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## **Disrupting Niceness in Literacy Teacher Education: Non-linear Trajectories Toward Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

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Who doesn't want to be the "nice" teacher? Society sends teachers clear messages about how "good" teachers look and act. This image includes being caring nurturers of children—a historical narrative strengthened by repetition and aimed at universalization. Meiners (2002) refers to this narrative as the "White Lady Bountiful" teacher trope, "the picture of the perfect maternal yet virginal presence, beneficently overseeing her charges with infinite patience and caring, yet somehow able to remain neutral" (Lensmire & Schick, 2017, p. xix). Hegemonic ideologies, such as whiteness, niceness, and patriarchy, project this particular kind of teacher as an ideal to aspire to while policing and punishing those who deviate from these norms. Demographics of the profession align with this ideology: 80% of public-school teachers are white and 77% are female (NCES, 2023), while 78% of teacher educators are white (Milner, 2021) and at each rank, education faculty are far more likely than faculty as a whole to be female (King & James, 2022).

Being the "nice" teacher is in conflict with the culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP; e.g., Ladson-Billings, 2006, 2014, 2017, 2021ab) we aspire to enact because work toward equity and justice necessitates discomfort and confrontation. Cultivating CRP as an ideology and practice is our goal as teacher educators, yet we acknowledge that it is often aspirational.

The socialization forces of niceness (Bissonnette, 2016; Castagno, 2019; Galman, 2019) and whiteness (Haviland, 2008; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011; Matias et al., 2014) aim to compel us back into compliance. Our work is to continue resisting, however uneven and messy that may look, and to continue working toward the kind of teacher education we want to create—one that, at its core, is accountable to minoritized students, families, and historically resilient communities and that positions the classroom as a site for social justice.

As a group of seven white, female literacy teacher educators of varied rank across seven institutions and six states, we participated in a self-study community of practice (SSCoP;

Kitchen, 2022). Our goal was to narrow the gap between our values of CRP as central to teacher education and our enacted practice. We worked to redefine the vision of a “good” teacher and try out new ways of more robustly enacting CRP. As an SSCoP, we support one another in identifying and addressing the shortcomings of our practice, problem solving, and building collective knowledge for ongoing action. We help each other identify instances where we may unintentionally perpetuate biases or problematic practices, while recognizing we likely have collective blind spots. Due to our geographic spread, our group helps us envision things differently because we’re not limited by the structures and internal politics of a single institution. Our SSCoP also functions as a racial affinity space to process, dialogue, and minimize cross-racial harm as we do the work (Picower, 2021).

An SSCoP helps us thoughtfully navigate this constant tension between what teacher education is (i.e., steeped in niceness and whiteness) and what we aim for it to be (i.e., a vehicle for social transformation). To explore this tension, we asked the following research questions:

- How did the structures of our SSCoP support or constrain the enactment of CRP in our literacy teacher education curriculum?
- How do the frameworks of niceness and whiteness illuminate missteps and opportunities in our efforts to enact CRP?

### **Literature Review**

Niceness and whiteness are the normative cultures in teacher education (Bissonnette, 2016; Carter Andrews et al., 2021; Castagno, 2019; Sleeter, 2012, 2017). Efforts to prepare teacher candidates to enact CRP, which we view as the foundation of teacher education, will be stymied if niceness and whiteness are not systematically examined and addressed. In the following sections, we provide an overview of CRP and the perennial challenges for enacting CRP in robust and principled ways. Then, we examine how the interlocking constructs of

niceness and whiteness (Castagno, 2019; Liera, 2020) reproduce the status quo and work to ensure CRP will continue to be taken up in superficial and sanitized ways (Bissonnette, 2016; Sleeter, 2012).

### **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Ladson-Billings developed and elaborated upon CRP to provide educators with both a counter-image of BIPOC achievement and a framework for equitable teaching (1995ab, 2009, 2014, 2017, 2021ab). Her influential studies (e.g., 1995ab, 2009) demonstrated how teachers, regardless of race, produced strong academic outcomes with Black students in historically resilient schools, narrowing achievement disparities between Black and white students. Because CRP is particularly important for students whose identities have been historically marginalized in schools, it is increasingly imperative for teacher preparation programs as the racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity of students continues to increase. Educator preparation programs must serve as key teacher learning sites (Gist et al., 2019) for future teachers to develop their abilities to enact culturally relevant practices that address persistent opportunity gaps disproportionately impacting minoritized students (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 2006, 2021a).

CRP requires three interconnected criteria: academic achievement, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. Academic achievement/student learning relates to students' abilities to speak, read, compose, compute, problem pose and problem solve with sophistication and agency. Cultural competence includes maintaining students' own cultures (e.g., languages, historic traditions, and contemporary cultural practices); leveraging, affirming, and valuing culture in learning experiences; and developing facility in at least one additional culture. Critical/sociopolitical consciousness includes helping students name, understand, and address social inequities within their communities and the broader world. Taken together, these tenets

help students read the word and the world (Freire, 1970/2018; Ladson-Billings, 2021ab) to view education as personally empowering and intellectually, culturally, and civically relevant.

Ladson-Billings (2021ab) contends that, since she originally published on the topic over 30 years ago, there have been many iterations of CRP, yet few reflect the theoretical model or have redressed the myriad debts (Ladson-Billings 2006, 2014, 2017) resulting from persistent structural inequities and inherent educator biases.

Importantly, CRP is a disposition from which practices follow (Gist et al., 2019). Ladson-Billings (2021ab) and other scholars (Gist et al, 2019; Sleeter 2012, 2017; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) have challenged stakeholders in educator preparation to enact CRP more fully in teacher preparation programs. To promote CRP in K-12 schools, teacher educators (who are predominately white and female) must build our own cultural competence and sociopolitical consciousness. For example, we must interrogate our own identities; challenge and question our worldviews; understand and redress historic and contemporary inequities; develop our cultural knowledge; and redress curricular whiteness and banking models (see e.g., Friere, 1970/2018; Ladson-Billings, 2006, 2021ab; Sleeter, 2012, 2017). This work allows teacher educators to frame the goals of teacher preparation and education itself, not around “success” or “college and career readiness,” but around empowering teachers to address inequity and injustice. CRP as a teacher education framework situates teaching as a political act (hooks, 1994) and teaching and learning as a part of the larger project of social transformation (Gist et al., 2019).

### **Niceness & Whiteness**

Whiteness is ideological and enacted. It centers on and invests in white culture, experiences, expressions, ideology, and behaviors while simultaneously refusing to acknowledge inherent structural, social, economic, and historic privileges (Haviland, 2008; Leonardo &

Broderick, 2011; Matias et al., 2014; Ohito, 2020; Picower, 2021). The hegemony of whiteness is an invisible and pervasive barrier to confronting, imagining, or enacting alternative possibilities that lead towards educational justice (Carter Andrews, 2021, Liera, 2020; Matias et al., 2014; Ohito, 2020). Characteristics of white supremacy culture that are embodiments and enactments of whiteness include, but are not limited to, perfectionism; defensiveness; valuing quantity over quality or the product over the process; fear of open conflict; a belief in neutrality and objectivity; and either/or thinking, which perpetuates a “with or against us” mindset (Okun, 2021).

Niceness, although its own force, is an instantiation of whiteness that is also ideological and enacted (Bissonnette, 2016; Castagno, 2019; Liera, 2020). Niceness is a socially constructed ethic that prioritizes comfort, social approval, and acceptance by avoiding conflict (Bissonnette, 2016; Castagno, 2019; Galman, 2019; Liera, 2020; Wegert & Charles, 2019). Enacted niceness in teaching and teacher education (Baptiste, 2008; Bissonnette, 2016; Castagno, 2019; Galman, 2019; Galman et al., 2010; Wegert & Charles, 2019) manifests through behaviors such as:

- glossing over or retreating from disagreement when it arises;
- remaining silent and ignoring or downplaying concerns;
- using hedging language (e.g., maybe, possibly, but I’m not really sure, if it’s okay...);
- using race-neutral language (e.g., being evasive about naming/”seeing” race, denying racial differences by emphasizing sameness);
- being compliant with and enforcing rules; and
- downplaying knowledge, expertise, and experience.



The impact of these behaviors is that “comfort and amenability are traded at the expense of critical dialogue” (Bustamante & Solyom, 2019, p. 176) and existing power structures are maintained.

In a year-long study with teacher candidates and eighth grade students in white-dominated educational spaces, Haviland (2008) utilized discourse analysis to identify the ways niceness is marked by avoidance moves when it came to discussing race, racism, and whiteness in a middle school classroom and a student teaching seminar. This included avoiding specific words, starting but not committing to ideas, asserting ignorance or uncertainty, changing topics, and letting others “off the hook.” These avoidance moves were often simultaneously enacted with techniques for upholding whiteness (e.g., joking to disrupt tension, agreeing to avoid discomfort), and were enacted by both male and female students and student teachers.

Whiteness intersects with niceness, and both are embedded in systems like education in ways that impact all who participate in these systems (Galman, 2019; Liera, 2020); this does not *only* include white people or women, as all of us are socialized to uphold and reproduce dominant ideologies. Niceness impacts everyone because of its alignment with the pervasive ideology of whiteness (Galman et al., 2010; Riemer, 2019), and in this way, the “frames bundle with each other” with particular impact to reinforce the socialization of women and teachers (Bonilla-Silva, 2009, p. 47). White women, who have long been “viewed as essential to the survival and development of the nation and the dissemination of particular ideologies,” are particularly measured by the expectations of niceness, as the “White Lady Bountiful” teacher trope illustrates (Meiners, 2002, p. 88). This persistent “Lady-icon,” who Meiners (2022, p. 90) refers to as a ghost haunting teacher education, is composed of intersectional identities: femininity, whiteness, heterosexuality, and social class.

In fact, “the ties between education, niceness, and whiteness are so interwoven that they can be difficult to identify, locate, and pull apart” (Castagno, 2014, p. 10). Niceness and whiteness are linked to qualities of neutrality, equality, compassion, and fairness—qualities also ascribed to “good” teachers. White women were historically recruited into teaching explicitly because they were constructed as “naturally” having “purer” morals and being less occupied with and capable of engaging in “worldly issues,” such as those of politics (Meiners, 2002, p. 88). Educators are particularly invested in these ideologies because schools “are positioned as fundamental to helping anyone—and everyone—achieve the American dream. Schools also worked, and continue to work, for most educators, so educators are understandably invested in this institution that provided an avenue for their own success” (Castagno, 2014, p. 165-166).

As a consequence, whiteness and niceness are systemic norms in education that act upon teachers (of any racial or gender identity) by incentivizing them to ignore or avoid conflict and challenging topics; downplay their knowledge to maintain harmony; and comply with prevailing conventions, rules, and norms regardless of their impact on minoritized students (Castagno, 2019; Galman, 2019; Galman et al., 2010; Liera, 2020). Even when educators try to push back, niceness serves as a weapon to police and regulate behaviors, typically leading to passivity due to fear of reprisal (Liera, 2020; Orozco, 2019; Riemer, 2019; Wegert & Charles, 2019).

Whiteness and niceness in education work together to perpetuate the dominant culture’s narrow and dehumanizing stance towards academic achievement and cultural competence; they are enacted to maintain power and privilege through deficit ideologies, meritocracy, and individualism (Baptiste, 2008; Castagno, 2019; Liera, 2020; Wegert & Charles, 2019). Normed and rendered invisible, whiteness and niceness in educational contexts go unaddressed or even unacknowledged (e.g., in relation to race and structural inequities) and we argue that they serve as significant barriers to principled enactment of CRP, contributing to its diluted implementation.

## **Method**

Shalaby (2017) argues that “no single one of us has the creativity, the courage, or the skill enough to teach love and learn freedom alone” (p. 179). Self-study provides a process and context to name, explore, and address problems of practice (Dinkleman, 2003; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). When collaborative, self-study disrupts the isolation many teacher educators face (Martin et al., 2011).

Centering equity and justice are core values for self-study researchers (Fletcher et al., 2016; LaBoskey 2004). When collaborators coalesce as critical friends within SSCoPs to problematize practice (Kitchen, 2022), they possess the capacity to build a community that redresses the niceties (Fletcher et al., 2016) that impede movement towards educational equity and justice (LaBoskey, 2004). For us, this effort includes centering CRP in more coherent, consistent, and comprehensive ways (Gardiner et al., 2023), an issue examined by only a few other collaborative self-study groups (e.g., Han et al., 2014; Moody Maestranzi et al., 2022).

For SSCoPs to offer a path towards equitable teaching and learning, collaborators must meet regularly over sustained periods, commit to a shared purpose, and demonstrate parity by uplifting all voices and encouraging alternative perspectives (Kitchen, 2022). In constructing a space that encourages critical reflection and supports change in practice, we drew on Kitchen and Ciuffetelli Parker’s (2009) and Kitchen’s (2022) descriptions of key SSCoP features to:

- develop a cross-institutional membership of teacher educators who meet voluntarily and with regularity (e.g., monthly meetings discussing shared readings);
- position ourselves as co-learners regardless of institutional rank or experience by rotating leadership roles and providing multiple opportunities for members to voice experiences, ideas, and perspectives (e.g., journaling and peer responses, whole group discussions);

- establish structures for collaboration that center problem posing/solving, asking questions, and sharing resources (e.g., assessing syllabi, sharing problems of practice from our classrooms);
- build personal and professional relationships that encourage trust and vulnerability, enabling difficult conversations (e.g., making time for social activities, using a set of sentence stems for pushing back or giving alternative perspectives); and
- aim to create knowledge that contributes to the broader field and teacher education reform.

Self-study is an iterative process that keeps our data in conversation with itself, allowing us to interrogate our own actions through SSCoP structures that change or perpetuate norms. When these tenets are mobilized, SSCoP allows members to accomplish more collectively than individually as members share and distribute their intellectual, experiential, and emotional resources (Tondreau et al., 2021). Furthermore, collaborative self-study provides opportunities for catalytic validity (Lather, 1986)—research that focuses and energizes us to name, understand, and analyze our lived practice to transform it.

## **Participants**

Whereas many collaborative self-studies include two to three colleagues in the same institution (e.g., Baker & Bitto, 2022; Martin et al., 2011), we are seven participants from seven universities across six states. We identify as white, middle class, cisgender female teacher educators across academic ranks. We draw on one another's experiences of other identity positions such as (dis)ability, sexuality, religion, and geographical context to inform our work together, while also recognizing that whiteness and niceness shape and limit our knowledge and perceptions.

Our collaboration began at a special interest group at the Literacy Research Association conference in 2018 with an initial mutual commitment to center critical literacy in our courses. We meet monthly via Zoom to build our collective knowledge by reading and discussing equity literacy research; deepening our cultural and critical competence through collaborative journaling; redesigning our courses by co-creating and trying new assignments and practices; and reshaping how we think about academic achievement.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Years as professor</b>	<b>Rank</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>University type</b>
Amy	3	Assistant professor	Tennessee	Mid-size, public
Elizabeth	9	Associate professor	New York	Small, private, liberal arts
Kristen	5	Assistant professor	Michigan	Mid-size, public
Nance	19	Professor	New York	Mid-size, public
Tess	7	Assistant professor	Vermont	Small, private

Tierney	1	Assistant professor	Alabama	Large, public
Wendy	14	Associate professor	Washington	Small, private, liberal arts

### Data Sources & Analysis

Data collection spanned January 2020 through December 2020, the timespan in which we read *The Price of Nice: How Good Intentions Maintain Educational Inequity* (Castagno, 2019) (February-September) and the following semester, when we applied insights into our teaching. Data sources include monthly collaborative journal entries from each member (n=84, 12 months x seven members) responding to group-determined prompts and readings from our shared text, as well as our related actions as literacy educators working to enact the tenets of CRP. We responded monthly to one another's entries and often included links to resources, assignment ideas, and websites related to group discussions. While we also record and transcribe our monthly meetings, we chose to analyze journal entries and responses because the dynamic structure captured our thinking and our interactions in-progress (See Table 2 for an example). Journals are a structure that allow each member time and opportunity to process and respond at their own pace, increasing the contributions of members who are quieter in meetings. Revisiting entries allowed us to see our collaboration with a new lens, deepening our understanding of how our work together was operating. We also believe that a collaborative journal structure can be a generative process for other SSCoPs that supports more substantive critical reflexivity.

For our first step of data analysis, the first three authors independently read and reread all journal entries and peer responses. We examined data for narrative units, attempting to keep each story and the dialogue it inspired among group members intact. In determining narrative units, we began from Riessman's (2008) definition of "a bounded segment of talk that is temporally ordered and recapitulates a sequence of events" (p. 116) and aimed to preserve sequences rather than coding segments. In this phase, reflecting our goals of CRP implementation, we used concept coding (Saldaña, 2015) with the codes "academic achievement," "cultural competence," and "critical consciousness," as these interrelated concepts are each essential for principled enactment of CRP. We identified narrative units where we saw ourselves grappling with these concepts. In our second round, we applied finer grained descriptive codes (Saldaña, 2015), drawing from the constructs of niceness and whiteness as defined by our framework. Examples of these codes include "glossing over or retreating from disagreement," "using hedging language," "using race-neutral language," "being compliant with and enforcing rules," and "downplaying knowledge and expertise." These codes illuminated where niceness and whiteness not only permeated our teaching, but also our collaborative dialogue. Coding with the lens of our theoretical framework also drew our attention to the ways that descriptive codes clustered together around core tensions. These tensions were engaged repeatedly in our discourse as we navigated the gaps between our visions for our teaching and the realities.

Self-study researchers have utilized tensions as a framework in exploration of a variety of contexts (e.g., Baker & Bitto, 2020; Martin, 2020). Applying comparative analysis across each participant's journals, (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) we observed that members of our group actively struggled with the same core tensions across entries and dialogue over time. Namely, we struggled with the role of CRP within the purportedly "neutral" academic content of literacy, navigating our socially prescriptive role as "nice" teachers with the goal of being critical

teachers, and our positionality as both experts and learners. The similarities in the challenges each of us grappled with suggest the salience of these tensions for teacher education.

From there, we each selected two narrative units that represented each tension and met again. We compared the individually selected narratives to our shared definitions of the tensions and collaboratively identified the narratives which most strongly illustrated the complexity of each tension and how the group grappled with it. We selected three representative entries that demonstrate how niceness and whiteness were embedded in our teaching and our engagement with each other, as well as how we negotiated tensions between our aspired and enacted practice. We conducted member checks to increase credibility (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

### **Findings**

We identified tensions between what niceness and whiteness demand of us and what we work towards as educators who practice CRP. Three tensions emerged as particularly salient; they were repeated throughout our interactions and across our different contexts. Collectively and individually, we grappled with positioning CRP as central to literacy content (not having it pushed to the margins of our courses), our desire to maintain a “nice” reputation alongside our goal of embodying criticality, and the interplay between our identities as “experts” and the need to position ourselves as learners/unlearners. Each tension is a territory we return to again and again, never completely resolving. While we aspire to enact CRP as an ideology and a practice, we find ourselves in constant negotiation and conflict between how teacher education currently is and how we want it to be. Niceness and whiteness are in the bones of teacher education, creating barriers to the full integration of CRP at both the individual and institutional levels. Our journals, and our analysis of them, have helped us to name and understand these ideologies in action in our own classrooms and programs, which has better prepared us for disrupting them.



We recognize that all three of these concepts are interrelated in complex and nuanced ways and that separating our data out into these three themes is a constructed heuristic. However, pulling these three aspects apart and analyzing them through the frames of niceness and whiteness illuminates factors that enable and constrain our work and supports identification of the challenges and missteps we made along the way, reinforcing our commitment to continuous learning.

### **Margins to Center**

One tension we identified is between centering equity in our courses and keeping equity on the margins. In other words, we felt tension between what we were trying to make space for and the content we felt we “should” cover. This tension stemmed from the standards that govern both P-12 and higher education, accreditation requirements, and our lived experiences both as students in and teachers of these courses in the past. Trying to juggle all those expectations and integrate equity work often resulted in the equity pieces feeling like add-ons to the already full curriculum of our courses. However, we acknowledged that the solution to this tension was not an either-or binary. Rather, we needed to maintain our commitment to the academic growth of our students and prepare them with the content knowledge necessary to become effective literacy educators while at the same time engaging them in critique of the ideology that literacy knowledge and skills are “neutral.” Rather than defaulting to a focus on “neutral” content, we grappled with making it clear that all the things we were teaching were connected to working toward equity and justice. While we often fell short of this goal, we worked to confront our socialization into our own niceness and whiteness that served to bound our re-envisioning of literacy methods.

Below, we provide a representative example of these efforts to balance content and equity simultaneously, integrating rather than adding on. This excerpt from Elizabeth’s journal illustrates the tensions between our efforts to center equity and justice and our socialization into conformity and upholding expectations. For ease of reading, the journal excerpt is provided in table format. The left column is the journal writer’s words. The highlighted portion indicates where SSCoP members responded to a particular statement or idea and their responses are captured in the right column. We refer to the central text—one individual’s response to the prompt—as a journal entry or excerpt; we refer to a central text, along with peer responses or comments, as a narrative unit.

**Table 2**

*Elizabeth’s September Journal Entry with Comments*

Elizabeth’s September Journal Entry	Comments
<p>In my Foundations of Language and Literacy course, I’ve always required students to read aloud. The previous assignment required them to find an award-winning book published in the last five years (otherwise they would all be reading Dr. Seuss). This year I assigned: <b><u>Culturally Relevant Read Aloud</u></b> ...<i>(assignment directions were linked and included a requirement of reading a diversity responsive book)</i>...</p> <p>I am proud of myself because I made this change based on the work we’ve done together. I made this change to my syllabus to embed more learning and teaching around culturally responsive pedagogy. One way we can get there (as elementary school teachers) is through text. This is what I explained to my students, in addition to leading a conversation about how young children, even</p>	<p>Kristen: I think we're socialized into a narrow definition of what constitutes literacy. Read</p>

<p>those in grades 1-3 are ready for it.</p> <p>I still worry that this assignment isn't central to the course or the work we do in the course.</p>	<p>alouds promote speaking and listening.</p> <p>Tierney: I completely agree with what Kristen said. Additionally, I think part of my worry is, not that I'm not centering literacy through this kind of work, but that I'm not making that connection explicit for my students, who are socialized to see literacy in that narrow way as well. I had a couple students (even though it was only a couple), that complained that my class wasn't at all meaningful to them and so that made me think about how I'm missing the mark in communicating how social justice, equity, and inclusion are an inherent part of literacy instruction and instructional decision-making.</p>
<p>I know the importance of centering the work we are doing. I feel like I am still a work in progress, and, therefore, my students are too.</p> <p>Maybe I am justifying myself, I think part of this goes back to the tension between teaching foundations or methods and culturally responsive pedagogy.</p>	<p>Amy: I think this also goes to the need for it to be a focus of a program, and not any one course. If CRP is an ongoing conversation, it can be a part of the course in balance with methods. I'm trying to think about how I address it in each component - what does culturally sustaining word work look like? What does culturally sustaining interactive read aloud look like? Etc.</p> <p>Elizabeth: This comment is really resonating with me.</p>
<p>The objectives and content of the course are regarding teaching kids to get the words of the page, and I do value this, in addition to being culturally responsive. Truly it's not an "or" it's an "and."</p>	<p>Wendy: I teach similar courses and what helps me is to consider (and tell my students) that we have a knowledge base for teaching children to read, but as important is "why would they want to read? that motivation and engagement with their own, their future, and other identities" and such. so, that's helped me think that culturally responsive read alouds</p>

	are essential. Hope that helps?
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This exchange shows ways that the SSCoP provided support and the expectation for integrating equity into coursework. Elizabeth changed an assignment to explicitly center diverse authors and texts and engaged her students in a discussion of how and why this was vital to their future classrooms. She was simultaneously proud of her work while recognizing that it remained insufficient; there remained a gap between her (our) values and goals and their enactment in her pedagogy. She refers to the discourses of “foundations and methods” and “objectives and content,” emphasizing what she felt needed to be learned and accomplished (as reinforced by standards), *and* the need to spend time ensuring that the content she taught reflected and incorporated elements of CRP. Elizabeth fostered the expansion of her primarily white, female students’ cultural competence through the requirement of diversity responsive text selection and challenging perceptions about young children’s readiness for learning about cultures beyond their own. This narrative unit featuring Elizabeth’s journal excerpt illustrates the ways the group pushed us to reimagine our teaching and our courses.

When considering ideologies of niceness and whiteness, this exchange reveals several constraining factors. It reveals how niceness conditions us to be compliant and rule-following and avoid imposition. Elizabeth questions if mandating diversity responsive texts is “central” to her course goals, reinforcing how equity work is often relegated to separate classes like Multicultural Education. Kristen’s response challenges that assumption of what a literacy methods course is and identifies patterns of compliance and acquiescence to audit culture. Tierney’s response indicates how niceness is a policing force that pressures us to maintain compliance with the status quo. Wendy’s response, with a push with alternatives at the end, also shows how niceness leads her to soften her language (“Hope it helps?”) in order to sustain

comfort and not exert authority. Indeed, rereading narrative units showed how niceness and whiteness are enacted in our dialogue to counterbalance critique or suggestions. Simultaneously, whiteness pressures us to do things the “right way” (i.e., status quo) and when we try something new, we fear getting it wrong. While we recognize that harm can be done when equity work is done superficially, fear also leads us towards inaction.

This narrative unit also indicates a broader pattern of the function of our journal spaces and structures. The comments made by other SSCoP members illustrate similar phenomena across multiple teacher education contexts. This allowed us to identify what aspects of the critical incidents and tensions we wrote about were ours individually and what aspects were shared. Our journals gave us the space and time to identify, unpack, and understand the forces that were shaping us and our actions. For example, Kristen was able to name our collective socialization into a particular definition of literacy and how it was at work in Elizabeth’s journal entry. The conversations that we engaged in within narrative units allowed us to connect what was happening at a micro level in our own classes to the macro-level socialization forces at work. When we were able to name and explore them, we were able to grapple with them in more productive and principled ways.

### **Nice Teacher vs. Critical Teacher**

Another tension that emerged from our analysis of the data was the conflict between our goal to enact critical pedagogy while simultaneously retaining our status as “nice” teachers. We felt pressure to live up to the conceptions of (particularly white, female) teachers as maternal, nurturing, and uncritically loving; these were stereotypes that our students, our colleagues, and sometimes we ourselves held. When they were disrupted, we experienced pushback and the policing forces of niceness and audit culture (e.g., course evaluations, reputations as “difficult”).

To avoid this, as we attempted to teach in increasingly equity-centered ways, we often found ourselves doing so in “nice” ways. At times, this meant that we essentially remained compliant rule-followers who only masked as allies. We had varying ways of dealing with the emotions this tension fostered (e.g., shutting it down, letting it bubble up, sharing with students, pouring it into writing), and grappled with balancing our own emotional responses alongside those of our students. We knew we needed to push our teacher candidates out of their comfort zones, but we continuously questioned how hard or how much we should push.

We also had few models of critical teachers—those who center equity and do not worry about others’ perceptions to help us envision our own practice—which was a challenge that was particularly consequential for untenured members. This tension highlights our work at the intersection of (un)learning, naming, understanding, and resisting whiteness and niceness and the institutional and societal structures and systems we are working within, which are designed to be self-perpetuating. As the narrative unit below depicts, it is by understanding and resisting that we build our cultural competence and sociopolitical consciousness as teacher educators in opposition to whiteness and niceness in order to disrupt those structures and systems more effectively.

**Table 3**

*Tierney’s May Journal Entry with Comments*

Tierney’s May Journal Entry	Comments
<p>I had never thought about lessons on social justice, inequity, and systemic oppression as being nice. But, of course, they are. I don’t think, after reading these first six chapters, that I have ever taught a lesson that was not nice. Is it even possible to teach a not nice lesson in the classroom in today’s political and social climate? I’m not even sure if</p>	<p>Amy: I’m thinking this is something we should discuss in our meeting. Some concrete examples might help our common</p>

<p>teaching in a not nice way is something I completely agree with, but that just may be because of my current conceptual understanding of what it might mean to teach in a not nice way.</p>	<p>understanding.</p> <p>Nance: I would like to talk about this too!</p> <p>Tess: Yes! Me too!</p>
<p>...</p>	
<p>I am invested in maintaining the appearance of being nice. Or, at least, I have been. But this is an amazingly difficult habit to break.</p>	<p>Amy: I wrote about the same chapter and the same unflattering recognition it provoked in my own journal entry. I agree that unlearning this habit is incredibly hard, and I feel like it will always be on-going work for me. But reading about how I've been socialized into this "ideal" so that I'm malleable and compliant made me angry, and therefore more committed to being less nice.</p>
<p>I struggle with what this means for what I am capable of changing in the classroom. The center of my research is tension but, in my everyday life, I avoid tension whenever possible.</p>	<p>Elizabeth: Me too.</p>
<p>While I finished my PhD, I found some of the words, more of a voice, more of a sense of agency in pushing back against inequities. In my personal life, these words, this voice and agency, have come with a fairly heavy price tag. If I really push beyond the boundaries of niceness in the classroom, what will the price be? (And, yes, I do understand the privilege I possess here - that I can worry about the price I might pay while others have no choice in paying the price.)</p> <p>I am not nasty. Not yet. But I want to be.</p>	<p>Nance: Me too, but I'm not sure how to do this.</p>
<p>And I suppose that is a start.</p>	<p>Kristen: I agree that it is very difficult to break the habit of niceness. When I took my comps during my PhD program, I wrote a critical piece about the problems of practice-based teaching and was not popular for doing so. Some folks at [university] really promote</p>

	<p>PBT. Long story short, my advisor said someone said they couldn't believe someone so nice could write such a mean paper. I am still angry thinking about it and it happened four years ago. I wonder if the more power people hold, the nicer they are. And the less power one has, the more nasty they're willing to be.</p>
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This narrative unit illustrates how we collectively grappled with recognizing our niceness and whiteness in practice and, in engaging with them, increased our abilities to address them. Here, Tierney begins questioning her own practice and shifting her perspective based on the reading and group discussion. At the beginning of her journal, she questions if she “agrees with” teaching in a not nice way. Throughout, she highlights the ways that she has been socialized into niceness and whiteness, and how those play out in her practice and in her life. Tierney’s “investment” in niceness highlights aspects of perfectionism, people-pleasing, and compliance. She names her awareness of these forces, alongside the challenge she finds in disrupting or deviating from them. Amy also names the socialization forces at work and illustrates the way that ideology drives action; she expresses anger stemming from increasing awareness of the way niceness and whiteness have manipulated her and this anger shifts her toward committing to disrupting these ideologies. While specific action steps are not identified yet, the reflection and shifts in thinking necessary to provoke and sustain action are evident for both Amy and Tierney.

We also see discourses of whiteness (Haviland, 2008) evident in how group members responded. For example, Elizabeth agrees with Tierney, starts to join the conversation, but then does not engage beyond her agreement. Nance agrees, as well, but then asserts uncertainty or ignorance—even within this journal space designated for explicit discussion of, and grappling with, niceness and whiteness. These ways of interacting are deeply embedded in our



socialization and, often, we recognize them best through hindsight. By revisiting narrative units from our journals, we can notice these patterns and work to disrupt them more thoroughly in the future.

By the end of Tierney's journal excerpt, a shift has occurred—she wants to teach in a “not nice” way, even if she's not yet sure of how to go about that. She moves from critical reflexivity to self-critique, prompting several group members to share their own self-critiques and mark issues to bring to the group meeting. By tracking Tierney's thinking across her writing, we can see how the ideologies we read about and discussed gave her language and concepts to view her own experiences in a new way and how the journal space prompted her to identify, and eventually push back on, those structures keeping her (us) “nice,” including her (our) discomfort and avoidance of discomfort and conflict.

This narrative unit further demonstrates how niceness acts as a policing force and the power dynamics that come into play for maintaining the status quo. Tierney speaks to the price she has paid in her personal life for not being nice, and questions, as a new professor, what the consequences of disrupting niceness would be. Kristen's response similarly shows how niceness was weaponized to keep her compliant and agreeable as a doctoral student. By questioning norms at her institution, she was censured by a faculty member, someone exercising power and wielding expertise. These examples illustrate that niceness is what is “expected” and rewarded in academia and when we disrupt it (acting in line with our values), we are policed and disciplined by individuals and institutions (Liera, 2020). As we come to recognize this pattern, we become more able and committed to taking action and rejecting/resisting our socialization.

A broader pattern revealed is how ideologies, until they are named and explored, make patterned responses seem like individual experiences and failings. As we identify and share how

we wrestle with enacted niceness, we recognize similarities in the comments of our SSCoP that illustrate a shared phenomenon across our multiple teacher education contexts. These interactions allow us to identify what aspects of the critical incidents and tensions we wrote about were ours individually and what aspects were shared. Rather than viewing these issues as a personal deficit in our practice (thinking we're too much or not enough), we were constantly reminded that whiteness and niceness are deeply entrenched in teacher education writ large. Whiteness and niceness are ideologies of the systems we are all a part of (Castagno, 2014; Galman, 2019). Ideologies obfuscate and our work together reveals the structures and systems of niceness and whiteness that teach us to blame ourselves rather than critiquing or dismantling the systems themselves.

### **Learner vs. Expert**

While we each recognize that literacy is not “neutral” and worked to engage our students with this concept, things did not always go according to plan. As part of our ongoing learning, we read about and discussed topics related to language, literacy, and power to further develop our cultural competence and socio-political consciousness. Yet, often, our reading and thinking guided our actions, resulting in a gap between our values and our practice.

We were in the process of learning both new concepts and content *and* ways to incorporate that learning into our practice. Learning necessitates uncertainty and some discomfort as we grow and stretch ourselves in new ways. We conceptually embraced the need for sitting in this discomfort, but also felt the tension between a learning stance and the expectation of expertise. Our students, our programs, and we ourselves often viewed our role as “experts” in the field—a notion shaped and perpetuated by whiteness. Many of us had consciously grappled with claiming our own expertise due to the gendered socialization of

niceness and now we were being challenged to revise that positionality. Data indicated that we grappled with these conflicting stances to our work and needed to make space for both in a way that recognized the complexities of our identities. While we could still claim the expertise that our experience and study in the literacy field afforded us (and in so doing, disrupt patriarchy), we also needed to acknowledge that we were on a learning journey without an end point—one we could model transparently for our students. Whiteness had intentionally hidden knowledge about the history of literacy as power, access, and currency (Leonardo, 2009), as well as denying opportunities to develop cultural competence about minoritized identities (i.e., de-centering whiteness) (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Sleeter, 2012).

The narrative unit below provides an example of our ongoing dialogue about our teaching choices, highlighting our critical reflexivity about our own practice, our responses to students, and our roles as critical friends in unpacking these incidents within our SSCoP, where we can be vulnerable and demonstrate uncertainty. These interactions help us to navigate the tension between our positions as co-learners alongside our students and the socially constructed identities as experts in our profession.

**Table 4**

*Tess's December Journal Entry with Comments*

Tess's December Journal Entry	Comments
<p>There was another class session that really stands out to me and has been on my mind a lot. What really stood out to me is that even with the best intentions, whiteness and privilege can manage to sneak in and negatively impact whatever good was trying to be done. I had assigned <i>Five Steps Toward Successful Culturally Relevant Text Selection</i></p>	

<p><i>and Integration</i> by Sharma and Christ (2017). During our discussion of the article, one student voiced that she had a major issue with the article's use of the word nonwhite (I went back and looked and it is used eight times). She asked us, "Would you refer to a woman as a non-man?" Boom. <b>I can't stop thinking about it and am ashamed that I had not thought of this when reading the article.</b></p>	<p>Tierney: But your students recognized that this was problematic. And they were comfortable bringing that up with you in class. This says a lot about the work that you've done with them. I know that I make these kinds of mistakes often (I think we all do on occasion) but I don't think I've created the kind of spaces that empower this open dialogue. That you have cultivated this space is a big deal!</p>
<p>There is just so much to unpack about the use of the term nonwhite. <b>It makes white the norm. Not to mention, it identifies people as "non."</b> Who would want part of their identity to begin with what they are not!? When thinking about this on many dog walks, I kept thinking about positive traits we may use to describe someone--athletic, funny, charming. Would we describe a person as nonathletic, nonfunny, noncharming? I digress, but there has been so much in my head about this. The use of the word nonwhite in this article took away from the authors' purpose of identifying books that are representative of a diverse population.</p>	<p>Nance: This sounds like a really powerful discussion. It demonstrates how your students are paying attention to language.</p>
<p>While my students certainly understood and discussed the importance of culturally relevant text selections, conversation shifted because of the language used. Wow, we need to think about this in all we do. I can only assume the authors had best intentions when writing this piece, but it failed to deliver <b>what they likely hoped.</b></p>	<p>Wendy: Like Tierney said, that's great the student pointed this out and that there was real discussion around this--and the importance of de-centering whiteness. I had a somewhat similar experience with an article I assigned that I had forgotten used "struggling writer"--so, first thing that happened in the class was a big [PPT] slide problematizing the language. Now, as I read your response and think back, I wonder if/where else deficit notions were embedded or perpetuated in other places in these readings. makes me want to go back</p>

	<p>with a more critical eye. On one hand, I was glad we had the opportunity to read critically, but I don't think we took the time in my class to read critically enough.</p> <p>Amy: Agreed - I'm sure I'm not catching it all, either. One of my students called out the use of the word "ghetto" in a selection from <i>Hidden Gems</i> (Bomer, 2010) we read in my writing methods course. But I think it's part of the transparency piece for us - to name that we're not catching everything, to model taking feedback as calling in, not calling out, to make evident that this is stuff they will encounter and need to be ready for, etc. And both examples and non-examples are helpful in learning, right? (at least that's what I'm telling myself)</p>
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In this example, Tess identifies a critical incident from her course, in which a student engages with a class reading critically and raises a perspective Tess herself had not yet identified. Tess references “best intentions” (both her own and the authors’), indicating that she was working to integrate her learning from the group into her teaching while also “letting others off the hook” by asserting that the message conveyed by the author’s language choices was unintended despite its impact. And though she shares her own openness to the critique raised by the student, her intellectual follow up lives side-by-side with an emotional response—shame. This affective dimension of whiteness (Brimmer, 2005) often emerges in response to critical interrogations of race and racism. While this tendency is evident in Tess’s entry, she also indicates humility in sharing both the incident and her new thinking about it, as well as willingness to remain in the discomfort (“I kept thinking...” “There’s so much in my head...” and “we need to think about this in all that we do.”).

Whiteness and niceness are evidenced as Amy minimized critique, diminished her insights, and engaged in hedging language (“at least that’s what I’m telling myself...”), softening language to make ideas more palatable and let others off the hook by indicating something is not that bad (both Tess indicating author’s best intentions and Tierney’s comment to Tess). Tierney, Nance, Wendy, and Amy all provide responses designed to give comfort, colluding with each other in creating a ‘culture of niceness’ (Haviland, 2008). Importantly, though these responses are tied to niceness/whiteness, they do not stop there.

As reflective individuals committed to our practice and to the centering of equity, we seek to learn from our mistakes. Yet, as individuals, we would not learn as efficiently or as deeply. The shared commitments of the SSCoP allow us to share and learn from our mistakes in more intentional, consistent ways. We also learn from *each other’s* mistakes, by making connections and reflecting upon our own experiences in relation to a similar situation. For example, Tierney indicates an insight into her own practice—that she needed to make more space for students to share their own critiques. Additionally, Wendy’s comment connects similar experiences, and acknowledges that “we didn’t take the time to read critically enough” in her class. This comment offered an opportunity to rethink her future response; rather than acknowledging an error and moving on, she could provide more deliberate space to critically read and respond to texts. In so doing, she could begin to disrupt whiteness by shifting to co-learning and questioning the authority of texts.

Broader patterns that can be surfaced in this narrative unit include the ways that socialized notions of expertise, worship of the written word, and norms of maintaining comfort intersect in ways that prevent working towards equity. The expectations of our students, colleagues, and ourselves are significantly shaped by these norms. As an SSCoP, we work to

disrupt (for ourselves and one another) the notion that there is a “right way” to do equity literacy, and even the notion that the readings we assign have it “right.” Instead, we aim to cultivate equity literacy as a perpetual lens through which we view the wor(l)d; our goal is that we, alongside our students, develop increased proficiency and fluency by turning that lens on each text we engage with (including the text of our teaching).

Each of us individually had moments in our practice where whiteness was revealed and we reacted with feelings of guilt, though the intensity and impact of those feelings shifted at different points on our individual journeys. As we become more aware of the ways whiteness and niceness are normalized and embedded in the bones of teacher education (and society at large), we develop our “racial stamina” (DiAngelo, 2018) and our stamina for sustaining ongoing transparency about our learning journey with our students. Repositioning ourselves in this way disrupts expectations and the power hierarchy of a “traditional” classroom. By entering our teaching with humility, we make space to learn from scholars of color, to acknowledge discomfort, to question and critique, or to make mistakes and work to repair. We model for our students that the work is always on-going and we are always becoming.

### **Discussion**

The global pandemic amplified entrenched inequities and led to calls to rethink, rebuild and “reset” education (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 2021b), and yet, several years after its emergence, we find ourselves still firmly rooted in the “grammar of schooling” as it has been (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Villegas and Lucas (2002) describe the ways in which CRP should be positioned as the center of program practices but rarely are. While CRP involves educators’ (both teacher educators’ and PSTs’) critical reflection on their foundational beliefs and socialization to develop racial reframes (Picower, 2021; Sleeter, 2012), teacher education was never intended to address this type of knowledge (Chapman, 2011; Sleeter, 2012, 2017). Deviating from the expectations

and socialization of niceness and whiteness (and the ghostly specter of White Lady Bountiful) will require “self-deconstruction and the capacity to invent” new ways of being (Meiners, 2002, p. 90); this includes inventing a new paradigm to aspire to, one that incorporates elements of “nastiness,” resistance, and activism rather than reproducing niceness and whiteness. Until teacher educators confront their own niceness and whiteness, their ability to enact CRP is going to be limited.

Consequently, the work of centering CRP in teacher education programs is necessarily in ongoing tension with the structures and systems of teacher education writ large (e.g., isolation, external standards, primacy of first authorship). Culturally relevant teacher educators, then, need strategies to navigate and persist through the ongoing tensions of their work. For us, an SSCoP helped to make the workings of whiteness and niceness visible and provided mutual support and accountability to disrupt these forces in our pedagogy and institutions.

As teacher educators, we often work in isolation, and might be the only faculty member in our areas of expertise. We need to be intentional about forming communities of practice to address (and hold ourselves accountable for) the niceness and whiteness that permeate schools, curriculum, and ourselves. The shared inquiry of an SSCoP can make these invisible forces more visible and support group members in figuring out how to disrupt them. For example, we have since implemented practices of bringing our analysis to group discussions in systematic ways (e.g. discussing the need for increased criticality in journals and responses), developing and implementing practices for explicit reflexivity on the working process of the group (e.g. critical incident interviews of one another), and building more consistent accountability structures for how we each connect our thinking and learning to action. Mutual support and accountability help us both to interrupt current practices and imagine other ways of doing things. Sharing the



tensions that we're facing across communities of practice is important for developing more effective ways of addressing the larger pervasive tensions embedded in the institution/profession.

By collaboratively journaling we named and recognized tensions as shared, not individual. We used both journals and meetings to explore ideas, trying to concretize ideologies/invisible concepts. Our journals served as in-between space to reflect more privately and on our own timelines, as the pace of meetings is faster, in-real-time dialog. The dual processes of writing and responding to each other's journals, along with our practices of analyzing our journal entries and interaction, are replicable for other educators. The recursive process of writing and analyzing our writing are key contributors to our growth (e.g., helping us rethink what academic achievement is and should be in literacy courses, expand our cultural competence as we learn from minoritized scholars, and build our socio-political consciousness). This iterative analysis is central to the process of becoming more critical of ourselves and one another. Reexamining our work to center CRP through the lens of whiteness and niceness allowed us to see and understand how and why we enact these ideologies, bringing heightened criticality into our subsequent interactions. These practices led to growth in both our awareness and our actions, indicating that, even though whiteness and niceness are embedded in our systems, concerted efforts can have an impact in their disruption. Therefore, in doing this collaborative self-work, we move intentionally towards more fully taking up the tenets of CRP.

Kenyon (2022) argues that "we need more self-studies and autoethnographies that connect the work of white scholars and faculty to the history and structures of whiteness and to their work in teacher education" (p. 36) without burdening our colleagues with minoritized identities with the emotional labor for our growth (Baker & Bitto, 2022; Love, 2020). Our work aims to respond to that call, and we join Baker and Bitto (2022) in the shared hope that in sharing

our own messy and vulnerable work that is still very much in process, we can provide a bigger window that others can look through and perhaps envision themselves in the work, too. Rather than reflecting on our navigation of these tensions as “completed” projects or as linear narratives of success, we remain committed to living permanently in the middle of the tensions and honor them as important, ongoing struggles rather than resolvable binaries. We must all commit to continuing to inquire into the ways that niceness and whiteness impede our enactment of CRP and educational justice and equity.

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