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Competency-Based Social Work Practice and Challenges in Child Case Management: Studies in the Districts Social Welfare Services, Malaysia

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Abstract**—**This study aimed to explore the practical experience of child welfare caseworkers and professionalism in child case management in Malaysia. This paper discussed the specific social work practice competency and the challenges faced by child caseworkers in the fieldwork. This research was qualitative with grounded theory approach. Four sessions of focused group discussion (FGD) were conducted involving a total of 27 caseworkers (child protector and probation officers) in the Klang Valley. The study found that the four basic principles of knowledge in child case management namely: 1. knowledge in child case management; 2. professional values of caseworkers towards children; 3. skills in managing cases; and 4. culturally competent practice in child case management. In addition, major challenges faced by the child case manager are the capacity and commitment of the family in children's rehabilitation program, the credibility of caseworkers are being challenged, and the challenges of support system from intra and inter-agency. This study is important for policy makers to take into account the capacity and the needs of the child's caseworker in accordance with the national social work competency framework. It is expected that case management services for children will improve systematically in line with national standards.

Keywords**—**Social work practice, child case management, competency-based knowledge, and professionalism.

I. Introduction

THIS paper aims to explore the social work practice in child case management. In social work research, child case management is constantly debated under *managerialist* perspectives. To explore the aspects of child case management in social work research, this paper should also consider *managerialist* approach which focuses on how cases are handled within a micro perspective. Undoubtedly, *managerialist* approach in social work case management practice has been debated so much these days [1], [2], [7], [8], [17], [18], [22], [26], [29], [32]. In particular orientation, the approach in the delivery of human services sees the scope of liberalism and conservative [34]. Here, the writer will only focus on three important elements in the case management of social work practice which are knowledge, values, and skills in handling children cases.

The Social Welfare Department (SWD) has introduced ten competency standards of social work practice which consist of sixth generic competencies and four specific competencies. The generic competencies are: 1. ethical behavior; 2. interpersonal communication; 3. cognitive reflection and creative thinking; 4. Problem solving; 5. management of tasks; and 6. capacity of leadership. Meanwhile, specific competencies include: 1. the ability to work with individuals, families, groups, and communities with the knowledge, skills, and methods of social work intervention; 2. the ability to work in accordance with the ethics of social work; 3. the ability to work professionally in organizational setting; and 4. the ability to create professional practical reflection. "Competence" refers to a combination of competent knowledge, values, and skills along with the process of understanding yourself and the effect of including the results of supervision, intervention, and interpersonal relationships with colleagues, users, and other agencies [31].

Practical competence requires the integration of knowledge, values, and skills and the practitioner must always want to learn and develop their potential skills. According to [16], a caseworker should focus on the skills, knowledge, and values that lead to the six key areas: (a) sensitive to ethnic and cultural practices; (b) the core skills of child welfare work, (c) social skills working methods; (d) the development of human and social environment; (e) the management of the workplace; and (f) planning the administration and policy of children welfare. In addition, as [11] had claimed, social work is a liaison profession, mediation, and negotiation between the profession, children, and their families. A study conducted by [11] also argued that although the nature of work in children services is complex and challenging, the social worker seeks to meet the challenges and a social worker in a multidisciplinary team is required to encourage themselves to work.

A child welfare caseworker should know and understand the case management system [13]. Reference [29] defined case management as a process of assessment of the overall situation through problem-solving and conducting the needs-based assessment.

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Open Science Index, Humanities and Social Sciences Vol:9, No:9, 2015 publications.waset.org/10002347/pdf

A study by [33] outlined three phases of case management assessment, planning and implementation. The case manager needs an extensive repertoire of knowledge, skills, techniques, and strategies [33]. In Malaysia, there are two types of children case management; field services and institutional services. A caseworker in the institutional services uses client management system (CMS) to handle the children. However, in field services, a caseworker is subject to the Child Act 2001 in dealing with the children who need care, protection, and rehabilitation [20]. In addition, the rights of children are also given full attention for the survival of the community, regardless any form of discrimination. Child's caseworkers have the authority to handle children cases through the proclamation as protector under Section 8 and the appointment of a probation officer under section 10 of the Child Act 2001 [19]. Besides, the casework management for children services is also guided by a quality standard of operating procedure (SOP) MS ISO 9001:2008. The state of practice has explained the ontological position or perspective of the child case management system. Whilst, in this paper author will demonstrate social constructivism as the paradigm of the research.

II. Methodology

This study was designed using a qualitative approach with grounded theory method. In particular, grounded theory is used to carry out and analyze research on the development of the theory of the field of study or from the study of participants [30]. A total of 27 child caseworkers, ten (10) males and seventeen (17) females, from Klang Valley were taken as the respondents. Purposive sampling technique was used in selecting the respondents. Data was collected using focus group discussion (FGD). Caseworkers were interviewed in groups. Informed consent was obtained from all caseworkers involved. Assistant moderator was also appointed for each focus group session to help the researcher to take notes and make an observation during the FGD. Each FGD consisted of 6 to 8 caseworkers as recommended [18]. The caseworkers were selected among assistant officers and community development officers from grade S27 – S44 who have at least two years of practical experiences either in the field services or in the children institution and have attended basic social work course and also have been appointed as a protector. Two case studies were selected purposely to stimulate the participants to discuss and share their experiences of child case management on practical aspects of social work competency, cross-cultural competency, and challenges in managing children cases. Data interview was recorded and transcribed. The verbatim transcripts were used for easy analysis and data organization. Data was analyzed line by line using NVivo 10. Leech and Onwuegbuzie [23] have suggested some qualitative data analysis techniques suitable for FGD. The techniques in particular are constant comparative analysis, classical content analysis, keywords in context, and discourse analysis. In this study, constant comparative technique were used to analyze the data through a process of open coding, axial coding, and selected coding as suggested in grounded theory research [23]. A study [14] has suggested three main stages in the constant comparative analysis. The first stage is open coding in which data is broken down into smaller units. The second stage, which is axial encoding, the codes are grouped into certain categories, and the third stage is selective coding where researchers build one or more theme that describes the contents of each category.

III. Research Findings and Discussion

The study found that four key principles in child case management are as follows: 1. knowledge in child case management; 2. professional values of caseworkers towards children; 3. skills in managing cases; and 4. culturally competent practice in child case management. These details will be explained further in the next section to look into the pattern emerged based on data analysis.

A. Knowledge in Child Case Management

The three basic principles of knowledge in case management are: 1. caseworkers' knowledge about the context of the case and the client's experience; 2. the knowledge in designing appropriate interventions; and 3. the knowledge and clear understanding of legal, policy, procedural, and organizational context practiced [25]. This study showed that child caseworkers have adopted three basic principles of knowledge case management particularly the knowledge about the context of the case and the client's experience, the knowledge in formulating appropriate interventions and a clear understanding of legal, policy, procedural and organizational contexts. Knowledge is something that is a dynamic process [31] and is constantly evolving with active use rather than something that is directed and described by others [24]. In brief, a knowledgeable person is able to do something without being instructed and they are very pro-active in their actions. Knowledge in case management is also one of the aspects of competency in social work practice.

References [4] and [13] have stressed the knowledge that should be mastered by caseworkers; 1. the knowledge about clients to design interventions; 2. understand the legal and policy, and 3. Understand the procedural and practical organizational context. These allow child caseworkers to act professionally in their actions and behaviors. This study showed that the child caseworkers understand and have the particular knowledge in child case management as requested. The results of this study are in line with [13] in which a child caseworker needs generic social work, child specialization, and a good child welfare system. Child welfare workers also suggested caseworkers to be well equipped with appropriate knowledge and skills, good attitudes, behavior, self-awareness, and professional. This study is in accordance with the principles and objectives of case management, service integration, continuity of care, equitable access to services, quality of care, empowering clients, and evaluation [33].

Open Science Index, Humanities and Social Sciences Vol:9, No:9, 2015 publications.waset.org/10002347/pdf

1. Knowledge about the Context of the Case and the Client's Experience

This study showed that a caseworker should be associated with a relevant theory to understand better what is going on and why things are happening. The process to understand risk situations faced by children either abused or children in conflict with the law is sometimes critical. Error interpretation in the management of child abuse cases may lead to such bad decisions, either in cases involving children who have died or families who falsely accused of abusing their children [21]. Child caseworkers 'engage' and build a professional relationship with the client by applying social work practice skills and knowledge, human psychology and social theory, cultural competency, and code of ethics for social worker. This knowledge has been used by the caseworkers in assessing the client's situations and to find out what have been experienced by the child. Code of ethics has been adopted by the social caseworkers to evaluate a client is unique, not punitive, maintaining confidentiality, or empathy in helping the process.

2. Knowledge that Assists a Caseworker to Plan Appropriate Intervention

With regards to the social work intervention for children, this study showed the caseworkers did adhere to the case management principle by grasping social work practice and case management model. The philosophy in case management emphasizes future, welfare, and the well-being of children as the basis for designing interventions. Every decision that affects children must be based on the importance and future of the children.

back to concept one, it may not be recorded but the concept was always touted that entry into the institution is the last resort, but it is not written, the concept is only touted that all probation officer, all the protector, so it meant they understood that, if any outsiders (other persons) are better suited to the children, let them be with the suitable persons…that's the concept. (Zairol, 11-year of experience)

The study also found that the caseworkers understood that intervention plan requires multi-sectoral approach, an eclectic involvement of multiple agencies and stakeholders such as the Royal Malaysian Police, Department of Health, Courts and relevant NGOs as well as the Child Protection Team (CPT) and District Child Welfare Committee (DCWC). This finding is supported by other research [28] in which child caseworkers need supports from various sectors as well as community based-organizations in the process of intervention.

long time already... there is DCWC, there is CPT, what are their actual roles? ... prevention alone? ...why do not we continue this…change the responsibility of this committee, if it can be a very difficult case, bring them together, we sort the problem. (Zairol, 11-year of experience)

3. Understanding the Legal, Policy, Procedures, and Organizational Context

The study found that the caseworkers involved in this research agreed that ISO Quality Manual and SOP helped them in case management. However, a caseworker still upholds professional attitude and rational decision-making based on the uniqueness of the case. Child caseworkers are subjected under the Child Act 2001. This study showed that they understand their tasks and responsibilities as stated in the legislation. These have been supported by [3] and [6] that social workers must give serious attention to the practical knowledge of legislation, local resources, human behavior and the social context, and welfare rights. The study also showed that case management philosophy of children is 'in the best interest of the child' as shown below:

Sections 91 and 93(of the Child Act 2001)*, he must go hand in hand, so the philosophy of work involving child that he may not involve only one party, meaning that we do not only depend on the child, we have to focus on both sides, parents and the child.* (Suhaidi, 27-year of experience)

I think our spirit when we handle children cases is to help the child itself, is not punitive, no matter you are a protector or a probation officer, we have to save him/her and that's the spirit, want to help. (Dollah, 7-year of experience)

This result is in agreement with [31] which suggested legislation, policies, and procedures as an essential component in social work. Each individual is unique and needs different problem-solving approach. To understand the context of children and families who are assisted, the child caseworkers have to make a careful observations and assessments. Caseworkers have to investigate using various methods in order to get the true picture of what is going on.

B. Professional Values of Caseworkers towards Children

The study found that child caseworkers who value their client, as practice an individual, will give their commitment to the welfare and social justice and demonstrate faith-based values and morals. These values are the backbone of every kind of action and the process of helping clients and also recommended by [25]. In child welfare work, the application of good values is the most important [31] and the first thing that will be taken when dealing with children's values and attitudes is referred. The caseworkers showed unconditional acceptance and nonjudgmental principle were embedded in their practices while dealing with cases. In addition, they are always neutral in handling cases.

1. Client Rights as an Individual

This study confirmed that the dignity and the rights of clients must be respected and put into the highest level of practice. In addition, the caseworkers need to ensure children's rights free from persecution and torture, and at the same time the rights of families and communities should also be maintained. Child caseworkers are also required to ensure that the confidentiality of individual rights is protected. In this

Open Science Index, Humanities and Social Sciences Vol:9, No:9, 2015 publications.waset.org/10002347/pdf

study, caseworkers were given freedom and children were given the opportunity to choose whether to stay with the mother or the father. For example:

within half an hour, an hour, there are up to two hours that we had to wait, the decision of the court, I feel okay that he (magistrate) interviewed the child on her own, so the child made his/her choices, when we call a.. I have also created a kind of drama, the child will go to his/her mom or dad. (Rosni, 7-year of experience)

2. Appropriate Practical Value

This study found that the caseworkers showed their passionate and high interest in working with children. Moreover, they also have the desire to learn and constantly improve themselves. The caseworkers feel that the working environment is increasingly complex with receiving complicated cases. The extract is as follow:

who want to join this unit he must have a passion, enthusiasm, a .. interest, if any interest he may take all here, he would learn, he will welcome the challenges, and he will be bold, he will be willing to…want to cooperate, if he has the interest, so passion and determination, this is…(Maimun, 9-year of experience)

3. Commitment to the Welfare and Social Justice

This research showed that the caseworkers have demonstrated their commitment to social justice and the welfare of children and families. They have executed their duty and responsibility in a professional manner.

4. Values Based on Religious and Moral

Coincidentally, all caseworkers involved in the focus group study are Muslim. In particular, religious values practiced in the daily life of workers shaped their character and personalities. The study showed that the religious-based social accountability is upheld in case management. For example, the caseworkers are willing to sacrifice their time and energy and not calculating the duties with practice ceased to rule, trust and *fisabilillah* (in a way of Allah) in employment cases. This is a significant finding because the sense of responsibility of the job comes from the caseworkers. The results of the study showed that the cultural values are rooted in ethnic, religious and moral that influenced individual and their social values. Previous study [34] stipulated that the social work stresses the uniqueness and dignity of the individual, the right to self-determination, professional boundaries, social and economic justice, and protection of the human rights.

C. Skills in Managing Cases

This study also analyzed the skills of workers in child case management. Based on the results of this study, 5 basic skills have been practiced by the child caseworkers. These skills include interpersonal skills, cognitive skills, skills in using and managing resources, administrative skills, and skills in making decision. This is in line with [34] who outlined such skills in his work. The pattern of skills outlined in this FGD covers the whole case management in a holistic manner. When the result was examined in depth, the skills that will appear as highlighted coincide with the context and environment of children who need protection and care.

1. Interpersonal Skills

Interpersonal skills cover the aspects of communication, good rapport, and a good relationship with other agencies and teamwork. Often, the main problem in any work regarding human services is communication skills. Communication is fundamental in the management of cases. Caseworkers and children communicate and connect with people who live within their environment. Reference [15] urged that interventions may include enhancing communication to maximize effective and compassionate care. The process of communication is very important in obtaining and presenting the information. A clear and effective communication helps clients simplify the processes in which the needs can be identified through this communication process. In addition, in seeking help from other agencies, communication among agencies is also important so that clients will receive appropriate assistance. Next, as a protector and probation officer, a teamwork is one of the approaches in helping clients where severe and complex tasks can be handled together as a group.

if compare with people who are good in talking, do not know how to communicate with people, people who can speak, I think this person is more suitable, right? People who have the skills to communicate better is more suited to be a protector or a probation officer. (Dollah, 7-year of experience)

2. Cognitive Skills

Cognitive abilities are the brain skills that we need to carry out any tasks; from a simple task to the most complex [10]. Foster has suggested to analyze cognitive process and the focus are on 'problem solving', 'thinking', 'decision making', and 'concept formation'. Cognitive skills focuses on the capacity of workers in the case of evaluation, how to apply the knowledge, and how the caseworkers gain knowledge, techniques and skills to observe, analyzing skills, self-reflection on client management, and handling personal problems. This study showed that workers who dealt with children cases need observation skills to assess the home environment, family circumstances, make an analysis based on the picture of the child and family, look into the question of client problems far into themselves, and the ability to separate client's personal problems from real problems. In addition, these cognitive skills also include how a child caseworker applies the knowledge and theories in the management of cases.

actually through the probation report...the court wants to see our view after the investigation, we interviewed the parents, children, and we can report his/her schooling, so actually…that was the spirit. We have given recommendations right there.. what we did is to help the kid actually, the probation report was prepared by the probation officer in fact is not meant to punish. (Ismail, 5-year of experience)

Open Science Index, Humanities and Social Sciences Vol:9, No:9, 2015 publications.waset.org/10002347/pdf

3. Using and Managing Resources

Various resources are available in the caseworkers' environment and this is an advantage and can provide support and assistance to the workers in handling cases. Resources are divided into two aspects, internal and external of the agency or organization where the employee is in charge of the case. Those resources must be used optimally. Sometimes, there are some situations where referring to other agency will solve the problems experienced by the client, particularly children. In addition, the resources are available in the child's surrounding and it also helps the children to increase their motivation to change positively. However, there are boundaries that should be realized by the caseworkers in dealing and using resources. So, at the same time, the caseworkers should put social work ethics as the foundation for professional services.

a senior officer will provide guidance to the new employees before they handle cases. Senior employees will assist new employees, work together in investigating the case and any complaints, then if...the senior officials are confident they can handle the cases themselves and then proceed a…it's the time for new employees to learn and manage the case themselves. (Ramlah, 4-year of experience)

4. Administrative Skills

This study showed that child caseworker have demonstrated their skills in making intervention, manage, monitor, investigate, and supervise. The order and the case management system highlighted by majority of caseworkers refer to the ISO quality management system. The existence of ISO is a valuable asset that should be proud of because it has more benefits than disadvantages in managing cases. ISO documents are a useful reference for new workers involved in the organization of the department to carry out necessary work. This shows that *managerialist* approach in social work practice may also contribute to the enhancement of effective service delivery.

The process is we have SOP but sometimes, sometimes we look into the case, sometimes each case might be different, it varies, even though we take for example the care and protection, but each is different, it starts from, initially the same, meaning that the reference from hospital and police, there we can see the different, so how to explain, look into the case. (Roziah, 9-year of experience)

5. Decision-making Skills

Decision-making process is a critical issue in the management of cases involving children because it will affect their future. The study found that the child caseworkers adhere to collective approach in making a decision through discussions and systematic use of Professionally Accountable Practice (PAP) Model. However, the study also found that child caseworkers experienced stress ethics in making decisions that concern safety, permanent placement, and well-being of children and youth in foster care [5]. Same situation was applicable to this study where caseworker experienced it. In this study, the approach taken by the child's caseworker in making a decision regarding the child was based on the philosophy of case management for the best interests of the child. This is a strong statement and shows the employees seriousness towards the rights of the children.

so if we want to take action, I explained to his mother but I could not continue to take action, I'm okay madam, right under section 17 for the case of negligence, the penalty for, this is the charges, this is the sentences, and case if your children will fell in May, but I did not say fall, possibly (emphasizing tone), but based on my own observation, yes it is something wrong, that's mean your child need a report, your child need counseling either at school or department at least once. (Saiful, 7-year of experience)

The results of the case studies also demonstrated competency skills in case management includes cognitive, resource management, administration, and decision-making consideration. Conflict of values is often a challenge and a dilemma to the caseworker in his/her capacity as child caseworker. However, sometimes the cooperation of various agencies to help children cannot be relied on because they may not understand the function and role of each, as stated in the legislation. It is understood that more skills and competency needed to deliver services which are based on ethics and professionalism in social work.

D. Cultural Competence

By referring to [12], the author urged that cultural competence aspects are important in the 21st Century for social workers, given the increasing globalization of the U.S. and the world. The caseworker understanding of cross-cultural context of whether there is a conflict of culture clash between the workers who are responsible for the case with the client's culture may influence the level of employee competence when dealing with a client [9]. This study showed that the caseworkers have demonstrated: i) Respect for values, culture, and religion professed by client in case management; ii) aware of the differences in handling cases of children in other countries; and iii) adhering to the religion. Amongst related extract are as follows:

They (Swedish) have a different way of approach compared to how we tackle the case in Malaysia. (Norita, 4-year of experiences)

So, maybe with this way, maybe Allah shows (parents who were found guilty in Sweden can be changed for the better, the better for his future). (Siti, 12-year of experiences)

He shares in the first sense because she lived with a non-Muslims, dining section (non-halal) and he was not allowed to pray. (Norita, 4-year of experiences)

This showed that the caseworker believe that the ways and approaches of case management in other countries are different from the practice and system in Malaysia. The caseworkers also stated their respect to the differences in practices in both countries. However, the caseworkers are more concerned with religious belief to make judgments and actions to be taken to the family. Placement arrangement of

Open Science Index, Humanities and Social Sciences Vol:9, No:9, 2015 publications.waset.org/10002347/pdf

the child must consider the religion of the child and their foster families. The caseworkers believe that Western culture did not focus on the cultural practices of a community in case management. The caseworkers are well aware of the fact that clients are eligible for family honor in religious and cultural aspects.

IV. Challenges in Child Case Management

Caseworkers faced many challenges in dealing with children cases. Their credibility is always questioned, less commitment from the family to the rehabilitation program, and lack of support from inter and intra-agency. The findings of this study are supported by [27] and [28], that the issue of credibility of the caseworkers and inter and intra-agency obstacle is happening on the ground when the caseworkers are managing the case of children. The caseworkers stated that they were too stressed when working in the unit, so there were few caseworkers have been hospitalized and that feeling was carried away home. This study is supported by other studies [28] and [29] where child caseworkers suffer from stress and burnout. A study [14] has supported that the working environment for children case is very high and critical load cases. Among the extracts highlighted that are related to the challenges in child case management are as follows:

- *in Kuala Lumpur I think, it is also a challenge where parents dare to dispute it, action taken by the protector or probation officer.* (Dollah, 9-year experiences)
- *..actually we assumed people say it is pressure…when we carry out child protection division, we are not only at work, but sometimes get carried away to the house and it provides us with full focus (concentrate) in case.* (Naimah, 6-year experiences)
- *The family may be also poor, they have no financial resources and they do not know where to get resources to visit and attend the institution*. (Zurina, 20-year experiences)
- *sometimes when we feel frustrated, we think that it is okay when they (child) were inside (probation hostel), but when they were out, only for a few month out, only for a few weeks, when we look into their Facebook we saw the pictures what so ever, their talking style, that sometimes makes us surprised* .. (Laila, 4-year experiences)
- *seems kind of ...they are expecting a warden (of probation hostels), seems like we are so perfect, we can do it all.* (Laila, 4-year experiences)

V. Conclusion

In summary, the proposal could be considered in addressing the challenges and issues in child case management including work specialization and improve training courses to children caseworkers. The result of this study suggests that the management of children cases must be in balance between *managerialist* approach and therapeutic relationship by giving the client's the right paramount. The key principles of social work practice with children are knowledge, value, and skills in case management. It is also associated with human psychology, social theory, professional ethics and procedural practice, as well as cultural competent practice. These frameworks are crucial for the caseworkers to be able to enhance the effectiveness of child case management system in this country. The study also showed that despite many obstacles faced by the workers such as family commitments, challenging clients, support system within or between intra and inter-agency, high workload, stress and demands of customers, the support from colleagues and organizations is believed to reduce some stress incurred by the worker. Interestingly, the context of religious and cultural competence among workers in this case are the strength that should be explored in greater depth, and thus makes an important contribution to social work practice and case management to the body of knowledge.

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