How Can Reflective Teachers Support Marginalized Grieving Children?

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TEACHING, LEARNING, HEALING:
HOW CAN REFLECTIVE TEACHERS SUPPORT MARGINALIZED GRIEVING CHILDREN?

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in Education

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St. Paul, Minnesota

May 2019

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To my family and friends:
Thank you for being there for me throughout my entire journey.
You are my sunshine.

To grieving children and families:
“I’d light one small candle, to brighten the darkness”.
EPIGRAPH PAGE

I step into this day...
(letting the past move into the past where it belongs,
and the future into the future where it belongs)

I step into my life...
(not someone else's).

I step into the mystery...

-Sister Jose Hobday, an American Indian woman and Franciscan nun
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my content experts:

Kim, I am forever grateful for your serenity, courage, and wisdom. I sincerely appreciate the time and energy you devoted to reviewing my drafts and offering suggestions and support at every iteration along the way.

Cheryl, your presence and encouragement has shaped my cultural awareness. Thank you for your commitment to the community.

To my project facilitator:

Patty, thank you for understanding me and continuing to believe in me. You’ve brought the best out of me.

To my capstone team, supportive colleagues, MAEd instructors and classmates:

My academic journey has been inspiring, challenging, and transforming. Thank you.
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

“Anyone old enough to love is old enough to grieve” (Wolfelt, 1991). Some children are not included in critical experiences such as saying goodbye or attending a funeral or burial. In some instances, children may not express typical “signs of grief” because they do not want to upset others. In other instances, children lack the strategies to self-regulate, leading to behavioral issues. There are developmental distinctions that impact how children grieve as well as environmental and cultural circumstances that can influence the grieving process (Busch & Kimble, 2001). Unfortunately, grieving children are often overlooked or forgotten. In my experience, children’s needs may be suppressed or overshadowed by grieving parents or relatives. In some cases, grown ups try to “protect” children by withholding details or not telling the truth. In this paper, I will explore the question, How can reflective teachers support marginalized grieving children?

In this chapter, I will discuss my personal and professional interest in grieving children. This interest developed through a combination of family, volunteer, and work experiences. Next, I will reflect upon the volunteer experiences and explore the concerns I have regarding cultural competence and inclusion. I will also share my professional background and make connections about how these experiences are related to my research question. Finally, I will review evidence that supports the relevance of my research question.
In my professional work, I recall an instance where I believed I was well prepared to deal with the death of a student only to discover that I was completely ill prepared to attend memorial services that I had been invited to attend for a Hmong family who practiced Shamanism. This experience took place in 2010 while I was employed by a non-profit scholarship organization (see Appendix A for all organizations mentioned) as a Development Officer. In this role, I managed major grant-funded scholarship programs.

One of the programs that I oversaw awarded scholarships to students who went through a rigorous application and selection process. They submitted proposals to design and implement a project addressing unmet needs in Minnesota. One of the scholarship recipients confided in me that she had terminal cancer. I assured her that we would work with her regardless of her condition. She continued to work diligently on developing her project (examining health issues in the Hmong culture) until her health declined to the point that she needed to be hospitalized. I will never forget when I received the call.

I believed I was well situated to deal with her death because of all the training I had and all the volunteer work I had done with grieving children and their families. I discovered I was not adequately prepared for the way in which her family would say goodbye. My student was Hmong and her family practiced Shamanism; I knew very little about the religious traditions. I consulted another Hmong student about what to expect. What should I wear? What do I say? (I do not speak Hmong). What do I do when I am at the memorial? I was fortunate to have someone who was culturally competent and willing to accompany me. She explained what was happening, translated my condolences to the family, and served as a much-needed guide through this new experience.
Personal and Professional Interest

Family Interest

My interest in supporting grieving children is comprised of a combination of personal, volunteer and professional experiences. My grandfather died of melanoma at the age of 47, leaving behind a wife and seven children ranging from age five to early twenties. At that time, resources to support grieving children were limited. My grandma attended a group for parents without partners and relied on her church for support. I often think of my grandmother and my aunts and uncles at their respective ages when I am engaging in volunteer work with children who were the ages of my aunts and uncles when my grandpa died. As I have learned more about the developmental stages of grieving children, I have a better understanding of how they were processing their grief and the age-appropriate responses they might have experienced.

Volunteer Involvement

My journey as a volunteer for two different organizations that serve grieving children and their families began several years ago. In the second semester of my senior year of college I was enrolled in a class on Death and Dying. We heard from many speakers from the community including funeral directors, bereaved parents, and nonprofit leaders. One of the speakers was the founder and Executive Director of a nonprofit organization. This organization is located in West Des Moines, Iowa and offers the most comprehensive and ongoing services for children, teens, adults, and families struggling with a death of a loved one in the state of Iowa. These services are offered free of charge to children and their families.
The Executive Director shared compelling stories and photos that caught my attention. She also was seeking volunteers to help at the upcoming grief camp so I signed up. I thought this would be an experience that I would help at once but it was so enriching that I continued to return. Observing how children were apprehensive when they first arrived and witnessing their transformation at the end of the weekend made it easy for me to continue this commitment. The unique blend of fun activities paired with time for small group discussions helped children share their stories and process their grief with other peers who had been through similar experiences. I have been involved as a volunteer since 1998 and was recently recognized for my 25th camp.

In 2004 I was volunteering at the camp in Iowa and met some people from Minnesota. They were part of a professional organization and were interested in starting their own camp in Minnesota. They wanted their leaders to receive historical background about the activities as well as some hands-on training to bring back to their volunteers. I immediately got involved and was a trainer at this organization’s very first camp.

Over time, the organization rebranded and now has a mission of being dedicated to bringing hope and healing to grieving children and families (see Appendix A). This organization offers a camp for children, teen retreat, programming for emerging adults, and a camp for adults with all services free of charge to the families. My involvement with this organization offered many leadership experiences. I served on the board of directors, participated in fundraising activities including a polar plunge, and helped develop programming for emerging adults. I have volunteered at 24 camps and have worked with children, teens, emerging adults, and adults as a small group facilitator.
As a volunteer, I have nearly 20 years of experience as a small group facilitator for children, teens, emerging adults, or adults at over fifty weekend camps designed for grieving children and their families. Over the years I have had many opportunities to reflect on my interactions with grieving children and their families. Something that makes me uncomfortable, though I have always been aware of it, is the lack of cultural diversity represented in the volunteers as well as the participants. Occasionally there would be a non-white child or family involved in our programs. More often than not, I was the only volunteer who was non-white.

**Inclusion: Limitations and Promising Practices**

My awareness of the demographics made me wonder how communities of color were or were not being served in dealing with their grief. Many of the children and their caregivers who attended camp were referred by funeral directors, school counselors, and faith leaders. What were the barriers preventing children of color from coming to camp? Implicit bias? Language and translation issues? Cultural or religious beliefs? Not wanting to be away from home overnight? Why was the volunteer base so culturally homogeneous? Were people from other cultures invited to volunteer? Were there time commitment limitations? Cultural, spiritual, or attitudinal differences?

I firmly believe in the positive aspects of both organizations or I would not have continued to return. However, I recall some situations where there was room for improvement with regard to inclusion. I can vividly remember instances that made me uncomfortable, yet I lacked the confidence to speak up or call out the organizational leaders who had more experience, qualifications, and influence than me.
These instances were microaggressive, not glaringly obvious to demand immediate change, but they likely left an impression on those who were negatively impacted. The situations were dismissed by leaders who condoned activities with the notion that “grieving kids need to have fun too” rather than recognizing the potential harm to others. I have also been encouraged by some promising practices that have been implemented, since both organizations have undergone leadership and staffing changes throughout the years. These practices acknowledge some of the medical, cultural, and social conditions that impact participants.

Overall, there has been adequate capacity to identify the campers who may need extra support for emotional and behavioral issues including depression, anxiety, ADHD, and being on the Autism spectrum. Both organizations designate a qualified individual to dispense medications in a confidential manner. They also arranged for a medical professional to meet with children and answer medical questions related to their loved one’s death or illness. They provide responses using proper terminology that is age-appropriate.

One of the organizations is making efforts to be more culturally inclusive through their printed materials, making sure the photographs feature participants from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and providing brochures that are translated to different languages. I was honored to be invited to review the proofs. This organization also recently made it possible for a child who identifies as transgender to come to camp, something that might not have been accommodated earlier on. This organization also recognizes that grief is a continuum and allows campers and their families to return as needed, free of charge.
Both organizations use healing circles in many of the activities throughout the weekend from opening circle to memorial ceremony to closing circle. These circles offer worthwhile and meaningful experiences that invite and encourage grieving children to participate, reflect, and share because everyone gets a turn to talk, everyone listens, and you have the option to pass if you are not ready to share. As a volunteer, I can see the value of using healing circles with the campers. However, I also consider who is not in the circle and why are they not in the circle. I wonder if there are alternative ways to bring the healing circle activities to those who do not come to camp. I wonder if the healing circles will help promote a culturally inclusive and accommodating atmosphere.

**Professional Background**

I have never been a classroom teacher unless you count the times I played “school” as a child. However, my professional work has always been closely aligned with education through previous positions I have had in fundraising, scholarship distribution, and program development. I also worked for a public financial advising firm in New York and several of our clients were prominent school districts on the east coast. My professional work has indirectly impacted audiences spanning from K-12 learners to college students, including pre-service teachers to current educators and graduate students. In my current position, I provide professional development for educators by administering graduate level certificate programs, arranging continuing studies courses, and managing partnerships with co-sponsor organizations. I also provide operational support for scholarship for Aspiring Teachers of Color and American Indian students.
In addition, I have had many enriching experiences and the privilege to serve on a variety of committees that support college students and promote inclusion. These roles include first-generation student engagement, diversity initiatives steering committee, LGBTQ student programming, Commitment to Community, campus colleague for first year students, campus colleague for social justice alternative spring break, advisory committee for a youth mentoring program, Women’s Leadership Retreat chaperone and planning committee, and service on Title IX committee for sexual misconduct.

First, I will discuss my work with a summer scholarship program and how it relates to culturally relevant teaching. Next, I will describe my involvement with an advocacy organization and the significance of coalition’s initiatives to recruit teachers of color and American Indian teachers in Minnesota. Finally, I will discuss my recent involvement with these racial healing initiatives and my facilitator training with healing circles.

Urban Scholars

My exposure to culturally relevant teaching originates from administering scholarships for a summer scholarship program which was designed to recruit, support, and retain teachers of color. Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings introduced the concept of culturally relevant teaching in the 1990’s. She is best known for her book *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (1994). Culturally relevant teaching should develop students academically, nurture cultural competence, and develop a critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995).
Urban Scholars had transformative experiences throughout their summer and beyond. They had intensive apprenticeships assisting in the classroom during summer school sessions and also met on a weekly basis for programming and additional support from peers and other professionals. For many, it was affirming to be a part of a community that recognized their uniqueness as professional educators of color. In addition to academic scholarships and stipends, Urban Scholars received mentoring from peers as well as experienced veteran teachers, many of whom were former Urban Scholars. They had opportunities to reflect on their cultural identities through activities such as “Where I’m From” poems. I believe that educators who actively engage and reflect upon their own identities will be better suited to encourage the same from their students. This can be achieved through leading activities and creating safe places to have courageous conversations.

Advocacy

I became involved with a coalition to Increase Teachers of Color and American Indian Teachers in Minnesota conferences in 2016 and 2017. According to the Coalition’s webpage, “The Coalition was developed in 2015 by educators and school district administrators to unite students, parents, teacher candidates, teacher educators, paraprofessionals, teachers and administrators from urban, suburban and rural area schools and districts” (TOCAIM, 2017). I believe the Coalition’s initiatives will have a significant impact and I have witnessed the importance of building community and a professional network.
At one of the conferences, the emcee announced that the conference was being held on land that was originally occupied by American Indian people. The event opened with a performance from American Indian drummers. This acknowledgement is significant and supports the importance of cultural inclusion, particularly following the grief and trauma of a tribal nation. I believe that teachers and other educators who embrace these practices of recognition and cultural inclusion, especially when dealing with grieving children and their families, will foster stronger relationships and meaningful interactions.

My involvement with the Coalition is one way that I can help support and advance the importance of culturally relevant teaching, particularly with students from marginalized backgrounds. It is no surprise that several former Urban Scholars are also actively engaged with the work of the Coalition through attendance at conferences, leading and facilitating breakout sessions at conferences, participating in legislative sessions, and organizing affinity groups for additional networking.

**Racial Healing and Transformation Initiative**

More recently, I became involved in an initiative for Truth in Racial Healing and Transformation. The initiative aims to reconcile competing historical and contemporary racial narratives that encompass varied individual and collective truths and lived experiences. Healing circles and “train the trainer” professional development training sessions are significantly connected to my research question and project plan to design professional development opportunities for leaders to work with grieving and marginalized earners.
I am particularly interested in making sure the healing circles are introduced to students from marginalized communities, who may not have adequate access or opportunities to attend other events like the camps where I have volunteered in the past. I also strive to make sure the circles are culturally inclusive and modified to accommodate the audience.

In February 2018 I attended a Train the Trainer: Circle Dialogue facilitator session sponsored by a Minneapolis-based non-profit. We discussed circle fundamentals, participated in narrative exercises, practiced facilitating in small groups, and engaged in personal and group reflection. This was not my first experience with circles, however, it was an opportunity to move from the role of participant to the role of facilitator. In July 2018 I attended a Racial Justice Facilitator training to lead conversations about race and racism at an upcoming event, *It’s Time to Talk: Forums on Race*. I also attended a Minnesota Educational Equity Edcamp conference in summer 2018.

Each of these experiences contributed to my training and development. This resulted in my increased confidence for facilitating circle dialogue centered around educational equity and racial justice conversations. These experiences were especially meaningful because I had the opportunity to participate in courageous conversations with people who are not my current colleagues. Over time, I have come to recognize that I have a tendency to censor my response when talking with family, close friends, and colleagues, in order to avoid conflict and to minimize discomfort. I am developing better techniques to invite and engage in situations that I would have previously avoided.
Research Question

According to the “Grief in the Classroom” survey conducted in 2012 by New York Life Foundation and American Federation of Teachers, 69% of teachers indicated that they had at least one student in their class(es) who had lost a parent, guardian, sibling, or close friend in the past year. I am intrigued by these statistics and would like to understand the impact of culturally relevant support for grieving children, particularly from demographic populations experiencing significant growth. How can educators and other professionals support grieving children, particularly children from urban areas, with strategies that are culturally appropriate? How can reflective teachers support marginalized grieving children?

Relevance to the Field

Babies of color now outnumber non-Hispanic white babies (1 year or younger), according to new estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau (2012). The latest estimate shows that the population of racial or ethnic minority babies was 50.2% (2015). According to the U.S. Census Bureau,

“between 2010 and 2015, the fastest growing racial group in Minnesota was the Asian population, which grew by 22%, adding nearly 48,000 people. Second fastest was the Black population, which grew by 16%, adding 45,000 people, followed by the Hispanic population, which grew by 13%, adding 32,000 people” (2012).

It is important to note that Asian and Black race groups are categorized separately and are not non-Hispanic.
As the Minnesota state population trends change, it will be important to adapt to the needs of the changing demographics, particularly for the educational achievement of urban learners. “Minnesota has one of the largest racial and economic achievement gaps and one of the worst school-counselor-to student ratios in the nation” (Cronin, 2016). The American School Counseling Association (ASCA) recommends a counselor-to-student ratio of 1:250. Minnesota’s ratio is 743 students per licensed school counselor (as cited in Cronin, 2016).

According to the U.S. Department of Education, Minnesota students’ performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) continues to be among the best in the nation. However, Minnesota's overall on-time graduation rates for students of color, across racial lines, puts it directly at the bottom of all 50 states. Additionally, Minnesota spends a smaller share of its education dollars on student support like school counselors, social workers and attendance trackers than any other state in the nation — and it has been that way for at least a decade (Pugmire, 2016).

Therefore, it is necessary to carefully consider how learners are marginalized as a result of Minnesota’s racial and economic disparities. Teachers can work to address these issues in their classrooms, principals and superintendents can make sure that students and schools that are identified as high needs are getting the most experienced and results-oriented teacher placements. Civic minded individuals can become informed and use their voting power to approve funding, to elect school board members, and to advocate for legislation that will be in the best interest of the students who have great potential and need conditions to support their success.
Finally, in the past few years there have been movements such as Black Lives Matter originating from police brutality and resulting in multiple deaths of young people of color. These tragedies have been occurring in cities throughout the nation as well as locally, in my community. More recently the March for our Lives and national student walkout have emerged in opposition to gun violence following a recent shooting in Parkland, Florida.

**Chapter Summary**

As we anticipate changing demographics, how can we adapt to meet the needs of our students, particularly those who are grieving? What can educators and administrators do to become more culturally competent about traditions associated with death, particularly in non-white and non-Christian communities? In this chapter, I proposed the question, *How can reflective teachers support marginalized grieving children?* I shared my personal and professional interest and described the relevance to the field which draws upon demographic changes and educational realities that are not favorable for marginalized learners.

I shared a personal experience by reflecting upon my grandfather’s death and recognizing the scarcity of grief resources that were available for my grandmother, my father, and my other aunts and uncles. I described my extensive volunteer experiences and highlighted how both organizations have a mission to support grieving children and their families. I also reflected on the limitations and promising practices as well as their advancements toward inclusion.
Further, I reflected on an early career personal experience with a student death. I introduced the concept of culturally relevant teaching and noted how it related to a scholarship program to recruit and retain teachers of color. I provided statistics that reveal the racial disparities in students who are educated in Minnesota. I joined an advocacy coalition that aims to increase teachers of color and American Indian teachers in Minnesota. Finally, I participated in the Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation facilitator training.

In the next chapter I will provide a literature review, project description, and concluding reflection. Chapter two will examine literature related to the themes of teaching, learning, and healing. For the theme of teaching I will review culturally relevant teaching, critical race theory, and trauma informed teaching. For the theme of learning I will review urban learners and grieving learners. For the theme of healing I will review healing circles, restorative justice practice and andragogy - the study of adult education. The literature review will help answer the question: How can reflective teachers support marginalized grieving children?

In chapter three I will outline the project description, which is a professional development plan aimed to inform educators who are working with grieving learners and their families in culturally relevant ways. In chapter four I will reflect on the project learning, revisit the literature, recognize the project limitations as well as the project impact, and ponder about next steps.
CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Chapter Introduction

In the previous chapter I discussed my personal and professional involvement. This includes volunteer experiences that gave me exposure to working with grieving children and personal reflection upon the limitations related to inclusion at the organizations where I volunteered. I also discussed professional work experiences that let to my understanding of culturally relevant teaching.

Chapter two will review current research to help answer the question: How can reflective teachers support marginalized grieving children? This chapter will explore subtopics within the themes of teaching, learning, and healing.

The first section of this chapter acknowledges equitable teaching. I will begin by providing a definition and framework for culturally relevant teaching. I will also mention some of the challenges to culturally relevant teaching. Next, I will examine the concept of critical race theory including references to publications that draw from student perspectives and recommendations for teacher preparation. I will conclude the section by exploring trauma informed teaching.

The next section of this chapter addresses types of learners, particularly marginalized learners. Urban and grieving learners will be the primary focus for this literature review. However, it is important to recognize that there are other learners who are also marginalized.
In the section about urban learners I will begin with a definition of urban learners and will also share the urban learner framework. I will also review topics commonly associated with urban learners: student achievement, student motivation, poverty, and parental engagement. I will conclude the section with characteristics of a good urban teacher. In the section about grieving learners I will begin by introducing children’s grief, terminology, and the tasks of mourning. I will then explain how children understand death and dying, describe how children grieve in different ways, and provide recommendations for supporting grieving children.

The next section of this chapter is about healing circles and restorative justice. I will begin by introducing children’s grief, terminology and the tasks of mourning. I will then explain how children understand death and dying, describe how children grieve in different ways, and provide recommendations for supporting grieving children. Next, I will describe healing circles including the origins, principles, and guidelines to establishing healing circles. I will also explore restorative justice practice.

I will conclude the chapter with andragogy, or the study of adult learning. I will introduce assumptions about adult learners, share principles for adult learning, and offer policies that support professional development.
Culturally Relevant Teaching

This section recognizes limitations in current research and offers conclusions regarding how culturally relevant teaching has the potential to impact marginalized and grieving learners. The section defines culturally relevant teaching, critical race theory, and trauma-informed teaching. It also examines research that supports and questions the significance of culturally relevant pedagogy. This section introduces the framework for culturally relevant teaching, reviews culturally relevant teaching from the student perspective, and provides recommendations for teacher preparation programs.

Ladson-Billings (1994) defined culturally relevant teaching as “pedagogy that empowered students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (pp. 17-18). Culturally relevant teaching focuses on the themes of academic success, cultural competence, and critical or sociopolitical consciousness (Young, 2010). Ladson-Billings described a culturally relevant instructor as “someone who attains conceptions of self and others, social relations, and conceptions of knowledge” (as cited by Young, 2010, p. 248). Gay (2002) offered the following definition “Culturally responsive teaching is defined as using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (p. 106). Other studies have had varying interpretations that include recognizing student strengths, validating student life experiences, and recognizing home cultures (Young, 2010). It is especially important for grieving and marginalized learners to have their strengths recognized, particularly when they might be vulnerable in their academic performance and accomplishments.
Culturally Relevant Teaching Framework

“Research has shown that no one teaching strategy will consistently engage all learners. The key is helping students relate lesson content to their own backgrounds” (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995, p. 17). Motivation is inseparable from culture; “To be effective in multicultural classrooms, teachers must relate teaching content to the cultural backgrounds of their students” (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995, p.17). It is essential to recognize home culture and understand traditions that might be unfamiliar. If the teacher is not knowledgeable about the home culture, this is a great opportunity to become informed because it will enhance the educator’s cultural competence and encourage communication with the student’s parents, caregivers, and extended cultural (and religious) community.

Wlodkowski & Ginsberg (1995) referenced the strong relationship between culture and motivation and suggested the importance of changing consciousness about motivation. They offered an intrinsic motivational framework for teaching culturally different students as a holistic and culturally responsive way to create, plan, and refine teaching activities, lessons, and assessment practices. Teachers who are willing to be establish inclusion, develop a positive attitude, enhance meaning, and engender competence will advance their cultural competence (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). If teachers are willing to pursue a stronger understanding of the cultural traditions of their students, they will yield greater respect from their students, peers, and administrators (Young, 2010).
Student Perspectives of Culturally Relevant Teaching

Byrd (2016) explored how culturally relevant teaching and school racial socialization were associated with the academic and attitudinal outcomes of diverse middle and high school students. Culturally relevant teaching focuses on high expectations, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. Byrd (2016) addressed the limitations of the study, noting that there are few empirical studies that show the effects of culturally relevant teaching, that culturally relevant teaching is determined by the teacher’s perspective rather than the students’ perspectives; and that culturally relevant teaching studies generally focus on predominantly black classrooms (pp. 2-3).

Byrd (2016) concluded that “culturally relevant teaching is an important method for promoting achievement and positive identities for students of all races” (p. 7) and offered these recommendations for teachers: get to know students and personalize instruction; teach about cultural diversity even when the class is not diverse; and encourage appreciation for diversity but acknowledge current inequities (p. 7).

Similarly, Howard (2001) conducted a case study to assess African-American elementary students’ interpretations of culturally relevant teachers within urban contexts. The qualitative data revealed three key findings that students preferred in their learning environments:

- teachers who displayed caring bonds and attitudes toward them,
- teachers who established community-and family-type classroom environments, and
- teachers who made learning an entertaining and fun process. (p. 131)
The author summarized that the teachers who students described were culturally competent, because they recognized the students’ cultural capital, which include knowledge, skills, and education. The interview results suggested the following strategies which have similar characteristics to previously mentioned research: caring, establishing community, and engaging classroom environments. Student perspectives are extremely valuable in addition to the perspectives of their parents, caregivers, and community leaders. Students who lack caring teachers, familiar environments, and engaging experiences will suffer consequences of low student achievement, missed opportunities for academic attainment, as well as the possibility of dropping out.

It is critical to validate student life experiences. When a death, loss, or trauma occurs, it is a time when students may be experiencing things that sets them apart from their classmates - which can be a source of isolation. It is also essential to recognize home culture and understand that traditions and practices might be unfamiliar. If the teacher, school administrator or other school specialist is not knowledgeable about the home culture, this is a great opportunity to become informed because it will enhance the educator’s cultural competence and encourage more effective communication with the student’s parents, caregivers, and extended cultural (and religious) community.

**Challenges of Culturally Relevant Teaching**

As previously mentioned, Wlodkowski & Ginsberg (1995) assert that no one strategy will consistently engage all learners. Young (2010) conducted research as a grassroots attempt to work with administrators and teachers at an urban school to define, implement, and assess culturally relevant pedagogy.
The data collection included pre- and post-inquiry group interviews, meetings with the principal and the principal intern, classroom observation, participants’ reflections, district’s documents, online discussions, and the researcher journal.

The findings addressed differences in the teachers’ and district’s interpretation of culturally relevant pedagogy; developing a shared understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy; and applying culturally relevant pedagogy to lesson planning. Some teachers do not feel that culturally relevant teaching related to their content areas and others felt that it was too time-consuming given their expectations to get students to grade level. According to Morrison et al. (2008), culturally relevant teaching “ultimately clashes with the traditional ways in which education is carried out in our society” (as cited by Young, 2010, p. 257). The study stressed the importance of educators’ race consciousness, addressing the systemic roots of racism in school policies and practices, and how to adequately equip teachers.

**Critical Race Theory**

According to Ladson-Billings (1998), critical race theory originated in the 1970’s from the legal scholarship and the role of property rights in understanding citizenship. It is supported by the concept that racism is normal in American society and requires critique of educational reform movements. Ladson-Billings referred to the school and civil rights legislation that led to desegregation as well as the move toward affirmative action and the creation of “protected classes” for marginalized groups. Ladson-Billings (1998) examined how critical race theory critiques curriculum, instruction, assessment, school funding, and desegregation.
Curriculum should be rigorous and emphasize critical thinking, reasoning, and logic (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Teachers should be held accountable for effective instruction rather than adopting a traditional set of skills that should work for all students. “When these strategies or skills fail to achieve desired results, the students, not the techniques are found to be lacking” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 19).

Traditional assessment measures and teaching to the test do not tell us what students know or are able to do. School funding based on property taxes is a form of structural racism that perpetuates cycles of low educational achievement, underemployment and unemployment, and standard housing. Desegregation was implemented with good intentions, but critics suggest that “rather than serving as a solution to social inequity, school desegregation has been promoted only in ways that advantage Whites” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 21). This is a problematic approach that perpetuates the marginalization children who are already marginalized in other ways such as disproportionate school funding, lack of access to highly-experienced teachers, and low expectations for academic achievement.

Ladson-Billings cautioned about the limitations of adopting cooperative learning with inadequate implementation; the shortcomings of ‘celebrations of diversity’ and the tendency to generate scholarly research that fails to elicit meaningful change for students of color. Critical race theory critiques curriculum, instruction, assessment, school funding, and desegregation with a social justice lens that also applies to grieving and marginalized learners.
Poorly designed traditional assessment practices and disproportionate allocation of resources, wealth, and access to experienced teachers should be under the microscope rather than making claims that students are the problem. Grieving, marginalized, and traumatized children face additional inequities when their educational settings fail to recognize tragic experiences that interfere with a student’s ability to thrive academically.

**Recommendations for Teacher Preparation**

Gay (2002) asserted the “importance of improving the school success of ethnically diverse students through culturally relevant teaching” (p. 106) based on research findings, theoretical claims, and personal stories of educators who worked with underachieving students from ethnically diverse backgrounds. Gay (2002) offered five elements of culturally relevant teaching:

- developing a cultural diversity knowledge base about cultural diversity
- designing culturally relevant curricula
- demonstrating cultural caring and building a learning community
- cross-cultural communications; and
- cultural congruity in classroom instruction

Teachers who are willing to practice personal reflection, call out social and structural injustice, and use examples of inequities in their curriculum demonstrate an exceptional ability to transform theory to practice.

**Trauma-Informed Teaching**

Many grieving and marginalized learners also experience childhood trauma. Crosby (2015) examined the ecological perspective as it relates to trauma and Blitz and
Anderson (2016) conducted a study about school personnel’s perceptions about race, trauma, and the stressors their students face. The significance of their study as it relates to grieving and marginalized learners is the recognition that grieving and marginalized learners are likely to experience trauma, be subjected to the teacher’s lack of understanding racial difference, and negative views of family from teachers.

Crosby (2015) discussed the adverse effects on students who experienced childhood trauma and referenced the ecological theory as an important framework for assisting students by using trauma-informed educational practices at these levels: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) ecological theory views human development and behavior as the product of various interacting systems.

At the microsystem level, trauma-informed educational practices suggest “that all school staff maintain settings in which they as well as their students are calm, relaxed, and focused in preparation to learn” (p. 225). Students are at a greater risk, particularly if they come from disadvantaged communities. An example is that a grieving or traumatized student may find it difficult to be calm, relaxed, or focused. Perhaps the student struggles with self-regulation due to anger, sadness, fear, or uncertainty. These emotions interfere with readiness to learn and could possibly be met with disciplinary action which also interferes with academic success. Some of the consequences include potential loss of instructional time, punitive action from administrators, and strained relationships with teachers and other support professionals in the school community.
At the mesosystem level, there are relationships and interactions between multiple microsystems such as parent-teacher conference. Teachers and support staff can demonstrate appropriate boundaries and social skills to advocate for positive interaction in student-peer relationships (p. 226). At the exosystem level, “practices, policies, and procedures that indirectly affect students through the school climate are instrumental in influencing educational outcomes” (p. 226).

The macrosystem is the greater cultural context of the previously mentioned systems and includes the influence of legislative policy and cultural perceptions. This is where activism and advocacy provides a platform so “teachers can eliminate stereotyping to reduce cultural biases and assumptions (p. 227). Crosby concluded that helping traumatized students requires a departure from the status quo. (p. 228).

Blitz and Anderson (2016) researched school personnel’s perceptions about race, trauma, and the stressors their students face. As a result of exposure to abuse, loss, and violence, children who live in poverty may be more reactive to stressors and less likely to possess behavioral and emotional regulation skills.

The experiences just mentioned, and others, are recognized as adverse child and family experiences (ACEs). According to the Data Resource Center for Child & Adolescent Health (2013), adverse childhood experiences can have profound effects on the lifelong health of adults. There are associations between the number of ACEs and the context of a child’s circumstances. For example, there are correlations between children who miss school or repeat a grade and their level of resilience.
Blitz and Anderson (2016) used a community-based participatory paradigm and collected data through questionnaires and unstructured interviews. The interviews were highly emotionally changed, resulting in tears, anger, frustration, and defensiveness.

“Understanding the role of race in teaching and learning is important since teachers who do not fully understand racial difference may be less effective in their implementation of effective strategies” (Blitz & Anderson, 2010, p. 539).

This is reinforced in the previous section on recommendations for teacher preparation. The failure to recognize the importance of this knowledge in theory, or lack of willingness to apply to practice in the classroom or school community will result in significant missed opportunities for student achievement which likely contributes to the achievement gap.

The authors found that teachers had a “color-blind” response and did not discuss their awareness of racial or class identities. They did not recognize the race or class differences of the students or their families. The teachers appeared to be caring and compassionate but had negative reactions to a workshop on culturally responsive pedagogy.

This behavior serves as erasure or minimization of students of color and exemplifies the lack of culturally relevant teaching or race consciousness. This is a significant concern because there are a disproportionate amount of white teachers in relation to the number of students of color or students who are from low socio-economic backgrounds.
“Understanding families through a trauma-informed lens may help school personnel move more easily beyond feelings of frustration” (Blitz and Anderson, p. 539). These authors recognized family engagement as a factor for high achieving schools and cultural responsiveness (Blitz & Anderson, 2010).

Some examples of effective family engagement strategies include getting to know the community where students are from, doing home visits, and calling home when you “catch a student who is succeeding” so family engagement originates in a positive manner. Effectively, it is meeting people where they are at or being willing to accommodate them for the sake of establishing strong connections between the triad of student, parent or caregiver, and teacher. These have all been suggested by colleagues (many who are teachers of color) who are dedicated to teaching urban learners.

The study found that the school personnel had negative perceptions of the students’ family life, assumptions of poor parenting, and little meaningful regular contact with students. When teachers and school administrators do not have the personal experience of their students and make no attempt to understand the background of their students, they and their students and families are missing important opportunities to effectively connect which can have adverse effects on student achievement potential.

Further, “it is important to consider that families living with poverty and high exposure to adversity may also be living with historical and intergenerational traumas” (Blitz & Anderson, 2010, p. 539). The authors found that “School personnel reported feeling ill-equipped to respond to the enormity of problems in students’ lives” (p. 538) and a need for more effective classroom management.
Learning

Urban Learners

In the section about urban learners I will begin with a definition of urban learners and will also share the urban learner framework. I will also review topics commonly associated with urban learners: student achievement, student motivation, poverty, and parental engagement. I will conclude the section with characteristics of a good urban teacher. In the section about grieving learners I will begin by introducing children’s grief, terminology and the tasks of mourning. I will then explain how children understand death and dying, describe how children grieve in different ways, and provide recommendations for supporting grieving children.

Urban Learner Definition

According to Martin, (1975) the urban learner is described as “a student being an active participant in an urban educational and learning environment. The urban learner includes such racial minorities as Native Americans, African Americans, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and a substantial number of poor Whites” (as cited in Kidd, 2009, p. 245).

Urban learners are frequently characterized by these labels: poor academic achievement, behavior problems, low teacher satisfaction, struggles with budget, lack of parental involvement, and lack of motivation (Szente, 2006). Research suggests that students in low-income urban schools face many barriers related to poverty, limited English proficiency, family instability, and poor health (Lippman, 1996).
Darling-Hammond (2010) identified five factors that create the major building blocks of unequal and inadequate educational outcomes in the United States:

- The high level of poverty and the low levels of social supports for low-income children’s health and welfare, including their early learning opportunities.
- The unequal allocation of school resources, which is made politically easier by the increasing re-segregation of schools
- Inadequate systems for providing high-quality teachers and teaching to all children in all communities
- Rationing of high-quality curriculum through tracking and interschool disparities
- Factory-model school designs that have created dysfunctional learning environments for students and unsupportive settings for strong teaching (p.96).

In other words, urban learners are often summarized by characteristics related to their location, academic achievement, and inequitable conditions. These deficit-oriented and biased factors fail to recognize the structural inequalities that contribute to the educational outcomes of urban learners.

An urban learner who is also grieving is vulnerable to the possibility of experiencing a *multiple jeopardy* in their academic achievement and personal well-being if culturally relevant teaching is not practiced. The term multiple jeopardy is a concept that describes a situation when an individual is oppressed by more than one identify that is accompanied by disadvantages or oppression. Examples of culturally relevant teaching include the teacher or educational professional interacting in meaningful and caring ways while maintaining high expectations of the student. Also of importance is for the teacher
or social worker to be engaged with the family or caregivers in a respectful way that
demonstrates cultural competence and religious sensitivity.

**Urban Learner Framework**

Research for Better Schools (1994) provided evidence that “all children can
learn” and “more of the same” (tracking, mediation, increased budgets) is not the answer
(p.77). The urban learner framework developed by Williams and Newcombe (1994)
presented a positive characterization of urban learners guided by these assumptions:
culture and cognitive development are interrelated; education must foster the full
potential of every urban learner by appreciating group membership and diversity; all
educational systems must value and care for the learner and the community; and all
individuals are both learners and facilitators of learning.

The framework proposed by Williams and Newcombe (1994) focused on four
themes:

- Urban students bring schools cultural strengths and learning experiences that must
  be reflected in curriculum, instruction, and school routine
- Culture plays a fundamental role in cognitive development
- Motivation and effort are as important to learning as are innate abilities
- Resilience is a characteristic of urban learners (p. 77)

The framework provided themes for urban educators so they can conduct needs
assessments and prioritize strategies in the areas of curriculum, instruction, assessment,
staff development, school environment, and management.
Student Achievement

Mayes and Moore (2000) conducted research on twice-exceptional urban learners. The purpose of their study was to examine how twice-exceptional African American students and their families make sense of intersecting social and identities. Their research found that there are 360,000 students in the United States with a disability who are also gifted and talented. In many cases, there are difficulties with identifying twice exceptional services because students may receive services for their disability without having their gifts recognized through gifted programming. Additionally, some twice-exceptional students experience masking, where neither exceptionality is recognized because they are meeting grade level expectations.

Mayes and Moore (2000) found that the experience of disability is different from giftedness. To be gifted was seen as an asset and students developed positive identities and perceptions. Students identified their special needs as being isolating; they felt segregated, low, and stupid. Twice-exceptional learners worried about school and the future, had a resolve to overcome special needs, celebrated their giftedness, reflected on their personal experience of race, and challenged peer relationships. Some of the challenges that were identified include: unsupportive educators and school environments, limited experiences with counselors, and the desire for support around their special needs (Mayes & Moore, 2000).

Twice-exceptional urban learners are praised for their giftedness yet they feel isolated for their special needs. The challenge is that there are disproportionate numbers of students of color who are tracked for special education and student discipline.
According to the Think Progress website, race is not the only factor that contributes to high rates of student discipline. “Students with disabilities who are served by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act were twice as likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions, and 67 percent of them underwent restraint and seclusion” (2017).

**Student Motivation**

Few studies have directly examined teacher perceptions of culturally informed achievement behaviors of African American children. Tyler, Wade Boykin, and Walton (2006) investigated whether or not “teachers perceive that achievement behaviors linked to certain cultural forms would be more advantageous in their classrooms in comparison to those linked to other cultural forms” (p. 998).

Their findings indicated that teachers perceived a higher level of achievement for the individualistic student and their instructional practices were favored mainstream cultural themes about competition and individualism. Another significant finding is that teachers’ expectations of students were lowered when factors such as race, gender, and socioeconomic background were considered. This research is related to my project because it investigated teacher perceptions on student motivation, which has a correlation to student achievement.

**Poverty**

Student achievement and student motivation are not the only factors that are associated with urban learners. Poverty is another widely recognized characteristic. Ladson-Billings (2006) made the analogy about national debt and the national budget
deficit as a comparison to the education debt and sought to understand the persistent inequality that exists and moves us toward short term solutions without addressing the long-term underlying problem. Ladson-Billings made the case that “the historical, economic, sociopolitical and moral decisions and policies that characterize our society have created an education debt” (p. 5).

The reasons for why we must address the debt include: the impact of the debt on present education process, the value of understanding the debt in relation to past research findings, and the potential for forging a better educational future. The debt serves as a reminder of the cumulative effect of poor education, poor housing, and poor health care that leaves children behind.

Gorksi (2008) believed that educators need to challenge the myths associated with the culture of poverty. These myths include the belief that poor students lack motivation, the belief that poor parents do not value education, the belief that students are linguistically deficient, and the belief that poor people tend to abuse drugs and alcohol. In addition, the author asserted that educators should develop a deeper understanding of culture and poverty and dismiss deficit thinking which leads to low expectations for their students.

Finally, the following recommendations were presented: Eliminate classist practices that attempt to fix poor students which include tracking, ability grouping, segregational redistricting, and privatization of public schools, and higher ordered pedagogies, innovative learning materials, and holistic teaching and learning.
Parental Engagement

Lack of parental involvement is often cited by teachers as a lack of investment in their children’s education (Gorski, 2008). This deficit model fails to recognize the many reasons why parents may not be present in their children’s classrooms. Barton, Drake, Perez, Louis, and George (2004) concluded that “parental engagement is a desire, an expression, and an attempt by parents to have an impact on what actually transpires around their children in schools and on the kinds of human, social and material resources that are valued within schools” (p. 11). Barton et al. conducted research to examine the ecologies of parental engagement in urban education. One of their findings was that neither the researchers nor the participants had a common understanding of parental involvement.

Barton et al. (2004) offered a new way to conceptualize parental involvement that frames parents as both authors and agents in schools and also offered Ecologies of Parental Engagement (EPE), a framework to understand what parents engage in and how they do so. The researchers found that there were greater engagements in academic spaces such as literacy and math, because they received greater instructional priority. Parents received less information on other topics such as science and had less access to activate their involvement in classrooms (Barton, Drake, Perez, Louis, & George, 2004).

In other words, there are inconsistent understandings about how parental engagement is defined and the Ecologies of Parental Engagement allow for some parents to be more involved than others.
Characteristics of an Effective Urban Teacher

In addition to academic research and action research, it is important to gather research from students who are urban learners. Corbett and Wilson (2002) conducted research that consisted of interviews with 400 students who attended low-income middle schools in Philadelphia. The results of this research suggested the importance of making sure students know that teachers care. It also revealed the following statements that students consistently said about their teachers:

- “Made sure that students did their work and controlled the classroom.
- Willing to help students whenever and however the students wanted their help.
- Explained assignments and content clearly.
- Varied the classroom routine.
- Took the time to get to know the students and their circumstances” (p.18).

Teachers can strengthen relationships with students and families if they are willing to show that they care about their students by getting to know their students (Corbett & Wilson, 2002) and engaging with parents. They should utilize strengths based strategies from constructivist theories rather than deficit models. They should appreciate students’ prior knowledge (Williams & Newcombe, 1994) as well as the knowledge of their community and maintain high expectations of their students.

Teachers should also collaborate with school administrators, social workers, and paraprofessionals to exchange strategies, best practices, and professional development that address the unique needs of grieving children as well as children who experience trauma, violence, and other significant life transitions (Williams & Newcombe, 1994).
Grieving Learners

When children experience the death of someone significant, their life as they knew it, will never be the same. In this section I will share statistics about grieving children and provide a foundation on children’s grief, terminology, and the tasks of mourning. I will also explain how children understand death and dying, describe how children grieve in different ways, and provide recommendations for supporting grieving children.

Children’s Grief and Terminology

“One out of every 20 children aged fifteen and younger will suffer the loss of one or both parents. These statistics do not account for the number of children who lose a “parental figure,” such as a grandparent or other relative that provides care” (Owens, 2008). Torbic (2011) estimated that 73,000 children die every year in the United States. Of those children, 83% have surviving siblings. Harrison and Harrington (2001) reported that in a study of 11- to 16-year-olds, 78% reported that at least one of their close relatives or friends had died.

Children might experience the death of a parent, sibling, grandparent, close friend, or even a family pet. A subset of children also will be impacted by additional complexities in the home, community, and country of origin. All schools will be affected by bereavement at some point. Statistics about the number of grieving children vary. According to the Child Bereavement Network, no one knows exactly how many children are bereaved each year.
Statistics indicate a high prevalence in the number of grieving children and it is important for educators and social workers to be well-informed about children’s understanding of death and dying, how children grieve in different ways at various ages and developmental stages, and how to support grieving children. This knowledge will be useful in preparing for deaths that are anticipated as well as responding to deaths that were unexpected.

Riely (2003) defined three important terms: grief, bereavement, and mourning. Grief is defined as “the total response to the emotional experience of loss through death of a significant person manifested in the psychological, social, and somatic reactions of children” (p. 212). Bereavement is “the state of suffering a loss through death causing subjective responses experienced by children after the death of a significant person” (Riely, 2003, p. 212). Mourning is “the behavioral process through which grief is eventually resolved or altered and is influenced by cultural response and spiritual beliefs” (as cited in Rando, 1993, p. 8). These terms are important because they refer to different experiences but are not always used in the correct context. In summary, grief is a response to an emotional experience, bereavement is a state of suffering, and mourning is a behavioral process.

Tasks of Mourning

Riely (2003) referenced the four tasks of mourning that were originally identified by Worden (1996), making note that children can accomplish these tasks in any order and may need to revisit tasks of mourning during the grieving process.
Accept the reality of the loss.

Experience the pain and emotional aspects of the loss.

Adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing.

Relocate the deceased person within one’s life, find ways to memorialize

Theologian Herbert Anderson’s article “Common Grief, Complex Grieving” (2009) has a similar approach for a family’s legacy of loss and response to loss. According to the article, “the tasks of grieving are difficult for individuals: they are even more complicated when the family is the mourner” (p. 131) or in instances of collective grief.

- The family must acknowledge the reality of the loss
- The family needs to share the pain of loss in order to build a common memory
- The family must begin reorganizing itself taking into account the reality of loss
- The restoration of meaning for a family will begin when it is free to hope again

In other words, individuals experience the four tasks of mourning and families undergo a similar experience as noted in Anderson’s response to loss. The tasks of mourning are an alternative to the “Five Stages of Grief” offered by Kubler-Ross (1969), who is best known for her book, On Death and Dying.

The stages are sometimes referred to by their acronym, DABDA. Kubler-Ross asserted that the stages grieving people experienced were denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. There are some social scientists who have challenged the five stages of grief. The criticism is that the model is oversimplified, lacks empirical evidence, there are alternative models (Stroebe et al. 2017).
How Children Understand Death and Dying

Children’s understanding of death and dying is different from adults. Willis (2002) stated that children of all ages need time and understanding to process the concept of death and dying which includes four components: the irreversibility factor, finality, inevitability, and causality. Crawford (2011) stated that grief is an individual experience and children do not grieve like mini adults. Unlike adults, children have a different understanding of time and at younger ages, lack anticipation.

Additionally, “with each new stage of development, the child may recycle, and in some ways revisit previous feelings and behaviors associated with the death” (McLaughlin, 1990, as cited by Willis, 2002, p. 222). “Age and developmental stage may affect the nature of children's emotional response to death, understanding of death, and ability to deal with death” (Quinn-Lee, 2014, p. 94). Theorists break down levels of understanding at various ages. For example, Bush and Kimble (2001) described specific age ranges and characteristics of understanding. Preschool children (ages two-six) view death as reversible and temporary. Children may engage in “magical thinking” and believe the dead person can be brought back to life.

Early elementary children (ages six-nine) understand that death is permanent. It is still important to use accurate vocabulary to reinforce this such as “died and dead” rather than phrases such as “we lost grandma” or “grandpa went on to a better place” which can be confusing. In addition, this language might be difficult for English language learners to comprehend. Grown ups soften the language with good intentions. However, these statements can be inaccurate and using these words can be a source of confusion.
Middle school children (ages nine-twelve) have a more sophisticated understanding of death but will have a greater desire for concrete specifics about how and why the death occurred. It is important to share facts accurately and connect students to medical professionals to explain the circumstances using age-appropriate vocabulary.

In summary, children have a different understanding of death than adults. The research illuminates how children comprehend death at different ages. This is significant because teachers and social workers should be familiar with these benchmarks in order to make age-appropriate assessments, interventions, or referrals for additional support. In addition, knowing how children understand death and dying, it is also important to know how children grieve.

**How Children Grieve in Different Ways**

Children grieve differently than adults. Their grief is experienced in small bursts. Hello Grief (2017) offers some of the behavioral aspects that children might experience on their webpage: separation anxiety, leaving parents, regression, impatience, withdrawal, inattentive, and protective. In addition to understanding how children grieve in different ways from a behavioral perspective, it is also critical to recognize cultural considerations.

According to Baggerly and Abugideiri (2010), research of grief counseling of Muslim preschool and elementary students, children often make sense of what they are experiencing through play. “Play therapy helps children process their thoughts and feelings concerning death, aids in resolving symptoms, builds resilience, and resumes the typical developmental process” (p. 120). They might re-enact experiences such as when the person died at the hospital or when they attended the funeral or burial.
Their recollection might not be entirely accurate but it is best to reaffirm the accurate part of their statements and overlook the inaccuracies rather than admonishing them or allowing them to believe things that are untrue. The authors recommend that counselors affirm religious beliefs that arise during play therapy with Muslim children.

“Muslim children are a growing population and a valuable and unique part of American communities. They need religiously sensitive counseling interventions during times of bereavement” (Baggerly & Abugideiri, 2010 p. 120). The authors described religious beliefs on the Islamic view of death and provided a cultural overview that includes mourning rituals, burial rituals, and accepted healing practices. They also addressed grief counseling interventions with children that include teacher and parent consultation, discussing death with Muslim children, group counseling, and play therapy.

This research was conducted as a case study and aligns with the research question, How can reflective teachers support marginalized grieving children? because it also recognizes a growing population that needs culturally competent counselors for grieving children (or teachers who are willing to use culturally responsive teaching). They encourage a collaborative community involvement that intentionally appreciates and values the traditions of an ethnically diverse culture. According to Baggerly and Abugideiri (2010), “Counselors need to promote social justice through equity in resources and services for marginalized groups who do not share equal power in society because of issues such as religious heritage” (p. 112).
Supporting Grieving Children

Children in our society are referred to as the forgotten mourners (Wolfelt, 2004). “It is important for school staff to establish trust and rapport with grieving students and their families” (Quinn-Lee, 2014, p. 94). Dyregrov, Dyregrov, and Isdoe (2013) found “that around 70% of teachers to some extent agree that grieving students are overlooked in school” (p. 127) Corr and Corr (1998) identified four tasks to support grieving children: understanding, grieving, commemoration, and going on.

Parent or adult caregivers who shield children from the death experience contribute to the problem (Riley, 2003). “To aid a grieving child or adolescent in understanding a death, helpers can provide prompt, accurate, and reliable information” (Corr & Corr, 1998, p. 152). Children are often excluded from discussions of death because parent or adult caregivers believe it is “too much” for them (Riely, 2003). “For a bereaved child or adolescent to be able to express emotions of grief, most often what is needed is the company of a caring person who can acknowledge the expression and validate the appropriateness of the feelings” (Corr & Corr, 1998, p. 154).

Rieley (2003) identified several therapeutic interventions to support grieving children that include: normative information, personal story sharing, question answering, play, art therapy, reminiscence, bibliotherapy, memory books, music therapy, journal writing, and letter writing. These activities have value in supporting students in meaningful and culturally encouraging ways because the activities are personalized for the student, and encourage appreciation in each individual.
“Grieving children and adolescents can often suggest ways in which they might wish to commemorate a death. Adults should listen to such suggestions and permit great latitude in ways in which this task is carried out” (Corr & Corr, 1998, p. 154). Brooten and Youngblut (2016) addressed keepsakes and triggers, “Children talked about keeping the deceased’s clothing, toys, ashes in a charm or necklace, and diaries. Several children slept in the deceased’s bed where they felt close to him/her” (p. 1118).

“Grieving children and adolescents may need permission to go on with life once again” (Corr & Corr, 1998, p. 155). “By 13 months, life had improved for most children as they resumed pre-death activities, interacted more with family and friends, and improved their grades” (Brooten & Youngblut, 2016 p. 1122).

**Healing**

Activities centered around healing can be a source of comfort for grieving or marginalized children and contribute toward resolving the loss of a loved one or toward healing from conflict or other traumatic experience. Healing circles have a deep historical tradition originating from the American Indian and indigenous people. Restorative justice circles are another practice that can be used to initiate healing with grieving children or marginalized learners. Morning meetings are another source for building community and instilling a sense of respect and compassion for the students within the classroom and throughout the school community.
Healing Circles

Healing circles, “talking circles” and “sacred circles” are an ancient form of meeting that gather human beings into respectful conversation for thousands of years. According to the YWCA Minneapolis, a circle is a modern methodology that calls on this tradition and helps people gather in conversations that fulfill their potential for dialogue, replenishment, and wisdom-based change.

Circles have been adapted and can be used effectively in other situations for a variety of different groups, issues, and timelines. According to Lee (1992), “the purpose of talking circles is to create a safe environment for people to share their point of view and experiences with others. This process helps people gain a sense of trust in each other.” With permission from the YWCA Minneapolis, I am explaining the sacred process that was gifted to the organization from the Lakota tribe. This information is also shared in the professional development plan, Appendix C. The principles of circle are to rotate leadership, take responsibility, and listen intently. The practices of the circle are to speak with intention, listen with attention, and tend to the well-being of the group. An essential step to initiating a circle is to establish guidelines:

- Listen without judgement
- Whatever is said in circle stays in circle (modify for mandated reporters)
- Offer what you can and ask for what you need
- Silence is also part of the conversation
- An agreement to share roles in the group and have a moderator to make sure the conversation stays open and honored
The facilitator shares these guidelines and might invite the group to add additional guidelines. The facilitator asks if everyone in the group can respect the guidelines.

Many facilitators will use a “talking stick” to signify who is talking. Sometimes they design and decorate this object with their own fabrics or textiles. Generally the talking stick is passed to the left, in symbolic recognition that our hearts are located on the left side of our bodies.

The facilitator(s) will have prompts to being the conversation. The first question might be fairly general to get things started such as sharing your name and another detail about yourself. The next prompt might be about a big picture ideal followed by a more local or personal topic. Once a level of trust has been established, there might be an invitation to share something of a more personal nature or perhaps discuss a conflict. They may continue passing left or they might open it up to whomever wants to speak and the talking stick would be given to that speaker. Most circles have some sort of closure that might focus on a hope or perhaps a call to action.

**Restorative Justice**

Restorative justice practices or restorative justice in education (RJE) offer another approach that can be used with marginalized and grieving learners. “Restorative justice practices allow schools to create individualized solutions that are manageable for the offending students to fulfill, allow victims to receive closure, and repair the harm caused by the misbehavior” (Watchel, 2001). This approach has the goal of peacemaking and empowerment. Researchers from WestEd Justice & Prevention Research Center published a report on restorative justice in schools and concluded that “RJ can help
address some major challenges schools face, such as disproportionality among discipline referrals and the zero-tolerance policies that contribute to a school-to-prison pipeline. In addition, the experts supported the need for further rigorous research in the field to determine the full impact of restorative justice in schools” (Guckenber et al 2015).

**Andragogy**

The importance of including this topic relates to the professional development plan that will be introduced in the next chapter. In this section I will introduce Knowles’ assumptions about adult learners. I will then share Knowles’ principles for adult learning. Finally, I will share the policies that support professional development.

Andragogy, or the art of adult learning, is an approach that is focused on helping adult learners. Pedagogy, on the other hand, is the term used to explain the focus on educating children. Malcolm Knowles is best known for his contributions in the 1970’s to the study of andragogy in English-speaking parts of the world. However, Knowles was not the first to address this arena of study and his approach has been challenged by European academics (Loeng, 2018).

Knowles defined andragogy as “the art and science of helping adults learn” (Loeng, 2018) and employed assumptions about the characteristics of adult learners resulting in recommendations for planning, directing, and evaluating adults’ learning. These are the original four assumptions. Interestingly, Knowles added a fifth assumption in 1984, “as a person matures, the motivation to learn is internal”.
● their self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality towards being a self-directed human being
● they accumulate a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasingly rich resource for learning
● their readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly towards the developmental tasks of their social roles
● their time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and, accordingly

their orientation towards learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of performance-centeredness (Loeng, 2018).

In 1984, Knowles introduced four principles for adult learning:

● Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction
● Experience (including mistakes) provides the basis for learning activities
● Adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance and impact to their job or personal life
● Adult learning is problem-centered rather than content oriented (Pappas, 2013).

These principles are essential to consider when developing the professional development plan. Taking these principles into account helps ensure that training is meaningful and relevant for the intended audience. A well-designed training is important yet barriers may still exist. Policies that support professional development in the era of reform include the need for systems to be in place.
Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) assert that systems need to be in place to allow teachers to collaborate. Also, there should be strategies for planning, sharing, learning, and evaluating. Finally, there should be opportunities for teachers to connect new concepts and strategies to their own unique concepts.

**Chapter Summary**

Chapter two reviewed current research to help answer the question: *How can reflective teachers support marginalized grieving children?* This chapter explored subtopics within the themes of teaching, learning, and healing.

The first section of this chapter acknowledged equitable teaching. I began by providing a definition and framework for culturally relevant teaching. I also mentioned some of the challenges to culturally relevant teaching. Next, I examined the concept of critical race theory including references to publications that draw from student perspectives and recommendations for teacher preparation. I concluded the section by exploring trauma informed teaching.

The next section of this chapter addressed types of learners, particularly marginalized learners. Urban and grieving learners were the primary focus for this literature review. However, it is important to recognize that there are other learners who are also marginalized. In the section about urban learners I began with a definition of urban learners and also shared the urban learner framework. I also reviewed topics commonly associated with urban learners: student achievement, student motivation, poverty, and parental engagement. I concluded the section with characteristics of a good urban teacher.
In the section about grieving learners I began by introducing children’s grief, terminology and the tasks of mourning. I then explained how children understand death and dying, described how children grieve in different ways, and provided recommendations for supporting grieving children.

The next section of this chapter was about healing circles and restorative justice. I began by introducing children’s grief, terminology and the tasks of mourning. I explained how children understand death and dying, described how children grieve in different ways, and provided recommendations for supporting grieving children. Next, I described healing circles including the origins, principles, and guidelines to establishing healing circles. I also explored restorative justice practice.

I conclude the chapter with andragogy, or the study of adult learning. I introduced assumptions about adult learners, shared principles for adult learning, and offered policies that support professional development. In the next chapter I will outline the project description, which is a professional development plan aimed to inform educators who are working with grieving learners and their families in culturally relevant ways.
CHAPTER THREE: PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Introduction

In the previous chapters I shared my personal and professional experiences associated with my research question, *How can reflective teachers support marginalized grieving children?* I reflected on how my own family was impacted by my grandfather’s death and how there were limited resources available at that time. I shared my journey through volunteering for two different non-profit organizations that serve grieving children and their families. I introduced my concerns about the lack of cultural diversity represented in the attendees as well as the volunteers and also identified concerns with regard to inclusivity. I highlighted the progress and some of the promising practices that have been implemented by both organizations.

My professional experience includes reflecting on my lack of knowledge in responding to the death of a former student who was Hmong and her family who practiced Shamanism. I also reviewed some relevant work-related experiences including work with Urban Education Summer Scholars (UESS), a scholarship program for pre-service teachers designed to recruit and retain teachers of color. This was an introduction to my knowledge of the importance of culturally relevant teaching. I mentioned my participation in the Coalition to Increase Teachers of Color and American Indian teachers in MN (TOCAIMN) which relates to marginalized learners and communities; and involvement with facilitator training for healing circles in association with the YWCA Minneapolis and Hamline University’s Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation (TRHT) center.
In the second chapter I reviewed literature and examined the subtopics within the themes of teaching, learning, and healing. The objective of this chapter is to inform the reader of the project I produced to accompany and support my research. First, I will describe the project and discuss the rationale. I will then provide details about the audience and timeline. Finally, I will provide an outline of the project design.

**Description of the Project**

The project incorporated a series of professional development modules presented in a “train the trainer” format. This project was designed to address the lack of knowledge and preparation adult leaders have to effectively meet the needs of grieving children, particularly students who come from marginalized communities. “Children are often considered the forgotten grievers” (Wolfelt, 1991). It is important for teachers, counselors, and other school officials to have adequate training to work with grieving children and their families (Quinn-Lee, 2014). It is also important that teachers have the training, skills, and commitment to work with children and their families in ways that are culturally sensitive (Gay, 2002).

According to the National Alliance for Grieving Children webpage, “childhood grief remains one of society’s most overlooked and least understood issues” (2017). Children are sometimes expected to deal with “disenfranchised grief” which Kupferman (2018) describes on her webpage as: “When your heart is grieving but you can't talk about or share your pain with others because it is considered unacceptable to others.” Professionals will be provided with training to help create spaces for grieving children so they do not have the experience what was just described.
Rationale for the Project

Prior to deciding to design “train the trainer” professional development, I had planned on completing research through the thesis option. However, after encountering some complications with the original research methods that included parent engagement, I decided I could more effectively aid students by bringing tools to their teachers and school administrators. Overall, this model should result in a greater number of caring and culturally competent professionals who are trained to facilitate healing circles.

Another reason for designing professional development is in response to resource availability. While conducting the literature review, it was fairly simple to locate information on the individual themes of culturally relevant teaching, grieving children, and topics related to marginalized communities. However, when these topics intersect, it becomes more difficult to find published information.

Available literature on this topic suggests that children have a better chance of completing the tasks of grieving if they are exposed to teachers and counselors who are empathetic and knowledgeable about children’s grief (Quinn-Lee, 2014) and are willing to use a culturally sensitive approach (Baggerly & Abugideiri, 2010).

For the purpose of this capstone project I focused on the Hmong and Somali cultures because they are the largest immigrant communities in the Twin Cities. Both populations departed from their ancestral roots because of conflict and war and settled in the Twin Cities and midwest because volunteer organizations were available to help. I recognize that there are indigenous individuals and more recent immigrant and refugee arrivals. However, they are not the primary audience for this project.
Hmong people first came to Minnesota in 1975 as refugees. The Twin Cities now has the largest urban concentration of Hmong in the United States. Similarly, the Somali population started emigrating to the Twin Cities in voluntarily the 1980’s and as the result of the civil war in the 1990’s. According to 2010 American Community Survey data, there are approximately 85,700 Somalis in the United States, around 25,000 of whom live in Minnesota.

Through informal conversations with professional colleagues from Hmong and Somali communities, I was able to gain a better understanding about the historical context and cultural and religious traditions that students and their families may practice. As a result of these discussions, I prepared documents outlining engagement essentials as part of the professional development plan. I am not from either of these cultures so my prior knowledge is somewhat limited. It is important to note that what I compiled is not necessarily representative of all people from Hmong or Somali communities. These documents are intended to be informative, but not comprehensive. Additionally, attitudes could shift over time so the practices and attitudes of future generations may evolve.

I learned that the Somali and Muslim cultures place significant emphasis on the teacher or other professionals who have a presence in the classroom. A teacher is viewed as a “second parent” and a source of healing. It is important for teachers to be approachable and culturally competent or familiar with the student’s cultural and religious traditions. It is also important to be a good listener and to encourage a student to share on his or her own terms as well as to honor wishes for privacy and confidentiality.
Through various conversations with Hmong-identified individuals, I learned about Hmong attitudes toward health - illness is viewed as a sign of weakness. Therefore, if there is a cultural aversion to working with doctors, counselors, and social workers then it is less likely that grieving children from Hmong and Somali cultures would access some of the traditional sources of grief support because it is not culturally encouraged.

I learned that Hmong funerals are generally from Shaman or Christian tradition. It is not uncommon for Shaman ceremonies to last 24 hours over a three-day period from Friday to Sunday. This can be exhausting and overwhelming for younger children who may not understand everything that is going on around them. Some traditional practices that might be surprising for non-Shaman attendees are the consumption of alcoholic beverages and the butchering of animals. Christian funerals are generally planned and organized by the congregation whereas Shaman funerals require extensive family involvement from food preparation to other arrangements related to the ceremony.

**Audience for the Project**

The project development location is in the Twin Cities metropolitan area, primarily St. Paul and Minneapolis which is comprised of a seven-county area. According to U.S. Census Bureau estimates, since 2010,

“the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan region has grown by about five percent, just over 175,000 people, thanks to a combination of a healthy ratio of births to deaths and a strong influx of immigrants. Those two things have kept the population growing, despite a net loss of residents to other areas of the state or the United States” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).
The audience for professional development can be variable based on topic, geographic location, and specific circumstances of the community. The primary audience for this project is K-12 educators which includes classroom teachers, paraprofessionals, and cultural liaisons. Other key participants could include school counselors and administrators as well as other school personnel who have direct interaction with children.

The training could also be useful for professionals who work in youth-serving organizations such as community based programs, faith communities, or other out-of-school settings. This group of trained individuals should be equipped to facilitate healing circles with grieving children. Additional themes for the project include training about grief and empathy, culturally specific grief support, intercultural communication, and personal reflection and wellness which are all related to the question, *How can reflective teachers support marginalized grieving children?*

It is important to note that the participants who are being trained to facilitate healing circles might also become “the audience” and this might happen in an unanticipated manner for participants. Sometimes statements that are shared in healing circles will trigger unexpected or unintended emotions and it is possible that they may evoke intense response. This is entirely natural and should be considered a part of the grieving process. It also illustrates an important message that we want to share with grieving children, that all feelings are acceptable. Being vulnerable and willing to model emotions for children is powerful and helps normalize the emotions they might also experience or witness in other family, friends, or caregivers.
Some of the grief-related reasons a participant could become the audience include grief in their personal lives that is recent, disenfranchised grief or compounded grief, or if unidentified grief from the past has not been resolved. These are instances where it is important for others to be supportive and to give the grieving person adequate time and space to process their emotions and experience the tasks of grieving.

Additionally, addressing intercultural communication issues might also create situations where participants become “the audience.” Situations might include passionate discussions related to racial inequality or enlightening personal reflection. Again, statements shared in the healing circle might trigger emotions that can be overwhelming and emotionally exhausting. It is important to be supportive and to provide adequate space to process, talk, or reflect on the incident.

For these reasons, modules addressing “self-care” or personal reflection and wellness were included. Wellness activities can be valuable for participants, particularly if they have just had triggering experiences. Wellness activities can also have significant effects for grieving learners and can help support self-regulation in a variety of situations.

**Timeline for the Project**

My timeline for developing the capstone project was February 2019 through May 2019. I shared my professional development plan with classmates and colleagues in early May. During the months and years following my project’s completion, I will continue to network with educators and youth-serving organizations with the goal of bringing greater visibility to my project. This could be accomplished by scheduling speaking engagements, arranging trainings, or presenting at future conferences.
In Spring 2019, I prepared training modules for healing circles, grief and empathy resources, intercultural communication, culturally specific grief resources, and personal reflection and wellness. Before creating these resources, not only did I research, but I participated in a training session offered by an initiative for Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation and also a Minneapolis based non-profit organization that is committed to eliminating racism and empowering women. I reached out to others in the Hmong and Somali communities and had informal conversations to gather information about traditions and best practices for dealing with grieving children in a culturally sensitive manner.

I implemented a pilot of the professional development in Spring 2019. I wanted to practice the activities on voluntary colleagues. The pilot program gave me an opportunity to test the modules as well as discover what worked and what needed to be adjusted. It also provided me with a better understanding of the testers’ reactions about what topics were valued and helpful and what topics were less valued or helpful than originally intended. This information was used to inform further tweaks and adjustments to help improve the quality of the professional development plan.

**Assessment of the Project**

The professional development plan starts with an assessment and rubric for the various types of training with regard to topic, level of engagement, and activity type. The topics are: healing circles, intercultural development, grief and empathy activities, and personal wellness and reflection.
The levels of engagement will vary based on personal experience, interest, and prior knowledge. The levels are introduction, developing/emerging, and reflective practitioner. At the introductory level, essential information is being shared and activities are designed for participants with minimal experience who want to learn more through observation or passive participation. Examples of introduction activities include observing a healing circle or learning culturally-specific details.

At the developing/emerging level, participants will engage in examination and reflection. Activities are designed for participants with some experience who have the desire to expand upon their knowledge by actively engaging in activities. Examples of developing/emerging activities include participating in a healing circle or perhaps co-facilitating a circle or writing a “Where I’m From” poem.

At the reflective practitioner level, participants are likely to lead activities and perhaps challenge or interrogate systems that perpetuate inequities. Activities are designed for participants who have achieved beyond the fundamentals and are positioned to train the trainer. Examples of reflective practitioner activities include facilitating a healing circle or completing the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI).

Each module has a pre-training assessment as well as a post-training evaluation that can be used by individuals. A separate version of assessment and evaluation was designed for organizational use. The assessment helps to identify the needs, goals, and expectations of each group and tailor activities and trainings with regard to objectives, and participant availability.
The evaluation helps to demonstrate the effectiveness of the training. Successful training is achieved if appropriate topics are selected, if adequate time is designated for each activity, and if participants have an opportunity to learn the techniques and engage in group discussion as well as personal reflection. The initial evaluations do not ask about the demographics of a school or the teachers, staff, or students. This information could be gathered informally as an additional form of assessment. Also, the context of the training as voluntary or mandatory is helpful as well as if the training is proactive if it is in response to a specific incident. These factors might influence the conversations or follow up reflection prompts used in training sessions.

If there are upward changes in the ratings (1-5) from the assessment to the evaluation, then there is quantitative evidence that the project is informative. The short answer feedback will provide an opportunity to gather qualitative feedback. Additionally, the “questions I still have” section will help identify areas where the training may need to be more specific or in-depth. Progress may vary and there is not necessarily a timeline for someone to get from one level of engagement to another. That will depend up the individual’s desire as well as the amount of personal reflection and willingness to make continuous improvement.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I introduced the project description which included the rationale, audience, timeline, and description of the project development. In the next chapter I will reflect on the project learnings, address limitations, recognize the impact, and consider next steps.
CHAPTER FOUR: Reflection

Introduction

In the previous chapters, I shared my personal and professional experiences associated with my research question, *How can reflective teachers use healing circles with marginalized grieving children?* In Chapter Two, I provided a literature review to explore research on the subtopics associated with teaching, learning, and healing.

In Chapter Three, I explained the project description. I also discussed the rationale, described the audience, and provided a timeline. The audience I selected comes from a social justice lens of equity and inclusion. While the project is designed to serve all participants, I have a particular interest in making sure it reaches those who are from marginalized and underrepresented communities, or under-served by traditional practices. Finally, I unpacked the project design that included a rubric to engage participants at different entry points from little experience to reflective practitioner and everything in between. I also touched upon indicators of growth through a pre-activity assessment and a post-activity evaluation designed for individuals or organizations.

In this chapter, I will reflect upon the project learning which has been inspiring, challenging, and transforming. I will also revisit the literature and summarize key findings related to the research question and project. Next, I will address project limitations and highlight project impact. I will discuss the potential for project expansion and complementary research topics that other scholars could explore. Finally, I will also reflect upon the next steps for my personal and professional journey.
Project Learning - Inspiring, Challenging, Transforming

The Hamline University School of Education conceptual framework is comprised of four themes: promote equity in schools and society, build communities of teachers and learners, construct knowledge, and practice thoughtful inquiry and reflection. The graduate courses, assignments, and capstone have collectively given me the chance to explore all of these areas in meaningful ways that have been inspiring, challenging, and transforming.

My project has evolved from an idea in my mind, to a working document, to a publication supported by research and artifacts. I have been given the unique opportunity for deeper learning through thoughtful inquiry, extensive research, and project design. It is highly unlikely that I would have independently taken it upon myself to explore the research in such depth. My classmates and instructors have been a source of inspiration. I have been enriched by the assignments, reading, and discussion posts, particularly the conversations related to social justice, equity, and inclusion. I am also inspired by the experiences that have contributed to my personal growth and development. With each new lesson I have acquired valuable perspectives and insights which inform my understanding of self and influence my engagement and interaction with others.

This experience has also been challenging. There are parallels to approaching this process as a marathon, not a sprint. A marathon requires careful training, discipline, and conditioning, it is a labor of love resulting in a deep satisfaction upon completion. There were definitely instances in the capstone writing that I wanted it to be a sprint. I wanted to write my first draft like it was my final draft with speed, precision, and perfection.
I was raised with the notion that when you make a commitment to something, you stick to it - no matter what. I sometimes wondered if I was on track or felt like I needed permission to make changes. Having the courage to take risks and make significant changes was a bit overwhelming, yet quite rewarding. I have been told by others that I have high expectations for myself and for others. Through this process, I have discovered that change can be a good thing and is not a reflection of being unreliable or lacking dedication. Looking back, I can see where I made things more difficult for myself by making significant revisions to the topics and research question. I was not afraid of assuming the additional work, even when the timing was unfavorable. It would have been easier to take the path of least resistance, but I opted for the “road less traveled”. That has made all the difference.

This process has been unlike any other part of my academic journey. It has been transformative because I got to take ownership of my work through my research question, literature review, and project design. Originally I was positioned to complete a thesis because I wanted to conduct research. After experiencing some setbacks with implementing the research, I did some soul searching and made the decision to transition to project. The benefit of this change resulted in having a hybrid class experience that included a peer review team. Also, I had an instructor who knew my capability and encouraged me to bring my voice to the page. Throughout the capstone journey I have also discovered more about the way in which I learn. I have never really considered myself to be a scholarly or academic type and there were times during the drafting and revisions when I doubted my capability. I took a leap of faith and have had no regrets.
Revisiting the Literature

The literature review was comprised of the following themes: culturally relevant teaching and critical race theory, marginalized students - including urban learners and grieving children, healing circles, and professional development. In this section, I will share key learnings for each of the topics.

In the research on culturally relevant teaching, here are some of the key findings with regard to education professionals. Teachers who are willing to establish inclusion, develop a positive attitude, enhance meaning, and engender competence will advance their cultural competence (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). If teachers are willing to pursue a stronger understanding of the cultural traditions of their students, they will yield greater respect from their students, peers, and administrators (Young, 2010). Teachers who are willing to practice personal reflection, call out social and structural injustice, and use examples of inequities in their curriculum demonstrate an exceptional ability to transform theory to practice.

Critical race theory critiques curriculum, instruction, assessment, school funding, and desegregation with a social justice lens that also applies to grieving learners from marginalized communities. Poorly designed traditional assessment practices and disproportionate allocation of resources, wealth, and access to experienced teachers should be under the microscope rather than making claims that students are the problem. This is closely connected to the next topic, research about students from marginalized communities. I explored the topics related to urban learners and grieving learners. A commonality of these student populations is that they are resilient.
In the research about children’s grief, I learned that children have a different understanding of death than adults. The research illuminates how children comprehend death at different ages. This is significant because teachers and social workers should be familiar with these benchmarks in order to make age-appropriate assessments, interventions, or referrals for additional support. Knowing how children understand death and dying, is also important to know how children grieve.

In the research about “train the trainer” professional development, I examined the theory of andragogy, or adult learning (Knowles, M. (1975). The principles of andragogy are:

- Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction
- Experience (including mistakes) provides the basis for learning activities
- Adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance to their job or personal life
- Adult learning is problem-centered rather than content-oriented

The literature review covered the themes related to my research question, *How can reflective teachers support marginalized grieving children?* It was fairly simple to find sources for each of these individual topics. However, when examining the intersections, the sources became more limited. This reality supports my decision to create a “train the trainer” professional development plan so that more people can receive adequate training to meet the needs of grieving children, particularly in responding to learners who come from marginalized communities or who are in need of culturally relevant support.
Project Limitations

One of the limitations of the project is that it does not actively cultivate student voices or parent engagement. This is definitely an area for further research. It was not feasible to gather information without obtaining institutional review board approval. Through informal conversations I was able to gather a sample of feedback from peers who teach in ethnically diverse classrooms. However, some of the limitations are also related to an educator’s prior knowledge or experience with grieving children, particularly those who come from non-dominant populations.

A teacher or administrator’s perception of their cultural competence and biases could also present limitations. For example, it is possible and not uncommon to discover that a teacher or administrator’s perception of cultural sensitivity or their cultural competence is not in alignment with their actual engagement practices. This reality could be revealed through surveys, courageous conversations, classroom observation, personal reflection, or instruments such as the Intercultural Development Inventory. This could also be revealed through talking with students or their parents about their interactions with teachers and administrators.

However, what happens once this reality is recognized? What does the teacher or administrator do with this information? With this knowledge, is there an expectation or accountability for improvement on the part of the teacher, administrator, or school community? What if the teacher wants to improve and is not given adequate time or resources? What if the school or principal wants teachers to improve but they do not see it as a priority? How are highly competent teachers and administrators recognized?
As noted in my assessment tool, there are many valid reasons why teachers might not participate in professional development on these topics. With limited professional development funding and an array of worthy needs, time and funding are realistic limitations. Attitudinal limitations are another obstacle. Some teachers or administrators will not find value in the subjects or it might take a back seat to other issues that appear to be more urgent. Perhaps they have not had a student in their school or classroom who has experienced the death of a loved one so it is not important. Perhaps they have had a student who has experienced a death and they believe it was adequately handled. Perhaps they have not considered the intersecting needs of a grieving child who is of the non-dominant culture.

**Project Impact**

When discussing my research question with colleagues, friends, and classroom teachers, most people respond with sincere intrigue. Many people will tell me about their own personal experiences and voice their support in the importance of my research and professional development plan.

Earlier this Spring, I collected data through the pilot research that I conducted with classmates who are teachers. Although the data collection was informal, I had fifteen voluntary responses that provided a small sample of valuable information. I did not collect information about the demographics of the responders or the demographics of the populations they serve, which would be significant if this data collection was formalized and used sophisticated research methods. I did not inquire about their access to professional development opportunities or access to time and funding for training.
The first question was to find out what professional development topics would be most useful. The highest level of response was for culturally specific grief support and intercultural development. There was also interest in healing circles and personal wellness and reflection. The least amount of interest was grief and empathy. The next question was about how much time can be invested in professional development and the resounding response was, “I am interested, but my time is limited.” There was a clear preference for learning in a small group setting, although there were a few who would like the combination of large group sessions and smaller break out sessions.

I inquired about the level of experience (1 indicates no experience and 5 indicates very experienced) as well as the desire to learn more (1 indicates low interest and 5 indicates high interest). The summary of responses can be found in Appendix 2.

- Healing Circles - low knowledge, above-average interest;
- Children’s Grief/Empathy - below average knowledge, above average interest;
- Culture Specific Grief: this question was revised for the final version, the original draft was confusing and had inconsistent response
- Intercultural Development
  - Knowledge of grief in my culture was above average;
  - Knowledge of grief in other cultures was below average;
  - Knowledge of grief in my student’s cultures - below average;
- Culturally Relevant Teaching
  - Experience with Culturally Relevant Teaching was average;
  - Interest in Culturally Relevant Teaching was above average.
In summary, respondents reported that they had less knowledge about each topic but they also had an interest to learn more in every category, especially culturally relevant teaching. I believe this topic is more universal and would be viewed as a greater benefit to people who have limited time. This was very informal but it illustrates the specific lack of knowledge in areas that significantly impact teaching, learning, and healing.

**Next Steps**

In addition to death by illness, accident, suicide, and homicide, there have been increasing incidences of violence happening locally, throughout the United States and internationally. The collective (and sometimes compounded) grief of the surviving family, friends, and surrounding community has led to nationally recognized movements such as Black Lives Matter and March for Our Lives. I am starting to notice greater visibility and programming that are similar to my research question and project. For example, the National Alliance for Children recently hosted a webinar on the topic of *Bereavement and Collective Loss in Serving Intercultural Children and Youth*.

Additional research could be developed specifically to meet the needs of recent immigrant arrivals to serve Karen and Burmese communities. Also, this project did not address the Native/Indigenous communities and the traditions of healing circles originated with the Lakota. Further exploration could be devoted to other types of loss and trauma, especially in a climate of uncertainty for dreamers, migrant families, and child separation. An increasing number of students face vulnerability to their basic human needs and are experiencing homelessness, food insecurity, and aging out of the foster care system.
I am also very interested in supporting college students and emerging adults. Many schools have ambiguous bereavement leave policies which are often insufficient for grieving students as they attend to their grief and meeting academic demands, often while being away from home. Many students deal with the subjective (and often unfair) experience of how each instructor chooses to enforce a policy or offer accommodations.

I am pleased that my employer will be offering a class on *Grief and Loss in the Classroom* through Graduate Continuing Studies next year. There are also non-scholarly initiatives that interest me. One idea is to develop a line of culturally inclusive greeting cards that are designed and translated by artists from the culture. Another is to develop children’s books to educate young people about death with illustrations and traditions that are culturally relevant. I intend to continue volunteering and educating myself and others about the importance of supporting grieving children.
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APPENDIX A

List of Organizations

Children’s Grief Awareness Day

www.childrensgriefawarenessday.org

Children’s Grief Connection of Minnesota (formerly Camp Amanda, MN)

Childrensgriefconnection.com

Coalition to Increase Teachers of Color & American Indian Teachers in Minnesota

https://www.tocaimn.com/

Every Step Care & Support Services (formerly Amanda the Panda Family Grief Center)

https://www.everystep.org/services/grief-loss

Hamline University Center for Excellence in Urban Teaching

https://www.hamline.edu/education/ceut/

Hamline University Center for Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation

https://www.hamline.edu/offices/provost/truth-racial-healing-and-transformation/

Minnesota Funeral Directors’ Association

www.mnfuneral.org

Minnesota Private College Fund

https://www.mnprivatecolleges.org

YWCA Minneapolis

https://www.ywcampls.org/
HEALING CIRCLE EXPERIENCE AND INTEREST

Healing Circle Experience
15 responses

Healing Circle Interest
15 responses
CHILDREN'S GRIEF EXPERIENCE AND INTEREST

Children's Grief Experience
15 responses

Children's Grief Interest
14 responses
CULTURE SPECIFIC GRIEF EXPERIENCE AND INTEREST
(Questions reworded for the final version due to incomplete response)

Culture Specific Grief Experience
10 responses

Culture Specific Interest
11 responses
INTERCULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Intercultural Development - My own culture
14 responses

Intercultural Development - Grief in other cultures
14 responses

Intercultural Development - Grief in my students
14 responses
CULTURALLY RELEVANT TEACHING EXPERIENCE AND INTEREST

Culturally Relevant Teaching - experience
13 responses

Culturally Relevant Teaching - interest
14 responses
APPENDIX C

Link to Professional Development Plan