

Understanding the Effectiveness of an Anti-Racist Educational Intervention

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Two years ago, I created an interactive board game, Refugee Journeys, which allows players the opportunity to experience settlement and integration from the viewpoint of a randomly generated refugee identity. The game has been widely used, yet understanding its effectiveness has been challenging. In this article, I detail the methodological choices made during project development along with the challenges and opportunities afforded by seeking to understand the effectiveness of the Refugee Journeys board game. Deeper understanding of the factors influencing the effectiveness of educational interventions allows for the assurance that these initiatives are meaningful and result in positive change.

Keywords: anti-racist education, intersectionality, educational intervention

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the effectiveness of an educational initiative designed to elicit empathy and combat racism is a difficult task. Self-reported data, combined with people's beliefs that racism is a personal act of hatred and violence rather than complicity in a system that benefits them, may mean that people view themselves as less racist and more empathetic than they really are. Participants may report high levels of empathy, yet whether their behaviour is affected by increased empathy is not certain. In 2018 after I launched the *Refugee Journeys* board game, I collected feedback from two groups of participants. The questions were broad, and designed to elicit exploratory, qualitative responses. Analysing these responses led to a deeper understanding of what factors were involved in the effectiveness of this anti-racist educational intervention.

This article contributes to a discussion on understanding the effectiveness of educational interventions by highlighting the challenges and opportunities along the way, along with methodological considerations for others engaged in this work. Anti-racist educational interventions are needed in today's increasingly populist and divided world. Understanding the effectiveness of these interventions helps target our approach so that we can be assured that our efforts are making a difference.

BACKGROUND

The *Refugee Journeys Board Game* was born out of a recognition that many volunteers, refugee sponsors, educators, and settlement workers, while equipped with good intentions, were nevertheless ill informed about the realities facing their clients, students, sponsored newcomers or new neighbours. Despite these benevolent intentions, as Gorski wrote, "*good intentions are not enough.*" (Gorski, 2008). Good intentions must be matched by deep knowledge and understanding.

Although education is thought of as the solution for ignorance, recognizing the need for a more robust education was not enough either. The people needing the education must also see the value in receiving it. Frankly, community members, volunteers, or even those in more direct roles like sponsors or educators were unlikely to voluntarily take a course or commit themselves to the time and energy required for improving their understanding of issues facing newcomers in their communities. As one of my participants said of their racist grandfather, “*Why would grandpa need to go to that class anyway? Grandpa is living just fine.*” (Lam, 2020, unpublished).

Faced with this challenge, I wanted to create an educational tool that would be engaging, non-threatening, and provide a tangible way to promote community and discussion about issues that rarely surface in everyday conversation. The *Refugee Journeys* board game was the result. Working with a game designer and graphic designer, I created a board game where participants are invited to take on a randomly assigned refugee identity. They then progress around the board, much like snakes and ladders (or chutes and ladders). As they progress, they pick up ‘*Experience Cards*’ which describe a real-life integration experience. These cards cause them to move forward or backwards or miss turns. After each card is played the group discusses what the impact of the card might be on their assigned identity, often launching deep discussion about policies, personal values, or their own unique experiences with the topic.

I wrote more about the creation process and early outcomes of the game (Lam, 2018) and described the learning outcomes modeled by the game, including critically defining the “finish” space – how do you know that you have “arrived” after the journey of integration? Other outcomes, such as understanding the multifaceted nature of integration, or the way intersectionality impacts integration are also described.

**FIGURE 1
GAME BOARD**

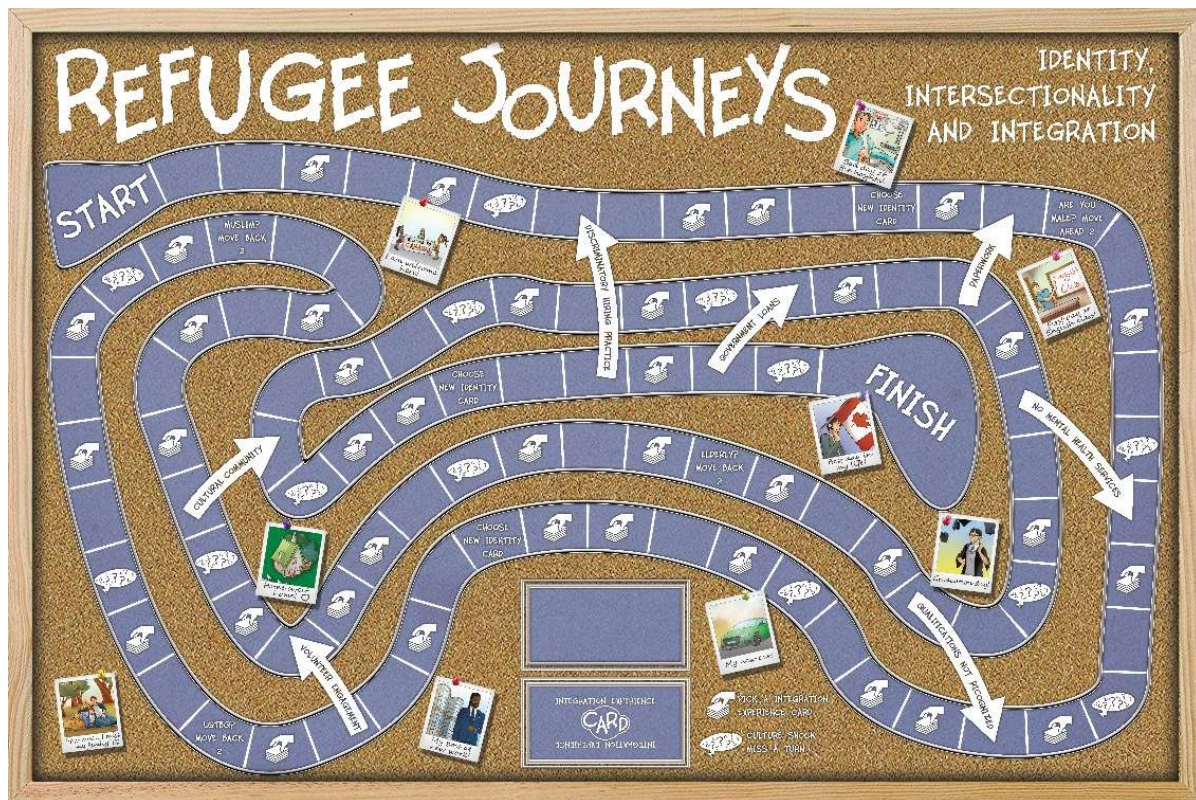


FIGURE 2
SAMPLE EXPERIENCE CARD

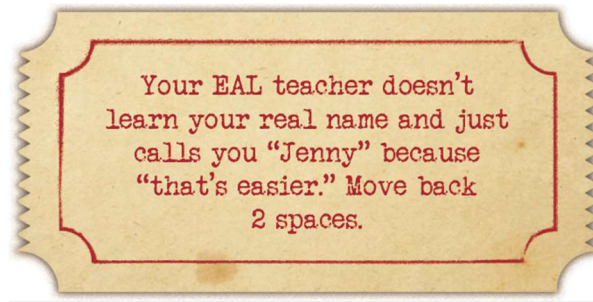


FIGURE 3
SAMPLE IDENTITY CARD



METHODOLOGY

While it may be useful to try to measure participants' empathy or sentiments towards newcomers before and after engaging with the *Refugee Journeys* board game, such as conducting a questionnaire before and after, this type of methodology had drawbacks that led me away from such an approach (Mjelde & Daly, 2012; Shahjahan, 2011). Measuring before-and-after levels of empathy toward newcomers or refugees would have relied on self-reported data, which can constrain the choices available (Fryer & Dinsmore, 2020) and are not always accurate in their perception (Devlin et al., 2014). Specifically when studying an anti-racist educational initiative, it must be considered that anti-racist scholars have shown that people consistently believe themselves to be less racist than their actions suggest (Condor et al., 2006). In the end, I decided to use an exploratory, qualitative approach. This allowed me to not just determine *if* participants' attitudes or perceptions toward newcomers changed, but to delve deeper into *why* and *how* (Lincoln, 2018), which would not only be useful in understanding outcomes of the game, but it shaping future iterations of the initiative.

Given the bounded nature of what I was aiming to explore, a case study methodology was appropriate (Flyvbjerg, 2011). In this case, I collected data on two different occasions, as I led sessions for two separate conferences geared towards educational professionals. My participants were attendees at these conferences, all of whom were educators, academics, or graduate students enrolled in faculties of education. To collect the data, I first introduced the board game including a brief description of the background of the game and how to play. The groups then divided into smaller table groupings of 6-8 players each, and played the game for 45 minutes to an hour. Following the game, I concluded with a whole-group debrief and then asked willing participants to fill out an anonymous "exit slip," which asked questions about how they felt during the activity, which parts of the game they liked or disliked and why, and what they took away from the activity. To analyze this data, I coded the answers into commonly expressed themes. I compared these in light of my own reflections as the group leader.

ANALYSIS

Some of the common threads that emerged in the data were that participants learned new information, felt emotional impact, enjoyed deeply engaging conversation, formed new, critical perspectives, and increased empathy. I examine each in turn, along with a description of how each of these are a critical part of inspiring positive change.

Learning Something New

Many participants commented that the game was educational. This could be seen in simple comments such as, "*I learned a lot*" (Participant 5) or in more complex responses like, "*I realized how much I didn't know when I wasn't sure how to respond to certain issues*" (Participant 7). Other ways this theme could be seen were in comments describing raised "*awareness*" (Participant 12), or, "*I felt enlightened in regards to the barriers (big or small) that different groups face.*" (Participant 10).

It is important that educational interventions focused on empathy building or anti-racism are able to educate about the realities of life for less privileged or marginalized individuals or communities. Describing these realities, including those that elicit admiration and respect for the ways in which barriers are overcome or withstood, can promote positive attitudes and behaviour toward others (Esses et al., 2008). The challenge facing many anti-racist, or empathy building initiatives is that they can require emotional labour of minoritized or excluded individuals or groups to educate and explain these realities. This was a carefully considered aspect of the *Refugee Journeys* board game, and one of the reasons why discussion about personal experiences is always optional, not mandatory.

Learning something new is core to the thrust of many educational efforts. However, as McArthur describes, learning must not be something "artificially separated" (McArthur, 2010, p. 302) from the broader society. Anti-racism work is not a curricular add-on, but must be integrated. By embedding it throughout this tool, and then by using this tool in a larger unit related to social justice themes, *Refugee Journeys* can be even more impactful.

Emotional Impact

Participants in this study described the emotions they felt during the game, and not all of the emotions described were positive. Some participants wrote that they felt "*uncertain*" (Participant 3), or "*worried*" (Participant 11). These feelings of anxiety were associated with having to pick up a card that could negatively impact their progress toward their goal. Other emotions were more directly related to their learning in the game. One participant wrote, "*[I felt] a little bit uncomfortable!..in a good way.*" (Participant 7). Frustration was also described, although this was in an empathetic sense. The participant wrote, "*I felt frustrated when something happened to me that was bad and beyond my control*" (Participant 1).

In the early iterations of the game, my attempts to highlight discriminatory policies or barriers encountered by newcomers led to a game which was overly negative. Players could not move forward frequently enough and the game was frustrating to play. However, the comments above were not related to the game-play, but to the learning itself. For example, the participant who described frustration related it to

the reaction to the game *content*, and the participant who described discomfort wrote a second sentence clarifying that the discomfort was because there was a lot the player had not known.

While eventually I added more positive cards (Your child joined a club and is making friends. Move ahead 2 spaces!) so that the game was more easily played, there was an important lesson to be learned in both the feedback from participants and in the process of game-creation: Participants must be able to see **both** the negative, dehumanizing, problematic impacts of policies and practices surrounding marginalized communities and the affirming, resilient, positive trajectories that result in hope. This is the heart of critical work: “Criticality is balanced connoisseurship—appreciating and judging together” (Mason, 2018, *personal communication*). One participant summed up this thought nicely: “[I liked] being able to use this as a tool in the classroom to open conversations about the difficulties of integration **but also the positive aspects**.” (Participant 6, emphasis mine).

Crafting an environment that results in emotional impact is a common component of educational interventions (see also, United Way’s *Poverty Simulation*, MCC’s *Forced Migration Simulation*, or the KAIROS *Blanket Exercise*). Lemaire led an early exploratory study using the *Blanket Exercise* and documented the emotional impact of that educational intervention, suggesting that the emotional impact is tied to impacts on future decisions (Lemaire, 2020). This certainly aligns with what I found. Participants frequently mentioned the affective dimensions of their experience with the *Refugee Journeys* board game.

Engaging Conversation

The response of appreciating the engaged conversation sparked by the game’s *Experience Cards* was the most commonly detailed response from participants. One participant summed it up well: “I like that the game provokes conversation at nearly every move.” (Participant 11). Some participants pointed out that the conversation was enhanced by the *Identity Cards*, which allowed for multiple perspectives, identities, and contexts into each discussion. Participants used words like “*meaningful*” (Participant 5), “*highly engaged*” (Participant 3), and “*thought provoking*” (Participant 7) in their descriptions of the conversation resulting from the game’s prompts. This was significant because none of the questions in the exit slip asked specifically about the conversation. These were unprompted comments, mostly commonly brought up when answering aspects of the game they liked, or take-aways from the game.

Deep, meaningful conversation is an important aspect of the *Refugee Journeys* game and was built into the design after the first iteration. In that first attempt, players moved through the experiences one after the other without pausing to reflect or discuss. While they were reading various research-based experiences of integration, they were not engaged or thinking about what type of impact those experiences could have. At the suggestion of my game designer and consultant, Rob Gosselin of *Birdlight Games*, I added discussion questions to the design of the game. From then on, the person who drew an *Experience Card* was responsible to select a question from the suggested questions or come up with their own to lead the group in a conversation about what that experience means. In the many times I have led groups through the *Refugee Journeys* board game exercise, the discussion has always been a rich source of engagement and learning for all. This aligns with what McArthur wrote: “Higher education needs to provide this particular combination of space; one which allows for complex ideas to be *debated* and *generated*, while also linked to the wider society” (McArthur, 2010, p. 303, emphasis mine).

Critical Perspectives

As anti-racist scholars have long been pointing out, racism is not only a personal act of hatred, but also systemic in nature (Young, 2011). Understanding the impact of policies and practices on a systemic level is one of the outcomes of this initiative. One participant wrote after playing the game, “*The system needs to change!*” (Participant 5), and another wrote, “*Issues have many facets and complications, and some systems in play are systematically holding these people down.*” (Participant 9).

Prompting critical thinking was built into the game by including experience cards that demonstrate prejudice, racism, and systemic bias. After playing, one participant wrote, “*This opened my eyes as to how many challenges and little things that a refugee could experience and how big an impact could be.*” (Participant 4). This type of thinking resulted from the experiential nature of the game—attempting to move

forward but being blocked, halted, or forced to move backward because of arbitrary or prejudicial experiences. As one player encounters this pathway, the person beside them may be sailing forward. It is emotional, as described in the section earlier, but it can result in participants' deepening understandings of the **cumulative** impact of "*challenges and little things.*" Another participant put it this way: "[*There are*] *privileges that different groups are afforded or setback by*" (Participant 10). As mentioned earlier, anti-racist initiatives that rely on the labour of minoritized or marginalized individuals to educate or explain their realities are problematic. By building this type of critical thinking into the design of the game, players feel the impact of systemic issues.

Empathy

Finally, the game resulted in increased empathy. One participant wrote it this way: "*It was interesting putting myself into someone else's shoes and thinking from their perspective*" (Participant 8), and another wrote, "*I like that this game allowed us to step into other perspectives. I felt like my perspective was changed.*" (Participant 2). Another participant wrote, "[*This activity*] *gave me a perception of understanding of being in a refugees' place*" (Participant 6). Other participants focused on more specific experiences such as, "*The daily exhaustion of never-ended surprises and adversities*" (Participant 3), or "*Financial challenges... credit score, homeownership, payday loans*" (Participant 12). Apple (2008) described this type of empathy as 'repositioning.' He wrote:

The framework politically and educationally progressive educators have employed to understand this is grounded in what in cultural theory is called the act of repositioning. It in essence says that the best way to understand what any set of institutions, policies, and practices does is to see it from the standpoint of those who have the least power. (Apple, 2008)

DISCUSSION

The importance of empathy, deep engagement, critical thinking, emotional impact, and learning something new are not groundbreaking in their novelty. What *is* new, is the depth that thinking about these components **together** brings to the conversation about the effectiveness of educational interventions.

This holds true in many areas. Focusing on only one aspect, such as learning new information, would not have the same impact. For example, it would be possible for a participant to read policy documents related to the different refugee streams of intake that exist in Canada, but that would not have the same impact as discussing the impact of these differences in a group, or feeling how they would impact you as you are trying to progress towards your goals. The discussion becomes generative, allowing for a safe space in which to imagine, explore, and try out new ideas.

In the data collected, participants emphasized the impact of this activity, describing the common themes detailed in this article. As future or current educators, they also made reference to their use of the *Refugee Journeys Game* in their own classrooms with comments such as, "*I would definitely use this in a high school class!*" (Participant 2). Thus, they see themselves as not only impacted by the experience, but willing to replicate the experience to impact others. In other words, change begets change.

CONCLUSION

Understanding *how* anti-racist educational interventions like *Refugee Journeys* effectively promote change leads to confidence that this work is meaningful and can guide future initiatives in creating opportunities for learning and change. By examining responses to the *Refugee Journeys* board game, I have identified the components of the experience that participants were impacted by. These components, learning new information, feeling emotional impact, engaging in deep conversation, forming critical perspectives, and increasing empathy allow for a deeper understanding of the elements involved in understanding the effectiveness of anti-racist educational interventions.

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