DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS

"A NECESSARY BOOK FOR ALL PEOPLE INVESTED IN SOCIETAL CHANGE." —CLAUDIA RANKINE

WHITE FRAGILITY

New York Times BESTSELLER

WHY IT'S SO HARD FOR WHITE PEOPLE TO TALK ABOUT RACISM

ROBIN DIANGELO

FOREWORD BY MICHAEL ERIC DYSON
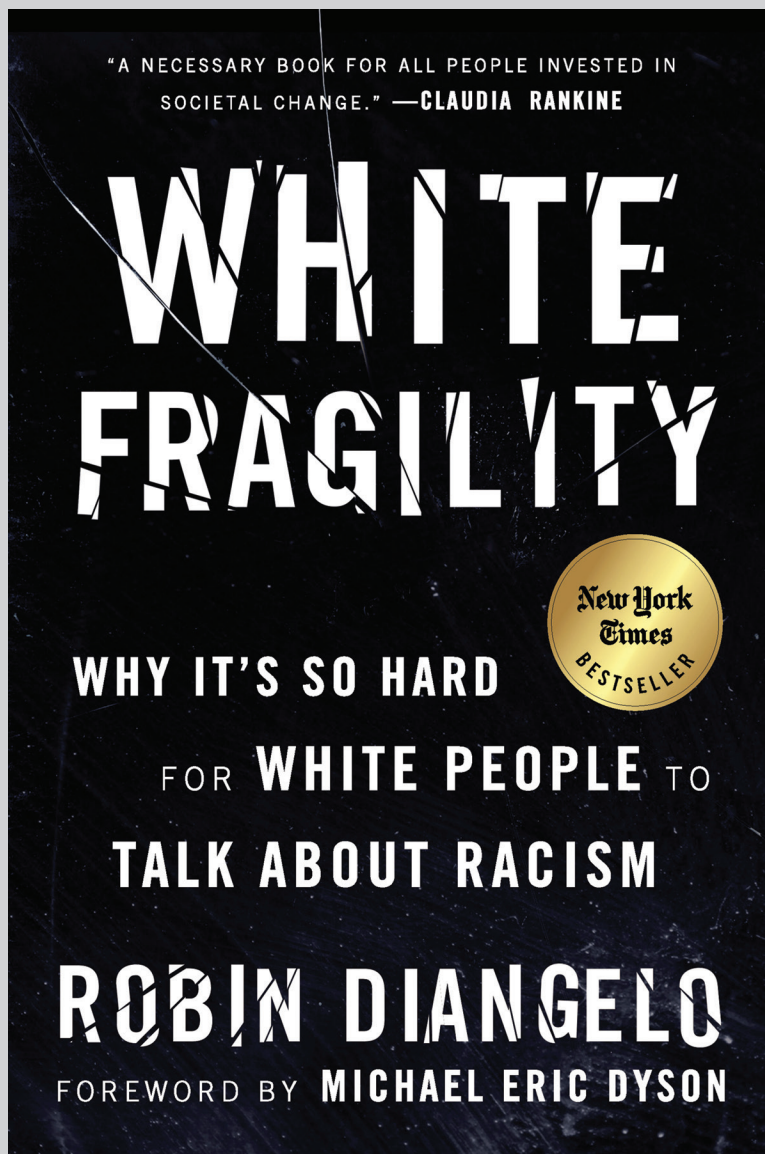
Guide by
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WHY SHOULD EDUCATORS READ *WHITE FRAGILITY*?

White Fragility is a must-read for all educators because racial disparities in access and opportunity continue to be an urgent issue in our schools. An educator's belief system can and does significantly impact how they approach teaching and learning.[1] Therefore, in a school system in which the teaching population remains primarily white and the student population continues to become more racially diverse, it is necessary for educators to develop the skills to engage in conversations about bias, race, and racism—especially their own.[2]

Additionally, despite an educator's best efforts, it is impossible to shield students from the hate-based violence they are exposed to on a national level. A report by the Southern Poverty Law Center, found that the rhetoric used by Donald Trump and his supporters, before and during the presidential campaign, had a significant impact on school climate.[3] Teachers reported an increase in verbal harassment of students, the use of slurs and derogatory language, and instances involving swastikas, Nazi salutes, and Confederate flags. Eight in ten teachers reported heightened anxiety from students in marginalized groups, including immigrants, Muslims, African Americans, and LGBTQ youth. Each month, Teaching Tolerance, a project of SPLC, tracks and publishes hate incidents at US schools. The latest report, from November 2018, found that there were 59 reported incidents in classrooms, at school events, and on social media.[4] Regrettably, students are living with hate in their midst at school, too, and it is imperative that educators take action.

Finally, there is only one reason to engage in emotionally fraught conversations about racism, and that is to end it. As educators, we need to summon up the courage and together act deliberately and honestly to address what remains to be our greatest national and educational challenge.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This study guide is designed to be used independently, as well as in small or larger groups by educators. Each section includes an optional **pre-reading** prompt that can be completed before reading the chapter, as well as a **chapter summary**, **key concepts**, and **questions**. Facilitators are encouraged to use discussion protocols to ensure equitable participation in group discussions. Though the author notes that the primary audience for *White Fragility* is white people, this guide may be used by those of all racial identities.

Reflection questions for facilitators before convening the group

1. In which situations would you be least or most comfortable?

2. Given that addressing racism necessarily invokes discomfort, how will you build your stamina? Do you have a community or support group to turn to?

3. How will your social identities impact the discussion?

4. What may be triggers for you and how would you manage it?

5. How well do you handle conflict?

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1   Buffington, M. L. "Fostering Dialogue in a Post-Racial Society." *Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education* 33, no. 1 (2016), 12–26.
2   Adams, M., L. A. Bell, D. Goodman, and K. Joshi. *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice.* 3rd ed. New York: Routledge, 2016.
3   Southern Poverty Law Center. "The Trump Effect: The Impact of the Presidential Election on Our Nation's Schools." 2016.
4   Dillard, C. "Hate at School: November 2018," *Teaching Tolerance*, https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/hate-at-school-november-2018..

6. What are the interests and motivations of your participants?

7. What is the relationship between participants?

8. What is the purpose for convening this group of people?

9. What does the group want to accomplish as a result of reading this text?

10. How will the questions be answered? What other protocols can you use to ensure equity of voice?

11. How much time are you allotting for each conversation?

12. Is the physical space conducive to the environment you wish to create?

13. How will you gather feedback from the participants throughout and at the conclusion of the discussion?

INTRODUCTION

Pre-Reading

Write about or discuss the following:

- What is your previous experience discussing race and racism?

- Why have you decided to read and discuss this book?

- What questions do you have prior to reading?

Summary

In the introduction, the author explains that North Americans live in a society that is deeply separate and unequal by race, that white people are socialized into a deeply internalized sense of racial superiority, and that conversations about race often challenge a white person's sense of identity. The author, focusing on white progressives, explains that the book will define "white fragility," discuss how it develops, how it protects racial inequality, and what can be done to overcome it.

Key Concept(s)

- White fragility

Questions

1. Why is it important to explicitly discuss race and racism in education with educators and with students?

2. How can reading and discussing this book lead to change?

3. What changes are you hoping to make as a result of reading and discussing this book?

THE CHALLENGES OF TALKING TO WHITE PEOPLE ABOUT RACISM

Pre-Reading

Read the following quote. Journal your thoughts or discuss.

> "Yet our simplistic definition of racism—as intentional acts of racial discrimination committed by immoral individuals—engenders a confidence that we are not part of the problem and that our learning is thus complete." (p. 9)

Summary

This chapter explains that two major challenges of talking to white people about racism are a limited understanding of socialization and a simplistic understanding of racism. White people have been socialized to see that race matters, but not their own race. Specifically, the Western ideologies of individualism and objectivity make it difficult for white people to explore the collective aspects of white experience. Thus, collectively white people do not see themselves in racial terms. Naming race, however, is a critical component of cross-racial skill building and is necessary in order to engage critically with the topic of race. Also, to increase the racial stamina that counters white fragility, white people must reflect on the whole of their identities and the impact of being members of their racial group.

Key Concept(s)

- Socialization
- Individualism
- Objectivity

Questions

1. What learning experiences required you to critically engage with the topic of race or racism? What was the impact? If you do not have any learning experiences to share, what do you believe would have been the impact?

2. What is most uncomfortable to you when discussing race? Why? When did you first notice that talking about racism is uncomfortable?

3. Consider the Key Concept(s) identified in this chapter. Expand on your understanding of them and give specific examples about how any of the Key Concept(s) impacted your ability to discuss race and racism.

4. What are you implicitly or explicitly teaching students about racial norms? How do you know?

5. Why is it important to integrate teaching about race and racism into your practice? What are the benefits and challenges? How can you meet the challenges?

6. How can you make use of the information from this chapter in your role as an educator?

—— **Chapter 2** ——

RACISM AND WHITE SUPREMACY

Pre-Reading

Read the following quote. Journal your thoughts or discuss.

> "Similarly, racism—like sexism and other forms of oppression—occurs when a racial group's prejudice is backed by legal authority and institutional control. This authority and control transforms individual prejudices into a far-reaching system that no longer depends on the good intentions of individual actors; it becomes the default of the society and is reproduced automatically." (p. 21)

Summary

Chapter 2 outlines key information about racism and white supremacy in the United States. The author emphasizes that race is socially constructed; however, the belief that race and differences associated with it are biological is deep-seated. Race is an evolving social idea that was created to legitimize racial inequality and protect white advantage. Historically and contemporarily, being perceived as white carries legal, political, economic, and social rights and privileges that are denied to others. White supremacy is the overarching political, economic, and social system of domination that describes the culture we live in and that positions whiteness as ideal. Naming white supremacy makes the system visible and shifts the locus of change onto white people, where it belongs. Challenging complicity with and investment in racism is life-long work for white people.

Key Concept(s)

- Prejudice
- Discrimination
- Racism
- Ideology
- White privilege
- Whiteness
- White supremacy

Questions

1. How has race impacted your life? If you are struggling to answer the question, why?

2. Review the racial breakdown of people who control our national institutions on p. 31. What specific conclusions can be drawn from this list?

3. The author asks several questions about racial socialization and schooling on p. 35, including "Why is it important to reflect on our teachers in our effort to uncover our racial socialization and the messages we receive from schools?" Answer that question and consider answering a few other questions from p. 35.

4. Practice explaining the differences between racism, prejudice, and discrimination in your own terms. Why is it important for students of all races to understand these concepts and the differences between them? What are historical or current examples of racism, prejudice, and discrimination that students can understand?

5. How does your school or classroom reinforce a racist ideology? How do you know?

6. Who or what benefits from the biological myths associated with race? How are biological racist myths perpetuated in school?

7. Describe some of the broader implications of our complicity and investment in racism.

8. How can the learning from this chapter be converted into an action item for your colleagues or students?

—— **Chapter 3** ——

RACISM AFTER THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Pre-Reading

Write about or discuss the following:

- What is colorblindness and how does the author challenge it?

- How do you see/have you seen color-blind ideology in your own life and teaching practice?

Summary

A simplistic understanding of racism leads people to believe that the civil rights movement and the desegregation of public facilities generally ended racist practices. However, racism is highly adaptable and modern norms, policies, and practices have resulted in racial outcomes similar to those in the past. Color-blind ideology, although initially well-intentioned, makes it difficult to address unconscious racist beliefs and has served to deny the reality of racism—thus holding it in place. Finally, cultural norms

insist that white people hide racism from people of color and deny it around other white people, which also makes it impossible to confront and address racism.

Key Concept(s)

- New racism
- Color-blind racism
- Aversive racism
- Casual race talk
- Cultural racism
- Backstage
- Front-stage

Questions

1. How have you taught the civil rights movement and its impact on ending racism? What do you need to add to the discussion?

2. How does aversive racism show up in education? What is its impact, and who does it serve?

3. As a white educator, what surprises you about backstage conversations you have been a part of? What surprises you about your stated beliefs about race and racism?

4. How does color blindness show up in school and how does it impact students of color? What evidence do you have that color-blind policies are not leading to more equitable outcomes for students of color?

—— **Chapter 4** ——

HOW DOES RACE SHAPE THE LIVES OF WHITE PEOPLE?

Pre-Reading

Read the following quote. Journal your thoughts or discuss.

> "But my silence is not benign because it protects and maintains the racial hierarchy and my place within it." (p. 58)

Summary

As a reminder, racial identity shapes a person's perspectives, experiences, and responses. In this chapter, the author delves into eight foundational aspects of white fragility. The author explains that because of their racial identification, white people in the United States will generally feel a sense of belonging, be free from the burden of race, have freedom of movement, and will be considered just people. People of color typically do not have the same experience. In addition, white people are most likely to choose racial segregation and position themselves as racially innocent. Those two choices, along with an obliviousness to the country's racial history, can lead white people to romanticize ideas about the good old days. Finally, *white solidarity*, which is an unspoken agreement among white people to protect white advantage and not cause another white person to feel racial discomfort, is key in maintaining white supremacy.

Key Concept(s)

- White solidarity

- White racial innocence

Questions

1. How does racial belonging play out in school? Do students of color feel they belong? How do you know?

2. How is the burden of race a reality for students of color? What are some examples of how they would feel burdened by race?

3. What examples do you have of white solidarity in action? What was the outcome?

4. When have you chosen to be silent? What encouraged that silence? What was the impact of your silence on the racial status quo?

5. On p. 59, the author writes, "Claiming that the past was socially better than the present is also a hallmark of white supremacy." What do you think you know about the racial history of this country? What more do you need to learn?

6. The author writes, "It has not been African Americans who resist integration efforts; it has always been whites" (p. 61). How has white flight—a process where white families fled from cities to the suburbs to escape the influx of people of color—impacted your school? What assumptions or biases are held about your changing population?

7. What are some connections between "deeply held white associations of black people with crime" (p. 63) and the racial disparities in school disciplinary practices?

8. The author writes, "Rather than change these conditions so that public education is equal for all, we allow other people's children to endure conditions that would be unacceptable for our own" (p. 67). How does racial inequality in schools serve white people?

9. What would be required of educators to advocate for equity for all?

10. Review the patterns that are considered the foundation of white fragility on p. 68. Which of these patterns is most significant to you in your life right now? Explain.

THE GOOD/BAD BINARY

Pre-Reading

Read the following quote. Journal your thoughts or discuss.

> "If, as a white person, I conceptualize racism as a binary and I place myself on the not racist side, what further action is required of me? No action is required, because I am not a racist. Therefore, racism is not my problem; it doesn't concern me and there is nothing further I need to do." (p. 73)

Summary

Following the civil rights movement era, many people believed that only intentionally malicious acts of extreme prejudice were classified as racist and that only bad people committed those acts. Thus, according to the author, the most effective adaptation of racism—the good/bad binary—became a cultural norm. The good/bad binary made it effectively impossible for the average white person to understand—much less interrupt—racism. The chapter ends by looking at some of the most popular claims within the good/bad binary and providing counter narratives to the claims.

Key Concept(s)

- Binary

Questions

1. How does the author's explanation of what it means to be racist challenge mainstream ideas?

2. What are the implications for you, personally, of this explanation?

3. How does the good/bad binary impact how we talk about historical or contemporary figures in school?

4. Have you ever been called racist? How did it feel? If you haven't, how do you think it would feel? How might these feelings function to actually uphold and protect racism?

5. As an educator, how does the good/bad binary impact your willingness to look at your own racism with other colleagues or confront racist practices in your school?

6. Review the list of color-blind and color-celebrate claims on pp. 77–78. Which of the claims are you familiar with? Which ones have you used or taught? Would you consider using them or teaching them after reading this chapter? Why or why not?

7. Select one of the counternarratives that start on p. 81. How do you feel when you read it and read the author's explanation? What might it tell you about your own beliefs about the good/bad binary?

ANTI-BLACKNESS

Pre-Reading

Read the following quote. Journal your thoughts or discuss.

> "Creating a separate and inferior black race simultaneously created the 'superior' white race: one concept could not exist without the other. In this sense, whites need black people; blackness is essential to the creation of white identity." (p. 91)

Summary

White supremacy impacts all people of color, however, black people represent the ultimate racial "other," leading to a uniquely anti-black sentiment integral to white identity. In this chapter, the author explains that anti-blackness is rooted in misinformation, fables, perversions, projections, and lies about African Americans. As a result, white racial socialization causes many conflicting feelings toward black people, including benevolence, resentment, superiority, hatred, and, most fundamentally, deep guilt about past and current systematic transgressions against black people.

Key Concept(s)

- Anti-blackness

Questions

1. How does anti-blackness show up in schools?

2. What does addressing anti-blackness look like for you as an educator?

3. What resources do you need to combat anti-black sentiments among colleagues and students?

—— Chapter 7 ——

RACIAL TRIGGERS FOR WHITE PEOPLE

Pre-Reading

Write about or discuss the following:

- How has the use of coded language, such as "urban," "inner city," and "disadvantaged," kept you and your colleagues from having open and honest conversations about race and racism in education?

- How does using these terms shift the responsibility for racial inequality from white people to people of color? What is masked by these terms?

Summary

Building upon earlier chapters, this chapter continues to explore what happens when white people are triggered in conversations about race and racism. Most white people can experience racial comfort because they live in insulated environments of racial privilege. Racial stress is triggered when foundational ideologies such as color-blindness, meritocracy, and individualism are challenged, and often white people are unable to respond constructively. Instead, common responses or emotions include anger, withdrawal, emotional incapacitation, guilt, argumentation, and cognitive dissonance.

Key Concept(s)

- Habitus

Questions

1. In discussing race and racism with students and colleagues, what are some things you can do to prepare them for emotional reactions?

2. How does your living and working environment reinforce your racial frame and ability to handle racial stress?

3. Which of the common responses or emotions have you experienced? What ideology was challenged that led to that response?

4. What strategies do you have to remain engaged when racial stress is triggered?

—— **Chapter 8** ——

THE RESULT: WHITE FRAGILITY

Pre-Reading

Read the following quote. Journal your thoughts or discuss.

> "In my workshops, I often ask people of color, 'How often have you given white people feedback on our unaware yet inevitable racism? How often has that gone well for you?' Eye-rolling, head-shaking, and outright laughter follow, along with the consensus of rarely, if ever. I then ask, 'What would it be like if you could simply give us feedback, have us graciously receive it, reflect, and work to change the behavior?' Recently a man of color sighed and said, 'It would be revolutionary.'" (p. 113)

Summary

Although research indicates that ideas about race are constructed as early as preschool, white adults often deny that racially based privileges exist. When challenged, white people resort to the discourse of self-defense. In conversations about race, and although no physical violence occurs, white people will characterize themselves as victimized or attacked. Claiming to be unfairly treated, they blame others from their discomfort. In that regard, white fragility is not fragile at all and can be a form of bullying that allows white people to regain control and protect their position.

Key Concept(s)

- Sociology of dominance

Questions

1. In conversations about race and racism, how does the use of the language of violence used by many white people function?

2. How do we create conditions for sustained engagement in uncomfortable conversations about race and racism, without centering white needs for comfort?

3. Why is this information relevant to educators?

—— **Chapter 9** ——

WHITE FRAGILITY IN ACTION

Pre-Reading

Read the following quote. Journal your thoughts or discuss.

> "White people are receptive to my presentation as long as it remains abstract. The moment I name some racially problematic dynamic or action happening in the room in the moment… white fragility erupts." (p. 117)

Summary

This chapter looks specifically at the common feelings and behaviors that occur when white fragility is in action. The author identifies common claims that are used to justify strong emotional reactions such as arguing, avoiding, denying, or crying. The claims are based on a series of assumptions that are common among the white collective when white fragility is in action. Each of these feelings, behaviors, claims, and assumptions is a function of white fragility. They block any entry point for reflection and engagement.

Key Concept(s)

- Functions of white fragility

Questions

1. When have you seen white fragility in action? How did you respond? What role did you play?

2. Review the list of feelings on p. 119. When have you felt any of those feelings in a conversation about race or racism? How did you behave as a result? What might have been the unintended impact of this behavior, in terms of either challenging or protecting racism?

3. Review the list of behaviors on p. 119. How would a person of color be viewed if any of these behaviors were exhibited in a conversation about race or racism? If you believe the person would be treated differently from a white person, why do you think that is the case?

4. How have your students felt or behaved when conversations about race or racism happen in class?

5. Review the list of assumptions on p. 121. What assumptions do you hold and how do they impact your ability or willingness to have a conversation about race or racism?

6. Of the assumptions on p. 121, which are reinforced in schools? How? What is the impact?

—— **Chapter 10** ——

WHITE FRAGILITY AND THE RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Pre-Reading

Read the following quote. Journal your thoughts or discuss.

> "I repeat: stopping our racist patterns must be more important than working to convince others that we don't have them. We do have them, and people of color already know we have them; our efforts to prove otherwise are not convincing." (p. 129)

Summary

The author learned from decades of experience that there are unspoken rules for how to give white people feedback on racist assumptions and patterns. Most notably, the cardinal rule is to not give feedback at all. White fragility punishes the person giving feedback and demands silence. However, feedback is a key element in being able to address and dismantle racism. The guidelines that are typically acceptable insist on white people feeling comfortable and supporting the racial status quo. Focusing on the feedback, instead of the delivery or messenger, is key to building the stamina necessary for continued engagement.

Key Concept(s)

- Feedback

Questions

1. Review the rules of engagement starting on p. 123. How many of those rules have you heard or used—even implicitly—when in cross-racial dialogues about racism? Which ones have you operated from, even if unconsciously? Why were they necessary conditions for your engagement?

2. When receiving feedback on your unconscious racist assumptions or biases, what have you found to be successful? What criteria did you use to determine the feedback was successful?

3. If you have never received feedback, what about your life has prevented that? How can you change those conditions?

4. What do you think white people mean when they say they need to "build trust" before engaging in a conversation about race? Based on the ideas in this book, how might you challenge that perceived need?

5. Review the common guidelines starting on p. 126. What could be used in their place?

—— **Chapter 11** ——

WHITE WOMEN'S TEARS

Pre-Reading

Read the following quote. Journal your thoughts or discuss.

> "We need to reflect on when we cry and when we don't, and why. In other words, what does it take to move us?" (p. 135)

Summary

In this chapter, the author reviews the historical impact of white women's tears on black people and white men. Heartfelt emotions are important; however, when and why we cry is also political. Emotions are shaped by our biases, beliefs, and cultural frameworks, and our emotions drive behaviors that impact other people. When a white woman cries over racism, regardless of her intentions, most of the attention will immediately go to her. For people of color, white tears demonstrate a white person's racial insulation and privilege.

Key Concept(s)

- White tears

Questions

1. Whose tears over racism matter and whose do not? Why?

2. How does the dynamic of white tears play out in schools, specifically around disciplinary practices or advanced coursework?

3. What more do you have to learn about the historical impact of white women's tears on black people? What steps will you take to get this information?

4. How can you show heartfelt emotions in conversations about race and racism that don't reinforce problematic relations?

—— **Chapter 12** ——

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Pre-Reading

Read the following quote. Journal your thoughts or discuss.

> "When white people ask me what to do about racism and white fragility, the first thing I ask is, 'What has enabled you to be a full, educated, professional adult and not know what to do about racism?'" (p. 144)

Summary

In conclusion, while the emotions, behaviors, claims, and underlying assumptions associated with white fragility are always in play, a transformed paradigm could develop different feelings and accelerate one's lifelong journey of addressing unconscious racial bias. If feedback on racist patterns was met with gratitude, motivation, or humility, possible behaviors that would manifest could be reflection, engagement, and understanding. Going forward it is important to continue to seek out more information, demand that information on white fragility is taught in schools, and build authentic cross-racial relationships. Finally, interrupting racism takes courage and intentionality. We will never interrupt it if we remain comfortable.

Key Concept(s)

- Reconciliation

Questions

1. The author wrote: "Many people of color have assured me that they will not give up on me despite my racist patterns; they expect that I will have racist behavior given the society that socialized me. What they are looking for is not perfection but the ability to talk about what happened,

the ability to repair." (p. 146) Does this statement help you along on your journey to address racist practices? Explain your answer.

2. What was the most significant learning that you experienced reading this book?

3. How can you make use of what you have learned?

4. What are the action items you are leaving with that would have an impact on your students and your school? How will you ensure that you enact them?

Notes

Find it online at beacon.org/whitefragility

About the Author of *White Fragility*

Robin DiAngelo is an affiliate associate professor of Education at the University of Washington. She coined the term White Fragility and is the author of *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard For White People To Talk About Racism*. She has been an educator on issues of racial and social justice for more than twenty years.

About the Author of This Guide

Val Brown is a professional development facilitator for a national nonprofit organization. Her role includes designing, facilitating, and evaluating anti-bias professional development for educators across the country. Val previously worked in public K-12 education and higher education as a teacher, instructional coach, district administrator, and professional learning specialist. In December 2016, she founded #ClearTheAir, a body of educators who believe that community, learning, and dialogue are essential to personal and professional growth.