

Case Study 8

Balancing Supervisory Responsibilities



Introduction

The case in this publication was written by a member of the College of Early Childhood Educators. The case describes a real experience in the professional practice of a registered early childhood educator. 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*.

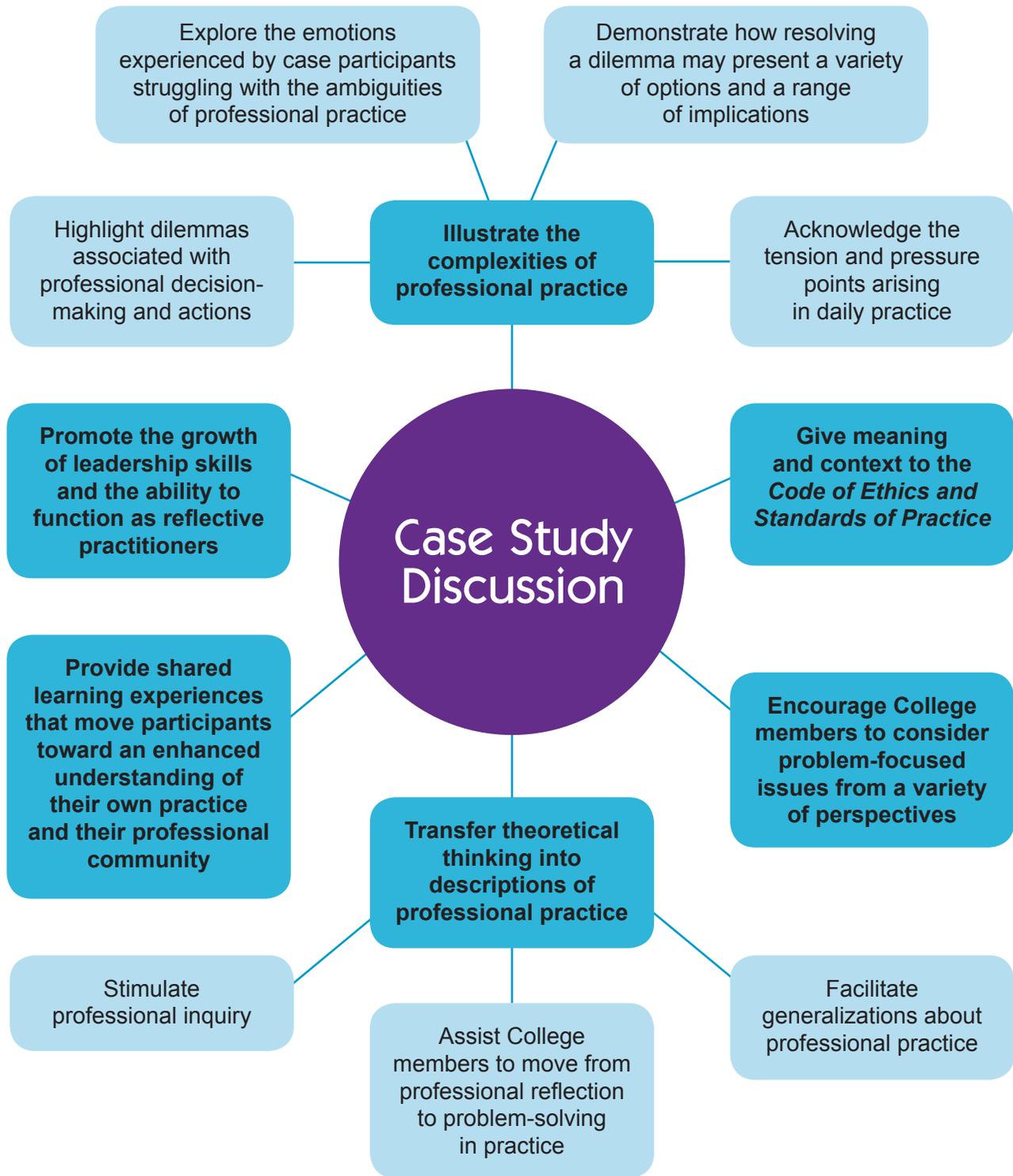
Case studies give meaning and context to the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice*. They transfer theoretical thinking into the realities, complexities and ambiguities of professional practice. They highlight the dilemmas and emotional tension associated with professional decision-making and action. 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 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



Balancing Supervisory Responsibilities

I dropped my coat and bags on my office chair and then went to the staff room to see if there were any notations on the daily schedule before making the rounds of the classrooms.

I had moved recently when my partner changed jobs, and felt it was fate when there was a posting for the role of supervisor at a mid-sized child care centre near our new home. It was in a large and growing suburb that had rapidly sprung up around a small town, and yet it still retained its small town feel.

The child care centre was one of a number of programs delivered by a non-profit organization that offered community services such as housing and senior support.

The job was very similar to my previous supervisory role.

“Hmm,” I said. “Penny is off sick and has called in Barbara. I haven’t met Barbara yet so it will be good to get to know her.”

Tara overheard my comment. “Barbara gets called in often. There aren’t many RECEs on the supply list and she’s always available.”

Tara is an RECE on the preschool team. She opens the centre at 7:00 a.m. and is the first staff member to have a break. Today, at the beginning of her break, Tara arrived at my office door. “Rose, can I talk to you about something?”

“Sure,” I replied. “Is it a staff room chat or should we stay in the office for some privacy?”

“Your office would be better,” responded Tara.

As with most small towns, the six RECEs and two early childhood assistants on this team all knew each other well. Many had grown up in the area and attended the same schools. I soon observed that Tara was a budding leader. At our first staff meeting, I had also picked up on the fact that she was the unofficial spokesperson for the others.

Today, when she asked to speak in private, I noted the concern in her voice.

I invited Tara to take a seat. “What’s up?” I asked. “Concerned about something?” She nodded.

“Barbara is not really strong and doesn’t do well on her own. She needs direction. Sometimes I need to step in to support her when she is working with the children and interacting with parents. The children sometimes don’t respond well to her.”

“So,” I asked. “Can I presume other staff members share this concern?”

Tara hesitated briefly. “Well, I think everyone has had similar experiences. Some people are more supportive. I’ve known Barbara all my life and I had her as a student on placement so I perhaps have more patience.”

I paused for several moments before asking Tara the critical question. “Should we avoid calling her in to supply at our centre?”

While there was a strong staff complement for the two preschool rooms, toddler room and on-site school-age program, the supply staff list was limited. The organization had run an advertisement to recruit more educators to supply. There were no new applicants.

“Oh no, I wouldn’t want to see that!” exclaimed Tara. “It’s just that she’s never really worked full-time in child care. She just graduated a couple of years ago. I think she’s improving and we just need to make sure she’s working with someone who can support her. The toddler team gets really frustrated when she’s in their room. If you ever need to move people around to cover, I don’t mind having her in my room to work with her. Besides, I wouldn’t want to see Barbara lose this job, even if it is just casual hours. She’s had a rough family life and I think this is good for her.”

**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.*

Later that year, we registered a new three and a half-year-old child, Darren. When Darren came to the child care centre for an orientation visit with his mom Kim, we observed right away that he was a child with challenging behaviours, limited language and self-regulation skills. When Kim had called looking for half-day care, she said preschool had been recommended by their family doctor. I wondered if there might be more complex issues.

After the orientation, Kim and I chatted in my office. Darren waited outside the office. Even though he had been given toys to play with while we talked, he repeatedly opened and closed the office door while using language that was unclear to me

I gently asked Kim, “Would you be willing to have one of our resource consultants observe Darren and provide some suggestions to both staff and your family about how we might provide Darren with support?”

To my relief, Kim was not only receptive, but also grateful. “We have been having a hard time with his behaviour at home for some time now. We were asked to leave another nursery school as a result of his disruptive behavior. Darren has run away from me both at home and at the shopping mall. I am concerned for his safety.”

We contacted the resource consultant for our site who immediately initiated a developmental assessment for Darren. The resource consultant advised us that there were funds available to arrange for a support staff person to come in and enhance the staff ratio in the morning when Darren attended. If we could find someone, the position would be funded on an interim basis for 10 weeks. After 10 weeks the program and funding support would be reviewed.

Barbara came to mind. As part of a team of three working with two RECEs, Penny and Tara, she would have more support and modeling to strengthen her practice. Barbara readily accepted the offer of the 10-week position of two and a half hours of work every day.

Although there were some challenging times, the team soon discovered that Darren loved sensory experiences and he would stay focused on those for a long time. They were able to break into small groups for routines and transitions and they always ensured Darren was in the group with two staff. He also loved snack time and going outdoors.

Then we had our first snowy day. The route coming in from the playground took them through a large foyer in the recreational centre where our centre was located. Penny was leading the first group of children from the playground to the inside of the foyer. Barbara was holding Darren’s hand at the end of the group. Penny had proceeded with the children into the child care centre. She knew that Barbara would be with Darren.

Several minutes later, having undressed the rest of the children, Penny looked up to see if Barbara was making progress with Darren. She looked out into the foyer and could only see Barbara standing alone and staring blankly. Penny opened the door. “Where’s Darren?”

Barbara calmly replied with a shrug, “He just took off down the hall.”

“Rose can you help my group?” yelled Penny. “Darren’s gone!”

Picking up on the panic in her voice, I called for the cook to join me in the preschool room and asked her to read to the children. I headed to the foyer. Barbara was still standing there. Penny was running through the halls.

I raced to the manager's office of the recreation centre. "Please make a PA system announcement immediately. One of our young boys is running through the halls unsupervised." The manager asked all the recreational staff members to watch for the child and try to keep him insight until the child care team could reach him.

What we did not know was that Darren had left the building by a rear door. A woman walking her dog in the area saw him running barefoot in the snow. Darren spotted her dog and ran to her. The woman realized what had probably happened. Darren happily walked back to the centre with the woman and her dog.

I was not surprised that Darren behaved this way on the first snowy day. Nor was I shocked that he had taken off his boots and socks. He hated wearing shoes or boots. What was most unsettling was Barbara's reaction. She continued to remain standing expressionless in the recreation centre foyer.

Tara, still outside with her group, noticed the dog walker returning Darren to the centre. She decided to bring her group in early. In the foyer, she encountered Barbara and quietly asked "What's going on?"

"Oh, you know Darren," replied Barbara with a nervous laugh. "He just decided to go running through the building and out the door." I asked Tara to check that Darren was comfortable and settled into an activity he enjoyed. I also checked on the contact information for Darren's family. Then I began to work through a serious occurrence report.

I called Darren's mother and described what had happened. We planned to meet the next morning when she brought Darren to the centre. We both hoped that the resource consultant could also join us. We would be revisiting the child supervision protocol and specifically our plans about how to keep Darren safe.

I thought more about Barbara's actions. I wondered if she was the best person to fill this support staff role. It was more than her unresponsiveness during the incident. I reflected back on Tara's protectiveness of her and her comment about how Barbara's home situation was challenging.

However, it was the disturbing phone call I had taken prior to the incident with Darren that heightened my concerns and added to the complexity.

Barbara's father had telephoned me early that morning. He was irate because Barbara was kept so late at last night's staff meeting. He yelled, "You expect way too much for the measly 10 hours you give her. You only think about yourself I suppose. You and your fancy big house, Mrs. High and Mighty! You think you're really something."

I was taken aback but took a deep breath and said calmly, "This is something I need to talk to Barbara about. I'm not having the discussion with you."

He carried on, cursing at me and repeating how disgusted he was with the way the organization was run. I was about to hang up when another voice came on the line and said, "I'm sorry, he's upset, he can be over-protective." I could hear him still ranting in the background.

I asked the woman if she was okay and she replied, "Don't worry about me dear. Please just have Barbara call before she leaves for home."

I was concerned for Barbara's well-being as well as Darren's. Barbara and I were scheduled to meet in my office in 30 minutes. The serious occurrence report needed to be completed. I wanted to prepare for the meeting in the morning with Darren's mother and the resource consultant. What decisions would need to be made? What were the implications for the children, the staff and the centre?

Case Study Reflections

1. What are the key facts in this case?
2. Analyze the case from the perspectives of the case writer, Barbara and Penny. How do their perspectives differ?
3. What issues exist for the case writer?
4. What ethical and professional practice standards could support the decision-making and actions undertaken by the case writer?
5. The centre staff recognizes that Barbara's home situation is challenging, and that this has affected her level of professionalism as an RECE. In what ways do you think this reflects the collective experiences of other members of the early childhood education profession?
6. How are the ethical and professional standards reflected (or not reflected) through this case?
7. The case writer has scheduled a meeting with Barbara to complete the serious incident report and discuss the situation. What do you think the case writer will do?

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