

Case Study 6

In the Best Interest of Children



Introduction

The case in this publication was written by a registered member of the College of Early Childhood Educators. The case describes a real experience in the professional practice of an early childhood educator (ECE). It profiles a professional dilemma, incorporates participants with multiple perspectives and explores ethical complexities.

This case study may be used by members as a source for reflection and dialogue about the practice of early childhood educators within the framework of the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice*.

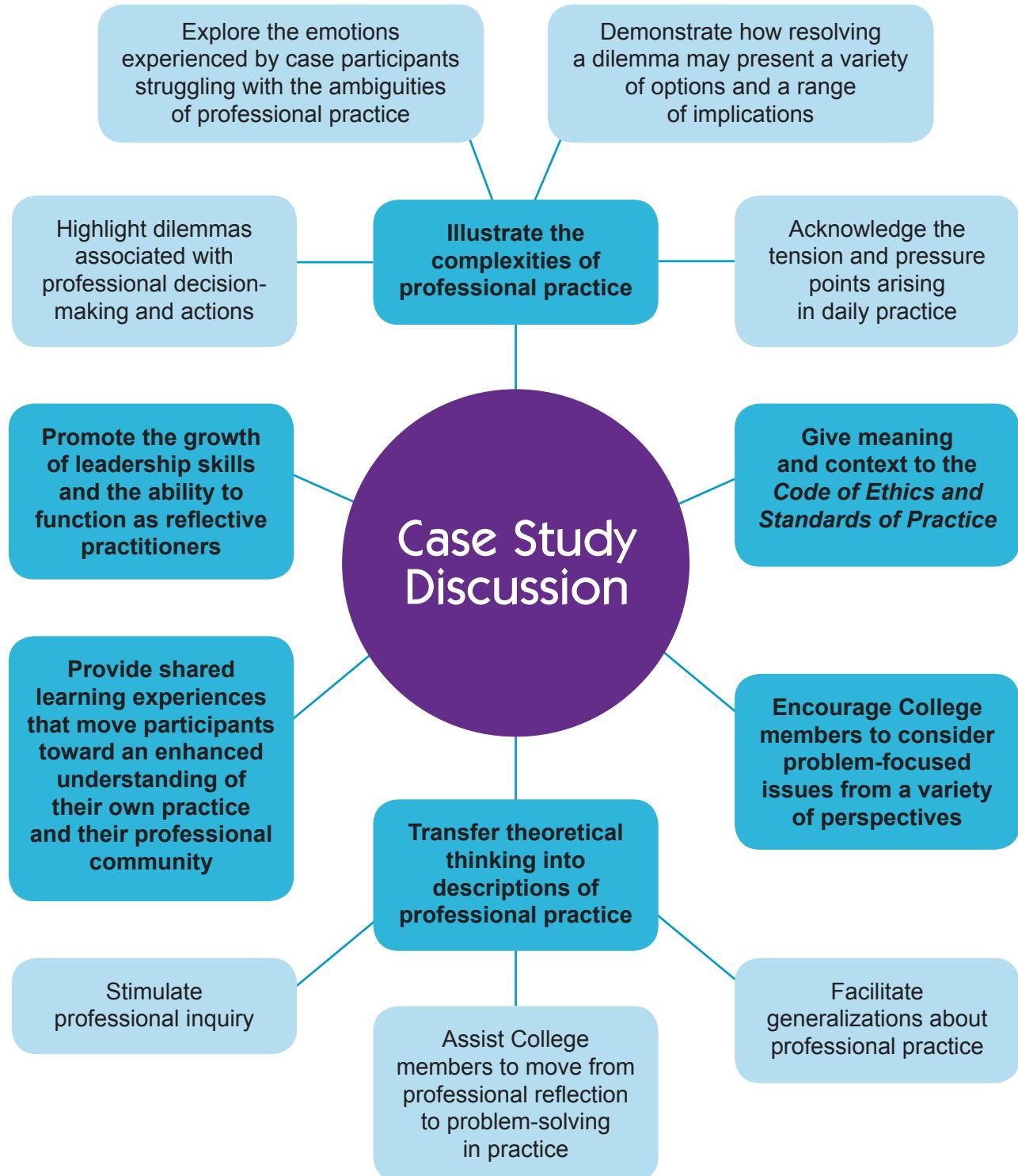
Case studies give meaning and context to the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice*. They transfer theoretical thinking into the realities, complexities and ambiguities of professional practice. They highlight the dilemmas and emotional tension associated with professional decision-making and action. Analyzing a case encourages College members to examine problem-focused issues from a variety of perspectives and to explore the implications of a range of decision-making options or solutions.

Case studies stimulate professional inquiry and reflective practice. Discussing a case is a shared professional learning experience through which members gain an enhanced understanding of their practice and their broader professional community. College members, while engaging in case reflection and discussion, may also construct new understandings and develop additional strategies to enhance their practice.

Case-based professional learning encourages registered early childhood educators (RECEs) to step back from the specifics of daily practice and analyze, in a more global way, the broader issues arising across their profession. RECEs can reflect, question assumptions and gain new insights into not only their own practice, but also their profession.

Case studies assist RECEs to identify common themes inherent to the rewards and challenges of working in the early childhood education sector. In this way, individual RECEs recognize that what seemed to be personal or isolated incidents are often examples of the broader and fundamental dilemmas facing other early childhood educators throughout the profession.

Enhancing Professional Practice through Case Study Discussion



In the Best Interest of Children

The mounting bills would still be waiting for me on the kitchen table when I arrived home. I loved my work at Jackson Nursery School in my small rural community, but my salary was really bringing me down. I also knew that with summer coming, I would have no work in July and August. How would I survive financially? I turned my key and opened the front door. The phone was ringing. I rushed into the kitchen, grabbing it just in time.

"Leslie?" I heard a very deep female voice that sounded vaguely familiar. Yet, I couldn't quite place it.

"Yes, this is Leslie."

"It's Karen. I'm an acquaintance of your sister's from a few years ago. She and I met at the child care centre where your niece Connie used to go. I believe you and I have actually met as well. You occasionally came to pick up Connie at the end of the day."

I searched my memory for people I met at the co-op child care. I remembered one very tall, abrasive and intimidating woman whose child played with my niece. Yes, her name was Karen. I had no clue why she would be phoning me.

In a friendly tone, Karen began to explain how she was now working in one of the newer co-ops set up for preschool and school-age children in Oak Leaf School. I didn't even know she was an ECE.

The Oak Leaf neighbourhood was an area of the city where many low-rental housing units were available. These homes provided affordable housing for families, and many new immigrants had settled in that area, hoping to build a better life.

Karen continued to talk. "Leslie, we need a coordinator who is bilingual with ECE qualifications." I recalled my sister telling me she had recently bumped into Karen and that she had asked about me. I had questioned why she had been interested in me.

Karen's next statement stunned me. "I thought you would be perfect for the coordinator job and that you might want to submit your resume."

My first thought was, how did she know I would be perfect for the job when she barely knows me? It seemed odd that she would think of me. However, I knew that the co-op where Karen worked had good salaries and working benefits. I also liked the philosophy of co-op programs. I decided it wouldn't hurt to forward my resume.

I began my new job at Oak Leaf School in the spring. On my first day, I was dumbfounded to see a bleak room with chairs and tables, a carpet for circle time, but not much else. The preschool classroom was austere and uninviting.

I was greeted by Pauline, the bilingual RECE, and a small group of five children. No other staff members were present even though it was already 10:15 a.m. I asked, "Where are the other staff members?"

Pauline replied, "Oh, they don't come until 11:30 a.m." Under her breath, I overheard her mumble, "If we're lucky." It was my first day and already I was feeling uneasy.

*The name of the early childhood educator who wrote the story is not provided. Names, locations, contexts and/or dilemmas presented in the case have been modified for the purposes of confidentiality.

During my two years at my previous nursery school, I had worked hard to create an aesthetically appealing place for the children and families. All the learning centres were intentionally designed to make them places where children would want to be and where parents felt comfortable. I could only hope that this setting would be transformed in a similar way.

At exactly 11:30 a.m., Karen walked in with a woman, who she introduced as Julie, another RECE. I smiled and said hello.

"So are you working here yet, Leslie?" Julie responded briskly. There was no warmth in her voice or body language.

The days crawled by during the first week as I tried to feel my way around. Pauline and I were the only ones in for work during the early morning hours, so we would talk and I gradually got to know her.

I noticed a program plan posted on the wall, but it appeared that none of the activities were being used. One day, I saw some more program plans hidden in the desk and asked Pauline about them. "Oh, those plans were prepared by Francine, the previous coordinator. She tried to get Karen and Julie to do something, but they stopped that for sure."

"Sorry Pauline, I don't understand. What do you mean?" I asked.

Pauline hesitated and then replied in a monotonous voice, "The board got rid of Francine before her probation was up because they listened to Karen and Julie." I disliked gossip and second-hand information, so I did not continue our conversation.

Days passed and I did not see any changes in the children's activities. Resources were limited to the same collection of books, blocks, papers and colouring pencils. I wanted to improve the program for the children's sake; but as coordinator, I was only responsible for registration, budgeting and overall administrative tasks, not for program planning.

One day, I finally asked Karen if she would mind me bringing in some activity centre resources that I had developed at home so the children could try them.

"Don't beat yourself up, Leslie," she said. "There is no point using all those ECE things you learned in college. These kids can't do it anyway because they don't speak English."

How could Karen be so cynical? I almost felt like she disliked the children and families in our school program. Karen and Julie always appeared charming and confident with the families. They acted like model employees whenever the parents were around and yet, I continued to witness two unmotivated and uninspired individuals who rarely planned activities for the children. The same songs were repeated daily during circle time. Karen, in particular, regularly made sarcastic comments to the children and spoke about them to other people.

One day, José, a child whose first language was Spanish, asked a question in broken English and Karen mimicked him. I was shocked. Did I really hear this? I didn't say anything because I thought I must have misunderstood. I went home distressed and wanted to do something about what I had witnessed. I was afraid to say anything to Karen, but the thought of remaining silent about her behaviour was even worse.

The next day I decided I needed to say something. I felt sick and anxious and realized that I was afraid of Karen. I should be grateful to her because I had a well-paid position in the sector, and without her I wouldn't be here. However, in the back of my mind, I remembered what Pauline had said about the board getting rid of Francine, the previous coordinator. I needed the job but I couldn't live with this every day.

I approached Karen just before the children's lunch break, when I had the opportunity to speak with her privately. "Karen, do you have a minute?" I asked.

"Sure Leslie," Karen responded. She appeared pleasant enough so I thought it was off to a good start.

"Yesterday I noticed that you mimicked José when he spoke English. I know you may not have intentionally meant to be disrespectful. I also know how hard he and many of the other children here are trying to learn English and adapt to an entirely different culture. Mimicking José's efforts could hurt him and the other children. I am uncomfortable with these interactions and feel they may not be in the best interests of the children."

"Oh Leslie, the last thing I would ever want is for you to be uncomfortable. Do you know I wake up every morning and think: How can I make Leslie more comfortable today? I should rethink my behaviour." Karen's sarcasm filled the air to the point where it felt toxic. Nothing more was said and she walked away.

Lunch rolled around, and the children were chatting while eating at their tables. At one of the tables, José and his buddy were goofing around. Karen warned José to settle down and eat his lunch. He shook his head and said, "I not hungry, Karen."

Slowly and quietly, Karen approached him and asked him to get up. She took his lunch and put it on the other side of the room. "Come José and eat your lunch in the hall where you can concentrate."

As I was throwing away some papers in the garbage, I overheard Karen speak to José over the noise and laughter of the other children. "Look at the rest of the children having fun. You could be having fun with them, but instead you are going to sit here until everything on your lunch plate is finished."

I had had enough. What was I supposed to do? I didn't want to be the next Francine, but I could not continue to work in a place where children were being treated so poorly. Something had to change.

Case Study Reflections

1. What are the key facts in this case?
 2. Analyze the case from the perspectives of the case writer and Karen. How do their perspectives differ?
 3. What are some complexities and/or tensions experienced by the case writer that have an impact on the way this case unfolds?
 4. How might the tensions evident in this workplace have an impact on the children and families?
 5. To what extent do the case writer, Karen and Julie fulfill, fall short or exceed your expectations for professionalism?
 6. How are the ethical and professional standards reflected (or not reflected) through this case?
 7. The case writer feels that accepting the position at Oak Leaf School was a good career move for her and aligned with her philosophy and values, but feels that something has to change as she cannot continue to work in a place where the children are treated so poorly. What advice would you give this RECE?



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