

Teachable Moments: The Trouble with Niceness

"The trouble with niceness...is that it skirts around important issues of equity, justice and fairness..."



This article is backed by the research of Jeanne Dyches Bissonnette and her research paper entitled: The trouble with niceness: How preference for pleasantries sabotages culturally responsive teacher preparation. Bissonnette is an assistant professor of literacy education at Iowa State University.

To avoid misunderstanding, let's begin with a definition of niceness, since one kind of niceness is appropriate and necessary and another kind of niceness is pretentious and hurtful.

What do we mean by the word niceness in this article and how can we say niceness can sabotage culturally responsive teacher preparation. There are two definitions of the word nice, given below:

Definition one: "to be pleasing and agreeable". Example sentence: When I went to the concierge desk at the hotel, the lady that was there was **nice** to me and very helpful.

Definition two: "to be non-confrontational, to avoid conflict, and to gloss over uncomfortable issues in order to maintain a semblance of pleasantness". Example sentence: After President Trump left the office of the White House, the GOP made a decision to play **nice** with Trump.

In this article, we are using the second definition of nice. With this definition planted in our understanding, we can now freely say that the trouble with niceness, or the trouble with trying to appear pleasant, is that it skirts around important issues of equity, justice and fairness, and avoids the hard conversations that are desperately needed in today's racially charged atmosphere.

We are increasingly becoming aware of a need in America to equip teachers with the ability to deliver culturally responsive teaching (CRT). CRT is a research based approach that honors a child's culture and home language and makes connections between what is being taught in the classroom and the home life of the child. All teachers should learn how to deliver culturally aware and culturally responsive teaching if they are to help students of color develop higher level thinking skills.

We at Education4Equity have done extensive research into how to equip K-12 teachers with how to be culturally responsive to students of different cultures in the classroom. The trouble with "niceness" is that niceness can function as a deterrent to speaking up for what is right - why? - because they are afraid of what others would think of them. We summarize cultural responsiveness by 6 phrases: honoring, bi-lingual, respecting, acknowledging, science oriented, and counter narratives. If you master these skills, you are well on your way to becoming a culturally responsive educator. Here are the 6 key skills along with a brief explanation of the skill. This is by no means an exhaustive list of what culturally responsive teaching means.

1. **Honoring:** Culturally responsive teaching honors the culture, language, and skin color of students, especially those who are socio-economically disadvantaged (many of whom are either black, Latinx, or Southeast Asian).
2. **Bi-lingual:** Culturally responsive teaching helps students become bi-lingual, guiding them to learn how to speak and write professionally but encouraging the student to hold on to their home language, their home dialects, or home ebonics. To tell a student to not talk a certain way, undermines their home culture and sends the message that their background is inferior. Rather we should help them hold onto their home language while also picking up the academic language. This is to be bi-lingual.

3. **Respecting:** Culturally responsive teaching understands how white privilege can suppress a colored student's ability to overcome their inferiority complex to speak their "own truth". A teacher with culturally responsive capabilities respects a student's color and encourages them to articulate matters that are meaningful to them (rather than asking them to be quiet, to avoid conflict, and just play nice).
4. **Acknowledging:** Culturally responsive teaching does not say "I am color blind – therefore I treat all people the same". To say this is to ignore the fact that one's color is meaningful to them. Colored students are very conscious of their skin color and culturally responsive teaching acknowledges the value that a student places on their color and learns to appreciate that color as being just as lovely as any other skin color.
5. **Science-Oriented:** Culturally responsive teaching recognizes that there is no scientifically proven data set that shows that a white person, due to their color or gene pool, is more intelligent than a black person or a person of a different color. Therefore, high standards and positive expectations that are given to white students should also be given to colored students.
6. **Counter Narratives:** Culturally responsive teaching is backed by a teacher's studying of different cultures so that he/she can give counter narratives to colored students. For example, when a black student says, "I'm not good at math because black people are not good at math", the teacher is able to positively and respectfully tell the student that black people are indeed good at math and that many present day individuals have had to master math concepts, including the following black individuals: Dr. Ben Carson, President Barack Obama, Usain Bolt, LeBron James, Tiger Woods, and Vice President Kamala Harris, all of whom have mastered mathematics and found ways to utilize math for their benefit.

In summary, we encourage teacher groups around the country to gather together and talk about whether there is an atmosphere of "niceness" at your school that discourages culturally responsive teaching. How do you address "the elephant" in the room by talking about the tension between certain ethnic groups at your school? It is suggested that you start with small topics and then build up to more sensitive topics. Use the 6 points above to encourage teachers and students of color to express what challenges they face. Remember, to talk about race does not mean you are racist.

Learn to foster an atmosphere of respect and openness at your school so that every culture and race feels welcome to express their needs and discuss their challenges. A student should be able to say: "The fact that George Floyd died at the hand of another human being, was wrong and inhuman." A "nice" person may avoid saying such things, in order to keep a kind of peaceful situation, but this only hurts the colored students in your class and hides the truth that needs to be spoken in a safe zone. And everyone at your school should be comfortable saying: Bigotry is wrong. Prejudice is despicable. And black lives, white lives, tan lives, and brown lives matter and they all matter equally.

In conclusion, we end with this statement: Being nice is appropriate when niceness works to unveil the truth. But when niceness covers up the truth and prevents our speaking up for humanity as a whole, then we should, in a spirit of camaraderie come together in smaller groups and research together how to face not only issues that divide us, but issues that keep us from speaking up for what we feel is right, true, and unifying.