Article

The (Im)Possibility of Interrupting Midwest Nice in a Predominantly White, Small-Town School District

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Abstract: As school and district leaders are confronted with explicit opposition to racial equity and inclusion policies and practices, they also continue to contend with Nice resistance. In this ethnographic case study, I draw on interviews with teachers and administrators as well as observations of meetings and professional learning sessions to explore how educational leaders in a predominantly white, small, Midwestern town navigated a culture of Niceness characterized by good intentions, comfort, and avoiding conflict. Though most educators said they supported equity and inclusion, they resisted the administration and the policies and practices administrators implemented. Leaders challenged the culture of Niceness in the school district by focusing on impacts, pushing teachers to do things they were not comfortable with, and having direct conversations. Ultimately, several administrators left the district, and some equity and inclusion efforts were stalled or rolled back. Based on the findings of this study, I conclude that it is difficult to interrupt Niceness in the interest of advancing racial equity and inclusion.

Keywords: interrupting Niceness; whiteness; leadership; equity; resistance; rural

1. Introduction

From the so-called "CRT-backlash" to book bans to restrictions on teaching about race, there have been numerous explicit attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in education over the last several years [1–3]. However, there remains a less obvious, but still powerful, Nice resistance to racial equity and inclusion in schools. Niceness is a socialized disposition that prioritizes what is pleasant and comfortable [4,5]. Niceness works with whiteness, a constellation of beliefs, practices, policies, and institutional arrangements that perpetuates white supremacy, to produce and maintain racial inequities [6–8]. Within education and beyond, Niceness individualizes racism, obscuring the systemic nature of inequities, and emphasizes good intentions over impacts, absolving people and institutions of responsibility for racialized outcomes [4,6,9].

There is a well-established body of literature on white teacher resistance to racial justice, including that from white educators who say they value equity and inclusion [10,11]. Even Nice, well-intentioned white teachers tend to prioritize comfort and avoid engaging with structural racism [12,13]. Within the field of educational leadership, research shows that white administrators often struggle to deal with resistance to racial equity coming from teachers and within themselves [14,15]. However, antiracist educational leadership requires administrators not allow resistance to derail the implementation of equitable policies and practices [16]. There is debate in the field about how to achieve antiracist goals in education; some advocate for collaborative leadership, while others believe top-down change may be necessary [16,17].

In connection with this Special Issue, the present study explores how educational leaders in a predominantly white, small-town school district in Wisconsin navigated, and in some ways attempted to disrupt, Nice resistance to equity and inclusion initiatives. I used an ethnographic case study methodology [18] and was guided by an overarching research

question: How do education stakeholders engage with each other around issues of equity and inclusion? Drawing on semi-structured interviews with teachers and administrators, as well as observations of school meetings and events and relevant documents, I found that in this context, Niceness was characterized by a focus on good intentions, comfort, and avoiding conflict. Most teachers were in favor of equity and inclusion, but they were opposed to the *way* administrators were implementing it. Teachers were resistant in large part because leaders and the policies and practices they were changing were not Nice; administrators focused on impacts, pushed teachers to do things they were not comfortable with, and wanted to have direct conversations. Resistance from educators, as well as from parents and community members who supported them, was very strong. Several administrators left the district, and some equity-oriented policies were rolled back. The findings of this study suggest that it is difficult to interrupt Niceness in the interest of racial equity and inclusion.

2. Literature Review: White Resistance to and Leadership for Racial Equity

Most schools in the United States continue to uphold and advance whiteness and white supremacy [19–21]. As Castagno [6] explains, "Whiteness, as a system of ideological and institutional race dominance engaged by everyone to various degrees, composes an elaborate and extensive set of mechanisms that work to sustain and mask dominance" (p. 165). Among the mechanisms of whiteness are white racial ignorance that obscures how racism is embedded in societal structures, an emphasis on individual intentions and actions, and prioritizing white people's comfort over racial justice [6,22–25]. Within schools, many teachers evade information about systemic racism and resist institutional changes intended to advance racial equity and inclusion. Educational administrators often struggle to implement antiracist policies and practices in the face of resistance from school staff.

2.1. White Teacher Resistance to Racial Equity

Teachers, especially white teachers, often engage the mechanisms of whiteness to resist racial equity initiatives in schools. By insisting that racism is about individual bias and bigotry, and maintaining their innocence as people who care about their students and are not racist, they deny systemic racism and argue against the need for changes to policy and practice [11,26,27]. Though there is evidence of white teachers contributing to institutional equity reforms [28,29], even teachers who say they are interested in making their schools more racially just often undermine this goal [10,13,30]. Much of teachers' resistance comes in response to policies intended to address racialized disparities in discipline and access to advanced academic opportunities [10,31]. White teacher resistance to antiracism can also be complex. White teachers may meaningfully contribute to racial equity in their schools by changing grading practices to reduce racialized tracking and taking responsibility for racist discipline practices, while still perpetuating whiteness by individualizing racism and allowing discomfort to limit action [12,32].

2.2. The Challenges of White Leadership for Racial Equity

Given that racism is systemic, there is a need for organizational change within schools and districts, and this requires educational leadership for racial equity [16]. Scholars in the field of educational leadership have documented the antiracist impact of institutional changes including talking and learning about race openly and collectively, incorporating race in all aspects of data-informed leadership, and revising policies and practices in areas such as tracking and academic support services [33]. Because whiteness is prevalent in educational spaces, it is crucial that administrators address whiteness as they seek to implement antiracist change [7,14,33,34].

Combatting whiteness in education is challenging for many educational leaders, particularly white educational leaders. In addition to countering resistance from staff, some white administrators, including those who self-identify as antiracist, are resistant themselves, engaging the mechanisms of whiteness to refuse learning about systemic

racism or taking responsibility for institutional change [35]. Many other white leaders feel that they do not know enough about race themselves and fear staff will push back on racial equity initiatives [15,36]. In many ways, this fear is warranted, as teacher resistance is powerful, and a few voices can easily lead others to question equity initiatives [37]. However, just as whiteness works in complex ways among educators, it also works in complex ways among leaders. In their composite counterstory of a white woman principal in a predominately white, suburban high school in the Midwest, Irby and colleagues [14] seek to complicate "the dominant victim/hero, racist/anti-racist, failure/success school leader narratives that characterize the field of educational policy and leadership" (p. 207). They describe how the principal navigated resistance to racial equity reforms coming from school staff and from within herself.

Antiracist leadership requires that school and district administrators not give in to resistance and "make clear that the goal for change is a nonnegotiable" [16] (p. 14). However, there is debate in the field about how to work through resistance. Many scholars argue for collaborative and collective leadership practices such as building trust with educators and fostering leadership among all education stakeholders [15,16,34,38]. Other scholars argue that more democratic forms of governance privilege white interests, and therefore, in the face of resistance to racial equity initiatives, change may need to be more top-down [17,39].

3. Conceptual Framework: Niceness, Whiteness, and Racial Inequity

Niceness is a socialized disposition characterized by acting and speaking in ways that are pleasant and comfortable [4,6,8,40]. Niceness also requires avoiding what is unpleasant and uncomfortable through silence, passivity, and denial [5,6,40,41]. Another defining feature of Niceness is its emphasis on good intentions [4,42]. Because Nice people have good intentions, any harmful impacts of their actions are understood to be an accident or mistake [4]. Although Niceness is practiced throughout the U.S., the Midwest is known as a particularly Nice region [43,44]. Scholars have noted that most teachers and educational leaders in the Midwest are cheerful and positive, have good intentions, and avoid uncomfortable topics, often through passivity and restraint [8,41,45].

In the U.S., Niceness works with whiteness to uphold racism and white supremacy [4,6,8,40]. As Critical Race Theorists and other scholars have argued, racism is embedded within societal structures [24,46–48]. Systemic white supremacy grants full rights and privileges to people racialized as white while denying those rights and privileges to people of color [24,49]. Whiteness obscures this reality and allows white people to evade information and deny knowing about systemic racism and white supremacy [24,46,48,50,51]. Niceness works similarly by "reducing complex structural relations to interpersonal matters" [4] (p. 29). Because both whiteness and Niceness frame racism as a problem of individual bias and bigotry, they can be deployed as tools to avoid taking responsibility for racial injustice [4,46]. In other words, Niceness and whiteness enable people racialized as white to maintain a sense of comfort and innocence when it comes to racism and white supremacy.

Within the field of education, scholars [8,41] have linked Niceness to concepts from critical theories of race and whiteness such as white fragility [23], emotionalities of whiteness [52], white ignorance [24,53], good white people [25], and color-evasiveness [46,50]. Ethnographic work has shown how Niceness perpetuates racial inequities in schools and districts. In an urban school district in the Mountain West, Castagno [6] found that teachers and leaders avoided analyzing inequities based on systemic power imbalances and shifted responsibility for inequities between each other and on to students and families. In an urban high school in Oregon, Niceness was characterized by genuine kindness and care, but was decidedly apolitical, which obscured the fact that inequities were being reproduced [9].

By centering understandings of racism on individual beliefs and interpersonal actions and prioritizing comfort over justice, Niceness works with whiteness to perpetuate racial inequities in education. Questions remain, however, about the possibilities of interrupting

Niceness in pursuit of equity. This study explores how educators and leaders navigated a culture of Niceness in a school district in Wisconsin and how attempts to interrupt Niceness impacted equity and inclusion initiatives.

4. Methodology

4.1. Site Selection and Study Context

The Dryden School District (DSD) was selected purposefully for its size, racial demographics, and engagement with equity and inclusion issues. (Aside from naming the state, I use pseudonyms for all places, organizations, and people in this study.) DSD serves about 1500 students, approximately 85% of whom identify as white [54]. Race is understudied in rural and predominantly white contexts; however, it is important to understand how race and whiteness function in these spaces [55–59]. As I explored potential research sites, I learned that the community of Dryden was engaging in conversations about race. Watching videos of previous school board meetings, I heard community members speaking publicly about their opposition to Critical Race Theory (CRT) as well as community members expressing support for equity and inclusion efforts in the district. On DSD's website, I saw a flyer for a series of conversations about creating a more inclusive community that was co-sponsored by the school district and several local nonprofit organizations.

By the time I began fieldwork in the fall of 2022, the community members who had explicitly opposed CRT seemed to have fallen silent; however, less obvious Nice resistance was building. This resistance focused primarily on the superintendent, though it included other school and district administrators and school board members as well. The superintendent, who had been hired by the DSD Board of Education in the spring of 2021, is a white woman from Wisconsin who has experience as a teacher and administrator working for educational equity. In her first year as superintendent in Dryden, she facilitated the development of a new strategic plan that included a commitment to equity and inclusion, helped lead the school–community partnership that hosted monthly conversations about inclusion, and established a restorative approach to student behavior. (In contrast to exclusionary forms of discipline, where students are punished for misbehavior with suspension or expulsion, restorative approaches to student behavior emphasize taking responsibility, learning from what happened, and repairing harm to relationships. Restorative practices are intended to reduce racialized discipline disparities.) However, in the face of strong resistance to initiatives she championed, including from many teachers, the superintendent submitted her resignation in the spring of 2023. Though the interim superintendent was guided by the strategic plan, and the community group continued to meet (albeit with sparser attendance and less school district support), school discipline policies and procedures were revised to be more punitive.

4.2. Participants and Data Collection

During the 2022–2023 school year, I conducted an ethnographic case study [18] of equity and inclusion conversations, policies, and practices in Dryden and its schools. To understand the culture of Niceness and how educators and leaders navigated it, this paper focuses on interviews with teachers and administrators, as well as observations of administration team meetings and school and district professional learning sessions, and relevant documents. I built relationships with leaders through observations of their meetings, and all ten school and district administrators agreed to participate in interviews. I recruited teachers during district-wide professional learning days and building staff meetings, and through referrals from administrators and other educators. In total, I interviewed 27 of the district's approximately 180 instructional staff. Every administrator identifies as white, and almost all of the teachers I interviewed, like the staff as a whole, are white. With few exceptions, interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Of the 27 educators, four asked that I not record the interview, so I took jot notes and wrote up complete listening notes shortly after the interview. All ten administrators consented to recording the interview.

Interviews were semi-structured [60] and covered a range of topics including teachers' and administrators' experiences in education and how they think about diversity, equity, and inclusion. Much of the interview data in this paper come from open-ended questions about the strengths of the schools in Dryden and challenges facing the district, as well as my concluding question for participants: "What are other things you think it is important for me to know about Dryden and its schools that we haven't talked about so far in this interview?" I found that many teachers and administrators responded to these questions by sharing their opinions about what others were doing. During observations, I was particularly attuned to how participants interacted with each other [61]. Instances when I observed participants discussing events which I had also witnessed, including administration team meetings where leaders debriefed professional learning sessions for educators, were especially illuminating.

4.3. Data Analysis

I engaged in an iterative process of data analysis, beginning with memos on emerging ideas during data collection and continuing with multiple rounds of coding and analytic memoing [60,62]. I started coding by hand, and then performed subsequent rounds of coding in MAXQDA 24 qualitative data analysis software. I created emic codes (e.g., Midwest Nice, good intentions) that emerged from the data, as well as etic codes (e.g., race-evasiveness) that captured concepts related to race, whiteness, and Niceness from relevant theoretical and empirical literature [60]. Overall, the conceptual framework helped me understand how different manifestations of Niceness formed a cohesive whole and how the combination of the different tools of Niceness were deployed in this context to resist certain equity and inclusion efforts. I strengthened the trustworthiness of the data and findings by reflecting on how my positionality and presence in the community shaped the data and how I was interpreting it, triangulating between multiple sources of rich data, and looking for discrepant evidence [61]. In addition, I sought feedback from peers and mentors, which helped me explore alternative explanations.

4.4. Researcher Positionality

Who the researcher is shapes all phases of the inquiry [61,63,64]. I am a white woman and former elementary school teacher. Though I have family in the Midwest, I have spent most of my life on the East Coast and I am affiliated with the University of Wisconsin–Madison, an institution that is viewed as liberal by many people living in small towns in the state [65]. I gained access to the district through the superintendent. I believe that similarities between our careers and my interest in educational equity were factors in her decision to allow me to conduct research in Dryden. My connections to the administration as well as assumptions about my political leanings made some educators wary of me; however, my experience as a teacher helped me build rapport with them. My interactions with Jacob, a middle school educator, illustrate the tensions some participants felt. Jacob shared his hesitation with me during our interview when, before answering one of my questions, he said, "I'm just debating how brutally honest I want to be with you". I sensed that he was being honest with me, as he shared doubts and things he had changed his mind about. Jacob later told me he enjoyed the conversation. As a white person, I was able to move with ease in Dryden. In addition, the fact that we share a white racialized identity seemed to put many participants at ease. For example, Travis, a high school teacher, moved his hand back and forth between us as he explained that we as white people are blamed for problems in society. In order to produce a nuanced, critical analysis of the data, I tried to balance competing tendencies of being too generous with and too judgmental of other white people [23]. I also tried to balance my former role as a teacher who had been critical of administrators, with my role in this project as a researcher who had closer relationships with leaders than educators. As I continue to develop the broader ethnographic case study of which this paper is a part, I am certain that I will come to understand other ways my identities shaped the research [66,67].

5. Findings

In the Dryden School District (DSD), good intentions, comfort, and conflict avoidance created a culture of Niceness. To varying degrees and in different ways, educators and administrators acknowledged and attempted to navigate Niceness. In particular, the superintendent named "Midwest Nice" as a barrier and tried to interrupt it in order to advance racial equity and inclusion. Her attempts to disrupt Niceness were met with strong teacher and community resistance, however, and the superintendent was pushed out.

5.1. Good Intentions

Most of the educators and several of the administrators I interviewed spoke about their colleagues' dedication and good intentions. This was the case even when teachers and leaders disagreed with each other. Some participants believed that good intentions were an asset in working collaboratively for equity and inclusion. Though it was less common for educators and administrators to talk about good intentions in relation to impacts for students, a few shared how teachers' dedication helped students, and others acknowledged good intentions while also noting the negative impacts of their colleagues' actions.

When I asked Alan, a white man and high school educator who grew up in Dryden, about the strengths of the schools in the community, he said of his colleagues:

> I think [teachers] are very invested in the district. So, I think the people who help the day-to-day operations run are good, high-quality people that understand the community, that are very giving people, and I think, that model of, of selflessness rubs off on students... the teachers are really invested... which helps, I think, provide the best level of success for students throughout the course of their educational career when you can, kind of, know the whole student instead of just the academic side of the student.

Alan emphasized fellow educators' good intentions and spoke about the positive impacts their dedication has on students.

Even teachers who were critical of their colleagues acknowledged their good intentions. Brigid, a white woman and veteran elementary school teacher, said of fellow educators, "they're invested in, here in Dryden" and gave the example of working with students who need extra help during lunch or after school. However, she was also critical of teachers who do things that harm students. Brigid gave the example of staff members making fun of the idea of gender pronouns. She didn't criticize their intentions, but said, "I just wish they would know. Or, they could be, they can understand like, they are hurting kids... who are already, you know, struggling or striving to figure out what's going on". Brigid valued her colleagues' good intentions and believed that the negative impacts of some of their actions were unintentional.

Like Brigid, Erica, a white woman and elementary school teacher from a rural area, named the negative impacts fellow educators had on students, but did not question people's good intentions. In her interview, Erica was overall critical of her colleagues' resistance to change, including not being welcoming of outsiders and not wanting to shift their teaching practices to meet the needs of diverse learners. However, at the end of the interview, when I asked her if there were other things that it was important for me to know about her school, the district, and the Dryden community, Erica said the following:

> I think that, you know, the, the people here, just like anybody in education, like they do have, like, the greatest of intentions... they don't know they're doing anything wrong, or whatever, 'cause they're just set in their ways. It's, it's accepted by a large majority. So it feels okay... And, 'We're fine. And stop trying to push your outside viewpoints on us. We're good.' And you know, they're not horrible people, you know, with horrible intentions. They love kids. And they're here, you know, so I don't want to take that from them either.

Even though she believed some teachers were not serving students well, Erica did not question their intentions.

Administrators also believed people who worked in the school district were well meaning. In fact, one of the working agreements for the administration team meetings was: "Presume positive intent and own your impact on others". Leaders were committed to assuming everyone had good intentions while also acknowledging impact. When the superintendent was frustrated with others, she often reminded herself to presume positive intentions. For example, during an administration team meeting in April 2023, school and district leaders were discussing a survey the educators' union had independently conducted. Administrators were frustrated with the process because they felt that it was not collaborative and was biased against principals. The superintendent acknowledged that it was hard for her to understand what the positive intentions were and that her most generous assumption was that some staff felt so unheard that they needed to express themselves in this way. The superintendent ended this conversation by affirming administrators' good intentions, conveying a message she wanted teachers to understand, "Our job is to support you".

One possible reason why educators and administrators upheld this characteristic of Niceness was that they believed good intentions allowed them to collaborate. Mike, a white man and school administrator who grew up in another small town in Wisconsin, noted that "pushback" on changes for equity and inclusion, including restorative practices, was a "tremendous challenge". However, he responded to my question about the strengths of the school district by saying, "everyone in this district, no matter, like, no matter how much friction arises in different areas, everyone that I work with here wants what's best for kids… everyone's here because they want to do right by the students in their room. That part's huge". He reiterated this point at the end of the interview when I asked if there was anything else he wanted to share. Mike said, "You know, you, you sit in the room with, with the teachers and the other educators here in the district, you realize that everybody wants to do right by all of the students in their classroom. It's a matter of figuring out how to get there". Mike acknowledged challenges; however, he believed that good intentions were a foundation upon which to build towards change.

Though most participants were committed to assuming positive intentions, some teachers doubted leaders' motives. In the quote above, Alan talks about "people who help the day-to-day operations" and teachers specifically but does not mention administrators. A little later in the interview, when I asked Alan about challenges in the community, he said the following:

> It's tough when trying to think of how to word this. There's, there's, sometimes, you know, it's really based off of hiring and whether it's a good hire, a good hire, a bad hire, you know, sometimes certain administrators align better to kind of what the community is looking for… There's been some, some good ideas and some well-intentioned things, I think there's been some things that have really rubbed people the wrong way.

Alan did not name the impact of leaders' "good ideas" and "well-intentioned things" on students but said that other actions the administration has taken have created discomfort and "rubbed people the wrong way".

5.2. Comfort

Several administrators and educators talked about different aspects of comfort in relation to equity, including not being recognized for the work they were doing, feeling judged for what they were assumed not to be doing, the process not being collaborative, and the pace of change. Miley, a white woman who grew up in a small town and now teaches at the elementary school level in Dryden, articulated how these different elements were not comfortable for teachers. When I asked Miley about the challenges facing the school district, she said that the new leadership was an issue. She explained that the superintendent made changes quickly and in a top-down manner:

My experience with good leaders is that when they come in, they kind of sit back and observe. And then changes come after that. And I found with this particular leader, that changes started happening really rapidly, before I felt like they understood the district and who we were. Um, so that's a big one because they're, it's top-down.

A little later on, I asked Miley a follow-up question, "You also mentioned, like, administration not understanding... are there other things that you think they're missing?" She responded:

Um, hon, honestly, I think this person kind of thought that we were dumb hayseeds. [Laughs] And started putting us through, like, racial sensitivity training and things like that. Not that that's not important but it, it really felt like a message was being sent. And it's like, 'You [referring to the superintendent] haven't even been through our building to really know what's happening in our classrooms', but I felt like assumptions were being made about things that were or were not happening in classrooms. And it felt kind of, it felt yucky... yeah, know what's actually happening before you're saying like, '*You* need to do this, this, and this.' [emphasis in her tone of voice] It kind of felt like the finger was being shaken at us. And it's like, 'You will.' And it's like, 'I am', [laughs], like.

Similar to many of the teachers I interviewed, Miley had a stated commitment to equity, and was doing things to help all students feel included. She read aloud books about Black history to her class and was thoughtful about facilitating conversations and answering student questions around those books, particularly given that there were few students of color in her class. However, Miley was critical of the way leadership was implementing changes.

The superintendent was aware of the concerns Miley and other educators expressed. In many ways, what the superintendent shared with me in her interview parallelled what Miley said. Speaking to staff concerns about the pace of change, comfort with different aspects of change, and feeling judged, the superintendent explained how she had presented equity to staff during a professional learning day the previous school year, her first in the district:

I was using the built, building blocks of equity to kind of just visually show the staff, kind of, this is an 8-to-10-year journey. And you start here, like this is where we are just starting to talk... about representation in the curriculum. And staff are very good about that here, in terms of looking for diverse perspectives when they're planning lessons, or, you know, mirrors and windows types of choices [the idea that students should see people who look like them and people who are different from them in books and other classroom materials]. So that, that landed really, really, really, really well, with staff here, they were ready for it. They were familiar with it, they felt comfortable, and to some degree, were doing it.

She then recounted a subsequent professional learning session about changing instructional practices to meet the needs of students. As the superintendent described it, the reaction from staff "was very polarizing". She explained:

And the feedback that we got from staff was, people were like, 'Yes, we're finally having this conversation.' And other people were like, 'I can't believe you actually just said that in front of a whole [auditorium]. That was so offensive, that you were actually kind of insinuating that we aren't doing the right work.' Or they took it very personally in a way that felt like, insulting and threatening, but with others that landed really, really, really well... while it's, like, about a book choice, or a poster or something like that, more superficial, that's an easier thing to get on board with rather than, 'Wow, I really need to rethink how I'm designing my instruction.'

The superintendent recognized that teachers were trying to help all students feel included by having diverse representation in classroom materials and understood that many staff felt judged when she pushed them to do more.

The superintendent was also aware that educators felt uncomfortable with the process of change. In pushing for greater educational equity and inclusion, the superintendent said that she expects staff to engage in professional learning, change their teaching practices, use certain curricula, and collect and reflect on student data. She acknowledged that this was new for many educators:

> But if you have never been held to that kind of accountability before, then it seems even harder, and it seems very top-down. And so, I think that perception of, you know, lack of autonomy or loss of autonomy, is something that's very real for staff. And, you know, we can't lose sight of that.

The superintendent appreciated educators' discomfort with the process of change. Nevertheless, concerns about comfort did not alter her plans for advancing racial equity and inclusion. In this way, the superintendent disrupted Niceness.

5.3. Avoiding Conflict

Among educators and leaders in DSD, there was a tendency to avoid talking openly about disagreements when it came to issues of equity and inclusion. Alan, the teacher quoted above who emphasized teachers' good intentions while expressing ambivalence about administrators' intentions, began by saying: "It's tough when trying to think of how to word this". Many of the other teachers I interviewed avoided, talked around, or declined to speak about conflicts happening in the school district.

Jenn, a white woman high school educator, requested that I not audio record the interview. When I asked her about challenges facing the schools, Jenn did not talk about conflicts between teachers and administrators, restorative practices, or concerns about discipline and safety, which were well known following public comments and administrator presentations at school board meetings, local and regional press coverage, and an online petition calling for the removal of the superintendent and high school principal. I asked a follow-up question about the petition and if that was affecting what was happening at her school. Jenn put a positive spin on the situation, saying that staff were supporting each other, and that they were able to talk about it and move on. It was notable that she did not specifically speak about the strained relationship between the principal and many staff members, or the concerns about safety and discipline raised in the petition. In her interview, Jenn avoided talking about conflicts at her school and, when asked directly about the conflicts, talked around them.

Jackie, a white woman elementary school teacher who is the parent of students in the district, was another educator who did not consent to audio recording the interview. As the interview was wrapping up, I asked her what other things she thought it was important for me to know about the elementary school, DSD, and the broader community that we had not talked about yet. She spoke about the school being open and supportive, and how it is a great place to work and to send your kids. I decided to probe a bit more and asked about the controversies happening in the district. I shared that I was confused because I heard so many positive things but also knew that there were conflicts. I said that I did not understand the disconnect and was wondering if she had any sense of it. Jackie paused, and said that it was a hard question to answer. Then, she paused again and said that she did not feel comfortable talking about it. Unlike many other interviewees who talked around the conflicts in the school district, Jackie was upfront about not wanting to talk about them.

It was not uncommon for administrators to put a positive spin on moments of conflict. One instance of this was during an administration team meeting where they were debriefing the recent professional learning (PL) day on Universal Design for Learning (UDL). (UDL is a teaching philosophy that emphasizes flexibility in the learning process to engage the wide variety of students in a classroom and support them in meeting rigorous academic goals). I attended the PL day on UDL, sitting with a group of middle school teachers during the

morning session for secondary staff and a group of elementary school educators during the afternoon session for primary staff. In both sessions, the educators I was sitting with were generally disengaged and critical of UDL. During small group activities, only a few of the people at tables where I was sitting shared and, in both sessions, teachers said that they were already implementing some aspects of UDL and the things they were not doing were unrealistic. In contrast to what I had observed, during the administration team meeting, school and district leaders were talking about how well the workshop had gone. At one point during the conversation, the superintendent interrupted the positive talk, noting that when she visited in the middle of the morning session for secondary teachers, "the atmosphere was chilly". Following this comment, administrators acknowledged that there was a difference between primary and secondary school teachers, and then returned to discussing what went well during the PL day, as well as logistical improvements for next time. My observations, however, suggest that it was not only middle and high school teachers who were resistant to UDL.

Although educators and administrators tended to avoid conflict and focus on the positive, the superintendent frequently advocated for having honest conversations about disagreements. She often did so by explicitly naming Midwest Nice. At an administration team meeting in early December, the superintendent was sharing what she had learned at a conference about how administrators can give feedback to teachers. In my field notes I wrote the following:

> This portion of the meeting opened with a slide on the TV that said, "Effort is not the same as Impact" (the words effort and impact were in red and the rest was in black). The superintendent said that so often we open conversations with teachers about a lesson we have observed with, "How do you think that went?" The presenter at the conference advises against that and instead asks teachers they are coaching, "Did the lesson have the impact you intended? How did you know?" The superintendent emphasized that this is totally different.

The superintendent's overall goal when it comes to giving teachers feedback was to focus on the impact of their practice. She told administrators that everyone needed to "stop being Midwest Nice", implying that talking about impact may not feel comfortable and may cause conflict.

In refusing to avoid conflict, the superintendent interrupted Niceness in a way that most educators and other administrators did not. By advocating for having honest conversations, the superintendent was also challenging other central aspects of Niceness in Dryden: good intentions and comfort. While most teachers participated in Niceness and leaders attempted to navigate Niceness, it was primarily the superintendent who tried to disrupt Niceness.

6. Discussion and Implications

The culture of Nice in the Dryden School District (DSD) was strong. Most teachers and administrators engaged in Niceness by emphasizing people's good intentions, prioritizing educators' comfort, and avoiding conflict. Though others were aware of and resisted some aspects of Niceness in some ways, it was primarily the superintendent who tried to interrupt the culture of Nice in DSD. The superintendent worked to assume positive intent but was also focused on how people's actions impacted the work of the school district and students' experiences. She was aware of teachers' discomfort but remained committed to her vision for advancing equity and inclusion. The superintendent also wanted to talk openly about challenges and disagreements, particularly around educational policies and practices such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and restorative approaches to student behavior. Though there was widespread support within DSD for equity and inclusion, at least in theory, there was strong resistance, particularly among teachers, to the superintendent's efforts to interrupt Niceness. The superintendent was pushed out of the district, and restorative practices, an equity initiative she championed, were rolled back.

The findings of this study are consistent with research that highlights the complexities of white teachers' relationship with racial equity and the challenges of antiracist school leadership. As other scholars have documented in different contexts [12,32], educators in Dryden tended to advance equity and inclusion in ways that were more comfortable for them, like having books and other educational materials that represented more racial diversity, but resisted changes at the institutional level, including changes to discipline policies. Antiracist school leadership requires action across scales, from individual learning and improving teaching practices to changing systems and policies [16]. Yet, as was the case in DSD, leaders often struggle to navigate teacher resistance and implement structural changes [31].

Critical theories of race and whiteness as well as the concept of Niceness are helpful for understanding how these patterns of behavior relate to racial equity in education. Though racism is systemic, mechanisms of whiteness frame racism as a problem of individual beliefs and actions and allow us to evade responsibility for structural inequities [6,24,46,47,51]. Niceness works in much the same way. By emphasizing positive interpersonal interactions and refusing to grapple with racialized power differences, Niceness obscures and perpetuates systemic racism and white supremacy [4,6,9]. Therefore, doing what is Nice, focusing on good intentions, maintaining comfort, and avoiding conflict, as many educators and administrators in Dryden did, ultimately hinders racial equity in education.

A major challenge of this study is that I rely more heavily on data from interviews because I was limited in what I was able to observe [68]. In relation to the research findings, I believe this limitation is most consequential for understanding the relationships between administrators and teachers, and teacher discomfort with discipline policies. Dryden, like many small school districts, does not have a policy for external research. In accordance with the requirements of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at my university, I obtained written authorization from the superintendent to conduct research in the district. This authorization included a provision that observation of nonpublic school meetings would be with the permission of the participants, which in practice meant that access to district- and school-level meetings was dependent on the superintendent and building principals, respectively. I was able to observe all or part of four of the five district-wide professional learning days during the school year, but the superintendent asked me not to attend on two occasions. I observed less frequently in schools, attending just three staff meetings in two buildings. When I asked principals if I could observe in their schools, they sometimes said they needed to think about it and then never got back to me, and other times they told me not to come. On some of these occasions, administrators explained that meeting dates and agendas changed for logistical reasons, but on other occasions, I inferred, based on context, that principals' refusal was related to conflicts between teachers and administrators.

This study did not include observations of students, meaning that I could not see if teachers' concerns about student behavior were due to discomfort with restorative practices or unsafe school environments. In interviews, I heard conflicting accounts. For instance, Paul, a high school teacher, told me, "I have heard more racist, sexist, and anti-LGBTQ+ language than I've heard in [about 15] years teaching here". He then explained how this type of language escalated to "physical altercations". On the other hand, James, an administrator who is also the parent of students in the district, believed the schools were safe and said, "I've had zero reservations about raising my kids in this community, about them going to school here". Based on interviews with multiple people, including a police officer and a local journalist who investigated concerns over school safety, and observations of in-depth discussions about student discipline during school board meetings, I concluded that though some teachers felt uncomfortable, the schools were not unsafe.

Despite these limitations, this study raises important questions for researchers and educational leaders around the complexities of navigating Niceness in pursuit of racial equity. In particular, it highlights the need for scholars and practitioners to better understand tensions in three interrelated areas: relationships between administrators and teachers, approaches to leadership, and discomfort and conflict. Though it is important for leaders

to build trusting relationships with school staff, waiting to do equity work until these relationships are established can delay necessary reforms [15,16,69]. During her two years in Dryden, the superintendent was working to build relationships with a range of education stakeholders. She was also aware of the challenges in this context. As the superintendent explained in her interview, "there are a lot of us versus them dynamics in Dryden. You know, you're from here or you're not, that's an us versus them, staff versus admin, us versus them. When I first got here, it was board versus admin, us versus them, very unhealthy. And there were a lot of these kinds of adversarial type relationships set up that are still pervasive in the community. So even if you're not going into the mindset of us versus them, you run into that dynamic". Despite the contentious dynamic she had with teachers, the superintendent seemed to be making progress in building relationships with several different constituencies, which is also an important element of equity work [16,31]. Many, though not all, of the parents and community leaders I interviewed as well as the majority of school board members and administrators, spoke positively about the superintendent. In school board and other public meetings, parents of color and local business leaders expressed their support for the superintendent. These relationships were not based on being Nice. As I observed in meetings, and as people told me in interviews, the superintendent challenged school board members and administrators both on issues of race and when she believed they were prioritizing comfort. It may be, as Miley and some other educators said, that the superintendent had not spent enough time in classrooms and schools getting to know teachers. It may also be, as other researchers have found, that equity reforms put tremendous strain on relationships between teachers and administrators [31]. Considering the extant literature and what happened in Dryden, further inquiries might explore the following questions: How can leaders balance relationship building and equity reforms? How should leaders prioritize relationships with different education stakeholders?

Another area that highlights the complexities of navigating Niceness is leadership approach. As Tanner and Welton [34] argue, "To truly incorporate anti-racism into leadership praxis, it is paramount that it neither be viewed as an individualistic endeavor nor conducted in some authoritative manner" rather "this work is one of collective struggle" (p. 409). On the other hand, whiteness and Niceness often exert themselves in more collaborative decision-making spaces and undermine educational equity [17,39]. As noted above, both teachers and the superintendent acknowledged that the process of equity reform felt top-down. Indeed, there were no formal structures for distributed leadership around equity and inclusion within the district during the 2022–2023 school year. (The district-level diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) committee that was formed after the murder of George Floyd in 2020 stopped meeting before I began my fieldwork.) However, the monthly meetings hosted by the school district and local community organizations were open to all. On average there were 20–30 people in attendance, including parents, community members, school board members, and administrators. During the time I observed, I only met one teacher at these meetings, despite the meetings being featured on the school website and the superintendent inviting staff to attend during a professional learning day. Other researchers have found that it can be powerful to invite education stakeholders, including teachers and community members, to collaborate on addressing complex equity issues [31], but in the case of the Dryden, the vast majority of educators did not accept the invitation to this problem-solving forum. Questions remain for researchers and practitioners around approaches to leadership: What formats of distributed leadership promote engagement among different education stakeholders? And within those formats, (how) can the effects of whiteness and Niceness be limited to maximize educational equity?

Along with other scholars researching in different contexts, I found that in Dryden, discomfort and conflict posed significant challenges to educational equity [12,14,15,22]. Irby [31] states that "Because most White people fear a truly equitable racial order as well as the racial conflict necessary to bring forth such a reality, leaders must situate racial equity change within a language and context of danger and discomfort" (p. 88). Discomfort and conflict can be used as "leadable" moments for administrators [70] and can be cultivated

and curated for racial learning and more equitable education [31]. However, discomfort can easily become unwieldy, causing education stakeholders to become entrenched in their oppositional stances, which hinders change [31]. Within the culture of Niceness in Dryden, discomfort and conflict were often avoided, limiting opportunities for change and leaving underlying issues unresolved. Though leaders generally, and the superintendent in particular, may have been trying to leverage discomfort and conflict to advance racial equity and inclusion, they did not succeed. Both within the literature and in this study, questions around the possibilities of interrupting Niceness remain unresolved.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and was approved by the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Minimal Risk Research Institutional Review Board (MRR IRB) (2022-1089) on 23 August 2022.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable as the IRB approval for this research does not allow data to be shared with people who are not members of the study team.

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