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The Trouble with Niceness: How a Preference for Pleasantry Sabotages Culturally Responsive Teacher Preparation

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Abstract: Because few teacher education programs are truly rooted in the philosophical aims of multicultural and social justice education (Asher, 2007; Banks, 2008; Hayes & Juarez, 2012; Miller, 2014), many pre-service teachers (PSTs) remain unpracticed—and unable—to teach in culturally responsive ways (Sleeter, 2012). But what structures and forces bear the culpability for the long documented shortcomings of this preparation? And how can literacy teacher educators honor their commitment to preparing practitioners capable of teaching *all* children? Here, the author postulates the ways in which teacher education programs' preference for niceness functions as an iteration of Whiteness that obstructs attempts to actualize culturally responsive teacher preparation, tending specifically to the complicity of audit culture, pre-service teachers, teacher educators, and curricula and instruction. In an effort to disrupt and ultimately dismantle the culture of niceness, the author offers successful approaches to training PSTs for teaching in culturally responsive ways, including displaying sociocultural vulnerability, modeling and creating opportunities for critical reflection, and collaborating alongside PSTs to craft a transformative curriculum.

Keywords: culturally responsive pedagogy, teacher preparation



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In order to be quality teacher education—that is, preparation that stimulates a sort of pedagogical dexterity that sees pre-service teachers (PSTs) leaving their teacher education programs capable of synergistically delivering their content in rigorous, differentiated, and multicultural ways—teacher education programs must commit to developing their students’ culturally responsive pedagogical skills.¹ But are PSTs *truly* engaging in an authentically multicultural education—one that prepares them for their role as culturally responsive pedagogues so that they can, in turn, provide equitable educative experiences for their future students? To this query, Ladson-Billings (2006) issued a blistering “no,” charging that “teacher preparation plays a large role in maintaining the status quo” (p. 42) as teachers enter the work force (still) largely unprepared to meet the nuanced needs of their students belonging to historically marginalized populations. In a similar critique, Hayes and Juarez (2012) contended that, “U.S. teacher education programs have never been set up to prepare future teachers for social justice in education or culturally responsive teaching” (p. 6). Some English PSTs lament that their teacher preparation did little to help them with the day-to-day challenges of enacting social justice in their classrooms (Cook & Amatucci, 2006). Still other PSTs—even those who engaged in a rigorous, critical teacher education program focused on social justice—experience great difficulty when it comes time to enact culturally responsive pedagogies in their classrooms (Davila, 2011). These findings are ominous given that K-12 students continue to reflect an increasingly vibrant array of cultural and linguistic diversity (Hussar & Bailey, 2013) while the U.S. teaching force remains predominantly White,

female, and monolingual (Boser, 2014). If the teacher education process is failing to prepare its PSTs to teach in culturally responsive ways during their multicultural classes and experiences, we must ask: *why?* And, perhaps more pointedly, *how do we fix it?*

Perhaps the greatest obstruction to preparing literacy practitioners to teach in culturally responsive ways lies in the challenge of disrupting the culture of niceness that imperceptibly osmoses many teacher education programs. Thelin (1978) wrote that “Niceness’...has been institutionalized, especially in schools of education” (p. 322). This construct allows PSTs to offer “nice”, liberal-oriented insights without truly engaging in the complex, and arduous, self-reflection processes culturally responsive teaching requires. But PSTs are not the only culpable party: reticent to engage students in these often times difficult conversations, stakeholders in literacy education often shy away from exploring matters related to access, equity, and social justice (Glazier, 2003; Haviland, 2008), preferring instead to stick to traditional, and safer, territory—such as lesson planning (Ginsburg, as cited in Britzman, 2003). These silences make teacher education programs complicit with an ideology that never truly prompts PSTs—or teacher educators—to rethink, and reshape, their approach to teaching. Ultimately, a preference for niceness often functions as superficial farce “that does little to shake the patriarchal foundations [of teacher education]...much less dismantle them” (Asher, 2007, p. 65).

In order to acknowledge and interrupt the forces that perpetuate the culture of niceness in teacher education programs, stakeholders must first develop

individuals who identify as gender-neutral. I have selected these pronouns because I believe they are more familiar for a diverse audience of readers.

¹ I acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that I can use when referring to individuals in my writing. Throughout this article I will use “he” to refer to individuals who identify as male, “she” to refer to individuals who identify as female, and “ze” for

an understanding of the forces most culpable for its ubiquity. As such, this paper calls attention to the culture of niceness in teacher education programs, investigates the structures and forces that fuel the phenomenon, and offers teacher educators culturally responsive pedagogical possibilities that resist and reject educative niceness.

Theoretical Frameworks

Critical Race Theory

In the 1990s, the theory of culturally responsive pedagogy established itself in the field of teacher education as a means to mediate the frictions between traditional schooling practices and students' sociocultural identities. Culturally responsive pedagogy has roots in critical race theory, which first emerged in the field of legal studies and offered a perspective through which to understand the disproportionate rate of incarceration of people of color (e.g., Bell, 1995). The movement was supported by scholars and other activists who believed that the "color-blind" mentality (that is, the insistence of "not seeing" a person's race/ethnicity) that was often central to civil rights work did not, despite its good intentions, properly address the systemic and institutional elements that led to and perpetuated widespread, endemic racism. In their foundational text "Toward a Theory of Critical Race Theory," Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) introduced critical race theory to the field of education, offering three maxims to describe its scope: that race continues to be a factor that perpetuates inequity in the U.S.; that the U.S. is based on property rights rather than human rights; and that understanding the intersection of education and property rights provides an analytical lens through which to understand both societal and educational oppression. Schools, understood as sites that reproduce both privilege and oppression, reify the relationship between race and property rights, with students belonging to dominant groups often

enjoying greater access to high quality educative experiences and resources (e.g., Kozol, 2012). These tenets, taken collectively, sought to identify and call attention to the ways in which schools, much like the legal system, perpetuate systemic and institutional injustices at the expense of students of color.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

The theory of culturally responsive teaching provided a way to realize the aims of critical race theory, which challenged stakeholders to take action against widespread, if often unacknowledged, educational inequities. It rejected the genetic deficiency (Terman, 1916) and cultural deprivation (Bloom, Davis, & Hess, 1965) paradigms of teaching, both of which applied deficit-framing to explicate the long-documented underperformance of students of color in U.S. schools (e.g., African American Male Task Force, 1990; Ogbu, 1981), which continues today, with Latino, African American, and Native American students dropping out at nearly twice the rate of White and Asian American students (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Though a commitment to disrupting inequities pulses throughout the theory, various stakeholders in the field conceptualize the notion of cultural responsiveness differently. Five strands characterize Gay's (2002) theory of culturally responsive pedagogy: developing a cultural diversity knowledge base; designing culturally relevant curricula; demonstrating cultural caring and building a learning community; developing a sensitivity of cross-cultural communications; and demonstrating a commitment to cultural congruity offered culturally relevant teaching as instruction that fosters students' authentic learning, enhances their cultural competence, and cultivates their sociopolitical consciousness. Building on the work of his forebears, Howard (2003) suggested that critical reflection, a process wherein teachers examine how their sociocultural identity, biases, and prejudices

impact their instructional practices, is an essential precursory component to culturally responsive teaching, an assertion on which I base both this article and my own pedagogy. While the meaning behind the phrase “culturally responsive” may shape-shift somewhat relative to the framework applied, common to all of these conceptions is the notion that students’ cultural backgrounds are powerful assets that, if meaningfully acknowledged and incorporated into classroom practices, can radically transform their educative experiences and disrupt the inequitable, hegemonic conditions in which many of them learn.

“Neutral” Teacher Education

Enacting authentic culturally responsive teacher preparation relies on fostering discussions that provide students with the opportunity to examine and confront the various forms of power, privilege, and marginalization that mark the classroom. Solórzano (1998) underscored this sentiment, writing that educational stakeholders committed to

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realizing the goals of critical race theory should “[challenge] dominant education theory, discourse, policy, and practice” (p. 528). But teacher educators may shy away from having these critical conversations for a variety of reasons. Perhaps the prospect of upsetting their students or disgruntling their administration vexes them; they may fret over the dire consequences they might face as a result of these frictions (e.g., Hayes & Juarez, 2012). Teacher educators may avoid these conversations because they have not developed a sense of their sociocultural identity and how it shapes their pedagogical maneuvers. They may endorse (unconsciously or otherwise) the ideology that

pedagogy is best when apolitical, an orientation favored by many White educators (e.g., Picower, 2009). But *all* education is political; instructing from a neutral teaching platform is impossible (Bissonnette & Boyd, in press; Freire, 1970). On the topic, Horton and Freire (1990) maintained that:

There can be no such thing as neutrality. It’s a code word for the existing system. It has nothing to do with anything but agreeing to what is and will always be—that’s what neutrality is. Neutrality is just following the crowd. Neutrality is just being what the system asks us to be. Neutrality, in other words, was an immoral act. (p. 102)

This apolitical insistence on neutrality allows teacher educators and their students to leave unexamined their sociocultural identities, renders culturally responsive teaching all but impossible, and helps explain why so many teachers are leaving their teacher education programs unable, or unwilling, to teach in culturally responsive ways.

But “neutrality” assumes myriad forms, and perhaps no manifestation is more problematic, and difficult to untangle, than that of niceness.

Fallacious Niceness

Often times, teacher education programs subscribe to notions of niceness and see it as a superior form of instruction—an aspirational one, even—and in doing so, fail to recognize the problematic properties of this reductive allegiance. Various scholars have worked to articulate the reasons behind teachers’ preferences for niceness. Like Horton and Freire (1990), Baptiste (2008) rejected

the notion of classrooms as neutral spaces, offering four fallacies of educational niceness—that is, “a practice predicated on the belief that it is possible and desirable for educators (and other educational stakeholders) to share their views with each other without imposing their will and opinions upon each other” (p. 6)—to explicate teachers’ avoidance of critical posturing. These four fallacies of educational niceness operationalized by many teacher education programs include: *Unwelcomed Acts are Unethical*, an assumption that leads teacher educators to shy away from critical points of discussion because they perceive engaging students in these conversations as an act of strong-arming imposition that defies morality; *Freedom is an Unqualified Good*, meaning that teacher educators believe it unethical to constrain and attempt to shape the beliefs of their students; *Titular Authority is Inherently Superior to Other Forms of Power*, which assumes that power conferred to a person due to his/her status, position, or title wields a particular, and augmented, brand of dominance that can be used to sway students’ beliefs and thus should not be used; and lastly, *Power is a Weapon Wheeled by Malevolent Subjects, at Their Whim and Fancy*, a notion that suggests that power is inherently oppressive and as such, is incapable of being used to promote a positive result. Teachers’ subscription to these fallacies underscores the motivations behind educational niceness, a construct many teachers don’t seem to realize they both uphold and perpetuate. Niceness and neutrality are iterations of the same phenomenon: *Whiteness*.

When “Niceness” Means “Whiteness”

For the purposes of this paper, I conceptualize Whiteness as a social construction designed intentionally and purposefully to realize hegemonic purposes (Frankenberg, 1993). Whiteness allows for a systemic advantage of a particular group over another, which in turns creates privileges and marginalization doled out to people based on the

conferred dominance/non-dominance of the groups to which they belong (Brodin, 2012). Because Whiteness often functions as the majoritarian, mainstream story, the construct has been normalized—seemingly neutralized—which perhaps explains why so many White PSTs struggle to understand themselves as racialized beings (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; McIntyre, 2002).

But what, exactly, is problematic with niceness? Isn’t being nice a desirable, even admirable, characteristic? To be sure, American society places a particular value on the construct in ways that other regions do not (Boorstin, 1982). Hartigan (2009) posited that in America, the terms “nice,” as well as “friendly” and “comfortable,” wield tremendous power and are often applied to make racially exclusionary distinctions. Despite its seeming attributes, “Niceness,” Low (2009) postulated, “is about keeping things clean, orderly, homogeneous, and controlled...but it is also a way of maintaining Whiteness” (p. 87). Niceness allows White students to control their social environments and defend their privilege. Alemán (2009) cautioned, “Liberal ideology and Whiteness privileges niceness, civility, and commonalities which only serves to maintain the status quo, covers up institutionalized racism, and silences the communities” (p. 291). Yet, many teachers cling to niceness, believing that their allegiance to the construct highlights their humanity and improves their pedagogy. In a critique of the construct, Bapiste (2008) stated:

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 inequalities—will be severely curtailed. (p. 26)

While American society generally celebrates niceness, the convention provides a specialized insulation that allows White PSTs to circumvent wrestling with their complex sociocultural identities, prejudices, and biases. Ultimately, the ideology functions as another iteration of Whiteness. And, like the social construct of Whiteness, the culture of niceness is often hard to discern, never mind combat.

The Usual Suspects: How Teacher Education Perpetuates Niceness

In addition to understanding the phenomenon of educative niceness, equally pressing is developing an awareness of the structures and forces that perpetuate this quiet hegemony. In what follows, I explore how four entities—audit culture, pre-service teachers, teacher educators, and curricula and instruction—perpetuate niceness and, in doing so, stymie culturally responsive teacher preparation.

Culprit 1: Audit Culture

Because of their dichotomous properties, the culture of niceness and social justice-oriented teacher preparation come into direct conflict with each other. These tensions are exacerbated in light of the era of standardization in which teacher education programs operate. Social justice-oriented teacher preparation requires teacher educators to equip their students with the tools for content mastery, critical thinking, action and social change, personal reflection, and awareness of multicultural group dynamics with the ultimate goal of working to create more equitable realities for students (Hackman, 2005). Equipping PSTs with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to teach in culturally responsive ways moves PSTs toward developing their own social justice

positionality and pedagogical repertoire. But many English teacher education programs struggle with navigating the “loaded matrix” (Miller & Norris, 2007) of social justice-oriented teacher preparation in an era of standardization. English teacher preparation programs often have a tenuous relationship with the concept of social justice. This strained relationship may be attributed to the term’s nebulousness (Alsup & Miller, 2014; Miller, 1999); it has perhaps only been further complicated due in part to the National Council of Accreditation of Teacher Education’s (NCATE) own troublesome history with the term: the organization removed the term entirely in 2006 though added it back in 2012 (National Council of Teachers of English, 2012).

Among teacher education programs, there is little agreement in how to conceptualize, and “do,” social justice teacher preparation. Dissatisfied with its definitional multiplicities and applications, Levinson (2009) bemoaned that “multicultural education is a conceptual mess” (p. 682). This assertion is disconcerting given that quality multicultural teacher preparation is a critical piece of positioning PSTs to work as social justice-oriented practitioners. Without a uniform understanding of the social justice lexicon, universities and colleges endorse varying programmatic approaches to social education programs and orient themselves to authentically culturally responsive teacher preparation, working to unpack PSTs’ beliefs and identities, equip them with the tools necessary to provide their own students with a democratic education, and/or examine multicultural issues (Barnes, 2016; Cochran-Smith, 2009; Trier, 2005). But while these approaches have proven transformative and align with the aims of culturally responsive teaching preparation, other English teacher preparation programs have forgone more critical, social justice-oriented approaches to teaching (Gorski, 2009; Miller, 2014). The newly-formed Council for the Accreditation of Educator

Preparation (CAEP, 2013) adopted the National Council of Teachers of English's (NCTE) social justice standard, though research around the new standards and its relationship to assessing social justice in teacher education programs is forthcoming (Alsup & Miller, 2014).

To that end, assessment plays a role in the failures of teacher education programs to prepare their English students for culturally responsive teaching. Schools of education often actively avoid empirical examinations of their teacher education programs (Zeichner, 1999) and thusly fail to learn how their own policies and practices impact educational outcomes for the diverse students PSTs will eventually serve (Nieto, 2000). Ladson-Billings (1999) suggested that these avoidances obscure the fact that some teacher education programs have not helped their PSTs learn the best practices for teaching *any* children, much less students belonging to historically marginalized populations, a clear violation of social justice-oriented teacher preparation (Cochran-Smith, 2009; Cochran-Smith et al., 2009). Despite failing to prepare their PSTs to work in equity-minded ways, teacher education programs often pass their NCATE credentials easily (Alsup & Miller, 2014).

Culprit 2: Pre-Service Teachers

Aside from programmatic hurdles, teacher education programs may also face an assortment of challenges from PSTs themselves while working to prepare them for culturally responsive teaching. Research shows that helping PSTs develop the awareness, insights, and skills required to combat educational inequities presents an extraordinary struggle (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Miller, 2014; Sleeter, 2001). Many PSTs demonstrate a disdain for multicultural courses, voicing their belief that multicultural education should be reserved for students belonging to historically marginalized populations (Rios & Stanton, 2011). Instead, PSTs

prefer to focus on learning to “do” teaching and surviving in the classroom (Britzman, 2003; Sleeter, 2001). Thomas (2011) wrote that many of his English PSTs believe that “anything theoretical is impractical” (p. 123). These antagonistic feelings about multicultural education, and the superiority of learning to “do” teaching over learning to “do” equity, can perhaps be attributed to the fact that PSTs are predominantly White, monolingual, and middle-class (Boser, 2014) and have little concept of themselves as racialized beings (Powell, 1997); as a result, they tend to have minimal, and limited, understanding and vision of good multicultural teaching (Sleeter, 2001, 2012). In order to reshape their feelings toward multiculturalism, PSTs must first understand the relationship of these feelings with their dispositions toward learning to teach (Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1995).

And perhaps there is no more important—and problematic—issue than that of dispositions, a concept that, much like *social justice*, presents definitional murkiness. For this paper, I borrow the definition offered by Alsup and Miller (2014), who wrote that “at their core, dispositions are the context and culturally specific embodied manifestations of one’s beliefs, values, and judgments about all practices related to the teaching profession” (p. 199). These deeply ingrained values and beliefs have been shown to guide PSTs’ behavior in educative contexts (Villegas, 2007) and reveal themselves through actions (or inactions) toward students (Diez, 2007). Dispositions are very difficult to change (Davila, 2011; Santoro & Allard, 2005; Zeichner, 1999) and, when unexamined, can have dire effects on K-12 students (Grant, 1991; Lee, 2007; Shoffner & Brown, 2010; Sleeter, 2012). For example, PSTs often demonstrate a belief in *absolute democracy* that assumes “kids are kids” independently of their cultures (Causey, Thomas, & Armento, 2000). This color-blind approach dismisses the importance of recognizing and affirming students’ sociopolitical

backgrounds by suggesting that a solid pedagogy is generally appropriate for all students (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Nieto, 1998). Another disposition common to PSTs is that of *optimistic individualism* (Causey, Thomas, & Armento, 2000), which suggests that with hard work and effort, a person, regardless of his or her sociocultural background, will triumph over oppressive circumstances. These ideologies fail to account for the institutional, educational, and systemic structures that push students belonging to historically marginalized groups "so far behind the starting line [in so many areas of U.S. society] that most of the outcomes will be racially foreordained" (Hacker, 1995, p. 34). Subscribing to these notions allows PSTs to deny their own privileges and thusly underplay the experiences of their students (Nieto, 1998). Working to cultivate his PSTs' social justice dispositions, Miller (2014) found that students often lacked a developed critical consciousness of the school settings in which they taught; those PSTs who did develop an understanding of how pervasive, endemic, and systemic injustices impacted their students were often too intimidated to position themselves as allies when opportunities arose. Yet, without taking action against these injustices, PSTs cannot truly align themselves with the aims of culturally responsive teaching.

In working to identify and alter PSTs' dispositions, White students must first acknowledge that they benefit in a myriad of ways from a longstanding, often invisible racial hierarchy that relies on the oppression of persons belonging to marginalized populations (McIntosh, 1989) and how their racialized experiences have impacted them both as people and teachers (Feiman-Nemser & Remillard,

1995; Kendall, 2013). But developing this race consciousness is no easy feat given that Whiteness is often seen as a normal, and neutral, way of being (McIntosh, 1989; Tochluk, 2010). But PSTs often balk against discussion of privileges and refuse to acknowledge the racist systems that provide power to some while oppressing others (Hayes & Juarez, 2012; McIntyre, 2002). Haviland (2008) found that White pre-service English teachers often employed numerous strategies to evade discussing racism and the role of Whiteness and perpetuated this evasion by changing the topic, avoiding words, or remaining silent altogether. PSTs may resist discussions of anti-oppressive practices because such conversations require them to consider not only the experiences of

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marginalized populations, but also their own complicity in these realities. When PSTs come to see that Whiteness does not embody any positive attributes, White students often experience anguish (McIntyre, 2002). This traumatic epiphany often leads them to a “crisis” (Kumashiro, 2002) whereby they recognize their complicity, be it oblivious

or otherwise, in the oppression of others. But these crises are constructive; these dispositions must first be troubled in order to be re-oriented.

But, though the culture of niceness would have us believe otherwise, working to improve the attitudes of PSTs is not the same thing as, nor is it a substitute for, preparing culturally responsive teachers. PSTs must internalize that culturally responsive teaching is rooted in the way they view, engage, and respond to the world around them. Thusly, teacher educators must utilize various strategies to support their PSTs as they develop the equity-oriented dispositions that act as the fulcrum of culturally responsive pedagogy—no easy feat.

Culprit 3: Teacher Educators

Like their students, teacher educators must acknowledge their own positionality and role in multicultural education in order to effectively teach their students (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Sleeter, 1996). That the college professoriate is, like the K-12 U.S. teaching force, an “embarrassingly homogeneous” (Ladson-Billings, 1996, p. 42) group comprised predominantly of White educators. Embarrassment aside, this homogeneity has almost certainly impacted the degree to which culturally responsive teacher preparation is actualized. Sleeter (1996) suggested that White educators’ increased involvement in multicultural education has played a role in the movement’s disconnect from social justice since so many belonging to this group have no previous experience performing social justice work. This finding is particularly unsettling given that these teacher educators determine what qualifies as essential knowledge for future English teachers (Morrell, 2005). Thusly, it is paramount for White teacher educators to grapple with their own sociocultural identities to ensure that they do not craft, and deliver, a self-servicing view of multicultural education (Sleeter, 1996). Troubling this positionality enables teacher educators to fulfill their responsibilities to their PSTs, their PSTs’ future students, and society at large.

But these efforts may not be lauded: some teacher educators who actively adopt and model culturally responsive teaching practices for their PSTs face backlash from their administrations. Such was the case for Malik who, in attempting to teach his methods students about culturally relevant pedagogy, was chastised for being “too radical” and having a “problematic disposition” (Hayes & Juarez, 2012) when he admonished a student for saying he was tired of the “race crap.” Literacy teacher educators who work to disrupt the culture of niceness by pushing their PSTs to examine and re-

orient their dispositions may be accused of “classroom politicizing and indoctrination—teaching morality” (Alsup & Miller, 2014, p. 201). Colleagues may also balk against true multicultural teacher education, instead preferring a strategy of “adding on”: that is, keeping European-American curriculum and pedagogies intact but supplementing them with materials speaking to marginalized persons’ contributions in order to help all students see they belong to American society (Banks, 1989; Takaki, 1993). Perhaps the most famous instance of this collegial clash in English education emerged during “the canon wars,” which saw a heated debate between those advocating for the “Great Books approach” (Bloom, 1987) and those supporting a more multicultural canon (Ravitch, 1990). Even those teacher educators who wish to engage in critical discussions of culturally relevant pedagogy with their PSTs may shy away from these conversations in order to avoid confrontations with administrators and colleagues alike.

Culprit 4: Curriculum and Instruction

The final barrier to culturally responsive teacher preparation lies in the delivery of curricula and instruction. Banks (2004) faulted teacher education curricula for its celebratory nature— that is, for superficially presenting multicultural content using a “holidays and heroes” approach. University-based multicultural courses may also present multiculturalism as “ghettoized issues of diversity” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p.42), inadequately preparing PSTs for the needs of their most underserved students. Some PSTs lament that their teacher education programs were too theoretical in nature (Cook & Amatucci, 2006) while others argue that the conventional training of English teacher candidates, which often focuses on the daily requirements of “doing” teaching per the political and bureaucratic mandates of the certification process, has resulted in novice English teachers

entering the classroom uncritical of the world around them (Thomas, 2011). Even the multicultural courses PSTs complete tend to focus on personal awareness and pragmatic aspects of teaching rather than developing PSTs' sociopolitical consciousness and commitment to educational equity, both marks of culturally responsive teaching (Gorski, 2009). Though the curricula and instruction PSTs engage is an unquestionably vital element of culturally responsive teacher preparation, these entities—and, in turn, the authenticity of PSTs' culturally responsive training—often shift based on contextual curricular realities.

Teacher education curricula is often delivered using a transmission instructional model that helps to explain PSTs' underdeveloped critical lenses. This “absorptionist” model favored among teacher education programs involves students acquiring knowledge as their professors share it with them (Prawat, 1992, as cited in Tatto, 1996). This results in a rather haphazard implementation of culturally responsive teacher preparation; a teacher educator may dedicate extensive time and efforts to preparing her PSTs to work in culturally responsive ways while another teacher may simply decide not to introduce her students to the concepts at all. Students almost always turn to lesson plan assignments to demonstrate their mastery of a professor's objectives, making it perhaps the most pervasive approach to preparing students for the demands of the classroom. Just as the concepts that undergird teacher education courses often shift based on the professor's own positionality and preference, these lesson plans may or may not require students to reflect on, sharpen, and apply their knowledge of culturally responsive practices. Cochran-Smith (1995) cautioned that the lesson plan approach will not sufficiently prepare students for an activist's stance as it instead suggests that “knowledge, curriculum and instruction are static and unchanging, transmitted through one-way conduit

from teacher to students, rather than socially constructed through the transactions of teachers, children, and texts” (p. 496). Though these instructional methods have proven problematic, they are still pervasive in teacher education. In holding with the traditional lesson plan approach—one that frequently stops short of critiquing the confluence of hegemonic forces in the classroom—the culture of niceness is preserved.

Pedagogical Possibilities for Rejecting Niceness

Thus far, I have described the sources behind and the entities most culpable for perpetuating the culture of niceness that permeates many teacher education programs. But despite these aforementioned obstructions, I maintain that teacher education classrooms are powerful spaces, and teacher educators are capable of working as agents of change. Morrell (2005) called for a move toward a model of critical English education in which literacy teacher educators function as “explicitly political agents” (p. 319) in order to disrupt the educational norms, such as niceness, that have long disenfranchised students belonging to historically marginalized populations. These critically-oriented literacy teacher educators work as activists and see their work with PSTs as a powerful way to prompt disequilibrium and, in turn, promote equity.

Recognizing (My) Intentionality

I pause here to note that mine is a social justice-oriented approach to preparing teachers capable of responding to the needs of their own culturally and linguistically diverse students by teaching in culturally responsive ways. Like Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999), I affirm the belief that such a positionality is undeniably political. But I also believe that *all* pedagogical actions are politically charged, and refusing to acknowledge them as such

affirms both the culture of niceness as well as the Whiteness at its core. To that end, I maintain that teacher educators—myself included—should openly discuss their positionality with their students and make explicit this orientation in their research. Mine is an approach to teacher education that aims to open up and sustain candid conversations around pressing, salient, and sometimes difficult classroom realities. My students and I work through these challenges together, because like Watkins and Ostenson (2015), I hope this preparation will position my students to be more effective, and more self-efficacious, when they close the doors of their classrooms and begin to teach their own students. By forwarding my unequivocal agency, I hope to incense my students to develop their own identities as literacy activists.

To realize my pedagogical goals, I turn to a constructivist approach to instructional delivery, an orientation that validates the belief that PSTs are learners who benefit from making meaning in context (Tatto, 1996). Accordingly, I intentionally frame readings, discussions, and activities to rupture the transmission model of knowledge. In my classroom, we are all teachers; we are all students. I invite my students to participate in a sort of dialogism—one in which we vacillate the roles of teacher and learner, itself a mark of culturally responsive teaching.

Secondly, it bears mentioning that to my way of thinking, the opposite of “niceness” isn’t a culture of shaming; rather, its dichotomy is open, critical, and provocative instruction, conversation, and reflexivity that makes culturally responsive teacher preparation possible. In what follows, I detail three practices—displaying sociocultural vulnerability, modeling and providing opportunities for critical reflection, and collaborating with PSTs to create transformative curricula—that offer a culturally responsive form of

teacher preparation, a model intentionally undertaken to prepare PSTs for the important work that lies ahead by first acknowledging and disrupting the niceness that hangs thickly in the air around us.

Displaying Sociocultural Vulnerability

I have always been intrigued by the fact that, as a teacher educator who identifies as White, female, monolingual, and heterosexual, I am representative of the homogeneity that plagues teacher education. But I have found that, strategically utilized, my sociocultural identity provides a means through which to engage my students—so many of whom look like me—in discussions of power, privilege, and equity. Hayes and Juarez (2012) challenged teacher educators to openly discuss Whiteness, and its presence in teacher education programs, in order to

“In my classroom, we are all teachers; we are all students.”

ready students for the demands of culturally relevant teaching. One strategy for initiating these discussions involves teacher educators “witnessing Whiteness” (Tochulk, 2010). This tactic draws attention to issues and instances of Whiteness, engaging students in its nuances and creating critical communities wherein all members can discuss how the construct affects their lives. One way I open up this conversation, and work to de-neutralize Whiteness for my students, is by sharing moments in my life in which I recognize my own privilege. For instance, I shared with my students how the weekend prior to class, I’d been pulled over by a [White] police officer while stopped at a red light. Baffled by the lights behind me, I sighed deeply, and, annoyed, turned into a parking lot. The officer, whose embarrassment matched my annoyance, avoided eye contact; he sheepishly informed me that my tags were expired. Apologizing prolifically, he handed me my ticket, which he assured me would be dismissed as soon as I showed evidence of my updated registration. Inwardly, I

groaned at the thought of having to deal with the issue at all. Only later did I realize that I was in the minority of people whose first reaction to blue lights was annoyance. At no time during the exchange did I experience fear. The revelation of this privilege struck me, particularly in light of the recent violent acts of police brutality against Black and brown bodies that have been brought to the forefront of our national consciousness. Mine was not a common reaction to blue lights, but it certainly was a privileged one.

Having first offered my own story, I then asked my students to reflect briefly on a time in which they experienced a similar dawning of privilege. I tell them that if what they are writing presents a struggle, or makes them uncomfortable, they are likely completing the assignment with fidelity. After a couple minutes, I hand students pieces of paper in which they scrawl a Six Word Memoir, a literacy strategy rooted in Smith and Fershleiser's (2008) project, which encapsulates their experience. To open up the conversation, I first offer my own memoir:

Blue lights

White Skin

Blessed Exasperation.

Once I have finished reading my memoir, students often return to their memoirs and make alterations. Some ask for a new piece of paper to craft an entirely new response. After writing, erasing, and writing again, students attach their six word memoirs to our classroom's "Privilege Collage," an expanse of paper we display prominently at the front of the classroom. I ask students to be vigilant throughout the semester in considering similar instances that come up in which they recognize how their sociocultural identity impacts a situation, or their response to it. Frequently—often before class or during class breaks—students shoot up from their

seat, a remembered instance of privilege springing to mind. They write their memoir and attach it to the Privilege Collage. Sitting back down, the returning student almost always quietly relates his/her experience to a peer, thereby opening up a dialogic space for students to engage in a critical conversation that they have themselves fostered. Periodically, I read the collage and invite willing students to share their experiences with the rest of us. I continue to add my own. In this way, I offer my own sociocultural vulnerability to coax my students into exploring their own positionalities. The activity has given students an individualized—but public—platform to share and come to grips with their complicated sociocultural identities. The collage's presence at the front of the room stands as an ever-present reminder that this reflexivity is an ongoing, iterative process, one in which we *all* participate—myself included. In this public yet uniquely individual way, my students and I work to push back against a culture of niceness that would have us avoid critical examinations of self.

Modeling Critical Reflection

Bound inextricably to sociocultural awareness is the process of critical reflection. As a literacy teacher educator, I work to create opportunities for students to explore how their own sociocultural identities might shape their interactions with their future students, just as my sociocultural identity informed how I reacted to the blue lights flashing in my rear-view mirror. Critical reflection is a foundational, precursory aspect of being able to teach in culturally responsive ways (Howard, 2003). But critical reflection is not easily undertaken, as evidenced by the difficulty teachers have in performing the action (Bissonnette, 2016; Siwatu, 2007). Just as teacher educators should model for their students how to differentiate instruction, manage their classrooms, and modify assessments, so too should they model critical reflection. Otherwise, how can we expect our

students to perform this important skill in their own classrooms?

Going First. In my classroom, I work to model this skill so that my students will have concrete examples of the forms critical reflection might take. Research shows that modeling culturally responsive practices grants students an opportunity to more fully understand its nuances (Conklin, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995). My students always seem a bit surprised when I offer, “Sometimes, when I reflect, I don’t like what I see.” Their attention fixed on me, I move into a narrative example.

When I was a high school teacher at a high school populated primarily by low-income students of color, I realized—a bit too belatedly, unfortunately—that many of my students did not have home computers. When I asked my students to complete tasks that required the use of a home computer, I was frequently frustrated with the number of students who came to class with the work uncompleted. I simply could not understand what I perceived to be my students’ academic apathy. *They get it in class, I would think to myself. Why won’t they do it at home?* It wasn’t until one downcast-gazing student told me in private that her inability to complete the assignment stemmed from her not having transportation to the community library, a place she frequented in order to access a computer. Equal parts embarrassed by and grateful for her honesty, I realized that I had been teaching from *my* sociocultural paradigm, which included growing up in a household in which computer access was taken for granted. Without meaning to, I had marginalized the very students I wanted to support—all because I did not critically examine the ways in which my positionality impacted my instructional choices. Accordingly, I began to offer students more clearly defined times to access our classroom computers—before school, during lunch, after school, and by appointment—to provide them with more opportunities to complete their assignments.

Secondly, I tried to limit assignments that required computer access to ones we completed in-class, making full use of my school’s media center and computer lab. In this way, I began to consider my sociocultural awareness (emerging as it was) to scrutinize, and modify, my instruction. This example is particularly rich because it introduces students to the notion that the “cultural” in “culturally responsive pedagogy” is not confined exclusively to race or ethnicity—that, in fact, reducing culturally responsive teaching to those pedagogies that involve a discussion of race and/or ethnicity often leaves unexamined the issues of inequity on which the framework rests (Gorski & Swalwell, 2009; Hammond, 2014). By offering this anecdote, I open up conversation in which my students and I discuss the importance of recognizing and affirming the nuances of students’ sociocultural identities, which requires us to consider our students’ class, sexual orientation, gender identity, and religious affiliations (among other descriptors), and the manner in which these elements might intersect so that we may evolve our culturally responsive practices.

In addition to owning up to my own classroom shortcomings, I find tremendous value in providing my students with timely examples of “real” teachers engaging critical reflection. To extend the conversation, we read Emily E. Smith’s acceptance speech for the Donald H. Graves Excellence in the Teaching of Writing award presented at the National Teachers of English Language Arts Convention (Strauss, 2015). In the speech, Smith, a fifth grade English Language Arts teacher in Texas, recounted an exchange during which one of her students of color told her that she “Couldn’t understand because[she] was a White lady.” Somewhat surprisingly, Smith conceded the point. We examine her speech—her epiphany, its ensuing traumas, and, most importantly, how she used this realization of cultural incongruences to change her

approach to instruction, making it more pertinent to her students' lives and thusly more culturally responsive. Students apply Nieto's (2006) five-level continuum of multicultural teacher awareness to the speech, labeling Smith's progression throughout the text. In this way, they apply a germinal framework to challenge and deepen their understanding of culturally responsive practices; additionally, they have a concrete example of what critical reflection looks like—and how difficult it is to do. We have applied the framework to my narrative as well. I relish the moments when my students debate a level's placement, as their dialogue is almost always indicative of the important theoretical grappling they are doing.

Having discussed these episodes, I challenge my students: how might our sociocultural awareness, or lack thereof, shape our pedagogical actions? Our inactions? I pose these questions to acclimate my students with the tough work that critical reflection requires—to get them unaccustomed to discomfort.

Students admittedly struggle with this skill. Not only is it a difficult skill to master as it often requires looking at the world often from an entirely altered paradigm, but also it is a practice few teachers have made explicit for them. To support their efforts, I encourage students to cultivate a critical collegueship (Lord, 1994) with someone they trust. This involves finding a peer or a mentor with whom they can be honest and forthcoming, but who will also give them critical, honest feedback on how they might improve their culturally responsive practice by being more mindful of their sociocultural identities and the ways in which it shapes their pedagogy. If performed with authenticity, critical collegueship wields tremendous power in the fight

to promote more equitable educative realities for students belonging to marginalized communities, a particularly important relationship for White teachers working with students of color (Bissonnette, 2016).

Co-Creating a Transformative Curriculum

Revitalizing the curriculum in teacher education courses can drastically impact PSTs' understanding of and willingness to perform culturally responsive pedagogy. Thomas (2011) recommended that curricula for English PSTs involve an investigation about the history of English as a discipline in order to help students learn the past, present, and potential for the subject. In my own classroom, I conceptualize required standards/curricula as

“In my own classroom, I conceptualize required standards/curricula as entities capable of inciting rich, provocative conversation around issues of equity.”

entities capable of inciting rich, provocative conversation around issues of equity.

Deconstructing the Curricula.

Despite my own feelings regarding the mandate, I acknowledge that the Common Core State Standards

(CCSS) is a reality many PSTs will confront when they move into their own classrooms. As such, in my classes, I work to familiarize my students with the standards—and help them develop the ability to analyze, critique, and, should they choose to, subvert them. To begin, we examine the Text Exemplars Appendix B (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), a list of CCSS-endorsed readings, annotating as we go. I ask students to offer ideas as to which groups benefit from the *intellectual property* of the exemplar texts. This question returns us to critical race theory, which suggests that understanding the ways in which property rights—here, the intellectual

property curricula affords—intersects with education, we are provided with an analytical tool to make sense of inequities. We compare our analysis with other critiques of Appendix B (e.g., Moss, 2013; Schieble, 2014). Because I want my PSTs to gain an understanding of the immediate ways in which local required reading lists will impact their own classrooms, I often have them examine state and district mandates. I pepper students with questions: What values and attitudes does this list endorse, if only implicitly? What patterns do you see? Who *don't* you see? What stories are missing? Who is responsible for these lists? Students very quickly ascertain the narrowness of the secondary curricula, a critique that has long been projected in educative discourse (e.g., Applebee, 1974; Bissonnette & Glazier, 2015). I particularly enjoy having students examine required curricula and policies around British literature, a canonical body that marked the secondary classroom upon the inception of literature as a secondary subject in the 1870s (Harvard University, 1896). When we compare this original secondary curriculum with ones currently employed in various districts and states as well as against the most recent national study of secondary curricula (Stotsky, 2010), students are quick to point out how very little the British literature curriculum has changed, particularly compared to its American literature counterpart, making the teaching of the British canon, like niceness, another manifestation of Whiteness.

Reconstructing the Curricula.

But we don't stop with this curricular query. Next, we consider possibilities for supplementing our required curricula. This activity helps PSTs develop a discipline-specific approach to actualizing social justice pedagogy (Kumashiro, 2001)—that is, an understanding of how they might modify their instruction to promote equity in their classrooms. Curricula development can help PSTs develop their

sociopolitical consciousness by having them consider, for example, Euro-centric canon formation (Banks, 1993), and alternative approaches to teaching literature such as the inquiry-based (Beach & Myers, 2001), deconstructivist (Morrell, 2005), or cultural criticism (O'Neill, 1993) models. Curriculum and discussions around multicultural literature should look to incorporate discussions of Whiteness in order to draw attention to the concept and likewise engage the authentic voices of White students (Glazier & Seo, 2005). This reconstruction process provides students with an opportunity to act as critical consumers of their discipline; in doing so, they develop a tangible product for pushing back against niceness.

One way my students and I reconstruct required curricula is through finding and incorporating quality texts that supplement the required curricula. To that end, I introduce my students to the art of counterstorytelling, a practice that acknowledges, affirms, and projects the stories of people belonging to historically marginalized groups (Delgado, 1989). Because, like Goodwin (1997), I believe that "in the search for authentic materials that can be used to prepare culturally responsive pedagogues, teacher education programs should turn to their students" (pp. 141-142), I encourage students to suggest counterstories to supplement the required curricula we have already examined. Given the CCSS's push for increased exposure to informational texts, I challenge students to find informational texts that could both supplement the curriculum while promoting sociopolitical consciousness. One promising practice involves having PSTs engage with informational young adult literature, an approach proven to catalyze PSTs' sociopolitical consciousness by providing the substance for elucidating, humanizing, and complicating the realities of social phenomena; helping them develop and apply additive frameworks; and supporting their engagement in social critique (Boyd & Bissonnette,

in press). I challenge them to turn to primary documents, such as Olaudah Equiano's (1814) slave narrative, frequently anthologized in British literature textbooks, to buttress their required content. Additionally, I encourage students to incorporate news articles that shed light on pertinent social issues and thematically link to required texts. Having engaged with informational texts utilized to promote conversations around inequity, students feel more self-efficacious in their ability to seek out non-mainstream stories that can both satisfy the CCSS *and* promote culturally responsive teaching practices. I see this collaborative curricular investigation and re-creation as a means by which to equip my students with the skills to be critical of their content and the political forces behind its inception, history, and present realities. Threaded throughout these activities is an ongoing dialogue on how power and marginalization are made manifest in our required curricula and standards. Our sustained critique of the hegemony literacy practices often perpetuate allows us to apply discipline-specific strategies to disrupt educative niceness.

Concluding Thoughts

Here, I have shared various strategies I have implemented with the intent of disrupting the culture of niceness—which is fundamentally a culture of Whiteness—that seeps into the very fabric

of so many teacher education programs. In looking ahead, it is my hope that other literacy teacher educators will offer their own successful strategies for dismantling this construct that renders authentic culturally responsive teacher preparation impossible. Like Baptise (2008), I hold that a grievous folly is produced when teachers refrain from imposing their own equity-minded beliefs on their students. Impose, impose, impose.

To disrupt the inequities students belonging to historically marginalized populations continue to face, all of the usual suspects—audit culture, PSTs, teacher educators, and curricula and instruction—must combine forces and thus fortify their efforts to reject a culture of niceness that thwarts culturally responsive teaching. Such a collective transformation means a cessation of the half-hearted pandering around culturally responsive teaching and multicultural education and requires instead a revitalized, legitimate commitment to social justice-oriented teacher preparation. Takaki (1993) wrote that rather than ignoring and shying away from the challenging dynamics of their profession, teacher education should “embrace this timely and exciting intellectual opportunity to revitalize the social sciences and humanities” (p. 117). Over two decades later, this charge resonates. Will we finally answer this charge, or will we continue to honor the stifling niceness that impedes equity-oriented teacher preparation?

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