

**THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL SUPERVISION
IN CHILD PROTECTION SERVICES
IN MALAYSIA:
A DIRECTION TOWARDS BEST PRACTICE**

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**THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL SUPERVISION
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A DIRECTION TOWARDS BEST PRACTICE**

by

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AASW	Australian Association of Social Workers
COS	Charity Organisation Society
CPO	Child Protection Officer
DSW	Department of Social Welfare
IFSW	International Federation of Social Workers
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
MASW	Malaysian Association of Social Workers
MWFCD	Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
NASW	National Association of Social Workers
PKMD	<i>Pegawai Kebajikan Masyarakat Daerah</i>
SPEC	Social Work Practice Executive Certificate Program
SOP	Standard Operational Procedure
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

**PENYELIAAN PROFESIONAL DALAM PERKHIDMATAN
PERLINDUNGAN KANAK-KANAK DI MALAYSIA:
HALATUJU PRAKTIS TERBAIK**

ABSTRAK

Penyeliaan adalah komponen penting dalam semua bidang praktis kerja sosial profesional, terutamanya dalam bidang berisiko tinggi di mana klien berada dalam keadaan berisiko atau sedang dcedera. Penyeliaan bagi kakitangan adalah amat penting dalam praktis perlindungan kanak-kanak. Manfaat penyeliaan kepada agensi, pekerja profesional dan klien, dan sumbangan penyeliaan yang baik terhadap praktis perlindungan kanak-kanak yang terbaik adalah diiktiraf. Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk mengenal pasti bagaimana responden kajian, memahami penyeliaan dalam persekitaran praktis profesional dan bagaimana pemahaman ini kemudian boleh membentuk espektasi mereka tentang jenis penyeliaan yang harus diadakan pada masa hadapan. Kajian kualitatif ini menggunakan pendekatan penerokaan, berdasarkan temubual dengan seramai 23 orang responden yang pada masa kini atau dulu, bekerja dalam perlindungan kanak-kanak statutori atau yang berhubung kait dengan sistem statutori. Penemuan kajian menunjukkan penyeliaan adalah komponen penting dan amat diperlukan dalam penyediaan perkhidmatan perlindungan kanak-kanak yang profesional di Malaysia. Penyediaan penyeliaan yang terbaik mempunyai hubung kait yang ketara untuk mendorong praktis perlindungan kanak-kanak statutori yang kompeten. Kajian ini menunjukkan penyeliaan adalah aktiviti profesional beretika yang membolehkan pembangunan dan perkembangan profesional bagi meningkatkan kompetensi setiap pekerja; menyediakan sokongan profesional untuk pekerja yang bekerja dalam persekitaran kompleks, tekanan dan berisiko; dan menunjukkan

akauntabiliti praktis organisasi melalui fungsi pentadbiran dan pengurusannya. Walaupun penemuan kajian menunjukkan persekitaran perkhidmatan perlindungan kanak-kanak yang bercabaran, penemuan kajian juga melaporkan pekerja perlindungan kanak-kanak berpendapat bahawa mereka tidak menerima penyeliaan profesional yang mencukupi, dan jikalau mereka menerima penyeliaan, ia selalunya tidak memenuhi keperluan profesional mereka. Responden kajian menyatakan bahawa para pekerja dalam sistem perlindungan kanak-kanak statutori di Malaysia, terutamanya pekerja barisan hadapan amat memerlukan praktis penyeliaan terbaik untuk membantu mereka dalam penyediaan perkhidmatan intervensi perlindungan kanak-kanak terbaik untuk kanak-kanak dan keluarga mereka. Penemuan kajian menunjukkan keperluan kritikal untuk memberi perhatian kepada pembangunan struktur penyeliaan profesional dalam perkhidmatan perlindungan kanak-kanak di Malaysia. Berdasarkan penemuan yang digariskan, beberapa cadangan telah dibuat, termasuk (i) penubuhan dan pemerbadanan sistem penyeliaan profesional sebagai sebahagian daripada sistem perkhidmatan organisasi; (ii) pembangunan dasar, piawaian, kompetensi dan garis panduan penyeliaan profesional; (iii) pembangunan kurikulum program latihan penyeliaan, bahan latihan dan struktur penilaian; dan (iv) pengambilan pekerja perlindungan kanak-kanak yang berkelayakan dan berpengalaman dalam bidang kerja sosial untuk menyediakan platform berasaskan kompetensi yang mana praktis penyeliaan profesional terbaik boleh dibina.

**THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL SUPERVISION
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A DIRECTION TOWARDS BEST PRACTICE**

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. Supervision of staff is of particular importance in child protection practice. The benefits of supervision to agencies, professional practitioners and clients, and the contribution of good supervision to best practice in child protection is widely recognised. The purpose of the study is to identify how respondents understand 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 23 in-depth interviews with present and past practicing workers in the statutory child protection system or associated with the statutory system. The study findings highlight supervision is an important and crucially needed component of the provision of professional child protection services within the statutory agency in Malaysia. The provision of best practice supervision is significantly related to facilitating competent statutory child protection practice. The study indicates supervision is an ethical professional activity that enables practitioner professional growth and development to enhance the competency of each practitioner; provides professional support for practitioners working in a complex, stressful and risk-based practice environment; and demonstrating organisational practice accountability through its organisational accountability administrative and managerial functions. Although the study findings indicate the challenging nature of statutory

child protection service provision, the study findings also indicate that child protection workers perceive they do not receive sufficient professional supervision and where they do receive supervision this supervision is often professionally inadequate for their professional needs. The study respondents recognise that practitioners within the statutory child protection system in Malaysia, particularly frontline workers urgently require best practice supervision to facilitate their provision of best practice child protection intervention services for children and their families. The findings of the study indicate the critical need for attention to be focused on the development of professional supervision structure within child protection service provision in Malaysia. Based on the outlined findings several recommendations are made, which include (i) the establishment and incorporation of a professional supervision system as part of the organisational service system; (ii) the development of professional supervision policy, standards, competencies and guidelines; (iii) the development of a supervision training program curriculum, training material and assessment structure; and (iv) the increased competency-based recruitment of qualified and experienced social work trained child protection workers to provide a competency-based platform upon which professional best practice supervision can be built.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Supervision is an important component in social work practice particularly in relation to child protection practice. Recognizing this, the purpose of this research is twofold. First, the research aims to describe and analyse the past and present place as well as the possible role (if any) of ‘professional supervision’ in the provision of child protection practice within the statutory agency, i.e. in the Department of Social Welfare (DSW) in Malaysia. Through an analysis of past and present understandings and possible applications of ‘professional supervision’ strengths and challenges the consequent needs of professional supervision in statutory child protection best practice services can be identified. Importantly, through such an analysis guidance can be provided in the development of a future professional supervision framework and model. Achievement of the first purpose enables the thesis to achieve its second purpose, which is to develop a potential supervision service framework and model which can be applied within a statutory child protection practice setting. Such a supervision framework and model provides the opportunity to develop professional standards for the provision of child protection practice supervision. Such standards will then provide a platform for future professional supervision competencies teaching-learning as well as professional supervision operational implementation and performance evaluation.

The research focus is related to a broader vision of the researcher to develop, and/or enhance and sustain supervision as one of the key strategic platforms of best practice in both statutory and non-statutory child protection services in Malaysia. This vision is derived from the researcher’s awareness that within Malaysian child

protection practice (and similarly social work/social welfare practice more broadly), there is an under recognition and consequently under valuing of the importance of professional supervision in facilitating and sustaining best practice.

The purpose of the research is to provide a linkage between developments in professional supervision and recent professional initiatives in Malaysia, particularly in relation to the National Competency Standards for Social Work Practice, Professional Competencies Training and the Social Work Profession Bill. The research is past, present and future orientated. While always holding its gaze firmly towards the future in terms of improved professional child protection practice in Malaysia, it equally seeks to learn from past and present activities within statutory child protection practice. In particular, it seeks to learn from recent innovations, such as the National Competency Standards for Social Work Practice, the Social Work Profession Bill and most importantly the joint DSW/UNICEF pilot on best practice child protection practice, namely Child Protection Tertiary Services Response Pilot.

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. It is anticipated that the research will not only contribute to the improvements in statutory child protection practice but it also has application to the broader provision of all social work and social welfare services and practices in Malaysia.

1.2 Origin of the research

This research is derived from the researcher's own professional knowledge, position and experiences in statutory child protection services and social work practice in general in Malaysia, underpinned by informed literatures on professional

supervision. The researcher has served as a Social Welfare Officer in the DSW at a district, state and national level for 16 years. Having professionally participated in several movements to enhancing the professionalism of social work in Malaysia, such as the National Competency Standards for Social Work Practice and Social Work Profession Bill, the researcher has had exposure to a broader professional arena in social work practice, training and education, social work management and administration, social policy and planning. Such exposure relates to the enactment of Social Work Profession Bill and its related regulations, development of Social Work Competency Training Modules and Curriculum, undertaking professional development (training) in social work and supervision, social work practice in child protection services and professional contact with overseas social work experts and specialists.

Based on these professional experiences the researcher has observed development events, profound changes and consequent needs in social work professionalization in Malaysia. The most change witnessed is the government initiative to professionalize social work practice and education through the development of an integrated multi-sectoral synergy among allied social welfare professionals in recent years. Among those initiatives are the enactment of the Social Work Profession Bill, the establishment of the National Competency Standards for Social Work Practice and the implementation of the Child Protection Tertiary Services Response Pilot.

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 under recognised role of professional supervision in addressing these complexities. To align with these notable concerns, the researcher takes note of the important linkage of professional

supervision to the best practice social work effort in Malaysia, particularly in the provision of statutory child protection services in Malaysia.

This research is therefore focused on the study of professional supervision in relation to the provision of best practice child protection services within the statutory agency in Malaysia. This focus pays specific attention to how supervision has been understood in the past and continues to be understood in the present and how the functions, roles and tasks of supervision can act to facilitate and sustain best practice in child protection; and thus the research can provide a future vision and direction for supervision development in the provision of best practice in child protection services in Malaysia.

1.3 Background

1.3.1 Geographic location, population, languages and socio-demographic problems

Malaysia is part of South East Asian Archipelago with one part that is Peninsula Malaysia connected to mainland South East Asia via the long Isthmus of Kra in Southern Thailand, while its southern neighbour is Singapore. The other part of Malaysia, consisting of the states of Sabah and Sarawak, is situated on the island of Borneo. Sabah and Sarawak are bounded by Indonesia while Sarawak also shares a border with Brunei. These two parts are also known as West and East Malaysia respectively. The total land area is estimated at 330,323 square kilometers (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2018).

The population of Malaysia is made up of many ethnic groups. Among three largest groups are the Malays and Indigenous (Bumiputera), Chinese, and Indian. As of 2017, it is reported the population of Malaysia is 32.05^e million people with an

annual growth rate of 1.3^e percent (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2018). In terms of age composition, 24.10 percent of the population are in the 0-14 years age group, 69.70 percent in the 15- 64 years age group, and 6.20 percent of the population are 65 years and above (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2017). Aligned with the ethnic composition, Malaysia is a multi-lingual country. The official language is known as Bahasa Melayu. However, English is commonly used as an active second language in many areas. Various dialects are practiced by the locals throughout Malaysian society.

Similar to other countries in the region, Malaysia has undergone significant growth in its social, economic, educational, science and technical transformations over the past decades. Along with this, the country is also increasingly challenged by the unprecedented socio-cultural and social demographical changes in the urbanization, industrialization, modernization, multi-dimensional and high risk social problems, which pose considerable stress on people, communities and the society as a whole (Lee, 2011; Fuziah & Ismail, 2013). In modern times, like any other country, Malaysian society is facing a number of issues in relation to the care, safety and protection of children, predominantly in relation to child maltreatment (such as abuse, neglect and abandonment of children, baby dumping, street children, children in conflict with the law and trafficking of children). Other social problems are family violence, poverty, abuse and neglect, destitute persons, health and mental health, beggar syndicates and so on. Albeit Malaysia is one of the more developed nations in Southeast Asia, poverty remains an unsettling and troubling issue. The incidence of poverty before independence in 1957 was more than 50 percent, it is less than 10 percent today. To ensure a quality life of the people, it has been the nation's aim to eradicate extreme poverty completely.

On the other hand, the rapid pace of social development and the service demands of vulnerable and marginalized groups has grown dramatically, compared to what they were in the last few decades. There is a declining capacity of the traditional informal care sector of family, kin and community to respond to the complex individual, family and social problems faced within Malaysia society in modern times. The loss or weakening of family kinship ties, a decline in human resiliency and coping ability, vulnerability of the disadvantaged, complexity of social problems and increased public awareness about legal rights have led to a greater concern for professionally trained personnel in the human service organisation to provide ever-better products and services. Also, higher expectations are imposed on government to provide and escalate effective, quality and professional social services to maintain and promote the well-being of the society. Social work plays an important role in understanding and responding to these concerns.

1.3.2 Social work child protection practice and supervision, a glance through the historical lenses of the Department of Social Welfare, Malaysia

The origin of social work in Malaysia can be traced from the early of 1900, during the British colonial time which aimed to address the well-being of the immigrant labourers from China and India. Social work practice became more structured when the British Military Administration established the Department of Social Welfare in 1946, which more commonly was known in the national language as *Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat* or 'JKM' (Ling, 2002; Fuziah & Ismail, 2013). Historically, social work in Malaysia was embedded within a social welfare paradigm which sought to respond through service provision to the needs of those most vulnerable and marginalized, such as the poor, destitute, women and children, people

with disabilities, elderly people and those in need. As the consequence of World War II and the Japanese Occupation there was a dramatic rise in the number of abandoned or orphaned children and the homeless. Formal social welfare service provision in Malaysia therefore became an institutionalised reality with the engagement of government (i.e. DSW) as the main pillar of social welfare support when the community could no longer rely on the extended family as the key social caregiver (Ling, 2002; Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development [MWFC], 2007).

Over the decades, DSW has grown up with the nation and has undergone twisting forces of social change and many evolving challenges. The range of services and programs under the Department's portfolio and the people it served has continuously expanded over the years. DSW key functions has shown a significant paradigm shift from a welfare basis in the 1950s to more emphasis on prevention, protection, rehabilitation, development and integration aspects of service response at the end of 20th century. These aspects are now described as the 'core businesses' of the Department (Ling, 2002; MWFC, 2007). Social welfare work has now extended from the more basic form it had since it was first practiced into an honoured profession that has its own values, knowledge, skills, principles, ethics and standards. It has come a long way in the last seven decades with the work that DSW carries out every day involving management of numerous, complex and multi-dimensional social issues, in particular helping those who have been marginalized by socio-economic circumstances, disability, age, violence and abandonment. The initial focus of the Department was to help women, girls, natives and the blind, as well as provide financial assistance to the poor and shelter homes for people with a disability. The list of target groups it serves has grown to a greater diversity of communities and

populations which now consist of children, young offenders, families, victims of domestic violence, people with disabilities, older persons, victims of natural disaster, vulnerable groups, destitute persons and victims of human trafficking. As a whole, DSW reaches out to a broad clientele, which is the general Malaysian society who are in greater need (MWFCD, 2007). Today, DSW is the main pillar in the MWFCD, which was established in March 2004. DSW remains as the focal point for all public social welfare services and the frontline agency of social development. It is also the biggest employer of social welfare workers and social workers in the country. As of 31 May 2018, there was a total of 7,486 staff across all services schemes, with 3,782 staff of these are in the social scheme. These staff are located at the national headquarter and states including the 64 institutions and 104 welfare offices at the district level throughout the country (DSW, 2018).

In terms of social welfare services, DSW oversees every dimension of social welfare services and assists clients with high diversity and complex backgrounds. This diversity of service response, includes the in-home support services and out-of-home services and varies from exclusive financial assistance and capacity building for the poor, to rehabilitation of juvenile delinquents, care, protection and rehabilitation of children, abused women and elderly people, relief schemes to victims of natural disasters, counselling and reconciliation support for couples with family conflict, reformatory services for the young offenders, community-based rehabilitation, skills training and the provision of basic necessity and equipment for the disabled, and so on. All of these clearly demonstrate the central truth of DSW's function and purpose, which is to facilitate the provision of social justice and the creation of a harmonious society as reflected in Malaysian Vision 2020. Along with this is the public expectation on the part of the Department of promoting a society where every citizen deserves the

same basic rights, opportunity, obligation, protection, care and social benefits, with freedom from oppression which can act to restrict individual access to full participation in all opportunities available within the society. On the other hand, similar to the social welfare approach in Western countries, the non-governmental voluntary organisations play pertinent roles in relation to the nation social welfare development agenda and their contribution is paramount. In conjunction with the government's social development programmes, a number of self-help organisations and social movement groups emerged during 1970's and 1980's (Ling, 2002) and this coalition between the government (i.e. DSW) and the non-governmental voluntary organisations has remained intact, particularly in relation to services which work to empower and advocate for the well-being of the disadvantaged. In addition, being a mandated government sector, social policy and law enactment has become one of the prominent functions of the Department in catering for emerging needs. Among the substantial ones include Destitute Persons Act (1977), Child Care Centre Act (1984), Care Centres Act (1993), Domestic Violence Act (1994), Child Act (2001), Persons with Disabilities Act (2008), National Social Welfare Policy (1990), National Policy for Older Persons (1995), Policy for People with Disabilities (2007) and National Policy for Children and National Child Protection Policy (2009).

Acknowledging the diverse clientele within the Department's services portfolio, children and families are the core of service attention. '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, this sentiment 'parlance' is at risk of becoming a cliché when the basic needs of children are not met or neglected in mainstream strategic planning. Children are always vulnerable due to

their developmental limitation and their dependency on their families/kin i.e., what happens to their families happens to them; they also need care when their caregivers need help. Children have the right to be protected by their adult caregivers because they do not have the coping capability as adults do to deal with the problems they encounter (DiNitto & McNeece, 1997).

Based on DSW annual statistics reports for 2017, a total number of 5,537 cases of Malaysian children were recorded in need of care and protection, and 173 cases were children who required urgent need of protection under the purview of the Department (DSW, 2017). Poverty is a key associational factor that relates to child maltreatment and its impact on children is reported to be negative and long-lasting (Eamon, as cited in Segal, Gerdes & Steiner, 2013). Based on the same annual statistics reports, 73,432 cases received Child Financial Assistance (more commonly known in the national language as *Bantuan Kanak-Kanak* or 'BKK'). These statistics have raised awareness about and shown the needs for better child care and child protection services in Malaysia. The provision of best practice in social work child protection plays an important role in these concerns. Unfortunately, a significant lack of professionally trained child protection social workers within the DSW is a prominent challenge in responding to poverty and maltreatment of children.

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. In respond to the concerns mentioned above, 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 statutory child protection services and inadequate 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.

Supervision has been widely recognised as an important component of professional practice in many disciplines particularly in social work. 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 worker to engage in ongoing reflection and critical analysis upon their practice. This ongoing reflection allows the social worker 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) 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 growth of supervision practice has attracted attention from social work scholars, educators, practitioner communities and allied helping professions. Although

it is globally recognised that professional workers need to be supervised, it still remain unclear how supervision itself is understood. Some important attentions have been highlighted from the literatures. Much of the supervision literature focuses upon the quality of supervisory relationship in supervision (Shulman, 1994; Wonnacott, 2012; Kadushin & Harkness, 2014, Thompson, 2015), function of supervision (Certo, 2003; Tsui 2005; Hughes, 2010), issues in implementing effective supervision in various disciplines (Davys & Beddoe, 2010), external supervision (O'Donoghue, 2010) and so forth. Common to much of the professional literature is a concern about the sustainability and development of professional supervision within human service organisations themselves. The potential effects that professional supervision may have on both practitioner and client outcomes had also been underscored in many scholar papers. Most of the literature reports the benefit that supervision can have in assisting the provision of professional practice through facilitating best practice outcomes (Tony, Louise, Christine & Majda, 2008). It is recognised there can be and are different types and models of supervision. However there remains a lack of empirical studies on what distinguishes each model of supervision and how each individual model actually works or contributes to best practice quality outcomes. Based on a review of the professional literature by O'Donoghue and Tsui (2013) of supervision research articles published between 1970 to 2010, one of the significant findings was the persistent lack of research studies and the limited contribution the existing research studies on supervision made to effective supervision practice.

Despite recognising supervision is important for high quality social work practice, the implementation of supervision in the DSW remains restricted. Notably, there is lack of an established supervision system to guide the operational provision of supervision within the statutory child protection system (DSW) in Malaysia. Due to

this lack, supervision is not embedded in the day-to-day practice of statutory child protection services in Malaysia. Even in the circumstances where supervision is claimed to be in place, it is not systematically and professionally conducted. Furthermore, research and formal documentation specifically related to social work supervision and particularly in relation to child protection practice is not common and not accessible in Malaysia. Therefore, the present research is timely as a means of beginning to filling some of the research gaps in Malaysia. It is important for the development of social work practice in enhancing best child protection practice in Malaysia that a research base is established to identify the supervision problems and needs in the provision of best practice child protection services, both for child protection itself and more generally for all types of social welfare services in Malaysia.

The research 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. Supervision as a significant component of professional social welfare practice is contextualized within a wider practice setting relating to professional standards and capacity development of the social work profession within Malaysia. In short, 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.

1.4 Statement of problem

The purpose of the study is to learn how professional supervision can be understood and responded in human service planning as a key component to improve social work statutory child protection practice in Malaysia. To be able to understand this purpose, an overview of the gaps and problems in relation to the provision of supervision, particularly in the provision of child protection practice within the statutory system is outlined in relation to three major areas of professional concern - (i) movements in social work professionalization; (ii) challenges in attaining best practice in statutory child protection services; and (iii) gaps in professional supervision of statutory child protection practice in Malaysia. Figure 1.1 presents the three major areas of the gaps and problems and manifests the rationale for how the research focus is derived.

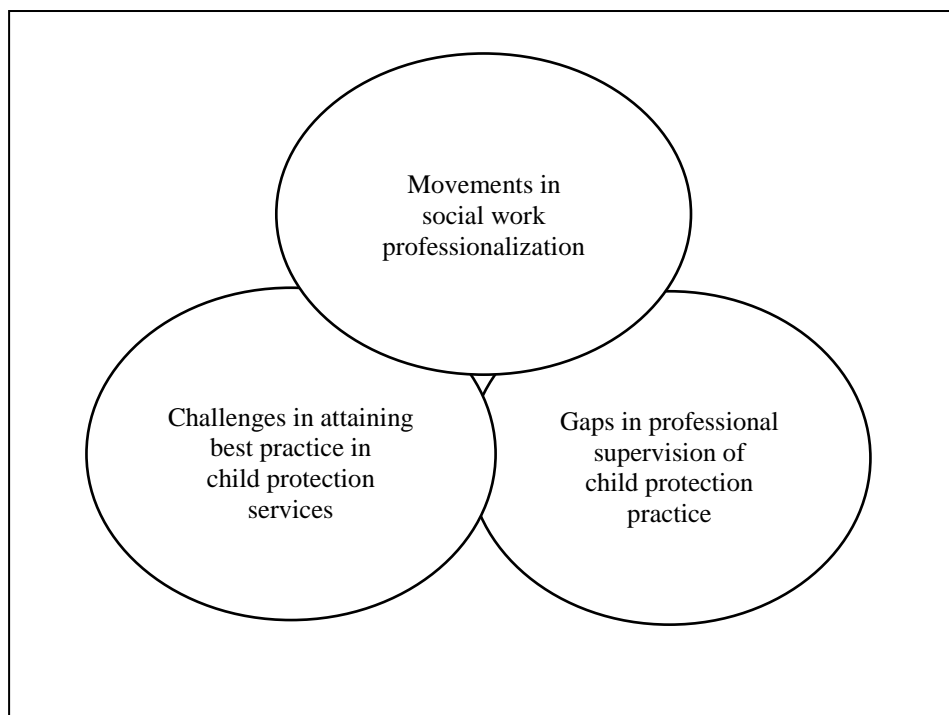


Figure 1.1 Key areas of the gaps and problems in relation to supervision in attaining best practice in child protection services within a statutory agency in Malaysia

1.4.1 Movements in social work professionalization

Social work is a relatively new profession in Malaysia. It was introduced in the early part of the 20th century and became more structured after World War II when social workers were called upon to help vulnerable groups, who direct or indirectly were impacted by problems and tragedies. Compared to other allied professions in the human services, such as health and education professionals, the social work profession received less attention in Malaysia in its development over the past decades. This lower level of development was a result of a number of factors which affected the degree to which social work as a profession could become professionalised in Malaysia, these factors are described.

1.4.1(a) Social work development initiatives

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 (e.g. a Council of Social Work Practice and a Council of Social Work Education). 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.

To meet these concerns and by acknowledging the importance of benchmarking practice, education, supervision and research in social work, the National Competency Standards for Social Work Practice was drafted in the early 2000s as a collective initiative of DSW together with the professional association, the Malaysian Association of Social Workers (MASW). The purpose of the National Competency Standards for Social Work Practice was to set benchmarks for competent social work practice. The standards were developed to guide social workers in utilising professional values, knowledge and skills into their practice to reflect professionally competent and appropriate practice. The Competency Standards for Social Work Practice document was approved by the Cabinet on 23 April 2010. Since then, social

work professionalization began to have a more progressive movement. Following from this endeavour, among the key initiatives of the Malaysian government in ensuring quality social work service delivery has been the drafting of the Social Work Profession Bill since 2010 and the initiating and implementation of the Child Protection Tertiary Services Response Pilot in 2012, as a joint initiative of the Government and UNICEF. The Social Work Profession Bill was enacted with the aim of ensuring the provision of competent social work practice in the delivery of social welfare services to the advantaged, vulnerable and marginalised populations of Malaysia, in particular to protect them from unprofessional and unethical social work practice. In response to these initiatives, the Child Protection Tertiary Services Response Pilot was first conducted in 2013 at two identified districts in the state of Selangor, Malaysia. The purpose of the pilot was to enhance professional social work competency in the tertiary statutory child protection and family welfare service response in Malaysia. The aim of the 'Pilot Project' was to heighten the provision of child care and statutory child protection services in order to meet international best practice standards. The ultimate goal is to ensure the best interests of the child are facilitated through the provision of competent professional practice. Overall, the key concern in the development of the National Competency Standards for Social Work Practice, the Social Work Profession Bill and the Child Protection Tertiary Services Response Pilot lay in the challenge to provide professional supervision to guide and support the aim of each of the projects to enhance professional social work practice standards.

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). The findings reflect the significant lack of the provision of organisationally service based social work supervisors in most social welfare organisations throughout Malaysia. Importantly, in relation to the focus of this study there is a significant lack of supervision provision within DSW.

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.

1.4.1(b) General view and perception on social work

Despite the significant efforts in attempts to professionalise social work practice, there remains a significant fundamental challenge for social work to be recognised as a profession in Malaysia. Malaysian social work has noted establish its own professional identity to differentiate it as a profession from other professions such as counselling, psychology, nursing, welfare officers or social welfare activities. The terms social work, social welfare, charity, voluntary and philanthropy efforts are often

inter-changeably utilised leading to public and government confusion resulting in synonymous usage with terms such as charity worker, welfare officer and helper (Sinnasamy, 2007). Within the country the term 'social worker' is barely recognised and known as someone who is a degree holder and practicing social work based on an international body of professional knowledge, values and skills. Individuals often claim the title of 'social worker' regardless of their training (or lack of it) and the type of activities they carry out. In Malaysia it is commonly found that philanthropists who donate funds, food, material support and goods; officers and workers in government and private sectors who provide human services and shelters, as well as individuals who render voluntary welfare effort in charitable organisations make claims they are social workers (Lee, 2011). Even within the government agencies and institutions, among the professionals and general public, there is still the perception that social work is any social, welfare, voluntary, philanthropy and humanitarian set of activities which can be undertaken by anyone. Thus, professional qualification and training are not expected or required as basic entry point for social work practice. Social work efforts are broadly defined which it encompasses a wide range of activities (Lee, 2011). Even when social work is recognised there is often a simplistic perception of what the efforts that the social worker is undertaking are and what makes these efforts recognised as the professional practice of social work. For instance, the acts of well-meaning, kindness and generosity based on human concern, a religious drive to good deeds by helping with cash emergency assistance and/or in kind, efforts in relieving poverty, helping the needy and seasonal visits to residents in welfare homes or patients in hospitals are all seen as 'good/kind' efforts, rather than efforts requiring training, specific professional values and a high level of knowledge and skills.

This phenomenon was noticeably presented during a series of national road shows which occurred as the result of the government initiative in relation to the enactment of Social Work Profession Bill, initiated by DSW during 2010 to 2014. Based on the narrative feedback, key stakeholders from the State authorities, human service government agencies, public training institutions and non-government organisations demonstrated a limited understanding of the profession of social work and as such were unclear about its roles and scope of practice. The existence of the professional role of 'social worker' (relative to the term volunteer or charity worker) and hence even of the use of the term was debated and the government efforts to professionalise and recognise the social work profession itself was being challenged. Concerning in relation to this challenge, was the threat that many non-trained individuals and even trained social workers perceived about the proposed professionalization of social work through regulation and licensure, which was a perception that regulatory professionalization could/would act to impede their practice, rather than enhance the provision of practice. Individuals without social work qualifications in particular felt deeply under threat. Other parties argued at the time that the regulation of social work 'could kill the spirit of volunteerism' (Borneo Post, 28 August 2014). These concerns indicate the general understanding and perception of the Malaysian society on social work is still vague. There is a little awareness that social workers need to be professionally trained, must utilise theoretical and empirical knowledge and skills in addressing social and human problems, as well as undergo regular professional supervision.

Of concern for the focus of the study is the clear evidence of an inadequate understanding of what social work is and why its professionalization is so important amongst civil service social welfare practitioners is further identified by Ismail (2015),

who conducted a pre-test and post-test on 148 social welfare officers during four nationwide supervision trainings initiated by the DSW in 2014. Ismail's survey revealed that social welfare officers had presented little understanding of what is social work. Some of them did not denote much knowledge on the professional characteristics of the social work profession. Many of them felt that social work did not have its own body of knowledge, skills and values, rather they indicated, social work as a profession relies on other disciplines like psychology, management, sociology and political science. In addition, in relation to the focus of this research, their understanding of supervision was low. Reassuringly however, the majority of the respondents were able to acknowledge the importance of supervision in enhancing the quality of social work service and direct practice delivery. However, a number of the respondents argued there was insufficient time to supervise and a lack of knowledge and skills amongst senior practitioners and managers to undertake supervision in an appropriate professional manner was reported as a key issue in the survey. As a result, Ismail concluded the government needed to relook at its current hiring system, especially in relation to social work employment at DSW to ensure individuals with appropriate social work training who understood and valued the role and importance of supervision in their professional practice could be hired and deployed throughout the service and thus establish a culture of professional supervision in the provision of government social welfare services.

From the above instances, as a whole, social work is poorly conceptually understood and not highly recognised or valued within Malaysian society. Relatively, social work is seen to be a voluntary, charitably and welfare work. Its philosophies, values, principles, functions, roles and scope of practices are not notably known. This situation has imposed challenges to social work practice, professional education, the

development of the profession and most importantly the establishment of a culture of professional supervision.

1.4.1(c) Human development and employment in social work

Globally, social workers are recognised as professionals with a minimum bachelor's degree in social work. In Malaysia, the 'social work activity' is undertaken by social work graduates and non-social work graduates working in any social work/social welfare setting, although often all the individuals are identified as social workers. They are the Social Development Officer (known in the national language as *Pegawai Pembangunan Masyarakat*) located at the DSW, prison and drug rehabilitation centers, medical social workers, social work educators and trainers, independent social work consultants, researchers and non-government welfare workers.

Reviewing social work human development in the past, recruitment through social work qualification is a relatively new area of concern in Malaysia. From the professional training perspective, the availability of formal professional social work training for social welfare workers was limited before 1993. Historically, the pioneer social welfare workers were sent to the London School of Economics and Political Science for a two-year certificate program, with specialization in the fields of youth work, industrial and rural welfare in Colonial Social Science. Then, the social welfare workers pursued their professional social work training from the University of Malaysia in Singapore, and subsequently the University of Singapore. In 1975, Malaysia's first qualifying undergraduate social work program was established at Univerisiti Sains Malaysia. Since then, the officers were able to receive professional training locally, but some officers also received professional social work training and

qualifications in the United Kingdom, United States, Australia, India and Philippines (MWFC, 2007; Sinnasamy, 2006; Fuziah & Ismail, 2013). The opportunity for pursuing professional social work education has increased gradually since 1993 with the rapid establishment of social work programs at various public universities within Malaysia. Universities which have initiated social work programs are the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak in 1993, Universiti Utara Malaysia in 1997, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in 2000 and Universiti Malaysia Sabah in 2004. During 2000s, common elements in social work curriculum and training programmes were acknowledged and competency standards for social work practice and education became the norm.

On the other hand, while the development of social work educational programs has shown encouraging movement since 1993, this encouragement did not carry through to outcomes in increased social work employment. Social work graduates were not prominently recruited into social work related fields, especially in the public sector. In contrast, individuals were being recruited into designated social work service position regardless if they had obtained formal social work training and education at any level. For instance, the Ministries and government departments that provided social work activities, namely the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, Ministry of Health and DSW were and continue to widely recruit non-social work graduates (DSW, 2018; Fuziah & Ismail, 2013). According to the National Survey on Social Work Practice in Government Agencies and Non-Government Organisations (DSW & MASW, 2005), in the context of local social work workforce, the majority of social workers who are recruited into public sector positions are placed at DSW, hospitals, National Anti-Drug agency, drug rehabilitation centers and prisons, with a few employed by NGOs. Furthermore, the survey highlights that among the 433 respondents who consisted of social welfare service providers and social work

practitioners in the government agencies and non-government organisations, only just under 10 percent of them are social work degree holders. The findings reflect that the majority of qualified social work graduates are not recruited into the mainstream of an established and clearly identifiable social work workforce. Although data on the number of social work graduates employed in social work related organisations and their place of employment is still limited in Malaysia Sinnasamy (2006) notes that based on the anecdotal data some social work graduates may have enrolled into teaching and other non-social work related fields.

From this historical chronological view despite the rapid growth of social work training and education in the past 20 years in Malaysia, the number of professionally trained social work graduates employed in the human service organisations remains limited. Malaysia still far behind other countries in professionalising its social welfare services through the provision of a significant number of qualified social workers. The social work degree has not been seen and continues not to be seen as a basic entry point to the human service agencies in the country, which is in contrast to a social work degree being set as a minimum prerequisite for social work practice internationally (DSW & MASW, 2005). Internationally, the provision of a social work workforce is the awareness of the importance of professional supervision in social work human service development. In some countries where social work is recognised as a profession, such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, professional supervision is provided by qualified supervisor with generally a Master's degree in social work and a significant number of years of practice experience. In order to achieve the professional requirement on par with international standards there is a need to give higher consideration in formulating a competent supervision mechanism in Malaysia