

Challenges of the Provision of Professional Supervision in Facilitating Best Practice in Child Protection Services

Chan Soak Fong¹, Azlinda Azman^{2*}, Paramjit Singh Jamir Singh^{2*}

¹Department of Social Welfare, Malaysia

²Social Work Programme, School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 Minden, Penang, Malaysia

*Corresponding author: Azlinda Azman (azlindaa@usm.my) & Paramjit Singh Jamir Singh (paramjit@usm.my)

ABSTRACT

Supervision is an important component in social worker practice. The provision of professional supervision is crucial to ensure the delivering of better quality child protection services. The study aims to explore the experience of supervision, specifically the views of respondents on the challenges of the provision of professional supervision in facilitating best practice in child protection services. A cross-sectional design utilizing an exploratory-descriptive qualitative method is identified for this study. The respondents of the study comprise of individuals work within a statutory child protection agency and individuals from non-statutory child protection setting but within other related professional bodies and services systems in relation to child protection. Findings indicate the lacking of a structured and systematic professional supervision, poor supervision in relation to a routinized 'technical' operational provision of supervision as well as lack of qualified social work supervisors are some of the most challenging situations in the provision of professional supervision in child protection services. The findings also recognize the importance of professional supervision in facilitating and sustaining best practice in child protection services. These findings have great relevance to the organization's human resource strategic planning and capacity building in the area of social work child protection practice. It can also be a platform and support on the need to develop a more structured professional supervision courses and trainings in the country.

Keywords: Child protection, social work, supervision

1. Introduction

Professional supervision is part of a wider quality of practice approach in social work generally and in social work child protection in particular. It takes place within an organizational context and aims to sustain and develop good practice to ensure best child protection practice outcomes to the clients.

The Department of Social Welfare (DSW), a department given major responsibility to provide social work services, as well as the biggest employer of social workers in the country, needs a systematic structural social work service delivery mechanism to ensure efficient, effective and professional service delivery. This includes a service platform and facility for ensuring professional supervision practice and qualified social work trained personnel are available to

respond to the growing care, safety and protection needs of children in Malaysia. Looking at the current situation in Malaysia, insufficient professionally trained social work practitioners, especially in child protection services and inadequate professional social work supervision are seen to be among the major challenges that the DSW encounters in its effort to promote best practice social work services, particularly in child protection.

In response to this, the purpose of the study is to explore the experience of supervision, specifically the views of respondents on the challenges of supervision in facilitating best practice in child protection services. This is an exploratory qualitative study, based on in-depth interviews with present and past practicing workers in the child protection system. This research is timely in that it is conducted in line with the current efforts of the Malaysian Government in promoting professionally accountable competency-based social work practice to enhance the professionalism of social work in Malaysia.

1.1. Statement Of Problem

Globally, social work as a profession has developed since the late 19th century. Over the centuries, social work has been recognised as a profession in many developed countries such as United Kingdom, United States, Canada, Australia, India, Hong Kong, Philippines and several other countries. A common philosophy shared among those countries is that social work practice is guided by a set of shared international professional practice codes, standards, principles, values and skills, as well showing development over the control of required qualifications (University qualifications) and competencies. In many countries, the professionalisation of social workers is based on developed social work legislation reflected in required registration and licensing monitoring mechanisms organized as a partnership between the professional social work body and the Government (Zastrow, 2008; Fuziah & Ismail, 2013).

In Malaysia, despite social work services being available for more than half a century, it has not developed as much in comparison to other developed and developing countries, particularly neighbour countries in the region such as Singapore (Lee, 2011; Fuziah & Ismail, 2013). Ling (2002) acknowledges the Malaysian government's growing efforts in establishing social development services in the 1980's which aimed to uplift the well-being of people through social welfare development activities. However, until 2000, there was little development in the professionalization of social work practice in Malaysia. Thus far, there is an absence of significant structural operational capacity in the social work profession in Malaysia such as the empowerment of a regulatory professional body to oversee the profession and its development, as well as any regulation to oversee and monitor the practice and education of social work in the country. This lack of regulatory professional authority raises specific concerns in relation to professional accountability and integrity and the enforcement of ethical and competent practice in the delivery of social welfare services by social workers to such diverse population groups such as the disadvantaged, vulnerable and marginalised.

Within the social work profession there has always been an awareness of the critical role of professional supervision in facilitating and enhancing the delivery of competent professional practice. In many countries where social work is an advanced profession, professional supervision is either a required professional association membership requirement (e.g. Australia, New Zealand) or a legislative mandatory requirement for social work licensure (e.g. several states in the United States, United Kingdom). Supervision is regarded as an essential tool for best practice in child protection services due to the often complex, demanding and risk-based nature of the work undertaken. Nevertheless, a few social work practice related surveys in Malaysia

indicate a pattern of insufficiency, ineffectiveness and inadequacy in the provision of supervision for social work practice (DSW & MASW, 2005; DSW & MASW 2012; Chan, 2015; DSW & MASW, 2015, Chan 2019). The findings reflect the significant lack of the provision of organisationally service based professional social work supervisors in most social welfare organisations throughout Malaysia.

The aspirations of many to achieve professionally accountable social work practice it is acknowledged will not be accomplished without the provision of appropriate professional supervision when social work services are available. This shortcoming denotes a persistent challenge the Department is facing whilst gearing toward the professionalization of social work practice throughout the country.

2. Literature Review

Social work is a profession that promotes human well-being by addressing barriers, inequalities and injustices in the society. It is an empowering and enabling activity guided by a professional knowledge-base based on professional values, knowledge and skills. Social worker helps individuals, families and communities by restoring the ability and capability of their social functioning (Kirst-Ashman, 2007; Zastrow, 2008; Thompson, 2015; Wilkins, David, Donald Forrester, & Louise Grant, 2017). Zastrow (2008) argues that based on the practice nature of social work that generic (broad-based) approach is emphasized, social work is a multi-skilled and multi-tasking profession. Social workers need trainings, supervision and to equip with a wide range of knowledge, skills and expertise over a broad area (both social and personal issues) to enable them to respond effectively to the situation encountered by the clients whom they work with, particularly children who have high tendency to be victimised in various types of child maltreatment including abuse and neglect (Kirst-Ashman, 2007).

Supervision is an important component in social work practice particularly in relation to child protection practice. Child protection practice, as a high-risk service area supervision of professional staff is of particular importance. In general, supervision is an interactional process by which a designated supervisor oversees the task performed by social workers and direct them with guidance and reflective feedback that drive for effective action towards best practice to the clients (Munson, 1983; Kirst-Ashman, 2007; Wilkins, David, & Vivi, 2019). Supervision is a dynamic, multiparty and interactional helping relationship which taken place in a contextual form within a specific organizational setting and greater cultural context (Tsui, 2005; Parker, 2013).

By acknowledging challenges in social work practice, social workers need to keep on learning and enhancing their knowledge and skill base capability to be competent and accountable. This is in accordance with reflective practice, that using critical reflection approach in supervision practice facilitates 'reflection-on-practice' which promote critical thinking, articulation of informed knowledge and increase the competency and confidence of social workers in undertaking challenging task more effectively (Thompson, 2015; Bogo & McKnight 2006; Hensley, 2008; McKitterick, 2012; Wonnacott, 2012; Caras & Sandu, 2014; Silence, 2017). Professional supervision thus enables social workers to cope better with the changing nature of social service spectrum, government transformation effort, requirement of high quality best practice standard and movement towards evidence-based professional practice (NASW & ASWB, 2013). Kadushin (1992a) also emphasizes the essential of supervisor in ensuring the agency accountability (Kadushin & Harkness, (2014). Supervisor has the immediate contact to oversee, monitor, review and examine the work done by the direct service workers. Agency accountability is thus lie upon the regularity and efficacy of the supervisory practice.

Most social workers are employed in human service organisations where their professional role is to accomplish the organisational objectives that direct the practice of services they provide. In light of this one of the challenges in organisational social work supervisory practice is recognition that supervision does not exist in isolation from other organisational practices. The implementation of supervision is influenced by various organisational factors such as organisational policies and regulations, types of organisational hierarchical structures, authorities and contemporary organisational power, culture, workloads, stress, staff availability of time, individual supervision personnel capabilities as well as extraneous human factors (including the intra personal and interpersonal concerns) and other internal and external factors (Copeland, 2000; McKitterick, 2012; Wonnacott, 2012; Beddoe, 2017; Mo, 2016; Turner-Daly & Jack, 2017; Wilkins, Forrester & Grant, 2017).

As noted supervision occurs within a complex organisational context. This context means many factors internal and external to the organisation act to determine if supervision is available and whether what is made available provides 'value-adding' worth to the service practice effort. Within organisational practice settings, supervisors are not solely responsible for facilitating the practice and quality outcomes of individuals. Supervisors are at the same time also accountable for the managerial and bureaucratic responsibilities within the organisational domain. Such as adhering to the organisational regulations, protocols and procedures in accomplishing the organisation's mission and objectives and fulfilling the requirement of stakeholders, which at times can lead to conflicts of interests, competing value positions and differing organisational stakeholder priorities in relation to supervision. As Wonnacott (2012) notes about the wider context of the social work supervision role within an organisation "the supervisor is part of the management system and shares responsibilities for practice standards, being accountable for their own practice as a supervisor and (along with the organisation and the supervisee) for the standard of social work practice" (p.22). Tsui (2005) also who notes the significant organisational referent point for supervision when stating "agency policy governs the behavior of supervisors" (p. 42). At times, supervisors are required to report the progress and outcomes of practice and services to the top management based on the standards and guidelines set by the organisational policies and accountability system. In other words, social work supervisors hold multiple organisational responsibilities which are located across both the management system as well as the professional practice system. The mix of dynamic responsibilities acts to impact if and how the supervision role may be undertaken and what outcomes can be attained.

3. Methodology

In view of the study purpose, a cross-sectional design utilizing an exploratory-descriptive qualitative method is identified for this study which aims to study how the respondents perceived, experienced and responded to the area of supervision especially their understanding on the definition of supervision. Qualitative method is utilised because qualitative research enables the researcher to explore where and why policy and local knowledge and practice are at odds. It seeks to elicits tacit knowledge and subjective understandings and interpretation, specifically on supervision in relation to statutory child protection practice.

The selection of the respondents was done through the use of a purposive sampling strategy based on the research purpose and research questions. A nonprobability purposive sampling matrix was developed to identify the categories of respondents the study sought based on three selection criteria: (i) professional qualification; (ii) practice location; (iii) three years practice experience. A snowball sampling technique was utilized as secondary technique to increase access to the purposeful sample category group respondents. The study population consists of 23 individuals

who are presently working or have worked predominantly within the statutory child protection system as a paid government servant or who have worked or are working in the non-statutory child protection system and whose work is/was closely associated with statutory child protection in Malaysia.

A triangulation data collection method is used where the in-depth interview is the major data collection mode utilised in the study is combined with other secondary data collection sources such as field notes and material from the professional literature. A Semi-Structure Interview Guideline was used which gave structure and clear direction to the research purpose throughout the data collection process. The acquisition of qualitative data was done through a face-to-face in-depth interview with the respondents. Immediately following each respondent's interview, with the consent of the respondent, the audio-recording of the interviews were transcribed and typed directly into a Microsoft Word file. A content and thematic analysis approach was then engaged for the analysis purpose.

4. Findings and Analysis of Results

The study aims to learn about supervision and how it works to enhance the provision of child protection practice within the statutory agency in Malaysia. Nevertheless, many people in Malaysia do not have a proper understanding of the conceptualization of the social work profession, social work practice and supervision; as well as statutory child protection practice, such as what is best practice and the supervision role in enhancing tertiary child protection services in a statutory agency. This lack of understanding in relation to all of these areas of practice has presented a significant challenge on how professional supervision facilitate best child protection practice in Malaysia.

The findings report the respondents' perceptions on the present conduct of supervision within child protection in Malaysia. This part therefore reports the findings on the supervision state in relation to the degree, more or less, of the provision of professionally appropriate supervision within child protection practice.

Presentation of the findings relating to how the respondents' 'perceive' and understand supervision within child protection is a complex and challenging data findings presentation area. This complexity is created because there is lacking of an established professional supervision structure and process within the child protection service organisation. Certain activities do happen within statutory child protection that have similar characteristics to supervision (e.g. people seek advice from senior workers) but these characteristics may exist apart from other supervision characteristics (e.g. regular meetings on professional and practice development).

As a result, the 'findings' of the respondents' perceptions and understandings are more about describing an incremental system and what is happening, rather than reflecting on an established integrated system that possibly is not working well. Therefore, the findings will because of this problem be findings that reflect the incremental nature of what is happening. Some of the respondents wanted to talk about non-receipt of supervision, others talked about what little apparent supervision they got was poor. It is this latter point which is the focus of the respondents' comment across the majority of respondents. In fact, many of the respondents seemed to recognise what the child protection officers were receiving was not professional supervision.

The respondents reported that what the workers receive in term of supervision was not good enough and was in many cases inappropriate in relation to the professional supervision role. The

respondents identified poor supervision in relation to a routinized 'technical' operational provision of supervision. They described the supervision as very technical and task-oriented which could be better described as managerial requirements monitoring than supervision. It was reported that supervision in such circumstances was, at least from the supervisors' part, seeking to ensure organisational task completion, rather than focusing on the enhancement and empowerment of the workers to undertake professional practice in a more professional competent manner. For example, the respondents noted during such 'technical/task-based supervision the supervisor gave instructions to the supervisee on what should be done without professional discussion or examination of the professional practice. Supervision in such a manner is undertaken for the purpose of attainment of the requested task requirement and without monitoring or evaluation of the standards of practice demonstrated 'as there is no further action or counter-checking the data, information or action plan made by the case workers.

The findings also report there is lack of competent people to undertake the supervisory role within the organisation. The respondents identified the organisation not having enough sufficient manpower capacity to address all social welfare and statutory child protection needs, particularly in relation social work trained workers, the respondents noted there remains the impact of poor manpower choices also affecting the capacity of the organisation to provide quality supervision. The respondents noted what the human resource capacity that did exist did not always match the professional competency needs of practice. For example, a competent supervisor must be someone who has a lot of hands-on experience, as well as a professional qualification, but individuals who are assigned to senior position (and therefore would be assigned to a supervision role) do not seem to have the relevant professional expertise to supervise.

5. Conclusion

The study sought to describe and understand how a group of respondents perceived the challenges in the provision of supervision in relation to their own child protection practice experiences. The study recognises the importance of professional supervision, particularly in the provision of child protection services. However, along with several social work professionalisation movements in recent year, an array of gaps and problems in relation to supervision in the provision of child protection is outlined, such as (i) lacking of a structured and systematic professional supervision; (ii) poor supervision in relation to a routinized 'technical' operational provision of supervision; and (iii) lack of qualified social work supervisors. In response to these shortfalls, the researcher points out a challenge to addressing the place of supervision as a component of best practice in child protection practice.

It is hoped this study will act as a stimulus for future studies in this area, as well as contributing to improvements in professional supervision provision in child protection. Supervision is undertaken within an organizational setting and by its nature is a learning process and an ongoing activity that engages competent supervision and involves a professional supervisory relationship. In relation to this, there is a need to enhance organisationally designed and authorised supervision operational structures, roles, tasks, standards and guidelines to guide and sustain competent supervision within the organisation.

References

- Beddoe, L. (2017). "Social work supervision for changing contexts." *Supervision in Social Work*. Routledge, 2017.

- Bogo, M., & McKnight, K. (2006). Clinical Supervision in Social Work. *The Clinical Supervisor*, 24(1-2), 49-67.
- Caras, A., & Sandu, A. (2014). The role of supervision in professional development of social work specialists. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 28(1), 75-94.
- Chan, S. F. (2015). Supervision in social work practice: A study of social welfare officers in Malaysia. Unpublished paper presented in the 19th International Symposium of the International Consortium for Social Development, 7 to 10 July 2015 at SIM University Singapore
- Chan, S. F. (2019). *The role of professional supervision in child protection services in Malaysia: A direction towards best practice* (Doctoral dissertation Universiti Sains Malaysia). Universiti Sains Malaysia.
- Copeland, S. (2000). New challenges for supervising in organisational context. In B. Lawotn & C. Feltham (Eds.), *Taking supervision forward. Enquiries and trends in counseling and psychotherapy* (pp.162-174). London, UK: SAGE
- Department of Social Welfare & Malaysian Association of Social Workers (2005). *National Survey on Current Social Work Practice among Social Service Organisations in Malaysia*. Putrajaya: Department of Social Welfare.
- Department of Social Welfare & Malaysian Association of Social Workers (2012). *National Survey on Caseload and Norms of Field Services at the Department of Social Welfare*. Putrajaya: Department of Social Welfare.
- Department of Social Welfare & Malaysian Association of Social Workers. (2015). *Survey on Caseload at the Department of Social Welfare 2015: Children Services*. Putrajaya: Department of Social Welfare.
- Fuziah, S., & Ismail, B. (2013). Internationalization of Social Work Education in Malaysia. In T. Akimoto & K. Matsua (Eds.). *Internationalization of Social Work Education in Asia* (pp.79-116). Retrieved from file:///C:/Users/ASUS/Downloads/International_Research_Project_2012_akimoto_asia.pdf
- Hensley, P. H. (2008). The value of supervision. *The Clinical Supervisor*, 21(1), 97-110.
- Kadushin, A., & Harkness, D. (2014). *Supervision in social work* (5th ed.). New York, NY: Colombia University Press.
- Kirst-Ashman, K. K. (2007). *Introduction to social work & social welfare. Critical thinking perspectives* (2nd ed.). Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Lee, P. N. (2011). *Development of medical social work practice in Malaysia: A historical perspective* (Master's thesis). Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang.
- Ling, H. K. (2002). Social work practice in Malaysia: A vision of direction. In N. T. Tan & I. Dodds (Eds.), *Social work around the world* (pp.83-97). Berne: International Federation of Social Workers Press.
- McKitterick, B. (2012). *Supervision*. London, UK: The McGrawHill Companies.
- Mo, Y. H. (2016). In search of a professional supervisory practice: External social work supervision in China. *Asian Social Work and Policy Review* 10, 349-357.
- Munson, C. E. (1983). *An introduction to clinical social work supervision*. New York, NY: The Haworth Press.
- National Association of Social Workers & The Association of Social Work Boards. (2013). *Best practice standards in social work supervision*. Retrieved from <http://www.naswdc.org/practice/naswstandards/supervisionstandards2013.pdf>
- O'Donoghue, Kieran (2015). "Issues and challenges facing social work supervision in the twenty-first century." *China Journal of Social Work* 8.2.

- Parker, J. (2013). *Effective practice learning in social work* (2nd ed.). London, UK: SAGE.
- Silence, E. (2017). *The significance of social work supervision in the Department of Health, Western Cape: Social workers' experiences* (Master's thesis). University of Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch, South Africa.
- Thompson, N. (2015). *Understanding social work. Preparing for practice*. New York, NY: Palgrave.
- Tsui, M. S. (2005). *Social work supervision. Contexts and concepts*. London, UK: SAGE.
- Turner-Daly, B., & Jack, G. (2017). Rhetoric vs. reality in social work supervision: The experiences of a group of child care social workers in England. *Child and Family Social Work*, 22, 36-46.
- Wilkins, David, Donald Forrester, and Louise Grant (2017). "What happens in child and family social work supervision?." *Child & Family Social Work* 22.2.
- Wilkins, David, and Vivi Antonopoulou (2019). "What does supervision help with? A survey of 315 social workers in the UK." *Practice* 31.1.
- Wonnacott, J. (2012). *Mastering social work supervision*. London, UK: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Zastrow, C. (2008). *Introduction to social work and social welfare. Empowering people* (9th ed.). Boston, MA: Brooks/Cole.