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Article

# Nice Girls like Us: Confronting White Liberalism in Teacher Education and Ourselves

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**Abstract:** Niceness includes behaviors such as avoiding conflict or controversial topics, being submissive and people-pleasing, performing teaching as “love” in uncritical ways, accepting deficit perspectives, and upholding patriarchal structures. In the spirit of Niceness, white female teachers often avoid the work of challenging inequitable systems because doing so leaves them vulnerable to being seen as “not nice” or troublemakers. In this article, we interrogate how “niceness” produces and perpetuates inequalities in schooling. In particular, we argue that we, a group of eight white female teacher educators from across the United States, are in positions of leadership, capable of perpetuating or disrupting “niceness” in our pre-service courses. Drawing on scholarship on niceness, femininity, and critical whiteness, we examine our complicity in acts of oppression and how we work to identify and unlearn institutional norms to teach for justice and equity. We share vulnerable moments when we upheld niceness. In doing so, we aim to reveal and explore how socialization into niceness enables our silence, inaction, and misguided action.

**Keywords:** niceness; education leadership; white liberalism; teacher education; self-study



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## 1. Introduction

Teacher educators influence future generations of teachers, children, and adults. One may not immediately connect teacher education and leadership when considering their roles in professional teacher preparation programs. However, we argue that the ideology of teacher educators—imbued with niceness—heavily influences their impact on the students enrolled in undergraduate or graduate studies.

This paper will argue that teacher education is part of a larger institution perpetuating systemic oppression and inequity. Since those involved in teacher education are predominantly white and female, its clients or students are thrust into a socialization process shaped in part by niceness and white liberalism. The problem is that while well-intentioned educators proclaim teaching for social justice, they often do so at the expense of children and youth from historically marginalized communities impacted by systemic oppression. We do not mean to suggest that all teacher educators are white and harmful. However,

despite “good intentions”, some teacher educators may knowingly or unknowingly mobilize inequitable teaching practices. Therefore, teacher educators are uniquely positioned to dismantle oppressive barriers often veiled in niceness.

Niceness is a ubiquitous term in the teaching profession. For example, when students find out who their teacher is for the new school year, they might hear, “Oh, you’re so lucky! She’s the nicest teacher”. Yet is being described as “nice” really a compliment? Recently, we asked a group of teacher educators how they would describe a “nice” teacher. Here are some of their responses that uphold niceness as a virtue in teachers:

- “A nice teacher respects students, accepts different perspectives, and cares about their students”.
- “Someone who can create a warm space for everyone”.
- “Someone who is a good team player and wants to support common work outcomes”.

But within the same group, we also received the following responses, which view niceness more negatively:

- “Someone who doesn’t rock the boat”.
- “Someone who goes along to get along”.
- “Someone who doesn’t push colleagues or students because they want to be liked”.

What does it mean to uphold “niceness” in teaching and teacher education? Is being a nice teacher the ultimate goal? Or does niceness divert attention from how schools perpetuate inequity and injustice?

## 2. Background

There is “a growing body of empirical evidence pointing to educators’ well-meaning dispositions and their role in sustaining inequitable educational outcomes” [1] (p. xiii). (Castagno, 2019, p. xiii). These dispositions, which Castagno [1] terms “niceness”, are celebrated in white American culture, and the problem with niceness in the classroom is that it shapes beliefs and actions that may unknowingly uphold institutional racism [1,2]. Female teacher educators often consciously decide to ignore challenging or so-called controversial topics in order to maintain a conflict-free classroom environment that complies with expected norms for teacher education settings [1–5].

Girls are taught to “be nice”, which means making other people feel good. Niceness conditions girls and women to avoid conflict by remaining silent or redirecting conversations, to be submissive and people-pleasing, to diminish our expertise, and uphold a white-centered, patriarchal, heteronormative way of being through our compliance. This is seen quite clearly when we look at student evaluations of teaching (SETs) in higher education settings. It has long been established that female professors are evaluated more harshly than their male counterparts, and women from minoritized backgrounds are judged more harshly than white women [6–8]. The expectation of niceness is baked into student evaluations of women, such that students expect female professors to be motherly and willing to take on their emotional needs [9]. When female professors stray from safe topics or maintain an academic, not emotional, focus, student evaluations often reflect this. As Smele et al. [9] (p. 973) (2021) learned from a female professor they interviewed, “[for] women my age, there’s either ‘you’re mom’ or ‘you’re mean’”. Because universities place such high importance on student evaluations (e.g., [10]), it is easy to understand why female professors of all cultural groups default to niceness. When we are nice, we are rewarded; when we are not, we are often called troublemakers, disciplined, and told to get back in line by administrators and colleagues (e.g., [2]). Niceness is one way that white liberalism manifests to protect or deter educators from working toward racial justice and disrupting dominant structures and ideologies [1].

The present study’s authors came together at a literacy research conference in 2018 at a special interest group meeting dedicated to teacher education research. We met for the first time because we all happened to join a sub-group focused on critical literacy, a theoretical framework that each of us identified as important to embed within our literacy

methods courses. Using a self-study methodology (described below), we worked together for several years to interrogate our own pedagogy as well as our internalization of white supremacy-based culture and its impact on our instruction. (Table 1 provides information about our roles in higher education and our positionality.) Initially, we focused on critical literacy as an avenue for exploring inequity, and our virtual meetings included discussions of common readings, sharing resources, and problem solving. Over time, we realized that our identities as white educators needed to be surfaced more explicitly, so our self-study included readings focused on white fragility, niceness, and whiteness. Most integral to this work was our discussion of Castagno's [1] *The Price of Nice: How Good Intentions Maintain Educational Inequity*. Through our conversations and journal reflections, it became clear how deeply the notion of niceness resonated with us. This article stems from the awareness that this work surfaced and the impact it had on us in our work as teacher educators.

**Table 1.** Teacher educator demographics.

Participant	Region	Instruction	Years in Higher Education	Positionality Statement
Rose	Northeast	Undergraduate and graduate courses in literacy education	18	Cisgender queer Jewish female—My identity as a teacher educator began with the goal of wanting to have more impact on the teaching of literacy than I did as both a literacy specialist and a classroom teacher. It is grounded in a view of literacy as a tool for engaging in the democratic process and creating societal change.
Violet	Northeast	Undergraduate and graduate courses in literacy education	10	Cisgender white, middle-class female; my identity as a teacher was inspired by the niceness of the teachers before me. As I studied teachers' identities, in and out of our self-study group, I learned to interrogate my own identity, including my niceness. This remains an ongoing process as my identity is ever evolving.
Heather	Northeast	Undergraduate and graduate courses in literacy education	8	Cisgender white Catholic female. My identity as a teacher educator grew from my desire to know more ways to support my students who were English language learners who were retained. As a teacher educator, it is my goal to spread pedagogical knowledge as well as equitable ways of teaching to future and current students.
Iris	Mid-Atlantic	Undergraduate and graduate courses in literacy education (Assessment, Children's Literature, Language Acquisition, and Methods)	6	I identify as a white, cisgender, middle-class woman and as a lifelong avid reader and writer. The joy and agency that reading and writing have given me have fostered my belief in the expansive possibilities of literacy education. I also live with anxiety and depression and experience migraines and chronic pain; my experiences with the way these conditions have impacted my teaching and learning drive my commitment to disrupting ableism in the classroom.
Daisy	South	Undergraduate and graduate courses in literacy education (Adolescent Literacies)	4	White cisgender and heterosexual woman who grew up in a middle-class household a generation removed from my family's cattle ranching background. My childhood in very rural areas of the West/Midwest served as a catalyst for my interest in how other people experience and view the world. The inequities I saw while teaching state-mandated "remedial" reading classes (determining students' ability to graduate with a high school diploma) brought me to teacher education and work, on myself in particular, that disrupts the systems and structures perpetuating the disenfranchisement of certain groups of people, particularly students of color and language learners.
Lavender	Pacific Northwest	Undergraduate and graduate courses in literacy education (Assessment, Children's Literature, Language Acquisition, and Reading and Writing Methods)	18	White cisgender and heterosexual woman who grew up in a lower-income household in a rural area. Niceness was steeped in explicit and implicit expectations for (young) women. In and after college I witnessed how social structures are designed to maintain the status quo and are a censoring force as well. I continue to battle against my people-pleasing, make-it-nice socialization.

Table 1. Cont.

Participant	Region	Instruction	Years in Higher Education	Positionality Statement
Daphne		Undergraduate and graduate courses in Reading Methods and Assessment, Children's Literature, Young Adult Literature, and Family Partnerships in Early Childhood Education	6	As a 51-year-old, white American female and former teacher turned teacher educator, I taught public and private school for over 10 years as a primary classroom teacher, a K–5 school media specialist, and technology teacher, and a middle school Spanish teacher. I also provided professional development to educators across the United States with a national reading institute for six years. I have taught undergraduate and master's literacy courses at large Midwestern and small rural public universities. In each position, I participated in perpetuating niceness and racism. My own lack of preparation for teaching in a culturally and linguistically diverse school motivates me, as a white teacher educator in a rural context, to continuously (un)learn niceness to better prepare future educators to dismantle racism and other forms of oppression.
Cherry	Midwest	Graduate literacy methods classes; Reading specialist endorsement classes; Doctoral literacy classes	18	I am a white, heterosexual, cis woman who grew up in an upper-middle class, majority-white suburb. In almost every way I have benefited from educational systems that privilege people that look like me. While I have long recognized that schooling has unequal outcomes for different groups of students and very much wanted my work in education to improve those outcomes, it is only over the last few years that I have recognized that my work was framed in whiteness and niceness and my definition of literacy success has been guided by notions of literacy that represent a mainstream white perspective.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

Drawing on scholarly work addressing niceness [1–4,11], femininity [11,12]), and critical whiteness [13–17], we examine our complicity in acts of oppression in order to identify and unlearn institutional norms and teach for justice and equity. This framework continuously guides our efforts to prepare pre-service and in-service teachers to teach in culturally sustaining ways [18–20]. Additionally, this framework has advanced our ability to act on our commitments to equity and justice as teacher educators. By discussing our vulnerable moments, we aim to bring more people into the conversation, understanding why and envisioning how they, too, might counteract niceness.

Niceness is a shared socio-emotional disposition, particularly evident amongst white females, which is both ideological and enacted [1,2,11]. In education, niceness entails avoiding conflict, controversial topics (e.g., racism), and forms of imposition; not owning one's expertise; being submissive and people-pleasing; reinforcing deficit perspectives; and upholding patriarchal structures [1–4,11]. While niceness is typically celebrated in white American culture, this article explores niceness as a tool of white liberalism—the conventions of which provide special insulation from conversations or actions that cause discomfort. White liberalism protects (white, female) educators from having to do the work of dismantling inequity, and it is a disciplining agent for those who disrupt dominant structures and ideologies [1]. Therefore, recognizing and unlearning niceness is essential for educational equity and racial justice.

Niceness can be easily conflated with kindness. However, some differences are important to note. Kindness is relational and involves complex moral and ethical considerations on the part of teachers as they consider the needs of their individual students and the collective whole [21]. Kindness sometimes means making decisions that disrupt the status quo or upset some students, as it prioritizes the needs of marginalized students. Conversely, niceness tends to be superficial, smoothing things over to maintain harmony, even at the risk of perpetuating harm [1]. Because white women are typically socialized into niceness, they also learn to uphold patriarchy [11,22,23]. According to Galman [11], white women are more concerned with how they are perceived by men, defaulting to unquestioning niceness rather than working toward social justice. Under the guise of niceness, white women,

therefore, avoid the kind of conflict and controversy that would challenge patriarchy and other dominant hierarchies [23].

Whereas niceness is a socialization process that suggests maintaining peace at all costs to avoid conflict, white liberalism is an intentional process wherein a white person does not act with good intentions. Instead, a white liberalist appears one way (e.g., anti-racist) but acts in another manner when doing something to benefit others would mean giving up their own power. Although different in subtle ways, niceness and white liberalism are both dangerous. Socialization into niceness lays the foundation for white liberalism. In other words, young, white girls will likely learn that they are good when they make others feel good. Yet, as they grow into adults who have learned to avoid discordance, they may do so at the risk of becoming adults who have practiced covering up injustice with “good intentions”. The problem is that they learn to manipulate others with these well-meaning intentions, maintaining or clawing their way to the top of the ladder of privilege and power where there is only room for a few. As adults, they have learned how to perpetuate racism and other forms of oppression to benefit their climb. White liberalism reveals how white women socialized into niceness are acutely aware of concealing “good” intentions in the name of racial justice for their own benefit.

#### 4. Purpose

The National Center for Education Statistics (2019) reports that in 2017–2018, 79% of classroom teachers were white, with 76% identifying as female. Given this statistic, niceness is an appropriate critical framework for analyzing our decisions and actions at the intersection of race and gender while exploring how niceness produces and maintains inequities [1].

For example, as classroom teachers, many of us believed in “color blindness” and that calling attention to a student’s race was impolite or, worse, racist. We maintained “good intentions” because our socialization into niceness was reaffirmed in teacher preparation programs with, for the most part, white female faculties. The preference for niceness in teacher preparation programs with faculty members who are also primarily white, and female is that it socializes new teachers into niceness, often preventing them from working towards anti-racism.

In this article, we seek to highlight how teacher preparation programs are fertile grounds for socializing educators into niceness. Teacher educators, a predominantly white group, who, like us, prepare future educators within teacher education programs utilizing self-proclaimed anti-racist commitments, do not always align their beliefs with their actions, often because of niceness.

#### 5. Methods

As eight teacher educators who self-identify as white, liberal, middle-class female teacher educators and former K–12 classroom teachers, we prided ourselves on being nice. Being considered the “nice teacher” was a label we valued. However, examining our roles in preparing pre-service and in-service teachers to teach literacy equitably has helped us understand how niceness is a barrier to combating racism in schools. For the past five years, we have engaged in an ongoing self-study community of practice (SSCoP) [24] in which we examined our role as white educators in perpetuating or disrupting racism and bias in our literacy and social studies methods classes [25,26]. This article focuses on different aspects of our self-study, namely, our journal entries and book discussions in which we shared critical incidents when we upheld niceness in our work.

While some self-study research has focused on whiteness in teacher education [27–30], more research is needed to understand how white teacher educators in positions to lead future educators may perpetuate racism through niceness. We suggest that teacher educators working in different locations and universities can use SSCO P to expand the disruption of niceness and whiteness in teacher education to improve the injustices embedded in educational institutions.



We used self-study methodology to explore two broad individual and shared problems of practice: (1) how to use a generative anti-racist approach to teaching and learning in our courses and (2) how our actions as white female teacher educators align with our commitments to anti-racist education. Although we are in various geographic locations across the United States, this methodology facilitated our joint work in studying teacher education practices as literacy education scholars [31]. Notably, the methodology foregrounds critical friendship and critical co-reflection [32,33].

We began generating data in January 2019, and the work remains ongoing. The data included in this article spanned January 2019–August 2019, consisting of audio and video recordings of monthly meetings (between 60–90 min) using a video conferencing platform, journal prompts, meeting agendas, monthly notes synthesizing the discussion, a list of tasks to perform before the next meeting (e.g., journal prompts and conference proposals), and a resource bank consisting of course syllabi, articles, and assignments available via cloud storage.

From the start, we selected and read texts for the purpose of discussion. In this space, we learned about white liberalism and how white liberals stated anti-racist beliefs do not always align with their actions. We recognized the harm of “good intentions” and the unintended yet present opportunity hoarding and unwillingness to give up power and resources that prevent change. Thus, we examined the mismatches between our beliefs and our teaching practices, and we began to understand our socialization into racism. As awareness of our complicity in upholding systemic racism for our benefit increased, we moved toward transforming our teaching practices with our commitments to anti-racism and unlearning niceness.

The data we analyzed for this article was a sub-section of the data collected and focused on video and audio transcripts of our monthly meetings. The data analysis for this study was ongoing; thus, we used constant comparative techniques [34]. A sub-group used open coding and identified codes to highlight instances when we perpetuated or disrupted niceness in our courses as teacher educators in leadership positions. Specifically, we noted words or phrases like “nice”, “interruption”, and “resistance” [35]. Once we had completed the initial coding, we discussed and collectively agreed on the codes and illustrative examples of each.

Focused coding allowed us to review the data based on the three themes that emerged: fragility/discomfort; lack of knowledge/inexperience; and fear of backlash. Each sub-group member re-read the data for examples of each theme, and then reviewed the others’ coding to discuss disagreements and to reach and confirm a consensus.

These themes are somewhat sequential in that our observations suggest that teacher candidates and teachers who are newest to anti-racism work are most likely to demonstrate fragility. Once they move beyond fragility, they tend to be hampered in proceeding with the work by their lack of knowledge or inexperience. Finally, when they begin to understand the need to address racism explicitly in their work in schools, it is the fear of backlash (from parents and administrators) that is most salient to them. It is important to note that pre-service teachers and teacher educators may move in and out of these stages. Niceness is so prevalent that even those who have engaged in anti-racist teaching for a long time may still feel fragile or vulnerable in certain situations. The following section will define each theme and provide illustrative anecdotes from our data.

## 6. Fragility/Discomfort

White fragility is a manifestation of the fact that white people have seldom had to engage in conversations about race, and whiteness in particular. With a mantle of niceness, we have been socialized to believe that discussions about race are impolite, unfair, or even offensive. As DiAngelo [36] (p. 2) asserts, “The smallest amount of racial stress is intolerable...and triggers a range of defensive responses”, which include “argumentation, silence, and withdrawal from the stress-inducing situation”.



Throughout our journals and conversations, we often noticed fragility in our work with teachers, both in ourselves and in our students. For example, Iris was in the position of coaching teachers as they taught their literacy curriculum. When one teacher was asked about the differential treatment given to white vs. black students, “she threw a stack of student work at me, blaming her students for what had gone wrong in the lesson as their papers scattered to the floor”. Another teacher called in sick every time Amy was scheduled to be in the building. Rather than have a conversation about possible examples of inequitable teaching, she avoided any circumstance that would put her in that potentially uncomfortable situation.

At first, Iris found herself leaning into niceness. Perhaps, she thought, if she could more intentionally present herself as nice, the teachers would be more willing to take her feedback. However, ultimately, she realized that she was putting adult comfort over student needs.

Similarly, when Cherry was overseeing a literacy conference organized by her reading specialist students, a black female professor, Tracey, led a session where a white student presented the importance of choice during independent reading. She had brought examples of books and provided reading lists of high-interest books. During Q&A, Tracey noted that the lists lacked books by and about people of color. She asked the student to share her thoughts on this, and the student stumbled to answer. When Tracey pressed her, the student started to cry. The other students in the session jumped to the presenter’s defense, offering her comfort. After the session ended, they sought Cherry out to report this incident and the “bullying” that they believed their classmate had endured. Cherry’s immediate response was to pivot to niceness, calming the student and soothing her hurt feelings. This scenario is a clear example of the weaponization of white women’s tears (e.g., [36]), whereby white women maintain control during challenging situations by redirecting conversations, attention, and resources to themselves. While the student certainly saw herself as liberal in her politics and beliefs, she was unable or unwilling to engage in a challenging conversation. In addition, the teacher educator, Cherry, also defaulted to niceness, avoiding conflict, and simply tried to smooth things over.

As our group came together to discuss incidents such as these, we considered how we might have acted differently when confronted with fragility and discomfort around topics of race. One of our essential understandings is that white teachers and teacher candidates are not accustomed to talking about race. As leaders in our teacher preparation programs, we need to have these conversations early in teacher preparation programs and continue to have them throughout. Building our teacher candidates’ and our own “racial literacy” (e.g., [37,38]) will help prepare us to have conversations about racial equity and to engage more fully when these practices are challenged.

Niceness implies that we will not talk about race at all. But imagine a teacher preparation program that builds in conversations about race and racist educational systems in every class. In the earlier classes, teacher candidates might be shocked or nervous. They may shy away from these conversations. But over time, if it is the expectation that teacher preparation programs will consistently ask teacher candidates to read about and discuss how racism plays out in classrooms, schools, and school districts, their racial literacy will grow. They would enter the school system in a more knowledgeable manner and be more capable of disrupting the racist practices, curricula, and beliefs that they encounter. It is, therefore, incumbent on us, as teacher educators, to prioritize racial literacy.

## 7. Lack of Knowledge/Inexperience

The section above looks at the notion of fragility, which includes the tendency of white teachers, teacher candidates, and teacher educators to shy away from conversations about race, using avoidance, anger, or tears. We have observed that even when some teachers or teacher candidates *do* engage in discussions about race, they exhibit misconceptions or misunderstandings that indicate a lack of experience or knowledge about race and racism, one which prevents productive participation.

This inexperience manifests itself in pre-service and in-service teachers by the questioning of the necessity of having hard conversations. This situation happened to Sophie recently in a literacy methods class when students asked why they should talk about race as they saw themselves as “colorblind”. Many white students seem to believe that *not* talking about race is the only nice thing to do. We see this as different from fragility because they are willing to ask questions and not shy away in this learning stage. The notion of colorblindness being the desired descriptor for teachers is a feature of our students’ inexperience. This notion has been ingrained in them from an early age, possibly by their families and white teachers, who may have shared only those parts of Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech that seem to uphold this stance.

Another way we have seen niceness and inexperience intersect is in talking with classroom teachers about utilizing works of children’s literature with a broad range of diverse voices. One teacher we worked with expressed concern that she could not do justice to a read-aloud about *Día de los Muertos* because she did not know enough about the topic and was worried that she would seem inauthentic or phony when reading aloud to her mostly Mexican students. Another student worried about reading books with diverse characters because she was afraid that she would not recognize bias or stereotypes and might choose a book that would perpetuate harm.

We are encouraged when teachers or teacher candidates are willing to express their doubts and concerns about utilizing diverse texts or engaging in conversations that highlight race and racist systems. The willingness to engage and ask questions is an opening for teacher educators. It allows us to respond and share readings, videos, and other resources to help open teachers’ and candidates’ minds. If, for example, teachers refer to King’s “I Have a Dream” speech as a rationale for supporting color blindness, we can give them other work by King, such as his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”, which is much more explicit about his stance on addressing racism. Similarly, we can provide frameworks and other tools for analyzing children’s literature for stereotypes and bias. We can provide practice opportunities for reading and discussing books outside teachers’ comfort zones. We should take every opportunity to address teacher inexperience by providing materials and instruction that chip away at that inexperience and lack of knowledge.

## 8. Fear of Backlash

In studying our practices individually and collectively, we all discussed our own fears relating to student course evaluations. As white teacher educators, self-exploration of how we embody whiteness and niceness has made us aware of the ways in which unearned white privilege affords us the opportunity to choose whether or not we teach about structural racism and other forms of marginalization and oppression in our courses. The overrepresentation of white teacher educators has facilitated an enterprise that has largely chosen to deflect responsibility for teaching about racism.

When we began revising course syllabi with an anti-racist approach, each of us experienced negative comments and ratings on end-of-semester course evaluations. Learning about white liberalism and niceness provided a lens that revealed that despite good intentions, we were not aligning our commitments with action but instead sought to protect our own fears and discomfort because of the possibility of being reprimanded or, worse, unemployed. This realization has helped us better understand our students’ fears, calling them into anti-racist teaching instead of shutting them out.

Similarly, we have found that once pre-service teachers move beyond the discomfort of speaking about race in our methods courses, they begin to ask challenging questions that have no definitive “right” answer. By “challenging”, we mean questions not answered in prescriptive curriculum manuals, the *Common Core State Standards*, or Teachers Pay Teachers. It is also unlikely that they will discuss racism in every course in their preparation program because they are typically taught by white educators [39].

The most common questions from pre-service teachers are: *How can I talk about topics like race if it upsets caregivers/parents? What can I do if my principal is upset with me? On*

the other hand, some pre-service teachers are angered and become defensive during conversations about race and racism, writing comments on course evaluations like, “This class was too political”, “Why are we talking about race in a reading methods course?” and “The professor made students cry because they felt guilty about being white”. Statements such as these are examples of the backlash that teacher educators may fear while seeking to maintain their status as “nice”. Pre-service teachers state that they fear termination, and this fear is warranted, given the current political U.S. landscape. However, we aim to provide them with the dispositions and resources to remain vigilant in their commitments and actions.

We find that many pre-service teachers reach a juncture when we discuss racism and other topics that, from their perspective, are challenging (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, religion, ability, class, and economic status). Some want to engage in these discussions and desire to work towards anti-racist teaching, while others, socialized into niceness, want to remain nice, accommodating, and people-pleasing. White women, in particular, are taught that making others angry is a form of failure. In this white, feminized teaching profession, we are also taught that the nice teacher is nurturing and maternal. Thus, we have found it important to explain to pre-service teachers that education is steeped in white liberalism, which perpetuates the assumption that, as teachers who “love all children”, “we are already there”. Many are visibly upset and in denial when we share with pre-service teachers that teaching is political.

In recent conversations with pre-service teachers, they brainstormed ideas for navigating their fear of backlash from families, administrators, and colleagues while seeking to disrupt their own orientation towards niceness. First, we discussed how pre-service teachers have the agency to make a thoughtful choice about where to seek employment. For example, some ideas we brainstormed include looking at school websites to read mission statements and newsletters and perhaps searching for local news stories to gain insight into a district’s priorities regarding equity and anti-racism. We further discussed how they might navigate backlash once employed; the reality is that any educator doing anti-racism work will face backlash at some point in their career.

Similarly, we discussed the importance of communicating with administrators when they teach a concept that may be challenged in their particular context. Providing space for parents/caregivers to voice their concerns is also advised. At the start of the school year, it is equally important to establish mutual trust between teachers, caregivers, and families. When teachers dedicate time to building genuine relationships with families, potential backlash relating to curricular decisions or the use of a “controversial” text can be worked out more efficiently, as caregivers will be more likely to discuss their concerns with the teacher rather than take the matter to the principal, superintendent, or even the school board. If a teacher anticipates a strong response to a text or topic, it can also be helpful to communicate with families ahead of time so any concerns they may have can be heard and addressed. Finally, a teacher’s intentionality goes a long way. No matter what they plan to accomplish in the classroom, they should be able to provide a rationale. For example, if a teacher supplements the first grade Thanksgiving curriculum to include the Wampanoag perspective about the first Thanksgiving, something which may contradict some families’ understanding of that time, the teacher should be able to explain why it is important for children to understand multiple perspectives to support critical thinking skills and provide historical accuracy.

## 9. The Continuing Journey: Moving beyond Niceness

As this article illustrates, niceness and white liberalism perpetuate racism and uphold whiteness. Niceness can prevent conversations or actions that make (white) people feel uncomfortable and excuse racist actions. It is important to note that each of the sections above, namely, fragility/discomfort; lack of knowledge/inexperience; and fear of backlash, reflect not only our teacher candidates’ struggles but also our own. While our self-study started because we were looking for ways to embed critical and anti-racist pedagogy

into our courses to support our candidates' growth in these areas, it became clear that our own work in these areas is a continual process. We initially became defensive, for example, when students pushed back on our anti-racist approach to literacy teaching. We acknowledged our own inexperience when students asked insightful questions about cultural responsiveness that we could not answer. And we certainly worried about backlash against us when student evaluations criticized our "overemphasis" on equity-related literacy instruction. Our desire to be the "nice" teacher was so ingrained that these moments often temporarily derailed our efforts. Having our self-study group as a place to process our feelings and work through possible responses and solutions was invaluable. Because of this strong support network, we became more confident in handling conflict in the classroom as it was happening because we had discussed similar scenarios and problem-solved them together.

We believe that naming and disrupting niceness is individual and collective work. The insidious effects of niceness and its maintenance of white supremacy are far-reaching. Therefore, we believe that all educators need to identify where, how, and why niceness manifests, what harm is done, and how to reshape our actions to center on equity and justice. This critical work requires (un)learning, sitting with discomfort, and accepting that counteracting niceness and the myriad ways white liberalism manifests is ongoing.

Because we are socialized into niceness and all the ways niceness enables silence, inaction, and misguided action, it can be difficult to identify our embodied niceness as well as respond in ways that decenter whiteness and repudiate white liberalism. We have found it helpful to engage in shared readings, provide spaces for individual and collective reflection, and meet regularly to discuss ideas, translate ideas to action, and analyze our actions' intended and unintended consequences.

Texts like Castagno's have helped us understand the myriad ways niceness plays out across educational contexts and understand niceness in more nuanced and comprehensive ways. We recommend common texts (books and podcasts) by people with marginalized identities to move towards post-whiteness (see [40]). These texts provide a common frame of reference that we deepen through individual and collective reflection, discussion, and identification of courses of action.

Time and space are needed to think deeply and work for change. Over time, we have found that journal writing, responding to each other's journals, and monthly meetings best facilitate our internal growth and action steps. We use Google Docs in a shared folder for individual journal writing focusing on monthly prompts we co-created, such as the following: *What role does "niceness" play in education? How do you think it contributes to maintaining educational inequity? Where and how have you upheld/disrupted niceness? What are you willing to risk?* Individual journals are important because they help us explore and contextualize how we understand, experience, and grapple with niceness and reposition ourselves as "not nice" educational leaders. To provide multiple spaces for dialogue, we have committed to reading and authentically responding to and challenging each other's thinking before reconvening via Zoom. Our responses uplift ideas, provide additional perspectives and share resources. When we meet, we are already grounded in the topics and how we understand, approach, and wrestle with the work, resulting in more profound, impactful meetings.

While our journey started as a self-study group of eight white women learning about structural racism, niceness, and whiteness within a field that is dominated by white women, it is critically important that our journey does not end there. Although niceness has socialized us into silence around racial injustice, we must now use our voices to expose and name the structural racism that exists in the professional teacher preparation programs that we work in and, in so doing, work to uplift our colleagues of color.

For example, several of us have roles on boards or committees that oversee speaker series related to literacy. Looking back on the speakers that had previously presented, we saw an overwhelming sea of whiteness. An important step was simply to advocate for diversity in the speakers that we hired. We insisted that we seek out and invite literacy

experts from minoritized backgrounds to be our keynote speakers. While this was a good start, it was also crucial to examine the boards or committees of which we were members. Who was on the board? Were there diverse perspectives and backgrounds represented? Further, who was in our audience? As we noted, again, that whiteness dominated, we realized we had to work with our black and brown colleagues to reimagine this work. Inviting colleagues of color to serve on our boards was important, and just as important was ensuring that their voices were elevated and heard.

Another area in which highlighting the voices of our colleagues of color was imperative was in course design. One part of our self-study was examining our courses—looking at the texts, assignments, and topics—to ensure that cultural responsiveness and anti-racism were embedded throughout. While we did not want to make more work for our colleagues, we also believed it was essential to partner with them in revising courses, not relying on our own understanding of cultural responsiveness in early literacy, for example, but seeking out the expertise of our colleagues of color.

In addition, as we noted the dominance of white voices in literacy research, we considered the importance of inviting our colleagues from minoritized backgrounds to partner with us in conducting, writing about, and presenting research. At one of our schools, we conducted a study of our own program through an equity lens, examining the perspectives of our students, alumni, and instructors. We designed the study together with black and brown colleagues and doctoral students, and we were able to secure funding to bring our entire research team to present at conferences.

Below are additional examples of ways we are working to uplift colleagues of color, specifically those in leadership roles. This list is by no means exhaustive.

- Intentionally reading, learning from, and citing scholars of color.
- Insisting on recruiting and advancing colleagues of color and interrogating salary scales and rank structures that diminish the work of our colleagues from minoritized backgrounds.
- Speaking up on the inherent racism of student evaluations of teaching and defending colleagues of color whose evaluations may suffer as a result.
- Examining institutional structures that marginalize colleagues of color, including tenure and promotion policies, course load, committee work, leadership hierarchies, etc. It is incumbent on white professors, particularly those with tenure (and therefore job security), to identify and call out unfair and racist structures.

It is imperative that we, as white teacher educators, ask our colleagues of color in leadership roles what we can do to support them best. All of the above ideas are suggestions that have arisen at our own schools, but we can never assume that we know best how to uplift our colleagues. This work must be performed collaboratively.

## 10. Our Recommendations for Getting Started

Informed by our experiences as a community of educators in leadership positions working toward anti-racism, we offer these recommendations:

- Follow anti-racist educators on social media platforms. Learning from others who are further on this journey or experienced in doing equity-related work is critical to your learning. An excellent place to start is with the hashtags #weneeddiversebooks and #disrupttexts. Also, most authors in our resource list have social media accounts.
- Find and engage with other educators interested in mobilizing anti-racist pedagogy. You may have colleagues at your institutions who want to do this work. Still, if not, it may be possible to find like-minded educational leaders via social media platforms, educational conferences, and peer-reviewed texts. There is power in numbers; having people to share ideas with and troubleshoot when questions or concerns arise is invaluable. Keep geography from obstructing your efforts. Technology provides space for anti-racist educators to collaborate globally.
- Provide spaces for individual and collective reflection (oral and written) on various texts, podcasts, and videos, and meet regularly to discuss ideas, translate ideas into

action, and analyze the intended and unintended consequences of our actions, past and present.

Each of these suggestions adds to educators' understanding of the impacts of racism in education. However, this inward-facing work is only the first step toward anti-racism. Action must be the ultimate goal.

### 11. Taking Action

Below are some steps for educators in leadership roles to disrupt niceness in their contexts:

1. Learn about and practice culturally sustaining teaching practices. Many educators and school leaders write and speak eloquently on this topic and provide specific ideas for making curricular modifications that allow all students to feel seen, valued, and engaged (see the book and podcast suggestions below). Many even offer free or low-cost webinars and professional development opportunities. With your colleagues, consider which changes you can make immediately and which you can prioritize moving forward. Seek the support of anti-racism organizations that can provide school-wide support and coaching in this work.
2. Attend school board meetings and PTA or PTO meetings. As educational leaders, you need to be informed about what is important to board members and parents and how those things do or do not align with equitable teaching practices. Be willing to speak up for equitable practices.
3. Conduct an audit of classroom and school libraries. Who is well-represented in the materials? Who is missing? Are stereotypes being perpetuated? Do your books with diverse characters represent multiple stories and perspectives? Be intentional about the books purchased for school and classroom libraries, seeking to ensure students have access to books free from stereotyping, and representing the full spectrum of humanity. Offer to work with the school librarian to ensure library materials do the same. (The Crisp et al. book, cited below, has suggestions to guide this audit.)
4. Seek out leadership roles and ensure diverse representation on curriculum committees so that your voice, demanding equity, is represented when your school/district is purchasing new curricular materials. Consider how the social studies and science curricula address injustices or do not do so, and advocate for the purchase of supplemental texts that will provide fuller pictures of science and social studies topics.
5. Understand that practice makes perfect. If you are worried about how you will respond to colleagues or caregivers who question your equity-based work, create scenarios that you and your colleagues can respond to through role play. For example, with a colleague taking on the role of a caregiver questioning the school's use of certain books, practice how you would respond in that situation.

We recognize that our efforts are continuous. Practicing anti-racism, which includes disrupting niceness and other manifestations of white liberalism, is lifelong work requiring vigilance, perseverance, humility, and (un)learning, and is aided by a community of critical collaborators. We write this article inviting others into this work and hope our experiences and collaboration provide insights to build upon and extend while envisioning how to counteract niceness and work towards racial justice.

### 12. Resources for Educators

During our collaboration, we have learned about and drawn on various resources that have helped us work towards anti-racism. We share these resources not as a complete list but as a place to begin learning how to disrupt niceness in the classroom. We read, listened to, viewed, and discussed books, articles, podcasts, and videos. Below is a list of sources that we have found particularly helpful, and most importantly, that the teachers and teacher leaders we work with have found helpful.



### 13. Books

- Baines, J., Tisdale, C., and Long, S. (2018). *We've been doing it your way long enough: Choosing the culturally relevant classroom*. Teachers College Press.
- *We have used this book in our literacy methods classes and our teacher candidates rave about it. Teachers appreciate the immediately actionable suggestions for making their classrooms more culturally responsive.*
- Crisp, T., Knezek, S.M., and Gardner, R.P. (Eds.). (2021). *Reading and teaching with diverse nonfiction children's books: Representations and possibilities*. National Council of Teachers of English.
- *Our teacher candidates often worry that they don't know how to evaluate trade books for bias and stereotypes. Each chapter in this book is dedicated to a different racial, ethnic, or cultural group and provides guidelines for evaluating books about that group, along with lists of excellent books and books to avoid.*
- Germán, L.E. (2021). *Textured teaching: A framework for culturally sustaining practices*. Heinemann.
- *This book guides middle and high school ELA teachers looking for a clearer understanding of what it means to be a culturally sustaining teacher and how to create culturally sustaining classrooms. We appreciate how it begins with teacher self-work, supporting teachers in understanding themselves, their biases, and how they have been impacted by white supremacy culture.*
- Minor, C. (2018). *We got this: Equity, access, and the quest to be who our students need us to be*. Heinemann.
- *With a practitioner-research focus, this book asks teachers to shift their thinking from "What is wrong with this student?" to "What is it about my teaching, curriculum, or policies/procedures preventing this child from being successful in my class?"*
- Muhammad, G. (2020). *Cultivating genius: An equity framework for culturally and historically responsive literacy*. Scholastic.
- *This remarkable book provides a four-part framework for teaching all children, focusing on identity, skills, intellect, and criticality. Each chapter ends with thoughtful questions for teachers and administrators that could easily guidebook discussions within a school.*

Podcasts (Each of the podcasts listed below is linked to an organization/website that contains impressive resources for supporting equity work in addition to the podcasts.)

- *Black History for White People* at <http://www.blackhistoryforwhitepeople.com> (accessed on 24 August 2021).

This podcast is dedicated to teaching black history to white people whose own schooling may have avoided or ignored these critical topics. Some episodes are devoted to important historical figures (like Sojourner Truth or Carter Woodson), while others look at the history of issues like mass incarceration or gentrification.

- *Teaching Hard History Podcast* at <https://www.learningforjustice.org/podcasts/teaching-hard-history> (accessed on 3 March 2022).

This podcast comes from the organization *Teaching for Justice*. It provides a deeper dive into topics like chattel slavery, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights movement. As the website states, "What we don't know about American history hurts us all".

- *Teaching While White Podcast* at <https://www.teachingwhilewhite.org/podcast> (accessed on 9 December 2019).

This podcast acknowledges that while 80% of the teaching workforce is white, most white teachers do not fully appreciate how or why their whiteness matters. This podcast helps white teachers better understand the impacts of their biases and assumptions on how they teach non-white students.

- *Leading Equity Podcast* at <https://www.leadingequitycenter.com/podcast> (accessed on 23 September 2020).



Sheldon Eakins has conversations with educators and leaders doing equity work in schools. With over 250 episodes, there is information on almost every possible topic related to equity in education.

#### 14. Postscript

In writing this article, we shared revelations about niceness and how we move forward. The mission statements of most schools of education include language that promotes inclusion for the betterment of society. Additionally, teacher educators typically tout inclusive learning environments where all children interact socially and academically to learn alongside one another. Many instructors within such programs teach socio-cultural theories—learning is social and cultural; thus, children learn from their environments. However, niceness is visible when teacher education programs collaborate with local schools. The education programs often send pre-service teachers into classrooms to complete their field experience, even when they know the learning environments are less than ideal.

In these classrooms, teachers often exclude the children perceived as “struggling readers” or “at-risk” from learning with their classmates during literacy instruction; they are frequently removed from the classroom or grouped by their perceived ability. The leaders of teacher education programs often remain silent about the inequitable practices pre-service teachers observe or examine without “pushing back” on the schools or teachers because they do not want to face backlash from their partner schools.

School administrators and teachers are under tremendous pressure to increase high-stakes test scores, ensuring all children achieve academically. And worse, funding is tied to children’s performance. In several states, teacher evaluations hinge on these test scores. Niceness reinforces inequitable schooling practices when the educational leaders who maintain teacher preparation programs dismiss problematic learning practices because they assume good intentions. They ignore practices that uphold racism, dismissing them as the way things are because that is how the school, as an institution, functions. When student teachers “push back” on observed problematic practices by their mentor teachers or in their placement school, their concerns are often minimized. The implicit message is to refrain from making waves. In this way, teacher preparation programs socialize pre-service teachers into niceness as an informal induction into maintaining the status quo. This paper is a call to action for educational leaders to disrupt niceness and transform the inequitable landscape of pre-service teacher education.

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