

Designing an Educational Board Game to Facilitate Anti-Racism Dialogue in Children

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Abstract

Many school activities show that kids have hidden biases, but teachers fail to teach them how to stop racism. Today, racism is not always open hatred; it often happens quietly through small insults, language bias, and unfair systems—a concept known as "polite racism" (Coen-Sanchez, 2025; Fleras & Elliott, 1992). To help fix this pedagogical gap, this paper presents a new board game designed for children aged 7 to 9. The game uses custom rules to show that racism hurts an entire community, not just one individual. Children play using five unique characters based on real people from diverse backgrounds who face everyday challenges like cultural exclusion, xenophobia, and colonized institutional systems. Unlike older board games that rely on individual competition, this design is fully cooperative: all five characters must reach the finish line together to win. If one player faces discrimination on the board, the entire group must pause and work together to advocate for their friend before anyone can advance. Teachers act as facilitators and step back so children can practice problem-solving on their own. Accompanied by a post-game reflection, this cooperative play model replaces classroom silence with active teamwork, giving young children the critical vocabulary, empathy, and confidence they need to recognize and stand up against subtle prejudice in their daily lives.

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Systemic and interpersonal racism remain pervasive global issues, deeply embedded within social institutions and everyday interactions. My motivation for exploring anti-racism stems from my positionality as a newcomer in Canada and a permanent resident of the United States. This is compounded by witnessing the regional and global impacts of systemic violence, such as the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. These experiences have shaped my understanding of racism not as a fixed, one-directional hierarchy, but as a complex global reality where groups can experience oppression in one context while perpetuating it in another. For instance, while members of the Korean diaspora face racism abroad, immigrants in South Korea simultaneously encounter systemic discrimination (Kang, 2010). This highlights the need to teach anti-racism without just pointing out prejudice and letting students learn passively. We need to help kids realize that anyone—including themselves—can fall into prejudiced habits, but to prevent them from falling into this pattern, we should facilitate children as educators to address the issues more directly

Early childhood education represents a critical yet underutilized pedagogical site for prejudice reduction. Research indicates that children begin internalizing racial biases at a young age, yet traditional educational frameworks often lack interactive, experiential tools to discuss race constructively (Priest et al., 2016; Yu, 2020). To address this pedagogical gap, I introduce a novel cooperative board game designed specifically for children aged 7 to 9. I argue that cooperative, rather than competitive, game mechanics are uniquely suited to this pedagogical task: by requiring collective advocacy over individual competition, this design allows young learners to identify subtle prejudice, build empathy, and develop cooperative problem-solving skills in a low-stakes, socially supported environment.

Critical Context and Literature Discussion

Children don't develop racial bias the same way adults do. Rather than learning complex beliefs, they absorb bias at a young age just by watching everyday behavior and sorting people into groups. This is the same premise underlying the "doll test" tradition, most recently revisited with four- to six-year-olds in CNA Insider's *Regardless of Race* series, which found that young children already express preferences along racial lines before they have the vocabulary to explain why. Priest et al. (2016) extend this into the school setting, showing that both teachers and parents in their study tended to discuss racism *reactively* rather than proactively — stepping in only after an incident occurred, rather than building racial literacy as a standing part of children's education. Yu (2020) adds that this gap has consequences specifically for immigrant children, whose experiences of exclusion among peers are frequently misread by adults as behavioral or language problems rather than recognized as racialized dynamics. Together, these studies support the claim in my introduction: children are not too young to encounter racism, but they are rarely given proactive, structured opportunities to name and interrupt it.

Fixing this problem isn't only about starting younger; it's about shifting kids from passive listeners to active problem-solvers. Research with high school students shows that when youth share real experiences instead of sitting through lectures, they feel empowered to fight racism together (Casanova & Domínguez, 2024). While this active approach works well, it hasn't been tested much with 7- to 9-year-olds. At that age, cooperative gameplay is a much better tool than formal group discussions to teach the exact same lesson. Existing design precedents for teaching children about race fall into three categories, none of which fully addresses this need. Assessment-oriented tools, like the doll-test format used in *Regardless of Race*, are diagnostic rather than instructional — they reveal bias but do not equip children to respond to it. Classroom simulation formats, such as *The School That Tried to End Racism*, use structured exercises (a privilege-based race) to make inequity visible — but does seeing who ends

up ahead and who ends up behind, in a single adult-run session, actually help children understand the systemic roots of that gap? The Conversation-based board game by Audrey Clausen's S.C.O.R.E. (Start a Conversation on Race Equality) uses answer-to-advance to prompt dialogue among players of "all ages," allowing participants to engage with the topic together — but the game is not built specifically for children in this developmental age range, and players still move individually rather than working as a team. Finally, narrative resources like Morrison's (2004) *Remember* present historical injustice through picture-book storytelling, which builds empathy through reading but remains a passive medium rather than an interactive one. My project responds to this landscape by combining what these precedents offer separately — developmentally-tuned content, active youth agency, and structured collective response — into a single cooperative board game built specifically for children aged 7 to 9.

Design Proposition

My speculative design for addressing racism grew out of conversations with friends rather than literature alone. Most adults whom I spoke to remembered encountering racism as children and having to make sense of it on their own, without school ever addressing it directly. My design speculates on how children might benefit if they learn to recognize and respond to prejudice before experiencing it firsthand.

Central to this concept is how the game handles character identity. Each of the five playable characters is based on a real person's lived experience, but players encounter them first as individuals—with distinct names and personal backgrounds—rather than as demographic categories. Instead of playing "the newcomer" or "the Pakistani character," players get to know a specific person with their own individuality. This choice directly counters the flattening effect of prejudice, which reduces people to stereotypes (figure 1). By prompting players to connect with characters as whole human beings before raising the topic of discrimination, the game works against the subtle biases children absorb long before school age (CNA Insider, 2022).

This individual focus operates within a collective structure. Firstly, players throw dice and move forward the number of spaces rolled with a smiley face token. When a character faces discrimination on the board, the game pauses, preventing any player from advancing until the group actively advocates on that character's behalf. Pairing personal empathy with a required group response shifts the dynamic from individual choice to collective responsibility: the group cannot succeed unless everyone helps. This design mirrors findings by Casanova and Domínguez (2024), who showed that positioning youth as active participants in confronting injustice—rather than passive receivers of a lesson—builds true solidarity. Ultimately, this raises a core question for analysis: can game-enforced cooperation build a genuine habit of standing up for others?

Figure 1

Sample Gameplay Board and Character Cards



Analysis and Discussion

Coen-Sanchez (2025) points out that polite racism operates through quiet, everyday patterns. My game, however, functions through distinct events: players roll the dice, move forward, land on a space, and respond to an obvious incident. This reflects the "incident model" that Priest et al. (2016) warn against, where adults only address race reactively after something visible occurs. This is less a flaw than an inherent constraint of board games, which require clear triggers to prompt player interaction. Still, it risks leaving children with the impression that racism consists only of isolated moments. While post-game discussions can bridge this gap, the game's design cannot solve this issue on its own.

Requiring the whole group to advocate for a character before anyone can move forward is the strongest part of the design. It directly reflects Casanova and Domínguez's (2024) finding that kids build genuine solidarity by taking action together, not just listening to a lesson. This analysis, however, revises the facilitator role outlined in my abstract: teachers cannot simply "step back," as I originally proposed. To ensure every student feels supported during these moments, facilitators need to actively guide the conversation with structured questions, so that practicing empathy remains a positive, shared experience for the whole group rather than an unmanaged one.

Beyond teacher support, this rule reveals other hidden classroom dynamics: if outspoken students end up taking over and telling everyone else the right answer, teamwork turns into peer pressure. This rule also affects students differently. While privileged children get a safe space to practice standing up for others, newcomer students whose real lives match the character cards might feel uncomfortable or feel pressured by outspoken peers to explain racism to their classmates. As a speculative design prototype, the game suggests one way that shared-fate rules might teach children to take responsibility for one another.

Conclusion

My speculative design is a cooperative board game for children aged 7 to 9, created to fill a major gap in early childhood anti-racism education. Instead of using competitive rules, the game uses shared strategies for problem-solving and dealing with racism as a team. This design transforms passive listening into experiential learning, showing children how to stand up to subtle, everyday prejudice. Each character has an individual backstory to prevent stereotyping. Additionally, players must work together to advocate for a character before anyone can move forward. This rule helps children understand how discrimination harms peers across different cultures and faiths.

The game does have some practical limits. Because board games rely on landing on specific spaces, the game risks treating systemic racism as isolated moments rather than everyday patterns. However, these limits highlight why guided teacher support is so important. The game serves as a tool for reflection, encouraging children to share their thoughts and feelings through discussion. Future research should test the prototype in real classroom or after-school programs. This testing will help measure how well these game rules build empathy and reduce bias. Overall, bringing cooperative anti-racism play into early childhood education helps dismantle hidden biases before children grow into adulthood.

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