A Culturally Informed Response to Grief and Loss (CIRGL): A Single Case Study of Anti-Racist and Culturally Responsive Program Development and Evaluation

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Abstract: *This paper provides a case study analysis of the Culturally Informed Responses to Grief and Loss (CIRGL) Professional Development Program, which equips school-based social workers and other professionals with skills and critical consciousness to support minoritized students in navigating grief and loss. By detailing the CIRGL program's development, implementation, and culturally responsive evaluation (CRE), the paper outlines the process for developing anti-racist and culturally responsive approaches in social work. The case study draws on the evaluation data including quantitative surveys of participants at the start and near the end of the program, qualitative interviews with a sample of participants near the end of the program, and the critical reflexivity of the developers and evaluators throughout the process. Overall, participants met the learning goals of the program and experienced the content as relevant and meaningful. Most participants also stated they felt confident applying the content in their work settings. The paper concludes by discussing the implications for anti-racist program development in school social work, highlighting shared values, strategies for addressing White fragility, and the importance of grounding the work in anti-oppressive practices. This case study demonstrates both the feasibility of such professional development programs and the need for such professional development opportunities.*

Keywords: *School social work, minoritized identities, anti-racist social work, grief and loss support, culturally responsive evaluation (CRE), case study, online professional development*

In response to the disproportionate losses of communities of color especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, heightened anti-immigrant rhetoric, and the racial reckoning after the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, Villarreal Sosa and Bohun (Authors 1 and 4) launched the first Culturally Informed Responses to Grief and Loss (CIRGL) Professional Development Program (CIRGL Program). The CIRGL Program aims to build capacity among school-based professionals to respond to grief and loss using a culturally informed and anti-racist approach. To evaluate the pilot CIRGL Program, which ran from January to May of 2023, Villarreal Sosa invited a team of researchers informed by a culturally responsive evaluation (CRE) framework. This paper provides a case study analysis of the program development, implementation, and culturally responsive evaluation. The limited research that exists on anti-racist professional development

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programs focus on the outcomes and the competencies (Cénat et al., 2024) rather than on how these anti-racists programs were developed and implemented. In this paper, we aim to provide insights into our process for anti-racist program development and culturally responsive evaluation, as well as lessons learned. We hope that examining the CIRGL Program can provide guidance for others who aim to develop anti-racist and culturally responsive education and professional development.

The Need for a Culturally Responsive and Anti-Racist Approach to Grief and Loss

In the United States, the concepts of grief and loss are generally framed from a Eurocentric, Christian framework, and as such may not consider ways that individuals in other cultures and belief traditions define and process grief (Buzelli & Snaman, 2023; Yoon et al. 2022). Furthermore, grief and loss are often discussed through a limited paradigm that refers to the death of a loved one, and the impact on an individual or a narrowly defined family group. Moreover, the grief process has become heavily pathologized by emphasizing stages of grief, or more recently, categorizing it through the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5th Edition (DSM 5), with the diagnosis of prolonged grief disorder (Granek, 2017; Horwitz, 2019). This perspective leaves little consideration for various types of loss that warrant a grieving process, the differences in timelines for grieving, and the multiple ways in which various ethnic, racial, and religious groups address their grief.

Scholars emphasize the need for culturally responsive services to better address the loss experience of those with minoritized identities or different cultural backgrounds (Bhugra & Becker, 2005; Eisenbruch, 1991). Bhugra and Becker (2005) note that bereavement among immigrants and refugees is often associated with mood disorders because of "misinterpretation of the cultural expressions of grief by Western trained clinicians" (p. 20). Similarly, Eisenbruch (1991) notes that refugees' cultural bereavement experiences are often mislabeled with a DSM diagnosis when in fact, their condition is an adaptive response to traumatic experiences in their home country and the adaptation processes in the host country. Furthermore, Yoon and colleagues (2022) argue that the prevailing pathological constructs and clinical interventions are insufficient for addressing cultural bereavement because they often do not include collective gatherings that are needed for healing from cultural loss.

Moreover, an anti-racist approach is also necessary to address the needs of racialized groups. Bordere (2014, 2019) coined the concept of "suffocated grief" noting that the concept of "disenfranchised grief" (the lack of acknowledgement of grief; Doka, 1989), does not adequately describe the grief experiences of those impacted by racism. For groups facing racial oppression, their grief experiences are first disenfranchised, and then they are punished for normal grief expressions (Bordere, 2014; Whissel Fenton, 2020). Moreover, when an individual's grief is unacknowledged and then penalized, they are experiencing the devastation of the loss and the compounded trauma that comes from others' biased responses to their grief (Whissel Fenton, 2020).

In addition to the evidence base that racially-blind approaches harm minoritized individuals as described above, there is a large body of evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of culturally responsive approaches (Anik et al., 2021; Chan et al., 2018; Collins et al., 2018; Hinton et al., 2011; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2021; Wilson et al., 2023; Yeh et al., 2022). One program found benefits beyond the intended target goals of the intervention such as an increased sense of empowerment, feeling more confident speaking in public, becoming an advocate for other causes, or developing mutual aid structures (SAMHSA, 2021). Anik and colleagues (2021) found in their meta-analysis, that culturally adapted psychotherapies are more effective than the control interventions. A series of studies have also found that culturally responsive interventions increase client engagement and retention in treatment (Gainsbury, 2016; Kumpfer et al., 2002; Lau, 2006). The more culturally responsive the practice and culture of social service agencies, the better the quality of services offered to diverse populations in the community (Calzada & Suarez-Balcazar, 2014; Giordano & Edwards, 2023).

Culturally Responsive and Anti-Racist Approaches in School Settings

Unfortunately, school-based social work interventions continue to use a racially-blind approach that is not culturally responsive (McGee et al., 2022; Phillippo & Crutchfield, 2021; Villarreal Sosa, 2021). Given a professional context that often ignores the need for culturally responsive approaches, the CIRGL team envisioned a professional development program that provides school-based professionals with the skills and critical consciousness to lead the creation of anti-racist and culturally responsive systems in schools that support grieving students. A culturally responsive and anti-racist approach to supporting youth who have experienced loss are critical to support healing and ongoing success in the school-based setting (Cervantes, et al., 2021).

The school is the most significant system for youth outside of the family, and therefore, must be better prepared to fully support youth in their healing. Oftentimes, minoritized youth experience the minimization or invisibility of their grief in the school setting because the reason for their grief does not fit the dominant culture's view of what is worthy to be grieved, and their behavior tends to be viewed through a racialized lens that treats youth of color as potential threats (Bordere, 2019; Bordere & Larsen, 2017; Nogera et al., 2011). As a result, schools employ punitive approaches to addressing behaviors that may be grief and loss responses, such as severe consequences for tardies or excessive absences or using punitive approaches to address behavioral issues rather than addressing the root causes of that behavior and providing needed emotional support (Bordere, 2019). On the other extreme, individualized and hyper clinical responses such as referrals to therapy and other westernized mental health interventions reinforce the pathologizing of grief (Bordere, 2019).

Interventions beyond these punitive, individualistic, and pathologizing approaches are needed to help young people learn to live with their grief (Bordere, 2019; Bordere & Larsen, 2017; Granek, 2017). The CIRGL program was born out of the idea that young people, particularly those who are of a minoritized identity, often are harmed by the

systems that are intended to support them when they are experiencing grief. It is imperative that school-based professionals are trained to take a more critical and race conscious approach when supporting young people. Therefore, the CIRGL program aims to address the narrow definition of grief and loss events, the suffocation of young people's grief, the over pathologizing of grief in the context of White Western conceptualizations of "symptoms," as well as provide tools to school-based professionals to better support grieving students. In the following sections we provide a description of the process we utilized for anti-racist program development followed by using culturally responsive evaluation to assess and monitor the program. The CIRGL is a self-paced, asynchronous, online professional development program that covers an overview of grief and loss, the application of a culturally responsive approach to grief and loss, racialized trauma and historically excluded/minoritized groups, the impact of the social/political context on grief and loss, a culturally informed multi-tiered systems of support, a healing centered approach, and community care.

By using a culturally responsive approach, the school-based practitioner considers power dynamics, uses critical self-reflection, has respect for differences, and emphasizes social justice (Blueford & Pinto, 2024; Danso, 2018). The school-based mental health professional (SBMHP) will engage the student and their caregivers in developing an individualized plan focused on how they would like to address the grief and loss (Nurse-Clarke et al., 2024). This plan could include asking the student if they would like to talk about the loss, how they would like other students and community members to be informed about the loss and asking the student about the best way to support them if they are experiencing emotional or behavioral challenges in school. Letting the student and their caregivers be the primary informants regarding how the school community can support them is a way to provide more culturally responsive interventions for the student. A culturally responsive approach allows for the exploration of a group's own culture, cultural adaptations of interventions to specific groups, incorporating cultural practices and materials, and using cultural identity as a resource and protective factor (SAMHSA, 2021).

In addition, the SBMHP would address how the school setting may or not be honoring the student's cultural or racial identity and their needs (Blueford & Pinto, 2024). Thus, the focus is not just on the individual intervention, rather addressing systemic inequities that disenfranchise and suffocate the child's grief. The SBMHP might offer a professional development workshop for teachers so that they learn about how grief expressions might vary across cultural contexts or increase awareness about how minoritized students are punished for their grief. The SBMHP might also support policy changes in the school to reduce or eliminate the possibility that minoritized students may be punished for grieving. Thus, a culturally responsive and anti-racist approach addressing power dynamics at all levels from the micro to the macro tailors interventions to the belief systems of the student, and addresses grief through a social justice lens, requiring attention to school level policies, practices, and overall climate (Nurse-Clarke et al., 2024).

The CIRGL: A Case Study

This paper frames this work as a single case study (Bonda, 2014). The single case study allows the use of multiple data collection methods to provide an overall picture of a case and support theory building (Bonda, 2014; Yin, 1989, 1992). In addition, a case study investigates a phenomenon while considering the social context (Yin, 1989). We draw on our own team conversations and documentation of our process throughout the program development and evaluation phase; the artifacts from the program development such as decision points, materials development, and structures of meetings; the data collection that was a part of the evaluation; and the existing literature on anti-racist professional development, culturally informed grief and loss, and culturally responsive evaluation to provide a holistic picture of the CIRGL program and implications for social work and professional development. This case will provide thick descriptions of approaches taken, obstacles encountered, any steps taken to address the challenges, and potential practices that can be replicated. While one case study is not generalizable, this case could provide a foundation for systematic research focused on anti-racist program development and implementation. This case will also inform others hoping to develop anti-racist and culturally responsive programming.

Understanding and Doing Anti-Racist Program Development

Racism negatively impacts the mental health care received by people of color; therefore, providers must incorporate approaches that consider this reality (Cénat et al., 2024). Cénat and colleagues (2024) review anti-racist training programs and find that they reflect several competencies: 1) understanding the social and historical context that may be at the root cause of mental health challenges, 2) the development of awareness of one's own biases and positionality, 3) the recognition of racist behaviors in mental health settings, 4) and using anti-racist competencies in their clinical work. Furthermore, Cornell (2023) finds that anti-racist educational programming yields positive results such as increasing awareness and confidence in anti-racism skills, increasing awareness of White privilege, and elimination of barriers to social action and an anti-racist mindset. While there is literature focused on the importance and content of anti-racist approaches and programs, there is limited literature about how they are developed or evaluated.

Furthermore, not everyone responds positively to anti-racist programming. Those implementing such programs may encounter participants who demonstrate resistance and deny that there is a problem (Blumer & Tatum, 1999). Leddy and O'Neill (2021) found examples of personal resistance to an Indigenous-focused teacher education program that included defensive anger, not submitting reflections, dismissing culturally grounded content, and other forms of disengagement. Despite potential resistance, courageous leadership creates possibilities for change and supports those who are already engaged in this work. Through the documentation of our process for program development and evaluation, as well as the findings of the evaluation, we further inform how professionals may respond to anti-racist content, and lessons learned for others hoping to develop such programs.

Anti-Racist and Cultural Responsiveness in CIRGL Program Development

An important first step as we launched the CIRGL program was the implementation of a shared language among all involved (Chun & Evans, 2019), from the leadership and content matter experts to participants in the program. This shared language included a definition Villarreal Sosa developed of *culturally responsive practitioners* as those "who have awareness of the sociopolitical context in which schools operate and dare to go against the status quo" and who address "implicit biases that intentionally or unintentionally impact how we relate to students, parents, and how we choose our intervention approaches" (p. 1). Similarly, Villarreal Sosa defined *culturally informed* as attending to the ways in which cultural identities and culture shape experiences of trauma, loss, and healing. Being culturally informed integrates this awareness into all services, structures, and policies. A culturally informed approach understands community strengths and attends to intersectional identities. The document with these definitions is available by emailing the first author.

Moreover, the program developers used Okun's (2021) work on White supremacy culture (WSC) to guide the overall program development process. Okun (2021) posits that WSC is embedded and normalized within organizations and provides recommendations for how to counter those norms and standards. Okun's framework was used in all decision-making processes. In particular, the program developers countered what Okun describes as a "sense of urgency," (p. 27), the "only one right way (p. 8)," and the notion of "qualified" (p. 12).

Operating with a sense of urgency can compromise values of inclusivity and thoughtful decision-making (Okun, 2021). Instead of subscribing to this sense of urgency, program developers implemented Okun's recommendations for realistic work plans, making time for collaboration and discussion, and processes for making decisions given the urgency culture in which we operate. One example of how we created space for collaboration included a two-day workshop and meeting for all content matter experts (CMEs). This provided the development of a shared vision and language, as well as opportunities for co-creation and collaboration. In addition, each module was assigned a team of CMEs, so that no module was developed individually. Furthermore, during the development phase of each module, the project coordinator met with the content matter experts to provide opportunity for feedback and strengthen the collaboration amongst and between teams.

The program developers also challenged the "qualified" value of WSC (Okun, 2021, p. 12) when selecting and working with the CMEs. A typical approach to hiring CMEs would have privileged formal, academic expertise and credentials in school-based settings and bereavement. However, the approach used for the CIRGL also privileged lived experiences, the ability to critically reflect on one's own positionality, and experience with minoritized and racialized populations. Thus while academic and professional credentials were considered, they were not the only factor in the selection. The rubric that was used in selecting content matter experts holistically accounted for all these factors. In other words, the program developers valued "theory in the flesh" (i.e., theory based on lived experience) as equal to academic theory (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983, p. 23).

The design process challenged the WSC value of "only one right way" (Okun, 2021, p. 8). The program developers honored the various ways in which our CME organized their modules, allowing for variability rather than uniformity across the curriculum. The CME ensured that the content centers those with minoritized identities and works against the common practice of racially-blind approaches, which requires variability across the modules.

Finally, from the user perspective, the program developers centered the need for maximum access and flexibility given the scheduling demands of school-based professionals and diverse learning styles. A culturally responsive and anti-racist approach meant that we considered both the users of the program and the students they would ultimately be serving. Providing flexibility and access was balanced with the need to provide enough time to dive deeply into difficult topics of race, racism, and oppression in the school-based setting. The CIRGL is also hosted in a learning management system that allows for electronic reading aids and captioning to provide access for individuals who require accommodations to participate. The program provides flexibility in quizzes and engagement with the content and requires an 80% overall pass rate to be certified in the content, with the ability to re-take any quizzes if needed.

Applying Culturally Responsive Evaluation to the CIRGL

Culturally Responsive Evaluation (CRE) is recognized as an evaluation approach, framework, and stance (Boyce et al., 2024). The foundations of CRE, grounded in a series of publications by Hood (e.g., Hood, 2001, 2004; Hood et al., 2022; Hopson & Shanker, 2023) have been further developed by evaluation scholars and practitioners to reemphasize and center the importance of cultural context in the field (Frierson et al., 2010; Thomas & Campbell, 2020). There has been a growing need to use CRE because of the increasing complexities of culture, communities, and contexts in the U.S. and globally (Boyce et al., 2024; Hood et al., 2015). Notably, CRE was born and influenced by theories of culturally responsive pedagogy to ensure that program evaluation is aligned with the lives and experiences of stakeholders of color (Hood et al., 2015).

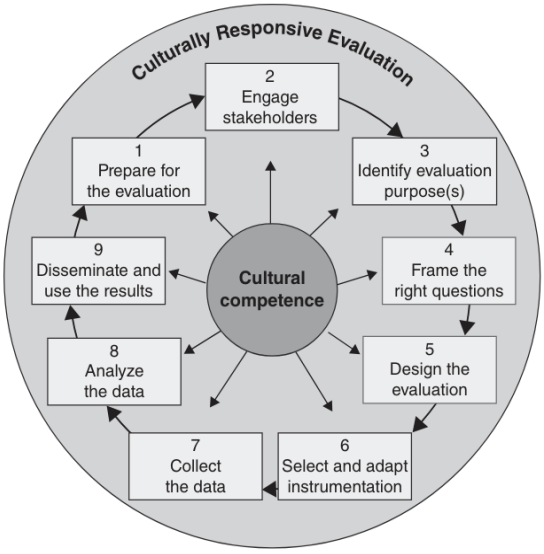
A hallmark of CRE is a focus on centering lived experiences of minoritized individuals as beneficiaries in programs and policies (Symonette, 2004). Cultural considerations such as ethnicity, societal norms, and situational dynamics are essential components in understanding the lived experiences of stakeholders as well as the social policies and programs (Acree & Chouinard, 2020). In addition, CRE values and seeks out stakeholder engagement (Acree & Chouinard, 2020). It is necessary to consider both elements together as culture influences the lived experiences of the stakeholders, and therefore, their engagement is central to understanding the impact or effectiveness of social programs (Kushnier et al., 2023).

Moreover, CRE has revolutionized how culture is addressed in evaluation by prompting evaluators to acknowledge power imbalances and prioritize equity in their approach (Hood et al., 2015). Culturally responsive evaluators make a wide set of decisions throughout the evaluation process to ensure that CRE values are incorporated. Evaluators who value cultural responsiveness and equity recognize the critical role played by power

imbalances, historical and ongoing forms of oppression, and bias during the evaluation process (Ghanbarpour et al., 2020). As a result, the most important goal of CRE is to help execute valid evaluations that result in centering the knowledge of stakeholders, promoting equity, and improving the political, social, and economic conditions of underserved communities (Boyce et al., 2024; Hood, 2009).

Furthermore, relationships are crucial for the success of CRE. CRE is a collaborative, democratic, and participatory approach that empowers stakeholders to co-design the evaluation process (Acree & Chouinard, 2020). CRE evaluators understand the unconscious bias about the minoritized communities that are often present in program development or delivery. To have sensitivity to unconscious bias or systemic racism that may be present, Hood (2009) emphasizes the importance of shared life experiences between evaluators and stakeholders. Consequently, it is important to have a diverse team of evaluators to ensure that a diversity of lived experience is represented potentially leading to deeper insight and understanding of the experiences of program stakeholders (Frierson et al., 2010). Each stage of evaluation is implemented through a culturally grounded framework informing each step of the evaluation process as illustrated in Figure 1. In this paper, we highlight the way in which CRE informed key components: alignment of values, decision-making, and relationships that promote social justice (McBride, 2015) to align with the CIRGL program.

Figure 1. A *Culturally Responsive Evaluation Framework* (Hood et al., 2015).



The CIRGL Culturally Responsive Evaluation

Identifying the Team and Aligning Values

Given the anti-racist and culturally responsive approach to the development of the CIRGL program, it was important to the program developers to collaborate with evaluators

who understood the need to be culturally responsive and anti-racist in the evaluation process. The program evaluators shared a commitment to a diverse evaluation team, honoring lived experiences, and attending to power in all aspects of the process. The evaluation team consisted of one senior and two junior evaluators with varied experiences from working in international non-profits to community development agencies. Their experiences included applying evaluative methods in areas where persons of color are the predominant beneficiaries of social programs and policies. In addition, the program developers and evaluation team represented diverse positionalities and lived experiences. The authors of this paper represent two of the evaluators and both program developers. Our positionalities are described below.

Villarreal Sosa, the program developer, is a Mexicana tenured professor and social worker with a focus on Latine youth. She is a second-generation immigrant who experienced growing up in a family living across national borders. Hanafy is an Arab/Middle Eastern PhD Candidate with extensive experience in the non-profit sector working in education and digital learning for leading multilateral organizations. Hopson is an African American tenured professor whose evaluation scholarship has informed the community of culturally responsive evaluation including building pathways for younger generations of scholars. Bohun, the project coordinator, is a White, cis gender woman raised in a blue-collar family in the border suburbs of Chicago. She has spent most of her social work career in anti-oppressive program development and implementation.

The evaluators worked with CIRGL program developers to design qualitative and quantitative assessments relevant to the program goals. Through discussions with the CIRGL developers, data sharing and other agreements were made to ensure co-ownership and co-construction of the processes. Discussions about values took place at multiple stages of the project so that the evaluation was aligned with the goals of the anti-racist, culturally responsive program.

Culturally Responsive Evaluation Methods

The evaluation team identified key questions and characteristics primarily focused on CIRGL Program participants' development of anti-racist, culturally responsive approaches to addressing grief and loss. Core objectives that guided the program planning were incorporated into the evaluation processes such as focusing on how the program shaped the lives and work of participants, the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of the participants, and measuring understanding of materials.

Data collection methods captured respondent motivations, experiences, and reflections of their learning at different times in the pilot phase: a survey in the first month (Time 1, January 2023) and last month (Time 2, May 2023) of the program, and qualitative interviews during the last month of the pilot (See Table 1). The Time 1 survey collected data on participant demographics, motivations for enrollment, understanding of the program, potential challenges for participation, and preferences regarding online learning. The Time 2 survey collected data on demographics, level of satisfaction, recommendations for improvement, knowledge gained, and the applicability of knowledge to daily work.

Both surveys contained open-ended questions that provided participants an opportunity to elaborate on their experiences.

Table 1. *Data Collection Methods*

Time	Method	Purpose and Content of Method
Time 1 Jan 2023	Survey	• Prior knowledge and understanding of the CIRGL Program • Status of module completion • Course expectations • Alignment between professional work and career aspirations • Challenges to participation • Clarity of course objectives and learning goals • Preferred methods for online learning • Demographics across age, profession (and professional background), race, ethnicity, gender, and age
Time 2 May 2023	Survey	• Satisfaction with the course and its relevance to current and future needs • Course strengths and suggestions for improvement • Likelihood of recommending the course to others • Status of module completion • Assessment of knowledge • Reflection of the course in daily life and confidence in applying a culturally responsive approach • Demographics across age, profession, race, ethnicity, gender, and age group
	Interviews	• Motivation for participation • Course experiences and review of content • Reflection in the workplace and future use • Personal experiences/positionality regarding course topics

Time 1 and Time 2 surveys were distributed by posting requests for participation and survey links in the course modules. A total of 50 participants completed the program, meeting the target goal for the first cohort. The learning management system (LMS) has several mechanisms in place to ensure that students successfully completed all modules. Participants were required to review content and take quizzes before moving to the next module. The project coordinator also verified completion of modules. Regarding survey responses, 44 course participants completed the survey at Time 1 and 31 completed the survey at Time 2. We suspect that there were two reasons for the lower response rate at Time 2. First, there was no requirement to submit the final evaluation survey before receiving the certification of completion. Thus, this task was voluntary, and it may have seemed onerous after completion of such a lengthy program. Second, there was significant drop in responses from White participants. We believe that the content focused on White supremacy later in the course may have resulted in some defensive reactions and could have impacted the decision to complete the final evaluation survey. This is discussed further in the findings section.

The qualitative interviews were conducted in May of 2023 and gathered information about motivation for participation, their experiences in the course, reflections on use of the content in their work, and their positionality as it relates to their response to grief and loss. Interview respondents were selected in collaboration with the Program Developers by identifying key characteristics that were important to represent such as geographic region, type of school, racial identity, and course completion time. Ten respondents were identified, and four agreed to participate in the interview (Table 2).

Table 2. *Qualitative Interview Respondent Characteristics*

Interview	Gender	Race	Age	Profession	Organization	State
1	Male	Hispanic/ American Indian	53	Grief Professional	Non-profit	CA
2	Male	White	49	Social Worker	Public School	ME
3	Female	White	42	Principal/Admin	Public School	WI
4	Female	Black/African American	27	Social Worker	Charter School	AL

At Time 1, 33% of respondents had completed module 1 and 23% of the respondents had completed module 3. Interestingly, 13% of the respondents had already completed module 6 and 13% had completed module 8, the last module of the program. At Time 2, when the second survey and qualitative interviews were conducted, over three-quarters (81%) of the respondents had finished Module 8. Thus, most respondents reached the final module.

Data Analysis

The evaluators conducted analysis of the survey data, computing the primary descriptive tools for the individual questions: mean, standard deviation and percentage of respondents who agreed. This analysis provided an opportunity to identify general tendencies across the survey data. Open-ended survey responses and interview transcripts were coded to identify important themes. During analysis, the evaluators simultaneously coded excerpts through open coding followed by thematic coding (Saldaña, 2021). Coding was undertaken using the open-source software, Taguette. Through multiple readings of the interview and survey transcripts, the evaluators identified themes and sub-themes and grouped them according to the study's objectives. These observations were then compared with the quantitative data to provide a deeper understanding of the participant experiences and outcomes. In sum, this analytical process employed both quantitative and qualitative strategies to present an enriched understanding of the subject under consideration. This analytic process also enabled the researcher to enhance credibility and dependability of findings through comparison amongst multiple sources (Green et al., 2007).

Demographics of Sample

Regarding gender, the sample is consistent with the overall population of school social workers and other school-based professionals. In 2023, 84.1% of child, family, and school social workers were female (Data USA, n.d.). Similarly, 77% of teachers are female

(National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023). The survey responders for the CIRGL were 94.2% and 88.2% female at Time 1 and Time 2 respectively (See Table 3 for full demographic characteristics). Racial categories were more diverse for our sample compared to national statistics for school social workers and teachers. White respondents made up 64.3% of our sample at Time 1 and 34.6% at Time 2. In contrast, 80% of teaching staff are White (NCES, 2023; Williams et al., 2016). While there is no demographic reporting of school social workers as a specialty area among national education statistics, the sample in a national school social work survey conducted in 2014 was 80% White (Kelly et al., 2016). First, this suggests that the CIRGL is appealing to a racially diverse audience. Second, there are further questions to explore regarding White participants and why they may not be participating in a program with a focus on cultural responsiveness and anti-racism at a rate comparable with their national representation.

Regarding age, most participants were in the 31-40 (Time 1: 40.5%, Time 2: 56.7%) age group in both surveys. The next most common age group varied at Time 1 and Time 2. At Time 1, the 41-50 was the next most frequent while the 21-30 age group was the next most frequent at Time 2. Overall, the CIRGL program appealed to those who are experienced social workers, suggesting an ongoing commitment to their professional development and need for culturally responsive grief and loss training. The representation of early career social workers suggests this content also fills a need even among those recently graduated from their training programs.

Lastly, the professional representation among our sample indicates we are attracting our target audience. The CIRGL program's main audience is social workers in schools but also designed in a way that includes other school-based professionals. School social workers and school-based social workers make up 72.2% of the survey respondents at Time 1 and 67.7% at Time 2. School-based social workers are defined as those employed by outside agencies, but working in the schools and school social workers are defined as those social workers employed by the schools and practicing the specialty of school social work. The roles of these two vary. School-based social workers employed by outside agencies often are primarily the provider of mental health services in the schools through individual, family, or group therapy. School social workers not only provide mental health support but are also tasked with other duties such as addressing truancy/attendance issues, providing school wide interventions and special education services, and serving on interdisciplinary school teams. School counselors and those in the "other" category follow. Those in the "other" category consist of grief support counselors, school social work interns, and community based social workers. Thus, the CIRGL program is attracting those professionals in schools who provide mental health or grief support in the schools.

Table 3. *Survey Demographics*

	Survey [n (%)]	
Demographic	**Time 1 (n=42)**	**Time 2 (n=34)**
Gender		
Female	40 (95.2%)	30 (88.2%)
Transgender	2 (4.8%)	1 (2.9%)
Genderfluid		1 (2.9%)
Other		1 (2.9%)
Race		
White	27 (64.3%)	12 (34.6%)
Hispanic/Latinx	6 (14.3%)	5 (15.4%)
Black/African American	5 (11.9%)	7 (19.2%)
MENA*		1 (3.9%)
Asian	1 (2.4%)	3 (7.7%)
Native American	1 (2.4%)	1 (3.9%)
Other	2 (4.8%)	1 (3.9%)
Age		
21-30	6 (14.3%)	9 (26.7%)
31-40	17 (40.5%)	19 (56.7%)
41-50	14 (33.3%)	
51 or older	5 (12%)	6 (16.7%)
Professional Role		
School Counselor	6 (14.0%)	4 (12.9%)
School District Employee	1 (2.3%)	1 (3.2%)
School-Based Social Worker	9 (21.0%)	4 (12.9%)
School Social Worker	22 (51.2%)	19 (54.8%)
Other	5 (11.6%)	5 (16.1%)

*Middle East and North Africa

Findings

Findings presented below provide insights into the successes and challenges of the CIRGL program and doing online, culturally responsive professional education. The first section focuses on course expectations, prior knowledge, and the user experiences regarding operational issues such as the technology and the amount of content. The second section focuses on the extent that the learning objectives were met, and the student reflections on positionality and relevance of the course.

Course Expectations and Prior Knowledge

Prior to enrolling, White participants' understanding of the program focused on cultural influences or cultural considerations in addressing grief and loss. The perspective is reflected in the following quotation: "*I was under the impression that I would be learning about different cultures and customs around death and grief*." (Survey Respondent 29, White, Time 1). Respondents of color focused more on the understanding of grief responses in "*BIPOC communities*" (Survey Respondent 37, Latina, Time 1). Across all racial groups, some participants did not realize it would be an in-depth program: "*I did not*

understand it was a course and so extensive. This was a great bonus. I thought that it was going to be a webinar" (Survey Respondent 16, White, Time 1). Overall, the respondents reflect a desire for increased understanding of grief and loss across diverse cultural contexts and acquiring practical tools for interventions in their professional practice. Interestingly, there are no stated expectations about critical self-reflection or a focus on Whiteness, suggesting expectations are more in line with cultural competence rather than cultural responsiveness. Cultural competence is defined as exposing providers to different cultures and their beliefs and practices. However, cultural competence fails to sufficiently address power differentials, an oppressive social context, or require critical personal self-reflection, and can instead lead to stereotyping and fostering implicit bias (Lekas et al., 2020).

When asked how enrollment aligns with work and career aspirations, participants describe grief and loss as an area that is often overlooked, but one they encounter on a regular basis particularly when encountering populations such as immigrant students or low-income students. Respondents describe the program as important to their professional growth and ethics. The following quotation embodies these responses.

> *As someone that provides SEL and community support to students and families, this certificate directly aligns to my professional work and aspirations. I think it is my responsibility to continue to learn and grow as a professional who works with a diverse community.* (Survey Respondent 20, Latina, Time 1)

User Experience

Workload and Depth of the Course

A major theme that emerged from participants at Time 1 was that the workload (81% of responses) represented a major challenge for completion of the course. One participant noted,

> *I had concerns about finding the time to complete the self-paced format of the course, as I balance my work responsibilities and my responsibilities as a mom and wife.* (Survey Respondent 11, Asian, Time 1)

The Time 2 survey reflected similar responses:

> *The workload was heavier than expected. I do not know how many CEs I will receive for completion, so it is difficult to gauge whether the workload was appropriate. I did think that the required work led to more in-depth learning.* (Survey Respondent 22, White, Time 2)

One respondent mentioned that they expected a workload much like some of the online professional certificates offered by some online entities, and were surprised by the depth:

> *I've only taken one other certification course, and the workload for that one was much less intensive than this was. I did feel the information was important and interesting, but this ended up taking up way more of my time than I expected. Maybe an estimate up front of how much is needed to complete the course would have been helpful.* (Survey Respondent 21, no response to race, Time 2)

While respondents were surprised about the depth and acknowledged the challenges of time, there was an appreciation for the depth of learning.

Course Objectives and Learning Outcomes

Course Satisfaction

The results indicate that the respondents generally found the course to be well-structured and effective in achieving its learning objectives. The participants found the course engaging and appreciated the current perspectives included, the resources provided, and the attention to different cultural groups. Most of the respondents stated they liked the content and agreed that it was relevant to their needs. Notably, 51.6% of the of respondents stated they were "extremely likely" and 32.6% are "likely" to recommend the program, indicating an overall positive view. The qualitative interviews supported these findings.

> *I know they [course modules] are great. Yeah, I feel like they appealed to a lot of people, a lot of people's learning styles. So, everyone learns a little bit differently. And so, I appreciated the readings. The evidence-based stuff. I appreciated the PowerPoint slides and lectures and videos, even the interviews with people and other organizations that kept it relevant…that was super helpful.* (Qualitative Interview 1, Hispanic/American Indian)

The respondents appreciated the quality of the content, the diversity of the experts that developed each module, the self-pacing of the course, and the ability to implement their learning in practice:

> *The content was fantastic, and I liked that the different modules were taught by different people to allow multiple voices to be represented. I appreciate that the course was self-paced, as this allowed me to complete it on a schedule that worked for me*. (Survey Respondent 10, White, Time 2)

> *I liked that each module was taught by different instructors. I felt like this brought a great wealth of knowledge to the course. I liked how in-depth the course went. When I first signed up for the training, I thought it was a 1-to-2-day training, but it was so much more than that. Great information that I am already implementing into my work.* (Survey Respondent 20, No Response to Race, Time 2)

While the main challenge of the program was the time it took to complete the program, the respondents agreed that the depth was one of the main strengths of the course. In addition, the respondents highlighted the diversity of the modules as presented by each content matter expert as a strength.

Learning Outcomes

The survey at Time 2 included a slider question asking respondents to rate their current level of knowledge using a scale from 0 (lowest) to 100 (highest) in the following areas covered in the various modules (Table 4). A slider question lets respondents rate an item or statement on a numerical scale by dragging an interactive slider. Overall, the respondents

rated a high level of knowledge in the areas of Culturally Responsive Lens, Racialized Trauma, Historically Excluded Groups, Grief-Informed Responses, and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support with mean scores ranging from 80.8 and 86.0 (See Table 2). Knowledge about a culturally responsive lens was the area where respondents felt the most confidence, as it had a higher mean of 85.6 with a lower standard deviation of 12.07 compared to other content areas. Kirkhart's Approach had the lowest mean of 58.9 with a standard deviation of 25.5. Community Cultural Wealth (M=74.9) and Healing Centered Engagement (76.1) were the next two lowest areas. This suggests that these three areas could be reinforced or enhanced to support student learning.

Table 4. *Reported Level of Knowledge (Possible 0-100)*

Construct	**Minimum**	**Maximum**	***M (SD)***
Culturally responsive lens	40	100	85.6 (12.07)
Kirkhart's approach	6	100	58.9 (25.47)
Racialized trauma	9	100	86 (16.37)
Historically excluded groups	11	100	85 (17.09)
Grief-informed responses	10	100	80.8 (19.92)
Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS)	11	100	82.3 (22.42)
Community cultural wealth	6	100	74.9 (22.24)
Healing centered engagement	10	100	76.1 (21.87)

More importantly, respondents reflected on the course content during the workday and felt confident applying the culturally responsive approach. The survey at Time 2 asked respondents to rate from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) their level of agreement with the following two statements: 1) "During the course of my workday, I found myself reflecting on the course learning," and 2) "After taking this course, I feel confident applying a culturally responsive framework to my work." The mean for the first statement was 4.16 with a *SD* of .88, and the mean for second statement was 4.23 with a *SD* of .63. A majority, 90.3%, of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they reflected on the course learning during the workday, and 83.9% either agreed or strongly agreed that they feel confident applying the culturally responsive framework. The participants in the qualitative interviews also reported learning new concepts, deepening their understanding of concepts previously learned, and application of that learning:

> *I loved the resources provided in the course and have referred colleagues and student's/families to many of the resources I learned of. I always knew grief was complicated, but I thought this course did an outstanding job of really helping me understand how things like racial battle fatigue and historical trauma also complicate grief. I absolutely would refer others to this course.* (Survey Respondent 7, Latina, Time 2)

> *We're doing grief training, and so because we haven't had a lot to draw from around diversity, equity, and inclusion, and having some good materials to be able to introduce into those trainings as well as training my own volunteers… So, to be able to integrate something that I think we've all been really hungry for has been super useful. And so actually a lot of the content has already worked its way into*

> *my slide decks as far as training goes*. (Qualitative Interview 1, Hispanic/American Indian)

Respondents brought aspects of the course into their workspaces, such as what the respondent above described. Others described creating work groups with colleagues to continue to discuss and apply what they learned in the course.

Igniting White Fragility

It is important to note that the survey responses included comments that were defensive and seemed to reflect White fragility among some participants (DiAngelo, 2018). White fragility is a term coined by DiAngelo (2018) and describes the defensive reactions that a White person exhibits when they are asked to consider their own race, when Whiteness is highlighted, or their racial worldview is challenged. Because White people often view themselves as "raceless" or as the "default" race, they are insulated from feelings of racial discomfort and are protected from racial stress. Responses reflecting White fragility can include anger, crying, fear, arguing, withdrawing, or silence (DiAngelo, 2018). Their comments focused on course modules that emphasized critical self-reflection and concepts such as White supremacy. One participant stated:

> *Do not assume that people are ignorant of the cultures they work with. The idea of white supremacy being continued through our current practices was a little off putting as we all take classes dealing with cultural diversity and cultures. That particular module was a turning off point for me. Classes should not make one feel guilty for who they are. You talk about cultural responsivity and yet we are subjected to being made to feel guilty if we are of Caucasian descent.* (Survey Respondent 27, White, Time 2)

Given that the program is designed through an anti-racist and culturally responsive framework, it is not surprising that some resistance was expressed in various ways, especially in addressing topics and subjects that require more unpacking, reflecting, and praxis. As mentioned in the demographic section of those who completed the Time 1 and Time 2 surveys, there was a significant drop-off in White respondents during Time 2 compared to Time 1. While we cannot confirm the reason, we can posit that the White participants may have felt defensive and less likely to respond to the survey.

Discussion and Implications

Overall, the survey results indicate a high level of satisfaction with the course and its relevance. Some participants did not expect the level of depth and time necessary for engaging in culturally responsive and anti-racist frameworks in a CIRGL program. The developers acknowledge the workload can be significant, but given the importance of the content, it was important not to abbreviate it and ensure the depth and exploration of the topics. The participants agreed that the depth of the content was useful to them despite the unanticipated time commitment. Modifications to help pace the program, including giving people up to a year to complete it, were implemented in the second iteration of the program. Notification about the length of time it can take to complete the program was also included

in the enrollment information. The developers are also addressing the issue of workload and access by developing an in-person train-the-trainer program. This model would provide significant coaching to identified trainers in a district, who would then be available to their colleagues in their community to train others and apply the CIRGL lessons in a very specific local context. The train-the-trainer component of the program will allow for more in-person engagement, community, and wider dissemination of the content utilizing a different delivery modality.

Respondents acknowledged the importance of considering cultural and contextual factors when responding to grieving students, indicating a growing awareness of the need for culturally informed practices amidst larger systems of oppression and racism. However, this evaluation raises key questions about participant engagement in anti-racist material that may challenge assumptions about privilege, Whiteness, power, and need for comfort when working through the material. Some responses may have reflected the manifestations of resistance to the implementation of anti-racist curriculum (Leddy & O'Neill, 2021). Thus, the evaluation results must be considered from this anti-racist and culturally informed lens, suggesting that resistance may be a sign that the program is having the intended impact, and considering what implications this has for understanding program effectiveness and continuous improvement.

The program developers selected evaluators that were aligned with the culturally responsive approach that mirrored the CIRGL program. As such, the program was not only evaluated for the operational components but also for the effectiveness using a methodology that centered the culturally responsive goals and values of the program. It is recommended that any program developer using a culturally responsive and anti-racist framework utilize program evaluators with the same approach.

The Culturally Informed Responses to Grief and Loss (CIRGL) Certification Program effectively addresses the need for culturally informed practices in supporting grieving students in educational settings. Respondents highlighted its strengths, expressed through their high satisfaction with the program's content, resources, relevance, diverse perspectives, and organization. By equipping social work personnel and others working in education and related fields with the necessary skills and knowledge, the CIRGL Program has the potential to foster more inclusive and supportive educational environments for grieving students. By incorporating participant feedback and considering participant responses to the content as part of the continuous improvement, the CIRGL Program can further enhance its effectiveness in providing culturally responsive support for grieving students and communities.

For those interested in development and implementation of anti-racist and culturally responsive programming, doing so requires alignment of values and shared language by those working in the program and those evaluating the program. These values and shared language guide the program development, implementation, and evaluation. In addition, there must be a willingness to slow down to maximize participation in decision-making. Program leaders should also be ready to navigate and push against organizational and professional values that are grounded in WSC that prioritize academic credentials over

lived experiences; and uniformity in content over a diversity of perspectives and ways of representing content.

Future program developers using an anti-racist and culturally responsive approach should consider delivering content in multiple modalities, particularly content that challenges White dominant cultural narratives, to ensure that there are options for individual, asynchronous learning, but also synchronous or in person learning. The implementation of multiple ways to access the content is aligned with the value of maximum accessibility and allows the user to engage in the way that is most appropriate for them. These strategies can help to enhance engagement and foster more opportunities for critical self-reflection as well as keeping individuals accountable to doing the anti-racist work.

Finally, program developers can expect that developing a program with anti-oppressive values may cause discomfort and could potentially trigger White fragility and resistance and should plan for those reactions. While systemic reviews and evaluation of anti-racist professional development focus more on content than process (Cénat et al., 2024), it is possible to apply approaches from critical learning paradigms (Cornell, 2023), equity audits (Chun & Evans, 2019), and cultural humility training (Danso, 2018) to inform the structures of certificate programs such as CIRGL. Planning for White fragility can include providing explicit language in the modules about what participants can expect, providing additional time to process (extending the time to work through the modules), monitor the discussion boards, and provide synchronous, live webinars to provide other opportunities and settings to process information, and have action orientated items so that participants can engage in tangible tasks to reduce the sense of powerlessness and guilt and in turn, reduce the intensity or instances of White fragility (DiAngelo, 2018) .

This case provides evidence that developing and implementing such a program is feasible, replicable, and effective. The overall positive response also suggests that there is a need for such anti-racist and culturally responsive content and programming. In the context of increasing hostility and pushback against diversity, equity, and inclusion, particularly with the second Trump administration, it is imperative to continue to support and create such professional development opportunities and reemphasize one's commitment to and importance of culturally responsive and anti-racist interventions for our minoritized children and families. This imperative is grounded in both our professional values and ethics, and in the current evidence base about what works best with minoritized youth and families.

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Author note: This project was supported by the philanthropic investment of the New York Life Foundation. We want to acknowledge the staff at Dominican University in River Forest, IL who went above and beyond to support the development ensuring its success. We also want to acknowledge Christy McCoy who worked with Dr. Leticia Villarreal Sosa to respond to the social political context and address the needs of minoritized youth through this project.

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