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Nice for What? The Contradictions and Tensions of an Urban District's Racial Equity Transformation

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Abstract: Diversity, equity, and inclusion training has exploded over the last decade. While many districts invest considerable resources in developing their leaders' knowledge and skills on equity issues, "niceness" can perpetuate whiteness and present formidable obstacles to meaningful progress. Investigating a large urban-emergent district as a case study, we examine the efforts to eliminate the racial barriers perpetuated by its leaders and explore the contradictions that arise after a year of professional learning geared towards antiracist district transformation. We employ a theory of racialized organizations, seeking to understand how whiteness as niceness impeded school leaders' efforts to engage in antiracist change work. The study provides valuable implications for policy, practice, and future research in education and equity.

Keywords: racial equity; district transformation; equity leadership



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1. Introduction

Whiteness produces and sustains racial inequity in schools because it functions in every aspect of schooling, often normalized through color-evasive racism [1] and embedded in practices and policies [2]. Whiteness is a social location and an ideology that legitimizes structures of inclusion and exclusion based on racial membership [3]. From this perspective, schools are racialized organizations with structures, often expressed through the link between people's racial schemas (e.g., beliefs in racial segregation) and how they distribute resources (e.g., schools with predominantly students of color are under-resourced), that (re)produce racial inequity in student experience, well-being, and outcomes [2,4]. In schools, whiteness often operates under the guise of niceness [5–7]. Niceness perpetuates White cultural norms and diverts attention from the realities of structural and cultural racism by normalizing talking about race, racism, and equity as not nice [6,8,9]. Specifically, niceness encourages indirect questioning of inequity [10], use of color-evasive solutions [11], and loss of accountability for racially unequal practices and policies [9]. Thus, leaders invested in advancing antiracism in their schools must identify how whiteness as niceness exists in and operates through practices and policies before creating equity-minded organizations [12].

In recent years, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) professional learning has grown in prominence, specifically after the Black Lives Matter Movement [13,14], to raise awareness about implicit bias among leaders, faculty, and staff, and to a lesser extent, to mitigate the role of implicit bias in practices [15]. For example, Okonofua et al. [15] found a reduction in Black student suspension by 39% and a reduction of the racial discipline gap of 47% when teachers engaged in empathetic mindset training to reduce racially inequitable outcomes in discipline. However, research has shown that sustained racially equitable changes within schools take more than a change in an individual's belief system [16].

Scholars have been critical of DEI professional learning, focusing only on changing individual belief systems [13,17]. Ishimaru and Galloway [13] argued that such DEI professional learning has elements of prejudice reduction training. When the learning benchmarks

are changing hearts and minds without equipping educators with the language, tools, and agency to transform structures and cultures perpetuating racial inequity, educators could encounter instances of arrested development because learning about racism and equity is uncomfortable and creates cognitive dissonance when people recognize that their practices do not align with their values of equity and justice [18]. This realization can be challenging because it requires educators to confront their biases and assumptions about race and racism, which challenges their perceptions about being nice educators [7]. Without intentional efforts to move educators from learning about their role in reproducing racial inequity to focusing on changing practices and policies, educators' development could be arrested by the tensions and contradictions that challenge a culture of niceness where engaging in racial equity work is not nice because it does not feel nice.

Indeed, while DEI professional learning and implicit biases may potentially offer productive outcomes such as a reduction in the racial discipline gap [15], the true impact of its effectiveness on those engaged in the training, including how educators understand and implement antiracist and equitable orientations, is less known. Given that whiteness as niceness is embedded in school structures, scholars have asserted that for DEI professional learning to be effective in equipping educators to transform their schools into antiracist organizations, the training must provide educators with the language and tools to address the historical, structural, systemic, and institutional nature of racial inequities [17,19–22]. This includes how niceness creates barriers to acknowledging institutional and structural racism. Moreover, DEI professional learning should also provide opportunities for educators to learn how they are implicated in reproducing—or disrupting—those dynamics in school policies and practices [23]. Organizational change scholars across education systems champion opportunities for administrators, faculty, and staff to participate in structured interventions where they can collectively reflect on their beliefs about race, equity, and change and how such beliefs inform their practices [2,9,23,24]. If an educator understands how their practices are reproducing racial inequities, thus misaligning with their espoused values for equity and justice, then with the proper tools, they could change such inequitable practices [25]. Through critical reflection and dialogue, educators can begin to identify how their practices contribute to racial inequity and develop strategies to address these issues [26].

We designed this study to shed light on the experiences of one large urban school district and how the leaders at the district and school levels describe the tensions and contradictions that arise during the antiracist transformation. Thus, our inquiry centers around an urban district invested in removing persistent racial inequitable barriers some leaders reproduce by engaging in a multi-year individual and institutional-level professional learning series. Our research question for this study is: How do district and school-level leaders in one large urban school describe how the collective culture of niceness surfaced contradictions during an antiracist transformation? Due to the complexity of the transformation, we reviewed data with the lens of searching for contradictions and tensions that arise and may hinder or support the progress of racial equity transformation.

2. Conceptual Framework: Schools as Racialized Organizations Operating in a Culture of Niceness

This section presents the theoretical and empirical background. Organizations such as K-12 schools can be viewed as racialized structures where race plays a significant role in shaping various aspects of the organization. Ray [4] argues that race is constitutive of organizations, influencing their formation and everyday functioning. For example, Stewart et al. [27] applied a theory of racialized organization and found how the notion of race neutrality in schools can perpetuate racial inequality among students and faculty. Moreover, this study shed light on how historical patterns of exclusion and segregation continue to shape educational settings, affecting workforce diversity and disparities within K-12 schools. A theory of racialized organizations posits that formal and informal organizational processes within K-12 schools can privilege White racial groups while limiting opportunities

for People of Color [27]. Such racial inequality can manifest in resource distribution or unequal funding [28], access to leadership positions [29], and the application of formal rules and policies based on racial considerations [30]. Therefore, researchers and leaders should understand K-12 schools as racialized organizations because race influences their organizational routines, norms, and hierarchies [4,30]. Moreover, scholars have argued that the study of whiteness should focus on intervening mechanisms to show how whiteness influences practice [1,17,31].

Interrogating whiteness becomes imperative while exploring how it perpetuates and reinforces institutional and structural racism within educational settings [32]. Whiteness (re)produces institutional and structural racism by masking power and privilege, thus normalizing White innocence that allows people's refusal to acknowledge the depths of violence whiteness inflicts on People of Color [32,33]. (In educational settings, whiteness functions through nice people [6,9,11,34], who tend to privilege comfortable, pleasing [35] acts or discourse in ways that extinguish topics that may be uncomfortable or challenging for many White people to discuss such as antiracism. This paper conceptualizes niceness and its relationship with education as a "shared socioemotional disposition or way of being" [7] p. xiv that maintains whiteness by prioritizing White comfort and fragility. White people, although People of Color also play a role, are the primary group that maintains a culture of niceness because they stand to benefit from whiteness [36]. A culture of niceness allows for confrontations and difficult conversations to be seen as incivility. Characterizing conversations about racial equity as confrontational reifies White supremacy, maintaining the status quo in schools. Individually, nice people eschew uncomfortable experiences and resist acknowledging negative attributes or actions of others in favor of what they deem to be positive demeanors, which requires that nice people reframe experiences or topics that may bring discomfort to make them palatable [7].

Acknowledging the culture of niceness and the notion that schools are racialized spaces illuminates contradictions and tensions that could occur during an antiracist district transformation. We suggest that the culture of niceness embedded within the organizational context and profession derail equity initiatives in schools using the cooling effect [37] to diminish hot topics. Several key studies have shown how whiteness operates in school leadership during change efforts. Whiteness has a significant impact on school leadership and change efforts, influencing racial equity, systemic racism, and leadership development within educational settings. For example, Wong [38] explains that whiteness in school disciplinary measures can impact racial equity initiatives led by school leaders. Researchers have also highlighted that promoting equity and justice orientations alone is insufficient to address the systemic racism that permeates public education, requiring a reflective understanding of whiteness and more profound structural changes [39]. Moreover, White school leaders often exhibit colorblindness and racial stereotypes that perpetuate inequities in schools and present barriers to marginalized students and families [40]. These findings underscore the complex ways in which whiteness influences school leadership, perpetuates systemic racism, and impacts efforts to promote equity and inclusion within K-12 educational environments. However, less is known about how whiteness impacts change efforts to make schools more antiracist.

Ray's [4] foundational piece on racialized organizations emphasizes how whiteness operates as property within organizational structures, impacting access to capital, labor distribution, and freedom. In K-12 settings, researchers have called for the acknowledgment of K-12 spaces as racialized organizations and calling into question the compatibility of antiracist leadership while upholding colonial practices such as grading, discipline, and other school policies [41]. Moreover, research has shown that organizations frequently engage in antiracist and inclusion training, such as implicit bias, to explain disparities and marshal toward equity, yet this training does little to change the individual level of whiteness and privilege, requiring more sustainable and organization-level changes [13,41]. For example, Ishimaru and Galloway [13] posit that change efforts were limited to the individual when they studied a school that focused on the individual as the mechanism for

change. As the researchers define it, the hearts and minds approach limits the necessary changes to foster equitable and antiracist transformations [13]. Instead, they assert that changes must happen at the organizational level to engender change [13].

A standard method of DEI initiatives is to provide professional learning opportunities for school leaders, faculty, and staff to foster an understanding of racial equity and to marshal change. However, research has shown that most of these trainings are ineffective. Despite gaining popularity, these trainings often need more differentiation, inclusivity, and opportunities for discourse and reflection. Kohlbecker [42] argues that DEI training should focus on organizational norms such as pedagogical expectations and practices. Similarly, in a review of the literature conducted by Corsino and Fuller [43], they found that the literature emphasizes training alongside building institutional commitments. Finally, research has shown that training must be conducted annually to be effective, with multiple trainings occurring during the same year and promoting input from historically underrepresented groups [43].

After reviewing the existing literature, we found a significant gap in research that explores the intersection of professional learning, whiteness in school leadership, and efforts toward antiracism. Further investigation is necessary to understand how these topics intersect and what can be done to enhance equity in school district systems. We recognize that there is more to antiracism than professional learning. We were curious about the functioning of whiteness in organizational norms such as niceness in schools. Specifically, we wanted to explore how niceness, which is a product of whiteness and privilege, can unintentionally hinder antiracist initiatives and perpetuate the existing power dynamics. This study begins to fill that gap.

3. The Case

We conducted a case study of school leaders at one urban school district participating in an antiracist transformation initiative. Case study research was suitable because it focuses on understanding a contemporary problem within its real-life context [44,45], including phenomena associated with organizational transformation [46]. Moreover, case study researchers define and bind the unit of analysis to help determine the necessary data collection and analysis [44,45]. This study studied how school leaders describe the contradictions and tensions that arise during a district-wide antiracist transformation. Below, we provide details about the setting of the study, data collection, and analysis methods.

3.1. Setting

Located in the Northeast, Jackson Falls Public School District (JFPSD) serves over 6000 students in a sizeable urban-emergent city. More than 80% of the school's students were classified as low-income. Jackson Falls serves approximately 25,000 students in pre-K through 12 grades across 50 schools. The district's student demographics were diverse: 70% Latino, 20% African American, 6% Asian, and 5% White. JFPSD is a community with lower socio-economic status and many families living in poverty. The district faced growing criticism about its lack of equity-oriented and antiracist practices by students and families, as demonstrated by an internal survey, which the district leadership discussed during the planning meetings (the authors were not given access to these internal surveys) and faced considerable pressure from the state, particularly after being relinquished from state control.

3.2. Initiative

In January 2021, JFPSD began a multi-year professional learning and transformation initiative to spur an antiracist school district. The first author designed and facilitated professional learning with the district leadership. Leaders from the school level (assistant principals and principals), district supervisors, coaches, assistant superintendents, and the superintendent attended two-hour meetings three times a month around topics of equity-oriented leadership such as modeling, equity mindset, and reflection [47]. The meetings

were held online via Google Meet and Zoom. The professional learning focused on a two-pronged approach. They were, first, building the capacity of the school and district-level leaders’ racial equity literacy and designing initiatives to spur transformational efforts toward racial equity. The first author designed the initiative to change current status quo policies at JFPSD that leaders identified needed to change, such as discipline, attendance, and grading policies. As part of these initiatives, educational leaders established objectives for their institutions aimed at promoting racial equity. Among these objectives were aspirations such as creating a hospitable ambiance that encourages inclusivity and a sense of belonging for all individuals, particularly those historically marginalized. Engaging in open and constructive conversations concerning DEI was essential to achieve this. At the end of each year, the first author asked leaders to reflect on progress toward goals and considerations for the following year’s racial equity transformation efforts. The first author used Padlets, described below, to document the results of the two years of reflection. Additionally, the first author interviewed seven leaders after year two to investigate the responses provided on the Padlets further.

3.3. Data Sources

The first author obtained the data through an institutional agreement with the district. The first author collected qualitative data from professional development sessions and seven interviews, including school principals and district-level supervisors.

3.4. Interview Data

One part of the data collection was through interview data. The first author used purposeful sampling to identify the participants in this data-collection portion. The participants were school leaders ($N = 7$) in a large, urban school district in New Jersey. The interviewed school leaders included two principals of K-8 schools, one high school principal, and four district supervisors who oversaw departments in more than one school building. The participants varied in gender, race, and ethnicity, and all have worked in the district for years. Table 1 provides an overview of the sample.

Table 1. Sample Demographics.

Leader	Level	Experience (Yrs.)	Race/Ethnicity	Gender
Arlene	Principal	6	Black Latina	Female
Martin	Principal	3	Black	Male
Carla	Principal	7	White	Female
Sammy	STEM Supervisor	10	White	Female
Maura	Arts Supervisor	1	White	Female
Fashon	Math Supervisor	4	White	Female
Samuel	Special Education Director	1	Black	Male

The first author used a semi-structured interview approach. The interviewees had previously engaged with the team members throughout their professional development sessions and had built a rapport. Throughout the interview, participants had the opportunity to reflect on the time they spent engaging in the work of district transformation. The interview protocol asked participants to share their positionality, how it impacted their work as school leaders, and how they engaged in professional development and the district transformation process. Additionally, they shared their work’s barriers and successes and how those may vary between faculty members and schools throughout the district.

The first author transcribed the seven interviews. Both authors applied inductive and comparative processes to code the data. First, initial or open coding was utilized in a preliminary cycle of analysis [48,49]. This allowed both authors to engage in what Yin (2016) described as disassembling the data. Preliminary codes were analyzed and grouped based on their connections to a reflection/experience related to the self, a reflection and experience

related to the collaborative learning process, or a reflection/experience related to their professional role and leadership practices. Using an iterative process, the authors grouped the initial/open codes before analyzing and refining them into broader themes [45,49].

3.5. Padlet Data

Participants responded to reflection questions on Padlets, digital walls where participants posted their responses. The data used is from seven professional development sessions conducted in June 2021 and June 2023, where the first author asked the leaders to fill in a Padlet using the TQE (Thoughts, Questions, Epiphanies) protocol method designed by Cult of Pedagogy [50]. The first author selected this protocol based on her work with antiracist district transformations and the notion that leaders need open spaces for reflection to engage in antiracist practices [51]. Padlet was used as a data-collection tool because research has shown that Padlet increases thinking skills and writing descriptive text [52]. The protocol was used as a guide to elicit responses, reflecting on the year of professional development conducted by the researcher. Hammond [53] offers protocols to help facilitate discussions about equity through structured and distributed deep conversations. The protocol asks participants to respond to their thoughts, questions, and epiphanies about the progress of the antiracist district transformation. As a result, the six Padlets were gathered between June 2021 and June 2023. The sample contained 74 responses from 78 participants, including 50 principals (elementary, middle, high, and alternative schools) and 28 district leaders. Comments ranged from 3 to 65 words in length.

3.6. Data Analysis

We used ATLAS.ti qualitative software to store and analyze the data. We analyzed the data set together in five steps. First, we read over the Padlets and interviews to obtain a global understanding of what the participants wrote, enabling immersion in the data. Second, we applied Braun and Clarke's [54] and Lochmiller's [55] approach to thematic analysis by framing the data through a constructionist orientation. Braun and Clarke [54] explain that thematic analysis can be a "constructionist method, which examines how events, realities, meanings, experiences and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society" (p. 81). We used the constructionist orientation to apply our interpretation of the data, which was rooted in the theoretical framework. Our research moved from simply describing what participants reported to offering an interpretation of the patterns we observed. The first author then individually coded the Padlets and interviews in Atlas.ti. Some codes generated were "niceness", "politeness", "fairness", "collective action", and "district alignment for accountability". Individual codes produced a sense of the data that then informed how the researchers assigned value to different perspectives, experiences, or recollections. Finally, we met to codify findings, discussing where the preponderance of evidence lay and how to present these findings through a social justice-oriented lens [56]. After every step, we met to discuss the round of analysis, drawing in the relevant literature, marking up models, and creating conjectures about our analysis. The first author relied heavily on the second author's expertise in racial equity.

3.7. Positionality

As researchers, we acknowledge the importance of understanding our racial and cultural background in shaping our perspectives and biases [57]. Through researching the self, we recognize how our experiences as scholars of color influence our approaches to educational research. The first author identifies as an Afro-Latina, cis-gendered woman who attended public schools in urban areas. The second author identifies as a cisgender Chicano, first-generation college student who attended under-resourced schools and who experienced being racialized by educators. By exploring our positionality, we aimed to critically reflect on how power dynamics and privilege, or the lack thereof, impacted our work. We were committed to representing diverse voices and perspectives in our research,

shifting the focus from individual experiences to systemic inequities within the racialized spaces of our country's educational system.

4. Findings

The themes are presented in the following text and illustrated by quotations from the Padlets and the interviews. We found discomfort in disrupting the collective professional culture of niceness within the school district. The culture of niceness surfaces the central contradiction: a racial equity transformation would not foster increased academic achievement. Alongside this central contradiction, we found one nested contradiction, "good accountability", or what the participants described as equitable metrics for grading and evaluation. We illuminate the embedded contradiction to unpack the complex racial equity organizational change process.

These findings potentially lead to recurring barriers to change and issues that undermine the change processes and spur transformation [58]. Also, we found leaders raised contradictions that were central aspects of their leadership, such as buy-in and fostering a safe space for teachers, accountability measures, and conflating equality with equity. We argue that the contradictions raised regarding these three embedded contradictions are White logics that cannot be changed. Instead, transformation must occur, which requires disruption.

4.1. *Tension: Navigating the Discomfort of the Collective Culture of Niceness*

Responses to the Padlet about reflections on the year of professional learning also yielded responses concerning "playing nice" and asking if real work would be done. The culture of niceness is pervasive in education, and the findings of this inquiry shed light on the pervasiveness and embeddedness of the culture of niceness. The culture of niceness requires Whites to portray themselves as racially progressive and empathetic towards People of Color. However, it is almost impossible for the dominant group to truly comprehend subordinate groups' perspectives simply because they are in the dominant position and the functions of whiteness are invisible to them. Thus, from the data, the participants were elevating how niceness should be recalibrated to return to the status quo. This is illustrated in comments such as, "Can we all just play fair in the sandbox? We are in this together. Let's leave our baggage at the door" and "What steps should I take in the face of teacher pushback". The notion of playing fair and leaving baggage suggests that the racial discourse that creates this tension does not allow for growth or change. This type of comment can be perceived as the discomfort that motivates/engenders/is part of whiteness. These comments align with Bonilla-Silva [59] in that naming the discomfort and attempting to return to the status quo disrupts attempts to pursue racial equity in school. Similarly, the comments about racial equity conversations by participants encourage/seek to alleviate their discomfort rather than address the racism that is present across the district. These appeals are one-way participants reifying the hegemonic racial advantage of whiteness apparent in the school district.

On the one hand, participants decried the need to return to the niceness culture. On the other hand, there were more comments about the continued disruption of the niceness culture that has begun due to the professional learning series. This was revealed in several participants, who named that discomfort is part of the process; it was occurring, and they saw it as a necessary tension for the progression of the transformation. For example, participants shared, "This equity work has made some staff very uncomfortable and has sparked necessary conversations about equity and White supremacy" and "We have to be willing to examine our practices for racism. If we don't do that, we are destined to support more of the same for our students". Another participant stated, "To move forward, we must have uncomfortable conversations that allow us to reflect on our thoughts, words, and actions".

The notion of being uncomfortable for these participants is welcoming in the pursuit of racial equity transformations. By naming the niceness (whiteness) [60] of the discourse

being used, the participants are actively de-normalizing the White preference to avoid conversations on race, instead normalizing a counternarrative that did not appease White discomfort. Connected to discomfort was the tension expressed by leaders regarding racial equity and teacher buy-in. As described above, some leaders asked about buy-in and bringing everyone on board. Arlene expressed the discomfort in her leadership: “Depending on the group you’re in, you know what you say and don’t say. We’re still working on creating a safety zone, not to make people too uncomfortable”. Another leader shared on the Padlet, “This equity work has made some staff very uncomfortable and has sparked very necessary conversations about equity and White supremacy”. The notion of discomfort showed up in all interviews and across all Padlets. This is also evident in comments about the opportunity for the district to transform toward racial equity. One leader shared, “I have a historical opportunity to continue to promote equitable education by supporting teachers who are in line with the district goals or supporting them as they learn to align to the district goals. There is an urgency to what we do here”. Another leader shared a famous quote from Desmond Tutu, “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor”, which signals the aspirational and hopeful perspective of leaders engaged in the transformation while signaling the various racial complexities of the work. The data shows that these participants were “leaning into discomfort” [61] p. 177, potentially wanting to go beyond a passive leaning into discomfort when it arose and actively stamping out niceness. The data suggests that many leaders wanted to actively promote discomfort because they believed that racial equity work would not be productive until the district leaders became significantly uncomfortable with racism and whiteness.

4.2. Racial Equity Transformation and White Logic Models Embedded in Schools

We found that the central contradiction illuminated an internal and external organizational incompatibility and that focusing on and implementing a racially equitable school district does not fit with the White logic models of schooling and accountability. The data suggests that leaders felt the contradiction of racial equity and attempted to conform to embedded organizational routines such as grading and accountability practices. Before the racial equity transformation efforts, leaders in interviews expressed that the grading and accountability policies were exclusionary, an element of White logic. As Carla aptly points out, “Why are we going to spend all this money to have this grade program if everybody doesn’t benefit from it”.

Leaders in our sample saw equity and academic achievement as mutually exclusive. The leaders explained one reason for this as they questioned how the racial equity transformation would lead to improvement or goals achieved regarding academic achievement. Leaders wrote in the Padlet, “I am wondering what impacts this will have on student outcomes”, and “I hope that this will positively impact student outcomes”.

The focus of the racial equity transformation was to engage in systematic change. For example, some leaders expressed that district-wide policies such as discipline and uniform policies were one of the causes of structural racial inequity. Sammy’s district leader shared,

Seventh graders can see injustice a mile away. I’m always amazed that the kids are as compliant as they are. We have a lot of inequitable and racist practices built in, like our uniform policy. But it amounts to the policing of black and brown bodies. We (district leadership) talk about this policy. Some leaders say it prepares them for college, and I was like that. Now look at all of your highest-performing blue-ribbon districts with the highest percentage of students going to college. Does any of them have a uniform policy? No. Why are we suspending children or having a removal from instruction? Because they don’t have pants.

The leaders who described the inequitable discipline policies align with research that shows that disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline against Black and other racially marginalized children negatively impacts their academic achievement [23]. Similarly,

leaders spoke to artifacts and metrics, “Equity is in every aspect of education, from funding to curriculum, to instructional choices, grading, etc.”.

Another element of the overarching contradiction is that leaders identified the racial equity transformation as solely an inter and intrapersonal activity rather than an organizational one focused on systemic changes across the school district. One leader stated, “Everyone needs to be onboard. This is a team effort, and we need to keep working towards the goal”, and “At the end of the day, it is about a matter of willingness”. Another leader commented on the Padlet, “How do we motivate resistant staff beyond compliance to do the work meaningfully?” We posit that this part of the contradiction surfaced because leadership literature, best practices, and preparation tell leaders they must have buy-in to engage in transformational initiatives. However, individual efforts may not be enough to address systemic issues. Thus, we see a contradiction in the perceptions of leaders that to transform toward racial equity, relying on organizational norms and routines proves more effective than waiting for individual buy-in.

This finding is echoed in the interviews of the school leaders, who detailed that they were moving beyond buy-in and instead toward racially equitable organizational practices such as inclusive curriculum, grading, and instructional delivery. For example, Arlene explained, “We are not going to engage in students making up for marking periods of work with 150 absences in marking period 4, and we have never done that. We’re going to give students the tools to be successful now before it gets out of control”. This quote illustrates how some leaders described the organizational practices that were being changed, avoiding the focus on buy-in.

Additionally, the data suggests that some leaders were able to engage in expansive learning because of the facilitation design and content. For example, one leader shared, “Racism is not a topic of comfort for me. I typically do not engage in conversations about it. These sessions have required me to self-reflect to be aware of my biases. I am thankful for the breakout rooms as they have forced me to speak and share my thoughts and learn from the leaders on the calls”. Opportunities to discuss racial equity with other leaders across the district illuminated some of these contradictions while also providing an opportunity to grapple with the collective culture of niceness.

4.3. “Good Accountability”: Designing Equitable and Inclusive Policies Metrics

By applying a racialized organization lens to niceness, we found that learning during the professional learning series provided new information, contradicting the school district’s status quo. This finding also illuminates racial inequity within a school’s organizational routines, such as grading. As it is a public school district under the gaze of educational state and federal policies that are color-evasive, we found that the leaders within the school and district wanted to reshape these metrics and policies imposed on them and input a racially equitable substitution. Many referred to a different type of accountability or “good accountability”. For example, Sarah, a district supervisor, explained, “The classrooms that receive support while also trying to work at, how do you deal with the accountability measures around those administrators? Moreover, I feel like that is the pain point for us. We really don’t have good accountability”. Leaders in the sample defined good accountability as equitable, inclusive, and relevant ways to improve racial equity through lesson plans, professional development, and individual accountability.

Leaders also wondered how the district’s accountability metrics, such as grading, would shift toward racial equity. One leader explained, “I am wondering what impacts this will have on student outcomes”. The data suggest that grading and outcomes were a focus for the leaders. Grading policies are traditionally situated in White logic due to their rigid and exclusionary practices [62]. As the district transformed, leaders saw an opportunity to expand their learning about equitable grading mechanisms. For example, Carla expressed that professional learning allowed the leaders to engage in conversations with each other and within their schools to ratify the grading policies toward an equitable orientation. Carla described using the book “Grading for Equity” [62] as an artifact to redesign her school’s

grading system, which she found inequitable. She asked, “Why is it a problem for students to make up missing work during our marking period? So, if they’re failing the second marking period and are on a student intervention plan, they are working to remediate that grade. What is the problem? Why is that not fair?” While leaders described their goals toward enacting “good accountability”, they also were aware that these changes would catalyze discomfort within their teachers. This discomfort would go against the collective culture of niceness because these were difficult conversations. Also, leaders were aware of the potential discomfort of their actions, as demonstrated in the data. For example, one leader wrote, “It is ALL people’s responsibility to be less fragile; People of Color don’t need to twist themselves into knots trying to navigate us as painlessly as possible”. Similarly, another leader shared, “To move forward, we must have uncomfortable conversations that allow us to reflect on our thoughts, words, and actions”. The data demonstrates how the collective culture of niceness was being navigated by leaders while negotiating and bringing about change.

5. Discussion

Our research offers insights into the complexities and conflicts that emerge during a racial equity transformation in an urban-emergent school district in the Northeastern United States. It underscores the necessity for systemic changes across the district to tackle racial disparities. The study also sheds light on the inherent contradictions that can hinder the change process or act as a catalyst for transformation. We discovered that the prevalent culture of niceness in education often poses a recurring obstacle to change. Additionally, we found that discomfort is a natural part of the transformation process and is crucial for progress, yet it presents a central challenge for leaders driving this work. Our research also revealed that leaders are primarily concerned with how racial equity is linked to White supremacist logics of achievement, accountability, and buy-in, highlighting a disconnect between academic achievement and racial equity. While equity is about parity in outcomes, our findings indicate that leaders mainly address the discomfort of racial equity conversations, policy, and curriculum changes without tethering them to outcomes.

Prior studies have demonstrated that schooling is rooted in White logics, and the socio-historical context significantly impacts the academic achievement of Black boys [58,63,64]. Our study aligns with the work of these scholars, emphasizing that racial equity must be addressed at the organizational, school, and district levels, and leaders must comprehend the embeddedness of White logics and the necessity for disruption. For instance, when leaders express the need for teacher buy-in to promote racial equity, we argue that this notion assumes a dominant culture into which teachers need to assimilate, often reflective of White culture. This assumption is problematic as it reinforces the idea of White supremacy and undermines the expertise of teachers in their own right [65].

Our study provides a critical perspective on the challenges and opportunities inherent in racial equity transformations within educational institutions, emphasizing the need to confront embedded institutional logics to achieve meaningful and sustainable change [51]. Finally, our findings connect to Singleton’s [66] work that posits discomfort arises with school-based racial equity work as it does not originate from the work itself but rather because there are already underlying tensions around race among the district leaders, teachers, and students. Finding ways to cause discomfort intentionally might be a pivotal step to disrupting White people’s “epistemology of ignorance” concerning racism, [67] p. 89, and lead to more support for race-conscious transformations.

Implications

Our findings suggest implications in racial equity organizational change in schools, leader preparation, and practice. The findings of our study provide insights into how schools and districts can engage in racial equity transformations that become sustainable practices. Our research findings suggest that to achieve sustained racial equity change, we need to move beyond just focusing on individual change. As a field, we need to recognize

the importance of systemic factors and focus on them as well. The theoretical framework of niceness often emphasizes individual-level actions rather than addressing systemic issues, which can hinder progress toward racial equity. District leaders must employ an intentional racial equity lens to ensure that every district function is aligned with its vision of racial equity and is dedicated to rooting out policies and practices that reproduce racialized outcomes [22]. This means leaders should develop a single, equity-focused theory of change for the school district rather than creating a separate equity plan [22]. Often, leaders are expected to create equity goals outside their annual progress goals. Equity should be infused at the organizational level to progress on all goals.

Our findings suggest that leader preparation can be a powerful catalyst to support leadership development toward racial equity. For example, we found that leaders leaned on the traditional aspects of leadership frameworks and jargon, such as teacher buy-in, safe spaces, and accountability, which reifies White supremacy. Instead, we recommend that leader preparation programs engage in leadership practices that provide alternative theories to catalyze a racially equitable organization. For example, leader preparation programs can model and teach leaders how to have difficult conversations about racial equity using the Courageous Conversations [66] and other established and evidence-based frameworks to disrupt the culture of niceness. Our findings also suggest that leaders need practice in data analysis and school culture building that mitigates racial equity. Frameworks such as the Learning Policy Institute's Districts Advancing Racial Equity (DARE) tool [68], Fergus' work on solving disproportionality, Hammond's [53] work on culturally relevant pedagogy and the brain, as well as several other racial equity centered practitioner materials, should be used as the basis of all leader preparation courses instead of as add-ons. In this way, aspiring leaders are given practice, feedback, and support to engage in these practices through a racial equity lens.

In addition to our study, a critical race institutional logics perspective can provide further insights into racial equity transformations in educational organizations. This perspective emphasizes the need to examine how different institutional logics intersect with issues of race and power within these organizations. By adopting this framework, researchers can gain a more nuanced understanding of how racial inequities are perpetuated and challenged within institutional logics and how these are shaped by broader societal forces [69]. Furthermore, applying institutional logic analysis in educational organizational research can offer a systematic approach to identifying, describing, and measuring the logic at play within educational institutions [70]. This can be particularly valuable in studying leadership and racial equity, as it provides a structured method for analyzing how different logics coexist and compete within these settings. Moreover, the institutional logics perspective conceptualizes the interactions among societal structures, fields, and local contexts. It is an apt frame for studying how leaders navigate and respond to the embedded contradictions and tensions that arise during racial equity transformations [71]. This perspective can help researchers understand the complex interplay between different institutional forces and how they influence leadership behavior and outcomes in the context of racial equity.

In summary, incorporating a critical race institutional logics perspective and institutional logics analysis in higher education research can enrich our understanding of the challenges and opportunities inherent in racial equity transformations within educational organizations. These frameworks provide valuable tools for examining how institutional logic intersects with race and power issues and how they shape leadership and organizational change efforts in pursuing racial equity.

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