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## JOURNAL ARTICLE

# The Relationship Between Reflective Supervision/Consultation and Reduced Burnout Among Early Education Professionals

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**P-5****6**

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### Abstract

*This quantitative study aimed to better understand the relationship between reflective supervision/consultation (RSC) and burnout among early childhood*

*ECE professionals in the*

*significantly linked to lower levels of burnout. Please see our privacy policy for details and any questions.*

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*consistent, relationship-based RSC has an important impact on the well-being of ECE professionals. The research provides recommendations to improve RSC engagement.*

The well-being of the early childhood education (ECE) workforce is increasingly understood as a cornerstone of effective services (Li Grining et al., 2010; Whitaker et al., 2015). Yet, those in the ECE field face complex challenges such as contextual adversity (Osofsky, 2009), low wages (Caven, 2021; Totenhagen et al., 2016; Whitebook et al., 2014), and few career development opportunities (Thorpe et al., 2020). Although ECE professionals value the work (Irvine et al., 2016; OECD, 2019), job-related stressors are linked to burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and turnover (Ansari et al., 2022; Osofsky, 2009; Schaack et al., 2020; Wells, 2015). While compensation is arguably one of the most crucial factors in the recruitment and retention of early childhood providers (Caven, 2021; Totenhagen et al., 2016), professional well-being has a considerable impact on highquality, consistent ECE services (Li Grinning et al., 2010). As ECE professionals work for wage-related policy changes, the field must also focus their attention on strategies that promote professional quality of life and well-being.

Well over half of young children in the United States participate in non-parental care arrangements, with nearly 62% enrolled in center-based programs such as preschool or prekindergarten (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). These numbers demonstrate the essential nature of ECE professionals. Yet, at between 30%–56% per year, turnover rates among ECE teachers are some of the highest (Caven, 2021; Koch et al., 2015). ECE turnover impacts program quality (Hale-Jinks et al., 2006) and child development (Markowitz, 2019 ). Research indicates that occupational stress and burnout are part of the problem (Schaack et al., 2020). Although the evidence base is limited, preliminary studies point to the benefits of reflective supervision/consultation (RSC) as a support for early childhood providers (Frosch et al., 2018; Shea et al. 2021; Susman-Stillman et al., 2020).

RSC is a well-regarded practice commonly used among infant and early childhood professionals, and it holds the potential to mitigate the effects of burnout (Frosch et al., 2018; Susman-Stillman et al., 2020). The practice of RSC enhances a provider's emotional capacity to do the work and respond sensitively to young children and families (Virmani & Ontai, 2010). The widespread use of RSC is well-documented. In fact, RSC is an essential component of the Endorsement for Culturally Sensitive, Relationship-Focused Practice Promoting Infant, and Early Childhood Mental Health© (Endorsement©) and a practice standard for the infant and early childhood mental health field. Notwithstanding the acceptance of RSC as best practice for infant and early

childhood professionals (Alliance for the Advancement of Infant Mental Health, 2018; Watson & Gatti, 2012), few empirical studies evaluate the impact of RSC on professional development and well-being.

Evidence regarding the positive effects of RSC is essential for funding and policy efforts (Tomlin et al., 2014), as well as a key factor in making RSC an evidence-based practice (Heller & Ash, 2016). Additionally, we would argue that ECE workforce wellness is essential, in its own right, making additional research an ethical responsibility.

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### JUMP TO:

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# Defining RSC

Although the primary focus of RSC is to support the professional development and reflective capacity of ECE supervisees/consultees, the definition of RSC continues to evolve. Consensus on the core components of RSC is reasonably new (Tomlin et al., 2014). Research on reflective supervisors has helped to operationalize RSC and foster the development of evaluation tools such as the Reflective Supervisor Rating Scale

(RSRS) used in this study (Gallen et al., 2016). Rooted in the literature on reflective supervision, the RSRS conceptualizes RSC into four core components: reflective process and skills, mentoring, supervision structure, and mentalization. Each component is defined in Table 1 and measured via subscales on the RSRS.

At its heart, RSC is a “relationship for learning” (Fenichel, 1992, p. 9) that fosters greater emotional curiosity and awareness. Rooted in attachment theory, RSC is a process by which the supervisee/consultee enhances their reflective capacity via a secure and caring relationship with their supervisor. In turn, the supervisee/consultee creates a similarly attuned and thoughtful space with children and families. RSC is also grounded in mindfulness and self-awareness. As such, the nonjudgmental space created in the RSC relationship helps supervisees explore their cognitive and emotional reactions to the work (Barron et al., 2022; Tomlin et al., 2014). In practice, RSC is a consistent, collaborative, ongoing process of reflection between supervisor and supervisee(s)/consultee(s) that matures over time (Gallen et al., 2016; Tomlin et al., 2014).

## Burnout

**Table 1. Definitions of the Subscales in the Reflective Supervision Rating Scale (RSRS)**

| Subscales                                  | Definition  |
|--|---|
| RSRS – Reflective Process and Skills (RPS) | Encourages growth and personal development                                |
| RSRS – Mentoring                           | Providing a trusting, attentive, and collaborative learning relationship  |
| RSRS – Supervision Structure (Sup Str)     | Providing consistent and engaged supervision                              |
| RSRS – Mentalization                       | Understanding emotional, situational, and cultural influences on behavior |

Concerns regarding a stable, resilient ECE workforce are on the rise (Madill et al., 2018; Whitebook et al., 2014). One area of workforce wellness that is linked to job instability is burnout (Wells, 2015). Burnout is often defined as the cumulative impact of job-related psychological and physical stress leading to poorer work quality and attrition (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Swider & Zimmerman, 2010). Burnout consists of three components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Emotional exhaustion is at the core of burnout and refers to the feeling of being overextended and exhausted by the work (Maslach et al., 2001).



Depersonalization refers to the feeling of negativity or cynicism toward the job, and reduced personal accomplishment is understood as professional inefficacy. When burned out, ECE teachers struggle to manage difficult classroom behaviors and connect with children (Curbow et al., 2000; Li Grining et al. 2010; Whitaker et al., 2015). Even more concerning, children with burned out teachers exhibit more externalizing behaviors (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014; Jeon et al., 2014) and have poorer academic achievement (Hoglund et al., 2015). With burnout rates as high as 56% among ECE teachers (Koch et al., 2015), a focus on ECE wellness is more important than ever.



## Current Study Questions

Developing a strong research base for RSC is critical in creating the buy-in needed for policy and funding. Using a quantitative approach, this study seeks to add to the ECE literature on RSC and burnout. More specifically, the study aims to understand the relationship between RSC and burnout among ECE professionals by investigating the following questions:

1. What is the relationship between RSC practice and burnout among ECE professionals?
2. What mediating role does RSC practice have on emotional exhaustion among ECE professionals?



## Methods and Sampling

This study used a quantitative, cross-sectional design to explore the relationship between RSC and burnout among ECE providers. Eligible participants included ECE professionals working in community-based child care, Head Start programs, and public school pre-K programs in the Midwest, wherein RSC was supported programmatically as best practice. Eligible participants included those 18 years or older who were members of the ECE workforce. Participants were recruited using an Institution Review Board-approved research prospectus. State and local ECE organizations and professionals participated in sharing study information to potential participants via social media, professional networks, and professional development events. Participants agreed to participate in the study when they accessed the survey.

## Quantitative Measures and Analysis

The online self-report survey was completed using an online survey platform. The survey was developed using Dillman's Tailored Design Method (Dillman et al., 2014) and question testing was conducted using the three-step interview question testing process (Pavkov et al., 2012). The Dillman approach involved completing "talk-aloud" sessions with a small number of early education professionals to inform decisions about survey organization and item response. Along with demographic information, participants completed the Maslach Burnout Inventory—Educator's Survey (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) and the RSRS (Gallen et al., 2016). This study used multivariate analysis to identify the strength of association between reflective supervision practice and occupational burnout and to control for several covariates that may mediate the role of reflective supervision.

## Survey Participants

Survey participants (N = 379) were ECE professionals, including early childhood teachers (61.7%), teaching assistants (0.6%), and other ECE professionals (25.9%). Nonteaching staff were excluded from the study. All participants identified as female, 82.8% were White, 9.5% were Black/African American, 7.1% were Latinx/e, 1.1% were Asian, and 4.7% self-identified as multiracial. Most participants were full-time employees (86%), while only 10.6% were part-time. Additionally, most participants had a bachelor's degree or higher (41.2% and 14%, respectively), 24.8% had an associate's degree, 10.6% had a child development associate credential, and 5% had no credential or degree. More than half (60.2%) of respondents reported earning less than \$40,000 dollars per year, while 25.3% earned \$40,000–\$65,000 per year. A mere 2.9% made above \$65,000. Despite low wages, more than three quarters of participants reported being somewhat or very committed to the organizational mission (17.9% and 61%, respectively).

## Findings

This study gathered quantitative data to better understand the relationship between RSC and burnout among ECE professionals. Two methods of statistical analysis (bivariate statistics and regression analysis) were used to examine the associations between RSC, covariates, and emotional exhaustion.

Correlations were calculated (Table 2) to look at the association between RSC and burnout. Results from the analysis revealed higher quality RSC was associated with lower emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, as well as greater personal accomplishment. Most notably, a negative correlation appeared between RSC and emotional exhaustion. A statistically significant negative association exists between all

components of RSC and emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, while a small statistically significant positive association emerged between RSC components and personal accomplishment.

**Table 2. Pearson's Correlation for RSRS and MBI-ES Subscales**

|                                    | MBI Emotional Exhaustion | MBI Depersonalization | MBI Personal Accomplishment |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| RSRS Total                         | -.337**                  | -.203**               | .070**                      |
| RSRS Reflective Process and Skills | -.388**                  | -.195**               | .167**                      |
| RSRS Mentor                        | -.361**                  | -.190**               | .183**                      |
| RSRS Supervision Structure         | -.340**                  | -.220**               | .162**                      |
| RSRS Mental                        | -.380**                  | -.235**               | .215**                      |

\*\* Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)

Note: MBI = Maslach Burnout Inventory; RSRS = Reflective Supervisor Rating Scale

Consistent with the bivariate correlation in Table 1, a statistically significant inverse relationship emerges between RSC and emotional exhaustion after controlling for covariates in a regression analysis (Table 3). The data indicated a positive relationship between income and emotional exhaustion, as well as an inverse relationship between age and emotional exhaustion. Higher emotional exhaustion was linked to respondents who identified as White. More research regarding these data is necessary to better understand and confirm findings.

Several covariates were measured on the survey including income, commitment, age, and length of time spent with supervisor. Surprisingly, emotional exhaustion had a small positive association with annual income, while depersonalization and personal accomplishment were not associated with pay. Unlike income, age had a small negative relationship with depersonalization, suggesting that increased age is linked to less burnout-related symptoms. The results also revealed that when ECE providers spend more time with RSC supervisors, they experience less burnout, specifically, less

emotional exhaustion. Self-identified commitment to the organizational mission had a small, yet meaningful positive relationship with personal accomplishment and a similarly small inverse relationship with emotional exhaustion.

## Discussion

With high rates of turnover and burnout (Ludden, 2016), greater attention to the needs of the ECE workforce is essential. Wellbeing plays a crucial role in the quality and consistency of ECE work (Susman-Stillman et al., 2020). Like many, we are excited to see a swell of advocacy and research focused on promoting ECE well-being. This study attempts to add to the growing body of evidence showing that RSC is an important professional development practice. We found that high-quality RSC, as reported by ECE professionals, is (1) significantly associated with decreased burnout and (2) predicts lower emotional exhaustion, a key dimension of burnout. These results provide important quantitative data showing RSC is a promising strategy for mitigating burnout and promoting well-being.

***Table 3. Regression Analysis for Emotional Exhaustion***

| Variable       | B       | S.E    | $\beta$ | t      | Sig  |
|----------------|---------|--------|---------|--------|------|
| Constant       | 46.495  | 6.072  |         | 7.657  | .000 |
| Total RSRS     | -.333   | .050   | -.338   | -6.693 | .000 |
| Age            | .132    | .056   | -.119   | -2.340 | .020 |
| Annual Income  | .638    | .234   | .138    | 2.721  | .007 |
| White          | 5.651   | 1.966  | .151    | 2.874  | .004 |
| Bach or higher | -15.632 | 12.338 | -.063   | -1.267 | .206 |
| Latinx/e       | -1.380  | 2.737  | -.026   | -.504  | .614 |

Note: RSRS = Reflective Supervisor Rating Scale, Age = Age of ECE professional, Bach or higher = Bachelor's degree or higher degree

## RSC and Burnout

ECE professional development is often focused on teaching, child-related education, and other work functions, yet research shows the quality of ECE services is linked to worker well-being (Li Grining et al., 2010; Whitaker, 2015). Ensuring a stable and resilient workforce requires more than job-related skills development and occupational competencies. The ECE profession involves complex and difficult emotional work,

including the ability to regulate emotions in response to children, families, colleagues, and work-related situations (Zinsser et al., 2016). A professional's reflective capacity impacts the observation of and response to internal and external emotions and cues, increasing mindfulness, self-efficacy, positive coping, and resiliency (Collins, 2008; Heffron et al., 2016; Jennings, 2015). Qualitatively, Susman-Stillman et al. (2020) offered numerous examples of how RSC improves emotional regulation and coping, enhances connectedness and reflective processing, and decreases feelings of burnout. Although limited in number, quantitative studies routinely indicate RSC results in reductions in burnout and occupational stress (Frosch et al., 2018; Gallen et al., 2016; Heffron et al., 2016; Virmani & Ontai, 2010; Watson & Gatti, 2012). The current study's findings support previous research and demonstrate that lower burnout is associated with high-quality RSC practice, particularly when more time is spent with the supervisor.



Results from the analysis revealed higher quality reflective supervision/ consultation was associated with lower emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, as well as greater personal accomplishment. Photo:

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## Individual Factors and Emotional Exhaustion

Sociodemographic factors, specifically age and race, emerged as predictors of emotional exhaustion. Consistent with previous studies of ECE and related helping professionals, we found younger age was associated with increased burnout (Lee et al., 2013; Moon & Lee, 2005; Simionato & Simpson, 2018). Younger age was significantly associated with emotional exhaustion, a core component of burnout. It may be that

younger professionals have fewer work-related coping strategies, increasing vulnerability to symptoms of burnout (Simionato & Simpson, 2018). Our findings emphasize the importance of proactively supporting younger professionals through RSC to promote stability and resilience in the field. Reflective skills derived from RSC enhance positive coping strategies (Collins, 2008) and the ability to contextualize and conceptualize complex situations (Shea et al., 2021; Tomlin et al., 2014).

Research on race and ethnicity in burnout is largely inconsistent, with some studies finding differences and others not (Lawrence et al., 2022). The results of this study show a slight association between emotional exhaustion and identifying as White. This finding may be a result of the covariates used in the regression (e.g., income, age, education) or of the nature of the large majority White sample. This study also did not investigate the extent to which ECE professionals were endemic to the communities where they worked, which may be an important factor in the results. Another consideration is how burnout is understood and measured (Lawrence et al., 2022), and the accuracy of identifying burnout among Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) ECE providers.

## Organizational Factors and Emotional Exhaustion

Compensation is widely recognized as one of the most critical factors in a stable and resilient ECE workforce (Sandstrom et al., 2020; Shea et al., 2021). Despite the integral nature of early childhood work, ECE providers are not adequately paid. Compensation varies depending on program, experience, regional location, and other factors. For ECE professionals, per hour wages have dropped more than 6% and the average annual salary is below \$30,000—just above the poverty level (Coffey, 2022). Although advocacy efforts are underway, we found wages to be considerably low with more than half of respondents making less than \$40,000 per year. Poor pay and nominal benefits have been linked to a variety of negative outcomes including burnout (Geolman & Guo, 1998; Whitebook et al., 2014). Yet, contrary to previous research, this study found increased pay to be associated with emotional exhaustion. In considering these results, we are curious about workload expectations, with even the slightest increases in pay. A push for greater quality, qualifications, and accountability has increased workforce expectations and demands without commensurate pay and benefits (Cumming et al., 2020; Sakai et al., 2014; Thorpe et al., 2020). Results of this study may indicate a mismatch between pay and workforce demands undermining efforts for better early childhood quality and stability (Main et al., 2018).



# Limitations and Considerations

Although this study contributes to the literature on RSC, the findings are nuanced and are the product of prepandemic life. Nonetheless, the results are a snapshot of ECE experiences and support continued RSC research and practice. Beyond the inherent limitations of cross-sectional studies, our findings are limited by the lack of diversity in the sample. We are uncertain if this is due to sampling strategy or a lack of diversity among ECE professionals in the study region. Coffey (2022) noted that close to two thirds of the ECE workforce in the Midwest is White. Careful assessment of sampling practices, as well as deliberate inclusion of communities of color, is particularly important for future studies.

Similarly, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of “best practice” RSC models such as the Best Practice Guidelines for Reflective Supervision/Consultation (Alliance for the Advancement of Infant Mental Health, 2018), which was alluded to early in this article. This model of RSC was predominately authored by dominant culture researchers and advocates. BIPOC advocates, leaders, scholars, and others in the ECE field have highlighted the need for diversity-attuned reflective practice that includes discussions of power, systemic racism, and privilege (Thomas et al., 2019; Wilson & Barron, 2022). With the support of the Diversity-Informed Tenets for Work With Infants, Children, and Families (Thomas et al., 2019) an ongoing antiracist, anti-oppressive reconceptualization of RSC is emerging.

Despite a growing body of research suggesting RSC impacts burnout and work-related stress, there are additional questions about the most supportive dose and format of RSC. Furthermore, this study indicates that greater time with a supervisor may support ECE well-being. Yet, time is a limited resource in ECE settings and a barrier to RSC. Reductions in this barrier may occur when recruitment and retention challenges, such as equitable pay, are more globally addressed. However, further research efforts are needed.

## Recommendations

The findings in this study suggest opportunities to support and strengthen the ECE workforce. ECE professionals provide sophisticated, nuanced, and emotionally complex services to the youngest members of society. Yet, while ECE professionals are committed to the mission, the work is often undervalued. As advocacy efforts continue to press for equitable pay, proactive, wellness-based support cannot be left behind. RSC education and opportunities are often available through state organization, yet more could be done to ensure consistent, high-quality RSC is available in ECE settings.



Preservice educational settings may be another area to promote RSC. Preservice RSC groups or simulation opportunities may support young professionals in developing the reflective capacity and coping skills necessary to persist in the field of early childhood.



Self-identified commitment to the organizational mission had a small, yet meaningful positive relationship with personal accomplishment and a similarly small inverse relationship with emotional exhaustion. Photo: ZERO TO THREE

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**Lee Wells, AM, LCSW**, (she/her), is the clinical director and co-owner of Mind Chicago, where she offers her expertise and support as a child and family therapist. Mrs. Wells has spent more than 15 years working with young children and families as an educator and social worker. She is also a doctoral student at Northern Illinois University researching burnout among early childhood education and care providers. She is co-author of the book, *A Kids Book About Pronouns*, in press with A Kids Co. and due out this year.

## Learn More

Beyond Reflection: Advancing Reflective Supervision/Consultation (RS/C) to the Next Level. A Professional Innovations Discussion Paper N. Hause. & S. LeMoine (2022)

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