoly™ the other day. It was an evening of action and fun. I thoroughly enjoyed getting to know others in the class, and being able to joke and laugh with them. Yet, what I learned, and am still learning, completely blows my mind. I see very differently now how our society functions.”

Joan is also one of the teachers who admitted to the class around midterm about being overwhelmed by the history and about feeling guilty. In another instance, she shared her “aha” insight on health disparities when she recalled not having seen Black patients in a metropolitan hospital during her own father’s rather long stay for heart problems.

### What Next?

There are, potentially, some additional modifications to the Monopoly™ game that might take students even deeper into an understanding of current inequities and some possibilities for restorative justice. One might offer the game with staggered entry but also with a more active bank that was able to extend “credit” (access to additional money) to late entrants to the game. The level of access to additional money or the amount of additional money required to even out the results of the game might be discussed concretely this way. This could easily segue into a discussion of reparations. This might also provide an opportunity for a discussion with those who would argue that while there is a responsibility to assure equal opportunity, there is no social responsibility to assure equity in results.

It’s obvious to us now that by carefully navigating the “slick spots” we can make it to a place near the top, but in many ways it’s still a beginning. From that ledge near the top many teachers realize that it isn’t just their perception that has a different dimension. Along with this learning comes the painful and difficult process of confronting their worldviews. For many, the process is too painful and demanding to accommodate into busy lifestyles and gets shelved (although we hope that those seeds may lay dormant only for a brief time). Many others never get to that ledge and choose to keep their blinders. Some, however, have begun that painful process of transforming their understanding as a part of transforming their practice in the classroom as is obvious from their questions and comments.

A couple of weeks after the Monopoly™ game, campus Republicans in another local university staged their “Affirmative



Action Cookie Sale” hoping to ridicule the practice of different rules for different races. The campus event was meant to dramatize the unfairness of affirmative action, but it was obvious in our own class discussions that most teachers had gone past such simplistic and dramatic examples of social discourse. Instead, they questioned and contributed to the significance of having the Black female as last in that racial list with the privilege of buying the cookie for 15 cents compared to the White male’s price of a dollar.

Two years after having played the

game in a diversity class, two teachers from a local high school reputed for its racial issues on campus commented, “The diversity course was the best learning experience we had in graduate school. The Monopoly™ game really changed the way I look at society and at the issues in school. We are more comfortable articulating our ideas about race among our peers and students.” Another teacher, “At first I really didn’t know where you were going with the Monopoly™ activity. As everyone started to share their experiences playing the game it just hit me between the eyes. I was struck



by the similarities. I'll never forget the experience." For another teacher, the course made such a difference that she has completely restructured her teaching activities, collaborated with school administrators to revamp the diversity issues in her school, and is now presenting the results of her work at national conferences.

The civil rights struggle caused by the 1954 *Brown* decision was a broad movement for racial and economic justice, and was backed by a variety of organizations and individuals. The national mood now is to ridicule affirmative action, mostly on the grounds that the rules are the same for everyone. We hope that such a simple activity can help players understand the complexity of historical and cumulative privilege, and engage us all instead in a healthy, honest, and candid dialogue about social, educational, and economic justice.

### A Closing Caveat

Any metaphor has limits to its usefulness in understanding another, more complicated phenomena. A strong caution should be raised about seeing this game as an analog for the classroom experience and learning itself. Although the accumulation of money and things is roughly comparable to the name of Monopoly™, the acquisition of knowledge is different in some fundamental ways. The arguments for even earlier intervention in the life of children with earlier schooling needs to be debated

from the standpoint of the differing goals of schools and school systems as opposed to parents and communities. Moreover, neither children nor their intelligence are commodities that can be easily quantified.

The utility of this exercise is to gain an insight into the lives of children within their communities given the history of racism and the delayed access to the social product of those who had been excluded from their fair share for hundreds of years. It begins to explain how the "achievement gap" might widen during children's time in school based on their relationship to promises made but not kept about opportunities that exist outside the schools. With that in mind, this exercise has proven to be a very powerful addition to needed discussion about race and racism that will set the context for activities inside the educational arena.

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