

THE CENTER FOR  
ETHICS & EDUCATION

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# Education Debts vs. Education Gaps

TEACHING GUIDE

The Center for Ethics & Education created this curriculum plan to give faculty and students the tools to bridge philosophy and education. This teaching guide is intended for use in both undergraduate and graduate education classes.

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About the Center for Ethics  
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## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- **Students will...**
  - **Learn about inequality in education** and the factors that contribute to inequality.
  - **Consider justice in education:** what educators and administrators “owe” in terms of addressing disparity in education.
  - **Practice conceptual analysis** and define key terms tied to educational disparity.
  - **Encounter philosophical writing** (arguments, criticism, and responses).

# TOPIC OVERVIEW

## and why it matters

### EDUCATION DEBTS AND EDUCATION GAPS

The US education system (like education systems around the world) is riddled with inequality. School districts spend unequally, and their students perform unequally. And even when federal and state legislatures target resources to lower-income districts to make spending more equal, significant inequalities still remain.

But not all inequalities of performance are bad! Typically, eighth graders outperform third graders on standardized tests. Not only is that not bad; it is positively good! So we need to think about which inequalities are bad, and which are not, and why.

Typically, the inequalities we worry about are those between children of the same age, especially when those inequalities correlate with race, or social class—and especially when we think that race or social class have been implicated in the way those inequalities have come about. The readings in this unit explore that question, and also explore how best to conceptualize the inequalities. The three readings offer different language and different conceptualizations of educational inequalities, grounded in different moral views about why the inequalities are bad.

# READINGS

These three readings address how best to think about the educational inequalities between different demographic groups in the US. Students of different races, and different social backgrounds, perform unequally well on standardized tests: these inequalities are sometimes referred to as “achievement gaps” (or, sometimes, when the demographic groups are specified, “the achievement gap”).

**Gloria Ladson-Billings**, while she acknowledges the existence of the achievement gaps, argues that describing it as a bare fact is misleading: the history of how the gaps came about means we should talk about the gaps as debts.

**Gina Schouten** argues, by contrast, that the language of ‘debt’ is itself misleading, because even if the history had been different, society would still have an obligation to address the gaps.

And **Theresa Mooney** argues that the problem is not with using the term ‘gap,’ but with using the idea of ‘achievement,’ arguing that inequalities in achievement (scoring high on tests) do not matter in themselves, but because they represent inequalities of opportunity.

## Readings:

- “From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools” by Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006)
- “Educational Justice” Closing Gaps or Paying Debts?” by Gina Schouten (2012)
- “Why We Say ‘Opportunity Gap’ Instead of ‘Achievement Gap’” by Theresa Mooney (2018)

## Suggested Companion Readings:

- “Whose Problem is Poverty?” by Richard Rothstein (2008)

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## Discussion questions on the readings:

- How do both Ladson-Billings and Schouten define the terms educational gap and educational debt?
  - In what ways do their definitions differ?
  - Give your own definition of these terms.
  - Which definition do you agree more with?

<b>Gap</b>	<b>Debt</b>
How Ladson-Billings uses the term:	How Ladson-Billings uses the term:
How Schouten uses the term:	How Schouten uses the term:
Student definition:	Student definition:

- What is each author's primary argument?
- Based on the established definitions, how does Schouten's paper critique and respond to Ladson-Billings?

## Morally troubling gaps

- Some achievement gaps are morally troubling: for example, most commentators think that we have reason to address the gap between black and white students of the same age. Some achievement gaps are not morally troubling: Consider the gap between 3rd graders and 8th graders.
- Here are some demographic groups between whom there are gaps:
  - Male/Female, Rural/Suburban, Affluent/Poor, Amish/Baptist, Mississippi/Massachusetts
- How would we decide whether they are morally troubling or not?
- What do the morally troubling ones have in common that the not-morally troubling ones don't?
- What are other examples you can think of and would like to discuss?

# SUGGESTED ACTIVITY #1

## Approaching a Reading

Prior to class discussion, have students journal or write a discussion post response to the following questions. Begin the class by having students share these responses in groups of 2-4 before moving to discussion questions.

- What was it like to read this/these article(s)?
- What ideas did you get out of it?
- Pick three sentences that are essential to the piece
- What did you find particularly difficult about this reading?
- What are five key words or terms in this paper? (Identify them)
- If you had to summarize the “main point” of this reading in 2-3 sentences, what would that be?

# SUGGESTED ACTIVITY #2

## Conceptual Analysis

Conceptual analysis is a method philosophers use to understand what we mean about certain concepts or ideas. In our ordinary language, we sometimes use concepts loosely or vaguely. By contrast, philosophers want to be very precise about the concepts they use, so there is as little room as possible for misunderstanding. They don't usually prescribe particular ways of using a concept, but by being explicit about how precisely they are using a concept, they try to avoid mistaking semantic disagreements for substantive disagreements. (For example: Kate, who only counts erotic images that degrade women as 'pornographic,' and condemns all pornography, argues with Anna, who defends some pornography as ethical. They think they disagree about a matter of substance, but it might turn out that Anna has a much more expansive definition of pornography, and that they actually agree about exactly what should, and shouldn't, be condemned).

Obviously, some concepts are quite precise. In English, "bachelor" just means "unmarried man," and someone who uses it some other way is making an error. And even very vague concepts have limits: it's quite difficult to come up with an unambiguous definition of 'sex,' but if two people go bowling together, and one of them describes that as 'sex,' they have definitely made a mistake. Many concepts—democracy, freedom, harm, justice, and the ideas in this unit such as achievement gaps—are used by different people in different ways in different contexts.

Imagine you have a big, complicated idea, like "justice" or "knowledge." Conceptual analysis is like taking that big idea and breaking it into smaller, easier-to-understand pieces. Getting clear about the terms used to describe certain concepts is a central part of philosophical inquiry.

### Making a Glossary of Terms:

- Have the discussion leader present the idea of conceptual analysis. (See above.)
- Have students engage with conceptual analysis by creating a glossary of terms:
  - Following a large group discussion, work collectively as a class to create a glossary of key terms from these readings.
  - Identify the most important terms, define how they are specifically used in the readings, consider how they are used otherwise/colloquially.
  - Why do you think some definitions of a particular term are better than others?

Some terms to consider: moral debt, achievement gap, equity, inequality, justice, achievement

# PEDAGOGICAL IDEAS

## Possible Pacing:

- Day 1: Assign Mooney's TFA paper as pre-reading. In class: Discuss Conceptual Analysis (Introduction to the topic.)
- Day 2: Assign Ladson-Billings as pre-reading. In class: Discuss the paper for 45 minutes and then have a conversation about definitions/terms
- Day 3: Assign Schouten as pre-reading. In-class: Discuss paper for 30 minutes; spend the rest of the class putting the papers in conversation with Ladson-Billings.

## Facilitating Good Discussion:

These are based on classroom norms and conduct in Philosophy 341: Contemporary Moral Issues and on Walter Parker's *Teaching Democracy: Unity and Diversity in Public Life*, pages 138-9.

## For Discussion Leader:

- Have students share their journaled responses in small groups (2-3)
- In larger groups, have a running "list" of students who are "on the docket" to speak next while also providing the opportunity for students to directly respond to a prior point (if relevant)
- Structure activities in groups on 4-5 before talking about takeaways and reflections (not the activity itself) in large group conversation
- Write main ideas on the board prior to conversation

## For Students:

- Do not raise hands
- Address one another, not the discussion leader
- Invite others into the conversation
- Cite and/or reference the texts to support your texts
- Base response in the reading/sources
- Listen to and build on others' comments
- Critically agree and disagree

*For more ideas about structuring discussion and asking good questions, see UW-Madison's [The Discussion Project](#).*

## For Deeper Inquiry:

- Prompt students to be critical of buzzwords, especially in education. Try to get them to be as precise as possible. For example: can they engage in the disagreements between Ladson-Billings and Schouten without using the term "[equity](#)", which is, itself, ambiguous?

# THE CENTER FOR ETHICS & EDUCATION

We at the Center are committed to encouraging philosophical reflection on contemporary issues in education. This curriculum was developed for use in undergraduate and graduate education, philosophy, and sociology classes. It is available for free.

The Center for Ethics & Education is housed in the Wisconsin Center for Education Research (WCER) in the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The Center supports the field of philosophy of education by supporting scholars, graduate students, practitioners, and policymakers in thinking analytically about ethical issues in education.

How did it go using this teaching guide with your class?  
We'd love to hear from you!

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