

# Spotlight Session Reviews

*The following passages are student reviews and experiences of select Spotlight Sessions during the 2018 Race & Pedagogy National Conference (RPNC). Students from the African American Studies 399 Public Scholarship course attended various spotlight sessions and were given the assignment to write a review of their chosen session. This is one of those reviews.*

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## **Spotlight Session: *The Implications of an Overwhelmingly White Teaching Force***

### ***Summary of Spotlight Session:***

Join Dr. Robin DiAngelo, writer and educator on racial and social justice and white identity as she discusses the history of harm done by schools in relation to students and communities of color and how to build the skills of repair.

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**Robin DiAngelo** received her PhD in Multicultural Education from the University of Washington in Seattle in 2004. Currently she is an Affiliate Associate Professor of Education at the University of Washington. She has taught courses in Multicultural Teaching, Inter-group Dialogue Facilitation, Cultural Diversity & Social Justice, and Anti-Racist Education. Her area of research is in Whiteness Studies and Critical Discourse Analysis, explicating how whiteness is reproduced in everyday narratives. She has authored numerous publications and books, including *Is Everybody Really Equal?: An Introduction to Key Concepts in Critical Social Justice Education*, co-written with Özlem Sensoy.

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### ***Reviewer of Spotlight Session:***

**Anna Mondschean** is a sophomore at the University of Puget Sound pursuing an undergraduate degree in African American Studies with minors in Education and Gender and Queer Studies.

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## **Spotlight Session Review: Robin DiAngelo on Whiteness and Pedagogy**

Written by Anna Mondschean

The 2018 Race & Pedagogy National Conference (RPNC) held twelve spotlight sessions across September 28th and 29th on the University of Puget Sound campus. These spotlight sessions were intentionally planned to engage the Race & Pedagogy Institute's foundational strategic priorities of the RPNC: including Pre K-12 education, teacher preparation, the school to prison pipeline, criminal justice, tribal sovereignty, the transformation of curriculum practices in sciences and humanities at the nexus of race, and arts as public pedagogy. Spotlight sessions sought to address the intersections of systemic miseducation across these priorities, and the pressing concerns of our current sociocultural, political, and economic moment.

At the spotlight session “The Implications of An Overwhelmingly White Teaching Force,” conference attendees joined Dr. Robin DiAngelo, co-author of: *Is Everyone Really Equal?: An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education, What Does it Mean to be White?*, and sole author of *Developing White Racial Literacy*, and *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*, to discuss white identity and how to combat racist teachings in ourselves and in the classroom. In the words of Masters in Teaching (MAT) candidate, DiAngelo is a “white, anti-racist thinker and activist who brings critical focus to white fragility, which she highlights is a state where even a minimal amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves.” The session took place in Schneebeck Hall, the music hall at the University of Puget Sound. It was packed with educators, students, and conference attendees, and as the seats filled up, many were left listening from the hallway. DiAngelo began her eagerly attended spotlight session with a quote from Seattle-based African American author and activist Ijeoma Oluo:

*“I don't want you to understand me better, I want you to understand yourselves. Your survival has never depended on your knowledge of white culture. In fact, it's required your ignorance.”*

DiAngelo made it clear that she wanted to offer the white folks in the audience “a rare opportunity” to reflect on what they bring to the table, as they are so often the overwhelming majority sitting at the tables of power and influence. With this, she emphasized that it is not enough to diversify educational, professional, and political spaces; the white folks already in those spaces must look inward at their own biases to create sustainable social change. DiAngelo doesn't buy into the common conception that diversity alone will fix our systemic racial problems. Instead, she advocates “sustained study, struggle, and focus” on the systems that reproduce inequality, focusing specifically on education.

### **Who is Robin DiAngelo?**

DiAngelo received her PhD. in Multicultural Education from the University of Washington in Seattle in 2004. She has spent her career writing and speaking to other educators about the pervasive implications of white supremacy in our school systems. From her career of participating in and leading of these discussions, she pointed out the common challenges she has faced in educating white people about racism, including individualism, exceptionalism, genuine ignorance, and colorblindness. She punctuated each challenge with an example that had the audience laughing with sheer relatability. She recounted some of the phrases we've heard come out of the mouths of white family, friends or colleagues far too often: “I was taught to treat everyone the same,” “I don't see color,” or “I'm not racist, I have XYZ attribute [multiracial nieces or nephews, a friend of color, experience travelling to Costa Rica] that exempts me” from responsibility for internalized

supremacy. As a professional “consultant and trainer for over 20 years on issues of racial and social justice,” she named her positionality early on in her talk.

*I am white,” she said, and “so much of what I am able to articulate about what it means to be white rests on the patient and brilliant mentorship of countless people of color. I think people of color understand what it means to be white to a degree that I never will, and as an insider, there is some understanding of it that I can speak to that seems to be useful to other white folks.”*

DiAngelo came with the assumption that her audience members had a basic understanding of the equity issues in American schools, and did not spend time giving evidence for systemic racism. “By every measure, across every institution in this country there is racial inequality,” she said, “I don’t think I have to establish that with this group today.” Therefore, she quickly honed in on the stakes of this inequality, saying that schools “are incredibly effective unequal sorting mechanisms for people into a hierarchical society, or we would not care what schools our children went to. But do we care? Oh Lord do we care!” This statement met applause and hit home for many white folks in the audience. She then turned to a more individualized approach to critical discourse surrounding whiteness, using thought-provoking questions to get the audience to think critically about their own socialization.

### **Audience Interaction with Robin DiAngelo**

DiAngelo entered into the interactive portion of the spotlight session, and had the audience turn to the person next to them and answer questions about their own racial education (or lack thereof) in regards to family life, education, and current social circumstances. A full list of these questions can be found in her text *Is Everyone Really Equal?* in chapter eight: “Understanding the

Structural Nature of Oppression Through Racism.” The first set of questions were organized to allow the audience to see the overwhelming patterns of racial homogeneity in their neighborhoods and social groups. The next group of questions focused on socialization and race-issues in education. She makes a point to articulate the stakes of this work for educators: “teachers are importers of knowledge, holders of a worldview, determiners of discipline,” and, I would add, responsible for either replicating or disrupting narratives of race their students have already internalized.

Although these questions were open-ended enough to be answered by a person of any race, they, along with the focus of Robin DiAngelo’s talk, were specifically geared toward coaxing understanding and reflection from white folks. Some may critique that she centered white folk in a conversation that should be centered around the experiences of people of color. I would agree,, and I would argue that she did this strategically, and that the whiteness-centered critical discourse was an integral space for white educators to begin or continue their individual work. The RPNC took place at the University of Puget Sound, a predominantly white institution, in an overwhelmingly white region of the country. In this context, DiAngelo reminded the audience that 82% of teachers and 84% of full time college professors are white. Although the imbalance of teacher demographics need to be changed, before these changes can be addressed white educators need to understand how their whiteness affects their students.

For many, this must begin with self reflection. In this talk, she provided an entrance point for white people to examine whiteness, a set of tools meant to be built upon with more sustained “study, struggle, and focus.” We could not expect an in depth survey of interpersonal and teaching tools in 75 minutes. What we got was a beginning for those who have not fully interrogated their whiteness before, and for those who had, an example of how to inspire the same in other white

people. As DiAngelo states: “White teacher, know thyself,” implying that white teachers need to understand the socialization, racism, and bias that they bring to the classroom, in order to implement anti-racist practices and ideologies. The continuation of the work is on us, the audience, the white future or current educator, and the ally to recognize the stakes, and as DiAngelo says, do our homework.