

**Conceptualization of Best Practice Approach to
Professional Supervision in Child Protection Services
Within a Statutory Agency in Malaysia**

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ABSTRACT

The care, safety and protection of children is a shared responsibility of the whole society. Government policies such as the National Child Protection Policy have emphasized the importance of collaboration among agencies as well as with the informal care system (families, neighbours and communities) to facilitate children are appropriately protected from maltreatment and its consequences. In recent times, there is an increasing awareness of the complexity of the jigsaw components of best practice in relation to child protection and the important roles of professionally trained social work child protection workers in addressing these complexities. One of the important provision to best practice in child protection is professional supervision. In relation to this, the understanding of the overall conceptualization of best practice approach to professional supervision in child protection services within a statutory agency in Malaysia is hence important. The paper discusses the concepts of supervision, child protection and best practice in child protection services. It recognises that social work child protection workers within the statutory child protection system in Malaysia, particularly frontline workers urgently require supported and valuing work environment, that encourages professional development and supervision to facilitate their provision of best practice child protection services.

Keywords: Child protection, Statutory child protection, Supervision, Best practice

1. Introduction

Over the years, there have been competing definitions of professional supervision depending on the focus of the particular helping profession. In general, supervision is an interactional process by which a designated supervisor oversees the task performed by a professional person and directs them with guidance and reflective feedback to facilitate effective action towards the provision of best practice for the clients (Munson, 1983; Kirst-Ashman, 2007). Supervision is a dynamic, multiparty and interactional helping relationship which takes place in a contextual form within a specific organisational setting and socio-cultural context (Tsui, 2005; Hess, Kanak & Atkins, 2009; McKitterick, 2012; Parker, 2013).

‘Children are future pillars of the nation and are our great resource’ is a common ‘parlance’ which people often say. This statement shows that the nation views children as a valuable asset and seeks to ensure all children’s well-being is taken care of. However, children’s right and well-being is challenged when the basic needs of children are not met or neglected in mainstream strategic planning. Meemeduma (2011) points out that child care, safety and protection services need to be characterised by systematic integration of services through a solid partnership between formal and informal services because the maltreatment of children is generated by complex factors which cannot be addressed solely by one party as a separate entity.

Due to the complex nature of the causal factors leading to child maltreatment and hence to the consequent services responses required to respond to this complexity, the quality of child protection services provided by a statutory child protection services such as those services provided by the Department of Social Welfare (DSW) is essential. Child protection practice requires a best practice professional response which is characterised by logical and theoretically informed approach to case referral, assessment, planning, intervention and review. Child protection practice therefore, requires competent professionally trained workers. To theoretically understand the conceptualization of best practice approach to professional supervision in child protection services within a statutory agency in Malaysia, it is important to look at what constitutes ‘best practice’ in the provision of child protection services in Malaysia.

2. Literature Review

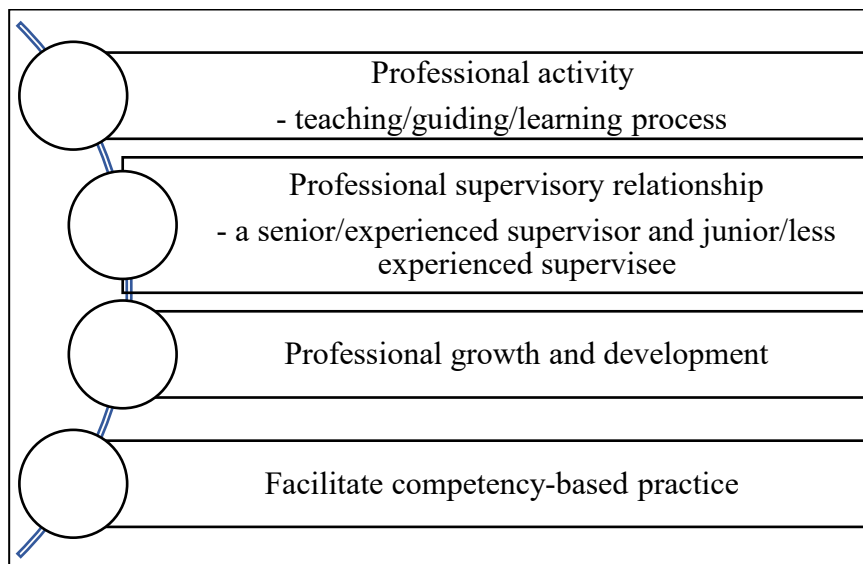
2.1. Supervision

Morrison (2005) defines supervision as “a process by which one worker is given responsibility by the organisation to work with another worker (s) to meet certain organisational, professional and personal objectives which together promote the best outcomes for service users” (p.32). Munson (1983) describes supervision as “an interactional process in which a supervisor has been assigned or designated to assist in and direct the practice of a supervisee in the area of teaching, administration and helping” (p.3). Munson further emphasises that supervisors are officially assigned and given designated tasks by an agency or law to oversee, facilitate, direct and guide the work individual organisational personnel they supervise. Supervisors are therefore responsible to both the organisation they serve and the professions they represent. Equally, supervisees are expected to be accountable to the supervisor. Wonnacott (2012) explains that supervision is primarily a relationship between two (or more) people with the ultimate aim of improving the delivery of quality and effective social work practice and the client’s outcomes. A quality supervisory relationship can have a profound influence on social work practice and service outcomes. These definitions indicate supervision as a process which supervisory relationship is an integral aspect of best social work practice.

Chan (2019) reports supervision as a professional activity, which acts to guide a learning process through utilizing the relationship between the supervisor and supervisee. Within such a learning relationship a senior, more experienced, knowledgeable, skillful, expert, and/or qualified person is able to teach, guide, help and support a worker to facilitate the worker in the provision of quality standards professional practice. This includes to ensure the practice is competency-based and accountable in meeting the operational responsibilities of the service, compliance with policies and procedures, and accordance to professional standards. The key concepts in relation to what supervision is presented in Figure 1.

As indicated in Figure 1, supervision is a teaching, guiding and learning process that involve a relationship between a supervisor and a supervisee and which aims to enhance professional growth and development and the professional competency of a worker. Supervision is recognised as involving a senior practitioner, who has more professional experience and knowledge, which is used to guide a junior or younger less experienced worker in professional practice, and to ensure the practice adheres to the regulation and administrative aspect of the organisation and is in accordance with social work principles. Supervision is a professional ‘holding hands’ with the supervisee to make sure the supervisee has relevant knowledge and skills and an appropriate professional attitude to conducting professional practice, which is based on the best interest of the child. In relation to this, supervision is a source of reference, a support system where an experienced person provides guidance, reassurance and emotional support so workers are not left without guidance to manage their individual professional practice. Importantly, supervision plays the role in promoting reflection on the self and practice and cultivating learning that helps the practitioners to grow professionally. These explanations are in line with some supervision literatures on the definition of supervision (Munson, 1983; Kadushin, as cited in Tsui,2002; Morrison, 2005; Kirst-Ashman, 2007; Hensley, 2008; Wonnacott, 2012).

Figure 1: Key concepts of supervision definition



Chan further reports supervision, is an interactional process by which a designated supervisor oversees and directs the task performed by the workers and assists them with professional guidance that seeks best practice outcomes for clients, and achieves the organisational, professional and personal objectives. The roles of supervision are thus to teach, guide, develop and support the social workers to become a more competent and accountable person. It empowers the workers to make sound decision and guides them in the right direction to ensure best practice.

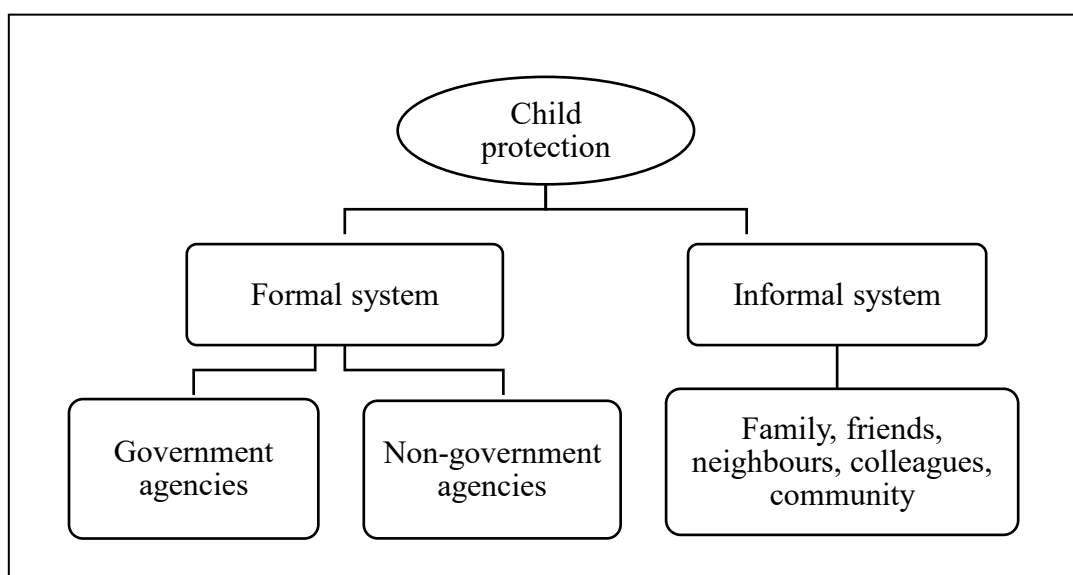
2.2. Child Protection

Based on the Malaysian National Child Protection Policy, ‘child protection refers to the strategies and activities to prevent and respond to neglect, abuse, violence and exploitation of children’ (DSW, 2009). Child protection is a specific area that all societies need to give highly attention towards ensuring the care, safety and protection of all children (Meemeduma, 2011). Given that one third of the Malaysia total population is children, child protection is no longer seen as domestic matter but rather a matter which requires a professional response.

The definition of statutory is something “enacted, created, regulated, controlled or determined by statute”, which are laws or bills passed by the legislature” (Statutory, n.d.). Examples of statutory law and policies in relation to child protection in Malaysia is the Child Act 2001. Two key policies enacted to govern this law are the National Child Policy and the National Child Protection Policy. The Child Act 2001 sets out mandatory power and authority as well as child welfare requirements such as the authorization of DSW in Malaysia and gazettement of child protection officers with lead responsibility in issues concerning child protection in the country. These law and policies also underline the statutory authority and functions of those responsible for child protection on providing services, especially protection for all children in need. It serves as a benchmark for child protection operational strategies and case practice standards.

Referring to the child protection structure as shown in Figure 2, child protection is provided within two systems: the formal system and the informal system. The formal system is an established organisational structure that aims to respond to the child’s care and protection need. It comprises both government (in which the statutory child protection takes place in) and non-government organisations, such as schools, businesses, private human service agencies, and federal, state and local government agencies (Woodside & McClam, 1998; Meemeduma, 2011). According to Woodside and McClam (1998), as compared to the formal system, the informal system is more difficult to recognise though not less important. The informal system is not illustrated by an organisational structure as reflected in agency policy, formal reporting mechanism or systematic organisational diagrams. It is composed of informal parties like family, friends, neighbours and community who provide needed support of any kind within the informal network, without involving formal organisations. It can be any individuals or groups of people, who do not gain any return in terms of salary or money, but have an interest and commitment (through the family, community) towards promoting the well-being of children in the society. While vast the majority of child maltreatment happens within the family, most of the child maltreatment situation are preliminary addressed by the informal system. When the situation is reported to be at a critical level, for instance a child is being abused or found possibly victimized in any unpleasant circumstance which may cause harm, specialized agencies and authorised workers begin to intervene in the child’s life. These parties are known as child protective service agencies, either governmental or non-governmental based.

Figure 2: Child protection structure



2.3. Best Practice in Child Protection Services

The term ‘best practice’ is perceived differently by different parties. The notion of ‘best practice’ is linked to what social work is and what are its roles and purposes in child protection. Based on the social work literature, best practice can be captured in two main areas.

2.3.1. Competency

Social work is a demanding profession that responds to complex and constantly changing personal and social problems within dynamic environments. Following the growth in professional human services and the greater demands placed on professional practice to meet the needs of vulnerable clients, there has been an urgent call for urgent increase in professionally competent social workers in Malaysia, especially in area of child protection practice (Meemeduma, 2012). Social work practice is not a routinized or mechanical practice response to the needs of service groups. Social work best practice requires the application across a Continuum of Service of a high level of professional knowledge and skills which are applied in a competent manner in relation to case referrals, assessment, case planning, case management, case review and case follow up and monitoring. Competent social workers are social workers who can utilise contextual assessment, critical thinking, reflective action, well-informed analysis, logical reasoning, professional decision making and evidence-based practice to guide their practice as it responds to the unique and specific needs of each case.

Competency means ‘capability’. Competency is a combination of observable and measureable abilities an individual has and demonstrably enacts, inclusive of their individual values, knowledge, skills and personal attributes to accomplish a task, activity or professional responsibility, or to solve some definite problem efficiently, effectively and successfully (“Competency”, n.d.; Veyland, 2002; OPTSQ 2005). According to McKnight (2013) competence is an “ongoing ability... to integrate knowledge, skills, judgment, and professional attributes in order to practice safely and ethically” (p. 460). Drisko (2014) defines competence as “the ability of an individual to perform a task” in a proper manner (p. 416). More precisely, “competency is a wide concept which embodies the ability to transfer skills and knowledge to new situations within an occupational area. It encompasses the organisation and planning of work, innovation and coping with non-routine situations. It includes those qualities of personal effectiveness that are required on the workplace to deal with co-workers, managers and customers” (NCVQ, 1988, as quoted in O’Hagan, 1996, p5). Barker (1995) defines competency in relation to social work practice as “competence in social work includes possession of all relevant educational and experiential requirements, demonstrated ability through passing licensing and certification exams and the ability to carry out work assignments and achieve social work goals while adhering to the values of the profession.”

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) Practice Standards for Social Workers (2013) highlights several standards for social work best practice. Competent social workers according to the AASW are committed to ongoing learning through continuing professional development and supervision in order to obtain knowledge and skills required for effective practice. Competent social workers must be able to articulate ideas and demonstrate their ability to integrate professional knowledge, values and skills into practice. Competent social workers uphold ethical responsibilities, particularly in dealing with ethical conflicts and dilemmas they encounter in practice. Competent social workers possess culturally sensitivity and are able to work in a culturally responsive and inclusive way.

The National Competency Standards for Social Work Practice in Malaysia (DSW, 2010, p.7-8) identifies a competent social worker as an individual who demonstrates the ability to

- i. underpin and inform their practice with reference to a value position as exemplified by adherence to a Professional Code of Ethics;
- ii. conceptually 'think' about the phenomenon of the individual and his social concerns brought to their attention;
- iii. access and utilise bodies of professional social work knowledge to guide understanding of the areas of concern;
- iv. appropriately and effectively select and apply the professional knowledge to the individual and social areas of concern presented;
- v. identify and consider alternative ways of thinking about an individual or social concern, and arriving at a professional position in relation to their understanding of the situation of concern;
- vi. design intervention planning objectives and strategies guided by a professional knowledge base;
- vii. implement a practice intervention plan through the appropriate and effective utilization of professional skills; and
- viii. professionally review and reflect upon practice to provide professional learning and direction for future practice.

The National Competency Standards for Social Work Practice in Malaysia lists 10 competency standards (generic and professional) for social work practice in Malaysia. Each competency is composed of values, knowledge and skills that define what social work practitioners in Malaysia are to know and are able to practice in an appropriate manner to ensure professional practice. The competency standards entail six generic competencies and four professional competencies which identifies eight core indicators of competent social worker.

2.3.2. Reflective thinking practice

Acknowledging that social work is an immensely challenging profession, scholars (Gambrill, 2006; Thompson, 2015; Ferguson, 2018) argue that professional social work practice remains insufficient if it solely draws upon professional values, skills in the formal knowledge (based on research, theoretical literature & practice wisdom) and the informal knowledge (individuals' life experiences). This is because professional values, knowledge and skills serves as generic tools in professional practice, but do not in themselves provide 'interpretive' application to specific practice situations/case. Professional theories seek to explain practice phenomenon through suggested conceptual frameworks which often offer speculative models of the conceptual relationships (causal and/or associational) of identified concepts. Although theories through their conceptual framework and suggested models do provide suggested intervention direction they cannot provide specific direction for the workers in a specific case. Here the worker becomes the facilitate interchange between what is conceptually known and what is known about a case. This is the role of the reflective thinking competency.

Reflective thinking practice is an important component of best practice (McKitterick, 2012; Ferguson, 2018). Reflective thinking practice is a key process utilised and outcome achieved during professional supervision. It is a developmental process which enables managers, supervisors and social workers to explore and review all aspects of practice deliberately, to evaluate the practice critically and to identify the pitfalls and strengths to be dealt to facilitate best

practice. Gould (as cited in Thompson, 2015) provides a means for understanding the role and importance of reflective thinking practice in the statement:

“... expertise does not derives from the application of rules or procedures applied deductively from positivist research... practice wisdom rest upon highly developed intuition which may be difficult to articulate but can be demonstrated through practice... reflective learning offers an approach to education which operates through an understanding of professional knowledge as primarily developed through practice and the systematic analysis of experience” (p.1)

Thompson (2015) captures the notion of Schon that reflective practice can be done in two aspects. That is, reflection-in-practice and reflection-on-practice. First, reflection-in-practice refers to critical thinking about the present situation (for instance what is happening) at the moment while it is happening and anticipating most appropriate subsequent action to be taken. This view of reflective thinking practice requires high level abstract and concrete cognitive skills which facilitate capability in analytical thinking and the linkage of theory to practice. Second, reflection-on-practice refers to a process of reviewing the practice after it has been undertaken. This process is most used in supervisory practice when both supervisor and supervisee post provision of practice reviews the situation of a client, identify problems and client strengths (assessment); further explores possible resources and approaches (planning) that might or were helpful; critically analyses the actions undertaken (intervention/evaluation); and measures way to achieve future goals. Reflective thinking is an ongoing process which can undertaken at any stage of the practice Continuum of Service. The purpose of reflective thinking is to ensure practice is undertaken in an appropriate, ethical and effective manner in order to increase the likelihood that clients receive best practice professional service.

The service benefit of reflective thinking practice is significant. Todd and Freshwater (1999) argue that reflective thinking practice facilitates continuous learning through a constant review, reflect, learn and transfer of learning process the professional engages with, which then facilitates, professional development and growth in practice. Thompson (2015) believes that reflective thinking practice reinforces the integration of theory and practice through enabling the conscious professional awareness of and linkage of theoretical knowledge to practice settings. Through such practices the worker is constantly working through theories to explain practice phenomenon and to gain possible guidance for intervention direction. McKitterick (2012) indicates reflective thinking practice contributes to supporting practice is carried out effectively according to practice standards, policies and procedures. Reflective practice facilitates best practice because it allows social workers to keep thinking and evaluating the appropriateness of practice actions undertaken and prevents the ‘easy-work syndrome’ that relies on ‘common sense’ and ‘formulalistic answers’ in practice. Reflective thinking practice empowers social worker competency and encourages professional continuous development and growth.

2.4. The Conceptual Elements

This section outlines the conceptual elements in relation to supervision in the provision of statutory child protection practice from a broader perspective - (i) supervision exists as a conceptual entity in this own right (what is supervision by itself); (ii) it exists in relation to social work (part of the broader social welfare system), and to social work’s sub-practice area - child protection and statutory child protection, as a professional entity (how does it relates to the bigger

circles); and (iii) both social work and supervision exist in relation to the organisation provision of child protection within the statutory organisation context (e.g. DSW).

Figure 3: Conceptual elements of supervision in social work statutory child protection practice

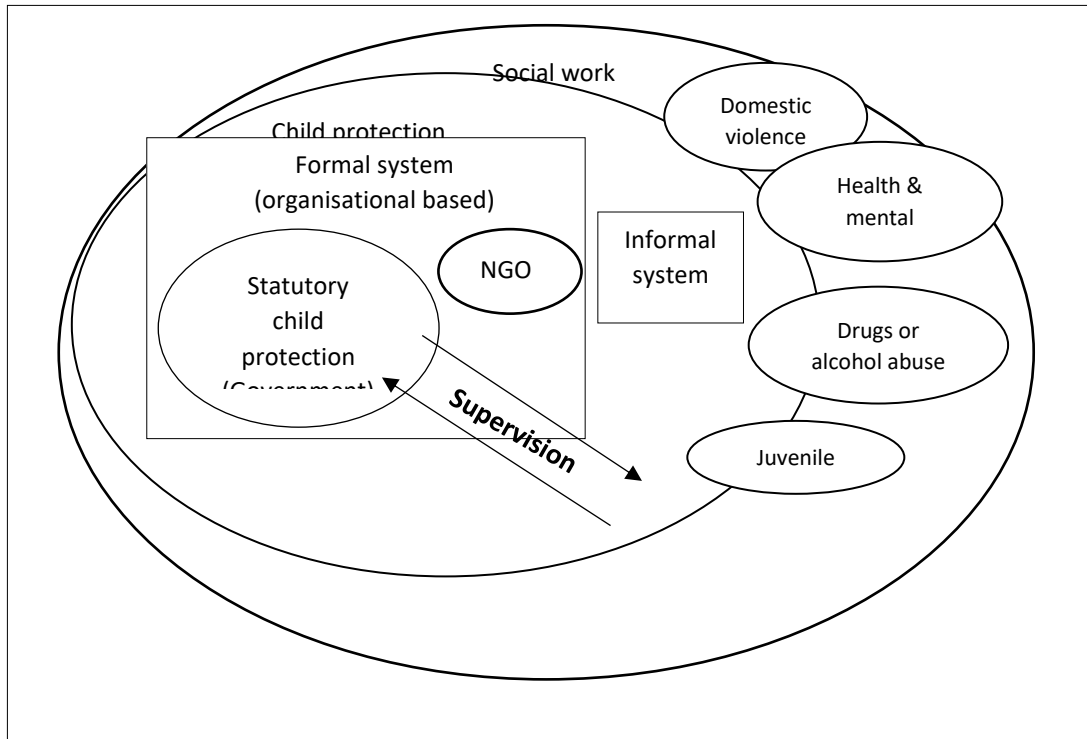


Figure 3 presents the conceptual elements of supervision in the provision of statutory child protection practice within social work profession spectrum. This diagram emphasizes social work, child protection and statutory child protection exist as a system within the social work spectrum. Although each of these concepts exists as a conceptual entity in its own right, each concept is placed in relation to each other as part of a suggested conceptual framework for supervision best practice.

The conceptual elements outlined in Figure 3 involve a dynamic inter-relationship between four contingent concepts composed of social work, statutory child protection (embedded in child protection), organisational context and supervision. This diagram leads to the formation of a more specific conceptual framework on how supervision functions in supporting best practice in the provision of child protection practice within a statutory organisational context. In relation to this, the discussion on how professional supervision can be theoretically understood to inform best practice is challenging and immensely interesting. Understanding the underpinned theories is therefore fundamental.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, to ensure the care, safety and protection of children is met, there is a significant desire to provide best practice statutory child protection services in Malaysia. It requires the government initiative to professionalize social work practice and education through the development of an integrated multi-sectoral synergy among allied social welfare professionals. Child protection practice as part of social work is a practice that particularly requires competency,

professional knowledge, skills and values. It is recognised that effective implementation of professional statutory child protection services in Malaysia requires the allocation of organisational resources, both human and financial. Organisations providing services for children and families require competent professional workers who require continuous opportunities for professional supervision and training at all levels, including continuing professional development. All staff, no matter how senior should benefit from professional regular best practice supervision. To be effective, child protection supervision has to function as a system rather than as a number of separate or disjointed parts within an organisation.

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