

# Reframing Grief for Black Students: A Qualitative Analysis of Grief Resilient Affirming Care through Empowerment (*G.R.A.C.E.*) Training

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## Abstract

Black students in K–12 educational settings experience grief in multifaceted ways that extend beyond the loss of loved ones and encompass racial trauma, community stressors, systemic oppression, and chronic disenfranchised losses. Yet, school-based mental health frameworks often fail to recognize or adequately address these culturally embedded grief experiences. This qualitative study examined how participation in the GRACE (Grief Resilient Affirming Care through Empowerment) training influenced Psychiatric Social Workers' (PSWs) conceptualization of grief among Black students. Fifty-four ( $n=54$ ) PSWs from the Los Angeles Unified School District's Black Student Achievement Program (BSAP) completed a pre and post-training qualitative survey. Reflexive thematic analysis was employed to explore shifts in knowledge, cultural responsiveness, and clinical application. Four major themes emerged: (1) *Expanded Understanding of Grief, highlighting recognition of the diverse forms of loss impacting Black youth, including racialized and systemic grief*; (2) *Culturally Grounded and Anti-Oppressive Practice, reflecting increased appreciation for the importance of cultural humility, historical awareness, and contextualized meaning-making*; (3) *Shifting from a Deficit Lens to an Honoring-Based Approach, illustrating greater ability to interpret students' grief responses without pathologizing or minimizing their lived experiences*; and (4) *Enhanced Clinical Confidence and Utility, demonstrating that the GRACE framework equipped clinicians with practical tools, language, and interventions to better support Black students' emotional well-being*. Findings suggest that the GRACE Model framework is a promising culturally responsive intervention that strengthens clinicians' capacity to provide affirming, healing-centered grief support. Implications include the need for continued professional development, integration of culturally attuned grief practices, and future research examining student-level outcomes.

**Keywords:** GRACE model, black students; grief, school-based mental health, culturally responsive practice, racial trauma, healing-centered engagement

## 1. Introduction

### *1.1 Introduce the Problem*

Black children and adolescents in U.S. schools are disproportionately exposed to multiple forms of loss and race-based stressors, including community violence, family separation (e.g., incarceration), housing instability, and repeated experiences of interpersonal and institutional racism (McKinnon et al., 2024). These losses often accumulate across developmental stages and operate alongside structural inequities to produce grief experiences that are layered, chronic, and frequently disenfranchised—that is, not publicly acknowledged or socially supported (Aeschlimann et al., 2024). Although schools are primary contexts for observing and responding to youth distress, conventional grief frameworks and many school-based mental health responses remain narrowly focused on bereavement tied to death and on symptom reduction rather than on culturally situated, systemic, and communal dimensions of loss (Aeschlimann et al., 2024; Onipede, Park, & Lau, 2024). This mismatch risks minimizing or misinterpreting Black students' grief expressions (e.g., anger, withdrawal, behavioral change) as disciplinary or developmental problems rather than as legitimate responses to loss and racialized harm (McKinnon et al., 2024).

A growing empirical and conceptual literature supports a more expansive understanding of grief that integrates racial trauma and the effects of cumulative, collective, and historical losses. Work on racial trauma and complex racial trauma (CoRT) highlights how repeated, chronic exposures to racism microaggressions, vicarious witnessing of racial violence, discriminatory institutional practices produce pervasive psychological and social consequences across the lifespan (Davison et al., 2022). For youth in particular, school-based experiences of racism are associated with elevated risk for poor mental health, suicidal ideation, and behavioral problems, suggesting that school personnel and clinicians must conceptualize grief in ways that account for racialized stressors and systemic harm (McKinnon et al., 2024). Parallel to this, recent scoping reviews underscore that culturally sensitive grief treatments and supports—those that center cultural meaning-making, mourning rituals, and community strengths—are essential for equitable and effective bereavement care yet remain underdeveloped in the literature and in routine practice (Aeschlimann et al., 2024).

Conceptual frameworks that prioritize collective healing, liberation, and cultural authenticity can guide the adaptation of grief support for Black youth. Radical healing and related liberatory approaches propose healing processes that extend beyond individual symptom reduction to include critical consciousness, collective agency, cultural authenticity, radical hope, and strength-based resistance (French et al., 2020; Adames et al., 2022). These tenets align with liberation psychology's emphasis on addressing structural sources of distress and empowering communities toward self-determination (French et al., 2020). In school settings, trauma-informed initiatives have gained traction as approaches to support students' socioemotional needs; however, recent reviews indicate that many trauma-informed school models inadequately integrate racial equity or culturally specific practices, limiting their relevance for

racially minoritized youth (Onipede et al., 2024). Consequently, frameworks that explicitly center culture, history, and collective meaning-making are needed to support Black students who are grieving in ways that acknowledge both personal and sociopolitical dimensions of loss.

The GRACE (Grief Resilient Affirming Care through Empowerment) Model was developed to address these gaps by offering a culturally grounded, strengths-based approach for school-based mental health clinicians working with Black K–12 students. Grounded in healing-centered and liberation-informed principles, GRACE integrates culturally relevant assessment (e.g., grief mapping), identity-affirming interventions (e.g., Story of My Name; Ancestral Letters), and system-level care planning (the GRACE Care Plan) designed to honor communal traditions and to resist deficit-driven interpretations of grief. By centering students' voices, cultural resources, and collective forms of resilience, the model aims to shift school mental health practice from pathologizing and reactive responses to proactive, affirming, and equity-oriented care. Despite growing interest in culturally responsive grief interventions, evidence regarding the perceived utility and implementation readiness of such frameworks among school clinicians remains limited. Understanding clinicians' post-training perceptions is a vital first step in assessing acceptability, perceived competence, and potential pathways to broader implementation and systems change. The present study examines how Psychiatric Social Workers (PSWs) employed in the Los Angeles Unified School District's Black Student Achievement Program (BSAP) conceptualized grief among Black students following participation in a GRACE Model training. Using reflexive thematic analysis of post-training qualitative survey responses, this study explores shifts in clinicians' definitions of grief, perceived clinical competencies, and readiness to adopt GRACE interventions within school ecosystems.

By documenting clinicians' reflections, the study contributes to three interrelated aims: (a) to characterize how culturally attuned, liberation-informed training influences clinicians' understanding of grief that is racialized, communal, and disenfranchised; (b) to identify perceived strengths and practical utility of GRACE interventions and the GRACE Care Plan for school-based practice; and (c) to surface implementation considerations—such as the need for whole-school collaboration and attention to racial equity—that are necessary to translate training into sustainable practice. Findings have implications for professional development, school mental health policy, and future research focused on student-level outcomes and fidelity of culturally responsive grief interventions.

### *1.2 Introduction to literature*

School-aged Black children and adolescents frequently face grief that extends beyond the death of loved ones to encompass systemic and community-based losses such as racial trauma, community violence, and family separation (Davison et al., 2022; Dutil, 2019). While literature consistently acknowledges the cumulative nature of these losses, scholars differ in how they conceptualize and respond to them. For example, Aeschlimann et al. (2024) emphasize the limitations of traditional bereavement frameworks, arguing that such models inadequately capture the complexity of culturally mediated and systemic grief. In contrast, school-based mental health approaches, as reviewed by Onipede et al. (2024), often prioritize trauma-

informed care broadly but do not consistently differentiate between individual trauma and structurally rooted grief. This divergence highlights a key tension in the field: whether grief should be treated primarily as a psychological experience or as a socio-culturally-embedded phenomenon requiring systemic intervention. Grief among Black youth is frequently disenfranchised, particularly when losses tied to institutional racism or generational trauma are not publicly acknowledged within dominant school frameworks (Aeschlimann et al., 2024). Traditional school-based interventions tend to focus on symptom reduction and standardized therapeutic responses, which may offer accessibility and scalability but risk oversimplifying students' lived experiences. In contrast, culturally responsive models foreground the importance of contextualizing grief within historical and communal realities. While these models demonstrate strengths in promoting identity affirmation and cultural relevance, they are often less standardized and may face challenges related to implementation fidelity and institutional adoption (Onipede et al., 2024; Palma et al., 2023). Thus, although trauma-informed initiatives have expanded awareness of student distress, their limited integration of racial equity can result in interventions that are procedurally inclusive but substantively insufficient.

Critically, some trauma-informed school frameworks may inadvertently reinforce deficit-oriented narratives by interpreting Black students' emotional responses through a pathology lens rather than as adaptive reactions to chronic and systemic stressors (Onipede et al., 2024). Palma et al. (2023) further critique these approaches, noting that without an explicit anti-racist orientation, trauma-informed models risk reproducing the very inequities they seek to address. Conversely, culturally adapted grief interventions emphasize communal healing, cultural rituals, and creative expression as mechanisms for meaning making (Aeschlimann et al., 2024). These approaches are particularly effective in validating non-dominant expressions of grief and fostering resilience; however, the literature also suggests variability in how such interventions are operationalized, with limited consensus on best practices or measurable outcomes.

Theoretical frameworks such as radical healing and liberation psychology offer more expansive approaches by explicitly linking individual healing to collective empowerment and systemic change. Radical healing theory highlights constructs such as critical consciousness, collectivism, and cultural authenticity (French et al., 2020), while liberation psychology situates distress within broader sociopolitical contexts and emphasizes agency and co-created meaning (Adames et al., 2022). Compared to traditional clinical models, these frameworks provide a more holistic understanding of grief that incorporates identity, resistance, and community resilience. However, a notable limitation across both frameworks is the relative scarcity of empirical studies examining their application within school-based settings, particularly with regard to measurable outcomes and scalability.

Across the literature, a consistent gap emerges between conceptual advancements and empirical validation. While culturally responsive and justice-oriented frameworks offer theoretically robust alternatives to traditional models, there remains limited rigorous evaluation of their effectiveness in school contexts (Onipede et al., 2024). Additionally, there is a lack of standardized tools for assessing multilayered grief experiences among Black youth, which constrains both research and practice. This gap underscores an ongoing challenge in the field:

balancing cultural specificity and contextual responsiveness with the need for evidence-based, scalable interventions.

Together, these studies reveal both the promise and limitations of existing approaches to grief intervention for Black youth. Traditional models offer structure and empirical grounding but lack cultural and systemic responsiveness, whereas culturally anchored frameworks provide contextual depth but require further empirical substantiation. This tension points to the need for integrative models that bridge these approaches. Frameworks such as GRACE (Grief Resilient Affirming Care through Empowerment) respond to this gap by combining structured intervention strategies with culturally grounded practices, including grief mapping, ancestral writing, community circles, and affirmation practices. By aligning with principles of radical healing while addressing implementation and assessment gaps, GRACE has the potential to advance both practice and research in culturally responsive school-based grief care, as well as inform equity-centered policy reform.

## 2. Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore how Psychiatric Social Workers (PSWs) in the Los Angeles Unified School District's (LAUSD) Black Student Achievement Program (BSAP) understood and conceptualized grief among Black students following participation in the *Grief Resilient Affirming Care through Empowerment* (GRACE) training. Qualitative description was selected for its suitability in capturing participants' naturalistic reflections, practice-based insights, and shifts in understanding using minimally interpretive, experience-near analysis.

### 2.1 Participants and Setting

Participants were 54 Psychiatric Social Workers (PSWs) employed within LAUSD and assigned to the Black Student Achievement Program (BSAP), an initiative aimed at improving academic, social-emotional, and well-being outcomes for Black students. The sample was overwhelmingly composed of African American women, representing approximately 95% of participants, reflecting the intentional recruitment and retention of culturally concordant providers within the BSAP initiative. Approximately 10% of participants identified as male. On average, participants reported four years of professional experience within the BSAP program, indicating a workforce with moderate tenure and familiarity with school-based, culturally responsive mental health practices. All PSWs voluntarily participated in the GRACE training and were invited to complete a pre/post-training qualitative survey. Inclusion criteria required participants to be:

- a) *Full-time PSWs within LAUSD;*
- b) *Assigned to schools serving Black students;*
- c) *Present for the full GRACE training sessions; and*
- d) *Willing to provide narrative responses to open-ended survey questions.*

No exclusion criteria were applied. All participants completed the pre/post-training survey,

resulting in a 100% response rate for the targeted sample.

## 2.2 Training Description

The GRACE (Grief Resilient Affirming Care through Empowerment) training is a culturally responsive, healing-centered framework designed to support Black students (K–12) experiencing grief resulting from personal, relational, racialized, community, environmental, and systemic loss. The training included:

- a) *Foundations of Black student grief;*
- b) *Exploration of disenfranchised and racialized grief;*
- c) *Developmental considerations across K–12;*
- d) *Introduction to GRACE clinical interventions (e.g., Grief Mapping, B.A.S.H. Reflection);*
- e) *Practicum-based vignette analyses; and*
- f) *Guided reflection on culturally grounded practice.*

The pre-training survey was administered prior to the training starting and the post-training survey was administered within 24 hours of training completion.

## 2.3 Data Collection Procedures

Data was collected using an anonymous online survey, distributed through a secure district-approved platform. The survey included one focal open-ended qualitative question analyzed for this study:

*“How has your understanding of grief among Black students changed after participating in the GRACE training?”*

Participants typed narrative responses ranging from brief statements to several paragraphs. No identifying information was collected, ensuring confidentiality and promoting honest reflection. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was embedded within the survey introduction. Data was downloaded into an encrypted file and stored on a password-protected server accessible only to the research team.

### 2.3.1 Analytic Approach

A thematic analysis approach, guided by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to examine the qualitative data. This method was selected for its flexibility in identifying patterns across participants' reflections and its suitability for training evaluation research. Analysis followed six iterative steps:

1. Familiarization: Two researchers independently read all responses multiple times to gain a holistic understanding.
2. Initial Coding: Researchers generated descriptive and interpretive codes using an inductive, data-driven approach.

3. **Generating Themes:** Codes were grouped into preliminary categories capturing participants' shifts in knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions.
4. **Reviewing Themes:** Themes were tested against the full dataset to ensure representativeness, coherence, and analytic rigor.
5. **Defining and Naming Themes:** Final themes were refined and clearly articulated with attention to cultural and contextual nuance.
6. **Producing the Report:** Themes were synthesized into overarching findings supported by representative participant excerpts (excluded here for anonymity).

Coding discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. Reflexive practices including analytic memoing and researcher positionality reflections were incorporated to account for potential bias related to race, professional background, and clinical experience.

### 2.3.2 Ethical Considerations

This study involved minimal risk, as data was anonymous and collected as part of a program evaluation process. No student data was collected. Consistent with district policy, the project was reviewed and determined to be exempt from institutional review board approval due to its nature as internal training evaluation and non-identifiable adult participant data. All participants were informed that their responses would be used for research and training improvement purposes.

## 3. Results

A total of 54 Psychiatric Social Workers (PSWs) participated in the post-training qualitative survey following the GRACE Model intervention training. All participants were currently employed in the Los Angeles Unified School District's Black Student Achievement Program (BSAP) and had completed the full GRACE training module prior to survey administration. The qualitative data analysis generated four overarching themes, each capturing PSWs' reflections on the implementation, perceived utility, and impact of the GRACE model when supporting Black K–12 students experiencing grief. Across themes, participants consistently described the model as culturally responsive, developmentally appropriate, and actionable within school-based mental health settings.

### **Theme 1: Increased Clinical Confidence in Addressing Racialized and Compounded Grief**

PSWs overwhelmingly reported that the GRACE training significantly increased their confidence in identifying, conceptualizing, and intervening in cases of grief specific to Black students. Participants described prior uncertainty about differentiating normative grief reactions from grief compounded by historical, racialized, or community-based trauma. Following the training, PSWs stated that they felt “better equipped,” “more grounded,” and “clearer in their approach” when supporting Black students whose grief experiences were intertwined with systemic racism, community violence, or chronic marginalization.

Participants emphasized that the GRACE framework's grounding questions, structured interventions, and cultural formulations allowed them to validate students' racialized experiences without pathologizing them. One PSW noted that the model "gave language and structure to what we see every day but haven't always had culturally specific tools to name."

### **Theme 2: Strengthened Capacity to Provide Culturally Situated, Non-Deficit-Based Care**

A central theme that emerged was the shift from deficit-oriented conceptualizations of bereavement toward strengths-based and honoring practices. PSWs described the GRACE model as affirming cultural identity, centering communal grieving traditions, and challenging Eurocentric assumptions about coping, resilience, and help-seeking. Many participants reported that the model supported a paradigm shift by encouraging them to "honor rather than fix," "explore meaning rather than correct behavior," and "center culture, not just symptoms." PSWs highlighted that the model legitimized the grief expressions of Black students—particularly expressions commonly misinterpreted in school settings as behavioral problems. As one participant explained, "GRACE interrupts the default narrative that Black students are acting out. It reframes their emotions as grief deserving of care."

### **Theme 3: Integration of Collective Accountability and Whole-School Collaboration**

PSWs reported that the GRACE model helped facilitate more collaborative, multi-disciplinary approaches to grief support across school ecosystems. Participants described using GRACE-informed language, consultation strategies, and psychoeducation tools to engage teachers, administrators, school counselors, and school climate teams. Several respondents emphasized that before GRACE training, grief interventions were often siloed within mental health services. Post-training, PSWs reported increased confidence initiating team-based discussions, supporting staff's cultural humility, and advocating for shared responsibility in recognizing and responding to grief among Black students. One PSW articulated that GRACE "creates a shared vocabulary that brings the whole school into the work—grief is not just a clinician issue, it's a community issue." Participants described a noticeable change in how school personnel understood grief triggers, behavioral manifestations, and the cumulative impact of racial stressors in Black children and youth.

### **Theme 4: Practical Utility of the GRACE Interventions and Care Plan**

Participants stated that the ten GRACE interventions and the GRACE Care Plan were highly usable in real-world practice. The structured nature of each intervention helped PSWs translate culturally grounded theory into concrete clinical action steps. Respondents reported that they incorporated the interventions into individual sessions, small-group grief support, and crisis response efforts. The GRACE Care Plan was identified as one of the most valuable components, offering a culturally responsive template for assessing presenting grief concerns, identifying internal and external resources, and creating individualized grief support strategies. PSWs highlighted that the Care Plan improved clinical documentation, treatment planning, and communication with caregivers and school staff. Several participants emphasized that the GRACE Care Plan promoted continuity of care, especially in cases where multiple providers interacted with the same student. As one PSW wrote, "It makes the invisible visible—students'

grief narratives, cultural strengths, and needs are captured in one place.”

### **Theme 5: Increased Awareness of System-Level Barriers and Opportunities**

A final theme emerged around participants’ heightened awareness of the systemic conditions affecting Black students’ grief experiences. PSWs described using the GRACE model to better understand how racial inequities, school discipline practices, chronic community trauma, and resource disparities shaped grief expression and recovery. Many PSWs expressed that the training expanded their capacity to advocate for systemic changes, including culturally responsive grief policies, more equitable mental health staffing, and district-wide adoption of culturally grounded practices. The model was viewed as a catalyst for broader school climate transformation rather than solely a clinical tool.

#### *3.1 Summary of Findings*

Across themes, results indicate that the GRACE training: Enhanced PSWs’ cultural competence and clinical confidence in addressing grief among Black students. Shifted PSWs from deficit-based to honoring-based frameworks, aligning practice with anti-oppressive and culturally affirming principles. Promoted collective accountability, strengthening collaboration across school personnel. Provided highly practical tools—particularly the GRACE Care Plan—to guide intervention and treatment planning. Increased awareness of systemic influences on Black student grief and encouraged advocacy for structural change. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that the GRACE model holds promise as a culturally grounded, developmentally attuned, and clinically effective framework for supporting Black K–12 students who are grieving within school settings.

### **4. Discussion**

The present study examined the experiences of 54 Psychiatric Social Workers (PSWs) within the Los Angeles Unified School District’s Black Student Achievement Program (BSAP) following their participation in the GRACE Model training. Pre-training survey responses from 54 PSWs revealed substantial variability in the approaches used to support Black students experiencing grief or loss. Participants described drawing primarily on general mental health and grief models (e.g., CBT, TF-CBT, stages-of-grief frameworks, motivational interviewing, and psychoeducation), with comparatively limited use of formal culturally responsive or race-centered grief frameworks. Several respondents reported adapting existing evidence-based practices to fit students’ cultural contexts, while a notable proportion indicated that they did not use any specific framework tailored to the lived experiences of Black students. Collectively, these pre-training data highlight both the breadth of individual practitioner strategies and a gap in structured, culturally grounded approaches to racialized grief support. Conversely, post-training survey responses demonstrated that the GRACE framework is a promising culturally responsive and developmentally attuned approach for supporting Black K–12 students navigating grief particularly grief that is often compounded by racial stressors, community trauma, structural inequities, and historical loss(es). This discussion contextualizes the findings within the broader literature on school-based grief interventions, racialized trauma, and culturally grounded clinical practice.

#### *4.1 Culturally Responsive Grief Care for Black Students*

Across responses, PSWs consistently reported increased clinical confidence and clarity in conceptualizing grief within a cultural and racialized context. Traditional grief models often fail to account for the unique historical, communal, and systemic burdens experienced by Black youth, including chronic exposure to racism, community violence, and intergenerational trauma. The GRACE framework appears to address this gap by integrating cultural affirmation, anti-oppressive practice, and contextual understanding into grief assessment and intervention. Participants noted that the model provided language and structure that aligned with their day-to-day realities in predominantly Black school communities—an alignment that is often absent in mainstream grief interventions. This finding reinforces prior scholarship that emphasizes the importance of culturally grounded grief work when supporting Black children and adolescents (e.g., Anderson, 2020; French & Brown, 2019). By centering meaning-making, identity, community, and collective healing, the GRACE model parallels emerging recommendations calling for interventions that acknowledge the sociopolitical conditions shaping Black mental health.

#### *4.2 Moving from Deficit-Based to Honoring-Based Approaches*

A major contribution of the GRACE training was its ability to shift PSWs from deficit-oriented frameworks to honoring-based, strength-centered conceptualizations of grief. Participants described how the model helped them validate the full range of Black students' grief expressions particularly those frequently misread as behavioral disturbances or defiance within school contexts. This shift is critically important. Research has long documented that Black students' emotional responses are over-pathologized and disproportionately interpreted as disciplinary issues rather than trauma- or grief-related needs (Gregory et al., 2016). The GRACE model appears to disrupt this pattern by reframing grief not as a problem to be corrected but as an experience to be honored, contextualized, and supported. By embedding cultural humility and contextualized meaning-making into clinical practice, the model supports more equitable mental health service provision and counters school practices that often rely on punitive interpretations of Black distress.

#### *4.3 Collective Accountability and Whole-School Collaboration*

Another significant finding was PSWs' increased engagement in collaborative, school-wide responses to grief. Participants reported that the language, tools, and grounding questions within the GRACE model supported more effective consultation with teachers, administrators, and other school personnel. This reflects a shift from individualized, clinician-centered grief support to a more relational, community-grounded model. This finding also aligns with literature emphasizing the need for multi-tiered, ecological approaches in school-based mental health (Weist et al., 2014). Black students often experience grief within communal contexts, and their experiences cannot be disentangled from school climate, staff perceptions, disciplinary environments, and peer systems. Thus, a whole-school approach is not optional; it is necessary. PSWs' reports suggest that the GRACE model fosters shared responsibility for grief support, encouraging school staff to view grief not solely as a clinical issue but as a community issue requiring collective care.

#### *4.4 Practical Utility and Clinical Applicability of the GRACE Interventions*

The GRACE interventions and Care Plan were consistently described as usable, adaptable, and relevant in real practice settings. This is an important contribution, as many culturally focused frameworks remain conceptual or theoretical and lack clear operational guidance for clinicians. By contrast, PSWs highlighted that the GRACE interventions provided concrete steps, adaptable strategies, and structured guidance for grief assessment, intervention, and treatment planning. The GRACE Care Plan was viewed as particularly impactful, supporting continuity of care, improving documentation, and enhancing coordination across providers. Given the fragmented nature of school mental health services and frequent staff transitions, a standardized, culturally responsive care plan may significantly improve long-term student support.

#### *4.5 Illuminating System-Level Barriers and Opportunities*

Participants emphasized how the GRACE model clarified the broader systemic and structural conditions influencing Black student grief—including neighborhood violence, school discipline disparities, racial microaggressions, and limited access to culturally responsive mental health resources. This expanded awareness is critical, as grief among Black students is rarely an isolated or singular experience; it is often interconnected with chronic exposure to racialized and community-based stressors. This shift in awareness may position PSWs as stronger advocates for systemic change within school districts. Interventions such as the GRACE model hold potential not only to support individual healing but also to influence school policies, staffing practices, and district-level priorities related to Black student wellness.

#### *4.6 Implications for School-Based Practice*

The findings suggest several practice implications:

1. Culturally grounded grief models should be embedded in district-wide mental health practices, particularly for schools serving Black students.
2. Training in the GRACE framework may enhance school-based clinicians' cultural humility, assessment skills, and intervention fidelity when working with racialized grief.
3. Whole-school collaboration must be prioritized, with teachers, administrators, and staff trained to recognize grief-related behaviors and respond with empathy rather than punishment.
4. Standardized, culturally responsive care plans (such as the GRACE Care Plan) can improve continuity of care, clinical documentation, and shared responsibility across multidisciplinary teams.

#### *4.7 Limitations*

Although the study offers important insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. The data relied on self-reported survey responses, which may be subject to social desirability bias. The sample, while robust for qualitative inquiry, was limited to PSWs within a single district and program, potentially affecting generalizability. Additionally, the study focused on post-training perceptions and did not include direct observations of clinical implementation or

student-level outcomes. Future research should incorporate longitudinal follow-up and triangulate data with student or caregiver perspectives to capture the model's broader impact.

#### *4.8 Future Directions*

Future research should explore:

- Implementation fidelity of the GRACE interventions across diverse school contexts.
- Student outcomes, including changes in emotional regulation, attendance, engagement, and school connectedness.
- Caregiver and teacher experiences with GRACE-informed support.
- Adaptations for multilingual, immigrant, or intersectionally marginalized Black student populations.

Randomized controlled trials, mixed-methods designs, or case study expansions would also strengthen the evidence base and further validate GRACE as an effective culturally aligned grief intervention model.

### **5. Conclusion**

This study provides preliminary evidence that the GRACE Model holds considerable promise as a culturally responsive, honoring-based, healing-centered, and clinically meaningful framework for supporting Black K–12 students experiencing grief. By honoring cultural identity, shifting away from deficit-based narratives, strengthening school-wide collaboration, and providing actionable clinical tools, GRACE appears well positioned to fill a longstanding gap in culturally grounded school mental health practice. As districts increasingly recognize the emotional and psychological needs of Black students, the GRACE model offers a timely, relevant, and equity-driven approach to advancing collective healing, racial justice, and student well-being.

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