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# Supporting Critical Multicultural Teacher Educators: Transformative teaching, social justice education, and perceptions of institutional support

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## ABSTRACT

In most teacher education programmes in Canada and the United States, educators' opportunities to develop equity-related skills are concentrated into single 'multicultural' courses. These courses tend to have a conservative or liberal orientation, focused on appreciating diversity or cultural competence, rather than a critical orientation, focused on preparing teachers to address inequity. In this study, based on a survey of instructors of multicultural and intercultural teacher education courses in Canada and the US (N = 186), we examined the relationship between the criticality of their multicultural teacher education courses and their perceptions of institutional support for the values they teach. We found a negative relationship between the two – the more critical the instructors' approaches, the less institutional support they perceived.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

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intercultural education;  
multicultural education;  
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## Introduction

Teacher education scholars have argued that the most effective way to prepare teachers to create equitable schools is to incorporate themes of equity and justice across teacher education curricula (Krummel 2013; Macintosh 2007). However, in most cases these themes are not incorporated across teacher education curricula. Instead, opportunities for teacher education students to strengthen equity knowledge and skills usually are limited to one diversity or multiculturalism course (Keengwe 2010; Scott and Ford 2011). (We hereafter refer to these as *multicultural teacher education* or *MTE* courses.)

With this reality in mind, teacher education scholars have attempted to map the nature of what students are learning in MTE courses and the ideological stances that commonly inform MTE course design (Gorski 2009; Kumar and Lauerma 2017). For example, building on McLaren's (1995) description of ideological stances for multiculturalism, Jenks, Lee, and Kanpol (2001) identified three ideological approaches to MTE: conservative, liberal, and critical.

Conservative MTE is assimilationist; it prepares teachers to help marginalised students conform to 'mainstream culture and its attending values, mores, and norms' (Jenks, Lee, and Kanpol 2001, 90). Liberal MTE prepares teachers to celebrate diversity but, like conservative MTE, fails to prepare them to understand or respond to ways power and inequity are wielded in schools. Critical MTE prepares teachers to participate in the reconstruction of schools by advocating equity, confronting issues of power and privilege, and disrupting oppressive policies and practices (Jenks, Lee, and Kanpol 2001; Lund 2006; Nieto 2017).

As discussed later in more detail, MTE scholars largely agree about the importance of transcending conservative and liberal approaches and embracing critical approaches grounded in equity and justice (Au 2017; May 1998; St. Denis 2011; Nieto 2017). Despite this theoretical agreement, an analysis of US-based MTE courses (Gorski 2009) showed that most were not designed with a critical perspective. While 29% reflected a critical approach, 71% reflected a conservative or liberal approach. Remaining unclear was *why* this lack of criticality persisted despite the critical approaches supported in MTE theory (Au 2017; Gorski 2008; McLaren 1995; Nieto and Bode 2018) and the broader literature on educational equity (Gorski and Swalwell 2015; Payne and Smith 2012; Wang 2013).

Based on survey data (N = 186) from people teaching MTE courses in Canada and the US, this study examined the relationship between the criticality of multicultural teacher educators' approaches to teaching MTE courses and the level of support they perceived from their institutions or departments for the values they teach in these courses. We focused on these conditions because MTE instructors' perceptions of a lack of institutional support is among the most well-documented challenges they face when it comes to teaching their courses the way they want to teach them (Gorski 2016; Marshall 2015; Sensoy and DiAngelo 2009).

We built this study through a three-part process for examining the relationship between multicultural teacher educators' criticality and their perceptions of institutional support for the values they teach in MTE courses. In order to situate the relationship within a critical multicultural framework, we first needed to validate the assumption that MTE courses taught by teacher educators who perceive themselves as critically-oriented actually are more likely to include critically-oriented content than courses taught by less critically-oriented teacher educators. Secondly, we examined the relationship between orientations to MTE and teacher educators' perceptions of institutional support, exploring whether a connection exists between the level of criticality educators reported applying to their MTE courses and their perceptions of institutional support for the values taught in those courses. Lastly, we examined which critically oriented topics were more likely to correlate with educators' perceptions of institutional support. For example, we examined whether instructors who taught critical

content, such as critical race theory, believed that the values they taught were supported by or aligned with the values of their institutions.

### **Conceptual and theoretical framing**

We drew on Jenks et al.'s (2001) three approaches to MTE (conservative, liberal, and critical) and Gorski's (2009) synthesis of five approaches to MTE, which was based on an analysis of how Jenks et al.'s approaches were reflected in MTE courses in the US. Gorski (2009) expanded Jenks et al.'s (2001) descriptions into a more detailed explication of five overlapping approaches to MTE, summarised in Table 1.

In addition to this category framework, the current study was informed theoretically by critical multicultural education theory (May and Sleeter 2010; Vavrus 2014). It started with critical multicultural education's assertion that, in addition to 'liberal' goals of exploring bias and strengthening cross-cultural skills, MTE ought to cultivate the ability to disrupt injustice and redistribute educational opportunity (Au 2017; Gorski and Swalwell 2015).

**Table 1.** Typology of approaches to multicultural teacher education (Gorski, 2009).

	Approach	Contextualising Frameworks	Objectives
Conservative	Teaching the 'Other'	Group-specific studies (e.g. the culture of poverty framework, teaching Latino students, and so on); cross-cultural communication; 'contributions' approach	To prepare teachers to work effectively with a diverse student population by studying the cultures, values, lifestyles, and worldviews of individual identity groups, and, in many cases, how to assimilate them into the education system
Liberal	Teaching with Cultural Sensitivity and Tolerance	Human relations, inter-group relations, tolerance education, cultural sensitivity, celebrating diversity, pluralism	To prepare teachers to enter their classrooms with awareness of and sensitivity towards diversity, particularly through an examination of their personal biases
	Teaching with Multicultural Competence	Multicultural competence, culturally relevant instruction, culturally responsive teaching, understanding multiple perspectives, culturally appropriate pedagogy	To equip teachers with the knowledge and practical skills necessary to implement multicultural curricular and pedagogical strategies, enabling them to engage the diverse learning styles of all students
Critical	Teaching in Sociopolitical Context	Critical theories and analyses, liberatory education, critical multicultural education, social justice education, and critical pedagogy	To engage teachers in a critical examination of the systemic influences of power, oppression, dominance, inequity, and injustice on all aspects of education, from their own practice to institutional and federal education policy
	Teaching as Resistance Counter-Hegemonic Practice	Those listed under 'Teaching in Sociopolitical Context' as well as postcolonial theory, Marxism, social movements, and educational activism	To prepare teachers to be change agents through the sort of critical examination described under 'Teaching in Sociopolitical Context' and through strategies for counter-hegemonic teaching and social activism

## **Terminology**

In the context of this study, ‘multicultural teacher educators’ are people who teach courses on multicultural education, intercultural education, and related topics. ‘MTE courses’ are the courses they teach. We recognise conceptions of these terms differ. However, as we mentioned earlier, these courses tend to share the phenomenon of being the only spaces within their coursework where most teacher education students learn about equity and justice.

## **Contextualising the study**

Two pertinent areas of scholarship contextualise this study: (1) scholarship related to the prevalence and nature of critical MTE, and (2) scholarship on the challenges multicultural teacher educators face trying to operationalise critical MTE in practice.

### ***The prevalence and nature of critical MTE***

MTE scholars generally agree about the dangers of relying on solely conservative or liberal approaches to MTE, including their failure to attend adequately to equity and justice (DiAngelo and Sensoy 2010; Nieto and Bode 2018). These approaches focus on assimilation and celebrating diversity, but not on preparing educators to respond to educational and societal injustice (Gorski and Swalwell 2015; May and Sleeter 2010; Nieto 2017).

Teachers who have developed a critical lens are prepared, for example, to recognise even the subtlest ways heterosexism operates in classrooms and schools; to identify and advocate against school policies and practices that create or exacerbate gender disparities in educational opportunities and experiences; and to engage students in conversations related to poverty and economic injustice (Gorski and Swalwell 2015). They understand the sociopolitical context of education (Nieto and Bode 2018) – how it is informed by and interacts with bigger societal conditions like structural racism and economic injustice. Whereas teachers with a liberal view might appreciate diversity through a ‘colorblind’ lens, teachers with a critical view understand how racism is reproduced in every aspect of schooling and to confront that racism directly by, for example, advocating for racial justice in school policy, teaching against racism (rather than only teaching about racial diversity), and engaging students in critical racial analyses of assigned learning materials (Yosso 2002). While liberal orientations to multiculturalism or interculturalism can offer important competencies, such as cross-cultural understandings and diversity awareness, they lack this transformative potential of critical approaches (Gorski, 2009). We cannot guarantee that all students who have access to teacher education coursework meant to prepare them with the knowledge and skills necessary

to do these things will choose to do them or feel empowered when they are in the classroom to do them, but we can be sure that educators who have never developed the knowledge and skills have no chance to do them.

Speaking to these concerns, Sleeter (1996) advocated a vision of multicultural education for social activism. Lund (2006) argued the importance of shifting from multiculturalism as a means for securing and retaining immigrant labour to multiculturalism grounded in decolonisation and justice. May (1998) lamented a history of hegemonic, 'simplistic and naïve' (2) approaches to multicultural education, including those focused solely on diversifying curricula. He endorsed a critical multicultural education that responds directly to racism, colonialism, and the 'inexorable globalization of capital' (May 1998, 4). St. Denis (2011) similarly advocated for a multiculturalism grounded in decolonisation and racial justice, arguing that liberal approaches silence Aboriginal communities and other people of colour. McLaren (2018) insisted on a *revolutionary* multiculturalism that transcends the limitations of liberal multicultural education.

Despite prevailing support in MTE theory for critical approaches, research has suggested that most MTE courses fail to reflect a critical perspective. As mentioned earlier, Gorski (2009), who analysed a variety of aspects of MTE courses, found that 71% were constructed in ways that were inconsistent with critical multicultural education. This finding supported scholarship suggesting that instructors of MTE courses may lack the critical orientation to teach MTE in transformative ways (Assaf, Garza, and Battle 2010; Trent, Kea, and Oh 2008).

### ***Challenges of teaching MTE courses critically***

A small number of studies and personal narratives by multicultural teacher educators hint at an explanation for this possible lack of critical orientations – an explanation that complicates the suggestion that teacher educators are to blame for the omission of critical perspectives in MTE. This scholarship suggests that multicultural teacher educators face barriers related to their teaching that may hamper their abilities to teach MTE courses how they want to teach them. Most commonly, scholars have identified three sets of barriers: instructional, institutional, and structural.

Instructional challenges refer to in-class conditions that could make adopting a critical stance difficult. These include student resistance (Gorski 2012; Crowley and Smith 2015) and difficulty navigating students' privileged identities (Matias, Montoya, and Nishi 2016; Owen 2010). Teacher educators who teach MTE courses have reported that these difficulties increase as more critical lenses are introduced (Chung and Miller 2011), such as when course content challenges dominant views related to meritocracy (Clark 2010; DiAngelo and Sensoy 2010) or when students from privileged identity groups are asked to consider structural injustice (Crowley and Smith 2015; DePalma 2010). They are elevated further for faculty from marginalised identity groups (Juárez, Smith, and Hayes

2008; Marshall 2015) who may pay a higher price on student course evaluations for adopting a critical perspective than their more privileged-identity peers (Atwater et al. 2013).

Institutional challenges refer to ways department- or institution-level culture undermines multicultural teacher educators' abilities to teach their courses how they want to teach them. For example, some report facing resistance from their institutions and colleagues (Cosier and Sanders 2007). Many feel as though they are the lone voices in their departments or universities advocating for educational equity and that they pay a professional price for doing so (Gorski 2016). The price may increase as they adopt increasingly critical stances (Marshall 2015).

Sociopolitical challenges refer to conditions outside multicultural teacher educators' institutions that impact their institutions' views of MTE. Rodríguez (2013) pointed to how federal policy and test-prep pedagogy tamp down critical perspectives in teacher education. Some have more broadly lamented the neoliberal school reform movement's effects, quieting equity discourses in teacher education (Liggett 2011; Rodríguez 2013). Relating these external pressures back to challenges multicultural teacher educators face within their institutions, Sleeter (2008, 2014) has argued that the imposition of neoliberal values on teacher education has led to shifts within teacher education towards the production of classroom technicians and away from a focus on equity. In the context of these conditions, many multicultural teacher educators feel increasingly marginalised, particularly if they adopt a critical stance (Gorski 2012; Marshall 2015).

These challenges could limit multicultural teacher educators' abilities, or their perceptions of their abilities, to teach their courses with a critical lens. At the very least, they complicate the popular perception that on average multicultural teacher educators adopt a conservative or liberal approach because they lack the knowledge or skills to use a critical approach (Assaf, Garza, and Battle 2010; Trent, Kea, and Oh 2008). It suggests that other sets of conditions might inform the gap between a philosophical endorsement of critically-oriented MTE and a possible trend towards less critical MTE practice.

## **Methods**

Data were drawn from a survey of multicultural teacher educators (N = 186) disseminated in the US and Canada between 2015 and 2016.

## **Participants**

Participation was limited to instructors (tenured and tenure track faculty, adjunct faculty, clinical and other non-tenure-track faculty, graduate teaching assistants, and instructors) who had taught at least one course in which the central content was multicultural or intercultural education, social justice

education, educational equity, or closely related topics for pre- or in-service teachers. Participants were identified through snowball sampling. We reached out to faculty colleagues who taught MTE courses, describing the requirements and inviting them, if they met those requirements, to participate. We also posted the invitation on social media sites frequented by people who teach MTE courses, such as the Facebook page of the National Association for Multicultural Education.

Roughly 10.2% of participants taught in Canadian institutions, making the sample representative when population and number of faculty in education programs in Canada and the US were considered. Participant demographics are summarised in [Table 2](#).

We chose to look cross-border at multicultural teacher educators in Canada and the US because, despite differences in the histories of multicultural education in the two countries – for example, multiculturalism is written into the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and centralised in the Canadian Multiculturalism Act – there are similarities across the countries’ socio-educational contexts. Additionally, while funding and accountability approaches differ, the countries have similarly structured public education

**Table 2.** Demographic profile of the total participant pool.

Demographic Characteristic	Identity	Proportion of participants
Gender <sup>a</sup>	Female	75.7%
	Male	22.2%
	Genderqueer	2.2%
	Transgender	0.5%
	Gender Fluid	0.5%
	Other	0.5%
Race	White	62.2%
	Black	11.4%
	Latinx	9.7%
	Aboriginal, American Indian, Native American	3.2%
	Asian, Asian American, Pacific Islander	3.2%
	Other Racial and Multiracial Identity	10.3%
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual	80%
	LGBTQ	20%
Disability	Without a disability	93.4%
	With a disability	7.6%
Faculty Rank	Full Professor	13%
	Associate Professor	24.5%
	Assistant Professor	23.9%
	Instructor	22.8%
	Other (Clinical faculty, graduate teaching assistants, etc.)	15.7%
Type of Institution	Public 4-yr College or University	70.9%
	Private 4-yr College or University	25.8%
	Community College	3.3%
Geographic Location	Urban	48.4%
	Suburban	21.2%
	Small Town	20.7%
	Rural	9.8%
Country	United States	89.2%
	Canada	10.8%

<sup>a</sup>Note that some categories may exceed 100% due to participants’ selection of multiple identities.

systems and grapple with comparable equity concerns relating to race, socio-economic status, gender identity, disability, and immigrant status (Parekh 2014; Duncan-Andrade and Morell 2008; Reid and Knight 2006). Additionally, multicultural education scholars in both the US and Canada tend to contextualise their scholarship in the complexity of intersecting identities and inequities. As a result, Canadian and US multicultural education discourses and practices often are examined together. (See, for example, Goodreau and Fredua-Kwarteng 2007; Lea, Lund, and Carr 2018).

### ***Instrument***

The survey was designed to identify teacher educators' approaches to designing and teaching MTE courses, in terms of both content and theoretical orientation. After a section of demographic items, participants identified the likelihood that they would include certain concepts in their courses and their levels of comfort teaching those concepts. Items for these sections were drawn from Gorski's (2009) examination of MTE courses. They ranged from conservatively oriented concepts (e.g. 'cultural traditions of racial or ethnic groups') to critically oriented concepts (e.g. 'critical race theory'). The next section, based on Gorski's (2009) approaches to MTE, asked participants the extent to which they believed MTE courses ought to prepare teachers with skills that, again, ranged from conservative ('help recently immigrated students assimilate') to critical ('actively resist oppressive practices adopted by their schools'). The last couple sections, not used in this study, included scales related to activist burnout.

We recruited three MTE experts to review the survey. Based on their feedback we adjusted several items to ensure conservatively oriented, liberally oriented, and critically oriented concepts were characterised in ways that reflected, not just Gorski's (2009) and Jenks et al.'s (2001) typologies, but also more general understandings of what conservative, liberal, and critical approaches look like in practice. The revised survey was pilot-tested by six multicultural teacher educators and further adjusted based on their feedback.

### ***Measures and procedures***

We developed four types of measures to investigate relationships between teaching MTE courses in critical ways and the level of institutional support participants perceived.

#### ***The composite critical theory variable***

Participants were asked to report, based on a 5-point likert scale spanning from 'extremely unlikely' to 'extremely likely,' how likely they were to incorporate various concepts (e.g. racism, poverty) and theoretical frameworks (e.g. critical race theory, feminist theory) into their MTE courses. The four concepts that best

aligned with Gorski's (2009) critically-oriented *Teaching in Sociopolitical Context* and *Teaching as Resistance and Counterhegemonic Practice* approaches were 'critical race theory,' 'feminist theory,' 'queer theory,' and 'critical disability theory.' We used these four items to create a scale and then transformed it into a dichotomous variable named 'composite critical theory' (CCT). Because we were looking specifically at instructors who were most likely to teach content reflecting the CCT variable, the means of the 5-point likert scale responses of '4.0' and below were coded as 'less likely' (n = 136) and responses above '4.0' were coded as 'most likely' (n = 42).

### ***MTE approach variables***

In order to determine the MTE approaches to which they subscribed, we asked participants to respond to a series of statements about what they believed MTE courses ought to prepare educators to do. Each of these statements aligned with one of Gorski's (2009) five approaches. The survey contained five such items aligning with each of the five approaches, with responses falling along a 5-point likert scale spanning from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree.' Each set of five items constituted a composite scale and was transformed into a dichotomous variable, again, highlighting faculty most likely to ascribe to each of the approaches. The means of responses from the multiple likert scales that informed each approach were tabulated. Outcomes at or below 4 on the 5-point scale were deemed 'less likely' to ascribe to each approach, while responses above the value of 4 were deemed 'most likely' to ascribe to each approach.

As a point of clarification, participants could ascribe to multiple approaches; some agreed with MTE purposes that reflected conservative, liberal, and critical orientations. In other words, the construction of these variables did not limit the number of approaches to which participants were likely to ascribe. For the purposes of our analysis, we might have identified one participant as ascribing to both 'Teaching with Multicultural Competence' and 'Teaching as Resistance.'

### ***Institutional support variable***

The dependent variable, 'institutional support,' was derived from a survey item that asked participants, 'To what extent do you feel that the values you teach in your multicultural education, intercultural education, social justice education, or educational equity classes are supported by your institution?' Possible responses fell along a five-point likert scale between 'extremely unsupported' to 'extremely supported.' Notably, when we created this item we did not intend to use responses to it as key analytical data, but rather as context in describing our sample. However, when we ran some initial tests, we were intrigued by its relationship to participants' experiences teaching MTE courses.

In order to create an accurate dichotomy across a range of perceptions of institutional support, we deemed responses that acknowledged any level of institutional support as 'more likely' to experience support. Neutral or negative values (scores of 3 or below) we deemed as 'less likely' to experience support.

### **Curricular inclusion variables**

Using a 5-point likert scale ranging from 'extremely unlikely' to 'extremely likely,' participants were asked to identify how likely they were to incorporate certain concepts into their MTE courses. In total, 38 concepts were provided in the survey covering themes such as race, socioeconomic status, religion, sexual orientation, gender, and disability.

### **Data analysis**

We ran three types of statistical tests. First, we conducted a chi-square analysis to determine whether there was a statistically significant relationship between the level of criticality to which teacher educators ascribed and the likelihood they incorporated critical theoretical perspectives into their courses. Secondly, we used a binary logistic regression to determine what relationships existed between the approaches participants adopted, the likelihood they included the CCT (Composite Critical Theoretical) variable, and the level of institutional support they perceived for the values they taught in MTE courses. Lastly, we conducted a non-parametric analysis of variance to determine whether relationships existed between curricular content participants taught and their perceived institutional support.

### **Results**

Although all participants were found to embrace multiple MTE approaches, the beliefs embedded within the approach *Teaching in Sociopolitical Context* were shared by the vast majority of participants, at 90.6%. The majority of participants also ascribed to tenets of the MTE approach *Teaching with Cultural Sensitivity* (66.1%) and *Teaching with Multicultural Competence* (79.9%) as well as *Teaching as Resistance and Counter-Hegemonic Practice* (79.1%). Just under a quarter of participants (22.4%) aligned with the tenets within the most Conservative MTE approach, *Teaching the Other*. These results suggest a notable level of criticality among participants.

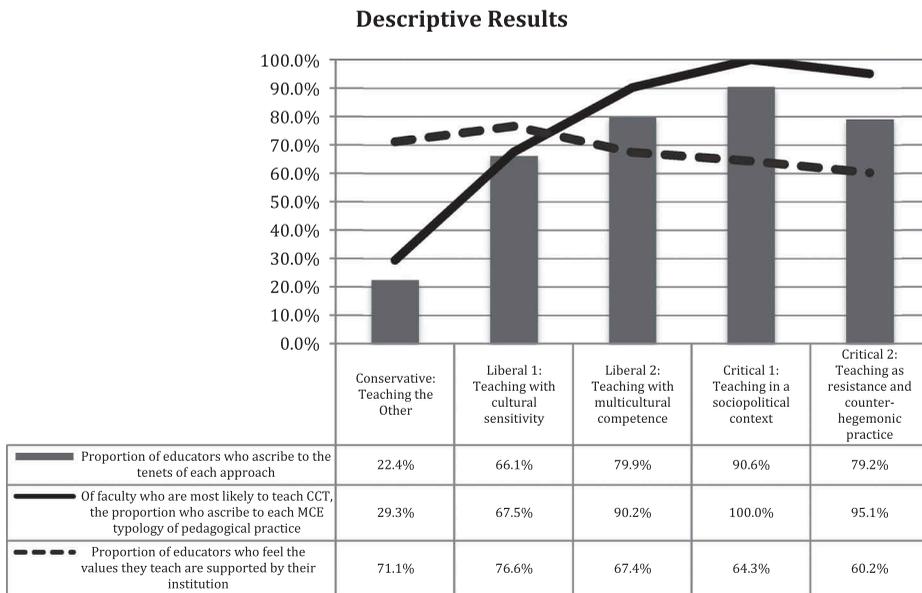
Using a chi-square analysis, we confirmed the relationship between teaching CCT content and participants' approaches to teaching MTE, validating what we had hypothesised about the relationship between variables. In other words, participants who were most likely to teach the CCT content also were most likely to believe that the purpose of MTE is aligned with critical approaches to MTE: *Teaching with Sociopolitical Content* (100%) and *Teaching as Resistance* (95.1%).

Notably, of faculty who were most likely to teach CCT content, only 29.3% ascribed to the tenets of the conservative approach.

After confirming the relationship between the level of criticality within each MTE approach and the likelihood of teaching the CCT content, we explored the connection between teaching CCT content and the likelihood of perceiving institutional support for the values participants bring to their MTE courses. In terms of institutional support, we found a clear relationship across MTE approaches. Educators who ascribed to the liberal approach, *Teaching with Cultural Sensitivity* (76.6%), were most likely to report feeling that the values underlying their teaching were supported by their institutions, whereas educators who ascribed to the most critical approach, *Teaching as Resistance and Counterhegemonic Practice* (60.2%), were least likely to feel supported. **Figure 1** provides a graphical depiction of these findings.

Already evident in these descriptive results are differing levels of institutional support perceived by participants according to whether they were more or less likely to teach CCT content. Of instructors least likely to teach the CCT content, 81.2% felt that the values they taught in their MTE courses were supported by their institutions, as compared with 18.8% of instructors most likely to teach the CCT content. The correlation between teaching the CCT content and perceived institutional support was significant ( $p = 0.042$ ).

Supporting further exploration of the Institutional Support variable, we used a binary logistic regression. We included each of the five MTE approach variables along with the CCT variable in the regression model as independent variables.<sup>1</sup>



**Figure 1.** Descriptive results.

The Hosmer and Lemeshow Test resulted in a significance value of 0.793, which indicates that the model adequately fits the data. Although not all variables resulted in significant outcomes, we did come to some interesting results.

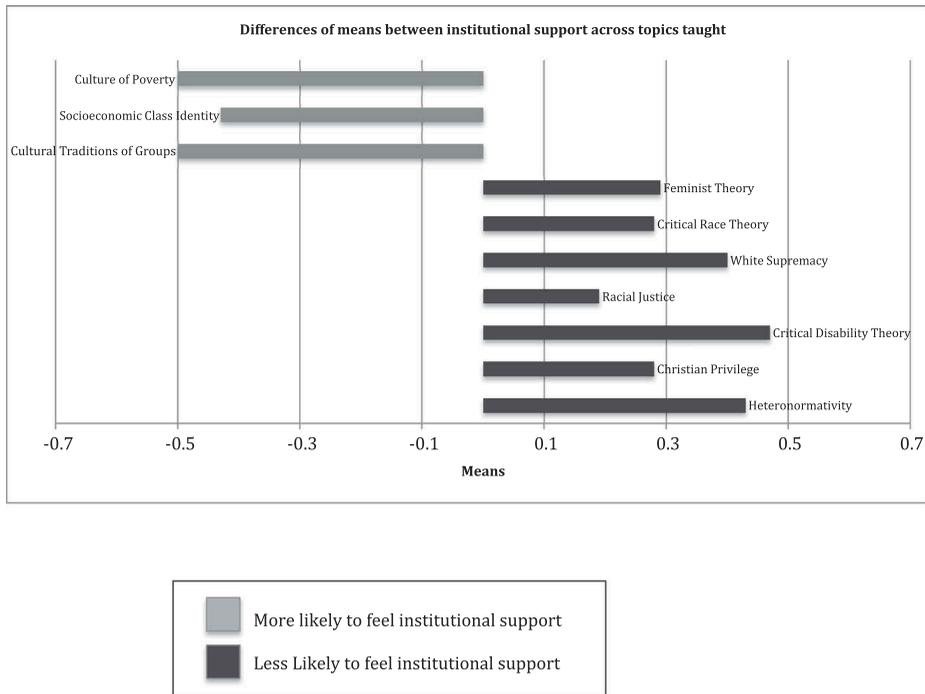
Of the six variables included in the model, three resulted in significant outcomes. Among significant findings, instructors who were most likely to ascribe to *Teaching with Cultural Sensitivity*, a form of liberal MTE, were almost four times as likely to perceive that their institutions supported the values they taught (3.85;  $p = 0.001$ ) than those who did not ascribe to this form of liberal MTE. Conversely, instructors who were most likely to ascribe to *Teaching as Resistance and Counterhegemonic Practice*, the most critical approach to MTE, were significantly less likely to report feeling that their institutions supported the values they taught (0.23;  $p = 0.42$ ) as compared with instructors who did not ascribe to this approach. Instructors who were most likely to teach the most critical content were less than half as likely to feel as though the values they taught were supported by their institutions (0.42;  $p = 0.041$ ) as instructors who were less likely to teach critically-oriented content.

While the most critical of the five MTE approaches came back as significant, the most conservative approach did not (even though the second least critical pedagogical approach did). This non-significant finding may be more a function of the number of participants who reported alignment with the conservative approach (22%) as opposed to the non-significance of the theoretical differences between conservative, liberal, and critical multiculturalism. In [Table 3](#) we summarise the regression analysis results.

The disparity in outcomes between teaching critical content and critically approaching the teaching of MTE courses called for further investigation into other curricular topics often considered within MTE courses and their correlations to educators' perceptions of institutional support. Due to the high variance of responses, we included results from a non-parametric analysis of

**Table 3.** Results of binary logistic regression exploring approaches to teaching MCE courses and institutional support.

Variables in Regression	N of participants who ascribed to/incorporated each approach	% of sample that ascribed to/incorporated each approach	Significance	Exp (B)
Conservative: Teaching the Other	38/170	22.4%	.830	1.113
Liberal 1: Teaching with cultural sensitivity	111/168	66.1%	.001	3.851
Liberal 2: Teaching with multicultural competence	135/169	79.9%	.525	1.388
Critical 1: Teaching in a sociopolitical context	154/170	90.6%	.676	1.472
Critical 2: Teaching as resistance and counter-hegemonic practice	133/168	79.2%	.042	.234
Composite Critical Theory	42/178	23.6%	.041	.424



**Figure 2.** Differences of means between institutional support of values across topics taught.

variance, which resulted in significance for ten concepts.<sup>2</sup> Using the means<sup>3</sup> for each concept, [Figure 2](#) provides a visualisation of significant topics and their relationship to institutional support. Briefly, faculty who were most likely to incorporate topics such as ‘the culture of poverty’ ( $p = 0.045^*$ ), ‘socioeconomic class identity’ ( $p = 0.007^*$ ), and ‘cultural traditions of racial or ethnic groups’ ( $p = 0.028^*$ ), all falling within a relatively conservative MTE approach, were significantly more likely to report feeling their institutions supported the values they taught. Contrarily, faculty who were most likely to incorporate topics such as ‘feminist theory’ ( $p = 0.061^{**}$ ), ‘critical race theory’ ( $p = 0.076^{**}$ ), ‘white supremacy’ ( $p = 0.019^*$ ), ‘racial justice’ ( $p = 0.33^*$ ), ‘critical disability theory’ ( $p = 0.012^*$ ), ‘Christian privilege’ ( $p = 0.092^{**}$ ), and ‘heteronormativity’ ( $p = 0.051^{**}$ ), topics reflecting a more critical MTE approach, were significantly less likely to feel their values were supported by their institutions.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine a possible explanation for an apparent inconsistency between multicultural teacher educators’ tendency towards critical orientations and their tendency towards not fully engaging those orientations in their MTE courses. Our findings point to differing levels of institutional

support as perceived by participants as a condition that may explain some portion of the inconsistency. But they also suggest that the inconsistency might not be as pronounced as suggested in previous scholarship. In this section, we discuss ways the findings complicate existing knowledge about this phenomenon and the implications of those findings.

### ***Critical orientations and critical practice***

Participants commonly believed in purposes for MTE that suggested a range of MTE approaches. In order to understand this finding, it is important to reiterate that the approaches described in Gorski's (2009) model do not delineate mutually exclusive styles of or philosophical orientations towards MTE, but rather a continuum of overlapping orientations ranging from conservative to critical. Each participant ascribed to more than one of these approaches. However, their beliefs clustered around *Teaching in Sociopolitical Context*, the first of the two critical approaches, and the two approaches bookending it: the more critical of the two liberal approaches, *Teaching with Multicultural Competence*, and the most critical approach, *Teaching as Resistance and Counterhegemonic Practice*. Participants were least likely to embrace the conservative approach and the more conservative of the two liberal approaches. If these results are representative of the larger landscape of multicultural teacher educators across Canada and the US, then they suggest that multicultural teacher educators embrace relatively critical MTE orientations.

This is an important finding. Scholarship on MTE in a variety of contexts has demonstrated the damage MTE can do when not incorporating critical perspectives. For example, in their study of a conservatively oriented teacher professional development model related to poverty and education, Smiley and Helfenbein (2011) found that attendees developed a false sense of preparedness to advocate for students experiencing poverty even as the professional development experience deepened their stereotypes. Similarly, in their study of the impact of purposeful field placements in racially diverse schools for white teacher education students, Groff and Peters (2012) found that the placements themselves were insufficient, leaving participants with the misperception that they had strong understandings of race even though they showed little understanding of racism and how it operates. The ability to apply a critical perspective to MTE courses and other MTE contexts is essential if the intention is to prepare teachers to create equitable education systems rather than emboldening them with false perceptions of their preparedness (Nieto 2017).

Complicating matters, embracing a critical MTE orientation does not necessarily guarantee critical MTE *practice* among teacher educators. In other words, even if most multicultural teacher educators agree philosophically with Groff and Peters's (2012) call for a more critical handling of race, it does not necessarily mean that multicultural teacher educators generally

have the knowledge to teach about race more critically. Furthermore, having a theoretical grasp of, for example, the tenets of critical race theory is not the same as knowing how, or even being committed and willing, to consistently apply its principles in practice. So even while this finding lends support to the idea that on average MTE instructors philosophically embrace critical orientations to MTE, it does not necessarily conflict with scholarship suggesting that on average MTE courses are not designed and taught in a critical fashion (Vavrus 2014).

It is notable, then, that the findings do suggest a relationship between critical orientations to MTE and at least the perception among MTE faculty that they are teaching their courses in critically oriented ways. For example, we found a positive relationship between the likelihood that participants would embrace critical purposes for MTE and the likelihood that they reported incorporating critical theories and concepts into MTE courses. Beyond the scope of this study, and perhaps an important next step in this line of inquiry, would be an examination of the effectiveness with which multicultural teacher educators who incorporate these frameworks do so, the extent to which they do so in ways that consistently reflect the tenets of critical theories or principles of critical multiculturalism, or the extent to which their students retain and apply critical orientations in their own teaching. However, the finding of consistency between participants' embrace of critical MTE and their tendency to incorporate (or at least perceive themselves as incorporating) critically oriented content offers at least the beginnings of a suggestion that a critical philosophical orientation begets the potential for critical MTE practice.

We would argue, as well, that it is not sufficient to rest on the laurels of critical intentions. And we cannot assume that teacher educators who have and apply critical lenses towards, say, matters of sexual orientation and heterosexism, also have and apply those lenses in how they teach about racism, transphobia, or ableism. Future research should look into these concerns more closely and directly.

### ***Critical orientation, critical teaching, and perceptions of institutional support***

Our results indicate that multicultural teacher educators' perceptions regarding whether the values they teach in their MTE courses are supported by their institutions is correlated with the criticality with which they design and teach those courses. Those who teach using conservative forms of multiculturalism that, according to previous scholarship (Gorski and Swalwell 2015; Au 2017), pose no real threat to the injustices MTE ought to disrupt, perceive significantly greater institutional support for the values they teach in their MTE courses. Contrarily, those who employ a critical approach perceive significantly less institutional support. We observed this trend across the approaches to MTE

courses, the likelihood of employing critical theories in MTE courses, and the likelihood of teaching specific equity-related concepts.

Although we found a relationship between criticality and the perception of institutional support, what remains unclear is whether institutions' levels of support are responses to the levels of instructor criticality or whether the levels of criticality are a response to perceived levels of support. Likely both are true to some extent, but more and different kinds of inquiry are needed to reach a clearer understanding of these pushes and pulls. It should be noted, as well, that participants' perceptions of institutional support are interrelated with a variety of contextual factors. Multicultural teacher educators perceive many challenges that affect their abilities to teach their courses as critically as they may want to teach them. As we mentioned earlier, many contend with institutional resistance (Ukpokodu 2007), student resistance (LaDuke 2009), and concerns about course evaluations (Atwater et al. 2013), for example. What we have managed to do in this study, responding to scholarship on the effects of limited institutional support for critical MTE (Gorski 2012; Chung and Miller 2011), is to isolate the perception of institutional support to determine its relationship with the level of criticality employed in MTE courses. It is beyond the scope of this study to identify the extent to which these other challenges informed participants' perceptions of support, but it can be presumed, at the least, that participants did not share a singular conception of what institutional support entails.

With these points in mind, what insights can be taken from the documented gap in perceptions of institutional support between more- and less-critically-oriented MTE instructors? Setting aside speculations about the relative effects of the previously mentioned pushes and pulls of support and criticality, the relationship is worrisome. Again, a single MTE course is often educators' sole coursework opportunity to develop critical consciousness (Freire 1986) related to matters of equity. If critical perspectives are omitted from these courses, many teacher education students would be left with no opportunity within their programs to develop the skills needed to teach and advocate for equity and justice.

Previous scholarship has suggested that some teacher educators who embrace a critical multicultural approach choose to weather the lack of support from their institutions and engage a critical approach, anyway (Gorski 2012; Sapp 2012). However, although we did not discern such a pattern in this study, choosing to do so could result in harsher repercussions for some faculty than for others. Untenured faculty might feel more vulnerable than their tenured colleagues should they need to weigh whether to buck institutional culture. Faculty who inhabit privileged identities, such as white faculty, enjoy greater levels of protection against institutional, peer, and student reprisals than more marginalised-identity peers (Marshall 2015; Sensoy and DiAngelo 2009). These reprisals may occur on top of implicit and explicit threats of tenure-denial and other microaggressions instructors from marginalised groups are likely to endure if

they assume an advocacy role in their classes or institutions (Essed 2013; Misawa 2015).

## Conclusion

Our results offer insights into the possible barriers critical multicultural teacher educators must navigate when constructing their MTE teaching. They also raise questions about the role teacher education programs play in the larger project of promoting educational equity. If not created and taught to raise consciousness and affect change, MTE courses do not fulfil their purpose (Grant and Sleeter 2006; Lund 2006; Nieto and Bode 2018). While faculties of education may lose an opportunity to participate in the promotion of social justice, teachers may be denied the skills needed to promote equity in their spheres of influence.

However, there is reason for hope. Even though educators who ascribe to a liberal form of multiculturalism were more likely to report feeling as though their institutions supported the values they infused into their MTE courses, 60.2% of those who ascribed to the most critical approaches reported that they felt supported by their institutions. Similarly, over half (52.4%) of those who were most likely to incorporate critical content perceived institutional support. While these figures are far from ideal, they provide room for optimism that institutional values can align with critical educational commitments.

As we consider these findings in light of the future of MTE, we note the preponderance of scholarship about the importance of cultivating critical orientations in teachers (e.g. Vavrus 2014; Wang 2013). A considerably smaller literature advocates strengthening critical orientations in teacher educators – the people charged with cultivating critical orientations in teachers (e.g. Vavrus 2002; Rubin and Justice 2005). Certainly, both are important. Teachers constitute the front lines of contact with students. However, that front line is shaped in part by the orientations adopted by teacher educators. We urge greater scholarly attention to strengthening critical orientations in teacher educators and to understanding the barriers that might limit the enactment of those orientations in MTE practice.

## Notes

1. A binary logistic regression analysis for institutional support was also conducted employing demographic variables as independent variables. While some variables approached significance, relatively no reportable significance was determined across measures.
2. \* indicates significance at 0.05; \*\* indicates significance at 0.1.
3. means calculated through an ANOVA.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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