

Promoting Resiliency in Child Welfare Workers through Reflective Practice

Evaluation Report



Center for Early Education
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This project was done as a team. Kris Johnson conceptualized the project. She and Jess Hoeper created the model and provided reflective consultation. Gil Domally also provided reflective consultation. Teya Dahle and Andrea Smothers provided expert knowledge and supported reflection throughout implementation. Alyssa Meuwissen designed the evaluation and led data collection, analysis, and authored this report. Meredith Reese and Madalynn Ebert assisted with data collection, processing, and analysis.

We are grateful for the time and thoughtful responses contributed by the participants.

Executive Summary

Given the high rates of stress in child welfare jobs, it is crucial to provide supports to this workforce that promote resilience. Reflective consultation (RC) is a model used in many early childhood sectors to support the processing of difficult emotions and provide a space for reflection but is not widely used in child welfare. Therefore, we developed a model of Reflective Consultation + Training (RC+T) developed specifically to support and build skills in reflection for child welfare workers. We piloted the model for about 1.5 years and evaluated its impact on the participants (workers and supervisors) in one county agency unit.

Main findings included:

1. The model was feasible for child welfare workers and supervisors to participate in, and participants were satisfied with the format.
2. Participants found the model valuable as it provided support and the opportunity to reflect and connect with co-workers.
3. The model increased their relational support at work, which was helpful in managing stress, navigating crises, and promoting wellbeing. However, stress levels remained high and some still found the work unsustainable.
4. The model impacted work by increasing skills in perspective taking, self-regulation, and relationship building.
5. Reflective consultation sessions were a safe place to discuss issues of power, privilege, and race.

These results indicate that providing reflective consultation and training for child welfare workers may be beneficial for their wellbeing and effective work.

Introduction and Background

Child welfare workers are at serious risk for secondary trauma and burnout (McFadden et al., 2014). This leads to turnover rates documented as high as 75%, impacting timeliness of services, family engagement, and safety outcomes (Anderson, 2000; DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; Casey Family Programs, 2017). Child welfare is often understaffed with high workloads and extensive regulatory requirements, leaving few opportunities for staff to pause and reflect. These challenges can lead to burnout, which puts child welfare workers at risk of putting more energy into protecting themselves emotionally than they do

in protecting children (Anderson, 2000), and can impair decision-making (Salloum et al., 2015). Focusing on emotional responses to the work is rarely part of the workplace culture, and child welfare workers can develop a culture “[deeply invested in] not showing or fully feeling what was there deep down to be felt” (Ferguson et al., 2019).

RC has been recommended as a strategy to combat these issues (National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2018), and holds promise given that child welfare workers with higher emotional intelligence, reflective skill, and social competence are more resilient to stress and better able to keep children safe (Kinman & Grant, 2010; 2011). Research supports the use of RC in the infant and early childhood mental health field to reduce burnout, improve workplace culture, and strengthen relationships with clients (e.g., Harrison, 2016), but much less research has been done around its application in child welfare.

Therefore, we developed a model of RC specific to addressing the needs of child welfare workers. This project piloted the model and sought to understand its impact on child welfare workers and their supervisors.

The Reflective Consultation + Training Model

First, we met with the administrator and supervisors to explain the approach and expectations. We then held a kickoff meeting with all staff to provide some initial training. The reflective consultants held brief individual meetings with each staff person to introduce themselves and answer any questions.

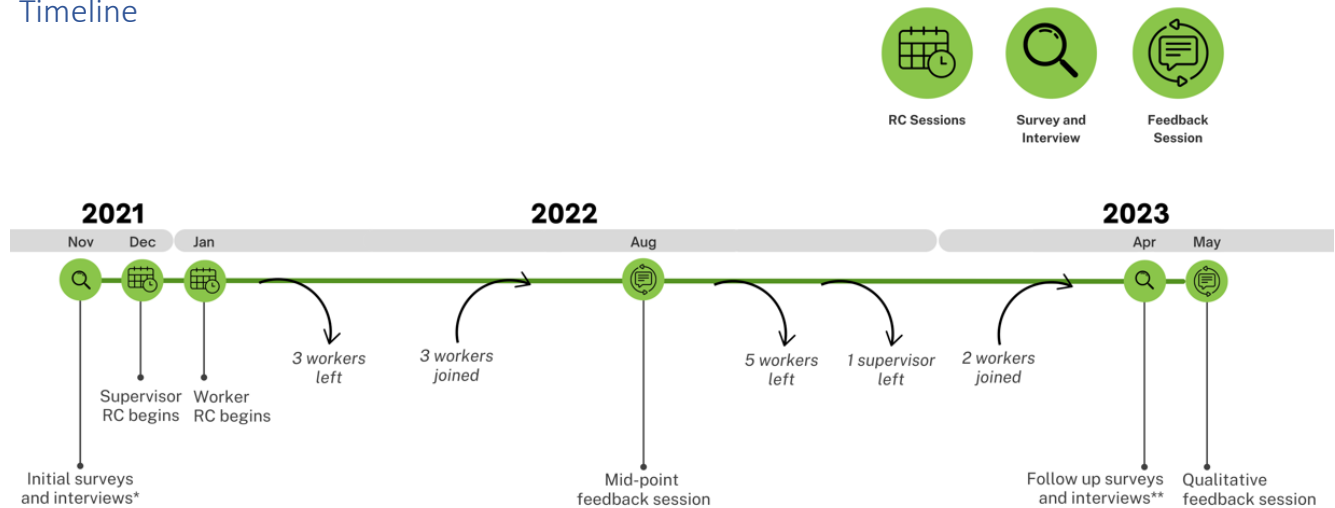
The reflective consultants then held monthly sessions with all levels of staff. The administrator received 1 hour of individual consultation per month. The two supervisors received consultation together, 1 hour per month. The monthly sessions for child welfare workers included 2 parts:

1. About 30 minutes of training as a whole group. Training topics included identifying and managing the complex emotions associated with their work. These trainings provided skills and strategies to manage the emotional and physical response to the work, including mindfulness, exercise, and diaphragmatic breathing. Some of the training sessions drew from principles of Dialectical Behavioral Therapy, a skills-based therapeutic approach that provides education on concepts such as understanding and naming emotion, changing emotional responses, problem solving, and distress tolerance (Linehan, 2015).
2. Splitting into two small groups of about 5 workers and 1 reflective consultant for about 1 hour of reflective consultation. Conversations often focused on building relationships and support among team members, especially in the post pandemic time period when staff were working remotely. At other times, the groups discussed case-specific situations or processed emotions that had arisen in their work.

Fifteen monthly sessions for workers and 17 monthly sessions for supervisors/administrator were held during the study period.

Research

Timeline



*Participants who joined RC late were administered pre-test measures when they joined

**Follow-up surveys and interviews were administered to those who had participated in at least 2 sessions of RC

Measures

Surveys were conducted online via Qualtrics, and interviews were conducted via Zoom.

Initial Surveys and Interviews

The initial survey asked about demographics, burnout and intent to leave, participants' relationships with their clients or supervisees, and rating of personal and team characteristics related to emotion and reflection. The interview covered stress and coping, workplace culture and support, attitudes about emotions and reflection, and power/privilege/race in the workplace. At the end of the interview, participants were asked to talk for 5 minutes about a challenging case they had experienced recently – these responses were later coded for reflectiveness using the Provider Reflective Process Assessment Scale.

Mid-Point Feedback Session

At the mid-point feedback session, the evaluation team met with participants in person. Participants completed an anonymous survey about their satisfaction with the model so far and any recommendations they had. They also completed a group interview (separately for workers and supervisors) about their experience with the model and any impacts they were noticing.

Follow Up Surveys and Interviews

At the end of the study, participants again completed a survey and interview similar to the initial measures, with additional questions asking about their experience and feedback around the RC + T model.

Qualitative Feedback Session

After the qualitative coding of the initial and follow up interviews was complete, the evaluation team held an in-person session with the child welfare workers to review the findings and get input about how conclusions aligned with their experiences.

The table below shows the number of participants for each phase of data collection.

Number of Participants	
Initial Data	10 workers, 3 supervisors
Mid-Point Feedback	8 workers, 3 supervisors
Follow Up Data	8 workers, 2 supervisors
Qualitative Feedback	4 workers

Sample characteristics

We collected demographic data on 18 participants. The table below shows demographic characteristics of the sample.

Percent of Participants	
Gender	
Female	72%
Male	28%
Race/Ethnicity	
White	56%
Hispanic/Latino	17%
Black/African American	11%
Asian/Asian American	11%
Missing	6%
Age	
25 - 34	33%
35 - 44	22%
45 - 54	39%
55 - 64	6%
Education	
Bachelor's Degree	50%
Master's Degree	39%
Missing	11%
Year of Experience in Current Role	
1 - 5	67%
6 - 10	11%
11 - 15	11%
16 - 20	6%
21 - 30	6%

Data considerations

Given the high level of staff turnover throughout the study, the sample for each timepoint included a different group of people, which limits the ability to make direct comparisons. For quantitative data where we were attempting to measure change over time, we only report on those who provided responses for both initial and follow up surveys (about 4-6 people, depending on the measure). Given the small sample sizes, we were not able to test for statistical significance. We instead used a cutoff of 10% of the scale (e.g. an average change of 0.5 on a 5-point scale) as an indicator of meaningful change. For the interview data, we analyzed responses from everyone who provided data at that time.

Main Findings

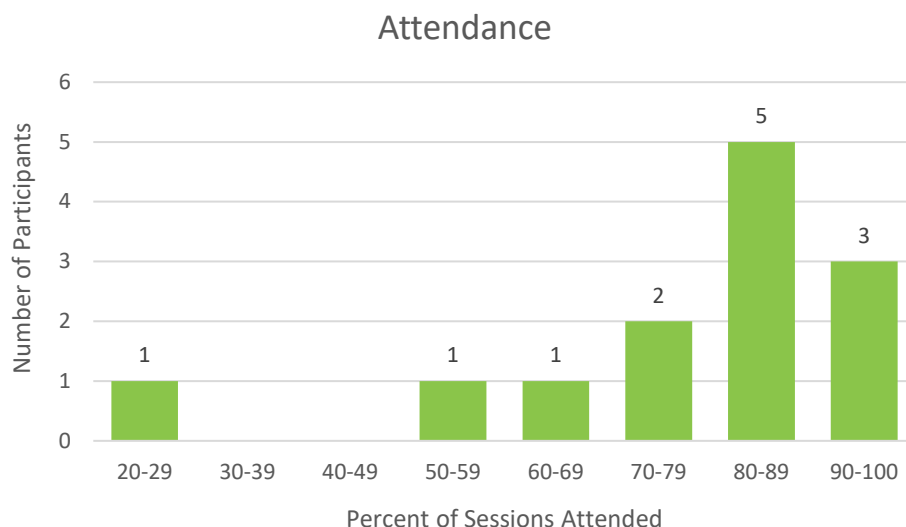
Findings will be presented around 5 research questions:

1. **Was the Reflective Consultation + Training model feasible for child welfare workers and supervisors?**
2. **Was the Reflective Consultation + Training model valued by child welfare workers and supervisors?**
3. **Did this model reduce participants' stress and burnout?**
4. **Did this model increase participants' reflection on work with clients?**
5. **How did Reflective Consultation + Training impact participants' experience of issues related to power, privilege, and race?**

Was the Reflective Consultation + Training model feasible for child welfare workers and supervisors?

Our pilot showed high support for the feasibility of the model. Attendance by most participants was high, and participants were satisfied with the format. Suggestions were mainly related to expanding the service.

The benchmark we set for the project around attendance was to have at least 80% of participants attend at least two thirds of the sessions. We met that benchmark, as 85% of participants attended at least 69% of possible sessions (excluding those whose employment at the agency only overlapped with 1 session). Average attendance was 80% of sessions, with a range from 27% to 100% (see figure below for distribution).



During follow up interviews, many workers expressed that they wanted to continue participating, and the county chose to hire the reflective consultants to continue to provide the services after the conclusion of the grant.

"I fully support reflective consultation becoming a part of our work life on a regular and consistent basis... it's so important to give us the opportunity to meet together in a safe space and discuss these incredibly important topics to our work."

When asked about feasibility, many participants admitted they were unsure about the addition of the time commitment when it was first presented, but by the end were very committed to attending because of the value they got out of the sessions.

"We're all busy. So, it at first it kind of seemed like it might be something that was just gonna be like, oh, another thing we have to do, but I actually I found myself looking forward to them quite a bit, and it's...very necessary."

Interview participants identified that breaking into small groups for discussion worked well. They appreciated having topics or themes for each session, but also that facilitators were flexible and were able to address what seemed pressing for the workers that day.

When asked for suggestions around format, some participants shared they would like to meet more frequently than once a month, possibly for 60 minutes rather than 90 minutes. They suggested having more in-person meetings, rather than virtual. One person suggested that it may be useful to occasionally include the supervisors in the group. They felt it would be helpful for other units across the agency to also have access to RC.

Was the Reflective Consultation + Training model valued by child welfare workers and supervisors?

Strong positive feedback was given by those who participated in the multiple rounds of research. Participants felt the model was a necessary support for their job. They valued the time for reflection and the opportunity to learn from their peers. Those who chose not to participate in the research are not represented in this feedback.

Participants were asked in a survey if they felt the RC + T model was worth their time invested. At midpoint (N = 7), 86% answered positively, at follow up (N = 7), 100% answered positively, and for those who completed a survey when they left their position before the study ended (N = 4), 100% answered positively.

"I felt more enthusiastic and thoughtful after each of my monthly sessions. It refocused me on what is important in the job and reminded me to keep in closer touch with my workers in ways other than just reviewing their cases."

In interviews, themes that were found across participants included that they enjoyed RC + T and looked forward to it, they valued the opportunity for reflection and felt that time and space to reflect were critical to their work, they learned a lot from their peers, and it made space for hard conversations.

"I love it. I haven't missed a single group. I am super positive about it with our new staff. I tell them how much we all enjoy it."

"It was just so nice to actually have time scheduled to take time to just reflect on my work and talk about, you know, things that I was struggling with, or good news, or whatever it might be, and then be able to just have the time and somebody to reflect on with it."

"It's just really been beneficial for me to hear some of the challenges that my peers have been through again, maybe in learning a new way to approach a client, or how to handle a tough situation with a client. So, it's been very beneficial."

When asked about anything that did not feel valuable, participants mentioned that occasionally discussions got sidetracked by disagreements between members, and while they generally felt the facilitators handled such incidents well, there could have been more redirection.

It should be noted that there were a few child welfare workers who participated in some RC + T sessions, but declined to participate in the research, or participated in early rounds of research but not follow up measures. There was one individual at the mid-point feedback session who provided strong feedback that RC + T was not helpful or supportive for them. Therefore, our positive results about value are limited because it is likely that people who did not find the practice valuable were less likely to provide feedback and participate in the follow up survey and interview. Women were over-represented in those who participated in the entire process, so questions remain about if the process is perceived differently by men.

Did this model reduce participants' stress and burnout?

Participants reported very stressful work contexts at initial and follow up data collection. Participants felt Reflective Consultation + Training was helpful in reducing stress, managing crises, and promoting workplace wellbeing, through increased relational support at work. Survey results did not show quantitative changes in burnout.

Interviews asked about the impact of the RC + T model on stress, burnout, and wellbeing. Participants found that the group was a safe, understanding outlet. They were aware that their jobs were highly stressful, and they felt less alone after talking with their colleagues. They found the sessions empowering, feeling more energized, hopeful, and positive after sessions. They also felt that sessions were a reminder to be more intentional about taking care of themselves, and they felt that the mindfulness strategies and breathing techniques were useful tools.

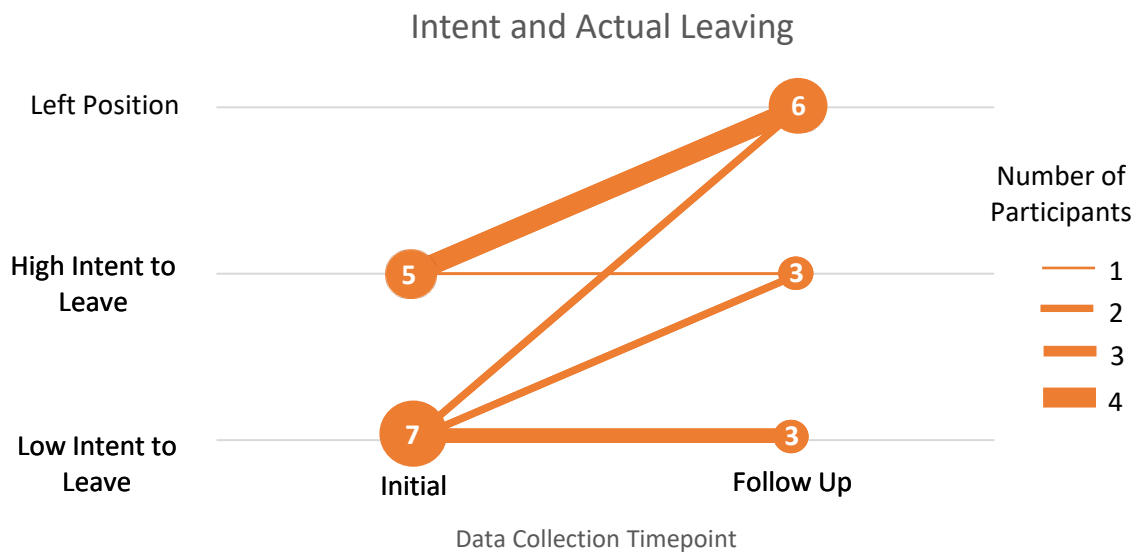
"It's like a built-in kind of mandatory reset every month, you know? I think something like this model is critical to the well-being of staff."

"You end up feeling more hopeful yourself, and more positive about the work in general, where it's not just combative or traumatic all the time - you can offer some hope. Even just some of the topics have been like...I intentionally applied it to one of my sessions, and then you come away from it feeling a little bit more positive than you would have otherwise."

Survey results showed that on average, participants had mild to moderate burnout before and after participating in the RC + T model, with no measurable change over time. Participants reported very stressful work contexts and factors outside of the RC + T model as impacting their burnout, including COVID-related changes to the work and traumatic cases. In the follow up survey, participants reported

having a lot of turnover on their team, being understaffed, and their supervisors being stretched thin. Because this study did not have a comparison group, we cannot draw conclusions about whether the RC + T model resulted in better burnout and turnover outcomes than would have occurred without that support.

We asked participants via survey to indicate their intent to leave their position before and after participating in the RC + T model. The following figure shows the change over time in responses to that question and compared to actual leaving. Of the 7 people who had low intent to leave initially, 3 remained low, 2 increased to high, and 2 had left at follow up. Of the 5 who initially had high intent to leave, 4 left their positions and 1 remained high at follow up.



Participants felt that RC + T increased the relational support they received at work. They found that the consistent dedicated space to connect with their co-workers led them to feel more engaged and comfortable reaching out, which was especially important in the new remote work context. Some, but not all, felt that moving to remote work had impeded their ability to get support from others. They appreciated the connection with others who are going through shared experiences and valued the outlet to share concerns, address feelings, processes together, as well as collaborate and learn from each other.

“We don’t have an opportunity to come together as a team and talk about some of these shared experiences like we used to when we’re in the office every day together. So, it’s just another opportunity for us to share those common experiences and build as a team and offer that support to each other.”

“I see a lot more of my coworkers or my peers reaching out. We’re reaching out to each other because we have been provided this safe space to have reflective consultation. So now we feel a little bit more secure in our insecurities and asking for help.”

Those who left their position before the study ended and shared feedback about why they left via an early exit survey primarily cited high job stress, lack of support, and the “thankless” nature of the job. They unanimously reported that RC + T was helpful and that they did feel

supported and acknowledged in that group, but it is clear that a once-a-month meeting was not able to mitigate the daily structural challenges they were facing.

Did this model increase participants' reflection on work with clients and supervisees?

Workers felt Reflective Consultation + Training gave them skills around understanding clients' perspectives and being more intentional in their interactions with clients. Supervisors also felt that they understood their supervisee's perspectives more but felt that job demands limited their implementation of reflective practices. Participants showed measurable increases in self-knowledge and self-regulation when discussing clients/supervisees.

Child Welfare Workers

When asked about the impact of the RC + T model on their work with clients, child welfare workers noted the value of sharing and collaboration with peers – they benefited from having discussions with peers who understand the work and can share insight from similar experiences. Additionally, reflection increased self-awareness and gave them a chance to consider alternative perspectives. It provided time to reflect on situations and be more mindful of one's own internal responses to difficult situations.

Interestingly, when survey participants (N = 6) rated their skill at perspective taking from 1 (very poor) to 5 (very good), their ratings decreased from 4.67 initially to 4.17 at follow up. It is possible that participants were more aware of the complexity and difficulty of taking others' perspectives after participating in the RC + T model, and this could have led to the lower ratings on that item at follow up.

"Reflective practice means being able to take time and reflect on the way I do my work, how it impacts the families I work with, what I can do better and what works well. CP is sometimes such a quick thinking, time sensitive problem solving job, that these groups have given me the ability to stop and think about the ways I do my work and how to be the best social worker possible."

Workers reported that they were more intentional about applying concepts that were discussed in RC + T with their clients, such as offering hope, slowing down, and encouraging parents to take care of themselves.

"I'm getting more comfortable with pausing to think about what my clients are saying, or you know my response to a difficult situation. I pause a lot more now, and think about it before I say it, because again, words have such an impact, and I want to make sure that I choose my words correctly, and things like that so reflective consultation reminds me to slow down a little bit and put a lot more thought into my interactions with my clients."

Survey results also showed evidence of higher quality relationships with clients after participating in the RC + T. Participants rated 12 items about their relationship with their clients on a 5-point scale (N = 4). The following items showed positive change of at least 10% of the scale:

- My clients and I both feel confident about the usefulness of our current activities in case management. (2.25 to 3.25)
- We have established a good understanding of the kind of changes that would be good for my clients. (3.00 to 3.75)
- My clients believe that the way we are working with their issues is correct. (2.25 to 3.00)

- As a result of our work together, my clients are clearer how they might be able to change. (2.75 to 3.25)
- We agree on what is important for my clients work on. (2.75 to 3.25)

The remaining items showed no significant change.

Supervisors

When supervisors were asked how participating in the RC + T model impacted their work with supervisees, they felt it increased their reflection on their own responses to their supervisees, and on their supervisees' perspectives.

“And really just being forced to look at like why I responded to that the way I did, and maybe how I could look at things differently.”

“The biggest thing was just about like making me reflect on why, why that person was displaying the behaviors they were. and then it helped me develop more patience with it.”

Supervisors mentioned that they heard positive feedback about RC + T from participants. They also recognized the parallels between how the administration interacted with the supervisors, how supervisors interacted with workers, and how workers interacted with clients, and felt that this model could be beneficial for the whole system. However, supervisors also shared a common theme that it was hard to implement new skills in the current stressed environment.

“Ultimately it did teach me better skills, I think, to be a better supervisor. But with what's going on right now, I do not don't think I could necessarily implement it.”

“I haven't quite figured out how to do it with my staff, because there's always so much going on.”

“I've tried to integrate it a little bit here and there where it feels like I have an opening.”

Supervisors rated 12 items about their relationship with supervisees on a 6-point scale (N = 3). One item showed positive change of at least 10% of the scale:

- The child welfare workers and I feel confident about the usefulness of our current activity in reflective practice. (3.67 to 4.67)

One item showed change in the opposite direction as expected:

- The child welfare workers and I have built a mutual trust. (5.33 to 4.33)

It is possible that the high rates of turnover at the time of follow up data collection impacted their perceived trust, that RC + T provided insight on the complexities of the supervisor/supervisee relationship, or that other factors contributed to this decline. The other items showed no significant change.

Interview Speech Samples

In addition to the survey and direct interview questions, we also attempted to learn about participants' reflection on work with clients/supervisees by asking them to talk about a recent case for 5 minutes and

using the Provider Reflective Process Assessment Scale to code their response. We coded 6 domains of reflection on a 4-point scale (N = 5). Two domains showed positive increases: Self-Knowledge (the consideration of one's own values, beliefs, and assumptions, and perception of oneself as a perpetual learner; 1.80 to 2.20) and Self-Regulation (taking time to pause and the ability to hold negative emotions without dismissing or rushing to fix; 1.40 to 1.87), which aligns with the interview findings that participants were more aware of their own internal responses and better able to be intentional in interactions with clients. Much of the reflective consultation focused on internal reactions. Overall, participants showed moderately low levels of reflection before and after participating in the RC + T model. The remaining subscales were focused on perspective taking and reactions to clients, which may need longer time and more direct focus on clients during reflective consultation sessions to show change.

How did Reflective Consultation + Training impact participants' experience of issues related to power, privilege, and race?

Reflective Consultation + Training became a safe space for participants to have conversations about these issues, and they felt comfortable to do so. The inclusion of a Black male facilitator was seen as valuable for some.

At initial data collection, workers reported that the county was very focused on Diversity/Equity/Inclusion issues and were asking for more input, however, it was unclear that the input was being taken into consideration or that any substantive changes were being made. In follow up data collection, people reported fewer discussions about these issues at the agency level, and there was still a sense that input was ignored.

When asked about having discussions about these issues with coworkers, some identified being very comfortable both before and after participating in RC + T, and others reported getting more comfortable over time.

The RC + T team realized that having only White women as reflective consultants may limit the support they could give, and thus invited a Black male reflective consultant to join the team. The addition of a Black male consultant was noted as positive for some workers.

Participants felt that RC + T provided a consistent space to talk openly about these issues. They reported that the space felt nonjudgmental, and it was easier to have hard conversations during this time than in other situations. Workers said that sometimes the conversations felt hard or uncomfortable, but that they were useful or needed.

So, [RC] opened up the topic, and has allowed me now to be more comfortable in asking my peers for their feedback on certain situations.

Everybody is being given the opportunity to reflect on their own feelings, and to be open about it to share it. To be genuine and transparent. That's what I have loved about it. I mean, you know there's no judgment. I think, that everybody really sees the transparency and appreciates that.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study was conducted within one unit of one county agency. Thus, the unique history, contexts, and events that occurred at this place during the study impacted the experience of participants. Additionally, results are likely to have been influenced by the three individuals who provided the reflective consultation. Their personal demographics, training, style, and approach are all unique. Given the small number of participants and high rates of turnover, we were limited in our ability to compare individuals across the study. Thus, the results of this study are informative but may differ from a similar model done in other places or with other people.

Additionally, we did not specifically measure what occurred during the reflective sessions. There is more to learn about how the depth of reflection during RC sessions and the topics of conversation covered impact participants' experiences.

Thus, it is necessary to continue gathering data from more diverse places and people to fully understand how reflective consultation can be effectively implemented in child welfare settings and the impacts it has on participants. Our next phase of research will interview a broader sample of child welfare workers participating in reflective consultation to dig deeper into how and why reflective consultation can impact their work.