When "Nice" Isn't:

Confronting Niceness and Whiteness to Center Equity in Teacher Education

ABSTRACT

Niceness is a socialized disposition, particularly amongst white women, that prioritizes comfort and neutrality while preventing resistance against oppressive systems. Given the demographics of teachers and teacher educators, niceness and whiteness are deeply embedded in programs and institutions. As eight white, female teacher educators, we drew on the power of cross-institutional collaboration to form a self-study community of practice with the purpose of interrogating and dismantling the ways niceness and whiteness function in our teaching and teacher institutions and create barriers to centering equity and justice. Findings indicated that collaboration helped us identify how niceness shaped and continues to shape our teaching and teacher identities, particularly how we navigate difficult conversations, think about our roles as teacher educators, and imagine literacy curricula. Findings also indicated that despite efforts to recognize and interrupt niceness and whiteness, our growth was nonlinear, and we find that constant vigilance and reflection is necessary. Implications for the broader field of education include the power of self-study for disrupting niceness and whiteness in teacher education and orienting the community toward action through mutual support and accountability, while also recognizing the ways in which niceness continues to function as a barrier for enacting change for social justice.

Over the last few years, the COVID-19 pandemic and renewed public interest in the Black Lives Matter movement have spurred significant national discourse focused on issues of (in)equity, including police brutality against People of Color; inequitable access to schooling and childcare during school closures; and the teaching of race, gender, and sexuality in schools. Research in teaching and learning has, for decades, explored how more equitable practices, like culturally relevant/sustaining pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014, 2021), can leverage the knowledges of all students for more equitable access to and opportunity for learning. In response to current political and social events, attention has also shifted to why these movements for equity and social justice have not led to more substantive change in K-12 and teacher education settings (Ladson-Billings, 2021).

As teacher educators who work to center equity in our courses, we turned to examine our own practices and the barriers to centering equity. We define teaching for equity as naming, challenging, and replacing ideologies and practices that lead to inequitable outcomes, particularly for Students of Color and other historically minoritized groups. We recognize that these ideologies and practices dehumanize groups of students and push them out of school. We hear Love’s (2019) argument that racism:

> Robs dark people of their humanity and dignity and leaves personal, psychological, and spiritual injuries . . . [to] literally murder your spirit . . . [resulting in] a loss of protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance—all things children need to be educated. (p. 38)

Centering equity in teaching and learning is imperative to redress the ways in which schools and schooling do harm. However, particularly as white, female teacher educators, learning to center equity requires examining our own positionalities and socialization and the ways in which these frames are barriers to equitable teaching. In this paper, we focus on niceness and whiteness as

two socialization forces that shape and often work against centering equity in teaching and learning.

Niceness is a shared disposition, particularly amongst white women, that centers silence, passivity, denial, and avoidance in ways that resist any sense of responsibility and maintain comfort at any cost (Baptiste, 2008; Bissonnette, 2016; Castagno, 2019a; Galman et al., 2010). Niceness serves as a “shield to protect (white, female) educators from having to do the hard work of dismantling inequity” while also disciplining those who attempt to “disrupt structures and ideologies of dominance” (Castagno, 2019a, p. xiv). Thus, niceness preserves and perpetuates white privilege. Considering that 80% of teachers are white and female (NCES, 2019) and 75% of teacher educators are white (NCES, 2020) in comparison to less than 50% of the U.S. student population who identify as white (Policy and Program Studies Service, 2016), niceness may serve as a significant barrier to equitable and socially just teaching that is responsive to the lived experiences of students in increasingly diverse classrooms. Understanding and redressing ways that socialized niceness upholds inequities is imperative because without recognizing and disrupting niceness (and whiteness), in themselves and in practice, teacher educators reproduce and sustain inequities.

This work cannot be done in isolation, as niceness and whiteness can serve as silent and harmful barriers to developing the kind of criticality and transparent self-reflection that is demanded from educators who aspire to authentically center equity. A self-study community of practice (SSCoP; Kitchen, 2022; Kitchen & Ciuffetelli Parker, 2009) supports the establishment of structures, routines, and practices to guide interactions among a group of critical friends with a collective goal. Our SSCoP explored “niceness” as a socialization force that upholds the status quo and impedes the teacher education equity work we seek to do. The purpose of this self-study

was to examine how, as an SSCoP, we interrogated the role our niceness and whiteness played in shaping our work as teacher educators even while we intentionally tried to center equity in our courses. Specifically, we asked: How did our SSCoP collaboration impact our ability to make changes to more fully center equity and justice? In what ways did niceness and whiteness challenge our work to center equity and justice?

Conceptual Framework

Niceness

There is "a growing body of empirical evidence pointing to educators' well-meaning dispositions and their role in sustaining inequitable educational outcomes" (Castagno, 2019, p. xiii) through niceness. Both ideological and enacted, niceness is a shared socio-emotional disposition, particularly amongst white females (Bissonnette, 2016; Castagno, 2019a; Galman et al., 2019; Liera, 2020; Weatherstone, 2019; Wegert & Charles, 2019). Socialized niceness prioritizes comfort related to the status quo and white, patriarchal, cis-hetero, middle-class, ableist norms. It includes behaviors such as avoiding or ignoring conflict, controversial topics, or forms of imposition; using race-neutral language and maintaining color-blindness; not owning one's expertise; and being submissive, rule following, and people pleasing (Baptiste, 2008; Bissonnette, 2016; Castagno, 2019a; Galman, 2019; Galman et al., 2010; Liera, 2020).

These enacted manifestations of niceness serve to discourage educators from standing up for themselves; advocating for minoritized colleagues, students, or communities; or asking critical questions related to inequitable policies or practices (Galman, 2019; Reimer, 2019; Wegert & Charles, 2019). When educators try to address inequities, niceness becomes a form of social control—a coercive and policing agent that regulates behaviors and maintains social

conformity through pressure to be agreeable, to not cause discomfort, or for fear of reprisal (Bustamante & Solyom, 2019; Liera, 2020; Orozco, 2019, Riemer, 2019).

Niceness and its accompanying need for comfort perpetuates inequalities. Niceness allows teachers and teacher educators to claim and believe that education is “neutral” and therefore not examine systemic structures that perpetuate inequities or assume responsibility for change (Baptiste, 2008; Bissonnette, 2016; Galman et al., 2010; Liera, 2020). Niceness permeates teaching and teacher education, simultaneously protecting and preventing white educators from acknowledging or redressing biases and deficit perspectives, as well as oppressive systems, structures, and practices (Baptiste, 2008; Bissonnette, 2016; Castagno, 2019a; Galman et al., 2010; Liera, 2020; Orozco, 2019).

Whiteness

If niceness is a symptom, whiteness is its root. Whiteness is a social construct that perpetuates a status quo centered on white color, culture, and consciousness (Applebaum, 2021). Whiteness empowers white supremacy to function invisibly and positions those who align or conform to whiteness as ideal while considering all other colors, cultures, and consciousnesses as deviant from that norm (Castagno, 2014; DiAngelo, 2018). Whiteness upholds and reproduces narratives of individualism, meritocracy, and deficit ideology, and is used to explain white success and blame others for their lack of success (Sleeter, 2017), refusing to acknowledge inherent structural, social, economic, and historic privileges of whiteness (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011; Matias et al., 2014).

Within the construct of whiteness, niceness is leveraged to maintain and magnify white privilege and power. Through discourse analysis, Haviland (2008) illustrates how whiteness intersects with niceness in the form of avoiding words that could be incendiary, starting but not

committing to conversations, engaging in safe self-critique, asserting ignorance or uncertainty, topic changing, and excusing others from participating. Niceness is simultaneously enacted with techniques that uphold whiteness. These techniques include affirming similarities, joking to disrupt tension and avoid difficult conversations, agreeing and supporting to avoid discomfort, and stressing care for and investment in all children in uncritical ways.

In white-centered societies, whiteness manifests in schools as niceness and being nice (or the pressure to be nice), positioning the acknowledgement of race and racial inequities as rude or inappropriate. This further prevents the recognition of whiteness and the impact of white supremacy on educational experiences. As a result, the combined belief in educational neutrality upheld by whiteness and the preservation and protection of white teachers’ (and white students’) emotional comfort prevents critical discourse around whiteness, white privilege, and white supremacy (Castagno, 2014; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Matias et al., 2014). Although well-intentioned efforts have been made to move toward educational justice, teacher educators’ work is often buttressed by white racial knowledge, an epistemology of the oppressor, to the extent that it suppresses knowledge of its own existence (Leonardo, 2009). Therefore, these efforts often perpetuate the status quo by affirming white non-participation, silencing talk, and missing opportunities to address and disrupt racism (Galman et al., 2010). Hegemonic whiteness, then, serves as a barrier to confronting, imagining, and enacting alternative possibilities that lead towards educational justice (Matias et al., 2014).

In essence, whiteness in teacher education contexts perpetuates educational inequity by upholding myths of educational neutrality and meritocracy, while niceness becomes an embodiment of whiteness, promoting silence, evasiveness, and inaction in redressing those inequities (Applebaum, 2021; Bissonnette, 2016; Castagno, 2019a; Galman et al., 2010;

Haviland, 2008; Liera, 2020; Matias et al., 2014; Orozco, 2019). For educators to engage in equity and justice work, they must recognize and work to reject and unlearn their socialization into whiteness and niceness (Baptiste, 2008; Castagno, 2019; Liera, 2020; Orozco, 2019).

Methods

Self-study creates opportunities to explore tensions between our instructional aspirations and enacted practice (Dinkleman, 2003; Fletcher, 2020; Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2015; Loughran, 2005; Samaras, 2011). Self-study also offers a means for systematic inquiry into broader questions related to equity that include but go beyond our individual courses and institutions, allowing us to expand our spheres of influence for reform (Fletcher, 2020; Kitchen, 2020; Loughran, 2005; Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015). For us, this tension is a negotiation of where we currently reside in relation to naming and grappling with enacted niceness and whiteness as individuals and as teacher educators. We believe that collaborating in critical and methodologically rigorous ways is necessary to enact change on our journey to center equity, both in principle and practice (Kitchen, 2022; LaBoskey, 2005; Loughran, 2005).

Participants and Context

We are eight white literacy teacher educators teaching across eight universities. Table 1 provides participant demographics and pseudonyms. We met in 2018 at a self-selected affinity space on studying teacher education during the annual conference of the Literacy Research Association. The original impetus for our group’s formation was to better center equity in the courses we taught such as elementary and secondary reading methods, writing methods, literacy assessments, language acquisition and development. The need for this work emerged because of tensions we experienced between our aims and neoliberal audit culture of education (Taubman, 2009), which prioritizes accountability measures such as EdTPA, Praxis, Council for the

Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), InTASC, and state and national literacy standards that result in the decentering of equity work (see, e.g. Cochran-Smith et al., 2018; Zeichner, 2018). The past four years, 2018-2022, we met monthly over Zoom, read and discussed readings by Scholars of Color, and analyzed critical incidents from our teaching and work with colleagues. In 2020, we decided to read *The Price of Nice: How Good Intentions Maintain Educational Inequity* (Castagno, 2019b), a book one of us saw at a conference. When Maryann recommended the book, we collectively recognized that identifying and grappling with our socialized niceness and whiteness must happen for us to be able to center equity and justice and enact tenets of critical literacy and that this edited book detailing niceness across a range of contexts and manifestations could be a foundation for collective growth. While we read *The Price of Nice,* it was 2020 and issues of racial justice and inequality were at the center of national discourse in the midst of the uneven impact of lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic and the nationwide Black Lives Matter protests in the wake of the murders of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd.

Our group is a SSCoP (Kitchen, 2009, 2022), which has evolved over time to reflect the following SSCoP features:

- membership of eight teacher educators coming from different institutions, who meet voluntarily and regularly (monthly) to rigorously analyze and reflect upon our joint aims;
- deliberately position ourselves as co-learners and establish norms in order to stand on equal footing as members regardless of our institutional rank or experience, allowing for the free sharing of ideas, hopes, concerns, fears, and perspectives;
- structures for collaboration that create space to problem pose/solve, ask meaningful questions, and share ideas and resources;

- trust, the ability to be vulnerable, and a distribution of emotional and intellectual resources fostered through meetings and equitable standing among members, enabling difficult conversations for engaging in critical and reflective thought; and
- a focused aim of creating knowledge for the broader educational field, leading to teacher education reform.

Data Sources & Analysis

Though our SSCoP has been meeting for four years, data collection for this study spanned February through September 2020 in conjunction with reading and discussing *The Price of Nice* (Castagno, 2019b). Data sources included (a) video recordings and transcriptions of eight Zoom meetings lasting 60-90 minutes; (b) monthly journals (n=60); and (c) review of materials in our shared resource bank (e.g., readings and videos by diverse authors, assignments we developed/co-developed, syllabi, policy language/ideas, etc.). In our journals, we responded to group-determined prompts based on readings from *The Price of Nice* (e.g., our understandings of niceness and whiteness, its intersection with our teaching, and our related (in)actions and (mis)steps). We read and responded to each other's entries, often including links to resources and assignment ideas. Our monthly meetings were scheduled after our collaborative journal responses.

Drawing from equity frameworks, we understand that dismantling niceness, and relatedly whiteness, includes naming, critically reflecting, negotiating, and pushing back (Freire, 1970/2018; Gorski & Dalton, 2020; Mentor & Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). To reflect this process, we identified a priori codes: naming, critically reflecting, negotiating, and pushing back. The codes are described in Table 2. The first four authors analyzed the data, reading and rereading the journals and transcripts from the meetings, applying the aforementioned codes. We then

identified and moved the coded narrative data into a set of 16 matrices (Miles et al., 2013) to consolidate the data for further analysis. The matrices were constructed as follows:

- Journal matrices: A matrix was created for each participant (n=8). There were eight horizontal rows representing the data collection months, February through September, and four vertical columns, each labeled with our codes.
- Meeting matrices: We created matrices for each meeting (n=8). The vertical columns were labeled with codes and horizontal rows with examples drawn from individual statements or conversations between participants. This allowed us to capture and code the interactive nature of our meetings.

To test our codes and increase coding credibility (Corbin & Strauss, 2014), we met to view a segment of one video, discussing how we applied our codes. Afterwards, we each also analyzed and coded one journal entry using our matrix before returning to meet again to discuss the codes and build reliability. To check our coding and interpretations, we reconvened the entire group to share codes and the matrices that demonstrated how we applied codes to the video and one journal entry. Afterwards, the first four authors divided and analyzed the full data set. To increase trustworthiness, we worked in teams to review each other’s data and analysis.

Then, we employed constant comparative analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2014), reading and rereading across all coded data to develop the interpretive themes described in our findings. To further increase credibility and further our learning as an SSCoP, we asked each group member to review our drafted results to confirm that their words and ideas were expressed in ways that were consistent with their intent (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). We then discussed results as a whole group, drawing on our norms and language stems for critical dialogue including, “The questions

that it raised for me are…” and “If I were going to be contentious, I might suggest…” (O’Dwyer et al., 2019, p. 308).

Results

Data from co-journaling and Zoom meetings indicated that each of us entered the teaching profession steeped in whiteness and niceness. For example, Jayne and Suellen, respectively, recalled their entrance into teaching, embodying “white saviorism.” In Diana’s first interview for a teaching position in an all-Black school, she told her future Black principal that she “didn’t see color.” Phoebe wrote, “Niceness is nuanced, maybe that meant being kind to others, not bullying, etc., but it also meant being colorblind. It really wasn’t until I studied for my Ph.D. did I even learn about my colorblindness.” These examples illustrated that we lacked both the awareness of whiteness as a tool for racism, and consequently, lacked the language to name, negotiate, and push back against structural inequities. Seven of eight of us are self-reported “people pleasers.”

Even though we stated that we try not to be, our conversations and journals reveal that our socialization into niceness and whiteness continues to shape the way we engage in our work. Below we discuss the following three themes related to our desire to keep things pleasant and be seen as a “nice” professor or as a “good” colleague: how we (dis)engaged in conversations that could be seen as “not nice,” how we rethought and redefined our role as teacher educators, and how we (re)imagined/(re)defined literacy curriculum.

Avoiding, Entering, and Navigating Difficult Conversations

A consistent thread in our data related to our (un)willingness and (in)ability to engage in what we termed “difficult” conversations with students and colleagues about structural racism, biases such as ableism and heteronormativity, deficit ideologies, and inequitable practices. Our

meetings, reading *The Price of Nice*, and journal reflections/responses provided regular opportunities to co-construct knowledge, as well as practice, problem solve, and experience talking about niceness and whiteness and its manifestations in our teaching and work with colleagues. Specifically, having these verbal and written conversations that may otherwise have not occurred gave us practice and problem-solving opportunities to enter into and navigate difficult conversations with each other, which ultimately contributed to an increasing willingness to initiate and/or engage in conversations that disrupted niceness with students and colleagues, albeit in uneven and inconsistent ways.

Analyzing data temporally revealed growth in our knowledge related to niceness, whiteness, and their impacts, *as well as* our willingness and ability to enter and navigate conversations about inequities. Yet, upholding comfort—our own, our students’, our colleagues’—remained a mitigating factor. Over time, we found ourselves launching and entering more frequently and deliberately into difficult conversations and challenging thinking, biases, and perceptions with our students and colleagues. Sarah’s journals revealed a pattern also evident in the reflections of other group members. In February, she wrote, “I am starting to feel slightly more comfortable initiating conversations about race and the need for equity-centered instruction.” In June, she stated:

> Because of our group, I have a better understanding of my own whiteness, and that being nice is not enough. I think it is easy for many of us to fall in the trap of just being nice. We need to go deeper. We need to have difficult conversations. Maybe we just play nice to avoid uncomfortable conversations.

A combination of factors that contributed to change: building knowledge by reading and discussing shared texts, as well as sharing knowledge through Zoom meetings and in

collaborative journaling; gaining regular (i.e., monthly) opportunities to talk, write, and reflect about systems, structures, and practices that reproduce inequities, as well as ideas and action steps for centering equity in our courses; providing peer feedback related to our (mis)steps through challenging conversations; and nurturing our ongoing mutual commitment and accountability through group and individual goals. As we came to understand how our embodied socialization pushed us to be “silent” and “compliant” and pressured us to “soften language and ideas" or to “not rock the boat,” we began to these recognize and name these behaviors as enactments of niceness and whiteness. The first place we practiced was with each other within the group. The absence of hierarchy and cross institutional membership allowed us to serve as critical friends and practice more critical discourse. Jayne, in particular, helped move the group forward by regularly stating during meetings, “I’m going to push back on that…” and “Another perspective is…” Her ability to push the group provided important perspective sharing and spaces to engage with more depth, directness, and nuance.

There remained tensions related to if, when, how, and why to engage in conversations addressing manifestations of white supremacy (e.g., deficit ideologies, curricular erasure and assimilation) and other emotionally charged topics in our work with students and colleagues. Our fears included negative student evaluations (Weatherston, 2019), students “tuning us out” by enacting their own avoidance moves (Haviland, 2008), saying the wrong thing and making situations worse, and/or being viewed as uncollegial, all with clear impacts for tenure and promotion. Macie discussed the tension she felt while negotiating her understanding of whiteness and her ability to navigate conversations about inequities with students, identifying institutional contexts that could encourage faculty to remain silent:

> Intentions don’t count . . . I am not even sure I am brave enough to push back against ideas in the classroom and that’s one thing I really need to get over. Having just gotten course evaluations back from students, I still feel the sting of some of the comments. I always have to prepare myself to read them. I need to do some work on reframing my perceptions of this feedback because that part (the tenure piece is a different issue) shouldn’t be what stops me from pushing against ideas in the classroom. My comfort is others’ discomfort. (March journal)

In July, Diana wrote about how she started “explicitly using the term white supremacy” when talking about the lack of representation of people with minoritized identities in school reading curricula and classroom books. She elaborated to say that while she had always talked about intersectional representation, she had not previously tied curricular erasure and distortion to white supremacy and, because of our SSCoP, she now had the understanding, support, and accountability to name it as such and not shy away from doing so. Similarly, in her June journal, Suellen described a situation where a white teacher candidate used deficit language about Ugandan people with “scary, rundown homes,” among other stereotypes. Suellen recalled that she:

> Honestly didn’t know what to do and was genuinely very nervous about this conversation. I wonder if in the past I might have glossed this over or let it go. But because of our work, I felt compelled to speak up.

Suellen met with the student individually, explained how the writing perpetuated deficit discourses, recommended additional resources to the student to learn more, and asked the student to revise the work informed by the conversation and resources.

While we collectively entered and navigated difficult conversations—naming, negotiating, and pushing back against inequities—with more frequency, our growth was nonlinear. Diana’s journal named a pattern of “push and retreat,” that we each found ourselves occupying in various situations where we disrupted niceness by raising concerns about policies and practices that perpetuate whiteness and white supremacy (e.g., ACT score requirements, evaluations of dispositions and professionalism, overreliance on CAEP standards and EdTPA rubrics that do not attend sufficiently to equity and justice), but then retreated to silence to maintain our own comfort and avoid conflict (Haviland, 2008). Diana recalled faculty meetings where, “I push my whole department but after every push, I retreat because I don't want to be ‘oh, *that* one’ and have people not listen to me” (February journal).

As we spent months building our knowledge of niceness and whiteness and its impact on our work, we supported and challenged each other to speak out more. We increasingly pushed through our own and others’ discomfort to intentionally navigate difficult conversations, yet our data clearly revealed the way socialized niceness and whiteness contributed to our discomfort in entering difficult conversations or caused us to entirely avoid or retreat from challenging discussions with students and colleagues. We recognized that we frequently did not feel knowledgeable enough, skilled enough, or comfortable in our abilities to actively challenge and disrupt biases and inequities. Yet, as Macie noted, “our comfort is not the point” (July journal).

Rethinking and Renegotiating Roles as Teachers and Teacher Educators

Participating in our SSCoP created sustained opportunities for us to interrogate our preconceptions about teacher educators and to (re)define and (re)negotiate our own expectations for ourselves. As white women in a predominantly white, female profession, having sustained difficult conversations about niceness and whiteness in teaching was important for understanding

the impact of our work in classrooms, but engaging in these conversations also meant bringing our identities into conversation with our role as teacher educators—an act with which we had had only limited experience. These discussions began to reveal the ways in which our whiteness and niceness operated in our work through the socialized ideologies of expertise and expectations of “the nice teacher” (Galman, 2019; Riemer, 2019) that both we and our students possessed. Our ongoing collaboration provided necessary opportunities for us to grapple with tensions around our socialization into teaching vis-a-vis our goals for redefining our roles—and the real challenge of what that renegotiation looked like in practice.

In journal responses and discussions related to how and why we initially became teachers and teacher educators, we each professed our desire to create student-centered classrooms where knowledge construction was a shared endeavor between teacher and students. As literacy teacher educators, specifically, we had the expertise to confidently structure collaborative discussions, help teacher candidates learn about and practice literacy methods, and build knowledge and skills to foster inclusive classroom spaces. Yet, for all of us, our socialization into schools as white women meant that we had few, if any, models for centering equity in practice in classrooms and varying levels of skill for doing so. Confounding, or related to, this phenomenon was our socialization into whiteness, which meant that, for us to feel legitimate in our roles as teachers/teacher educators, we felt that we must be perceived as experts. In our own ways, we each found and expressed discomfort in our lack of expertise and the accompanying discomfort of renegotiating roles in ways that disrupted socialized expectations.

We began to question the pressure we felt to be perceived as experts and to connect our need to retain the sense of authority that we had been previously granted as white teacher educators with terminal degrees to the characteristics of white supremacy culture (Okun, 2021).

Cara captured this tension while reflecting on how engaging with whiteness and niceness had impacted her perception of her role as a teacher educator:

> In the past, I’ve tried to be the expert and wield power so that my students would not see that I was grappling with these issues. I’m ashamed and embarrassed of some of my actions. I think learning more about whiteness and how it operationalizes oppression has helped me understand that I’m on a lifelong journey . . . I need to be open, honest, and humble with my students on Day One. However, I would also make very clear that it is a lifelong journey that I am committed to but by no means an expert or an exemplar. (July journal)

When analyzing data, we saw increased attention to how we named and situated ourselves as learners, positioning equity work as a lifelong journey. We began to identify the need to situate ourselves as learners alongside our students if equity work was to be collectively taken up. Our conversations helped us to see that our students’ socialization into whiteness and niceness (e.g., enacting silence, viewing teaching as apolitical, believing that hard work was all that was needed for “success”) could prevent them from engaging in equity work in ways that promoted real change (Bissonnette, 2016; Galman et al., 2010). We collaboratively grappled with how to (re)negotiate our roles as non-experts within expectations for expertise held by ourselves, students and colleagues, and general academic communities. Our conversations and reflections shifted to ways to disrupt our own and our students’ expectations for expertise and the necessity of showing vulnerability and situating ourselves as co-learners in pursuit of greater knowledge about and ability to work towards equity and justice in teaching. In July, Sarah described aspects of her renegotiation of her role, including the necessity of flattening hierarchies, revealing vulnerabilities, and co-learning:

> I think we need to prioritize learning alongside our students—and this is something we need to make very clear. I am still learning about structural racism and the inequities that are prevalent in our society. I think we need to show that we are learning to be better equipped to deal with this and to fight against racism.

Expertise was not the only preconceived characteristic we and many of our students ascribed to teachers and teacher educators. We also had to grapple with the construct that being a nice teacher means loving all children equally. We named and critically reflected upon our own embodied role perceptions of teachers as saviors or teachers as people with an uncritical love of children who are nice, colorblind, and colormute (Pollock, 2005). Examining why we and our majority white teacher candidates chose to become teachers, how we defined our roles, and interrogating how those expectations were subsequently carried out through the design of curriculum and instruction emphasized the underlying expectations of niceness held for teachers and teacher educators. Speaking to these reflections on the trajectories of white women who become teachers, Sarah shared her thoughts on Galman’s (2019) chapter in *The Price of Nice*:

> But in Chapter 5 they talked about interviewing all these students and why they became teachers and it was constantly because they’re caring, they love animals, they love children. And I was like, well, if that’s where we’re at, of course we’re pushing back on the difficult things [teaching with equity]. It’s so real to me because I could see all my students in it and I kept seeing my own teacher education classes. (May Zoom)

Pressure to be seen as nice and to avoid conflict often led to a softening of our approach or an avoidance of issues of equity in our curriculum and instruction. It also meant struggling with the tension of being perceived as something other than nice—a role we are socialized into and expected to occupy (Castagno, 2014, 2019a; Galman, 2019)—when we did enter into spaces

of conflict. For example, Maryann described her struggle with pushback from her students in her first semester of a new position:

> That first semester I was really struggling and I was talking to a friend of mine, who is a Woman of Color, and she said, “Yeah, you’re disrupting their expectations. They walk into your class and they expect you, as a teacher educator, to be a nice white lady. They don’t expect that you’re going to bring up these things. And you’re disrupting their expectations of what this classroom space is going to be.” That comment has really stuck with me because I think that’s part of the resistance I get because they’re like, “No, you’re supposed to speak my language. You’re supposed to be the nice teacher.” (May Zoom)

Maryann’s reflection highlights the way that the expectations for niceness are entwined with those of whiteness in teacher education, and the disciplining agents such as student resistance we experience when we define our role differently than those expectations (Liera, 2020; Riemer, 2019).

These reflections and discussions were simultaneously occurring while inequity and oppression were highlighted as the nation went into lockdown when the COVID-19 pandemic hit and as Black Lives Matter protests were revived. These events further disrupted our notions of teaching and teacher education as a “nice” profession as conversation focused on the role of schools in creating inequity and harming People of Color. In our June meeting on Zoom, Suellen reflected on an analogy she had seen saying that “teaching is to white women what policing is to white men,” expressing that this analogy was an idea she had to “sit with for a little bit.”

This parallel became the cornerstone for us to rethink why we were teaching, how we discussed the teaching profession with our students, and how we redefined, renegotiated, and

reshaped our roles to build courses in ways that moved beyond just the teaching of content to functioning with an underlying and consistent purpose of advancing equity and social justice. The resultant rethinking and renegotiation of roles gave greater coherence and clarity for how we worked to more deliberately center equity, as well as our moment-to-moment decisions during instruction and interactions.

Reimagining and Redefining Literacy Curriculum

A rethinking and renegotiation of our roles in ways that accounted for our identities and positionalities while teaching in equity-centered ways necessitated a reimagining of our literacy curriculum and day-to-day classroom practices. Our explorations of niceness and whiteness led us to examine our practices, our curriculum, and the teacher education programs in which we functioned. This led us to identify individual, institutional, and societal barriers to centering equity while simultaneously reading, discussing, sharing resources, and implementing/analyzing common assignments to collectively work towards dismantling some of those barriers in our day-to-day work. This reimagining and redefining of our curriculum looked different for each member, dependent on our context, teaching load, and experience with equity work, and often looked different across time for individual members. Despite these individual differences, data indicated several patterns in rising tensions focused on niceness that we collectively felt and confronted in our SSCoP.

As we began rethinking curriculum, tension emerged between our vision of equity-centered teaching and the pressures we felt to be compliant. Education’s audit culture (Taubman, 2009), articulated in documents like the Common Core State Standards, CAEP, program curricular maps, and licensure requirements, determines much of what can be taught, both in K-12 and teacher education. Literacy, particularly, is “susceptible to being parsed into discrete

parts,” yet is always shaped by social, cultural, and contextual factors (Hallman et al., 2022, p. 127). Zoom transcripts and journals indicated that we felt the pressure to comply with authoritative standards and expectations even when they were not consistent with our own expectations for teaching in equity-centered ways. Cara expressed that she often felt conflicted about what and how to center content in her courses even though “this [equity] work matters and I’m convinced that it’s more significant than the ‘skills’ and ‘strategies’ or content knowledge that is traditionally associated with literacy courses in teacher preparation programs” (February journal). This tension emerged in debates among our SSCoP members about how to center equity without eliminating content considered necessary for teachers to work in K-12 classrooms (e.g., teaching phonics and comprehension skills/strategies). Individuals, identifying as rule-followers and people pleasers, discussed feeling the pressure to comply. Group members also felt that meeting standards and expectations would position us as “good” teachers who would be lauded by students, administrators/supervisors, and colleagues. Challenging standards and expectations or de-centering them to forefront equity, on the other hand, meant *not* being nice and potentially positioned us as being inadequate in providing teachers with the necessary content knowledge to do the jobs expected of them in schools.

However, these considerations served as productive tensions, helping us reimagine what literacy curricula could be, learning and unlearning about literacy and power, while we simultaneously worked together to figure out how to push back against the niceness that invokes compliance to authorities (e.g., standards, administration). We discussed how we could center equity and help teacher candidates develop critical lenses for interrogating standards, assessments, and instructional programs/strategies, giving them the content knowledge *and* the

criticality for using the tools in ways that empower all learners. Cara, who had expressed concern about how to center equity in February circled back to the same issue in her July journal, writing:

> I do not begin planning with the state’s professional teaching standards and work backwards. Instead, I begin with the standards, which take a skills and strategies approach to literacy, and [I] ask myself how the standards are equity centered. They’re not. So, this semester I’ve taken those standards and tried to parallel them with teaching for equity.

Cara’s journal entries demonstrate how our consistent work together supported our individual reimagining of our own courses and our collective push back against niceness in our teaching practices.

We also had to rethink how to be more intentional in designing pieces of, or entire courses, to move beyond addressing issues like inequity ad hoc during course discussions to deliberately weaving in and pushing back against ideologies stemming from white supremacy, including deficit language and colorblindness. Some of the changes we discussed were to adjust instruction and curriculum, which included diversifying texts to represent Scholars of Color, adding or revising guiding questions for courses, and rethinking assignments. Despite the changes we made as individuals, rethinking our curriculum surfaced tensions around challenging the positioning of teaching and learning as a neutral endeavor. These kinds of changes meant not only centering equity but also “provid[ing] space to really look structurally and to get our students away from just thinking about this as a methods class [that is about] learning how to do x and y [because] it’s so much more” (Diana, June Zoom). Instead, we worked together to find coherent ways to model the centering of equity in ways that increased their awareness of what was being taught, how it was being taught, and why.

Challenging the neutrality of teaching and learning, however, refocused our conversations on niceness. In reading *The Price of Nice*, Maryann saw her own “ongoing learning [about how to disrupt niceness and whiteness] reflected . . . [in the teaching] of systemic oppression…in a ‘nice’ way—impersonal and distant, rather than personal and relevant, [as] impacting all of us right now” (May journal). This experience resonated with many SSCoP members, who shared examples of ways in which they had attempted to teach in equity-centered ways but found themselves doing so in nice ways to essentially remain compliant rule-followers who only mask as allies to People of Color and other minoritized groups. We wrestled with the harm these actions had caused and how we might move forward by confronting these moments in our teaching to remain more aware of and responsive to the ways in which systemic inequities impact students and how our choices in curricula and practices can perpetuate or disrupt those systems.

Considering that most of us had had few, if any, models for what equity-centered teaching could look like, confronting our niceness (and whiteness) to address the tensions we experienced while rethinking our curriculum demanded space for co-thinking and co-creating. Love (2019) compares teaching for justice to science fiction because both are works requiring knowledge of how things are in the world and imagining how things might be. This world-building approach is how we thought about our SSCoP work, particularly because, in addition to having few models, curricular whiteness meant that we had large knowledge gaps we needed to fill. In May, Macie recorded in her journal:

> I think one of the greatest revelations I’ve made in reading this book, in conjunction with other readings, is that I actually don’t have the knowledge about America’s race history to teach a truly social justice-oriented lesson that speaks to and with Students of Color in

my classrooms. My first reaction was to blame it on my privilege. But, my privilege is in being able to blame it on my privilege.

Addressing the dearth in models and the impact of curricular whiteness on our knowledge, we found co-thinking and co-creating essential for imagining new possibilities and for making curricular changes, including seeking out Scholars of Color and historical and contemporary literacy perspectives that have been erased or relegated to the margins. For example, Suellen, Macie, and Diana began to start their courses with an emphasis on literacy, power, assimilation, and erasure, providing an historical perspective on literacy to debunk ideologies of neutrality. Regular time and space for collective thinking provided opportunities for us to define clear equity goals and to interrogate, identify, and (re)design tools for working towards that goal, including developing assignments, adding new readings and media, critically evaluating syllabi language, reframing approaches to assessments and curricular tools, and reorienting our stated course goals.

Discussion

There is a moral imperative to disrupt structural inequities and teach for justice and equity (Love, 2019; Mentor & Sealey-Ruiz, 2021; Picower, 2021; Souto-Manning, 2020). Disrupting niceness, which is connected to whiteness and works to uphold white supremacy, is one critical step. Our SSCoP opened a collaborative community space for group members where discomfort was encouraged and where doing justice and equity work in education was considered an ethical and moral obligation, enabling us to more intentionally take action to disrupt niceness and whiteness. In collectively learning about and making sense of the ways our niceness and whiteness operated to uphold the status quo, our data revealed common patterns related to engagement in difficult conversations, renegotiating our roles, and reimagining literacy

curriculum. In each of these areas, changes were made while we faced (and continue to face) challenges, reinforcing the fact that working towards equity and justice is lifelong (un)learning and that complex work, particularly work that seeks to disrupt the status quo, is facilitated and sustained by a community of critical friends.

Niceness and Whiteness Centered in Teacher Education

Reimagining teacher education away from ideologies of neutrality, meritocracy, color-blindness, ableism, heteronormativity and other vestiges of white supremacy requires time, intentionality, knowledge, resources, and a balance of support and challenge. As teacher educators, we need to learn about whiteness/niceness, engage in conversations that cause discomfort, unlearn ideologies and learn about literacy/power, and change both our curriculum and our enacted roles. Souto-Manning (2021) offers us this invitation: “How can we interrupt the trauma and harm inflicted in and by literacy education, paying the literacy teacher education debt?” (p. 597).

Souto-Manning (2021) argues that:

> Our obligation as literacy teacher educators committed to justice is to upend literacy teacher education’s demographic and curricular allegiance to whiteness. Instead, literacy teacher education must learn from the rich literacies and languaging of Black and other children, youth, and communities of Color. (p. 596)

We recognize that we are eight white teacher educators seeking to do equity work. We seek to disrupt whiteness and niceness, but recognize we are each socialized to uphold both. Yet, this is our work to do or, as Souto-Manning (2021) names it, our literacy teacher education debt to pay. It is important for us to do the work of addressing whiteness (and niceness) while not recentering whiteness in doing so (Picower, 2021; Matias, 2022). Picower (2021) and Love (2019) implore

white teachers to call your people in. This is what we are doing together and what we believe the field must do. We also heed the warning that it is enacted white privilege and an act of violence to ask people from marginalized communities to bear emotional labor for our growth (Delgado-Harris, 2020; Love, 2020; Roberts, 2020).

Although our findings indicated that we renegotiated our positionalities and roles while engaging in equity work, we still fought against our own socialization into being the nice teacher and meeting our teacher candidates’ expectations for our roles. We cannot center equity if we do not critically examine our own socialization, both as white women and as teachers. We need to interrogate our own early teacher identities and our teacher educator identities much in the way Mentor and Sealey Ruiz (2021) call upon teachers to do an Archeology of Self. In essence, any work towards equity must include understanding and reckoning with the socialization forces of niceness and whiteness, and how they serve as interconnected and invisible barriers playing out at individual, institutional, and societal levels.

While institutional structures like course evaluations can be opportunities to learn and grow from practice, they can also be silencing mechanisms when niceness and whiteness are weaponized to refrain from raising topics and assigning content that cause students or colleagues discomfort. Teaching standards and licensing exams are intended to organize teaching and learning for equity. Yet they are also rooted in whiteness and can be constraining, and our socialized niceness can lead us to be rule following and compliant, reproducing teachers who perpetuate niceness and whiteness, thereby sustaining inequities.

Moving forward, we must more comprehensively interrogate when, why, and how the difficult conversations *beyond* the group are engaged or avoided, and build our skill and stamina for both calling out and calling in. We must recognize the inherent privilege of even labeling

conversations related to race and structural racism, heteronormativity, ableism, whiteness and white supremacy, and deficit ideologies as “hard.” Doing so recenters whiteness. We, as white female teacher educators, need to name the fact that engaging in conversations about race, equity, and disrupting invisible power structures is not something that we have been socialized to do; we lack knowledge, words, and skills. If we do not acknowledge that these conversations are difficult and that we require (un)learning and practice, we may not create the space and hold each other accountable for upholding niceness by maintaining silence, changing topics, or other avoidance moves.

Recommendations for SSCoP

Our SSCoP provided a space to engage in naming, critically analyzing, negotiating, and pushing back against niceness and whiteness as we worked to center equity in our work. While we each navigate equity work with our own set of prior experiences, data showed that we each made and are still making advances in more sustained, in-depth, and accelerated ways that we credit to the ongoing collaboration, commitment, and structure of the group. While we made strides to center equity, niceness and whiteness remain barriers to confronting, imagining, or enacting alternative possibilities that lead towards educational justice (Matias et al., 2014).

Throughout this period of time, data showed we also wrestled with holding onto false notions of “the expert,” a default position many of us entered into when we were uncomfortable. Our data analysis revealed how our socialization internalized vertical expertise and authority in ways that we did not fully recognize until we co-analyzed and shared our data; viewing this emphasis on hierarchy within the flattened hierarchy of our SSCoP was particularly stark. We must continue our collective work in confronting these forces in deliberate and deeper ways.

We believe that doing equity work requires structures and processes like what an SSCoP can offer. Even though we are each in institutions/departments with stated equity aims, we find opportunities to truly grow are insufficient. While we would have worked individually to center equity in our teaching in more deliberate and effective ways, we accomplish more as an SSCoP than we would have as individuals. Our collective growth was a result of our SSCoP, a community that provided the space, time, mutual commitment, balance of support and challenge, and distribution of our intellectual and emotional resources (John-Steiner, 2000; Wenger, 1998).

We heed Kitchen’s (2020) admonition that self-study must move beyond the individual (or even the group) to engage the broader field, imagine new possibilities, and create change. One of the most important aspects of an SSCoP is an orientation toward action—that the work of the group does not only serve the group but works to advance the goals of equity and justice in the field more broadly (Kitchen, 2009, 2022). In the interest of supporting others in forming their own SSCoPs and amplifying the impact of this structure on teacher education, we offer the following considerations:

- *Seek cross-institutional colleagues at various stages in their careers, while ensuring each member stands on equal footing*. This allows for the open sharing of divergent perspectives and experiences and intentionally disrupts the structures of a vertical hierarchy. When collaborating across institutions, it can be easier to be vulnerable and take risks. There are opportunities to first work through challenges before taking the work back to one’s institution. We recommend looking for potential collaborators in affinity groups in spaces such as conferences, special interest groups, and snowball sampling across colleagues.

- *Create structures and norms to support collaboration in a variety of inclusive ways*. Zoom, Dropbox, Google Drive, and other platforms make it possible to meet and collaboratively build and share resources and knowledge. Membership should be large enough to support divergent perspectives and the ebb and flow of participation (i.e., when invariably members need to miss a meeting, there are enough members for generative participation). We found monthly collaborative journaling and responding to each other’s ideas increased continuity, provided a format for quieter members or members who needed more time to reflect and synthesize ideas. Using the comments feature to respond to peers’ writing led to greater idea and resource sharing.
- *Relationships matter.* The work deepens as relationships deepen (John-Steiner, 2000). Build in time to connect as people before moving on to agenda items.
- *Identify a goal that each member is committed to working towards that is complex enough to require collaboration*. Learn from each other and also include readings and viewings by people whose perspectives and identities have been historically minoritized. We must do the work to (un)learn, while recognizing that our knowledge will always be incomplete. For example, we have since gone on to collectively read and learn from Scholars of Color including Kinloch and colleagues (2019), Baker Bell (2020), and will next turn to Parker’s (2022) new book.
- *Take action based on group collaboration.* While reading/viewing to learn is important, it is insufficient. Action steps must be taken, and the group needs to build in structures of support and accountability (e.g., deadlines, bringing work samples, such as revised assignments or syllabi).

- *Ensure there is a balance of support and challenge where discomfort is not avoided*. It can be easy, especially with niceness as a socializing force, to be supportive without challenging each other. Allot time specifically for critical feedback. We cannot fully enact more equitable instruction if we do not look at ourselves, our profession, and our institutions.
- *Disseminate the work to expand the impact beyond the group to become a resource for increasing equity in teaching and teacher education*. Ultimately, this work is not about us as individuals or collaborators, this work is about disrupting the entrenched inequities that dehumanize and push students out of school, and therefore working towards a more just, equitable, and inclusive society.

This process has been meaningful and generative for all of us. We believe doing this work is complex and vital and is best accomplished in community. We hope our examples and illustrations furthers the field's understanding of what niceness and whiteness look like in teacher education, the urgency of developing critical consciousness around these constructs, and the value of working with others to set goals and take action. This is the work of white teacher educators to do, and the time to begin interrogating your practice is now.

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Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Experience	Rank	Region	University type
Maryann	3	Assistant professor	Tennessee	Mid-size, public
Phoebe	9	Associate professor	New York	Small, private, liberal arts
Cara	5	Assistant professor	Michigan	Mid-size, public
Jayne	19	Professor	New York	Mid-size, public
Suellen	15	Associate professor	Illinois	Mid-size, private
Sarah	7	Assistant professor	New York	Mid-size, private
Macie	1	Assistant professor	Alabama	Large, public
Diana	14	Associate professor	Washington	Small, private, liberal arts

Table 2

Code Descriptions

Code	Definition
Naming	Identifying when niceness was enacted with students or colleagues (i.e., avoiding conflict, maintaining silence, compliance/obedience, maintaining femininity, deficit thinking).
Critically reflecting	Moving beyond naming to critically reflecting upon when, where, and how niceness was upheld in our work. This includes linking how embodied niceness maintained the status quo (i.e., connecting to larger structures of inequities).
Negotiating	Moment-to-moment decisions for when/when not, how, why/why not and with whom we did/did not disrupt niceness (i.e., prioritization and tradeoffs). These are the tentative, incremental steps towards equity and justice (e.g., making equity/justice palatable to uphold images of the feminine “nice teacher;” hedging our language or actions because of fears related to course evaluation, tenure and promotion, or other constraints).
Pushing back	The steps taken to actively disrupt niceness to center equity and justice (including missteps). We decided that the moral and ethical imperative to do the work superseded our socialized niceness (e.g., changing assignments, syllabi language, emails and dialogue with students and colleagues).