



## Book Review

*The Price of Nice: How Good Intentions Maintain Educational Inequity.* Angelina E. Castagno, Ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019. 284 pp.

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*The Price of Nice: How Good Intentions Maintain Educational Inequity*, edited by Angelina Castagno, introduces the analytic framework of “Niceness” as a barrier to confronting inequity in education. Niceness, as a concept, manifests throughout the work in various ways, not only in terms of what it is but—often more effectively—by what it is not.

The first section of the book addresses Niceness in K–12 Schools. Gooding (2019) uses three school-based case studies to demonstrate how “‘nice’ is the polite, willful, superficial suspension of a deeper understanding [...] of conflict” (p. 4) and “mask(s) the political reality of meanness against non-White children” (p. 13). Wong (2019) analyzes Niceness in the context of a racially and culturally diverse public high school in which Niceness means discussing topics such as social justice in ways that present racism as individual and racial conflict as having two legitimate sides. For example, Wong (2019) mentions a worksheet that asks students to explain “how stereotypes could be harmful [...] and helpful” (p. 28). Sierk (2019) looks at two different schools with New Latino Diaspora (NLD) populations in Nebraska, where “Niceness is a manifestation of Whiteness” (p. 37). Sierk (2019) demonstrates that because racism is constructed as intentional meanness in this context, the preponderance of intentional Niceness must mean racism does not or cannot exist. Students are left with a superficial Niceness that facilitates numerical diversity but precludes the potential for solidarity, because it is premised on a false assumption of equal power dynamics. Mac’s (2019) ethnographic study of special education in a charter high school connects Niceness to “benevolence, constructions of goodness, and paternalism” (p. 55). In this construction, Students of Color with disabilities are co-constructed by the system as bad and lazy, whereas dominant groups can express sympathy and paternalism without challenging said construction. Galman (2019) demonstrates how Niceness is connected to an “idealized White middle-class femininity” (p. 71) expressed by (and expected from) White heterosexual middle-class preservice elementary teachers. In this chapter, Galman (2019) demonstrates that “*nice* is the near enemy of *good*” (p. 79) in a context where her participants are ultimately “more comfortable with patriarchy than they are with social justice” (p. 82).

The second section addresses Niceness in Higher Education. Wegwert and Charles (2019) study young, White, middle class, cis-female elementary teacher candidates who invoke “Be Nice” as a catch-all phrase with students, even when they are being bullied. The authors establish the profound notion that “(w)hen we individualize difference we are left with sameness [...] a homogenization of difference” (p. 103). In “Evaluating Niceness,” Weatherston (2019) examines professor evaluation systems like Rate My Professor (RMP), in which Niceness (including giving good grades) is a “counterfeit virtue” (Ward, 2017, as quoted in Weatherston, 2019, p. 123) prioritized over “civility, equity, democracy, and academic standards” (p. 123). Villarreal et al. (2019) present the study of a university working

to diversify its faculty, finding that the organizational culture of Niceness requires people to be “polite, diplomatic, and non-confrontational” (p. 133), silencing faculty of color and returning the university to the racial status quo. Ben et al. (2019) use creative storytelling and metaphor, rooted in critical race theory (CRT), to share vignettes of Students of Color in predominantly White colleges, “forced to perform Niceness” in a way that demands “self-containment” (p. 145). “Niceness for survival,” they write, “highlights the toxicity of Niceness—not to be confused for the kindness and respect that students of color deserve” (p. 146). Bustamante and Solyom (2019) use the CRT strategy of counter-storytelling to demonstrate how Niceness silences everybody as they try to fit into PWIs, even when they are Latino law students there for the explicit purpose of impacting and representing their communities.

The third section, “Niceness across Schools and Society,” helps the reader envision the implications for justice when people choose the antithesis of Niceness. Lazdowski (2019) demonstrates how Niceness is sustained through a lack of racial literacy, whereas racial literacy can be the antidote to the obfuscating role of Niceness. Community members at a school board meeting used the skills of racial literacy to question narratives of Niceness and to intervene in ways that could be perceived as “boisterous, rude, and direct” (p. 198) while also being effective. Wilson and Yull (2019) demonstrate how, in an upstate NY urban school district, everyday “Nice” and “colorblind” behaviors such as reporting achievement and discipline in race-neutral ways or praising teachers’ labor, sacrifice, and good intentions within a technocratic definition of “teaching” meant the maintenance of a status quo in which racial inequity was already prominent. Smolarek and Negrette (2019) challenged teachers in a K–12 Teacher PD workshop in suburban Wisconsin to show how “Midwest Niceness [...] can start to mean socially acute awareness of dissimilar realities” (p. 234). Vaught and Judge (2019) demonstrate how some White people fail at Nice Whiteness, because they are girls and because they have working-class backgrounds. Systemic Niceness, as Vaught and Judge (2019) show, “reinforc(es) White heteropatriarchal dominance” (p. 255) that does not serve the interests of all White people. Finally, Reimer (2019) uses a feminist lens to demonstrate how women across the U.S., and across racial, cultural, and sexual identity differences, are “troubling the gendered tropes of nice and nasty” by embracing terms like “badass woman,” “nasty woman,” and “bad girls” because Niceness both “constrains women’s professional lives and careers” (p. 267), and sanctions inequality.

I began this book in October 2020, at the height of a four-year period in which overt racism—and outright meanness—were used to divide and weaken the populace. I kept asking myself, “Can’t we be anti-racist *and* nice? I’m so tired of all the meanness.” But this book does not theoretically conceptualize “Nice” as the opposite of “mean.” Because of that, the answer to my question is: no, we can’t be anti-racist *and* nice. “Niceness,” as it is conceptualized by Castagno and her team of authors, is the theoretical opposite of authenticity, responsibility, disruption, honesty, racial literacy, competence, equity, goodness, and even kindness, all of which are required for building a racially just society.

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