



Teaching Privilege

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How do you teach privilege to 15-year-olds? How do you teach white privilege and class privilege to 15-year-olds when most, but not all, are themselves born into such privilege? And how do you teach these concepts in a way that will encourage students to be receptive and analytical, not defensive and resistant?

We have grappled with these questions for the past six years as we worked with colleagues to develop a course titled “An Ethical Response to Poverty.” A part of our school’s experiential X-term program, the course has been a requirement for all ninth-grade students since 2011. We use activities, simulations and service-learning as tools to help students develop an analytical approach to poverty and economic inequality.

St. Catherine’s is an independent girls’ school in the West End of Richmond. It is both connected to and separated from the city in which it resides. While the school rests within the city limits, its surrounding neighborhood is one of the wealthier enclaves in the metro area. St. Catherine’s students come from all over the Richmond area, and its financial-aid program promotes representation from all socioeconomic groups. Moreover, St. Catherine’s is an Episcopal school whose mission statement declares that it is committed “to building a welcoming community within and beyond the school through teaching social responsibility and inclusiveness.”

But until the late 1960s, St. Catherine’s was a segregated, all-white institution, and its alumna base has historically been connected to the economic and political power elites who dominated



the city for generations. These realities inform our curriculum and our approach to teaching privilege. At times, our exploration takes us into some uncomfortable conversations. Nevertheless, we root our exploration of poverty in the history and geography of our city and encourage our students to ask questions about the origins of concentrated poverty in Richmond and its correlation with race.

How the course unfolds

“We designed it this way”

We begin with a series of questions designed to prompt students to think about why poverty exists, where poverty exists, and how it is portrayed in our culture. The goal in this exercise is to help students to identify their assumptions and also to begin developing a set of questions that will guide their inquiry.

We then guide students through an activity that uses an online, interactive map based on census data to show how income levels and racial and ethnic groups are distributed throughout the Richmond area. Students are assigned a census tract in one of the Richmond neighborhoods where poverty is concentrated, and they use Internet resources—including Google Maps’ “street view” function—to get a feel for the neighborhood. We use *The New York Times*’s 2010 census resource (<http://www.nytimes.com/projects/census/2010/map.html>), but the online resource called Mapping Inequality (<https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=4/36.71/-96.93&opacity=0.8>), gives over 150 redlining maps of cities across America. We ask students to develop hypotheses for why residential patterns in Richmond have developed in the way that they

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have and to develop questions they would like to explore in later meetings. Here are some of the questions students have asked in past years: “Why is income so dependent on race?” “What are the people like that live there? Are they struggling to get by?” “Was this area ever in a better condition? If so, what happened?” “What is the connection with race and poverty?”

And as John Moeser, a retired urban studies professor from the University of Richmond and an expert on the history of Richmond’s segregated neighborhoods, has told us, the answer to the question, “Why do we have concentrated poverty in Richmond, and why is it so correlated with race?” is chillingly simple: “We designed it that way.”

Of course, scholars continue to explore the answers to these questions. They are not questions that only pertain to Richmond. In essays in *The Atlantic*, Ta-Nehisi Coates (building on the research of others, including Richard Rothstein) has helped to reveal the origins and legacies of residential segregation. The patterns are similar throughout the nation’s cities. Government policies, beginning in the early 1900s, created *de jure* segregation and impoverished neighborhoods. Students begin to realize that patterns of race and socioeconomic privilege were

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constructed through city planners, racial purity laws, and loan practices.

This history has real-life consequences

We have brought in experts from the Richmond community, including Brian Koziol of Housing Opportunities Made Equal, who has walked our students through the “map of opportunity” to explain how it is that growing up in one neighborhood just a few miles away from us can lead to a life expectancy that is literally decades shorter than that of our own surrounding neighborhood.

Students anywhere in the country can examine their own opportunity index. The Opportunity Index examines “economic, educational and civic factors that foster opportunity.” It “helps identify concrete solutions to lagging conditions for opportunity and economic mobility” (<https://opportunitynation.org>). Another resource to get at similar effects is the Policy Map (<https://www.policymap.com/>). These resources will show how areas of opportunity stand in contrast with areas that have historically suffered under redlining and economic prejudice.

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One interesting shift here might be to use the term “opportunity” instead of “privilege.” Explaining the city landscape in terms of opportunity may help students to engage the issue of privilege in a less combative fashion.

These concepts can be challenging for such a young audience to process. In an effort to help students make a connection with inequality, we also use simulations in the hopes that students will be the ones telling us, “This is not fair.”

Simulation: living on the edge

One recent activity we have developed is the use of the Missouri Community Action Network simulation (<http://www.povertysimulation.net>). This simulation allows students to “live in the shoes” of others living at the poverty level. Students have to get their children to school, get to work, pay their bills, go to the grocery store and manage everything else that comes with the stress of living on the edge. The activity includes many community partners who act as the community resources to the students in the simulation. The social services office, interfaith community center as well as the payday lender and pawn shop all act as resources for the participants in the simulation. A local Roman Catholic priest acts as the pawnbroker, effectively teaching students the economics of pawn shops and payday lenders. Our students get a sense of privilege and economic options, or lack thereof.



Understanding the real Monopoly

Monopoly, by definition, is about teaching players how to win the game through acquiring real estate. The website Teaching Tolerance (<https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/tolerance-lessons/the-real-monopoly-americas-racial-wealth-divide>) gives a different set of rules that mimic the real life inequality of the marketplace. Some players come to the game late after others have multiple turns before them. In one aspect of the game, a player can enter the game halfway through the game play. This player may enter and replace the most wealthy of players, thus “inheriting” her wealth. One resource for classroom teachers is the TED talk: “Does Money Make you Mean?” (<https://www.npr.org/2014/04/04/295360962/does-money-make-you-mean>). This experiment examines how winners feel they have earned their winnings, even if the game is rigged for winning. One key component of the game is to have real winners and losers. We give the winners of the board game a large bag of candy. This makes the game

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much more realistic because students are playing for something they legitimately want. It also makes the game more stressful and more impactful.

Our activities and simulations are designed to have students “feel” the questions. Privilege can paralyze students because they are being blamed for something that they have had no part in constructing, even if they benefit from it daily. The curriculum is intentionally directed to ninth grade students, who are about to embark on their service-learning career. Our hope is that the questions the curriculum raises will stay with our students throughout their time at St. Catherine’s and will lay a solid foundation of empathy and understanding as they continue to learn and develop. ●

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