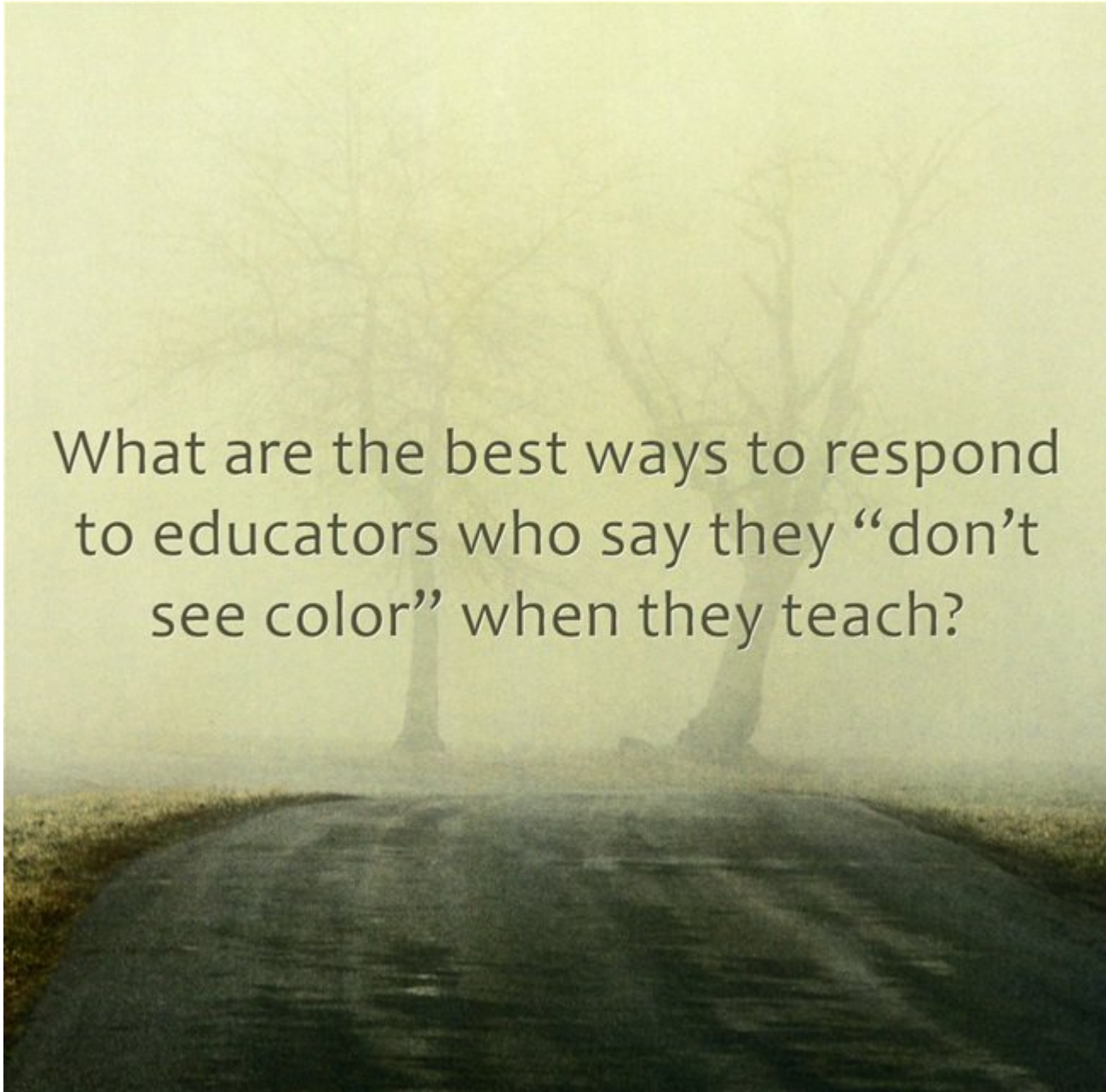


## How Do You Respond to a Teacher Who Says, 'I Don't See Color'?

By [Larry Ferlazzo](#) on [September 5, 2019 3:58 PM](#)

The new question-of-the-week is:

***What are the best ways to respond to educators who say they "don't see color" when they teach?***



**Note: This is such an important question that responses won't be published in a "one-and-done" series. Different answers to this question will appear at least three times (and perhaps more) during the school year, so there will be plenty of time for readers to respond. The first series of responses will be guest-hosted and edited by Shannon R. Waite, Ed.D., who has written this special introduction (you can also listen to an interview**

**with Shannon, Terri Watson, and Chris Emdin about this topic here):**

*Shannon R. Waite, Ed.D., is a clinical assistant professor in the Educational Leadership, Administration, and Policy division in the Graduate School of Education at Fordham University. Dr. Waite is developing a research agenda centered on examining the significance of culturally relevant leaders in supporting student achievement, understanding their responsibility to be social-justice-oriented, equity-focused leaders, and priming educational leaders to develop a critical consciousness with the end goal of dismantling institutionalized oppression in schools and systems. She is a mayoral appointee to the Panel for Educational Policy and has two daughters attending public school in New York City.*

Upon completion of his listening tour, New York City schools Chancellor Richard Carranza heard a number of issues, priorities, and needs from public school families across the five boroughs of the city. As a result of what he heard during the tour, he reorganized the structure of the district, established an Office of Climate and Wellness and, within this office, the Office of Equity and Access. OEA has been charged with the task of providing professional development on implicit bias and culturally responsive educational practices. This professional-development series has been met with vitriol, attacks, and accusations of being divisive and discriminatory.

Those who stand in opposition to these professional development sessions on implicit bias and culturally responsive education decry that this type of training has no place in schools as administrators and teachers should be "colorblind and treat all students equally." A number of teachers have asserted that "they don't see race" when they teach, and this sentiment has been supported and echoed by some parents, staff, and members of the New York City public school community at-large.

As both a scholar-activist and an engaged, invested New York City public school parent, I am deeply troubled that the ideology of colorblindness is being used by educators as a justifiable response after experiencing discomfort during professional development. Particularly when the preponderance of educational research does not support, but debunks, colorblindness as a best practice in the field of education. In *Towards a Critical Race Theory in Education*, Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate assert that there are three "central propositions" to understanding Critical Race Theory (CRT):

1. Race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States.
2. U.S. society is based on property rights.
3. The intersection of race and property creates an analytic tool through which we can understand social (and, consequently, school) inequality.

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- Shannon R. Waite, EdD in Education Week Teacher

I share these as CRT anchors the rationale, framework, and lens through which the ideology of colorblindness and the appropriateness of this ideology in the field of education is discussed in this series. In *Towards a Critical Race Theory of Education*, Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate dissect the matters of both race and property rights as being significant factors in the U.S., highlighting that they also intersect and are interrelated. They proffer that "racism is not a series of isolated acts, but is endemic in American life, deeply ingrained legally, culturally, and even psychologically" and that CRT presents a challenge to the "traditional claims of legal neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy as camouflages for the self-interest of dominant groups in American society."

Having established the operational framework to ground both this discussion and the responses that shall follow, I offer that individuals who subscribe to the ideology of colorblindness, both in silence and those who boldly proclaim it publicly, do so to camouflage their vested self-interest in maintaining the systems and structures of institutionalized oppression, inequity, and racism deeply entrenched and interwoven into the foundation of education in the U.S. Education in America was not created to be equitable when white men were the only people in the country allowed to be educated. There was an inherent caste system created then, and it still exists

today. It has simply converted from operating as an economic class system based solely off of wealth to one based off of the construct of race.

In *The Ideology of Race in American History*, Barbara Fields eloquently articulates and uses historical context to shine light on the truth, which is that slavery was the impetus for the ideology of race because the rise of racism was born "at the very point in time when large numbers of men and women were beginning to question the moral legitimacy of slavery' that the idea of race came into its own." Understanding the historical context of race, racism, and inequity in this country is central to dismantling it and authentically reimagining this country's ability to offer *all* students an education that can be "the great equalizer (of the conditions of men)," as Arne Duncan wrote in ***Education: The Great Equalizer***.

Empowering school communities to examine the ways in which their unconscious bias and prejudice, including the assimilationist and colonized perspectives of educators of color, impact how they lead, teach, and interact with the students and families they serve *is good pedagogy*. Being responsive and inclusive of all cultures and genuinely "taking our differences and making them strengths," as Audre Lorde wrote in *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House*, are commonly pontificated as general best practices in the field of education. Developing a critical consciousness allows for the kind of self-examination, reflection, and introspection that affords school communities to have honest conversations about why systems operate and function the way they do.

Deep reflection coupled with courageous conversations allows school communities to examine the dysconscious systems and biased structures *they* conceive and implement. Often these policies and practices are developed with the best of intentions, and school communities are *only* able to see that the unintended consequences of these policies actually hurt students and families by committing to becoming a critically conscious school community. These are exactly the types of professional development seminars and trainings districts engage in when they are authentically committed to diagnosing the root cause of the ailment and not simply content with treating the symptoms.

In a classic discussion, "A Talk to Teachers," which James Baldwin delivered in 1963, he talked about the reality of challenging the status quo and articulated just what it could cost to make impactful change. He said:

"Any citizen of this country who figures himself as responsible—and particularly those of you who deal with the minds and hearts of young people—must be prepared to "go for broke." Or to put it another way, you must understand that in the attempt to correct so many generations of bad faith and cruelty, when it is operating not only in the classroom but in society, you will

meet the most fantastic, the most brutal, and the most determined resistance. There is no point in pretending that this won't happen."

Baldwin's words are timely and accurate as what we are witnessing in New York City is nothing short of fantastic and I imagine it may only get more brutal. My hope in responding to this question is to offer the 60 percent of people who **Dolly Chugh suggests are open to being influenced** an alternative perspective to their current narrative and/or an alternative to the narratives that have been conjured up and incessantly perpetuated by individuals and groups invested in maintaining inequity because it serves their self-interests. Responses to this question start by examining the impact the ideology of colorblindness has had on groups and members of society who have been "othered," examining the impact colorblindness has on the lived experiences of students, parent advocates, staff, and administration, and exploring why colorblindness is perpetuated in education and the cost of this false narrative to the field.

**Part I will discuss the historical context of colorblindness and look at the impact of groups who have been "othered." Part II will include the voices of individuals exposed to and in the position of navigating colorblind ideology in schools on a daily basis. Part III will include responses from researchers and scholar-activists in the field of education.**

***NOTE: These three "Parts" will comprise the first group of responses to this question appearing here. Additional responses will be published at various times throughout the year.***