

The Importance of Professional Support in Supervision from the Lance of Child Protection Workers

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i7/25778> DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i7/25778

Published Date: 10 July 2025

Abstract

Supervision is an important component of all areas of professional social work practice, particularly in high risk areas where clients are at risk of or are being harmed. Child protection practice, is recognized as a high-risk service area and therefore professional supervision is of particular importance in ensuring the provision of best practice child protection services to the children and families. The purpose of the study is to identify how respondents perceive supervision within a professional practice environment and how this understanding may then act to shape the expectations of what supervision should be in the future. This is an exploratory qualitative study, based on 15 in-depth interviews with present and past practicing workers in the statutory child protection system. The study respondents recognize supervision as an important activity in supporting professional practice in stress related risk practice environments and in facilitating professional learning and development in social work child protection practice. The study indicates supervision is an ethical professional activity that provides professional support for practitioners working in a complex, stressful and risk-based practice environment. The contribution of good supervision to best practice child protection services, which in turn to benefit the agencies, professional practitioners and clients, are widely recognized.

Keywords: Best Practice, Child Protection, Competency, Professional Support, Supervision

Introduction

In children services, the frontline child protection workers would be the key party to address issues of safety and protection of vulnerable children, as well as problems related to their families. Children's right and well-being is challenged when the basic needs of children are not met or neglected in the mainstream. Child protection has become more complex and challenging in modern days. 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 child protection workers is essential. While ensuring the provision of best child protection services, there are many stresses and challenges in working with children and families. Heavy paper work, long work

hours, large caseloads, high accountability requirements, limited resources, inadequate professional training and lack of organisational support supervision are among the challenges child protection workers often face. Despite tremendous stresses and challenges, provision of best practice child protection services should always remain as a top priority. Child protection practice therefore, requires competent child protection workers who are professionally supervised.

It is accepted internationally that best practice in child protection practice, as with any form of practice, is underpinned by access to professional supervision. Supervision is valued as an important activity in supporting professional practice in stress related risk practice environments and in facilitating professional learning and development in social work practice. This is a study of supervision within the profession of social work. It is a study in particular of supervision in relation to field practice (direct practice) and child protection in a statutory practice environment. The study is conducted in Malaysia, which is facing not only issues in relation to supervision but also more broadly issues in relation to all social welfare provision. This is a study of not only supervision itself but also how supervision may play a part in capacity building professional social work practice in statutory child protection services per se, as well as within the wider social work environment in Malaysia.

Statement of Problem

Children are vulnerable in most critical situation as compared to adults. As Davies (1994) notes, children do not exist in vacuum. Anything which happens to an adult can have an impact on a child. Despite the growth in the complexity of human problems and often declining coping mechanisms of individuals within society, children are dependent on adults to meet their basic care needs, such as physical, psychological, emotional, cognitive, moral and spiritual care; especially to protect them from harm (McCormack, 2013; Meemeduma, 2013). Nor Amni, a retired Director to the Children Division of Department of Social Welfare (DSW) notes that “a child is easily influenced and the traumatic experiences can cripple his ability to grow up into a functioning adult” (MWFCD, 2007, p.58).

The government, be it the federal or state, is a key mandated body that is responsible for statutory child protection services. The government is responsible for facilitating the meeting of children’s care, safety and protection needs. This expectation is not always fulfilled where the government is unable to provide immediate appropriate tertiary child protection response services due to a lack of sufficient personnel, personnel with the required competencies or a lack of instrumental resources (housing, income, respite care).

Being committed as the key statutory agency in child welfare services, the challenges DSW encounters is related to the emergence of increased problems which face facilitate children’s care, safety and protection in the modern world. To assist children and their families in managing problems the function of DSW is to enhance the preventive capacity of families by enhancing family resilience and social functioning through building self-efficacy/competency. DSW therefore has a dual focus which is both preventive to stop problems arising and responsive to address problems that have arisen (Woodside & McClam, 1998). In response to the needs of clients, DSW encounters an increasing number of problems to be solved, a rise that many experts attribute partly to a changing culture and lifestyle within the country. Life has become more complicated and challenging for many people in Malaysia.

People are living with various stress in the modern world. There is an arising number of individuals who feel alienated from their neighbourhoods and communities as consequence of urbanization and modernization. Meanwhile, the increased awareness of the public of their legal rights has led to higher expectations placed on the government to provide better quality and more efficient social welfare services.

Child protection is a **very challenging practice in social work context**. By work nature, child protection workers always deal with child maltreatment cases involving abuse, neglect, and trauma, which can take a heavy emotional. Child protection workers may also encounter moral dilemmas and ethical conflict, for instance, in deciding whether to remove a child, reunify a family, or terminate parental rights. Constant exposure to such complex situation may lead to compassion fatigue, high stress and emotional burnout.

Protecting children today involves greater complexity and challenges than in the past. Child protection workers can no longer rely on traditional intervention approaches and methods in dealing with contemporary emerging child protection issues. Services need to have a sound knowledge and skills base and always update with the latest knowledge and research professional, particularly in relation to child protection (Chan, 2019). Meanwhile, child protection workers always reported to handle more cases than they reasonably should, in addition to limited resources and professional supports can lead to time pressure and potential mistakes.

Literature Review

Davies (1994) stresses that rising standards of living and life betterment means that expectation of social welfare services also arise, particularly in relation to services for children. Services are no longer about giving financial aid to the poor. Rather, it is expected the statutory child protection services are able to ensure the entire well-being and best interest of the child is taken care of. It is about the care and safety of the child, empowerment of the family and community, enhancement of their social functioning and capacity building of the community as a whole in achieving appropriate care, safety, and protection outcomes for the children and their families (Davies, 1994). In relation to this, best practice statutory child protection practice means the care, safety and protection of every child is always attended in a timely, efficient and proper manner based on professional principles and values, as well as guided by a body of professional knowledge and standards.

Social work is a profession that places significant emphasis on human social functioning and the role of the external environment in support individuals and communities. Farley, Smith and Boyle (2000) describe the functions of social work services as threefold: include restoration of impaired capacity, provision of resources and prevention of social dysfunction. Competent child protection workers seek to identify, control or eliminate factors that cause impairment of the family or caregivers resulting in child maltreatment, as well as help to rebuild the social functioning of the family or caregivers. Through the use of a professionally informed knowledge base, child protection workers are able to develop, coordinate, facilitate and improve the existing social resources available to clients. Child protection workers are also able to act in a preventive role by capable anticipating individual and social problems that might arise in (before the occurrence of maltreatment), and to control and eliminate the condition that possibly could hamper effective social functioning of

caregivers especially in providing care, safety and protection to children. In response to these basic functions of the social work profession, particularly in dealing with child maltreatment, there is an increasing parallel risk of harm towards the children and their families if the child protection workers do not have the relevant professional knowledge and skills and professional competency to respond appropriately and effectively to the preventive and responsive service needs of clients (Meemeduma, 2013). In this regard, professional supervision is essential to ensure the provision of best practice child protection services.

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 organisational context and aims to sustain and develop good practice to ensure best child protection practice outcomes to the clients. Supervision is useful in social work practice because it helps the social worker to work more effectively in the uncertain and dynamic work environment (Gardner, as cited in Parker, 2012).

Supervision enables the social workers to engage in ongoing reflection and critical analysis upon their practice. This ongoing reflection allows the social workers to manage the complex and often contested nature of social work practice, especially in the area of child protection practice. For example, where values within society relating to the integrity of the family can often be in conflict with the right of children to be cared for, safe and protected and thus require the State to step in through the role of the social worker and protect the child. Napier and Fook (as cited in Parker, 2012) and Chan (2019) explain that through the mutual trust and respect relationship established in supervision, social workers can be more confident in their practice and deal positively with the stress of the often contested and challenging practice environment.

The benefits of supervision are acknowledged as it facilitates practitioner empowerment, encourages professional development and best practice standards resulting in more positive consumer feedback, fewer service complaints, and contributes to reducing staff burnout (Hughes, 2010; Carpenter, Webb, Bostock & Coomber, 2012; Chan 2019). Kadushin and Harkness (2014) denote social work supervision as a primary platform for the organisation to deliver services to the client in an appropriate, efficient and effective manner. Shulman (1994) argues professional supervision importantly contributes to the reduction of the risk of unethical and unprofessional practice. Regular supervision ensures adherence to policies, procedures, and standards. It also helps maintain consistency and quality in decision-making and interventions. Effective supervision guides the practice of frontline workers to facilitate the service goal of the organisation is accomplished and the best interest of the clients are met (Meemeduma, 2014).

Methodology

A cross-sectional design utilizing an exploratory-descriptive qualitative method is identified for this study. It aims to study how the respondents perceived, experienced and responded to the area of supervision especially their views on the importance 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 the importance of professional supervision in the provision of best practice in child protection services.

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 15 individuals who are presently working within the statutory child protection system as a paid government servant in Malaysia.

A triangulation data collection approach is employed in this study, with in-depth interviews serving as the primary method, supplemented by secondary sources such as field notes and materials from the relevant 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.

Findings and Analysis of Results

The study findings highlighted the significance of supervision, with respondents expressing a wide range of perspectives on its importance. One of the key findings was supervision provide professional support for child protection workers to provide competent practice.

The respondents identified the provision of support for supervisees plays an important function in supervision in relation to statutory child protection practice. This includes monitoring practice in relation to the emotional well-being of the practitioners, management of personal issues and worked related issues at workplace. The respondents noted supervision is an outlet especially for professional practitioners who are working with children and adults in risk-based and highly stressful practice situations. Such work can 'empty their emotional cup' leaving the practitioners at risk themselves. For example, the respondents noted supervisors could pay attention to and assess the workers' emotional state of mind, help them to overcome the fear and negative feeling from the case, as well as reinforce a positive perspective on their work and what they have achieved. The study respondents also noted that many social workers may have some adverse experience in their lives which may in turn affect the way they understand and respond to the case and to the client. The respondents noted supervisors need to be experienced and capable in assessing and supporting workers' emotional needs, providing support and where appropriate inspiring the worker to do better.

"Sometimes the workers have tried all the solutions and they cannot think already, that is why the supervisor can play the part... you have your own ideas and that is why you can give them more ideas and look for alternative solutions. When they empty the cup, they are much more focused, much more mindful and conscious about what decision they are making or what alternatives they are giving."

(Dianna)

“Besides the professional job, there are household problems, family problems or personal problem. Therefore, the supervisor really needs to be very experience to be able to detect if there is any experience in the past that may have shaped or triggered the way of how the workers dealing with specific children, for instance, about lesbianism... need to be able to detect these little things that are surfacing... The objective (of supervision) at the end of the day is to have a supervisee who is healthy, who is above her head, who is objective. Not someone does not do self-care, who is burnout, tired and not enthusiastic, and doing this for the sake of doing the work.”

(Chloe)

The respondents reported supervision also facilitates the workers’ coping skills, i.e. the capability to cope with challenging situations more effectively. If the supervisee does have concern about how they are managing and performing their professional work the supervisor has to be capable of detecting this problem and to assist the worker to understand the reasons for their work performance and to help them to improve their practice.

“If anything like changes in the behaviour or you see the social worker becoming very stress up, you know something is wrong. That is why you call them in to have that person supervision... we call it like ‘hitting the brick wall’, they cannot *tahan* (withstand) already with the case. So, you have to really think of creative ideas to build back their empathy... make them to think out of the box.”

(Dianna)

“There must be somebody immediate above you who sort of guide you, who sort of be there for you in case this person is helpless, do not know where to turn to.”

(Putri)

Meanwhile, some respondents revealed emotional support is important in terms of professional growth and development, as it enables the workers to feel comfortable and guided when they know their work is being monitored. In particular, when there is a mistake, supervision could help to release their worry because the supervisor would guide them in an appropriate direction. The respondents emphasized that professional support is important especially for the young practitioners, because they need help and support in dealing with complex cases in statutory child protection practice. The respondents indicated that the professional support of supervision can help the practitioners to relief from heavy caseloads and increase their work enthusiasm. Such relief may occur when through the supervision relationship the supervisee is provided with a supportive environment in the workplace and the workers as a result may feel less stressful, less worried, less alone and more inspired about their work. The workers would feel happy, confident and appreciated if the superior cares about their professional work. As a result, they feel more confident and more motivated in rendering their work. Supervision therefore may act, according to some of the respondents to prevent burn-out.

“The supervisor should be able to offer new skills to the supervisee in dealing with the issue... do they have knowledge, if not, go and read up. Inform them of best practices. Do they have skills? If they do not have the skills, coach or mentor them the skills.”

(Chloe)

“When we receive supervision from our manager, psychologically we feel like, ‘oh, this case is being monitored by our boss’, we feel happy lah. After discussing with boss we do not feel so much of stress because there is a support from the boss.”

(Siti)

“It would be better if the Department Head is taking note on what has been done by the Protector on children. The Protector also feels confident and what have been done is appreciated by the Department Head... looks like the Department Head really cares about the Protector.”

(Wati)

“It is good for us because we will be aware... it is not about being observed but knowing someone is concerned and trying to understand how our work like, so we are to be more considerate, and more appreciate, and we will put in more effort to improve our weaknesses.”

(Fauziah)

Many of the respondents discussed this area of the ‘supportive’ function of supervision. The idea of support in supervision is closely linked to the idea of ‘professional support’ to enhance professional growth and development to achieve organisational and individual professional practice outcomes. However, because professional supervision seeks to work through a professional engaged relationship, the boundaries between professional support and personal support is not always clear to supervisors, supervisees or organisations. Professional support is support for a supervisee to undertake the professional role. Personal support is support in relation to the professional worker’s own private life and clearly has an associational relationship with professional role, but it is not the core function of professional supervision. The responses of the respondents reflect this confusion amidst a recognition of the professional support role. Chloe's quote is a good example of this mixture, where the supervisor is expected to provide *personal support*. In contrast, the other respondents recognized a more professional support role of supervision. It is to the credit of the respondents that so many were able to lay emphasis on the professional support role.

Discussion

Despite the outlined variations in how supervision is understood by the respondents, one key aspects emerged from the finding results in relation to the importance of supervision was supervision provide professional support to ensure the well-being of the child protection workers. This finding is in-line with the stated importance of supervision cited in the social work supervision literature.

The respondents in the study recognized supervision has an important role in safeguarding child protection workers in statutory child protection. It is a process which can assist the workers to cope with their emotions, manage uncertainty and to continue to grow and learn professionally (Pilalis, 1986). The study findings indicate the role which supervision has in dealing with workers’ emotional management of child protection work. Child protection work can be emotionally taxing. Supervision offers emotional containment, helping workers process distress, manage stress, and avoid burnout. The study recognizes professional support as an important component of supervision that contributes to effective

practice, particularly in child protection practice. This includes monitoring the emotional well-being of the supervisees, as well as managing personal issues and worked related issues at the workplace. It is reported that supervision increases the work enthusiasm of the supervisees in which workers are facilitated to improve their work performance when there is supportive environment at the workplace. Supervision represents an important symbolic meaning to workers that they are organisational supported, appreciated and cared about (Meemeduma, 2011; Hamama, 2012; Ladany, Mori & Mehr, 2012; Gray, 2015; UNICEF, 2016; Chan, 2019).

Supervision acts to facilitate the provision of professional support in a manner to act to prevent work-related harm to both the clients and the social workers' well-being (Kilminster & Jolly, 2000; Hensley, 2008; Kadushin, 2014). The study recognizes supervision encourages reflective practice, allowing workers to examine their biases, assumptions, and values, which is vital when working with vulnerable children and families. This is particularly important for inexperienced social workers where experienced practitioners can guide the new social work graduates and help them transition smoothly into the professional environment (Hensley, 2008; Collins-Camargo & Royse, 2010; Teoh, 2023). As described by Kadushin and Harkness (as cited in Bogo & McKnight, 2006), supervision helps workers to handle stress through providing encouragement, reassurance, and appropriate individual professional autonomy and discretion especially when workers experience high risk cases which can lead to professional discontent, disillusionment and eventually practice participation discouragement. Effective support given by supervisors was found to be helpful in increasing worker morale and professional job satisfaction of the workers, which in turn may contribute to improvements in the quality of service clients receive (Bogo & McKnight, 2006). The study's findings are further supported by Chan (2019), who emphasizes that supervision offers a structured environment for critical reflection and the discussion of complex cases, enabling practitioners to make more informed, ethical, and balanced decisions. Supervisors can identify areas for growth, provide feedback, and guide professional development. In short, effective supervision supports both the **wellbeing of the child protection workers** and the **safety of the child**, and reinforcing the overall effectiveness of child protection systems.

Conclusion

There is increasing recognition of the complex and demanding nature of child protection work, where best practice involves navigating a range of interrelated factors such as legal requirements, complex family dynamics, cultural considerations, and organisational constraints. Professionally trained child protection workers play a vital role in managing these challenges, using their expertise to navigate difficult situations and make informed decisions in the best interests of children and families. However, in the provision of best practice child protection services, child protection workers encounter an array of challenges, which often include high caseloads, emotional stress, limited resources, risk of personal burnout, and the pressure of making critical decisions that can have long-term impacts on children's lives. Their ability to apply sound judgment, manage risk, and maintain ethical standards under such pressures is essential to ensuring the safety and well-being of vulnerable children.

Supervision is widely acknowledged as a vital element of professional practice across various disciplines, especially within social work and highly challenging child protection

practice. The study acknowledges that supervision plays a crucial role in ensuring the delivery of high-quality child protection services through providing professional support to the child protection workers. Despite the challenges, many child protection workers stay in child protection service system because they are passionate about helping vulnerable children and families. With better support, training, manageable caseloads, and professional support, the job can be more sustainable and deeply rewarding. **Regular supervision** with experienced supervisor helps child protection workers handle difficult cases and emotions more effectively. Whereas **debriefing** and peer support create a space for child protection workers to share burdens and feel less isolated. It helps reduce burnout, though not always easy with high caseloads.

Contribution of the Study

This study is closely aligned with the DSW'S initiatives to strengthen the professionalism of social work practice. The findings are expected to inform strategic planning and capacity-building efforts, particularly in the area of statutory child protection, with the goal of enhancing the overall quality and effectiveness of service delivery. The findings can also be a platform and support to develop a more structured professional supervision system within the Department, initially in relation to child protection services and later on to its full provision for other services.

To enhance the delivery of statutory child protection services, this study enables the DSW to implement professional supervision grounded in international best practice standards. It supports the capacity building of senior officers and managers to provide supervision that is appropriate, effective, and efficient. The adoption of high-quality professional supervision will strengthen the competence, effectiveness, and resilience of frontline child protection workers, ultimately leading to improved outcomes for children and their families.

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