

# Q and A: How White Educators Can Move Beyond 'White Fragility'

## What educators can do to break the status quo of racism

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Author Robin DiAngelo thinks white people are being too sensitive. Her New York Times bestselling book, *White Fragility*, based on a term she coined, debuted in the summer of 2018. Its publication sent hackles into the air over the notion that white people—even progressive white people—who refuse to acknowledge their own racist tendencies are actually perpetuating the status quo and making racism worse. The “fragility” DiAngelo writes about is the near-universal response of white people to deny they harbor racist intentions. In a rush to be defensive, white people eschew any productive conversation to repair the relationships or make a change. [← Back to Story](#)



DiAngelo, a white woman, began exploring white fragility after spending time as a diversity trainer, talking primarily to white workers. “I was trying to talk to white people about race, and the hostility was off the charts,” she said. “I got better at seeing what it means to be white—when a society says it doesn’t mean anything and, yet, is profoundly separate and unequal by race.”

Being friendly, open minded, and surrounding yourself with diverse people is not enough, she says. We live in a racist society, she explains, and for it to change, we have to acknowledge the role each of us, DiAngelo included, plays in perpetuating it.

—Courtesy of Robin DiAngelo

In a conversation with Rebecca Gale for *Education Week*, DiAngelo declined to comment on the range of reactions to the [charged encounter last Friday](#) between Covington Catholic High School students and an Omaha Native elder on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington. She was, however, candid and forthright in discussing her findings and how educators, from different backgrounds and races, can play a pivotal role in getting more comfortable having conversations about race, making repairs, and shifting our worldview.

A Q and A follows. It has been edited for clarity and length.

### **The premise of your book—that white people who claim to not hold racist views actually do more harm than good—can be both uncomfortable and useful in challenging existing viewpoints. How would such lessons translate into education, where teachers are creating narratives for their classrooms and engaging with students from all backgrounds?**

Well, we only have control over our immediate selves. [White] teachers need to understand that we are a product of our society. We have been raised, live in, and teach in a context of institutionalized racism, and that default is to reproduce that racism.

I don’t think anyone is confused that schools are not equal and the education that children receive is not equal. The status quo is racism, and so if you are not intentionally and strategically seeking to interrupt that status quo, you are invariably reproducing it. It is not dependent on your intentions, your friendliness, or awareness. It takes intentional effort.

### **What does that “intentional effort” entail?**

It entails a lifelong effort. It is not simple, and it is not easy, and there is not a solution or answer I can give. Understand that this is a lifelong process.

There are very strong social pressures to not look at these dynamics, and as a white person those forces are rather seductive. It’s so much easier not to deal with this, to be complacent and carry on.

The two questions I get from [white] teachers are: At what age should we talk to children? And how do I do that? Those are problematic questions because they show there is a moment we have a conversation, rather than integrated into everything I do. It suggests the asker is not the problem. If an anti-racist framework is integrated into how I see the world, then it will be integrated into how I teach.

**"The status quo is racism, and so if you are not intentionally and strategically seeking to interrupt that**

An example is gender. A lot of teachers understand there is not a moment you talk about genders; the binary gender roles are at play 24/7. Children come into that building in kindergarten with already ingrained ideas about what it means to be a girl and what it means to be a boy.

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**Your book outlines why solutions like diversity and inclusionary trainings are not sufficient to counteract white fragility. In the education sector, where such trainings are commonplace, groups (such as in Santa Barbara) are even suing school districts over anti-bias training, claiming such programs that focus on unconscious bias and inclusivity are anti-white. Is there a better solution to approach the defensiveness of white fragility?**

I don't think equity training is problematic unless it's not followed by anything. People need to be given information. The problem is that when the presentation is over, people think [the diversity training] is done. It has to be sustained.

There are very strong forces that don't want to challenge the status quo—it works quite well for a demographic that has a lot of power. There is a time we need to ask ourselves: Who am I? Am I not going to address this because some people don't want to? We wouldn't have a civil rights movement if people gave up in the face of resistance.

Of course, I don't think it's anti-white. I am talking about patterns that are consistent and observable among a group of people that have been collectively socialized, in the same way we would look at patterns with gender, and see if they were limiting, and then challenge them.

**So, then, why is it so hard for white people to talk about racism?**

There is not a single reason; there is a convergence. We have been taught that racism means you are intentionally prejudiced against a group of people on race and intentionally want to do them harm. We hear it as, "I am a very bad person and want to do someone harm based on their race." Most white people would be offended by that.

I am looking at racism as a system that is infused and embedded across aspects of society, and asking white people to grapple with how this system has shaped us, and understand that we collude with that system regardless of our intentions.

I also think there is guilt and a kind of moral trauma at the profound history of harm that our society has perpetrated toward people of color—African-Americans, in particular.

It's hard to look at what we've done: the school-to-prison pipeline, mass incarcerations, executions of unarmed black people. We want to turn away from that and distance ourselves, rather than face it and take responsibility for it.

**How can educators apply such principles surrounding race to a classroom, especially in a classroom with so many children where it would be impossible to tailor education goals and lessons to individuals?**

It's not a moment or a lesson. Teachers have frameworks, and they're integrated into the way they teach. Ask, what assumptions am I making? I am having a strong reaction to this child. Could race be a part of that, given that race is a part of that? What kind of policies does our school have, and what is the impact of those policies? Are we noticing that certain demographics of our students are over or under represented? In his book, *Stamped From the Beginning*, Ibram X. Kendi says that a racist policy is any policy that has a racially disparate result. By that definition, virtually every policy in education is racist. We have to look at testing, tracking, and the way we allocate resources.

Another thing that a predominantly white teaching force must understand is that there is a deep history of harm between the institution of education and people of color. We have not done right by children of color. When parents of color mistrust our school system, and mistrust our [white] teachers, [white people] have to see that mistrust as rational and having been earned, and that will change our response to it. [White] teachers must earn their trust, rather than demanding it.

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**You talk about the narrative of “racial exceptionalism” where people of color are framed as exceptional or heroic for overcoming obstacles and hitting specific achievements. Michelle Obama’s book, *Becoming*, also speaks to a similar idea—that there were many talented young people in the South Side of Chicago, and the exceptionalism wasn’t limited to her and her brother. How can one reconcile the “racial exceptionalism” narrative with the idea that students of color may still face systematic barriers to success?**

I think teachers have to understand that the narrative has been a drumbeat. Across our lifespan we have been reinforced on that hero and heroine approach. Watch out for it.

[The stories of] Ruby Bridges and Rosa Parks, teachers just love, and they completely hide the structural narrative of racism, and hide the white people that were part of opening that access. Ruby Bridges and Rosa Parks didn’t just do this on their own. They were surrounded by people who resisted and thwarted their efforts, and who opened doors. It wasn’t just one special person who did it all by themselves.

*The interview has been edited for length and clarity.*