

Case Study 4

Denton's Birthday Cupcakes



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*.

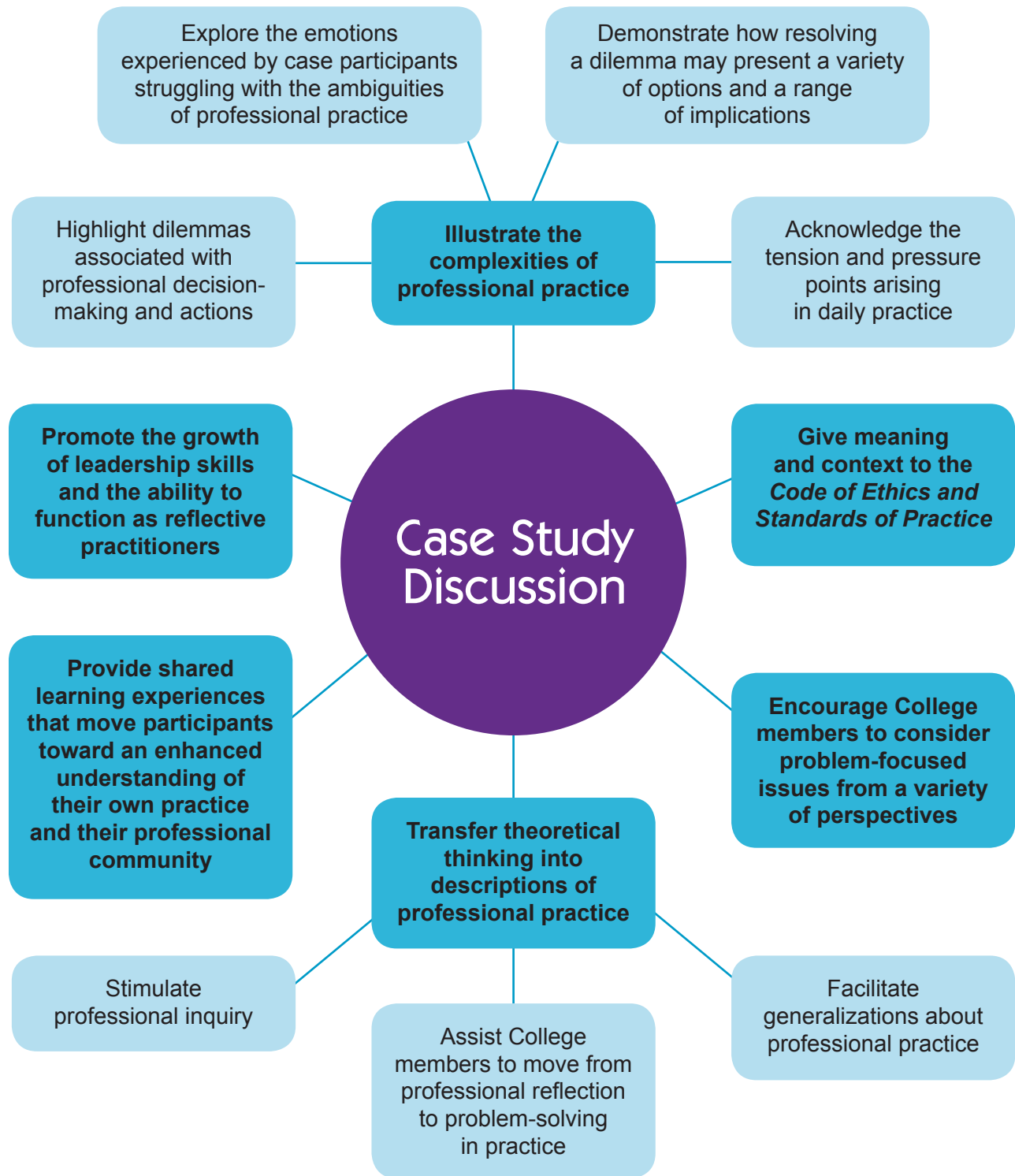
Case studies give meaning and context to the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice*. They transfer theoretical thinking into the realities, complexities and ambiguities of professional practice. They highlight the dilemmas and emotional tension associated with professional decision-making and action.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



Denton's Birthday Cupcakes

There was a buzz in the preschool room over Denton's fourth birthday.

Denton ran to jump up and down in front of me. "Julie, Julie, mommy brought cupcakes to have after lunch. They have chocolate icing!"

"Great, I can hardly wait!" I replied with a smile. I guided him over to where the children hung their spring jackets and sweaters on the other side of the room.

On the way over, I did think that the arrival of the cupcakes was a bit unusual. Rebecca, our cook, always makes cupcakes for the children's birthdays. Before lunch, I would most likely find out why these "outside" cupcakes had been delivered.

The centre has an efficient system to notify staff about food that isn't safe for specific children. All staff members knew how critical this system was to ensure the safety of our children. I was reassured by the belief that Rebecca would let staff know if the cupcakes were okay for the children.

Our centre is medium-sized, located in the suburbs and has an infant, toddler and preschool room. There is a new supervisor, two RECEs in each room and a cook. Most of us have worked here for a number of years. I feel we run a quality child care program and I am proud of how we all work together to support the children and families. We take pride in our program, our responsive relationships and the staff are all professional.

On the administrative side of things, we have a comprehensive staff policy manual. All policies, including the anaphylactic policy, are read out loud with the entire staff present each year. Staff members each "sign off" on the policy to indicate that they are aware of the crucial policies that are part of the Ministry of Education licensing requirements.

The morning was the usual whirlwind of activity. Two hours later it was lunch time. The children were anxious to finish their lunch. They knew that cupcakes were on the trolley. I heard Denton shouting, "Julie, the cupcakes are coming. Look at them!"

Denton almost knocked me over as he ran across the room. As he raced to the trolley, I hesitated for a moment. The fact that Mika had a nut/peanut allergy flashed through my mind.

The cupcakes had been purchased at a store, but Rebecca had put them on the trolley. She must have checked the ingredients to make sure they were safe. I noticed that my team partner, Kelly, did not hesitate. We handed out the cupcakes together.

During nap time, Mika complained about her stomach hurting. I offered her some water and told her to rest. "We did a lot of running outside this morning in the heat. Maybe that's what has your stomach upset. This is the hottest day we have had so far this spring. Let me know how you feel in a few minutes."

She rested on her cot and I moved closer to keep track of how she was doing. At one point, I ran through a list of things that could be upsetting her stomach and asked her if she needed to use the washroom. After a while, she did not feel any better so I had her join me on the couch. We read stories to take her mind off of her stomach ache.

As the children began to wake up and got ready to go outside, I thought to myself, "Did Mika eat a cupcake?" My second thought was, "Could she be having a reaction?" Suddenly, I felt ill and a sense of urgency came over me.

**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.*

I ran to the recycling bin to check the cupcake package label. The words “May contain traces of nuts” were printed in large text.

As quietly and calmly as possible, I alerted Kelly, about my suspicions regarding the cupcakes and Mika’s illness. Kelly asked, “Do you know for sure that Mika actually ate a cupcake?”

I replied, “I’m not sure. I saw her lick the icing once maybe, but not eat it. Actually, I’m pretty sure she didn’t eat it because she doesn’t really like desserts and never eats the cupcakes.”

We consulted Mika’s Individual Anaphylaxis Emergency Plan (IAEP) hanging on the bulletin board and a sore stomach was not listed as a symptom. Regardless, we decided to monitor her to see if her symptoms got any worse or changed in any way.

I went to notify Samantha, the supervisor, about what may have happened. “Why didn’t you read the label or question if they were safe?” exclaimed Samantha.

“They were on the trolley, so I assumed that Rebecca had checked them. That’s her job.” I was nervous. I could see Samantha’s increasing alarm.

Samantha turned away quickly and began heading for her office. “I will call the parent. Bring Mika into my office so I can monitor her.”

I brought Mika inside and Samantha and I checked her over. We noticed a slight rash on her back. Was it due to a reaction to the cupcake or to the hot weather? I once again checked Mika’s plan. A rash was a possible symptom. Now I didn’t know what to think.

I bumped into Rebecca in the kitchen and asked, “Didn’t you check the cupcakes before you put them on the trolley?” Looking very worried, Rebecca replied, “The parent told me that Samantha said they were okay and gave him permission to bring them in. I thought Samantha had checked the ingredients. It’s not my fault.”

I rolled my eyes and continued on my way out to the playground. I had a big knot in the pit of my stomach.

A little later, the parent arrived at the centre. He was fuming. “How could you let this happen? I’m so upset! I’m going to report this to the Ministry! I will have your jobs! This should not happen!” he yelled at the supervisor.

We could hear him from the classroom and I felt awful. I could not believe this had happened. We are usually so careful. I felt horrible and hoped Mika was going to be okay.

Samantha apologized profusely and gave the parent the details of what had happened. “An apology is not good enough. I cannot believe this! I am taking her to the doctor right now.” He carried Mika out the door to his car.

As I was packing up to leave at the end of my work day, Samantha called me into her office. “Please take a seat and tell me your side of the story.”

I told her that I had been initially concerned this morning about outside food coming into the centre. I knew that we usually only did that with social evenings when the parents were present and supervising their own children. Before these social events, parents were always reminded about the centre being a nut/peanut free zone. I also said that I believed that Rebecca should have checked the cupcake package label before she put them on the lunch trolley.

I wondered if Samantha thought that this was entirely my fault. I reminded myself that I didn't tell the parent he could bring in cupcakes from home and I wasn't the one to accept them in the morning. I should not be the one to get all the blame.

Samantha must have been reading my mind. "It is every staff member's job to check and double check before you serve food to the children. That responsibility is especially true in this instance because you have shared with me that, when the cupcakes first arrived, you experienced some concern. Unfortunately, you did not act on that concern."

Samantha continued, "I need you to re-read our anaphylaxis policy before you go home. Reflect on your part in the policy and procedures as an RECE and your role when it comes to serving the children lunch and snacks. Let's just hope that Mika is okay."

As I sat staring at the policy and procedures manual, I wondered if Samantha talked to Rebecca. Did Rebecca have to read the policy and procedures again? Was I in trouble or was Rebecca? What about Kelly? I wanted to ask, but was afraid to hear the answer.

I finally tried to focus on reading our anaphylaxis policy. When I had finished reading, I asked Samantha while pointing to a line on the policy, "Do you see here where it says that the only time we let in outside food to the centre is at parent social events? Normally we only do it at those events, not children's birthdays at the centre. At least that is what we have done in the past, but one of the examples given here is birthdays, alongside family barbeques and holiday celebrations. Maybe we should take the word birthdays out of that part of the policy so today's incident does not happen again."

Samantha curtly responded "I will take a closer look at the policy once I have finished dealing with today's situation."

On my way out of the office, I noticed she was filling out a serious occurrence form to send into the Ministry.

As I walked through the front door at home, my phone rang. It was Samantha. "Hello Julie, Mika is fine. The doctor does not think it was an allergic reaction. She will be back at the centre tomorrow morning. Just so you know, Mika's father is still really angry and has asked for a meeting with me tomorrow morning."

I was glad that Mika was okay. What is going to happen next? Was the situation entirely my fault? Would I be involved in the morning meeting with Mika's father?

Case Study Reflections

1. What are the key facts in this case?
2. Analyze the case from the perspectives of the case writer, the cook and the parent. How do their perspectives differ?
3. What professional values and issues surface through the case? What impact might these issues have on professional practice?
4. The case writer questions whether or not it was her fault that the cupcakes were served to the children. How might these feelings be mitigated?
5. What are some steps that centre staff could take, going forward, to avoid similar situations from happening in the future?
6. How are the ethical and professional standards reflected (or not reflected) through this case?
7. After hearing that Mika's father requested a meeting for the following morning, the case writer appears to have a diminished sense of professional self-confidence. What advice would you give this RECE?

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