
What's best about social work supervision according to Association members

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Abstract

This article is the second in a series where the results from a national survey of social work supervision practice are presented. The survey was the first phase of an ongoing doctoral study into social work supervision undertaken by the first author and supervised by the co-authors. The article explores what's best about social work supervision from the perspective of members of the ANZASW by discussing their responses to an open-ended question. The 399 statements made by the 204 respondents were categorised and analysed according to frequency and theme. It was found that:

- the portrait of the best things in supervision ranged across the areas of practice, environment, relationship, and the qualities, attributes and abilities of the supervisor; and
- there were marked frequency differences across the practice and supervisor response categories between those who participated in supervision as both supervisors and supervisees and those who were solely supervisees.

The implications of these results for supervision practice are discussed with regard to development towards best practice guidelines, a model of 'best' supervision and an evaluation tool for supervision.

Background

This article is the second in a series based on the results of a national survey of social work supervision practice conducted amongst full members of the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW) in 2004. The previous article mapped the territory of social work supervision within the Association through a quantitative analysis of the results from the survey's closed questions (O'Donoghue, Munford and Trlin, 2005). This article reports and discusses the responses made to a question in which the respondents were asked to comment on the two best things about their supervision.

The specific question of what's best about social work supervision is not widely explored in the social work supervision literature. The most relevant literature relates to the phenomena of the good supervisor, good social work supervision and the strengths of social work supervisors (Davys, 2002; Kadushin and Harkness, 2002; Kadushin, 1992a). Kadushin

and Harkness, upon reviewing research about good supervision, developed a portrait of the 'good supervisor' from supervisee satisfaction and preference studies and empirical research concerned with supervisee and client outcomes. They concluded that the good supervisor was 'a person who is a technically competent professional with good human relations skills and good organisational-management skills', and that the good supervisor's approach to supervision is more likely to result in effective supervision and client outcomes. That said, Kadushin and Harkness acknowledged that the contribution of the supervisor is 'only one factor in the equation' that creates good supervision since supervisees contribute to supervision and proposed a contingency model informed by what has been shown from research to be good and effective for many supervisors. This contingency model consisted of a 'best-fit decision' between the individual supervisor and supervisee, working in their particular agency setting, serving a specific client in an 'idiosyncratic, problematic situation' (Kadushin and Harkness, 2002: 324-327).

Davys (2002), in a qualitative study conducted in New Zealand concerned with the elements of 'good' social work supervision amongst social workers and supervisors participating in external supervision, developed a model in which the four elements of good supervision were identified as:

- 1) the attributes and qualities of the supervisee;
- 2) the attributes and qualities of the supervisor;
- 3) the opportunity to exercise choice; and
- 4) the nature of the supervision relationship.

Davys characterised 'a good supervisee' as being: clear about what they wanted from both the supervisor and supervision; open and willing to actively participate in supervision; honest in their sharing of practice experiences and personal reactions; able to prepare and plan for supervision; self-reflective; willing to provide feedback; confident to challenge the supervisor; and trained in supervision. The good supervisor, on the other hand, was depicted as a competent and knowledgeable practitioner, who is also trained and competent as a supervisor with the ability to: challenge supportively; monitor self and be open to feedback; provide support and containment across a range of situations and emotions; and to manage power and authority. Furthermore, this good supervisor was also a supervisee who participated in and valued their own supervision. The third element in this model concerned the ability for supervisees and supervisors to choose each other, which meant they were free to 'move into' or 'out of' the relationship and that this freedom strengthened their ownership, commitment and responsibility to ensure that supervision met their respective expectations and needs. The fourth and final element of 'good supervision' was a relationship in which the expectations have been negotiated and a contract or agreement established (Davys, 2002: 140-144). In enacting this agreement the parties demonstrate mutuality, respect and regard, are authentic and exchange energy and enthusiasm, in a process that they share and own, which facilitates interactive learning, support and challenge, and is regularly subject to two way feedback and review.

The study most similar to our own, in terms of approach, was conducted by Kadushin (1992a) in the United States amongst members of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). This study involved a large scale postal survey in which open-ended questions were used to examine the 'strengths' as identified by both supervisors and supervisees. Key strengths identified by Kadushin (1992a: 18) were the supervisors' 'knowledge, skills

and experience' in relation to the work supervised and their 'ability to develop positive, supportive relationships with supervisees'.

From the three studies reviewed above it appears that what's best about supervision is: a constructive interpersonal relationship between the parties; the meeting of the supervisee's needs in the areas of practice, emotional support and development; and effective aid in the direction of assisting the supervisee to help their clients achieve positive outcomes. In addition, it also appears that what's best is contingent upon the setting (including, the extent to which a choice of supervisor is available), the characteristics of the participants, the supervision practice and the nature of the supervision relationship. Against this background we now turn our attention to what ANZASW members consider was best about their social work supervision.

Data collection and analysis

The questionnaire was sent out in two postings to a sample of 417 potential respondents (being a third of the Full members of ANZASW). A total of 209 questionnaires were returned, yielding an overall response rate of 50.1%. These questionnaires were checked and it was noted that 204 respondents recorded an answer to the question concerned, which read: 'What are the two best things about your supervision?' Overall, the 204 respondents provided 399 (97%) out of a possible 408 statements, with most providing two statements and a few respondents only recording a single statement. These statements were grouped by the respondents' supervision roles, namely: supervisee, supervisor or both (i.e. those who were both supervisors and supervisees).

A thematic analysis model was used in the data analysis (Ezzy, 2002; Patton, 2002). The first step in the procedure involved the identification of broad categories. This was done by highlighting key words and phrases in each statement. Four broad categories emerged from this process: practice, environment, relationship and supervisor specific. The relevant statements were then cut and pasted into a category file. The next step involved reviewing each category file and further analysing the statements according to key words and themes within that category and then creating sub-categories. From this development of categories and sub-categories the reporting framework utilised in this article was developed.

The best things

The 204 respondents produced 399 statements identifying the best things about their supervision. Sixty-nine percent of these respondents and statements were from those having the dual roles of both a supervisor and a supervisee, whilst 28% were from supervisees, with the remaining 3% coming from those who identified solely as supervisors. In this section the statements will be discussed within the four category areas of practice, environment, relationship and supervisor specific. Table 1 presents the number and percentage of statements across all four categories and associated themes.

Table 1. The best things about supervision: Categories and themes.

Categories and Themes	N	%
<i>Practice</i>	168	42
Progressive learning and development	67	17
Human responsiveness	42	10
Interactional process	32	8
Accountability and safety	27	7
<i>Environment</i>	107	27
The situation	37	9
Time	35	9
Comfortableness	18	5
Opportunity	17	4
<i>Relationship</i>	70	18
Supportive	24	6
Trust	18	5
Honesty	18	5
Openness	10	2
<i>Supervisor Specific</i>	54	13
Qualities and attributes	31	8
Expertise, knowledge and experience	23	5
Total	399	100

Practice

The definition of practice used for this category included those aspects within the process of supervision that facilitated the meeting of supervisees' needs in the areas of their work, emotional support, communication and development, as well as the assistance provided to supervisees with their social work practice problems. Within this category four themes were identified, each of which is discussed below according to its order of prevalence (see Table 1).

Progressive learning and development

Within this theme, emphasis was placed on making progress with problem solving, being able to reflect upon practice, being challenged and extended, and learning and developing professionally in supervision. Making progress with problems included such things as: feeling 'clear about tasks to move forward', 'working out ways and methods to cope with work issues', 'problem solving around casework' and 'positive outcomes, particularly an agreement to a way forward'. For reflection upon practice the areas of reflection included

practice, behaviour, 'case management stuff', issues presented and casework. Being challenged and extended occurred through the discovery of the 'wider perspective', the examination of 'transference/countertransference' dynamics, the viewing of 'practice with different eyes' and supervision providing an opportunity to extend and deepen thinking. The learning theme was specifically identified as it related to 'ideas', 'about other agencies and areas of social work', 'through the parallel process dynamic', and in relation 'to use of self'. Finally, professional development included the general growth and development that occurs in supervision, as well as abilities in specific practice models and approaches including kaupapa Maori theory and 'cross-ethnic' learning.

Human responsiveness

The main features of this theme were support, empowerment, responding to needs and an expressive forum. Support was referred to in general ways such as receiving support, being supported in supervision and supportive supervision. The notion of being empowered or energised was characterised by statements such as 'The refreshment I experience to re-enter the work place' and a 'Positive, healthy, empowering process'. The responsive to needs feature focused on general comments about the supervisee's needs being met as well as more specific comments concerning such needs as 'being listened to', 'cared for', having one's 'spirituality incorporated into supervision', and 'having issues addressed'. Supervision as an expressive forum was expressed via references to 'validation from ventilation', and 'share, vent and debrief'.

Interactional process

The interactional process theme included statements pertaining to discussion, being challenged, feedback, the approach taken and direction given. It highlighted the ability to discuss issues and concerns, such as caseloads and ethics, in an open professional manner together with the process of challenge and being challenged. Comments were also made concerning interactional processes (e.g. 'being listened to', 'working with the whole person', providing 'perspective, guidance and clarification'), receiving feedback, and a strengths-based process.

Accountability and safety

Statements on this theme included three distinct features: the accountability supervision provides; the safety afforded by supervision; and the contribution that supervision makes to accountable and safe social work practice. Almost half of the statements referred to accountability in relation to practice, clients, quality of work, monitoring of standards, and professional ethics and conduct. Supervision was also depicted as an accountability forum within which there were 'expectations of preparation', a 'focus on [the] issues supervisee[s] bring to sessions and also what they don't bring' as well as 'shared responsibility for decisions'. Safety was concerned with: the respondent's safety, client and supervisee safety, enabling 'safe practice' and the provision of a 'safety net for the worker'. The remaining statements included in this theme pertained to supervision's contribution to accountable and safe practice via: the review of practice; the affirmation of the social work role and values; the maintenance of confidence and competence in professional work (by ensuring 'things are kept up to date with nothing left lingering', 'improving effectiveness', 'facilitating best practice'); and by affirming good practice.

It is worth noting at this point that the four practice themes described above are reflective

of the supervision literature. Harkness (1995; 1997) found that problem solving and empathy within supervision practice contributed to supervisee satisfaction and improved client outcomes, whilst Kadushin and Harkness (2002), Brown and Bourne (1996), and Middleman and Rhodes (1985) emphasised the developmental, educational and learning aspects of social work supervision. Similarly, Munson (1993; 2002) and Shulman (1993) affirm the importance of the interactional process within supervision practice, while Morrison (2001), O'Donoghue (1999; 2003) and Hughes and Phengelly (1997) highlight supervision's role in terms of providing professional process accountability and safety.

Environment

The environment category concerned the setting within which supervision was conducted and embraced four themes, namely: the situation; the time made available or provided; comfortableness; and the opportunity of supervision itself.

The situation (space, place, location)

The situation theme was concerned with the location where supervision occurred, its availability, the type of space provided by supervision and the place that supervision was for them. For the respondents an external location, (i.e. outside of the agency), readily available supervision, conducted in a relaxed atmosphere, within a space provided for offloading, discussion, and reflection, were key features of the situational setting. With regard to the place that supervision occurred, the respondents described it as the place where they: connected with their supervisor, profession, peer and group; shared their frustrations and successes; could be challenged; and could learn and develop.

Time

Time was referred to in two ways: first, as a commodity, with time being used for a specific purpose or claimed as belonging to the respondents; and second, in terms of the frequency and regularity of supervision (i.e. timing). Statements which referred to time as a commodity identified the time that supervision provided for reflection, claimed that supervision was the respondent's personal or professional time (e.g. 'Time for me' and 'Time devoted to me as a social worker') and were concerned with the use of time (e.g. 'catch up on things missed' and 'to connect with the supervisor'). The remaining statements within this theme were concerned with timing and made reference to having regular supervision or the frequency of supervision.

Comfortableness

Comfortableness embraces statements referring to the supervision environment as being either safe, great or positive. A safe environment was a non-threatening one where issues could be aired and raised, that was trusting and safe for reflection and within which there was 'cultural safety', 'confidentiality' and a 'safe space to explore any issue'. A few statements mentioned a 'great environment' for development and debriefing, a 'positive environment' where practice could be discussed and reviewed, and within which 'proactive, productive learning' could occur.

Opportunity

This theme encompassed statements referring to the opportunity to: discuss issues in difficult and complex cases in-depth and confidentially; talk about practice and agency issues without prejudice; process practice events (i.e. trauma, emotional situations) and the impact

of the work; improve skills, practice and expertise; and to reflect on practice, get feedback, get ideas and clarification from colleagues.

Taken as a whole, the four themes comprising the environment category are somewhat novel as the environment concept has (until recently) received scarce attention within the social work supervision literature. O'Donoghue (2003) asserted that there was little consideration of it prior to Kadushin's (1992b) brief ecology of supervision and Tsui and Ho's (1997) proposal that culture was the major context within which supervision occurs. That said, Tsui (2005: 49) has recently emphasised the importance of the physical context, describing the 'venue, seating arrangement and the atmosphere of the place where supervision is held' as central to positive supervision experiences. In relation to the location or venue, it was interesting to note that only 3% (13) of the statements identified a location external to the agency as one of the best things and that internal or agency supervision was not mentioned. While this result is not statistically significant, it nonetheless raises questions concerning where supervision is best located. This is particularly true when viewed alongside Davys' (2002) description of good external supervision and O'Donoghue's (1999) finding that probation officers who reported the best experiences of professional supervision had participated in external supervision (nine of his 15 respondents also expressed a preference for external supervision). There is clearly a need for further research with regard to the location of supervision.

Relationship

This set of responses concerned particular features of the supervision relationship, namely, a supportive relationship with trust, honesty and openness. A supportive relationship was one where support was linked with affirmation, collaboration, connection, positivity, shared responsibility and equality. Trust was referred to as enabling frank discussion, a trusting relationship or trusting the supervisor or one another, as well as providing the atmosphere within which supervision took place. Honesty was linked with comfort, trust and openness, whilst openness was associated with transparency, honesty, trust and ease in the relationship as well as the ability to discuss anything personal or relevant to work.

The features of support, trust, honesty and openness identified by the respondents directly reflect the literature which espouses relationships characterised by these concepts as foundational to good and effective supervision practice (Tsui, 2005; Davys, 2002; Harkness, 1995, 1997; Kaiser, 1997; Shulman, 1993). That said, none of the respondents mentioned having a contracted relationship as one of their best things, in stark contrast to the literature which characterises good supervision relationships as having their expectations negotiated, agreed and contracted (Tsui, 2005; O'Donoghue, 2003; Davys, 2002; Morrison, 2001; Kaiser, 1997). One possible explanation for this unexpected finding is that support, trust, honesty and openness are what make human relationships meaningful, secure and valued – and are therefore seen as the best things – whereas contracts and agreements are essentially tools that establish the nature, purpose and scope of a relationship, thereby facilitating the aforementioned relational characteristics. Obviously, this unexpected finding signals the need for further research concerning the role and effects of contracts and agreements upon the supervision relationship.

Supervisor specific

The fourth category that emerged concerned features personally specific to the respondent's supervisor or the respondent as a supervisor, namely, the supervisor's qualities and attributes, expertise, knowledge and experience.

Qualities and attributes

Statements concerned with qualities and attributes made up the majority of statements in this category. The relational qualities and attributes identified included being: professional, available, challenging, open and honest, collaborative, reliable, safe, affirming, supportive, understanding, impartial, maintaining confidentiality and having a sense of humour. Other more general statements spoke of the supervisor helping and sharing (thoughts, views and suggestions), being 'interviewed and selected by the team', being someone requested, not working in the organisation, being of 'high calibre' and 'valued and respected'. The remaining statements were made by dual role respondents and were concerned with their supervisory role (e.g. being 'strength-based', 'being challenging and supportive with supervisees', 'looking forward to seeing supervision clients' and 'seeing supervisees learn and grow').

Expertise, knowledge and experience

A small number of statements identified the supervisor's expertise and knowledge as a best thing about supervision. Those concerned with expertise referred to: the 'level of skill', 'challenging and extending practice', using 'perceptive questioning', holding 'the whole/macro of the supervisee and career path', 'ethics and safety', and the field of practice. Statements referring to the supervisor's knowledge spoke of combining theory with practice and knowledge of theory, ethics, strength-based and feminist practice. The remaining statements identified experience, which in all but one case (where the respondent's own experience of various supervision styles was identified as a best thing) related to the experience of the supervisor.

Overall, the supervisor-specific features noted by the respondents were clearly related to the key strengths identified by Kadushin (1992a:18) concerning the supervisor's 'ability to develop positive, supportive relationships with supervisees' and 'knowledge, skills and experience' in relation to the work supervised.

A composite thematic portrait

The above categories and themes reveal that the best things about the respondents' supervision ranged across the full terrain of their practice, environment, relationships and the qualities and attributes of their supervisors (or themselves as supervisors). From this range, a composite thematic portrait which spans the four categories and the respondent role groups emerges. This portrait shows that the best things include:

- supervision practice in which there is progressive learning and development, human responsiveness, a constructive interactional process, and accountability and safety;
- an environmental setting where the situation is agreeable, time is claimed and productively utilised, the participants are comfortable, and there are opportunities for supervision conversations and practice;
- a relationship characterised by support, trust, honesty and openness; and

- supervisors who demonstrate well developed personal and professional qualities and attributes, plus expertise, knowledge and experience.

Inter-group differences

Marked differences were observed between the dual role and supervisee groups in the nature and distribution of responses for and within the practice and supervisor-specific categories. It was found that (see Table 2): the dual role group recorded 44% and 12%, respectively for these categories, in contrast to the supervisee group's 34% and 20%. Within the two categories these differences were predominately concerned with three particular themes, namely: progressive learning and development (dual role 19%, supervisee 11%); accountability and safety (dual role 5%, supervisee 8%); and the qualities and attributes of the supervisor (dual role 6%, supervisee 14%). A reasonable explanation for these variations may be found in the developmental differences between these two groups. Those with more experience in supervision (i.e. the dual role group) are usually more interested in the process and supervisee development, than those with less experience (i.e. the supervisee group) who are usually more reliant on concrete advice, practical direction, reassurance and role modelling from both supervision and their supervisors (Kadushin and Harkness, 2002; Brown and Bourne, 1996).

Table 2. The best things about supervision: Key inter-group differences.

Categories and Themes	Dual Role Group		Supervisees Only Group		Overall *	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Practice	121	44	38	34	168	42
Progressive learning and development	53	19	12	11	67	17
Human responsiveness	30	11	10	9	42	10
Interactional process	23	8	7	6	32	8
Accountability and safety	15	5	9	8	27	7
Supervisor Specific	32	12	22	20	54	13
Qualities and attributes	16	6	15	14	31	8
Expertise, knowledge and experience	16	6	7	6	23	5

* Includes solely supervisor group.

Implications

In this section potential development towards a best practice guideline, a contingency-based best supervision model and an evaluation tool will be explored as three possible implications of the findings presented above for social work supervision practice in Aotearoa New Zealand.

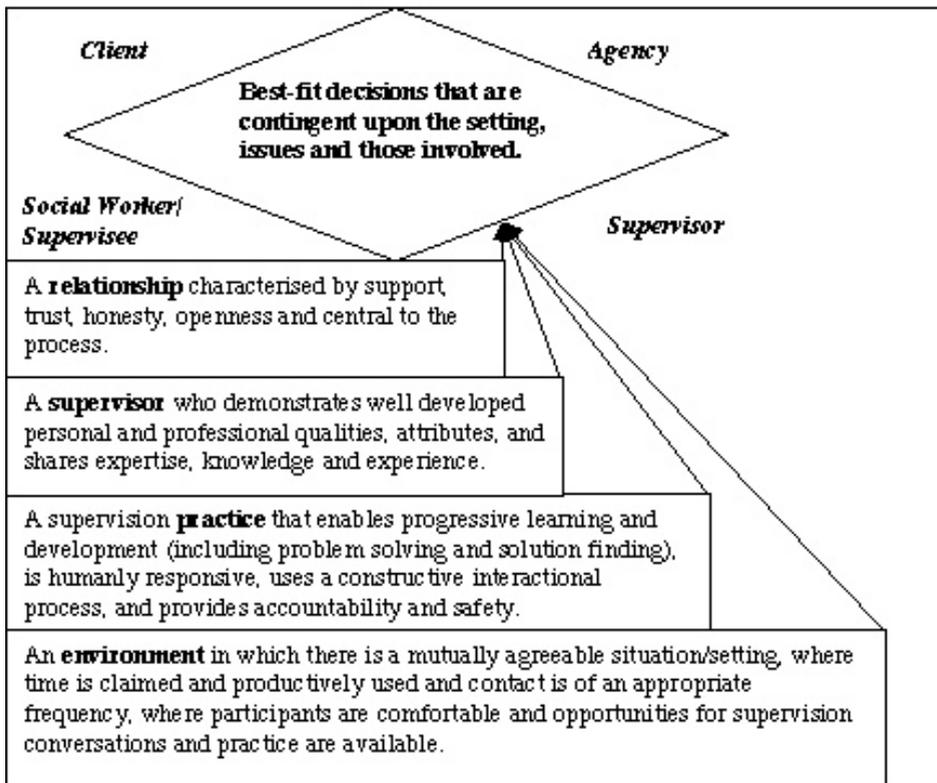
Towards a best practice guideline

Munson (2004) argues for the development of best practice supervision guidelines on the grounds that social work supervision and practice methods have been increasingly questioned by funders and managers of social service organisations. Munson also notes that the professions of psychiatry, psychology, nursing and teaching have already made significant progress in developing these types of guidelines. It is upon this basis that we assert that the results presented above could be treated as a contribution to the development of a best practice guideline for social work supervision practice in Aotearoa New Zealand. Such a guideline would complement the Association's supervisor practice standards, and its policy statement on supervision and ethical guidelines in relation to supervisory relationships (ANZASW, 1998; 2004a; 2004b). It may also assist the ANZASW supervisors' interest group in their recent attempt to develop a supervision guide for social service organisations (Hirst, 2006). It is respectfully asserted that the views of many members of the Association, as reported in this study, ought to be foundational to the development of any guidelines developed on social work supervision, particularly at this time when the Social Workers Registration Board is in the process of developing its supervision policy for registered social workers (Faure, 2005).

Towards a contingency model of best supervision

Earlier in this article the contingency model proposed by Kadushin and Harkness (2002:327) was discussed. This model consisted of a 'best-fit decision' made between the individual supervisor and supervisee, working in their particular agency setting, serving a specific client in an 'idiosyncratic, problematic situation'. The second possible implication of the results, therefore, is their contribution to the development of a contingency model of 'best social work supervision'. This emerging model would consist of a scaffold built from the study results which would, in turn, provide the foundational support for 'best fit decisions' contingent upon the setting, issues and those involved. The model could be developed either separately or in conjunction with the best practice guideline. Figure 1 provides a possible diagrammatic representation of this emergent model.

Figure 1. Emergent model of 'Best Supervision'.



Towards an evaluation tool

The composite thematic portrait arguably provides a benchmark for the 'best things' in supervision in Aotearoa New Zealand. This benchmark could be used as a measure against which social workers, supervisors and social work agencies could evaluate their supervision. An example of how such an evaluation tool could be developed and used by supervisors and supervisees as part of a supervision review process is included below. The areas covered by this tool were all drawn from the themes and features identified in this article. The best or ideal supervision is apparent when there is an agreement by those participating (i.e. the supervisor and supervisee) that all of the items occur 'frequently' and the great majority of them 'almost always'. The items or indicators in the form could also be turned into questions that might then be used to evaluate supervision from an agency or organisational perspective. Finally, the tool could be used to evaluate the extent to which the best practice guideline and/or the best practice supervision model were being implemented in a particular agency or professional setting.

Conclusion

This article has explored the question of what is best about social work supervision from the perspective of 204 members of ANZASW. The picture that emerges from these members consists of a conducive supervision environment, in which progressive, effective, interactive and safe practice occurs within a supportive, trusting, honest and open relationship with a supervisor who demonstrates well developed professional qualities and attributes and shares practice expertise, knowledge and experience. It was found that there were marked variations in perception – between those who were both supervisors and supervisees (the dual role group) and those who were solely supervisees – in the practice and supervisor-specific categories (notably for the associated themes of progressive learning and development, accountability and safety, and the qualities and attributes of the supervisor). It is suggested that the reason for the variations may be related to development stage differences between the two groups. Finally, three implications were identified for these results, with respect to the development of:

- a best practice guideline,
- a contingency-based model of best supervision, and
- an evaluation tool.

It should, of course, be noted that while this article has traversed the views of the survey respondents and presented a pathway towards what may be best supervision in ideal terms (Tsui, 2005), there is obviously a need for further research and evaluation of supervision practice within Aotearoa New Zealand.

Supervision Evaluation Form

	Almost Always	Frequently	Some- times	Rarely
To what extent does the supervision we participate in:				
1) Problem solve and find solutions				
2) Facilitate reflective practice				
3) Enable learning				
4) Develop the supervisee professionally				
5) Provide support				
6) Empower and energise				
7) Respond to supervisee needs				
8) Enable emotional expression				
9) Facilitate discussion				
10) Challenge and extend				
11) Use a constructive communication process				
12) Provide constructive feedback				
13) Provide accountability for practice				
14) Enable safe practice				
15) Take place in a mutually agreeable setting				
16) Use time purposefully				

To what extent does/is the supervision

we participate in:

- 1) Occur regularly (i.e. at an appropriate frequency)
- 2) Feel comfortable
- 3) Make the most of the opportunities available
- 4) Involve a supportive relationship
- 5) Involve a trusting relationship
- 6) Honest
- 7) Open
- 8) Involve a supervisor who demonstrates well developed relational qualities and attributes
- 9) Involve a supervisor who shares practice expertise and knowledge
- 10) Involve an experienced supervisor
- 11) Involve a supervisee willing to engage learn, develop and participate in supervision

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