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## Troubling the Niceness of Social Change in Leadership Education

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# TROUBLING THE NICENESS OF SOCIAL CHANGE IN LEADERSHIP EDUCATION

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This article troubles a culture of niceness that upholds racism, whiteness, and other forms of oppression, as well as challenges the simplistic application of social change in leadership education. Leadership educators have several responsibilities for challenging ideologies, practices, and discourses that secure whiteness when teaching about leadership for social change. The current article begins with situating the relationship of whiteness and niceness, then offers liberatory considerations for troubling niceness in leadership education. Considerations for why leadership educators and students, based on their social identities and lived experiences, might resist addressing social inequality, power, inclusion, and equity in leadership are discussed. Pedagogical considerations for responding to resistance and disrupting systems of oppression are described, drawn from liberatory pedagogical frameworks

The social change model of leadership development (Higher Education Research Institute, 1996) represents an incredible contribution to the field of leadership education, along with the overall presence of leading to enact social change broadly. However, social change as a concept has an undergirding of neutrality and does not name social change for whom or to what end, resulting in a rhetoric of niceness and com-

placency in our learning environments. Socially just and culturally relevant leadership learning (CRL; Bertrand Jones et al., 2016; Beatty & Guthrie, 2021; Chunoo & Guthrie, 2018) demands us to go further, naming systemic oppression and working to create equitable communities. The purpose of leadership learning needs to go beyond social change and name leadership is for eradicating oppression, individually,

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interpersonally, and systemically. The current article will trouble a culture of niceness that upholds racism, whiteness, and other forms of oppression, as well as challenge the simplistic application of social change in leadership education.

### Situating Whiteness and Niceness

Whiteness is defined as embodied racial dominance through interpersonal and institutional processes, practices, and discourses that perpetuate global white supremacy in everyday lived experiences (Wiborg, 2020). Whiteness is often invisible to white individuals in power with illusions of innocence (Leonardo, 2004); however, whiteness is visible for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and has very real effects—materially, psychologically, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Whiteness is reified through early theories of leadership still included in curriculum; like charismatic leadership, transformational leadership, and servant leadership, to name a few (Liu, 2019). Leadership research perpetuates whiteness through somatic norms where white men are typically studied and identified as normal in leadership positional roles (Ospina & Foldy, 2009; Puwar, 2004). Williams et al. (2022) examined the maintenance and reproduction of whiteness in student leadership programs, citing the need to critique who is considered to be leaders on college campuses. As a result, leadership educators have several responsibilities for challenging ideologies, practices, and discourses that secure whiteness. For example, avoiding conversations about racism to limit feelings of white guilt because those feelings often lead to paralyzing sentiments or checking out of the conversation (Beatty et al., 2021; Leonardo, 2004). However, inactions limit critical analysis of white supremacy which is dutifully required when teaching about leadership for social change.

### CULTURE OF NICENESS

When discussing issues of race and racism, educators and students can perpetuate or rely on a culture of niceness to yield advantages, keep order and civility, or establish distance by not addressing whiteness in the classroom. McIntyre (1997) included a culture of niceness in their original study through describing white talk. McIntyre (1997) conceptualized white talk as dis-

course that protects white people from examining their individual and collective participation in the maintenance of white supremacy. This involves being nice and polite rather than engaging in critique—either individually or interpersonally with others—and reframing discourses on racism to not alter the status quo of whiteness (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; McIntyre, 1997). If racism is directly named as a problem, often the focus is on positive relations between racial groups or the progress that has been made, obscuring the very real consequences of white supremacy (Leonardo, 2009).

In leadership education, the prioritization of niceness can result in generalizing social change or social justice issues as a rhetorical tactic to dismiss talking seriously about racism and white supremacy. Low (2009) stated, “Niceness is about keeping this clean, orderly, homogenous, and controlled...but it is also a way of maintaining whiteness” (p. 87). Embracing the messiness of socially just education, requires dialectical critique and flexibility/space for this critique. However, how higher education is broadly structured and how educators and students are socialized within the institution, it becomes challenging to resist order and control. For example, because of academic rigor demands and the hold on outcome-based education, educators have a significant amount of content to cover with little flexibility for adapting to the needs of the class. This is further affirmed by the intense responsibility educators may feel if they are—the only—leadership class that addresses social justice and systemic inequalities or could be the only class students take if they are not continuing in a minor sequence. Are we, as leadership educators, complicit with maintaining a culture of niceness that prioritizes whiteness in our learning environments?

### Liberatory Considerations for Troubling Niceness

Liberatory pedagogy, as described by Taylor and Beatty (2018), can be used as a strategy of disruption. As such, they call for educators and students “...to critically examine and identify power relations, ideologies, and cultures,” (Taylor & Beatty, 2018, p. 112), citing how education cannot be ideologically neutral and requires critical consciousness raising about oppressive social conditions (Sayles-Hannon, 2007). Naming white

supremacy and its relationship to leadership as a tool for asserting power is an action that should be taken to trouble niceness in leadership education. Minimizing consequences of deviating from whiteness in classrooms must be a primary goal of educators. The next section will briefly offer three considerations from liberatory pedagogy scholarship to deviate from whiteness and pedagogical possibilities to engage in the complexity of social change. This is not a finite list, rather an effort in gaining deeper perspectives and potential practices to apply.

### NAMING AND TRUTH-TELLING

Truth telling is a form of praxis and involves challenging problematic ideas and beliefs about BIPOC, as well as other marginalized populations (hooks, 2005). Leadership educators have to grapple with truth-telling in the classroom—both their own truth-telling and those of their students. This truth-telling depends on the identities of the educators and students. In a study exploring whiteness in undergraduate leadership classrooms, I found that white truth-telling was presented as factual, under the guise of lived experiences, when the discourse was rooted in white supremacy and perpetuated controlling images of Black women (Wiborg, 2020). Truth-telling is complicated and often contentious for BIPOC educators and students. As described by Taylor and Beatty (2018), “When oppressive behaviors emerge [for Black faculty], it is important to consider the impact of those behaviors on others, how it affects us as instructors, how our structural position offers us power to intervene, and how our approach is read by students in the course” (p. 115). Everyone is implicated by the system, but the risks and labor required in truth-telling is different based on complexity of identities. Consider these additional possibilities for naming and truth-telling:

- Situate truth-telling as a form of understanding and examining something larger, recognizing how individual truth-telling has connections to systems of oppression.
- Teach about dialectical critique and engagement since naming and truth-telling may bring up conflict. A potential strategy is to clarify terms and their associated processes like critique, conflict, contradiction, misunderstanding, etc. For example, a critique is

about assessing and analyzing practices, with a goal of discernment, not finding a resolution (Brown, 2020).

- Consider social locations when sharing stories and opinions, and how that influences critique or affirmations. Truth-telling requires moves against colluding with whiteness, meaning whiteness requires us to soften realities or dilute the real effects of social inequalities in our lives and organizations.

It is important to note conservative state legislatures are attempting to make truth telling more difficult with movements against critical race theory. In some states, students can report faculty and instructors for their teaching methods according to their perceived misalignment to various legislative bills. Leadership education has centered social change for decades and is a scholarly standard; and even though what has been described here may be difficult and painful for some students to explore their participation in systems of oppression, it is a necessary one.

### LOCALIZED AND DISORDERLY EXAMPLES

CRLI suggests providing ways for students to connect learning to social, political, or environmental issues that affect their lives and contribute to change (Bertrand Jones et al., 2016). In leadership learning, there is an opportunity to demonstrate through examples, prompting, and pedagogy how inequitable systems operate and how we individually play a role in perpetuating them. Re-writing what leadership is about requires us to move outside of the traditional leadership canon, drawing from community organizing. Spaces that name the realities of white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, and how those intersect to maintain oppression. This organizing is occurring on campuses and as Collins and Whittington (2021) stated is an opportunity to engage in the very local context in which students can create change. CRLI and engagement with the five dimensions of campus climate, requires educators to understand the institutional and local context. Leadership education has been more actively including activism in learning environments; however, Mahoney (2021) recommended drawing from leadership that exists in-between or alongside our institutionalized structures in higher education. Pushing against a culture of niceness requires centering leaders

and leadership that make disorderly and disrespectful moves of resistance. Consider these additional possibilities for localized and disorderly examples:

- Engage in an environmental scan (Tevis et al., 2022). Research and learn about the current racial climate for BIPOC on campus and in the local community, as well as other marginalized communities. Consider researching student social justice issues that have been historically addressed on campus, pulling artifacts from your library, or connecting with people engaged in that work.
- Connect the local to the global. Often, when discussing social change, educators use large issues like marriage equality, Black Lives Matter, and other liberation movements as examples, but that may be difficult for students to access. Instead, focusing on more local issues like the renaming of campus buildings, student housing costs, or how student government decisions are made can be more accessible in considering change aimed at disrupting systems of oppression. Open the possibilities of examples used and work on having the social justice literacy to name/describe what is occurring.
- Talk openly with students and often, regarding their life on and off campus. Consider how their identities shape their involvement and what examples/applications they might bring to class conversations. Students may not think something counts as “leadership” or as “relevant” so be considerate of how you structure application prompts to draw out examples outside of more formal structures.

### ANTICIPATE RESISTANCE

Hyttén and Warren (2003) found in their research on students discourse of whiteness and racism in education, students defaulted to an appeal of extremes, engaging in binary, either/or thinking. The binary most identified in student discourse included the real world versus the ideal world. This discourse is described as, “...largely functioning as a form of cynicism and pessimism in light of the difficulty of enacting lasting social change” (Hyttén & Warren, 2003,

p. 83). Students struggled to see both—the current world we are living in and the ideal world that social justice efforts move towards—which resulted in an overwhelming sense of powerlessness and skepticism for change enactment. This discourse can be understood as a form of resistance to enacting social justice. Overall, we need to consider how our discourse and the discourse of students can reduce complex social issues to binaries. Consider these additional possibilities for resistance:

- Ladson-Billings (1996) described how silence can be a form of resistance employed by students. Educators may experience some students seemingly being unwilling to engage. This may cause tension for you, as a leadership educator, because of your commitment to making courses engaging—so give yourself grace and flexibility.
- Recognize your own resistance to avoiding conflict, especially any resistance to talking about race or the problem of racism, as it could be a maintenance of whiteness. Consider why you are resistant; is it for white racial comfort? As described by Yoon (2012), “...safety for white people at the expense of racial dialogue is arguably a form of indirect violence upon people of color” (p. 598). If you are a white leadership educator, it is crucial to engage thoughtfully with your own racial identity and identify ways you perpetuate whiteness, including your own classroom and curriculum silence.
- Being okay with not being seen positively or easily liked (hooks, 1989). Students may not enjoy your class or see you positively because of the challenging nature of the class. This is especially hard to cope with given the perceptions of leadership learning being a fun or enjoyable experience. Consider what coping strategies you might employ and what support structures are needed.

### Conclusion

To move beyond social change embedded in a culture of niceness, it requires a deep engagement with our own social identities and how we have been socialized to uphold racism and other forms of oppression. This



lends to an understanding of why students, based on their social identities and lived experiences, might resist addressing social inequality in leadership. Leadership educators and learners must address social justice and systems of oppression through a critical lens, naming tensions to unsettle dominant ideologies.

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