

“We Can’t Paint Them with One Brush”: Creating Opportunities for Learning about Refugee Integration

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Abstract

This article presents the process of creation and initial outcomes of a pedagogical tool called Refugee Journeys: Identity, Intersectionality and Integration, which allows players the opportunity to experience settlement and integration from the identity of a refugee. The purpose of the tool is to educate players about the need for intersectional approaches to refugee service provision, to foster a sense of admiration and respect for refugees’ experiences, and to interact with public policies from the perspective of the least privileged. Outcomes involve recognitions that individual identities affect integration experiences and meaningful discussions about refugee integration, identity, and discrimination.

Résumé

Cet article présente le processus de création et les premiers résultats d’un outil pédagogique appelé Refugee Journeys: Identity, Intersectionality and Integration [Parcours de réfugié: identité, intersectionnalité et intégration] qui donne aux joueurs la possibilité de vivre un établissement et une

intégration sous l’identité d’un réfugié. L’objectif de l’outil est d’instruire les joueurs quant à la nécessité des approches intersectionnelles pour fournir des services aux réfugiés, de favoriser le sens de l’admiration et du respect vis-à-vis des expériences des réfugiés et d’interagir avec les politiques publiques à partir de la perspective du moins privilégié. Les résultats se traduisent par une reconnaissance de l’influence des identités propres sur les expériences d’intégration et par des discussions constructives sur l’intégration, l’identité et la discrimination des réfugiés.

The Assumptions of Integration

Ivan¹ arrived in Canada with a background as an electrician. Although eager to work, he learned after arrival that his qualifications were not recognized. He could retrain at the local community college at his own expense, but to register for classes he needed a higher English level. With a family to support, he chose to work at a well-known company doing menial labour. To this day, he continues to work menial labour despite his professional background.

Alyia attended her first English class eighteen years after arriving in Canada. Upon arriving in Canada, she could not attend classes because she was at home with small children and there was no child care available. Later she had already established a network within her own ethnic community and was able to meet most of her needs in her own language. On those rare occasions when she needed to use English, her husband and her children interpreted for her. After eighteen years, she decided it was time for her to learn. She was placed in a level one beginner class but found most of the content focused almost exclusively on getting a job, finding an apartment, or accessing the health-care system. She continued to attend classes for the social benefit but did not continue the following year.

The policies and programs that make up settlement and integration services are built on assumptions that are not always accurate, as demonstrated in the cases above. One assumption is that low-level language learners are new arrivals in the country. Other assumptions may be that all refugees are eager to find employment or adopt “Canadian values” and “Canadian soft skills.”² As in the case of Ivan and Alyia, refugees do not always progress towards a goal in the same way as others. In fact, refugees may have different goals entirely. Were an outside source to decide that Ivan’s goal ought to be economic integration, he would have arrived immediately integrated, since he began working upon arrival in Canada. Yet if the goal was high language proficiency, or finding work in his professional field, he may still be considered in need of further integration, despite living and working in Canada for many years. Similarly, Alyia felt comfortable and confident in Canada despite very low language level and was able to contribute to society through her own social network. If the definition of integration is focused solely on language skills and employment, Alyia would be considered poorly integrated.

As these stories demonstrate, integration programs and policies need to consider the multi-faceted, intersectional realities of refugees’ lives. Integration is not linear, but multi-directional.³ It is for this purpose that I created the board game *Refugee Journeys*. I wanted to make the realities of intersectionality vivid and visceral for teachers, service providers, and sponsoring groups to inspire empathy and experiential learning.

The *Refugee Journeys* game draws heavily from Anthias’s notion of intersectionality,⁴ which emphasizes the multi-directional and layered nature of identity and belonging. In relation to refugee journeys, the journey is not unilateral, from “impoverished refugee camp” to “happy, productive Canadian.” Rather, there are layers of identity and belonging that can form differently in different contexts and along different timelines. The relationship between intersectionality and student outcomes is explored by Grant and Zweir:

“Policies and practices that do not take into account students’ intertwining identity axes risk reproducing patterns of privilege and oppression, perpetuating stereotypes, and failing at the task we care most deeply about: supporting all students’ learning across a holistic range of academic, personal, and justice-oriented outcomes.”⁵

The Need for a Community Engagement Tool

Beyond the goal of emphasizing intersectionality and inspiring empathy, I also wanted the tool to educate “mainstream” Canadians about refugee experiences. Educating the public about refugee journeys may be a way to counteract prejudice and discrimination. As Esses et al. describe it, “Campaigns that elicit admiration and respect for group members, perhaps by demonstrating the hardships that they have successfully overcome, may prevent negative attitudes and behavior toward refugees in general. As attitudes become more favourable, it will be easier to promote more just behavior on our part and fulfill our commitment to the protection of refugees.”⁶

It is not only public opinion that needs to shift, however. Policy-makers also need to be aware of potential unforeseen consequences of their decisions, and of the people such as Ivan and Alyia described earlier, who fall outside the typical path of integration. Apple describes the importance of this approach: “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.”⁷

For these reasons, the board game tool places the participant in the vantage point of the refugee. As players move around the board from start to finish, they do so from the perspective of a refugee.

Community Context

Position of Researcher

I approach this study as a Canadian English as an Additional Language teacher. As such, I have been hearing stories of discrimination and marginalization from my students for many years. I have also heard stories of success, resilience, and strength. While I understand that there are practical considerations and constraints for policy-makers and decision-makers, I am influenced by the many stories I have heard from my students throughout the years. I am not an outside observer analyzing immigration policy and settlement decisions in an abstract way, but I am someone for whom theory and policy has very real impact. For example, if policies become increasingly employment-focused and pragmatic, that causes real impact in the classroom, particularly for those students who are not attending classes in order to find a job. Such students

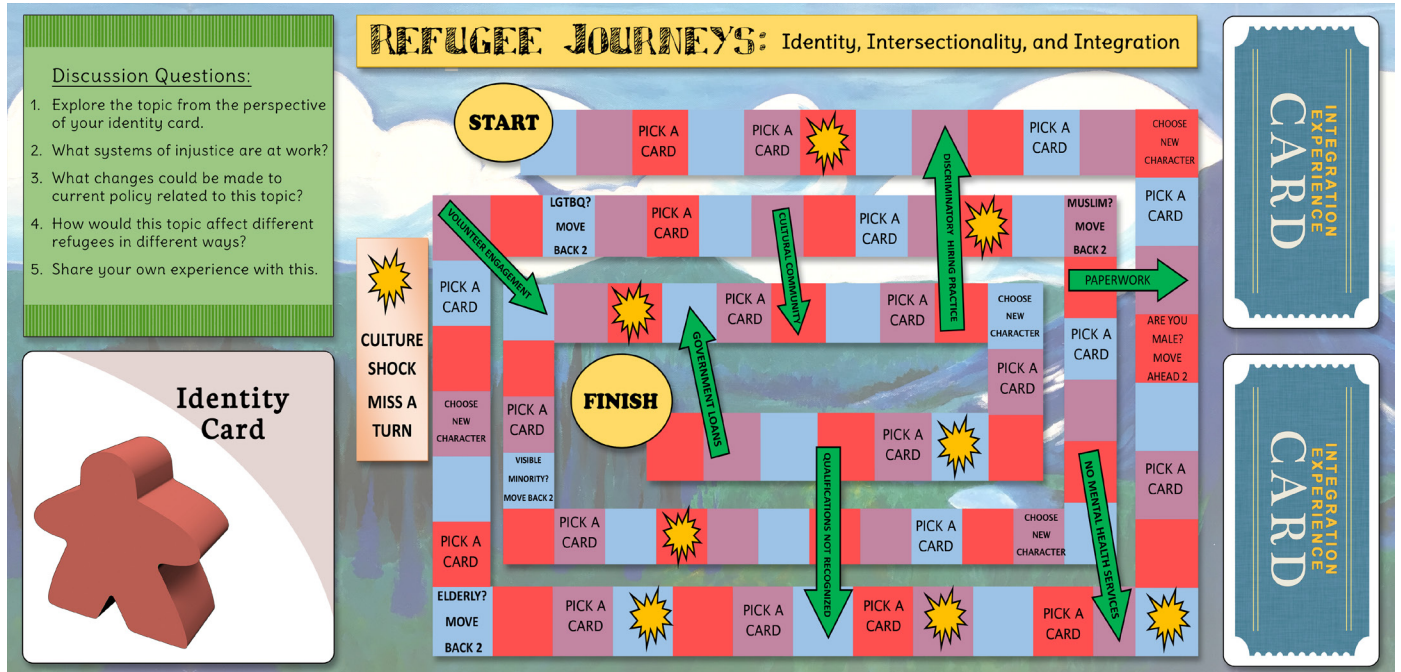


Figure 1: Refugee Journeys Board Game

find their needs less and less addressed by the curriculum, as it shifts to follow economically driven policies.

It is not pleasant, as a “mainstream” Canadian, and one currently employed in the EAL profession, to take a long and hard look at my own role and participation in a system that places the EAL teacher as the knower, the helper, and the cultural guide. Yet the antidote to this hegemonic system is not to stop helping. As Paulo Freire described in a video interview, the teacher has a duty to teach just as the student has a right to learn.⁸ The antidote to the proliferation of the hegemonic system is for teachers, educators, policy-makers, and other invested parties to recognize the value of alternate, often marginalized realities and competing narratives. If we want to help, we must first learn to listen. In progressing towards the creation of a space for alternate narratives, the *Refugee Journeys* tool plays an important role.

Target Communities

This project is aimed at pre-service teachers, current teachers, language teachers, teacher educators, settlement agency staff, community organizations, and any others who work with or have contact with refugees, or whose mandate it is to educate the wider public about refugee experiences. The board game may also be useful for university instructors desiring to facilitate conversations about integration, barriers, identity and belonging or to inspire reflections about refugee experiences in Canada.

Why a Board Game?

I wanted to create a tool that would demonstrate the differentiated way individual refugees integrate, depending on their identity. I also wanted my research to be mobilized and interacted with in spheres beyond the “hermetically sealed circle of research being only available in academic journals ... read almost solely by other academics.”⁹

A board game could move the discussion of refugee integration, identity, and intersectionality from academic journals into everyday life. According to Jones, Procter, and Younie, “Knowledge mobilization is about reducing the gap between research and practice and simultaneously strengthening the link between research and practice.”¹⁰ In seeking to critically engage with the issues of refugee integration at the community level, a participatory tool that brings research findings forward, while simultaneously allowing for dynamic engagement and feedback from practitioners results in a partnership-based “feedback loop.”¹¹ Thus, community practitioners could connect with refugee integration research, engage with it in a discussion-based, collaborative process, and in turn add their own voices, expertise, and experience to the ongoing discourse.

How to Play the Game

Players begin by drawing an identity card. Using that identity, they take turns rolling a die and progressing around the board, drawing experience cards when they land on an

experience square. After they read the experience card to the group, they discuss the experience together using discussion questions on the board, keeping their identity card in mind.

Guiding Assumptions

Several guiding assumptions were made in creating this tool. It was assumed that the bulk of participants using the tool would have a basic knowledge of Canada's position as a refugee destination. I recognize that this is not always the case, and I imagine this board game taking place within a larger educational framework focused on both criticality and background information about the Canadian immigration system. It was assumed that using a board game as an educational tool would be a task familiar to most participants.

In mitigating the assumptions that participants would understand the different intake streams of refugees (e.g., privately sponsored, blended, government sponsored), the meaning of the term *culture shock*, and some of the terms used in the identity cards (e.g., *sexual orientations*, *religions*), a glossary of terms was created for participants to reference as needed.

It was initially assumed that most participants would understand that refugees arrive in Canada for a variety of reasons (war, environmental factors, discrimination, political upheaval, and so on) and from many different countries, but after reflection, it was decided to include a background sheet emphasizing the variability of refugee journeys, with a document called "Building Hope: Refugee Learner Narratives," from Manitoba Education and Training (2015).

In building this tool, it was assumed that many teachers and pre-service teachers have chosen the profession out of a desire to help, to improve the lives of their students, or to make a social contribution.¹² However, it was this assumption that fuelled the desire to challenge the "saviour narrative" and call for a tool which would explore refugee experiences and spark discussion. Part of teacher preparation and ongoing professional development must be focused on how to develop respectful and equitable relationships with the families and communities of their students.¹³ As Zeichner describes it, there is a "dominance of a discourse of 'helperism,' where the emphasis is to save students from their broken communities rather than recognizing and building on the strengths and funds of knowledge that exist in these communities."¹⁴

Critically Defining Integration

Although the term *integration* is used often in the media and scholarly writings, finding an agreed-upon definition is difficult. It is sometimes defined broadly to mean adaptation, adjustment, or acculturation.¹⁵ It is often applied to employment and language learning, as Achim Dercks of the Association of German Chambers of Commerce and Industry

(DIHK) said succinctly, "What is integration? It's a job, and speaking German."¹⁶

Integration has also been argued to mean nothing more than slow assimilation.¹⁷ Canada's Immigration and Citizenship defines *integration* as an "ongoing process of mutual accommodation between an individual and society,"¹⁸ yet in the very same document the word *integration* appears in problematic phrases such as "greater integration," and "successful settlement and integration." It is not clear what part of the process-based definition is determined to be "greater" or "successful," nor is it clear who is responsible for this success. This type of language points to the underlying belief that although integration is a process, it is still a process towards a goal. The problem arises when the goal remains undefined.

A second problem with the uses of *integration* arise from the tendency to use binary language. For example, we see positive language such as "successful integration,"¹⁹ "effective integration,"²⁰ or "proper integration,"²¹ as well as negative language such as "failure to integrate"²² or "poorly integrated."²³ Integration discourse lacks the language to talk about integration in an appropriately nuanced way, notably because "failure to integrate" is almost always a criticism levelled at the refugee, not the host society.

Within this problematic environment, once those refugees who do not integrate "well" are labelled negatively, dehumanization of refugees becomes possible and flourishes.²⁴ Not only is dehumanization of refugees seen in areas such as media and news reporting,²⁵ but it can also be identified in the very systems and policies that are tasked with serving refugees themselves.

Integration is "the ability to contribute, free of barriers, to every dimension of Canadian life, that is, economic, social, cultural and political. The goal of settlement is for every immigrant to have full freedom of choice regarding her/his level of participation in the society. If the immigrant wants to participate actively in the society, there are no systematic barriers preventing her/him from doing so, and there are mechanisms in place to positively facilitate this process."²⁶ However, when viewed critically, integration is a multidimensional project underwritten by power-holders in the host society, influenced by racism, discrimination, and fear, and fuelled by global capitalism. "Acting white," a minoritized individual told me, "isn't my first choice, but it helps other people feel more comfortable with me."²⁷

The term *integration* is used as though it is a constructivist process, with both sides accommodating and learning from each other, but the policies, programs, and funding decision-makers operate with a uniform, positivist trajectory based on a static notion of success. Despite equitable definitions highlighting the accommodations required for both sides,

and the emphasis on process, host society groups and agencies still determine milestones for refugees to reach and attach weighty rewards to those refugees who reach those predetermined milestones.

A notable example of these conflicting definitions is the October 2012 change to the Canadian citizenship requirements to include a higher level of charter language ability.²⁸ The predetermined path of integration thus involves learning language and then acquiring citizenship. The Canadian government writes it this way: “The acquisition of citizenship is a significant step in the integration of newcomers.”²⁹ Conversely, this means that refugees who choose not to pursue Canadian citizenship are missing an important step in integration.

Language skills, employment, and social connection are important, but they are not the only factors involved in integration, and even these do not always unfold in a linear fashion. A student may stop and start language study for various reasons, and employment may change, stop, or begin at different times and for different causes. Social connection and a sense of belonging are also important, but cannot be easily quantified, and do not always mean a connection with the white majority.

Teasing apart these multi-faceted definitions and uses of the word *integration* reveal that there are layers of integration, much in the same way that identity and belonging can be experienced differently in different spheres.³⁰ A refugee may be very comfortable in one sphere and feel completely alienated in another. And just as identity can change, so also integration is not static, but changes.

The Process of Creating the Game

In creating the game, I was drawn to the activity called the “Walk of Privilege,”³¹ where different life experiences are highlighted and participants move either forwards or backwards, depending on their individual experiences. I wanted to create a research-based tool where integration experiences are highlighted, and participants feel their effects. My hope was that, in playing the game, participants would find the exploration such issues as integration, identity, and belonging more tangible and visceral.

The initial design of the game was based on a common children’s game, Snakes and Ladders. In this game, players either climb ladders or slid down snakes to reach their goal. The game is moved along with a die, and players land on snakes or ladders by chance. I liked the random aspect to the game and thought it fit well with refugee integration, since much of the external forces of integration are outside the locus of refugees’ control. For example, refugees cannot control whether their paperwork moves slowly or quickly, or whether their qualifications are recognized, whether mental

health services will be available in their language, or whether they will face discrimination when looking for a job. This is not to say that all refugees are powerless, which would be a dangerous assumption, resulting, in Freire’s terminology, in “a lack of confidence in the people’s ability to think, to want, and to know.”³² Refugees are not powerless, but in the journey of integration, some experiences happen *to* them, and not *from* them. For this reason I chose to design a board game design included a random aspect, such as the roll of a die.

The next question I needed to answer was what to label the *start* and *finish* of the game. If the path of the game board represents the path of refugee integration experiences, where does it begin, and where does it end? The goal is not always clear, and it may change, depending on the individual. For this reason I chose to leave the start and finish of the game board labelled with the words “Start” and “Finish,” and to include a question for group discussion following the game: “If you had to label the ‘Finish’ button of the game, what would you label it?” This way the discussion will spark conversation around the topic, fostering deeper engagement and critical thinking about the issue.

In creating the game board, I chose a design that spirals inward. While I initially chose this purely for aesthetic and practical reasons (I needed a long path to represent the long journey of integration, but needed it to fit on a game board), during a trial of the game it was pointed out that the spiral path could represent the way that integration may seem to go round and round, but not always in a unidirectional way. So the design of the game remains a spiral. Also, changing the integration metaphor from a line drawn from start to finish to a more multi-directional metaphor such as a spiral allows for a more accurate representation of lived integration experiences.

As mentioned, I chose a path that is very long. The game takes a long time to play to the end and players seldom finish. This is initially frustrating for players, as they want to move forward quickly. Yet the design is intentional, to symbolize the long journey of integration, and the frustration of feeling close to a goal yet not quite there. This is also symbolic of the fact that even after many years refugees can still experience discrimination and racism and may never reach the benchmarks of integration as defined by governments and other external sources.

An early decision was to include multiple sources of data for the refugee experience cards, because it mitigates against arguments that the game is based entirely on relative experiences. In seeking to make informed statements without universalizing or over-generalizing, I collected experiences from multiple data sources over several months. As I have been an EAL teacher for over a decade, some of the experience cards were taken from refugee students I have taught.

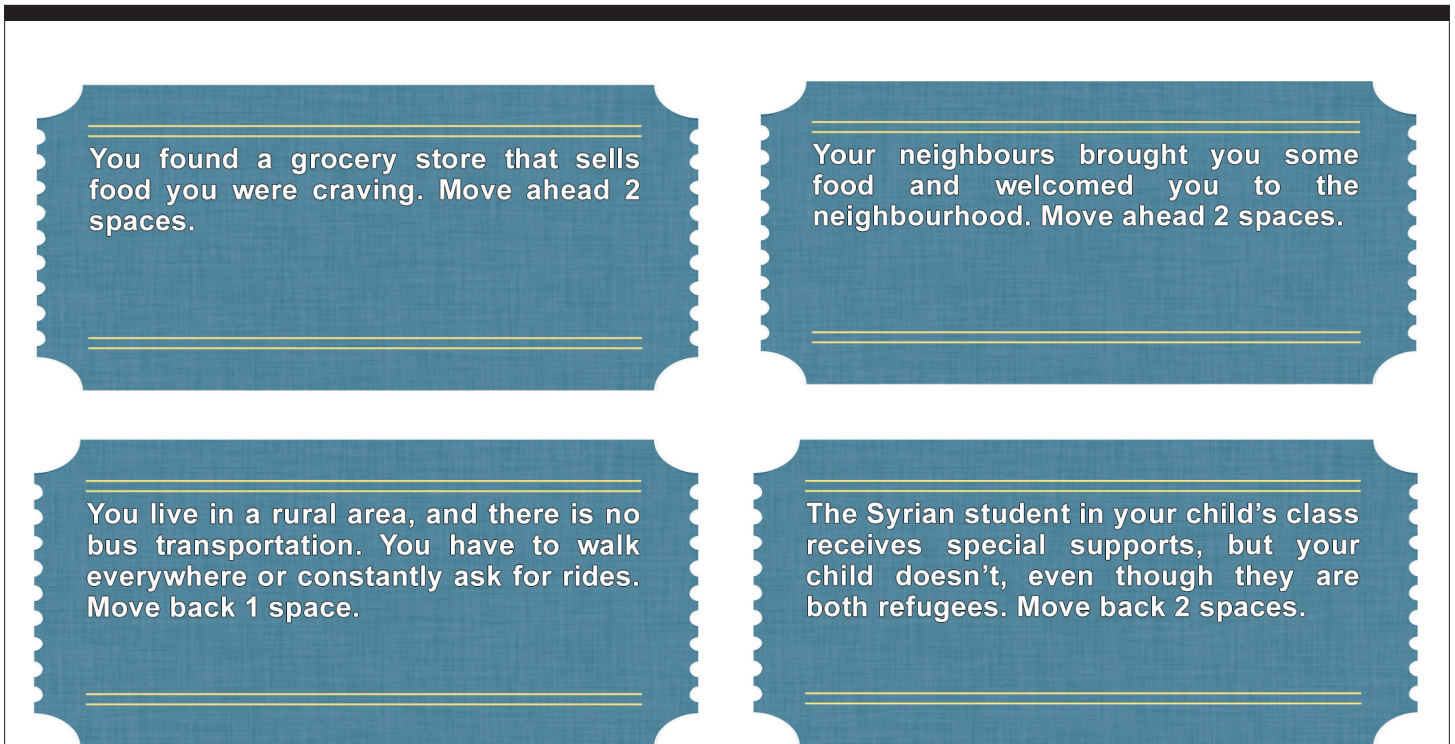


Figure 2: Sample Experience Cards

Other experiences are from refugees I read about in media accounts or journal articles.

I initially included only negative experiences because I wanted to critically highlight the barriers that must be overcome, but the resulting game was impossible to play, with players moving only backwards or missing turns. I also felt that this did not accurately represent life journeys, as both positive and negative experiences happen. Since not all experiences can be categorized simply as either positive or negative, and because some experiences may cause different responses, depending on the individual, after each experience card is drawn there is a discussion that focuses on the way identity would affect that experience. For example, in one discussion card, the children are learning English, and this may be seen as a positive trajectory. However, the parent who told me this story was very upset that her children would no longer know their home language. This highlights the conflicting emotions surrounding integration and how different people experience integration in different ways. The discussion also highlights how some of the experiences, although initially positive (e.g., "Your family had a baby! Move forward 2 spaces") may also encounter further barriers (e.g., "No child care").

I also included more positives to the game board (e.g., "Cultural community") after a trial run in which by random chance very few positive experience cards were drawn. The

game board is always visible during the game, allowing players to see both positive and negative experiences.

In my early drafts of the game, I did not include any identity cards or discussion questions. The game moved much more quickly, but it was possible for people to flip through the experiences and play the game without engaging the experiences at any deep level. After discussion with early participants I decided to include identity cards and conversation questions. This made it impossible to play the game without engaging in discussion and it also allowed for deeper exploration of the ways in which identity affects integration.

In creating the identity cards, I listed different aspects of identity. To avoid stereotypes or caricatures I created the identities randomly, checking only at the end for consistency. I created a table with the categories on the cards, and then assigned random ages, genders, and so on. To generate occupations and educational background I read media accounts of refugee stories. For countries of origin I used the most recent refugee arrivals to choose countries that were represented in Canada. Once all the categories were completed, I ensured that all were consistent (for example, I could not have a border-crossing asylum-seeker from Pakistan). In the end I had sixteen different identity cards.

I needed to acknowledge that identity is multi-faceted and intersects with many aspects of integration,³³ yet not every aspect of identity could fit into the cards. I initially

Identity Card

Age: 17
Gender: Male
Country of Origin: Colombia
Sexual Orientation: Heterosexual
Health: Difficulty hearing
Occupation: Student
Education: grade 11
Family: Lives with parents, 1 younger sister (12)
Housing: Rent house
Religion: Christian
Refugee Status: Government sponsored

Identity Card

Age: 18
Gender: Male
Country of Origin: Syria
Sexual Orientation: Gay
Health: Undiagnosed illness, often sick
Occupation: Meat-packing plant worker
Education: Interrupted since grade 9
Family: Single
Housing: Basement apartment
Religion: Muslim
Refugee Status: Privately Sponsored

Identity Card

Age: 35
Gender: Transgender
Country of Origin: Sri Lanka
Sexual Orientation: Gay / Lesbian
Health: Vision impaired
Occupation: Caterer
Education: Management certificate
Family: Partner still in Sri Lanka, no children
Housing: One-room apartment
Religion: Buddhist
Refugee Status: government sponsored

Identity Card

Age: 33
Gender: Female
Country of Origin: Iraq
Sexual Orientation: Heterosexual
Health: PTSD
Occupation: Hotel staff
Education: Limited literacy
Family: Married, three children (8, 5, 3)
Housing: Renting small apartment, wants to move
Religion: Muslim
Refugee Status: government sponsored

Figure 3: Sample Identity Cards

included age, gender, country of origin, sexual orientation, occupation, education, family, housing, religion, and refugee status. After more trial runs of the game, I added health, since health and level of (dis)ability is a very significant aspect of integration. I also added several places in the journey where players may choose a new identity card. This

is to represent the fluid aspect of identity, which may change over time whereby certain identity markers (e.g., employment) that seemed stable and not an issue of concern can suddenly move to the forefront of refugees' lived experience if they suddenly lose their job, for example. In the introduction to the game, I included a statement about how not every

aspect of identity could be used, yet other identity markers significantly affect integration, such as language ability, skin colour, geographic location, social status, and so on.

A key component to the game is discussion. After each experience card is played, the player launches a discussion around the topic. This prevents the game from becoming simplistic or from reinforcing stereotypes. Instead, through discussion, players are encouraged to think about how their identity card would relate to the experience, furthering understanding of intersectionality. Discussion questions focus on issues of identity (e.g., “Explore the topic from the perspective of your identity.” “How would this topic affect different refugees in different ways?”), criticality (e.g., “What systems of injustice are at work?”), and critical policy analysis (e.g., “What changes could be made to current policy related to this topic?”). I also included the option to share personal experiences (e.g., “Share your own experience with this topic”), as many participants may have been refugees or immigrants themselves, or travelled abroad, or have had relatable experiences in Canada. By revealing personal experience, participants can join their expertise to the topic, yet it is optional and not forced.

The context for the use of this game has shifted considerably since its inception. I developed this game for a class project in a graduate course on criticality in education. Yet as the game progressed, I began to envision a wider audience for this tool. This game could be used in pre-service teacher education classrooms, as well as for ongoing professional development for current teachers. This game could also have application for preparing private sponsor groups, and within the settlement sphere, helping English as an Additional Language teachers, settlement facilitators, volunteers, and other staff have a deeper appreciation for the experiences of refugees.

Ethical Issues

Some participants may feel uncomfortable with the issues brought forward. They may experience trauma and not wish to participate. In order to address these ethical issues, a statement in the introduction to the board game assures participants that participation is optional, and they are free to participate at whatever level they feel comfortable. Resources for support are also listed at the end of the presentation as well as in the board game instructions.

What Does the Game Teach?

The game emphasizes the connection between identity and experience, bringing intersectionality into a tangible space. It highlights the unique quality of each journey, with no two players following the same path. It points out the many parts of life that can affect integration. It teaches that there may not be a clear “end” when all refugees are integrated. It highlights

areas of systemic discrimination, but also emphasizes that individuals can experience the same thing in different ways. And it creates space for discussion, relating personal experiences to the topic, and engaging with integration in a deep and meaningful way.

The Game in Use

The game has been used with pre-service teachers, graduate students, post-secondary educators, and researchers. It was a privilege to observe the discussions that ensued and to hear the personal connections to the experience cards. One player did not understand why one experience was problematic for another player (“You had to mop the floor in your English class. Why is that a problem?”) and other players were able to explain from the perspective of their identity cards. In other cases, the game highlighted areas of discrimination, and players responded indignantly (“Why do I have to move backward just because I am a woman!”) The discussion was rich and meaningful.

One early group needed encouragement to discuss each experience. Perhaps they were accustomed to playing board games where the purpose is to get to the end quickly, and they wanted to move forward without including discussion. But the discussion is where meaningful engagement happens, and without it, the game becomes simplistic. I needed to remind them that the purpose of the game was not to “win” but rather to learn.

After receiving approval from the research ethics board, I began collecting responses from participants. Responses included comments such as, “I liked the scenarios. It was very informative to learn about all these cases.” “Refugee experiences are very diverse and we can’t paint them with one brush. The game encompasses the values of empathy and social consciousness.” “As players you discuss these issues not merely as concepts but as human realities.”

Next Steps

Now that the initial trial uses of the game have been well received, I would like to continue with a before-and-after survey process to measure empathy and to see if the game can be used to increase empathy towards refugee experiences. I would also like to develop a website for the game, which would allow players to submit ideas for further experience cards, which could be developed into an “expansion pack” for the game.

I envision the game as a pedagogical tool that could be used or adapted in broad contexts. In its current iteration, the game is specifically Canadian. For example, the identity cards specify the sponsorship stream, and some of the experience cards relate to policies within Canada. However, as a tool, the game is highly adaptable and could be reworked for use in other contexts. The game can be ordered online at <https://www.thegamecrafter.com/games/refugee-journeys>.

NOTES

- 1 The names of individuals have been changed. These are composites of stories from my more than ten years as an English as an Additional Language (EAL) teacher and researcher, but no story belongs to a single individual. The purpose of these vignettes is to personalize the problematic nature of some integration definitions.
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- 12 Helen M.G. Watt, Paul W. Richardson, Uta Klusman, Mareike Kunter, Beate Beyer, Ulrich Trautwein et al., "Motivations for Choosing Teaching as a Career: An International Comparison Using the FIT-Choice Scale," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 28, no. 6 (1 August 2012): 791–805, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2012.03.003>.
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