



Case Study 3

Getting Bumps and Taking Lumps

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.

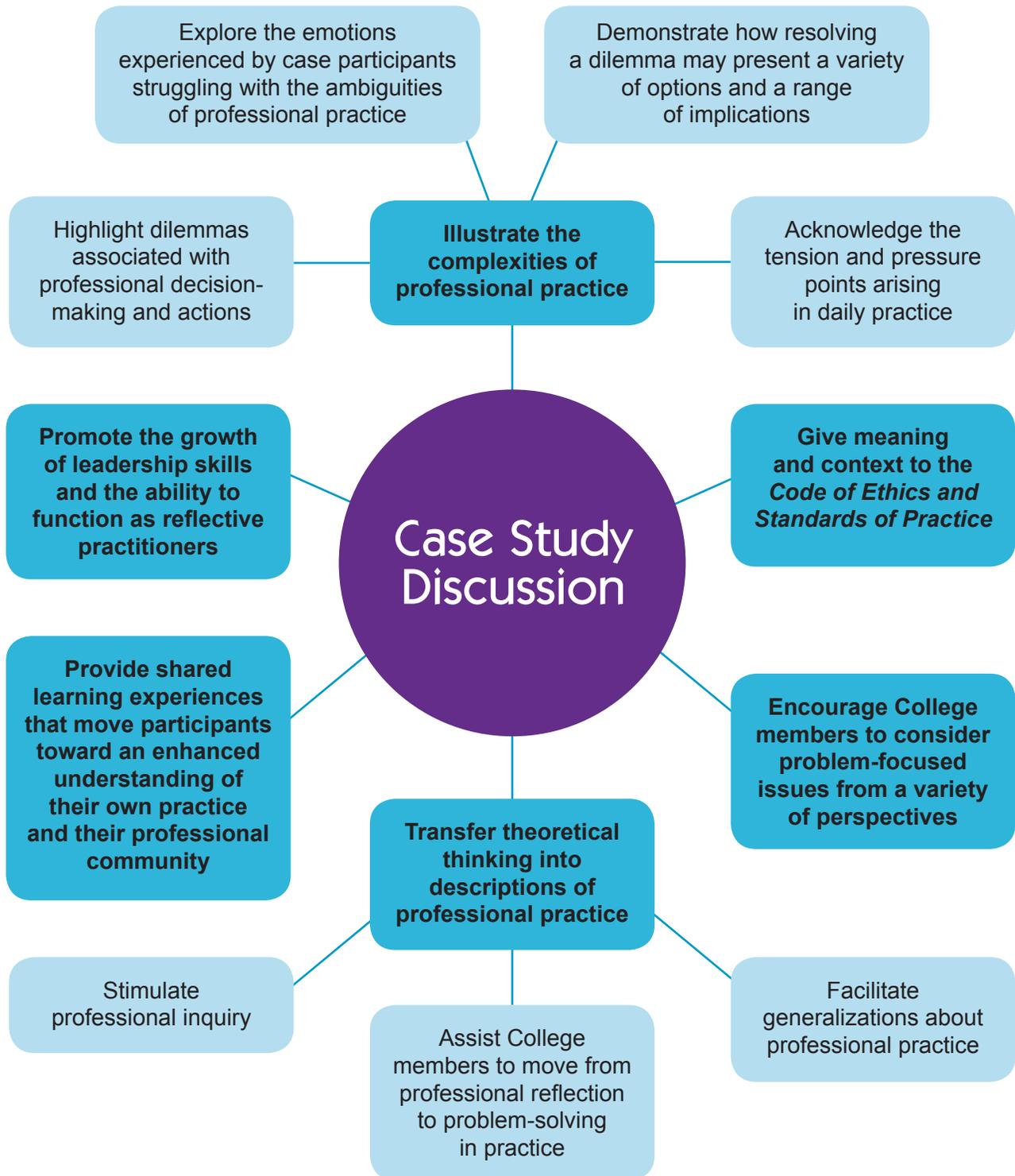
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Enhancing Professional Practice through Case Study Discussion



Getting Bumps and Taking Lumps

I love this age, I truly do. Ten-year-olds have a sense of inquiry and searching imaginations that offer so much scope to an early childhood educator. I have become more and more dedicated to working with this age group. Not that they aren't often very frustrating and challenging, but the good days far outnumber the bad.

I have worked with school-age children in a variety of capacities over the past 20 years, but only pursued my early childhood education qualifications when my own children had passed through their teen years. Many people are fooled by my grey hair, but the reality is that I have only worked as an ECE for about five years. The company I work for took me on as a novice and has supported my growth and continuing education over that time.

It was one of those days of fairly controlled chaos in our after-school program with 24 nine- and 10-year-olds getting their sillies out after a day in the conventional classroom. The art centre was covered in plastic and full of future Van Goghs. The carpet was littered with building blocks, Lego and gangly pre-teens. They came in all shapes and sizes and all of them had different interests and abilities.

My partner and I took pride in the work that we did with individual children and the group. We wanted to help them enjoy their time with us and to explore the boundaries of learning. We had worked on some wonderful projects with the children. They could be so engaged and enthusiastic!

Recently we had spent months investigating the Olympics in anticipation of the upcoming games. The almost two-metre papier-mâché mountain the children had built, complete with ski runs, chair lifts, skating rinks and medal podiums was proof to us that we were on the right track. Small groups of children huddled around the mountain ski run. The children took turns announcing the start of each race in loud and very official sounding voices. These children were

fully engaged in both learning and play. It was a noisy and happy place. The young bodies were relaxed and there was a feeling of contentment in the room.

The exception was Jake*. His body was tense and his hands worked jerkily with his Lego. His eyes were lowered to the carpet and there was a scowl on his narrow, shadowed face. Jake was one child who needed extra support. He came to us with multiple cognitive and social challenges. He found the busy nature of the classroom unsettling and the noise disconcerting. He would often retreat from the activity in the room. When Jake was overwhelmed by the noise and activity, he would sometimes strike out at the children around him and yell in frustration. Jake had spent several months in our program, and we were pleased that he had developed some of his own coping strategies and was willing to try others that we suggested.

Jake often would forgo his snack when he needed some private time. Out would come the Lego bin and he would cocoon with his imagination in his private space and get down to some serious building. He wasn't good at sharing that private time. We were trying to help him work successfully in small groups and accept other children's input. At least now, he usually did not pull away when another child crowded too close to him.

Today Jake was cautiously allowing Bart to play with him in his Lego world. I was helping to diffuse another potential crisis between warring Monopoly players who were threatening each other with tiny plastic houses and hotels. My partner, Mercedes, was clearing up the last crumbs of snack. I admit that, for a moment or two, my back was turned. Suddenly there was a crash, an angry yell and a painful cry. Both Mercedes and I were on the carpet in a flash. A red-faced Jake, arm raised

**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.*

with a block clutched in his hand, loomed over Bart, who was curled up on the carpet with his hands clamped over his face, crying wildly and cursing colourfully at Jake.

I went to Bart and Mercedes went to Jake. Bart was reluctant to take his clutching fingers off his face. No small wonder. A goose egg the size of his fist was surfacing just above Bart's left eye. That goose egg was going to be colourful tomorrow. Jake clearly wanted to inflict more damage. Mercedes was gently talking to Jake, trying to calm him down and remove him from Bart's proximity.

The other children were quick to offer their opinion of who had instigated the conflict and who was responsible for the outcome. Suzie yelled, "Bart stole Jake's Lego!" Martha added to the chaos by jumping up and down and squealing. Adam felt a need to comfort Bart and managed to fall on him in his attempt to offer solace and a hug. Bart howled louder and harder.

Mercedes managed to separate the boys and began to check the lump on Bart's forehead. "How many fingers do you see?" Mercedes asked Bart gently. She wrapped an ice pack quickly and efficiently over his swollen forehead.

I was concerned about Jake and was talking to him down on the carpet with care and understanding. I spoke quietly to him, looking him straight in the eye, and said, "Don't worry, Jake. Everything will be okay. Bart will be fine."

However, Jake also needed to know that he wasn't off the hook and that his behaviour was unacceptable. I was disappointed in his actions. I felt we had made a lot of progress helping him control his temper, and to communicate more easily with us and with the other children. He was bright enough to know that hitting was not the answer. Jake peeked through his fingers at Bart and saw the goose egg and the ice pack on his forehead. Jake's brow was furrowed. His facial expression suggested honest remorse.

Peace had just been restored when Bart's father arrived to pick him up. The previously calm Bart completely lost it. Wailing and gesturing wildly, he ran to his father sobbing, "Jake tried to kill me. Look! My head is split wide open!" He clung to his father, crying hysterically. Mr. Gibson's face flushed tomato red. His entire posture stiffened. He was irate and yelling. "I want to know who did this to my son! What's that kid's last name? I am going to phone his father and tell him what I think of his no-good son!" He was getting louder and angrier by the moment. His arms flailed and his fists clenched.

"Could we please take this out into the hall, Mr. Gibson? The children don't need to hear our conversation," I suggested.

"Why not? They need to know that there is a violent kid in the group. Parents need to know it too!" He went on to accuse us of not keeping his son safe, not running a reputable child care and many more unpleasant shortcomings.

It was upsetting for the children. They were clustered together at the back of the room. I felt unsettled and embarrassed. I wanted to yell just as loud as he did but knew that was not the answer.

I tried to explain to him, as calmly as possible, that I could not give out personal information about any of the children. Diplomatically, I pointed out that he wouldn't appreciate it if I gave someone else information about his child. He grabbed Bart and hustled him out of the classroom and down the hall. He assured me from a distance that I had not heard the last of him. I was quite sure that was true.

It took us quite a while to convince Jake that he wasn't in terrible trouble and that Bart's father wasn't going to come after him or his father. The return of repetitive hand flapping and head

bobbing was a strong indicator that Jake was frightened and really apprehensive about what might happen after he went home. He kept whispering, “What will my mummy say? Will that man come to my house?”

It angered and upset me that Jake felt threatened and frightened. We tried to reassure Jake and the other children that everything would be fine. By the time they were picked up by their parents, we had achieved relative calm. It was well after 6 p.m. by the time we had tidied up the program and I went home to fret and stew about the unfortunate incident. I would call my director in the morning. She would have gone home by now.

I had only begun to organize the program very early the next morning when the phone rang. “What on earth happened in your room last night?” My director demanded angrily. “Why didn’t you warn me that we had an unhappy parent? He is making all kinds of threats!”

I was caught completely off guard. I hadn’t had an opportunity to make that phone call or to fill in the necessary paperwork yet. After a night of worry, I felt that I had handled the situation quite professionally.

I was summoned to our head office to meet with my director immediately. “Why did you not see exactly what happened? You are supposed to be watching the children at all times. Why was that parent allowed to leave your child care so upset? You know that the other child has behavioural issues. Why was he not being supervised more closely?”

There were so many difficult questions and so few had answers that didn’t sound like excuses. I wasn’t sure she was really listening to my attempted answers. I walked away shaken and questioning myself. Was I doing a good job? Should I have handled the situation differently? Why didn’t she trust my decisions?

Case Study Reflections

1. What are the key facts of the case?
2. What are the main issues in this case?
3. Analyze the issues from the perspectives of the case writer, the parent and the director. How do their perspectives differ?
4. What ethical and professional practice standards guided the decision-making and actions of the case writer?
5. In what ways and to what extent does the case writer fulfill, fall short of or exceed your expectations for professionalism?
6. The case writer leaves the director's meeting with three unresolved questions about professional practice. What answers would you consider appropriate?
7. The case writer appears to leave the director's meeting with a diminished sense of professional self-confidence. What advice would you give this RECE?

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