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### Permalink

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### Journal

Berkeley Review of Education, 12(1)

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### Publication Date

2022

### DOI

10.5070/B812153038

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# Nice to Whom? How Midwestern Niceness Undermines Educational Equity<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*Although U.S. schools grapple with persistent racial inequities, niceness, a socioemotional way of being that privileges whiteness, regularly impedes equity efforts in K-12 and teacher education settings. In the Midwest, niceness is uniquely rooted in a historical “obsession with public civility” (Cayton & Gray, 2002, p. 159) that advances whiteness through a “demure white supremacy” (Cleveland, 2021, para. 6), particularly in education. Here, the authors theorize Midwestern educational niceness, a regionally produced and enacted phenomenon “nicely” instantiated by the overwhelmingly white, Midwestern teacher workforce that stymies equity efforts. The authors conceptualize the ways whiteness, through niceness, works through other phenomena including color-evasiveness (Annamma et al., 2017; Bonilla-Silva, 2006), white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018), and emotionalities of whiteness (Matias, 2016). Countering the insidiousness of Midwestern educational niceness will require a recognition that this regional form of niceness and equity are incommensurate.*

*Keywords:* equity, K-12 education, niceness, whiteness

Despite the rapid demographic changes occurring in public schools across the United States, the educator workforce remains woefully racially homogenous. This workforce, of which 79% were white<sup>2</sup> and 76% were female during the 2017–2018 academic year (Spiegelman, 2020), operates within an educational system plagued by its continued investments in “whitestream” schools (Urrieta, 2010). Teachers tend to operate within a structure that perpetuates white, Eurocentric, middle-class ways of life (e.g., minimizing the experiences of racially minoritized populations, glossing over acts of racist violence; Urrieta). The focus on whiteness and white supremacy in K-12 schools is not new and continues to garner more nuanced attention (Castagno, 2014, 2019; Hagerman, 2018).

Some scholars examining whiteness recognize a phenomenon called niceness (Bissonnette, 2016; Castagno, 2014, 2019), conceptualized as a dominant cultural

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<sup>2</sup> We borrow from Dumas (2016) and lowercase white, because “it is nothing but a social construct, and does not describe a group with a sense of common experiences or kinship outside of acts of colonization and terror” (p. 13).

construct of American identity (Bramen, 2017). Our experiences as a white, European American woman (Riley Drake, assistant professor) and a Mexican American man (Gabriel Rodriguez, assistant professor) shape our vantage of how we then conceptualize niceness. In this paper, we conceptualize niceness and its relationship to education as a “shared socioemotional disposition or way of being” (Castagno, 2019, p. xiv) that functions to maintain whiteness by prioritizing the comfort of individuals with dominant identities, particularly white people. Whiteness functions through nice people (Castagno, 2014), who tend to privilege comfortable, “pleasing” (Bramen, 2017) acts or discourse in ways that douse topics that may be uncomfortable or challenging for many white people to discuss. Although people of color can perpetuate niceness, it is most frequently maintained by white people, who stand to benefit from whiteness (Picower, 2021). Individually, nice people eschew uncomfortable experiences and resist acknowledging negative attributes in or actions of others in favor of what they deem to be positive demeanors, which requires that nice people reframe experiences or topics that may bring about discomfort to make them palatable (Castagno, 2019).

Niceness operates in particular ways in particular contexts. In the Midwest,<sup>3</sup> niceness takes on a unique, regional identity; it is common in everyday dialogue but is largely evasive from recognition due in large part to the region’s preoccupation with an “obsession with public civility” (Cayton & Gray, 2002, p. 159). In schools, scholars theorize niceness as educational niceness, defined as “a dominant cultural norm that polices discourse, relationships, policies, and practices in ways that reinforce educational inequity” (Castagno, 2019, p. xx). This paper aims to conceptualize educational niceness in the context of the Midwest as a hybridized form of niceness termed “Midwestern educational niceness.” This term describes and analyzes the ways in which niceness operates ubiquitously in the Midwest through phenomena that obstruct equity efforts in K-12 schools and teacher education. By derailing equity, we ask: Nice to whom? In other words, to whom is Midwestern niceness in schooling actually nice?

We suggest that white teachers and administrators regularly derail equity initiatives in schools using the cooling effect (Grim et al., 2019) of Midwestern educational niceness that operates to chill hotly contested issues (e.g., race, racism, white supremacy) through these phenomena. In what follows, we situate ourselves in this discourse as two differently positioned people with lived experiences that inform our understanding of niceness. We then aim to describe how whiteness acts as the orientation through which niceness flows, functioning as a principal lever in a system designed to uphold white dominance. Next, we interrogate Midwestern niceness as a unique, regional disposition and examine Midwestern educational niceness as enactments of whiteness, particularly operating through color-evasiveness, white fragility, and emotionalities of whiteness. We conclude with recommendations for educators to consider in order to move beyond niceness in education as a means to advance racial equity.

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<sup>3</sup> We borrow from the U.S. Census to define the Midwest as consisting of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wisconsin (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

### Positionality

We situate ourselves in this discourse as authors both born and raised in Midwestern states but with different racialized and gendered identities. Our collective identities and experiences offer us insight into how to engage in these issues that speak to our insider vs. outsider status. Below, we explore our identities and experiences in relation to niceness in a Midwestern context.

Riley (Author One) identifies as white and, as such, niceness has largely privileged her comfort in Midwestern schooling spaces. Growing up as a white woman in predominantly white, rural Iowa meant she was saturated in a “culture of niceness” (McIntyre, 1997). Her experiences as a K-12 student, school counselor, and now assistant professor largely align with the socioemotional ways of being most familiar to her and shield her from having to recognize the toxicity of niceness as whiteness.

Riley, however, recognized niceness when, as a school counselor in a public school, she invited elementary students to learn about oppression, community resistance, and ongoing movement organizing for racial and social justice in classroom counseling lessons. Students of color, who had long resisted the various forces of racism and white supremacy against them in the school, began to articulate their experiences with oppression in new ways. They described how the actions of particular teachers were racist, which were met with anxious, tight smiles from several white women educators in the building when students voiced their experiences openly. This niceness, manifesting as silence, did not deter students from continuing to share their experiences, but Riley received the indirect message that the students’ assertions made the educators uncomfortable, and they were quick to reroute discussions and move on to other topics of conversation. Later, when community backlash from white parents forced Riley to “stop the social justice teaching,” she was told that the community “just wasn’t ready yet.” She recalled the early warning signs manifesting in white teachers’ attempts to nicely evade students’ resistance, and questioned: *Who* was not ready?

Gabriel (Author Two) comes to this project as an assistant professor whose research and teaching is guided by his Mexican American identity and upbringing in suburban Chicago. His experiences growing up in a lower-middle class household with immigrant parents bring a different vantage point to this project. Growing up in a predominantly white community was a difficult context to navigate, as the community Gabriel grew up in had yet to experience major demographic shifts. Attending schools with a small number of peers of color was instructive in how he navigated schooling and made sense of whiteness in consciousness and subconsciousness. Gabriel’s marginalizing experiences in suburban K-12 schools provide him with first-hand insight to the importance of creating opportunities for his mainly white undergraduate students to reflect upon their identities as they prepare to enter a profession where they enter schools experiencing demographic change.

Gabriel’s experiences, coupled with his youth-centered research, is used to engage preservice educators. Gabriel talks about his schooling experiences to help students understand course content to then understand the importance of storytelling. Students hear first-hand accounts from Gabriel and guests, as well as course content, to learn about academic and social difficulties students like Gabriel endured (e.g., microaggressions,

silencing oneself). In sum, he does so to create entry points for students to understand and learn from marginalized perspectives.

Riley and Gabriel's experiences position them from particular vantage points to explore Midwestern niceness as it functions in educational contexts. In what follows, we explore the ways that whiteness works through niceness.

### **Whiteness Through Niceness**

Conceptualizing whiteness through niceness with attention to particular Midwestern dispositions complexifies the often-narrow explanations of the ways whiteness works and situates this conceptualization within second wave critical white studies (Jupp et al., 2016; Lensmire, 2017; Tanner & McCloskey, 2022). Studies of whiteness within the second wave attempt to explicate complexity and resist monolithic and overly simplified descriptions of whiteness, such as white privilege (McIntosh, 1988). Whiteness is “non-static” and has the “virtual capacity... to undo, creatively morph and adapt, reinvent and reconstitute, and disseminate itself according to material place” (Jupp & Badenhorst, 2021, p. 602). Thus, regional contexts influence the ways whiteness functions.

Whiteness works all around us, acting as a veneer that masks the world disparately for differently racialized people. It is important to differentiate whiteness, which acts as “a system of beliefs, practices, and assumptions that constantly centre the interests of White people” (Gillborn, 2019, p. 113), from white people, who make up a socially constructed identity—historically situated as the “archetype of racial domination in the United States” (Omi & Winant, 2014, p. 131). Distinguishing between whiteness as a system and white people as individuals is important to move beyond the “essentialization of complex identities” (Jupp & Badenhorst, 2021, p. 599).

The system of whiteness is ubiquitous, the specificities of which shapeshift and are difficult to detect. Leonardo (2016) has described whiteness as the white hole that “projects ideological chimeras that hide its own physics” (p. 7). Due to its frequently hidden or invisible nature (Leonardo, 2009), often mostly to white people (Ahmed, 2007), like black holes, whiteness is unobservable, and its presence is often only determined by its impact on surrounding bodies and structures. Thus, whiteness can often most easily be seen as it intrudes on the lives of and impacts people of color (Leonardo, 2016). To white people who work to maintain it, however, the power and manifestations of whiteness often remain invisible.

White people tend to seek to maintain whiteness primarily to sustain benefits they accrue (Gillborn, 2006; Harris, 1993; Lipsitz, 2006) and preserve white racial comfort (DiAngelo, 2018; Macedo & Bartolomé, 1999; Sleeter, 1993). White people, who are frequently socialized to believe that racism is a construct of the past, are regularly socialized in an insulated world that often protects them from seeing the realities of racial stress experienced by people of color (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). The hidden nature of this insulation (Leonardo, 2016) leads many white people to feel entitled to the protections and immunities (Cabrera, 2017) that whiteness affords them. When a white racial worldview is challenged, many white people perceive the challenge as a threat to their own self-constructed identities of being “good” (Applebaum, 2010) and “nice” people. Niceness is strategically constitutive of whiteness (Castagno, 2014, 2019).

In efforts to overthrow threats to their own white identities and preserve their comfort, thus maintaining and reinforcing whiteness, many white people tend to respond in ways, such as through niceness, that seek to restore white racial equilibrium (DiAngelo, 2018), or congruence with who they believe they are and their post-racial understandings of the world. In what follows, we explore the use of Midwestern niceness as a tool used by many white Midwesterners to cool off the heat of racial stress and reinstate a positive sense of racial identity. In particular, we scrutinize how whiteness is performed by white Midwesterners to preserve white comfort (DiAngelo, 2018; Jupp & Badenhorst, 2021; Matias, 2016).

### **Midwestern Niceness: A Regional Phenomenon**

Kix (2015) described Midwestern niceness as what it is not: It is not the false kindness people associate with the South, nor is it the direct harshness people think of the Northeast. Many white Southerners lean toward thickly sugar-coated interactions with obviously racist undertones. Many white Northeasterners, conversely, often speak with an air of authority and remove question or suspicion of intent, which manifest in unique place-based ways to uphold whiteness. Midwestern niceness, however, as a disposition, is humble, cheerful, and restrained. In fact, the most noteworthy aspect of Midwestern niceness is, “the restraint from speaking ill of others, even if others should probably be ill-spoken of” (Kix, para. 7). This restraint often becomes passive aggression, as Midwesterners go to great lengths to talk around uncomfortable topics rather than directly discuss them. Kix suggested that Midwesterners’ stifled talk resulted in repression: “Of course, the duty to be nice and consider the feelings of others has a downside: the whole universe of things we have to repress” (para. 10).

Repression is a hallmark of whiteness (Tanner & McCloskey, 2022). This repression results from the rigidity and policing of boundaries, leaving white people with a near inability to be fully open (Tanner & McCloskey, 2022) due to a constant surveillance of what is or is not “appropriate” to think, feel, or be (Morrison, 1992). Through niceness, repression acts to stifle and contort dialogue and action related to what may be perceived as unpleasant or uncomfortable, and in doing so, stunts progress toward equity. Specifically, repression acts to “perpetuate racialized inequalities and injustices” (Jupp et al., 2016, p. 1154).

This way of being, a combination of humility, cheerfulness, and restraint rooted in repression, was operationalized by psychologist, Jason Rentfrow described a uniquely Midwestern psychological profile marked by, “high levels of extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and low levels of neuroticism and very low levels of openness” (Meriwether, 2020). Thus, to maintain an environment that is agreeable to white Midwesterners, what is disagreeable must be repressed. Rentfrow described the typical Midwesterner: a person who tends to be agreeable and friendly but would prefer to spend time with people who share the same values (Meriwether, 2020).

These tendencies to be agreeable and to get along with one another have been traced back to the late 1800s. White settlers who were pushed out of the Northeast during the Industrial Revolution, colonized the land that is now known as the Midwest (Kix, 2015; Smolarek & Negrette, 2019) and sought to follow the Golden Rule amongst themselves: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you (Gewirth, 1978). Midwest historian,

Jon Lauck, suggested that settlers exhibited a high level of mutuality (Meriwether, 2020), wherein they came together to support one another's livelihoods through the construction of barns and other agricultural architecture. Settlers from what are now the southern and northeastern U.S. regions, as well as Ireland, Germany, and Scandinavia, came together to forge relationships in order to thrive on the settled land. Although they were largely white, they had diverse languages, practices, and ways of living. Mutuality meant that they often looked past perceived differences to promote a "barn raising culture" (Meriwether, 2020), as their livelihoods depended upon the support they had from one another. This same sense of mutual obligation did not extend to those indigenous to the land, Native Americans, who were forced from their lands by the white Europeans.

Contemporarily, this unique disposition can result in difficulty integrating and developing authentic relationships for those new to the idiosyncrasies of Midwestern niceness, particularly when newcomers are people of color (Mendoza, 2017; Vega, 2015). Ironically, descendants of the white ethnic groups who originally colonized Midwestern lands, and were once newcomers themselves, seem to struggle to build connections with newcomers of color. In fact, beneath the facade of civility, the Midwest can often be a place where people of color experience a kind of "nicely" veiled racism (Cleveland, 2021; Gustavo, 2018; Vega, 2015). Dr. Sujey Vega recounted the experiences of Latinx immigrants in Indiana in her book *Latino Heartland* (2015). The white, Midwestern families in the neighborhoods where the Latinx immigrants lived would smile and say hello to Latinx immigrants, but there was a superficiality within these greetings (Vega). Individuals of color who moved to the Midwest from other U.S. regions similarly described the distinct, yet evasive, form of niceness that is uniquely Midwestern:

Despite a deep history of racism, when a Latino in Texas experiences southern hospitality, the "kindness" exhibited is transparent and one can usually discern whether or not it is sincere or just a veneer of good manners thinly masking racial animus. There are many cues that enable one to know how they are perceived because southern hospitality and overt racism are not mutually exclusive. In contrast, Minnesota Nice—and its corollaries in Iowa, Nebraska, Ohio, and Wisconsin—is much more difficult to discern, which makes connecting and integrating into local culture difficult for outsiders. (Mendoza, 2017, p. 28–29).

People of color, who testify that racism runs deeply throughout the Midwest and aims to be concealed by a layer of niceness (Cleveland, 2021; Gustavo, 2018; Plaid, 2015), have widely documented the elusiveness of Midwestern racism.

### **Midwestern Educational Niceness**

As the Midwest becomes increasingly populated with youth of color (McPhillips, 2020), educators continue to be overwhelmingly white. In fact, while 79% of educators nationwide identified as white (Spiegelman, 2020), in every Midwestern state except for Illinois, at least 92% of educators identified as white (Holzwardt et al., 2016). In Iowa, 99% of teachers were white in 2016 (Holzwardt et al., 2016).

Due to an increasingly racially diverse student population, a growing number of Midwestern school districts have noted a need to become more aware of issues of

diversity and equity (Breese, 2020; Shillcock, 2021), particularly as they relate to race and racism (Turner, 2020). In metropolitan areas with historically large concentrations of Black<sup>4</sup> and Latinx communities, as well as in smaller cities with increasing populations of communities of color, these efforts are primarily aimed at closing opportunity gaps (Carter & Welner, 2013). Indeed, across the United States, students of color experience racism in schools that contributes to the education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) and impedes access to equitable educational opportunities (Gorski, 2017; Kohli et al., 2017). In the Midwest, the region's "demure white supremacy" (Cage Conley, as cited in Cleveland, 2021, para. 6) exacerbates these inequities.

The demure nature of whiteness through niceness in the Midwest contributes to primarily ineffective initiatives that may seek to challenge racial inequities in Midwestern school districts yet continue to fall short of their espoused commitments. Even when educators are ostensibly operating to disrupt inequities, the power of niceness to shape how those disruptions are enacted is far-reaching. As Castagno (2014) remarked, "diversity and niceness are so intertwined that any engagement with diversity is necessarily, almost by definition, nice" (p. 4). Ineffective equity and diversity initiatives may be the result of Midwestern educational niceness, which we conceptualize as the privileging of whiteness in educational settings through "polite" discourse and actions that aim to comfort, rather than unsettle, the status quo. Although people of color can enact niceness, the predominantly white teachers and leaders who comprise the majority of the Midwest educational workforce and who stand to benefit from this phenomenon, frequently use Midwestern educational niceness to extinguish inflammatory conversation, such as dialogue about racial inequities, to maintain a facade of decorum and civility. Niceness then frequently results in a "cooling effect" (Grim et al., 2019) that serves to minimize, or avoid altogether, direct confrontations with what are often hot topics for many white people, such as white teachers' avoidance of students' voiced resistance to the racism noted above.

The ineffectiveness of racial equity initiatives is visible across schooling settings. For example, de la Luz Montes (2017) described her experiences in higher education moving from Los Angeles to the Midwest, where "the commitment to politeness and protocol inhibits transparency because transparency necessitates debate, faculty thoughts, and opinions, which may lead to uncomfortable conversations" (p. 161). This commitment to politeness and protocol is also identifiable in K-12 schools and teacher education where, like their historical antecedents, many white Midwestern educators seem averse to confrontation that would destabilize a culture of civility and decorum (Castagno, 2014). In teacher education, Midwestern niceness often works to stunt or halt white preservice teachers' (Bissonnette, 2016; Meadows & Lee, 2002) and leaders' (Marshall & Theoharis, 2007) learning about equity or social justice matters, particularly when related to race. Meadows and Lee (2002) outlined the difficulties they experienced with primarily white educators who struggled to discuss the topic of white privilege. Their white students' Midwestern-influenced conceptualization of themselves as "nice, fair, and polite" (p. 111) regularly subverted their potential for understanding white privilege.

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<sup>4</sup> We capitalize Black when referencing Black people or communities, because Black is a "self-determined name of a racialized social group with a specific set of histories, cultural processes, and imagined and performed kinships" (Dumas, 2016, p. 12–13).



Likewise, Marshall and Theoharis (2007) described the infiltration of niceness into predominantly white educational leadership preparation programs in the Midwest. They detailed the challenges of moving educational leaders “beyond nice” and toward criticality as leaders for social justice in education. In K-12 professional development, Smolarek and Negrette (2019) found that white Midwestern educators tended to avoid the topic of race. When confronted by examples of racism in the United States, the educators used optimistic, defensive moves that reframed reality as, “it’s better now” (p. 219). These efforts to cool off what are perceived as hot topics by predominantly white teachers and leaders stymie the discourse needed to advance equity.

Scholars have identified phenomena that aim to subvert direct attention to racial discourse and, thus, racial inequities in education through colorblind or color-evasive discourse (Annamma et al., 2017; Bonilla-Silva, 2006), white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011, 2018), and emotionalities of whiteness (Matias, 2016). They have described these phenomena as the strategies white people use to avoid substantive discourse or acknowledgement of race. In a Midwestern context, educational niceness frequently functions through these phenomena to maintain whiteness. Even in increasingly racially diverse schools, these phenomena are employed with rigidity to uphold, “the construction of a public culture designed to allow people to talk and participate in ways that suppress differences behind facades of civility and the common good” (Sisson et al., 2006, para. 30). In what follows, we describe these phenomena and how they manifest in Midwestern educational settings through niceness.

### **Midwestern Educational Niceness Through Color-Evasiveness**

A central facet of Midwestern niceness is a desire for pleasantness and passivity (Kix, 2015). In schools that are seeking to advance equity and thus inviting educators to consider race and racism, educators frequently aim to preserve pleasant conversation and repress (Tanner & McCloskey, 2022) potentially revealing or disruptive discourse. This specific phenomenon is an example of color-evasiveness (Annamma et al., 2017). Earlier conceptualizations of this phenomenon were color-blindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2006) and color-muteness (Pollock, 2004). Both terms describe the degree to which people avoid race, especially in dialogue. More recently, Annamma et al. (2017) introduced color-evasiveness to more explicitly identify the strategy behind color-blindness, as well as circumvent the deficit-oriented assumptions often made about people with dis/abilities:

Color-evasiveness as an expanded racial ideology acknowledges that to avoid talking about race is a way to willfully ignore the experiences of people of color, and makes the goal of erasure more fully discernible. In other words, to use the term “evade” highlights an attempt to obliterate. (p. 156)

Color-evasiveness, then, as a term and practice, describes efforts to remain race-neutral, often having more to do with deliberately repressing the topic of race than with not seeing it, as colorblindness originally described (Gillborn, 2019). Many white, Midwestern educators go to great lengths to avoid recognizing race in simultaneously active and passive ways and strive to cool conversations that might call for such racial acknowledgement to maintain an environment that privileges whiteness.

Educational niceness is frequently enacted through color-evasive strategies employed by predominantly white teachers to evade and repress much needed dialogue about race and racism in schools (Castagno, 2014; McIntyre, 1997; Pollock, 2004; Tanner & McCloskey, 2022). McIntyre (1997) studied how individual white teachers understood race and identified the use of white talk that was used to deflect from white people's roles in racism. White talk occurs when white people "talk uncritically with/to other Whites, all the while resisting critique and massaging each other's racist attitudes, beliefs, and actions" (McIntyre, p. 45–46). Using nice, white talk allows for whiteness and racism to remain intact and for white people to avoid discomfort. Another tactic to avoid discourse about race is color-muteness (Pollock, 2004), or the refusal to talk about race. Teachers in Pollock's analysis de-raced Black students, avoiding publicly naming the race of students who wandered the halls, yet whispered "Black" in private. These teachers made assumptions about the reasons Black students were disengaged in their classes with no public attention to the underlying reasons that Black students may feel disconnected from their classrooms. By avoiding the naming of race, teachers simultaneously neglected the realities of Black students' experiences in schools and reinforced whiteness.

In the Midwest, many white K-12 educators frequently engage in Midwestern educational niceness through color-evasiveness. In Riley's experiences as a K-5 school counselor working at a school district in the Midwest, most white teachers frequently talked around students' race, likely to maintain their own racial comfort. Riley recalls multiple occasions during lunch, for example, when teachers were on duty to monitor students. Many teachers would come to Riley's office door, located near the cafeteria, to ask for help with "those kids." Riley would ask whom they were referring to and they would rattle off the names of Black students. When referring to the students collectively, teachers typically identified the group as those kids, which served to nicely repress race and distinguish Black youth as the students they referenced. Those kids were referred to frequently, as they were often the students who experienced hyper-surveillance across the school day. During lunch, for example, Black students who moved out of their assigned seats were likely to be policed by white teachers, and told to return to their seats, while white students who engaged in the same behavior were rarely noticed. Those students were named as such because nice, white educators chose to erase students' races to assuage the discomfort they felt in naming race. In this context, naming race would have outed nice, good (Applebaum, 2010) white educators for policing Black youth and reinforcing whiteness. If they could not see race, they could not see racism. Educators must name race to disrupt racial inequities.

In the context of teacher education, Gabriel has faced resistance when discussing the interplay between niceness and whiteness. During his unit on whiteness and white supremacy, Gabriel offers students multiple opportunities to reflect upon their racialized identities. For instance, Gabriel assigns students an article on Iowa nice, a podcast episode on the topic of Midwest nice, and videos on white people reflecting on their whiteness. One of the most common questions students articulate during class is, "So, are you saying that I shouldn't be nice?" For many of his students, most of whom are white, their investments in being nice may make it difficult to fully understand that not everyone is extended the niceties they believe exist for everyone; they struggle to understand how Midwesterners use niceness as a tool to further marginalize people with minoritized

identities. Further, while some white students struggle to go beyond being surprised, others will engage in color-evasiveness through silence or resistance. Some students will espouse color-evasive rhetoric by saying that they do not see race during class conversations, assignments, or teaching evaluations. This stance relies on their good intentions as enough to combat inequities. Their belief is that they need to treat all their students the same and will make comments that they are committed to caring for all students.

Yet, in class, these types of comments fall short when students downplay issues of race and racism when discussing these topics. White students in Gabriel's classes often downplay the role of structure and ask questions that ultimately place blame on PK-12 students of color. When white students focus on niceness, their responses reflect their socialization to and their comfort level with racism. According to Gabriel's experiences in Iowa, many white students refuse to sit with their discomfort on questions of race and racism. Instead, white students shift the focus back to those who experience racism and question their narratives of marginalization. In doing so, they question whether these issues are as significant as they are made out to be. They struggle and refuse to see that the niceties they are extended are often not the case for others. Moreover, Gabriel's white students wrestle with the realities that doing the work of anti-racist education and fighting for abolitionist futures in schools require confronting people and structures invested in the continued oppression of students with minoritized identities.

### **Midwestern Educational Niceness Through White Fragility**

Another common element of Midwestern niceness is the tendency to see oneself as fair and equal (Kix, 2015; Meadows & Lee, 2002). When confronted with evidence that one's actions may not be so fair, however, white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011, 2018) is often the result. White fragility is defined as the defensive moves that white people make when challenged racially (DiAngelo, 2018). When educators are confronted with evidence of racial inequities, particularly in environments that historically and contemporarily privilege white people, they often become highly fragile. Many white Midwesterners, who tend to see themselves as nice people, struggle when confronted with evidence that suggests they could be doing anything that is arguably not nice. Thus, when confronted, the stress that they experience is often intolerable and the outcome is a range of defensive responses such as argumentation, silence, and retreat. These responses serve to return nice, white Midwesterners to white racial equilibrium (DiAngelo, 2018).

Educational niceness through white fragility often operates through silencing. In dialogue about racial inequities, educators may silence themselves as defensive posturing to protect (Mazzei, 2008; Sue, 2016) and preserve their racial comfort, which ultimately serves to maintain whiteness. Mazzei (2008) found that in a Midwestern context, predominantly white preservice teachers remained silent in discussions of race throughout much of a course, until she directly questioned them about their silences and found out that many of them were fearful of saying the wrong thing. Many students believed it was better to be silent than to say something impolite. Similarly, Sue (2016) asserted that many well-intended white people fear harboring unconscious racial biases, and if they speak, they will be found out. Thus, to maintain their self-perceptions of being

nice, decent human beings who would never racially discriminate, as well as their sense of comfort, they also maintain silence.

At times, white fragility operates through argumentativeness. When engaged in conversations about race, educators may assume defensive stances by arguing from a position that seeks to maintain racial innocence. White Midwesterners, who tend to pride themselves on fairness and civility (Kix, 2015), may argue in subtle ways to elucidate their presumed innocence (Annamma, 2015; Bernstein, 2011; Lensmire, 2010) and maintain comfort. These efforts act to cool off the heat that arises from suggestions that they are somehow connected to racism. We notice that if Midwesterners perceive that their ethic of fairness is being questioned, they often respond with “I treat everyone equally,” or sentiments of the like.

In the Midwest, Riley noted instantiations of Midwestern educational niceness through white fragility in the form of silence and subtle argumentativeness when she presented the topic of race as an elementary school counselor. When she posed questions about racial inequities to educators in professional development settings and more informally during individual conversations, silences were often the standard response. However, when she anonymously surveyed those same educators and others in the school building, the responses were vastly different. Educators chose argumentativeness and relied on the Midwestern ethic of fairness, suggesting that they treated all students the same. For example, when discussing the school’s emphasis on promoting cultural proficiency, one educator argued that cultural proficiency was not the answer. They disagreed with a school-wide focus on understanding inequities and suggested that all students would be better prepared if they were taught to use a growth mindset instead. The silences that Riley noted when speaking with educators in person indicated a level of fear about how their remarks would be perceived. When given the opportunity to respond anonymously, though, educators were more likely to argue against centering race in discourse. Nice, white Midwestern educators leveraged silence and arguments at opportune moments to protect their peace, and thus whiteness, from the perceived threat of racial dialogue.

In the context of teacher preparation, Gabriel has found white students tend to engage in silence, resistance, or voice their disagreement through course assignments. As was noted above, Gabriel interprets white students’ silence in courses as a desire to avoid confrontation and circumvent giving him or their peers the impression that they might be racist. Unless asked directly, students seem to shy away from saying that they are afraid of making a mistake or saying the wrong thing. Their actions imply that they would rather sit in silence and appear to be competent on something they are either struggling to comprehend or resist for fear of judgment or reprisals. For many of his white students, being raised to keep one’s opinion to oneself helps derail the possibilities for meaningful, deep, introspective conversations. White students’ silence also raises questions of how comfortable students are in receiving knowledge from their instructors and engaging with content. These are students who have likely attended schools that have rewarded them for their compliance and who benefit by merely being white. To rock the boat is something they are unwilling to do. With that said, many white students in Gabriel’s classes appear to be comfortable voicing their opposition to class content in their writing and course

evaluations, which scholarship demonstrates is especially common when the instructor is a person of color and/or female (Evans-Winters & Twyman Hoff, 2011).

### **Midwestern Educational Niceness Through Emotionalities of Whiteness**

Another common facet of Midwestern niceness is the desire to see oneself as a Good Samaritan (Cage Conley as cited in Cleveland, 2021, para. 8). This desire, operating through Midwest niceness, can be seen in the emotionalities of whiteness, defined by Matias (2017) as, “those racialized feelings that surface when teaching and learning about race that can either hinder (e.g., guilt, denial, resistance, anger, silence, etc.) or better support (e.g., empowerment, acceptance, determine, love, etc.) the fruition of racially just education” (p. 119). Matias (2016) has argued that those commonly expressed feelings, such as white people’s overt resistance or anger that appear when confronted with racial dialogue, can serve to mask deeper emotions that are the result of a particular trauma in whiteness. Thandeka (1999) asserts that these traumas are the result of the embeddedness of whiteness in childhood, during which white caregivers offer love conditionally when white children follow unspoken white rules. These deeply rooted understandings about whiteness, then, become a form of white shame, as white people deny race in favor of congruence within white communities (Thandeka).

Educational niceness is often enacted through emotionalities of whiteness, which have been explored primarily by Matias and colleagues (Matias, 2016; Matias & Zembylas, 2014). To hide deeper emotions rooted in whiteness, white preservice teachers primarily rely on superficial performances (Boltanski, 1999) of sentimentalized love and care. Such performances are divorced from the political action needed to address real inequities (Chouliaraki, 2010; Darder, 2002). For example, Matias and Zembylas (2014) examined how white preservice teachers routinely camouflaged disgust using declarations of care and love for students of color in routine performances. Thus, nice declarations frequently sentimentalize students of color.

Riley’s experiences evince how Midwestern, white K-12 teachers frequently engage in sentimentalization to cool their own emotionalities of whiteness. For example, Riley worked closely alongside white teachers struggling to respond to enactments of resistance predominantly displayed by students of color in classroom spaces. Resistance by students of color in whitestreamed (Urrieta, 2010) schooling is not uncommon as they frequently seek to regain their humanity in a system intent upon denying it (Kohli et al., 2017; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). Many of these white teachers did not recognize this dynamic, however, and frequently bemoaned their efforts to coach students of color. Instead of reflecting upon themselves, they offered reinforcements for what they deemed to be positive behavior and consequences for presumably negative behavior, asserting that nothing they did worked or, if it appeared to be effective, seemed sustainable. Enactments of care, such as hugs, were common as were comments about how much they “love those kids.” Yet commonly missing from this approach to care, rooted in a Midwesterner sensibility to appear good and nice, was any noticeable attention to altering classroom curricula and pedagogy so that it might be responsive (Gay, 2000) to or sustain (Paris & Alim, 2017) the identities and ways of being of students of color. When Riley suggested this option, many white teachers suddenly no longer needed support, and offered that the reinforcements in place were effective. Riley interpreted this response as signaling that

white teachers' nice attempts to care for and love their students stopped short of attending to the injustices that students of color, who often resist whitestream schooling, were experiencing.

Similar to Riley's work and observations, in Gabriel's work with preservice educators, he too finds that many of his white students espouse apolitical support for care and love. This response typically occurs during the part of Gabriel's course when the focus is explicitly on preservice secondary students' identities, privileges, and political commitments to their practice. Students will show support for care and love and downplay the political nature of teaching in class discussions and writing assignments, such as a critical autobiography that Gabriel assigns. Yet, when pushed to think about history, structures, and context, many of the white students shy away from those conversations, which force them to think about the political nature of education. For them, being political in the classroom is wrong. Students' comments during discussions suggest that they assume that being political means they are indoctrinating students. Yet, rarely do some of Gabriel's students consider how the current structure is indeed political and a reflection of white, middle-class norms, facts that are noticeably absent from their written reflections. When students are pushed to think about their agency and advocacy through case studies, many of the white students struggle to make sense of how they would respond if placed in a similar position. Their investment in niceness at times limits their ability to advocate for their students, for they do not want to be disruptive to the school communities they will soon be joining and therefore continue to hold a belief that it is not their role to be political. This stance speaks to a larger need for teacher preparation programs to be clear in their commitments and to think about the type of future educators they want to cultivate. If the goal is to develop educators committed to liberatory outcomes, then having students engage in the work of what it means to be political is a necessity.

### **Conclusion**

Midwestern educational niceness operates through other phenomena to simultaneously protect racial comfort, advance whiteness, and obstruct equity efforts in schools. In the examples provided, Riley and Gabriel found that despite their efforts to support white preservice and in-service teachers' understanding of whiteness, niceness often stalled deep, critical awareness and action to disrupt inequities. Niceness through color-evasiveness, white fragility, and emotionalities of whiteness halt the equity work in which so many K-12 schools claim to engage. Through the cooling effect of Midwestern niceness, norms such as equality and fairness are upheld through tactics that act to stymie genuine engagement with racial inequities. Most of the time, acts to engage in a real discourse about the roots of inequities in schools are seen as not nice or counterproductive.

When racial inequities are revealed, one of the most common responses from school districts is to offer subtle arguments about what they are doing right as opposed to focusing on the racism at hand. Responses are typically peppered with language such as "acceptance," "difference," "culture," and "diversity." These attempts to redress specific instantiations of racism are cloaked with discursive language and actions that seek to privilege whiteness and maintain the comfort and ease for predominantly white

educators. For example, following clear incidents of racism in a Midwestern school district, including a student being openly ridiculed for being Asian, the superintendent used subtle argumentativeness in an interview to suggest that the school district was engaging educators in learning about “diversity and equity” following the racist events (Shillcock, 2021). Educators should be learning about equity as part of their professional identities and practices throughout the year, not only following racist incidents.

In this paper, we asked: nice to whom? To whom is Midwestern niceness in schooling actually nice? When no substantial institutional change results from nice initiatives, whiteness remains intact, which is not nice for students of color. When school districts do not prioritize equity, equity becomes noncompulsory.

We conclude that Midwestern educational niceness is incompatible with what is required to upend racial inequities in schools. While many white Midwesterners may prefer polite protest or comfortable conversation that emphasizes equality, those actions or discourses will not challenge the policies and practices that are deeply embedded in the structure of schooling, which marginalize already vulnerable youth, particularly youth of color. When the aim of white Midwestern educators is to disrupt inequitable systems in schools, they must defederate from Midwestern niceness to ameliorate the disparities that have historically plagued students of color. The efforts to cool off the perceived hot topics of race and racism is resulting in failed, ineffective attempts to redress inequities.

There is nothing nice about niceness for students of color. White, Midwestern educators have a responsibility to examine how niceness as a uniquely regional cultural construct is operating in their practices, procedures, and policies. This can be done through reflexivity, over time, toward racial conscientization (Jupp & Badenhorst, 2021), or a deep, critical awakening regarding the implications of race. By examining what Midwestern educators deem polite and impolite, educators can come to see how those norms have resulted in racialized patterns in their lives. More specifically, educators need to rid themselves of the tendency to prioritize whiteness through niceness as color-evasiveness, white fragility, and emotionalities of whiteness. Approaches to confront whiteness through niceness directly may include perspective-taking, centering voices of students and their families who are racially minoritized in schools, and reflecting on and making courageous changes to pedagogies and practices. We must consciously choose the path toward dismantling white supremacy by challenging Midwestern niceness and authentically centering equity. While perhaps uncomfortable, disruption to whiteness and white supremacy is actually nice.

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