# "Asking the 'dumb' questions":
An evaluative survey of reflective supervision with statutory child protection social workers

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## ABSTRACT

**INTRODUCTION:** Reflective social work supervision is essential to professional development, building resilience and client work. However, in child protection, supervision is preoccupied with managing risk and meeting outcomes at the expense of analysis and critical reflection. Oranga Tamariki (OT), the statutory child protection organisation in Aotearoa New Zealand, has recently been scrutinised for poor supervisory practice. The authors worked alongside OT social work supervisors and supervisees to explore ways to generate resilience, learning, self-awareness and develop practices that support reflective capability and well-being in supervision.

**METHODS:** This article presents data from the pre/post online evaluation of an action research intervention study with OT supervisors and supervisees. The aim of the online survey was to measure participants' supervision practices, and the extent to which perceptions of confidence, reflection, professional learning and resilience improved.

**FINDINGS:** The findings are reported from key areas within OT supervision: the frequency of supervision sessions, the functions of supervision, engagement in reflection, supervision-changing practice, resilience and longevity in social work careers and the supervision of supervisors.

**CONCLUSIONS:** The results from the survey showed social workers had increased confidence as they built reflective capacity, resiliency and improved their supervision practice. The study identified the importance of developing learning spaces that enhance reflective supervision for supervisors and supervisees in child protection.

**KEYWORDS:** Supervision; social work; child protection; critical reflection

Supervision is a cornerstone of effective social work practice, a professional process that encompasses reflection, education and case management (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014). Despite considerable literature indicating the value of supervision to practice on worker and organisational outcomes (Carpenter et al., 2012; Pitt et al., 2021), research relating to supervision which supports practitioners and their relational work with service users is only beginning. Wilkins et al. (2018) has indicated "practice-focused" group supervision has a "golden thread" between supervision, practice, family engagement and decision making. "Systemic" group supervision has been identified as significant in creating more purposeful and relational engagement

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between social workers, children and families (Bostock, Patrizo, Godfrey, & Forrester, 2019; Bostock, Patrizo, Godfrey, Munro, et al., 2019)

Supervision, particularly statutory child protection social work, is buffeted between professional and organisational accountabilities informed by a context of risk management and outcome delivery (Davys & Beddoe, 2020; Wilkins et al., 2017). For some time, international literature has impressed upon us the need to improve child-protection social work services and provide space for reflection (Beddoe et al., 2021). Reflective supervision is essential for critical analysis and effective decision-making in these statutory professional spaces (Rankine, 2017). However, authors such as Wilkins et al. (2017) argued, from a British local authority perspective, that reflective supervision remains unclear in definition, how it is currently provided and how it is measured for effectiveness. The diverse support needed for statutory social workers to utilise and receive reflective supervision in statutory organisations requires drastic and creative changes in practice thinking.

The Ministry for Children, Oranga Tamariki (hereafter OT), the Aotearoa New Zealand statutory child protection organisation, is the site of the current research. The organisation has been criticised in recent reports related to the over-representation of tamariki Māori (children) within the welfare system and the organisation's procedures and the legislation (Boshier, 2020; Office of the Children's Commissioner (OCC), 2020; Waitangi Tribunal, 2021). The lack of reflective supervision was identified in all the reports. It is within this context that the authors promote supervision as the critical practice tool to build reflective and responsive social work that achieves better outcomes for tamariki and their whānau (family).

The current action research study with OT social work supervisors and supervisees explored reflective supervision practices

and aimed to strengthen practitioner development. The focus of the study was to explore further approaches that generate resilience, learning, self-awareness and to develop practices that support reflective capability and well-being for both supervisors and supervisees. The study contained three separate parts: development of a learning community with OT supervisors (Rankine & Thompson, 2021); thinking aloud in supervisor–supervisee dyads (Rankine & Thompson, in press); and an online evaluation pre- and post-intervention of the action research study.

This article concentrates on the pre/post evaluation of the action research intervention study from an online survey with OT supervisors and supervisees. The online survey was completed by all supervisor and supervisee participants who were actively involved in the study. The aim of the survey was to evaluate participants' current supervision practices and the extent to which confidence, reflection, professional learning and resilience had improved or not.

## Social work supervision

Supervision is a lifelong, professional process that is central to learning in social work (Davys & Beddoe, 2020). The supervisor is responsible for the supervisee meeting organisational, as well as personal and professional goals (Morrison, 2005). According to O'Donoghue (2003), social work supervision should model best social work practice with clients. To meet the multi-faceted nature of organisational, professional and personal goals in supervision, the structure of supervision has provided a foundational understanding of the various functions required in sessions. These include providing administrative, educative, supportive and mediative functions for the supervisee (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014; Leitz et al., 2014; Morrison, 2005). However, it is also critical that supervisors use an approach underpinned by reflection and learning which assists supervisees to develop and use skills and knowledge within the

ever-changing practice landscape of social work (Morrison, 2005).

Reflective supervision is a supervisory approach that emphasises learning, knowledge development, accountability and transformation in practice (Davys & Beddoe, 2020). Reflective supervision moves beyond a task-focussed structure and stimulates collaboration, analysis and emotional regulation (Franklin, 2011). Reflection (Kolb, 2014; Noble et al., 2016), and critical reflection (Fook & Gardner, 2007; Rankine, 2018), are essential elements underpinning reflective supervision. Both are necessary for critical examination, re-imagining, learning and developing alternative ways of practising.

The importance of supervision is recognised within social work professional standards. Within Aotearoa New Zealand, social workers have a mandatory obligation, through the regulatory body, the Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB), to receive and participate in supervision. The SWRB have identified that supervision is central to ensuring social work competence and is a requirement for social work registration (SWRB, 2016). The SWRB's Code of Conduct includes expectations that participants in supervision critically reflect on practice and supervisors ensure that supervision is culturally relevant and responsive for Māori (SWRB, 2016).

## Supervision in statutory child protection organisations

Child protection social work is challenging and emotionally charged for the practitioner (Davys & Beddoe, 2020). These social workers require a balance of skills between managing bureaucracy, complex decision- making and child abuse casework (Kelly & Green, 2019). Within this demanding context, it becomes vital that the social worker receives opportunities for reflection and support in supervision. The supervisor is often the social worker's line manager and juggles several administrative responsibilities, including organisational accountability to managing risk, performance and case management. Escalating acuity of casework, dwindling resources and the associated media and public scrutiny of child protection work has left social work practice controlled by managerialism and neo-liberalism (Beddoe, 2010; Rankine & Thompson, 2021). These wider, systemic pressures leave little space for professional aspects of social work practice such as emotional support, reflection and critical reflection (Wilkins et al., 2017). Moreover, the associated tick-box nature of a managerial approach does little to promote the best interests of children and families (Pitt et al., 2021).

As Aotearoa New Zealand's statutory child protection agency, OT recently has been under considerable scrutiny regarding practice and the use of supervision. The Ombudsman highlighted the lack of reflective supervision and critical practice in social work practice with families where the focus was merely on task completion and outcomes (Boshier, 2020). In particular, the decision making of social workers was criticised for a lack of assessment and the associated impacts of these practices on outcomes for Māori (Waitangi Tribunal, 2021). The OCC (2020) highlighted the urgency for strengthening and implementing supervision policies and practices that address institutional racism and support effective work with Māori. "Hipokingia ki te kahu aroha, hipokingia ki te katoa", the initial report by the Oranga Tamariki Ministerial Advisory Board (2021), has identified a significant gap in social work training and the need to develop an organisational culture that supports staff through reflective supervision.

OT's statement of intent over the next three years has a clear focus towards accountability of practice and developing a positive culture and relationships in social work (OT, 2021). Underpinning this commitment to practice, supervision

within OT has been reviewed through Professional Supervision Policy and Standards. These standards outline OT's commitment to improving a social worker's practice through effective supervision and improving outcomes for children and families (OT, 2017). The Professional Supervision Policy outlines the significance of reflective supervision as key to the supervisor's role and the critical examination of the supervisee's thoughts, feelings and actions (OT, 2017). The Standards provide a benchmark for supervision: promoting quality practice with regular supervision sessions, focusing on the supervisee's needs, supporting effective work with Māori and cultural diversity, and supervisors having appropriate levels of skills, knowledge and competence (OT, 2017). Whilst the Professional Supervision Policy and Standards espouse effective supervision practice as essential to child protection social work, the implementation of these changes in practice continues to raise significant concern (Waitangi Tribunal, 2021).

## Research of supervision

Research in social work supervision nationally and internationally has grown considerably over the last two decades (O'Donoghue, 2021; O'Donoghue & Tsui, 2015; Sewell, 2018). The literature takes the stance, similar to OT's Professional Supervision Policy and Standards (OT, 2017), that supervision is a fundamental ingredient for high-quality and effective social work practice (Wilkins et al., 2017). Social work supervision in social work can promote self-care (Rankine, 2017), provide professional development (Nickson et al., 2020), build resiliency (Beddoe et al., 2014), and reduce burnout and intention to leave (Carpenter et al., 2012; Leitz & Julien-Chinn, 2017; Mor Barak et al., 2009).

For reflective supervision to be relevant to practice, wider contextual factors need critical examination. These contextual factors include power dynamics, dominant structures and discourses that impact on, and influence, social workers' work with service users (Noble et al., 2016). Social work supervision generally lacks this depth of analysis (Rankine, 2018). The development of reflective supervision allows for anti-oppressive and culturally sensitive practice to emerge (Hair & O'Donoghue, 2009); which is essential when working with Māori.

The complexity of child protection work requires organisations to further develop reflective supervision for its workers. Carpenter et al. (2012) recognised the practice imperative for social workers to receive emotional support and the resources to develop and maintain reflective thinking. However, the effect of supervision on practice is an area of research that requires further evaluation (Wilkins et al., 2018). To date, Watkins (2020) has stated that evidence supporting supervision is weak, particularly for worker and client outcomes. It was the authors' intent in the current study to explore supervision practices that generate resiliency, learning, self-awareness and develop supportive reflective capability for supervisors and supervisees. And build supportive learning communities within the practice environment.

## Research design and data collection

The online survey was one part of a study to evaluate the two action research methods (Rankine & Thompson, 2021) working with supervisors and supervisees in OT. The authors, with research and practice experience in supervision, collaborated with the participants to explore and deepen reflective practice. The other research methods involved the development of a learning community with OT supervisors and a *thinking aloud* process with supervisor–supervisee dyads to deepen the reflective capacity and well-being within supervision. The questionnaire was designed for supervisors and supervisees to complete at pre- and post-intervention stages of the action methods.

The questions in the survey were influenced by recent research related to supervision and longevity in role (Leitz et al., 2014; Leitz & Julien-Chinn, 2017), resiliency (Beddoe et al., 2014), improving spaces to reflect in supervision (Beddoe et al., 2021), improving practice for children and families (Bostock, Patrizo, Godfrey, & Forrester, 2019; Watkins et al., 2018) and developing support and supervision of supervisors (O'Donoghue, 2021). To ensure validity, the questions were reviewed and refined by the authors and input was also requested from other experts in the supervision area with extensive experience. The questionnaire consisted of contextual questions related to frequency of supervision; the functions of supervision; engagement in reflection; supervision developing practice; supervision assisting resiliency; supervision improving confidence to change existing practice; and perceptions of supervision promoting positive outcomes for children and families. Supervisees and supervisors were also asked separate additional questions on the survey. Supervisees were asked the additional question "Does supervision support longevity in your social work career?" Supervisors were additionally asked "How often do you receive supervision?" and "How often do you engage in reflection while receiving supervision?". Data were measured used a five-point scale ranging from *not at all* to *all of the time*. The exceptions were Question one that measured frequency of supervision from *never* to *weekly* and Question two related to the functions of supervision from *not important* to *very important*. Each question also asked for a qualitative response to provide further description to the answer provided on the five-point scale. A final qualitative question was asked on each survey regarding any further participant comment related to supervision in the survey. Internal reliability was not measured and mean scores were used due to the small sample size and the different scales used in the questionnaires. The time between each survey (pre- and post-intervention) was approximately one year. The purpose of participants completing the online survey twice was to evaluate the supervisors' and supervisees' views around current supervision practices and the extent to which confidence, reflection, professional learning and resilience had improved.

Participants employed at a regional OT office were invited to become involved in the study through the distribution, by the regional senior management team, of an information sheet to all care and protection social work staff. Participants completed and sent the signed consent form to the authors. The questionnaire was distributed by a web collector where the survey link was electronically sent to participants. Participants then received an electronic link via email to complete the online survey through the SurveyMonkey website. This was done prior to becoming involved in the interventions and after the study had been completed. An independent contractor completed a report on the data and provisional findings from the online surveys. The study was approved by the Human Participants Ethics Committee at the University of Auckland and consent obtained from the Chief Executive of OT, the Regional Manager of the appropriate OT site and Senior Advisor of Regional Operations.

Four supervisors and six supervisees participated in the online survey. The online survey provided both quantitative and qualitative data which were analysed descriptively and manually (Excel was used for quantitative data) due to the nature of the data and sample size. Frequency graphs were created for most of the quantitative questions to facilitate comparisons across pre- and post-intervention stages. Qualitative data were coded manually. Where data were collected as a five-point differential rating scale, mean scores were calculated as a useful indicator related to the question.

## Findings

The pre- and post-intervention survey explored the following key areas of

supervision within OT: the frequency of supervision sessions; the functions of supervision; engagement in reflection; supervision changing practice; resilience; longevity in social work career; and the supervision of supervisors.

### Frequency of supervision sessions

The supervisors and supervisees were asked to indicate how frequently they received/provided supervision. At pre- and post-intervention phases, the mean frequency of supervision remained the same as *once a fortnight* (see Figures 1 and 2). However, supervisees reported receiving less supervision at the post-intervention phase (for example, two supervisees stated *sometimes* and one supervisee stated *once a month*). Supervisees reflected, in their qualitative comments, on their own experiences of becoming more senior workers and therefore the frequency of supervision was consistent with OT policy. The policy details that new staff should



*Figure 1. How Often Do You Provide Supervision? (Supervisors)*
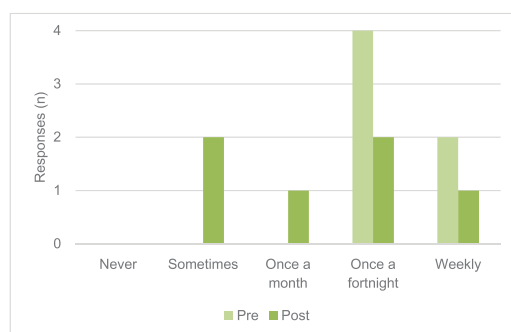


*Figure 2. How Often Do You Receive Supervision? (Supervisees)*

receive weekly supervision, reducing to fortnightly after the social workers have 12 months' experience (OT, 2017).

From the survey, some supervisors felt that more supervision of social workers was required: "I think supervision should be weekly, to both meet the requirements of the Ministry where we demonstrate consultation on casework, and reflection, where we explore the emotional impact of the work more."

The supervisees indicated that they participated in weekly or fortnightly supervision. However, for some, this was also subject to supervisor availability. The availability of their supervisor meant that supervision was not as frequent as they would like, with one supervisee stating, "According to the availability of my supervisor, it is when we can have it." Some supervisees indicated that the frequency should be determined by the needs of individual social workers, e.g., "I like to be guided and gauge by actual need rather than policy" and "We agree that we can meet any time there is a need." These statements were made post-intervention when there was also reduced availability of supervisors (as stated above).
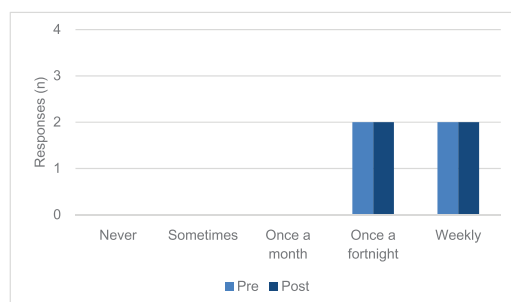
### The functions of supervision

Both supervisors and supervisees were asked to rate the importance of four specific supervisory functions on a 5-point scale (1 = *not important*; 5 = *very important*). These supervisory functions align with key literature and are necessary in meeting professional and organisational needs (Davys & Beddoe, 2020; Kadushin & Harkness, 2014; Morrison, 2005). For comparison purposes, mean scores have been calculated for each function/participant group (Table 1).

Supervisors rated the importance of all four functions in supervision higher than did supervisees. At the post-intervention stage, supervisors rated all four functions as of lower importance, and supervisees rated managerial (2.67) and mediation (2.33) functions as lower.

Table 1. Mean Scores For Supervisory Functions

| Importance of supervision function in supervision | Supervisor | | Supervisee | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Pre | Post | Pre | Post |
| Managerial matters | 3.75 | 3.00 | 3.17 | 2.67 |
| Professional development | 4.50 | 3.50 | 4.33 | 4.33 |
| Support | 5.00 | 4.75 | 4.67 | 4.67 |
| Mediation | 4.25 | 4.00 | 3.33 | 2.33 |

Participants were also asked to describe the types of issues brought to supervision via an additional qualitative question. Supervisors mostly raised caseload management, as the "pressing" topic. Other issues included providing case updates, professional development/training opportunities, administration (such as leave, human resource matters, policy, IT systems), managerial (such as performance or conduct), practical coaching (such as dealing with difficult clients), internal and external relationships, and issues of a more personal nature (for example, work–life balance, stress management). Despite mediation listed as a potential function in the quantitative part to this question, supervisors did not comment on this further.

Caseload management was also frequently mentioned by supervisees (this included receiving guidance, direction, and advice on cases). In contrast to the comments made by supervisors at the pre-intervention stage, there was more of a focus on personal issues or feelings in the session. For example, "overall experiences and feelings towards work"; "things relating to my wellbeing"; and "how I am feeling due to personal circumstances and the significant impact these have on my work". Other topics mentioned by supervisees included professional development/training, understanding of processes/practice standards, relationships, and task-orientated issues (such as delays in completing work as per policy).

The nature of the topics brought to supervision were slightly different for supervisees. At the post-intervention stage, supervisees were bringing different issues to their supervision with comments suggesting a greater amount of reflection at meetings. Supervisees spoke often about supervision being an opportunity for "support", as well as a chance to reflect on "personal views and how they influence practice." Supervisees were more eager to discuss cases and their thinking and decisions. This was so they could reflect further and identify areas they could "improve on and grow."

### Engagement in reflection

At pre- and post-intervention, supervisors and supervisees were asked to indicate the frequency of reflection occurring in supervision sessions. As seen in Figures 3 and 4, supervisors perceived that the frequency of reflection increased across the two timeframes (see Figure 3) with two supervisors stating *most of the time* and one *half the time*. Whilst supervisees indicated a slight decrease in reflection occurring in their
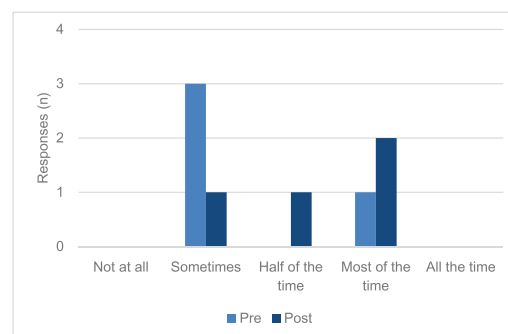
Figure 3. How Often Do You Think Reflection Occurs During the Supervision You Provide? (Supervisors)
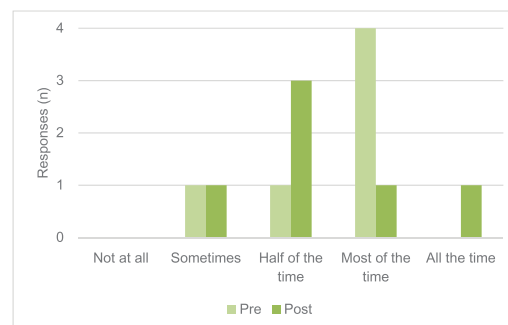
Figure 4. How Often Do You Engage in Reflection During Supervision? (Supervisees)

sessions (see Figure 4) with three supervisees at post-intervention stating *half the time.* The decrease corresponds with the reduction in frequency of supervision for supervisees over the time of the study.

One supervisor made a further clarification about the level of engagement of reflection in supervision not being enough due to demands and time pressures:

> Not enough time to be as reflective about particular practice as I'd like. In this extremely busy work most social workers just want the quick answers and to be able to get on with things! An hour once a fortnight is never going to be enough (not even once weekly) to cover all functions of supervision and keep up with all task-focus/casework as well as give good reflection time to the complexities of this work.

In addition, the supervisors and supervisees were asked a qualitative question to describe *how* reflection occurred during supervision sessions. The supervisors highlighted a range of strategies that they used, for example, asking open questions, revisiting initial thoughts/beliefs/biases, allowing silence and reframing statements. The strategies that the supervisors used were based around a specific case discussion or plan. One supervisor described that some supervisees feel challenged around the process of reflecting:

> I often find that asking questions to get social workers to reflect on their decisions are seen as a threat, and are viewed that you are challenging their practice for disciplinary reasons. I also find that social workers feel challenged to explain their case analysis, they will often tell you about the information they have gathered, and the plan they are putting in, but not about why that plan is the right one.

In contrast, supervisees identified a range of issues that they brought to supervision to reflect on. Casework featured consistently and supervisees would bring concerns, "errors or mistakes", case complexities and difficult decisions to supervision. Positive experiences when working with children and families or "wins" were also seen as useful: "Reflecting on the positive practice I have done and also the impact this has on a child/ young person and/or their family and how I felt about that." Supervisees also raised professional development areas for further reflection such as specifically asking for feedback from a supervisor, critical thinking and exploring alternative perspectives and possible personal bias.

### Supervision changing practice

Supervisees positively responded to supervision being helpful towards improving their practice. All participants responded that supervision improved practice either *most* or *all the time* across the two survey times (see Figure 5). It was noted the mean decreased at post-intervention to *most of the time* as one supervisee felt that supervision had slightly reduced in helpfulness in improving practice.

The supervisees were asked to provide an example of a time that supervision had improved their practice. A range of positive experiences were shared. For one supervisee the sharing of feelings and previous experiences was helpful to shift pre-existing patterns, values and beliefs:

> I have shared openly my concerns about families that do not engage openly with
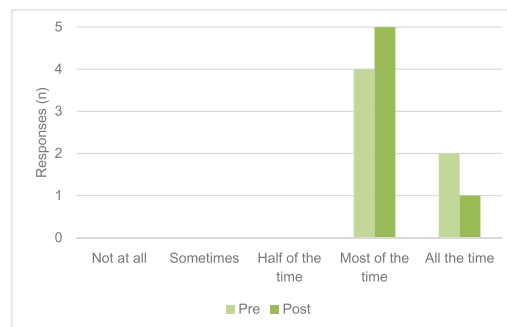


*Figure 5. Is Supervision Helpful Towards Improving Your Practice? (Supervisees)*

Oranga Tamariki. My supervisor was able to advise me of times where she had engaged with families in her position and had received similar experiences. My supervisor asked me questions about my desire to support families in their times of needs and asked about how it made me feel when families weren't ready to engage.

Another supervisee realised the value of supervision in exploring doubts and fears when working with a specific family and working through the best decision that could be reached at the time:

I find supervision has improved my practice when I had doubts about a decision I had made regarding one of my cases and through supervision I was able to reflect and be guided by my supervisor to realise I had made the right decision.

Supervisors and supervisees were both asked whether supervision assisted with developing confidence in making changes to practice (see Figures 6 and 7). Supervisors overall were less likely than supervisees to indicate that confidence had improved as a result of supervision. At pre-intervention, two supervisors rated this as *sometimes* or *half the time*. This was perhaps due to the supervisor's tentativeness and self-critique in their own skills and abilities within supervision. By post-intervention however, two supervisors rated this as *most of the time*.
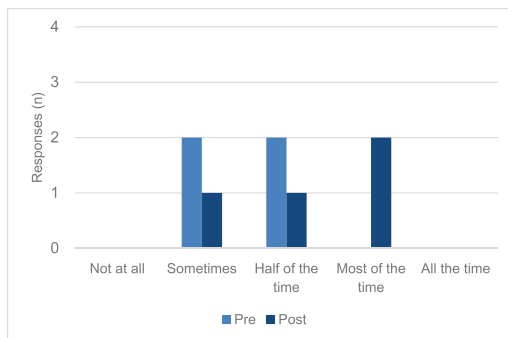
In comparison, five supervisees at post-intervention felt supervision had developed their confidence *most of the time*. Both participant groups noted that confidence was present at least some of the time. There was an increase across pre- and post-intervention, with more supervisors and supervisees feeling that confidence was improved *most of the time* at post-intervention.

When supervisors were asked for specific examples relating to confidence and change in practice, supervision was highlighted as helping supervisees stay in the job despite difficulties, overcoming overwhelmingness, developing greater empathy, delivering better outcomes to clients through *seeing* cases from the client perspective.

There are times with newer workers where they become overwhelmed with what is happening in families and forget to find out why things are happening (as the why is where the effective intervention strategies sit). I think that by asking the right questions about why, this has helped social workers de-escalate and think about interventions that are better targeted and less invasive.

Supervisees identified the value of supervision towards the development of plans when working with families and creating a better understanding of procedures and processes. One supervisee expressed that, "If I come away from supervision with new ideas, or having
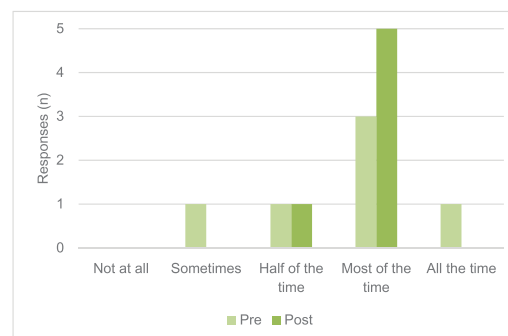


*Figure 6. How Confident Do You Think Supervisees Are Towards Making Changes to Their Practice? (Supervisors)*



*Figure 7. How Confident Are You Towards Making Changes to Your Practice? (Supervisees)*

processed how I can do something differently, or more confidence in myself, I feel able to make changes." Another supervisee spoke about how supervision developed their confidence in making connections between theory and their practice:

> Supervision helps me to be confident in my practice and ensure I have made decisions based on policy/ theory and can back up my decisions. An example is discussing a court plan I was filing and working through each step and what I was trying to achieve both short and long term. I ensured I could explain how each step was child centred. I was challenged by using theory and good practice until I was clear.

In addition to the more general questions outlined earlier, both supervisors and supervisees were asked whether supervision enhanced confidence in their ability to improve outcomes for children and families. Supervisors and supervisees gave some specific examples:

> A social worker extremely anxious about attending multidisciplinary meetings is now regularly and confidently hosting/ facilitating groups of professionals all working with a child/family. Lots of assurance, talking through worries etc in supervision. Initially supported social worker at meetings, modelling facilitation, slowly taking "back seat" at their pace and eventually withdrawing from meeting (leaving them to it). (Supervisor)

> I think that supervision has helped me to improve an outcome for a child by being feeling supported in my decision-making for a child regarding a need for a separate bedroom for two siblings in a home who needed their own space due to a history of sexual abuse and they now have their own bedroom and this is already having an improvement for them. (Supervisee)

### Resilience and longevity in social work career

The supervisors and supervisees were asked whether supervision increased supervisee resilience. By post-intervention, the supervisors felt that supervisees' resilience was increased as a result of supervision *half of the time* (Figure 8). However, from their supervision sessions, supervisees felt more resilient between pre- and post-intervention, with high levels of resilience identified at the post-intervention stage (Figure 9). This included three supervisees stating *most of the time* and two supervisees stating *all of the time*.

The qualitative question asked supervisors what they do to encourage resilience with supervisees. Supervisors provided a range of responses at pre- and post-intervention stages including "[giving] credit where credit is due"; affirming competence; normalising experiences; providing clarity; creating collegial/peer support opportunities; talking
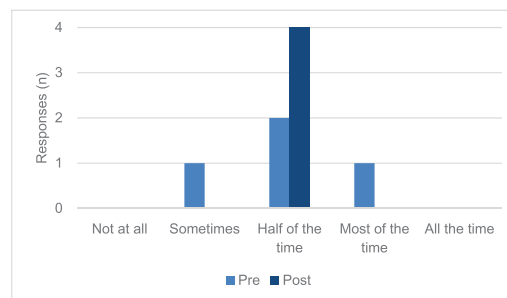


*Figure 8. To What Extent Do You Think Your Supervision Increases Resilience in Your Supervisees' Work? (Supervisors)*
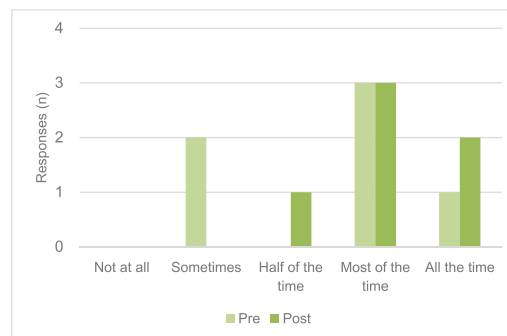


*Figure 9. Does Supervision Increase Resilience in Your Work? (Supervisees)*

through difficult situations; and offering advocacy or other support. The importance of maintaining a structured work–life balance and promoting self-care was also discussed: "I talk to them about taking breaks, finishing on time, structuring their time and keeping their passion for the work alive."

Supervisees were asked in what ways supervision increased their resilience. For many supervisees, having the opportunity to talk with a supervisor who had a professional understanding of their situation and potential concerns was seen as key to developing resilience:

> It gives me somebody to talk with when I have had a difficult encounter with a client, family member or other professional. Having supervision with a person who has experienced the challenges of the job is important because I am a new social worker and talking through the challenges helps me put them into perspective. This encourages me to process what I have experienced, which positively affects my resilience.

Supervision was seen as a way for supervisees to seek reassurance, "separate the personal and professional spheres", gain confidence, and "cope with the everyday nature of the work". Trust and respect in the supervision relationship was also mentioned by several supervisees as being helpful for their resilience so that there was a plan to "truthfully sharing worries" and "asking any 'dumb' questions."

Supervisees felt that supervision supported their longevity in their role and social work career. The majority of supervisees indicated that longevity was supported at least *most of the time* (see Figure 10). Five out of six supervisees stated that supervision promoted their longevity *most of the time* or *all of the time* by post-intervention.

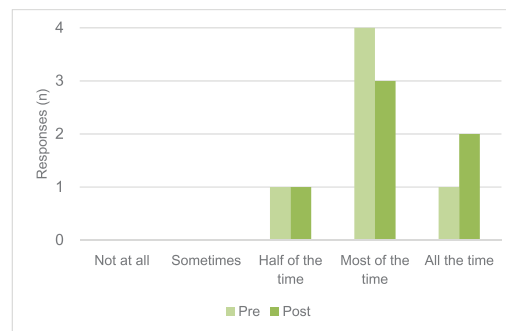Qualitative findings supported the quantitative data outlined in Figure 10.



*Figure 10. Does Your Supervision Support Longevity in Your Social Work Career? (Supervisees)*

Supervisees consistently indicated that supervision had helped them "settle into the job", feel "supported" in the role, and as a result, increased their job satisfaction. Not only did supervisees identify that longevity in their social work career was supported by good supervision, but it was adversely impacted when the supervisory relationship was not working well:

> When I have a positive relationship with my supervisor I am able to better manage stressful times. When I do not have a good relationship with my supervisor I feel more overwhelmed by my work and believe that I cannot do this job much longer for the sake of my mental health and general wellbeing.

> I have always found it beneficial to have an engaged and thoughtful supervision session, to help me stay positive and recognise the good that I do in my work … I have thought about leaving several times, generally when I have felt least supported.

### Supervision for supervisors

Supervisors were asked to consider their experience of their own supervision, both in terms of frequency and their own engagement in reflection (Figures 11 and 12). The majority of supervisors indicated they received supervision themselves *sometimes* or *once a month*. At the post-intervention stage, supervision frequency had slightly increased
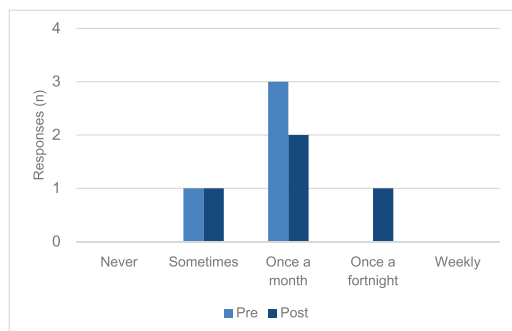
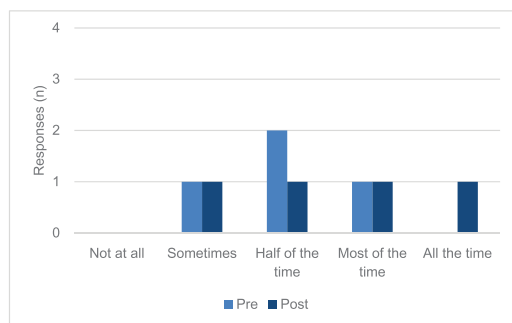*Figure 11. How Often Do You Receive Supervision? (Supervisors)*



*Figure 12. How Often Do You Engage in Reflection While You Are Receiving Supervision? (Supervisors)*

with one supervisor indicating that they were receiving fortnightly supervision.

Qualitative comments indicated that supervisors felt their own supervision was often "overlooked", which could leave them feeling "isolated" as "no one else in the office who would understand the unique pressures of the job".

One supervisor stated that their supervision "tends to get overtaken by other things that come up and take over as being urgent". Supervision that was provided externally was viewed as positive as the supervisor "did not bring their own political agenda into the supervision" and "sessions are reflective, rather than collusive".

In relation to engagement in reflection, the majority of supervisors engaged in reflection at least *half of the time*. At post-intervention, there was a slight increase with one supervisor stating they now

reflected *all the time*. When asked how their own supervisors encourage reflection, the techniques mentioned were similar to those discussed previously. These skills and techniques included open questioning, reframing, use of silence, and encouraging discussion. One supervisor felt that reflection did not occur during their own supervision sessions (although this was not realised in the quantitative aspect to the question) and said, "I can't comment as this has not been the case previously and may not happen."

## Discussion

The results from the survey showed an overall increase in the participants' perceptions of their confidence in reflection, resiliency and improvement in practice in supervision from pre- to post-participation in the study. The focus of the action research study, using thinking aloud interventions and a learning community, was to explore approaches that generate resilience, learning, self-awareness and to develop practices that support reflective capability and well-being for both supervisors and supervisees in OT. The findings from the online surveys indicated that participant perceptions, related to their professional development and reflective supervision, since the interventions had shifted positively.

The frequency of supervision, as outlined by the participants, connected with existing organisational policy and professional mandate (OT, 2017; SWRB, 2016). However, there was mention by participants that supervision should be drawn by need, rather than just meeting procedure. The four supervisory functions outlined in the survey align with supervisory functions within key literature (Davys & Beddoe, 2020; Kadushin & Harkness, 2014; Leitz et al., 2014; Morrison, 2005). These supervisory functions assist in providing necessary structure in the supervision session and meeting professional and organisational needs. Support and professional development were indicated by supervisors and supervisees alike as

central to supervision. The significance of supervisory support in sessions remains consistent with other studies (Leitz & Julien-Chinn, 2017). However, the *pressing* topics raised in supervision by supervisees were predominantly managerial matters and case direction—typical within a statutory child protection environment where the supervisor has line management and caseload responsibility for the supervisee (Beddoe, 2010). After the implementation of the learning community with OT supervisors and the thinking aloud process with supervisor–supervisee dyads, managerial aspects to supervision became less relevant as participants indicated that a reflective and supportive space was more important. This realisation by participants is consistent with Wilkins et al. (2017) and Beddoe et al. (2021) in tackling the need to create reflective spaces that meet statutory social workers' professional needs rather than supervision which is line management.

The supervisors and supervisees were asked to describe *how* reflection occurred during supervision sessions. The feedback regarding reflective supervision was very positive overall. Supervisors (who had also had the experience of participating in the learning community and thinking aloud process) indicated that there was an increase in reflection in supervision over time. Skills that are strengths-based encourage reflection and are essential to ongoing learning. These skills were central to the action research methods. Strengths-based training for supervisors has led to changed perceptions from supervisees and supervisors and promoted positive change in supervision (Leitz et al., 2014; Leitz & Julien-Chinn, 2017). The supervisors in the survey highlighted the strengths-based skills used to foster reflection but it was noted by both supervisors and supervisees that reflection centred around casework and meeting outcomes. However, supervisors commented that there was not enough reflection for social workers generally. These comments suggest that, whilst supervision occurred regularly, reflection and learning is not prioritised due to pressing managerial

agendas monopolising supervision time. Leitz and Julien-Chinn (2017) have stressed the significance of support in supervision and the time away from other systemic pressures for supervisors to provide consistent supervision. The debate continues over how busy supervisors juggle competing commitments around line management and reflection with their supervisees.

Pitt and others (2021) have critiqued the ambiguity and often diluted understanding of reflection in supervision by social workers. Wilkins et al. (2017) have maintained that reflective supervision in statutory social work is not clearly defined and generally is described as case management. Supervisors in this study also indicated that social workers became defensive and struggled to reflect on their plans with families. Social workers, particularly in statutory settings, need a safe space in supervision to explore their work, be challenged, be able to identify the use of power and ethical considerations (Cousins, 2019). Support for social workers to unpack their practice is crucial and requires a range of approaches (Wilkins, et al., 2017). Pitt et al. (2021) also argued that, whilst considering a different perspective in supervision may be the beginning of reflective supervision, statutory social work needs to consider a more critical lens—that of exploring power, inequality and social justice. The participant comments in the data presented an absence of aspects related to culture and work with Māori. Crucial to current criticism aimed at OT is the ability of social workers to explore wider environmental issues impacting on social work decision making involving whānau Māori and develop culturally relevant practice (Waitangi Tribunal, 2021). Within the managerial and crisis-driven environment of child protection, it is imperative that social workers have a space to critically reflect and advance decision making in their practice with children and families (Rankine & Thompson, 2021).

Supervisors and supervisees were confident that supervision was associated with changes in practice. These findings

correspond with other literature that has identified supervision as positively associated with completing work and job satisfaction (Carpenter et al., 2012; Mor Barak et al., 2009). Recent research reviews on supervision have emphasised the gap between supervision directly impacting on worker and client outcomes (Watkins, 2020) and parallels the criticisms directed at OT and the lack of supervision in practice decision making (Boshier, 2020; OCC, 2020; Waitangi Tribunal, 2021). In contrast, the qualitative examples from the supervisees in this study emphasised the value of supervision in providing clarity with child-centred decision making and guidance on practice issues—important factors associated with developing whānau-centred practice and providing solutions to OT practice. Similarly, supervisors and supervisees felt that supervision had improved their confidence after participation in the research. The online survey also provided direct examples of how supervisors and supervisees saw supervision relating to positive interventions for children and families. These examples included hearing the views of others, managing heightening emotions, taking time with complex decision making and making the *right* decision. Identifying strengths and resources in the supervisor–supervisee relationship has a parallel relationship with the supervisee and work achieved alongside families and children (Leitz & Julien-Chinn, 2017). These examples highlight the importance of OT social workers reflecting on their work through supervision and relating positive changes in their work with children and families.

Resilience in the workplace is often linked to effective supervision. A study by Beddoe et al. (2014) highlighted participants' need for reflection, safe exploration of emotions and that receiving constructive feedback in supervision was central to creating resiliency. Participants in this study also connected the significance of supervision with resilience in the workplace. Supervisees significantly identified an increase, post-intervention,

in their resilience and willingness to stay in their role because of supervision with their supervisor. Supervisees additionally identified that, when there was not adequate support or a good supervisory relationship with their supervisor, there was a strong desire to leave their role. The qualitative comments concurred with previous citations that talking about obstacles, self-care and feeling supported made supervisees more resilient and likely to stay at work.

The supervisors who participated in the online survey were specifically asked about their own supervision. The supervision of supervisors should be key in the development of practice and reflection, but curiously, is an area not explored in literature and research (Patterson, 2019). Despite supervision being offered approximately once a month, there was also mention from supervisors that supervision would be overlooked for other urgent tasks. Reflection may be present in the supervision of supervisors half of the time and the opportunities for external supervision assisted in disengaging with organisational agendas. Overall, the frequency of supervision for supervisors and the level of reflection increased over the duration of the study. Patterson (2019) suggested that managers should be replicating the practice that they provide to frontline practitioners and strive to ensure reflection over surveillance in a learning culture. Supervisors also need training and reflective supervision to ensure safe and accountable practice. Ongoing training and supervision as professional development should go in conjunction with one another (Leitz et al., 2014). In response to criticism in the recent reports (Oranga Tamariki Ministerial Advisory Board, 2021; Waitangi Tribunal, 2021), supervision within OT needs to reflect a bi-cultural lens with Māori-centred principles. This promotes social and cultural differences in supervision and decolonises existing supervision practices (O'Donoghue, 2021). Protected spaces for OT supervisors to explore, evaluate and critique decision

making involving whānau Māori and wider environmental issues need to be urgently prioritised in the development of social work practice (Rankine & Thompson, 2021). Embedding a culture of reflection and learning requires commitment within every aspect of the organisation, including supervisors and managers. This focus on improving supervision in OT requires future evaluative research that encompasses bi-culturalism and is Māori-focused.

## Limitations

The experiences and reflections are representative of the supervisors and supervisees in this study. The data collected from the online survey and the research are not generalisable. The survey may have transferability to other supervisees' and supervisors' views and mean scores across other OT sites in the organisation. Given the small sample size, participant experiences of supervision, understandings of reflective supervision and cultural diversity were not holistically captured. Reflective supervision in this context, is predominantly formed from a Tauiwi (non- Māori) lens and does not encompass concepts of Te Ao Māori (worldview) or other cross-cultural notions of cultural humility and sensitivity. Further studies that utilise a Māori framework, cross-cultural considerations and include studies by Māori for Māori supervisors and supervisees in OT are recommended for future research. The data collection from the online survey represents the supervision situation for social workers at two particular points: pre- and post-research. Whilst the survey provides an indication of changes in supervision over this duration in time, there are limits to the reliability and validity of this data directly. Whilst this study provided some initial investigation around supervision changing practice outcomes for social workers and their work, the impact of supervision on client outcomes needs to be central to further research in supervision (Watkins, 2020). Further studies, similar to Wilkins et al. (2018), Bostock, Patrizo, Godfrey, and Forrester, (2019) and Bostock,

Patrizo, Godfrey, Munro & Forrester, 2019) that explore practitioner work alongside effective practice with service users, are central to an Aotearoa New Zealand research agenda which builds towards better children and whānau, aiga (family) outcomes. Despite the limitations outlined, this study contributes towards the evidence base of supervision literature in social work practice in Aotearoa New Zealand, specifically supervision practices in OT. Such opportunities provide an examination of current practice that highlight strengths, potential changes and the opportunities to develop reflective supervision and alternatives to social work practice with families.

## Conclusion

Creating opportunity for reflection and learning in supervision is an ongoing tension in statutory social work as managerial agendas continue to prevail. The recent criticisms from the OCC, the Ombudsman and the Waitangi Tribunal detail the ongoing concern directed at OT around inclusion in decision making with children and families—particularly Māori—and the protected space for social workers to learn and reflect on their practice. To ensure responsive and reflective practice in supervision at OT, committed to better outcomes for tamariki and their whānau, child protection social workers need space that promotes learning and critical decision making. This study has highlighted the value of creating learning spaces for both supervisees and supervisors to critique and develop supportive practice which complement reflective supervision. Future bi-cultural and Māori-centred research is essential for improving reflective supervision and outcomes for children and families.

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