

# The string to my kite: How supervision contributes to the development of a newly qualified social worker's professional identity

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## ABSTRACT

**INTRODUCTION:** A social work professional identity is constructed through a period of education and training, including workplace experience. For students transitioning to professional work post-qualifying, there is a period of significant adjustment, requiring an anchor from which professional identity can continue to develop and grow. The study reported in this article aimed to explore how newly qualified social workers perceived supervision as the string to their kites, anchoring them to their professional foundations.

**METHOD:** A qualitative methodology using semi-structured interviews explored the experiences and views of eight newly qualified social workers (NQSWS) in relation to the continuing construction of their social work identity, the challenges they faced in their transition and adjustment to their new professional status, and the role they regarded supervision had in facilitating this process.

**FINDINGS:** An analysis of the narratives indicated that the NQSWS regarded supervision as essential in building confidence and professional autonomy and ensuring they remained engaged in the construction, maintenance, and ongoing shaping of their professional identity.

**CONCLUSION:** For NQSWS to successfully navigate the transition and adjustment from student to professional social worker, frequent and regular access to quality supervision in their first-year post-qualifying was highly valued in supporting safe practice and professional identity development. Ensuring a more intensive approach to supervision in the first year of practice presents both a challenge and an opportunity to social work employers and the regulatory body that sets standards for the social work profession in Aotearoa, New Zealand.

**KEYWORDS:** Supervision; newly qualified social workers; professional identity; social work education

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An understanding of what underpins each social worker's unique approach to practice is referred to by Webb (2017) as a *professional identity*, encompassing the personal and professional aspects of the self. Professional

identity is constructed by adopting the values, knowledge, skills, and behavioural norms identified by a professional group (Connolly & Harms, 2019; Harrison & Healy, 2016). As an ongoing, fluid process, it also

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involves constantly navigating the shared dimensions of the self (beliefs and values), knowing, thinking (knowledge and theory) and doing (methods and skills).

The foundations for a social work identity are laid during a period of higher education studies (Shlomo et al., 2012; Wiles, 2017). During their studies, students integrate their professional identity into a practice framework influenced by educators, student peers, field education experiences, and structures such as professional bodies and regulatory frameworks (Roulston et al., 2018). The Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW) *Code of Ethics* (ANZASW, 2019) and the Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) *Practice Standards and Code of Conduct* (SWRB, 2016) guide the construction of a social work identity. However, it is with the introduction to practical experience that the concept of professional identity comes to life (Webb, 2017).

Integrating theory into practice and understanding how to use their practice frameworks begins with student experiences of field education, as professional identity develops when students can share their thinking, values, and perspectives with other professionals (Wheeler, 2017). Field education also provides an avenue for students to develop resilience to manage the challenges and tensions they will encounter when leaving the relative safety of student life and entering the reality of doing social work (Webb, 2017). With placements regarded as a supervised initiation into the profession, the SWRB's (2021a) *Programme Recognition Standards* require students to have at least one hour of supervision with their field educator per week. Supervision is a process of professional learning and practice enhancement that enables students to reflect on, understand and develop, their emerging professional identity (Roulston et al., 2018).

The SWRB has the expectation that, once registered, social workers will continue to engage in supervision at least monthly

(SWRB, 2018). However, it is argued that this expectation neglects to recognise the significance and challenge of NQSWs' transition from students to social work professionals, and under-estimates the intensive additional support needed during this vital developmental stage (Beddoe et al., 2020). Whilst ANZASW recommends its newly qualified members have a minimum one hour of supervision per week, Beddoe et al. (2020) argued that it is debatable whether this recommendation is implemented in everyday practice.

This article presents the findings of a small-scale, qualitative study detailing the rich stories of NQSWs. Three areas were explored: NQSWs' concepts of emerging professional identity, their experiences of supervision, and the ways in which supervision influenced and supported the development of their professional identity. The findings support the view that the first years of working life for NQSWs are pivotal for professional identity development (Miller, 2013) and that supervision is a critical site for this development to take place.

## Literature review

A common theme in studies following NQSWs into the workplace describes their first experiences as a collision with reality (Newberry-Koroluk, 2014; Tham & Lynch, 2014). The metaphor "hitting the ground running" was used by Donnellan and Jack (2015, p. 3) when considering the transition phase for NQSWs. Likewise, Fook et al. (2000, p. 79) described this challenge as being "...thrown into the 'deep end' of practice, frantically swimming as they were confronted with new situations for which they must take responsibility".

According to Harrison and Healy (2016), the first years of practice for NQSWs are crucial for professional identity development and a structured induction process and support is required. As part of a 5-year longitudinal study of Aotearoa New Zealand's new

graduate social workers, Hunt and colleagues (2017) explored support needs for students transitioning into becoming professional practitioners. Most respondents stated that they found their first year of work challenging, with disclosures such as: “nearly every day presents difficulties for me” (Hunt et al., 2017, p. 65). Local and international research clearly indicates that a mosaic of support structures is necessary for NQSWs to adjust to their new professional status, and supervision has been widely recognised as a key component of this package (Beddoe et al., 2020; Donnellan & Jack, 2015).

The purpose of supervision is to improve the social worker’s ability to do their job more competently; help them grow and develop; maximise knowledge and skills; and work increasingly independently through the use of a supportive approach that instils confidence and self-belief (Nordstrand, 2017, Zuchowski, 2014). The literature emphasises that accountable social work is achieved through the structures and processes of good supervision (Jones et al., 2009; Kettle, 2015; O’Donoghue et al., 2018). Effective supervision was declared by Mor Barak et al. (2009, p. 3) to be “a vital aspect of service delivery in social service organisations”. Supervision can also protect workers against stressful work environments, provide support during difficult times, and offer guidance for navigating job challenges and workplace cultures.

Research specifically dedicated to NQSWs’ experiences of supervision is limited (O’Donoghue & Tsui, 2015). A British research report and toolkit produced for new social work practitioners highlighted that supervision assists with building NQSWs’ practice confidence, caseload management and emotional support (Jones et al., 2009). Building confidence was achieved when supervision provided an avenue for knowledge and skill development. Caseload management is viewed more positively when NQSWs are given the opportunity to reflect on their work, rather than being told what to do. Of importance amongst the findings

was the recognition of the value of a place in which NQSWs could discuss the emotional impact of the work (Jones et al., 2009).

Pack’s (2012) study of an effective supervisory relationship for NQSWs discussed the importance of establishing safety. The context of safety in the supervision space referred to the ability of NQSWs to explore difficulties within their practice. Bogo and McKnight (2006) promoted a list of qualities needed by supervisors to create this space. These included being available, imparting practice wisdom, and utilising a communication style that was supportive and validating. Wonnacott (2012, p. 70) added that an effective supervisor understands the capability of the worker, is aware of their own impact on the supervision process and that the relationship can take on a “mirroring” effect.

The supervision experiences of Aotearoa New Zealand NQSWs have received some attention in the social work literature (Beddoe et al., 2020; Hunt et al., 2017). Hunt et al.’s (2017) longitudinal study following the first three years of practice for NQSWs reflecting on differing experiences and quality of supervision. The study focussed on the frequency and effectiveness of supervision although effectiveness was not defined. Beddoe et al.’s (2020) study captured the experiences of NQSWs in the new era of mandatory registration and the requirement for 2000 hours of supervised practice post-qualifying for provisionally registered social workers to move to full registration. They found the frequency and quality of supervision was variable, more attention was needed on educational and developmental aspects, and that supportive structures were of value during this important phase of an NQSW’s professional development.

Whilst the insight from the reviewed studies is invaluable, understanding the place of supervision in supporting NQSWs to continue to construct and consolidate

Table 1 Study Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Years post qualifying	Sector	Field of practice
Sally	Female	50-60	New Zealand European	Two	NGO	Health
Joanne	Female	30-40	Australian	One	NGO	Pasifika
Sam	Male	20-30	New Zealand European	Two	Government	Child Protection
Julie	Female	30-40	New Zealand European	One	NGO	Health
Phoebe	Female	20-30	New Zealand European	One	NGO	Children and Families
Rebecca	Female	40-50	New Zealand European	Two	NGO	Children and Families
Alice	Female	20-30	Austrian	One	Government	Mental Health
Jessica	Female	40-50	New Zealand European	Two	Government	Child Protection

their emerging professional identities post-graduation remains a gap in the existing literature.

### Methodology

A qualitative methodology was chosen to align with the exploratory focus of the study reported here, the key aim of which was to explore the ways in which supervision helps NQSWs shape their developing professional identities in an Aotearoa New Zealand context. Qualitative methodology enables researchers to examine social practices and processes, identify barriers and facilitators for change and discover reasons for the outcomes of interventions (Starks & Trinidad, 2007).

A social constructivist perspective with an interpretive approach was used. At its core, social constructivism posits that individuals try to understand their worlds and develop meanings that correspond to their lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). The interpretive approach allowed the exploration of the naturally emerging dialogue from a series of interviews focusing on the understandings NQSWs assign to their experiences of

supervision as they continue to construct and re-shape their professional identity (Berg & Lune, 2012).

Three areas were explored: NQSWs' concepts of emerging professional identity, their experiences of supervision, and the ways in which supervision influenced and supported the development of their professional identity.

### Data collection

The research participants (see Table 1) comprised eight NQSWs in their first or second year of post-qualification who were receiving social work supervision. Participants were recruited through the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW) and an Institute of Technology. Following an initial low response, a snowballing technique was applied. The researcher used their local and national social work networks to recruit participants. The research was approved by a University Human Ethics Committee.

Participants' supervision experiences were variable. For example, one social worker

had worked in the social work profession whilst studying and was experienced in receiving different types of supervision. Post-qualifying, this participant could draw on experiences from three social service organisations, in contrast to another social worker who was 6 months into their first social work position and had experienced only one supervision session. The participants engaged in semi-structured 60-to-90-minute interviews, either over Skype video conferencing or face to face in an agreed location. All the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed before being sent back to the participants for checking and approval.

### Data analysis

A thematic analysis approach was used to identify, analyse, and report on patterns and themes in the transcribed raw data. Discovering themes and patterns was achieved by identifying the commonalities within the participants' responses (Rubin & Babbie, 2014). Time was spent listening to interview recordings and engaging with the written data to make notes on initial ideas. To address the trustworthiness of the ideas, the researcher kept a journal and engaged in meetings with her research supervisors. A chart was developed from the transcripts, which aided in the coding of specific content (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The coding process supported the researcher to construct potential themes and provided a system to connect data to each theme, generating a thematic map of the analysis. Refining and naming the themes required ongoing analysis to filter the specifics of each. Finally, categories were created with sub-themes attached (Braun & Clarke, 2022). To ensure consistency within the analysis, the researcher linked themes to how supervision supported NQSWs' developing professional identities, combining an analysis narrative with illustrative participant quotations using an interpretive approach that utilised existing literature (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

### Findings

Three themes were constructed from the data analysis: (1) NQSWs conceptualisation of social work identity, (2) the challenges of transitional adjustment to a professional identity, and (3) the qualities of supervision that support the development of that professional identity.

#### *Conceptualising social work identity*

The participants held a range of views on how they conceptualised their social work professional identity, relating to their practice frameworks, values, roles, and tasks. Moulding their personal and professional social work identities together was of particular focus. Julie, for example, reflected on her studies as a personal journey of self-discovery, "I am just me ... my social work lens is just part of my face now like it's a perspective, it's a way of life, it's a way of living". Sam, who had been personally shaped by his Christian faith, referred to his social work identity from a strong religious and philosophical stance:

If I was trying to pinpoint the identity aspect of it and how much it ties in with who I am ... I always think of this verse in the Book of James where it says true religion is this ... to advocate for the widows and the orphans and to be unstained from the world, and I always think, you know, a lot of church is focussed on that whole aspect of being unstained and apart from the world, but very little seem to focus on advocating for those who are disadvantaged, and I sort of see my social work identity as finding a beautiful way to fulfil that command.

Four of the participants commented that the breadth of social work fields of practice made it difficult to articulate what the one overarching 'role' of a social worker entailed and therefore found that this was defined in part for each of them by the field of practice they worked in. Alice said:



Table 2 Participants' Experience

Name (pseudonym)	1 <sup>st</sup> social work position	Employed in a social service before qualifying	Volunteer & community work before qualifying	Support work before 1 <sup>st</sup> social work position
Sally		√		
Joanne			√	
Sam	√			
Julie	√			
Phoebe	√			
Rebecca	√			
Alice				√
Jessica	√			

It's a hard one ... my job is to assess suicide risk of people and assess their mental state, so that's my primary sort of task. But if I worked in a different job, I would explain it differently again.

During field education, participants were inspired by social workers and field educators/supervisors who demonstrated authenticity, relationship building and creative problem solving as key aspects of their professional identities. Julie explained, "she was so assertive and confident without being confrontational"; Sally admired, "the respect she has for people and clients, and I've seen their respect for her, and I think that stands out". Participants concluded that the qualities contributing to professional relationships began with a "passion for people", and that social workers and supervisors displayed "empathy", "warmth", and "genuineness". Creative problem solvers within the confines of policy and procedure, Jessica concluded were: "social workers who look outside the box and find different ways of getting around hard situations".

"Self-determination", "social justice", and "advocating for human rights" were highlighted as important components of the participants' professional identities. "Cultural competency" was touched on by two participants who worked in Kaupapa Māori and Pacific organisations whilst

identifying as Pākehā. They held a desire to build on the foundational knowledge of cultural competence gained through their studies. Having "integrity" also strongly underpinned participants' social work identity. Some participants acknowledged social work identity through outcomes achieved with clients, the breadth of their field or practice specific roles and the daily tasks that they performed. Outcomes were expressed as "finding positive paths" to help those who were having challenges, "empowering" people to make change, and "advocating" for those who were disadvantaged.

In effect, a social work identity results from a process of understanding oneself as a social worker, underpinned by collective values that are articulated through the various roles and fields of practice social workers work within.

### ***Transitional adjustment to a professional identity***

The transition and adjustment to professional status required participants to come to terms with the tension between their initial expectations and the realities of social work. Table 2 provides information about participants' experience.

The time and effort invested in the orientation process by the participants'

organisations provided the first impression of professional work. Three participants felt satisfied, Alice received one day of orientation, that included online learning and then adequate time to observe staff before “easing” into the role. Phoebe felt that she was given enough time to settle in and appreciated that “the rest of the team were really supportive in taking me out on visits”. Sam had 12 days spread over 6 weeks. In contrast, five participants felt dissatisfied. One described “... an utter nightmare and it was a big déjà vu from my placement ... so I researched a lot”. One participant would have preferred a mentor, and Sally who had previous social work experience implied assumptions were made when she asserted “... you know... stop! I need to actually get a bit more orientation stuff going”.

Two participants indicated their organisation had expected them to manage the role and responsibilities from the day they began. For example, Julie recalled: “I remember my first day and the process, there was no process; there was no welcome ... I’m supposed to come in here and do this job”. Similarly, Joanne described the fear she felt as, “[i]t was a trial by fire”.

Two participants worked for the same organisation in different sites and reflected on their initial work experiences. Jessica said:

... that environment to go in with, with no guidance and to be dealing with very serious situations, where the decisions you make severely affect children and their families was a lot of responsibility ... and I really needed somebody to be working alongside me with that, not just to be on my own.

Sam held a caseload by the second week due to staff shortages, but he felt able to meet the challenge due to the support of his supervisor.

It definitely helped me to hit the ground running and to learn a lot more quickly on the go, but it meant that a lot of the

cases were more prone to mistakes because I didn’t know the processes ...

Participants revealed additional challenges upon leaving the safety of the student space and going into their employing organisations. Four participants, two from the health sector and two from small NGOs, reflected on the difficulties of working within a multi-disciplinary team, feeling under-utilised because other team members did not have a clear understanding of their knowledge and skills. Four participants were so disillusioned with the unsupported transition and adjustment into their social work roles that they considered finding alternative employment. Jessica conceded that:

It was terrible at the beginning, I was seriously thinking about leaving, I wondered if it was the right job for me, I was very stressed, I couldn’t separate work from home and I, I was lost ... I was completely lost in the first six months.

The various emotional impacts reflected in the participants’ experiences highlighted the importance of organisations to provide supportive structures to assist NQSWs navigate this transitional period and invest in professional identity development. Without these structures in place, job retention, stress, and burnout negatively impacted on participants’ social work identity.

### ***Supervision that develops professional identity***

The supervisory relationship, the environment, reflective learning, and the importance of emotional safety to build resiliency were identified as elements that supported the participants constructing their professional identities.

The foundation for a supervisory relationship begins with a supervision contract. All the participants had been introduced to a supervision contract during their field education so were aware of the formality and

context of the process. Participants articulated that the act of sitting down and talking about the contract in the first supervision session was a positive approach to building a relationship. Key areas within the contract were reported as “time, frequency”, and “no interruption”; the working alliance “outlines basic expectations of supervisor and my own expectations”; and sessional format “check for me, client practice needs and then agency-related matters”.

Trust within the supervisory relationship was emphasised as an important element for effective supervision. Sam spoke of his “connection” with an internal supervisor he could be open and honest with by saying:

... I was able to trust her with a lot of the struggles that I was going through ... telling her how I am feeling. It’s just really supportive in the really practical ways of when I just don’t feel like I can do a task my supervisors have always sort of stepped in and said don’t worry, I’ve got it, let me help you and so I’ve found that really good when things get stressful.

A supervision relationship built on trust provided the context within which practice issues could be confidently explored without fear or shame and participants could learn and make meaning of those experiences.

The supervision environment was regarded by participants as the space they could concentrate on themselves rather than the service they were providing or the organisation they were accountable to. Sally said, “to get some headspace and get out of that busy world”. Supervision was a reflective time in a quiet and secure setting, Pheobe stated, “I think about what I am thinking”. Participants felt that supervision provided an opportunity for examining themselves and aspects of their professional identity, Sam described this as a place to “check myself”. All the participants stated that supervision was the structure that

provided quality assurance, (demonstrating professional social work with clients), and ensured that organisational policies and procedures were followed. Sally referred to this as “dotting of the Is and crossing of the Ts”. This also provided confidence and reassurance to participants, that they expressed as: “on the right track”, “slowed me down” and “I’ve done my job right”.

Supervision provided the participants with essential learning and development opportunities that ensured the ongoing construction and reshaping of their professional identities. Reflecting upon practice was considered key to developing growth and competence, and whilst knowledge and skill were gained during training, these were re-shaped by cumulative experiences that were discussed in supervision. Rebecca stated:

I try to be reflective throughout but it’s a forced reflection and its reflection with somebody, articulating how I practise and what I’m happy with or what I’m not happy with, or I will do differently next time ... it really helps to have the space to do that.

Taking ownership of their thoughts empowered participants to facilitate their learning, rather than being told what to do. Having the ability to reflect on their practice enabled participants to discover how they were reacting to experiences, to make changes that re-shaped their professional identities. Julie articulated this as: “it’s giving me the confidence to and opportunity to reflect on what I do and find my own words for it”.

Receiving feedback was an important aspect of the supervisory relationship for participants. Validating feedback was necessary to build confidence and have reassurance that they were providing effective services for clients. Pheobe described how validation gave her “peace of mind” when going home at the end of the working day. Similarly, Julie acknowledged



the importance of validating feedback, but also recognised the importance of being challenged in supervision which enabled personal growth and development as a NQSW. Receiving challenging feedback in supervision regarding unconscious behaviours provided Sam with valuable learning opportunities:

I definitely learn a lot from it but it's the most uncomfortable feeling to realise that on top of everything else the way I am responding to a case or a situation is not the wisest or the safest or the healthiest ... I need to be mindful of that ... I need to deal with myself.

Participants identified supervision as a positive activity that provided the support and guidance needed to navigate the first years of practising social work. However, there were challenges for them in engaging in supervision that supported their professional identity development. Individual supervision for most participants was contracted in their first year of practice to occur either weekly or fortnightly, however, only two reported this arrangement had been consistent. Jessica, for example reflected on one of her earlier experiences which had emotionally impacted on her to the extent that she considered leaving the organisation:

I would have to arrange the supervision—she never arranged it; I would have to fight to get it and it worked out to be about once every month, once every six weeks.

Similarly, two participants had to “fight” to even receive supervision, as “it wasn't a given”. These participants were employed in non-government organisations and had to produce ANZASW policies to convince managers to invest in external supervision.

Even with these challenges, the participants were unanimous in identifying effective supervision as an influential process in constructing their professional identities.

## Discussion

The findings of this small-scale study indicate that professional identity is conceptualised by NQSWs through a process of integrating their personal and professional selves and locating themselves within their unique practice frameworks. Observing varying styles of working, learning from role models and embracing opportunities for experiential learning influenced the participants in their perception, development, and realisation of their professional identities.

As social work students construct their professional identities during tertiary studies, they are influenced through field education. This process of professional socialisation provides students with the opportunity to observe the learning from the classroom modelled in practice (Wheeler, 2017). The influence of role modelling, shadowing, and conversations with experienced social workers makes a significant contribution in shaping professional identities. With the shift into a paid social work role, experiencing theory transferred into practice provides NQSWs with the opportunity to analyse other people's social work identities as well as gain a greater understanding of their own. Essentially, role modelling through practice and supervision, supports them to “gradually think, act and feel like a social worker” (Webb, 2017, p. 7).

Transitional change is experienced in various ways, bringing different levels of satisfaction for NQSWs moving from student to employee roles. How this evolves is dependent on the organisational context and the supportive structures in place for NQSWs to adjust to their new professional status. Consolidating their professional identity brings initial challenges that test NQSWs' resilience and confidence as the tension between ideal and real practice becomes more apparent (Newberry-Koroluk, 2014; Tham & Lynch, 2014).

For participants in this study, starting their professional jobs with little or no orientation, with an expectation they would carry out the role and responsibilities from the first day caused stress, fear and anxiety regarding their performance and competency, exacerbated uncertainty, reduced confidence levels, and diminished job satisfaction, negatively impacting on their view of themselves as social workers. As the literature suggests, without supportive structures in place, this phase is challenging (Manthorpe et al., 2015). Therefore, there is a need for ongoing intensive support during this transitional period so that NQSWs can consolidate their professional identity with a growing sense of belonging, attachment to the social work profession and enthusiasm for their work.

Regular, frequent, and well organised supervision has been identified in the literature as a pivotal supportive learning environment that actively encourages the continuous development of professional judgment and skills. All participants in the study had been involved in supervision during field education, therefore, theoretically and through their student experience, had some knowledge of the process (Hay et al., 2019). Once in practice, negotiating a clear contract for supervision formalised the process, reflecting the significance of the activity and the active participation by both parties. Contracts are consistently identified in supervision literature as establishing organisational guidelines and clear role boundaries within the relationship (Davys & Beddoe, 2021; Morrison, 2005). As the narratives of the participants highlighted, the contract loses integrity when it fails to transfer into practice and the NQSW may become disillusioned and disengage with the process.

A combination of relational and environmental factors in the supervisory relationship enhanced the development of participants' professional identities. Davys and Beddoe (2021, p. 74) describe a "virtuous

cycle of trust" process in the development of the working relationship. When the supervisor is responsive and respectful and there is shared investment within the relationship, this encourages the supervisee to be open and willing to share their work. This positive behaviour strengthens regard and respect from the supervisor because the practice of sharing fosters trust and mutual respect within the relationship (Thomas, 2022). The negative effects experienced by some of the participants in their supervisory relationship resulted from inconsistent sessions, lack of respect for the role of supervision, and a lack of guidance. Disrespecting participants' needs resulted in frustration, anger, and mistrust.

Quality supervision reassures NQSWs that they are practising social work with clients safely and are carrying out their roles and responsibilities professionally. As foundational knowledge and skills continue to develop through experience, having a support structure to explore and make sense of their practice with clients provides impetus for confidence and belief in themselves to grow (Hunt et al., 2017). Through reflection, NQSWs can discuss dilemmas, behaviours, and ethical issues, allowing for ongoing learning, as well as exploring feelings and emotions safely to gain a greater sense of themselves (Beddoe et al., 2020). Supporting NQSWs to explore difficulties and resolve conflicts helps to build resilience to navigate stressed and chaotic organisational contexts (Beddoe et al., 2014). Participants in the study valued the monitoring aspect of supervision as it provided reassurance they were performing to the expectations of organisational policy and procedures.

Participants acknowledged that receiving challenging feedback within supervision provided valuable learning opportunities. Heron (2001, p. 59) referred to challenging feedback as "uncomfortable truths" that are aimed at promoting change through

consciousness-raising. When Sam was confronted with aspects of himself that he had not previously been aware of, this provided a state of dissonance. Davys and Beddoe (2021) maintained that, through the supervision process of resolving the unsettledness, learning takes place and behavioural change occurs which, in turn, assists the re-shaping of professional identity.

Participants in the current study found that supervision provided the best environment for them to effectively explore their practice. Social work organisations are crowded, noisy and stressful environments, whereas supervision allows for doors to be closed and a quiet space that invites focussed conversation to be created (Davys & Beddoe 2021). Tsui (2005) maintained the physical setting for sessions affects workers' behaviour. Therefore, the space that a session takes place in matters, for example, the venue and physical properties like lighting and furniture arrangements. When sessions are private and uninterrupted, this encourages concentrated time that is conducive to open and honest discussion.

Regular supervision is an essential part of professional practice that is fundamentally linked to NQSWs' wellbeing and practice safety (Moriarty et al., 2011). Participants employed in government departments reported that inconsistent formal supervision sessions had impacted negatively on their developing professional identities. Their comments echo Manthorpe et al.'s (2015) study which found that when receiving infrequent supervision, NQSWs felt overwhelmed, experienced poorer working conditions and were less engaged in their work. Further, participants working in the NGO sector reported having to "fight" for the entitlement of supervision due to financial and resourcing constraints. The SWRB and ANZASW supervision policies specify that supervision supports professional social work practice and, as such, is fundamental to maintaining

professional identity (ANZASW, 2016; SWRB, 2018). Essentially, supervision is a resource that social workers claim as part of their professional identity. Having to advocate for the right to have supervision de-values this assertion and puts NQSWs' practice and wellbeing at risk. Social work is a challenging profession carried out in an increasingly complex environment. When the environment provides barriers or denies access to supervision that NQSWs believe they are entitled to, and identify with, this inhibits their ability to develop and grow their professional identities.

### Limitations

The qualitative design of the study was subject to limitations. Although the sample represented a range of characteristics, only a small number of participants' viewpoints provided the data and thus it cannot be generalised to other NQSWs. All participants identified as tauīwi (non-Māori, other peoples). The lens through which they understood their experiences therefore did not encompass concepts of Te Ao Māori.

### Recommendations for further study

There are several recommendations to come out of this small-scale study. Considering the impact field education mentors and supervisors role modelling of professional identities has on social work students, exploring this in the context of identity formation and socialisation into the profession would make an important contribution. Using a larger representative sample would capture a more diverse cross-section of NQSWs, reflecting the values and experiences of those from a range of training institutes, multicultural backgrounds, gender, urban and rural settings, and fields of practice. It would be particularly valuable to consider how Māori and Pasifika NQSWs conceptualise their professional identities. Additionally, research into the ways in which workers who have registered through the experience pathway (SWRB, section 13)

conceptualise their professional identities would add to the richness of the literature around this important aspect of developing practice.

In line with the literature explored here, the study suggests supervision plays a vital role in professional identity development and the transitional phase of NQSWs adjusting to professional work. Further research could focus on the differences in supervision experiences between NGO and government sectors, how supervisors perceive professional identity and professionalism, how they identify as role models; their skill level; organisational support systems; professional development and training opportunities.

### Conclusion

The transition and adjustment to professional work is a crucial developmental stage that ignites a new learning process. This study has highlighted the importance of regular and effective supervision within which NQSWs are able to continue to construct, shape and realise their emerging social work professional identity.

Given the inconsistent experiences of supervision reported by the participants, it is recommended that the SWRB review their supervision policy and consider reinforcing the significance of the activity, identifying specific expectations for professional supervision within the 2000 hours of supervised social work practice required post-qualification. It is recommended that consideration be given to NQSWs having weekly access to supervision in their first-year post-qualifying to ensure safe practice and positive professional identity development.

Raising the profile of supervision and providing clearer expectations has the potential to provide the momentum for government and community organisations to understand and prioritise quality supervision for all NQSWs.

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