

T H E P R I C E

*of* NICE

*How Good Intentions  
Maintain Educational Inequity*

Angelina E. Castagno

EDITOR



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## Mapping the Contours of Niceness in Education

ANGELINA E. CASTAGNO

Americans are unique because they are nice and friendly.

—Carrie Tirado Bramen, *American Niceness: A Cultural History*

History is replete with injury and harm inflicted on others by nice people doing nice things.

—Ian E. Baptiste, “Wages of Niceness: The Folly and Futility of Educators Who Strive to Not Impose”

One need not search hard to see Niceness in action, and once Niceness is a concept with which you are familiar, the instances of its functioning may be overwhelming. At the end of the 2017–18 school year, I was casually talking with a teacher at an elementary school in Arizona where I had spent the year facilitating a series of professional development workshops related to equity and inclusion. The teacher noted how she was now more adept at *seeing* “racist behaviors” among her colleagues, but that she struggled to *talk about* them because of her “need to create harmony.” This was a White woman working in a school with over 50 percent teachers of color, 65 percent students of color, and a leadership team that was vocally committed to pushing the staff to become more equity oriented—in other words, she worked in what we might call a best-case scenario for challenging the status quo and yet still, here, she was constrained by her own adherence to Niceness.

Most educators are nice people with the best intentions regarding the schooling they provide to students every day. The dictionary definition for *nice* is consistent

with conventional understandings of the word; to be nice is to be pleasing and agreeable, pleasant and kind. What counts as nice is determined by people and communities. Thus, there is nothing factual about Niceness. We construct the notion of Niceness, and we connect it to particular behaviors, interactions, and discourses. A nice person is not someone who creates a lot of disturbance, conflict, controversy, or discomfort. Nice people avoid potentially uncomfortable or upsetting experiences, knowledge, and interactions. We do not point out failures or shortcomings in others but rather emphasize the good, the promise, and the improvement we see. Niceness compels us to reframe potentially disruptive or uncomfortable things in ways that are more soothing, pleasant, and comfortable. This avoidance and reframing are generally done with the best intentions, and having good intentions is a critical component of Niceness. In fact, as long as one means well, the actual impact of one's behavior, discourse, or action is often meaningless.

Niceness is incredibly attractive and, at the same time, difficult to critique. But it is precisely this critique that is necessary if educators are to better understand the ways we maintain and advance inequity despite, or in spite of, our best intentions. The challenges associated with critiquing Niceness find resonance in the feminist articulation of the “killjoy” (Ahmed 2010; Aidoo 1977)—that is, one who is perceived as disrupting or ending the joy of others. Ahmed (2010) explains how “in speaking up or speaking out, you upset the situation. That you have described what was said by another as a problem means you have created a problem. You become the problem you create.” A killjoy does not ascribe to the norms of Niceness because she knows that doing so means she is complicit in the perpetuation of educational inequity.

Schools are heralded as fundamental to helping anyone—and everyone—achieve the American dream. They have worked—and continue to work—for most educators, who are understandably invested in an institution that provides an avenue for their own success. Schools educate a diverse student body, but diversity and Niceness have been so intertwined that any engagement with diversity is necessarily, almost by definition, *nice*. As Ahmed (2007) notes, we generally have a “desire to hear happy stories of diversity rather than unhappy stories of racism” (164). Diversity in schools has been framed in such a way as to require a stance of inclusion, optimism, and assimilation. These concepts are, in turn, constitutive of the Niceness we see in schools. Despite their good intentions and the general Niceness among educators, most schools in the United States contribute to inequity every day. How does this happen? At the most basic level, that is the question that this book explores.

### *An Emerging Body of Scholarship*

Many readers will be familiar with the cultural construct of the “ugly American” and may wonder how Niceness fits into that global narrative. This is especially

pertinent during this particular historical moment during which the U.S. president epitomizes the image of the ugly American and was even so named by a former Mexican president. But Bramen (2017) offers a compelling cultural history of American Niceness and argues that it is a cultural construct with a deep history, despite its relative lack of scholarly exploration. She notes that “the nice American is as pervasive as its negative counterpart, but it has been neither studied nor defined as explicitly. This is partly due to the fact that niceness is assumed to be a national default mode, an obvious and superficial gesture not worthy of serious inquiry. Its banality puts it under the radar of cultural analysis. My fundamental claim is that even though it often goes unnamed as a pattern of behavior, niceness pervades the everyday conduct, assumptions, and discourses of and about Americans” (7). While Bramen offers a historical account of Niceness in American society, *The Price of Nice* narrows the focus to U.S. schools in the current era.

Ladson-Billings pointed to the connection between Niceness and education when she asked “Just What Is Critical Race Theory and What’s It Doing in a Nice Field Like Education?” (1998), but her question has yet to be really taken up by educational researchers. I began thinking about Niceness through my research on Whiteness among K–12 teachers in Utah (Castagno 2014). In one of my first interactions with this particular community, a school district administrator handed me a video that had been produced for the district earlier that year titled *We Teach the World*. As I listened to her describe the “diversity in our district” and the various ways the district addressed that diversity, I also observed the standard educator decor on the surrounding office walls—posters addressing every child’s ability to learn and succeed, apple and pencil knickknacks, youth artwork, and quotes about leaders who inspire. There was a clear undercurrent of what another district leader called a “culture of nice” in the stories she shared with me.

I spent the next decade talking about this concept of Niceness in my classes with both new and veteran teachers and educational leaders, as well as with colleagues in universities across the United States. The concept seemed to resonate, so that prompted my investigation into if, and how, others had examined Niceness in schools and other sociopolitical institutions. There were a few articles and books that took up the concept, but most of the references to Niceness were in the personal development / self-help bodies of literature. For the most part, those who had explored Niceness had done so from an individual psychological perspective and, as a result, focused on the impacts or implications of Niceness on individual people. Although this was part of how I was thinking about Niceness, it was by no means what I considered the most important part of the phenomenon.

Niceness is most important because of its relational elements and, especially, its material consequences. Being nice is not the same thing as being ignorant or having a lack of awareness. Within a frame of Niceness, oppressive actions are not actually oppressive; they are just hurtful. They are therefore assumed to be the result of individuals who have made bad choices or who just do not know any better. This

framing diverts attention away from patterned inequity, structural oppression, and institutional dominance. But structural phenomena cannot be addressed with individual explanations. Inequity thrives when we limit our understanding of it to individual intentions, knowledge, instances, and interactions. Sabina Vaught and Deirdre Judge's chapter in this volume offers an especially poignant illustration of this idea; their ethnographic data point to larger state engagements with Niceness and how those engagements function to maintain the structured, institutionalized power of the state.

My interest in equity finds resonance with Ward's (2017) analysis of Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. Ward uses King's writing to draw important distinctions between civility as a virtue tied to justice and courage, and Niceness as a defective generalized ethic that is more concerned with maintaining wealth, prestige, social approval, innocence, and comfort. He notes, "Friendly gestures and kind words, unproblematic in the context of morally benign relationships, are seen as sanctimonious ways of preserving one's power and comfort in the context of unjust ones. These efforts at preservation of an unjustly privileged self are aided by wishful thinking (the semblance of hope), an immoderate desire for power, comfort, and the acceptance of others, excessive fear of experiencing the loss of these, and indifference to real disagreement (the semblance of tolerance)" (Ward 2017, 133). Bringing this focus on justice and equity into the educational sphere, Bissonnette (2016) offers an institutionally situated analysis and suggests that teacher education programs have a preference for Niceness that obstructs efforts to actualize culturally responsive teacher preparation. She focuses on the audit culture of teacher education, preservice teachers themselves, teacher educators, and the curriculum and instruction within teacher preparation programs as four key sites where Niceness is visible and operating to reinforce Whiteness. Weaving the thread from Ladson-Billings's 1998 reference, Bissonnette concludes that Niceness "allows [preservice teachers] to offer 'nice,' liberal-oriented insights without truly engaging in the complex, arduous, self-reflection processes culturally responsive teaching requires" (2016, 10).

Baptiste (2008) defines "educational Niceness" as educators' aversion to all forms of imposition. He does not attempt to discern the extent to which Niceness is a widespread phenomenon, but instead attempts to illustrate the phenomenon of Niceness through language and philosophical analysis. He begins with the premise that education is political; he then articulates four fallacies associated with Niceness and four perils of Niceness. The perils include "(a) wrongful assignment of credit or blame, (b) deployment of weak and ineffectual means of coercion, (c) repressive tolerance, and (d) negation or masking of teacher power" (23). In discussing his own lived experiences, Baptiste suggests that educators' advocacy of Niceness is a facade for imposing their values and ideas on others. The chapter in this volume by Joseph C. Wegwert and Aidan/Amanda Charles offers support for this suggestion,

as well as for the additional point that Niceness is also a facade for the perpetuation of the status quo of patterned and pervasive educational inequity.

As a whole, teachers and educational leaders are invested in Niceness (Castagno 2014; Goodman 2001; Marshall and Theoharis 2007). My earlier ethnographic research found that Niceness was a key component of the Whiteness that informed diversity-related policy and practice in Salt Lake City schools. Similarly, Alemán's (2009) study in Utah found that educational leaders' political discourse is shaped by Niceness, which ultimately limits their critique of racism and silences the experiences of underrepresented students. Others have also linked Niceness to Whiteness, racial exclusion, and race privilege (e.g., Hartigan 2009, Low 2009, Bissonnette 2016). Much of this research highlights how Niceness is performed, embodied, policed, and taught among both adults and youth in schools. It is done in implicit and explicit ways. But Niceness is not uniformly applied or expected, so context always matters. While my own work has focused on the connections between Niceness and Whiteness in educational spaces, we also have to explore and better understand the intersectional aspects of Niceness. And Niceness isn't limited to the adults in schools. When young people do not adequately learn the norms of Niceness, they experience repercussions and are often disciplined for being overly critical (Goodman 2001). Girls, especially, are socialized and encouraged to be "pleasing" via "a tyranny of niceness" (Deak 2002, Sommers 2005).

Intentionality is important in understanding Niceness. Good intentions have been linked to the perpetuation of inequity in schools (Castagno 2014, Lewis and Diamond 2015), and the role of intentions is not limited to the educational environment. As Bramen (2017) notes of American culture writ large, "Niceness implies that Americans are fundamentally well-meaning people defined by an essential goodness. Even acts of aggression are framed as passive, reluctant, and defensive acts to protect oneself against the potential aggression of another. My point is that American niceness assumes that Americans are decent and good-natured people with the best of intentions. Even if they do serious damage in the world, American niceness means that the damage will be more than likely seen as a mistake" (8). I have advanced a similar argument (Castagno 2014), and there is a growing body of empirical evidence pointing to the connections between educators' well-meaning dispositions and their role in sustaining inequitable educational outcomes. Silence, passivity, denial, and avoidance are all tied to these patterns. So it should come as no surprise that the word *nice* derives from the Latin *nescius*, meaning "ignorant," and the French *nescire*, meaning "not to know." As Sommers (2005) explains, "To be nice means to silence ourselves in some way, and in doing so, we compromise our authenticity and give up freedom to act and speak. On the other hand, niceness may facilitate the shedding of responsibility" (12).

## *A Sociocultural Mapping of Niceness in Education*

This book advances the concept of Niceness as an analytic category that encompasses a wide range of practices and discourses. The concept of Niceness emerged as an *in vivo* code for me and for many of the authors in *The Price of Nice*, but it is much more than that. It is clear that Niceness is a thing that stands on its own and is pervasive in educational settings. It matters as an analytic category because of the way it maintains and/or produces inequity. Niceness is a shared socioemotional disposition or a way of being. It is about one's emotional state, the emotional state of others, and the behaviors and discourses that support those emotional states. The emotional component of Niceness may help explain why it has eluded scholarly critique for so long—indeed, the classic dichotomy between reason and emotion, or between rationality and feeling, has long relegated the latter of these pairs to a place of relative unimportance. At the same time, it may also be this emotional component that contributes to the durability and pervasive commonsense acceptance of Niceness.<sup>1</sup> Unlike some analytic categories, Niceness is something that many people recognize in themselves and others, and something that at least some people actually name themselves. It is not a heady or overly academic concept. It is common enough to be relatable to most people who hear the word, and it is precisely this relatability and commonsense status that has allowed it to go mostly unexplored and uninterrogated.

Niceness is one mechanism for reifying structural arrangements and ideologies of dominance across lines of race, gender, and social class. It functions not only as a shield to protect (White, female) educators from having to do the hard work of dismantling inequity but also as a disciplining agent for those who attempt or even consider disrupting structures and ideologies of dominance. This distinction is important. We can, and should, think about Niceness as embodied by those in more powerful and privileged positions; but we should also think about it as the demand to act nice among those challenging power. The chapters in *The Price of Nice* provide illustrative examples of both of these employments of Niceness in schools.

Through her research with young, White, preservice teachers, Sally Campbell Galman highlights how Niceness includes behaviors such as avoiding conflict, maintaining a feminine look, framing teaching as love, and supporting existing power structures through obedience in chapter 5. But Galman also discusses the work of “nasty” teachers—those women who construct teaching as political work and engage in the difficult tasks of critiquing the status quo and advocating for students when nobody else is doing so. In chapter 11, Katie A. Lazdowski demonstrates that interrupting Niceness can sometimes be an effective approach for interrupting Whiteness. By countering narratives of Niceness directly and publicly, there are opportunities to foster greater racial literacy within schools and other public spaces.

Other chapters take this a step further by exploring the policing functions of Niceness. As just one example, in chapter 9, Colin Ben, Amber Poleviyuma, Jeremiah Chin, Alexis Richmond, Megan Tom, and Sarah Abuwandi highlight how Niceness causes self-containment among students of color; this self-containment is connected to the simultaneous isolation and hypervisibility among students of color in predominantly White institutions of higher education. The disciplining function of Niceness is reminiscent of Frye's (1983) point that oppression requires that you show signs of being happy with the situation in which you find yourself; anything other than smiles and cheerfulness often result in your being perceived as ungrateful, mean, angry, bitter, or even dangerous. Indeed, complying with the norms of Niceness requires great personal costs for people of color. Code-switching is similarly connected to the demand that minoritized and marginalized people engage Niceness, since switching to the dominant codes of power is often performed as a strategic survival mechanism. In chapter 10, Nicholas Bustamante and Jessica Solyom offer a telling counterstory about a young Latino student in a predominantly White law school who wrestles with the norms of Niceness, but who also draws on his own familial and community legacy to guide his journey.

Niceness is both an embodied practice and a set of discursive expectations. It functions as an institutional norm within educational spaces (and other spaces, but that is beyond the scope of this book). Niceness encompasses a range of practices, discourses, and ideologies, and many of the chapters in this book illustrate some of the specific behaviors and practices that make up Niceness in particular settings. This is especially true in the chapters that draw on ethnographic research, since that is a methodology particularly well suited to uncovering micro-level phenomena. At the same time, this book assumes that microlevel patterns are indicative of larger phenomena and it is through these windows that we can better grasp the meaning of Niceness as a larger analytic category. Niceness can be understood as a political practice, much like Brown's (2008) analysis of tolerance, in which she argues that the concept of tolerance individualizes political conflict and power hierarchies; tolerance suggests that we should all simply behave in ways that demonstrate acceptance of others. The problem, of course, is that tolerance obscures pervasive injustices and, therefore, the need for equity. This is where Niceness and tolerance interface—Niceness includes tolerance, as Brown aptly deconstructs it, but Niceness is more than tolerance.

Some may wonder about the extent to which Niceness is conflated with things such as civility, tolerance, and love, but this book suggests that Niceness is operationalized *vis-à-vis* some of these related concepts. As I read much of the newer scholarly work on race, social class, sexual orientation, and gender identity in education, many of the concepts and findings can be connected through and to what I'm calling Niceness. Consider, for example, the theory and empirical evidence around White fragility, civility, the White savior complex, allyship, and code-switching: each of these concepts is connected to each of the others through Niceness and

their functional purpose of maintaining inequity. To elaborate on one of these examples, we can look to DiAngelo's (2018) important discussion of what she calls White fragility. When White people are challenged racially, they tend to experience emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt. These emotions are often paired with defensiveness, argumentation, and/or silence. White fragility is a sort of protective mechanism for maintaining White racial equilibrium. Similarly, Niceness is a mechanism for maintaining White racial equilibrium—that is, it functions to prevent any sort of challenge or tension (disequilibrium) related to power and structural inequity. As the chapters in this book highlight, Niceness is often engaged in racialized contexts and situations, but it is also engaged intersectionally and functions to gloss over inequities related to gender, social class, heteronormativity, and other power hierarchies. White fragility emerges from a rupture in Niceness, which results in conflict, tension, direct communication about inequity, and what some may interpret as “meanness.” But viewing these ruptures as mean only makes sense when we understand that White fragility is at play.

In other words, Niceness is an analytic category that encompasses a number of other practices, discourses, and concepts frequently found in educational settings. Aspects of Niceness that are perhaps the most commonplace in schools include silence around issues of racism, homophobia, and sexism; coded language that allows for the discussion of others while not actually naming them as such; and the general avoidance of potentially uncomfortable or controversial conversations so as to not rock the proverbial boat. Chapter 13, by Bailey B. Smolarek and Giselle Martinez Negrette, and chapter 3, by Jessica Sierk, highlight the ways Niceness is embodied through practices such as silence, tolerance, and lack of critical engagement with social issues. In the higher education context, Kristine T. Weatherston's chapter highlights how institutional norms around teaching, grading, and student feedback rely on double standards and reinforce gender bias on college campuses. And in chapter 1, Frederick W. Gooding Jr. examines four distinct cases highlighted in the media at schools across the United States to illustrate how the criteria and definitions of acceptable, nice behavior shift depending on context, identity, and relations to power. It is this sort of nuance that the book collectively conveys.

A sociocultural approach to studying Niceness would be incomplete without a genealogy—that is, a contextualized, historicized analysis—of Niceness. I recommend readers examine Bramen's (2017) cultural history of Niceness for a detailed account of how Niceness was prevalent in nineteenth-century America. Her cultural history focuses on five key engagements with Niceness during this time period: Indigenous forms of welcoming and the subsequent “dangers of hospitality”; Black amiability and the “slave's smile”; the Niceness of Christianity that emerged from a previously harsh conception of an angry Calvinist God; how femininity required Niceness while simultaneously constraining women's behavior and emotional life; and the contradicting images of American Niceness during the U.S. occupation of the Philippines. Future work on Niceness in education could look to key moments

such as the early feminization of teaching, the U.S. civil rights movement in schools, and neoliberal trends in education to provide a genealogical unpacking and teasing out of both the meaning of Niceness and the relationship between it and particular historical and cultural moments. Bramen's argument that "the dominant story of American niceness depends, in part, on incorporating the niceness of the oppressed" (37) is consistent with my own observations of Niceness in educational spaces in the twenty-first century that highlight how Niceness is expected of those who occupy marginalized positions within U.S. schools and society.

Niceness is often tied to deficit perspectives about students and communities. In this way, it is also tied to a number of other theories advanced by educational researchers studying inequity. The White savior complex (Emdin 2016; Straubhaar 2014) is a great example: If I believe my students need someone to rescue them from their plight in life, and if I view myself as capable of providing that rescue, then I engage in ways that advance a paternal or maternal relationship and that are often self-serving in the sense that they boost my sense of philanthropy and belief that I am doing good in the world. But my own savior identity relies on the presence of someone (or many someones) who must be saved. In other words, my Niceness requires that I view my students as needing help, as incapable on their own, and/or as missing something that I can provide. This is a classic deficit framework. Deficit frameworks ultimately say that unsuccessful people lack something that is needed to be successful; these take a number of forms, but some of the more common ones in recent years include that students who are unsuccessful lack grit or a growth mind-set. Deficit frameworks are tied to individualism in the sense that they locate issues or problems within individuals. This can be contrasted to a systems analysis or an institutional framework that locates issues and problems within systems, policies, and institutions. Clearly the world does not work in such dichotomous ways, but overly relying on individualized understandings (success depends largely on one's mind-set) sets one on a clear path to deficit beliefs about individuals (they don't have enough grit), which in turn leads one to seek solutions within individuals (they need to try harder, study longer, develop more resilience). These deficit frameworks teach kids to adapt to systems that are broken rather than requiring broken systems to adapt or even be fixed.

### *Niceness, Meanness, and the Trump Era*

Since the election of Trump to the U.S. presidency, many have noticed a more mainstream White supremacist rage that has (re)surfaced across the United States. I wonder if, in fact, this resurgence is actually one of the many unintended consequences of decades of Niceness. The trend of liberal *laissez-faire* tolerance cannot adequately keep meanness in check. At some point it allows too much.

Thinking about Niceness has taken on a new urgency, as well as some new meaning, in the age of Trump. It now appears to be acceptable for explicit hate speech to be spewed all over our schools, businesses, and public spaces. But it is not okay for resisters, protectors, protestors, and other activists to display their forms of engagement and communication; theirs is *not nice*, anti-American, a riot, divisive. There seems to be a double standard. This was clearly illustrated in the events of August 2017 in Charlottesville, Virginia, and the subsequent responses by the U.S. president and others (Heim 2017). In 2018 this double standard was perhaps no more obvious than in the debates surrounding Colin Kaepernick and multiple other National Football League players kneeling during the national anthem before games as a means of protest against the persistent racial injustices in our country. Many Americans were outraged over these players kneeling, yet these same people simultaneously vigorously defended other demonstrations of free speech in support of causes that aligned with their own interests (the Second Amendment, anti-immigration policies, etc.). As Harper (2018) points out, the policy adopted by the National Football League in May 2018 that requires players to stand for the anthem is squarely about race and is, in fact, a violation of players' First Amendment rights. Future research and cultural analysis should explore new engagements with Niceness in the age of White supremacist rage that we are currently witnessing. It may indeed be one of the (unintended) consequences of Niceness to have allowed this sort of phenomenon to fester.

Overall, though, this book suggests that within schools, and particularly among the adults in schools—the presumed educators—Niceness still rules. There is indeed meanness within educational spaces, and Gooding's chapter, as well as chapter 15, by Frances J. Reimer, point to just a few examples of this. But even in the instances of meanness, we can learn something about the norms of Niceness that are expected, broken, and policed in various ways. It is this nuanced unpacking of Niceness that the chapters in this volume collectively offer.

As we finalized this manuscript in spring 2018, the nation saw a steady pattern of statewide teacher walkouts. They started in West Virginia, then progressed to Oklahoma, Kentucky, Arizona, and Colorado. Teachers, support staff, parents, children, and allied community members came together to demand increased funding for public schools and compensation for those working in them. Educators in the United States are not the usual suspects for such large-scale social movements, and that fact has everything to do with Niceness. As Naomi Shulman shared via social media shortly after Trump was elected president, "Nice people made the best Nazis. My mom grew up next to them. They got along, refused to make waves, looked the other way when things got ugly and focused on happier things than 'politics.' They were lovely people who turned their heads as their neighbors were dragged away. You know who weren't nice people? Resisters."<sup>2</sup>

Even the word *strike* brought about tension among educators and allies in Arizona. When I shared a colleague's social media post about strikes being difficult

for everyone, but especially for those who are actually striking, an online debate ensued about the Arizona movement being “a walkout, but not a strike.” One commentator noted that “walkout is often used as a less controversial term than strike”—which is exactly the point, and probably why Arizona’s educator-leaders were very careful to use the word *walkout* in all of their messaging. Like *resisters*, the word *strike* connotes a stance that is confrontational and even defiant. Resisters, and those who go on strike, are not nice. But educators are nice, traditionally. Even more important, educators occupy ground zero for ensuring that the norms of Niceness are passed on to the next generation.

Niceness is an important mechanism for maintaining the status quo. Schools are institutions that sort children based on race, social class, gender, language, citizenship, ability, and any other number of power-related identity categories. This sorting and selecting feeds the society in which we live—one that is capitalist in nature and requires individuals at various status levels. There is an inherent tension between this functional need of U.S. society and the ideologies of equality and meritocracy on which U.S. schools and society are heralded. So although we continue to propagate the American dream—the notion that anyone can succeed if he or she tries hard enough—most people know this to be far-fetched. This dream may not be impossible, but it is surely not probable. And the probability is even less likely for those who sit on the “wrong side” of certain identity categories. This is where Niceness is particularly useful. Niceness compels educators to focus on the dream, the possibility, and the effort of each individual student. Niceness deters educators from grappling with the red flags that consistently emerge in achievement, behavioral, and other data. Niceness, in other words, both enables avoidance and shields educators from doing the hard work of confronting inequity. The result is the perpetuation of educational inequity.

Niceness is both an institutional norm within schools and an embodied practice among educators. Since the U.S. teaching population remains largely White and female, it follows that Niceness is raced and gendered in particular ways. Niceness takes on specific qualities among White, female educators, but it is not confined to educators who are White women. The nuances of how Niceness is engaged are locally differentiated, but the overall patterns remain firmly in place. In other words, Niceness works at both the individual and institutional levels. Thus, in order to really understand Niceness, we must examine it at each of these levels and also at the intersections of the two. The chapters in this book take up this challenge by exploring Niceness in educational spaces from a sociocultural perspective. Collectively the book unpacks what Niceness looks, feels, and sounds like in educational spaces from elementary school through higher education. *The Price of Nice* specifically engages the following questions:

How does Niceness both reinforce structural inequity and also disrupt it?

How is Niceness engaged differently by individuals and communities who occupy different relations to power?

When does Niceness work, and to what end?

In all the efforts to advance equity and justice along the educational pipeline, how do we both engage and disrupt Niceness?

What are the personal and institutional costs to maintaining Niceness in schools?

Throughout the chapters we see that Niceness is mobilized as a dominant cultural norm that polices discourse, relationships, policies, and practices in ways that reinforce educational inequity. One of the most critical distinctions that this book offers is between Niceness as a normative practice willingly and purposefully engaged and embodied by educators, and Niceness as an expected—and even policed—practice imposed on those who are inclined to challenge the status quo. This distinction often falls along identity lines. It should not be surprising that Niceness in the first iteration can generally be observed among White, female teachers. Chapter 12, by Marguerite Anne Fillion Wilson and Denise Gray Yull, and chapter 6, by Wegwert and Charles, explore this pattern in depth. Wegwert and Charles's chapter highlights the nuanced intersections between race, class, gender, and sexuality that are engaged through Niceness in teacher preparation, whereas Wilson and Yull's chapter explores how Niceness is taken up by administrators and school board members. Intersectionality is also taken up in chapter 14 through Vaught and Judge's exploration of how Niceness functions through patterned and institutional benevolence.

### *Opening Up a Conversation*

My hope is that this book provides a foundational understanding of Niceness and opens up additional conversation and research into the concept of Niceness. The chapters in *The Price of Nice* interrogate Niceness empirically and conceptually; are grounded in data, personal narrative, and cultural analysis; and are situated at various points along the spectrum, from elementary schools to higher education. Chapter 8, by Cynthia Diana Villarreal, Román Liera, and Lindsey Malcom-Piqueux, provides one example of how Niceness is both an emic and etic concept. In other words, Niceness was a specific concept that was explicitly used by participants in Villarreal and colleagues' study, but it was also a more general theme that the authors found throughout their analysis of the data writ large. This is also true in other chapters in this volume; collectively they highlight the ways in which Niceness is raced, gendered, and classed. Notably, Niceness is not always fully ascribed to, but even when Niceness breaks down at the individual or interactional level (i.e.,

people acting “not nice”), it continues to operate at an ideological and institutional level in service to inequity. Chapter 2, by Jia-Hui Stefanie Wong, and chapter 4, by Sylvia Mac, both offer examples of the ways educators engage Niceness that ultimately reinforce inequity. Wong’s research explores this among teachers who self-identify as being committed to social justice, and yet even they engage social justice work in nice ways that their students see right through. Mac’s research focuses on special education and suggests that inclusive education is also engaged in nice ways that fail to advance equity for students with disabilities. Ultimately, the present volume turns Niceness on its head to highlight the ways in which it can actually be not nice, good, or healthy for individuals and communities because of the way it maintains, protects, and reinforces educational inequity.

The book is organized loosely around the “sites” in which Niceness is explored: Part I comprises chapters that explore Niceness in K–12 classrooms and schools; Part II investigates Niceness in postsecondary settings; and Part III explores Niceness across educational settings and society. In each of these sections readers will note the multiple and varied ways Niceness is embodied, by whom, and to what ends. Perhaps the most critical distinction is between Niceness as an embodied practice of dominant players and the demands of Niceness placed on those who challenge the system. In many chapters, these two categories overlap. Another critical point that emerges is that although Niceness is often thought about as an individual attribute, a collective reading of the chapters herein clearly demonstrates how Niceness is actually relational and has structural consequences.

The need to understand Niceness is urgent and far reaching; indeed, efforts to reduce educational inequity will continue to fail if we don’t understand it. As Baptiste (2008) notes, “Educational niceness . . . is not a humanizing imperative. Rather, it is a deluding phantom—a salacious seduction which might make educators popular with students, and leave them feeling good about themselves, but, which, in the end, might turn out to be the unwitting handmaiden of oppressive hegemony. Until educators rid themselves of their yearning to be nice, until they embrace wholeheartedly their obligation to impose, their educational impact—especially in addressing social inequality—will be severely curtailed” (28). There exists a long legacy of scholars who argue that culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings 1994, 1995), responsive (Castagno and Brayboy 2008; Gay 2000), sustaining (Paris 2012, Paris and Alim 2014), and/or revitalizing schooling (McCarty and Lee 2014) is the path to educational equity. But I agree with Bissonnette (2016), who suggests that Niceness is a barrier to the genuine engagement of these approaches. In her analysis of efforts to advance culturally responsive teacher preparation, she notes that “the opposite of niceness isn’t a culture of shaming; rather, its dichotomy is open, critical, and provocative instruction, conversation, and reflexivity” (19). This call for direct communication and “real talk” about oppression has been echoed by others (e.g., Pollock 2005, 2008), as has the related point that those of us in more privileged positions often are able to do this in ways that others cannot.

But direct, honest relationality is not enough if deficit frameworks still pervade. Thus, we must also work to create spaces where deficit ideologies can be unlearned and replaced with ideologies of justice and equity. This work requires both an affective element and a structural one. In other words, emotions are real, and research is clear that emotions often serve as barriers for the kind of equity work that I'm suggesting (Matias 2016). At the same time, understanding the role of emotions does not mean letting people off the hook when the emotional work becomes too great—this, in fact, takes us right back to Niceness. Instead we must acknowledge the emotional, affective elements of Niceness while simultaneously naming the structural components that holds inequity in place.

### Notes

1. Many thanks to Peter Demerath for helping me see this important point.
2. Naomi Shulman, Facebook, November 2016. Shulman later elaborated on the comment; see Shulman 2016.

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