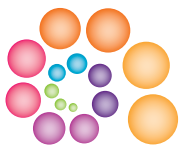


Case Study 6

New Responsibilities and Challenges



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professional
learning

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*.

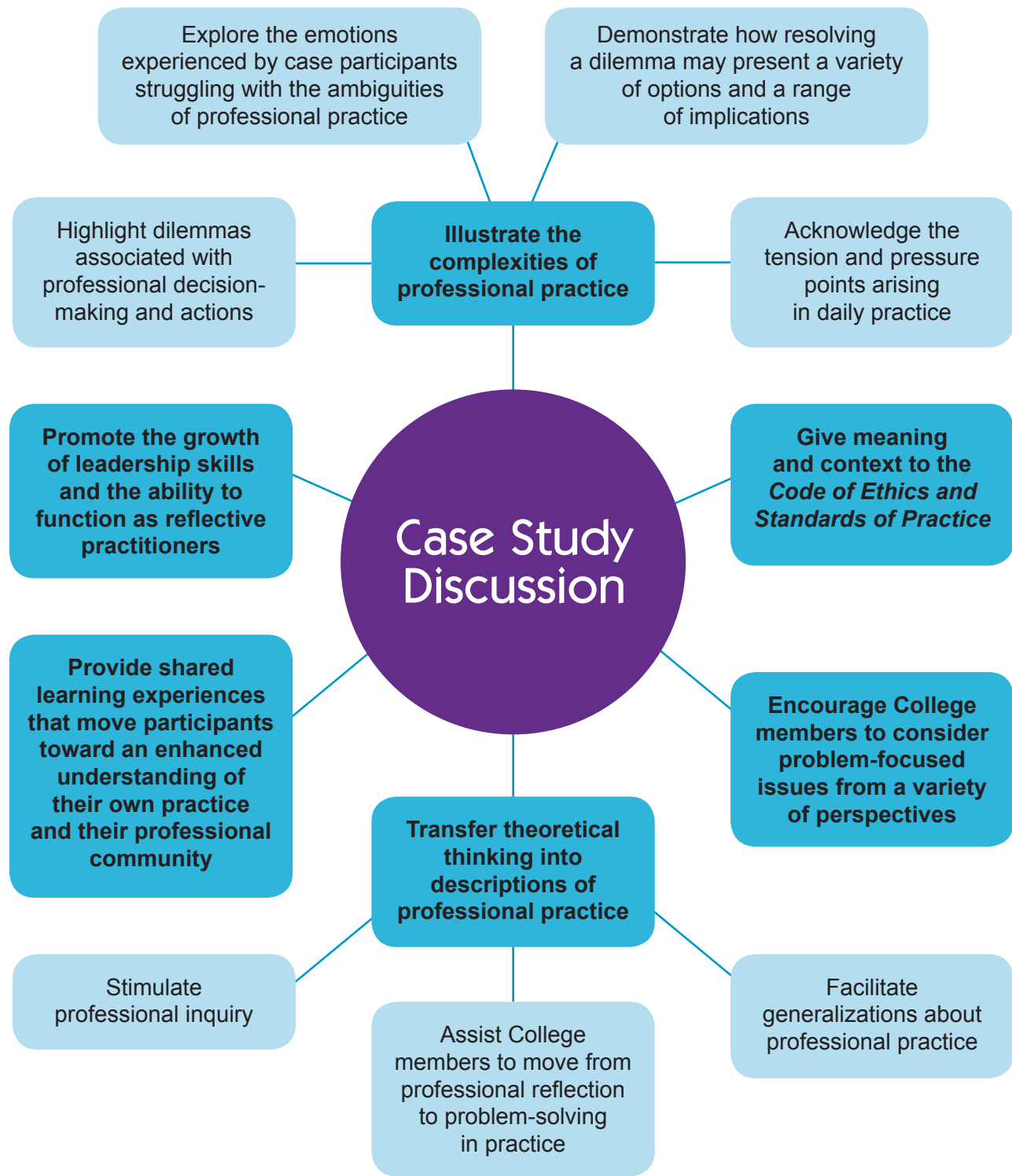
Case studies give meaning and context to the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice*. They transfer theoretical thinking into the realities, complexities and ambiguities of professional practice. They highlight the dilemmas and emotional tension associated with professional decision-making and action.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



New Responsibilities and Challenges

I was both excited and nervous. Today was my first day as the supervisor of a child care centre in the city. The centre provided care for toddlers and preschoolers. I was looking forward to meeting my team of RECEs and early childhood assistants.

My predecessor, Cheryl, was available to stay for a week to show me the ropes before leaving for her new job. Full of exuberance, we walked the halls of the centre as I introduced myself to the staff. For the most part, I was greeted with smiles and friendly “hellos”.

However, I was surprised when I approached one of the staff in the toddler room. “Hi, my name is Janet, it’s a pleasure to meet you. Your name is?”

She looked up at me and said softly, “Malyka. Just Malyka.”

“How long have you worked here Malyka?”

With her eyes averted she replied, “Too long.”

A thunderous laugh rolled across the room. I turned around to find the source and a tall, lanky woman with her arms crossed snapped, “I’m Lorraine. I’m the ECE.”

I approached Lorraine, extended my hand to shake hers and said, “Nice to meet you, Lorraine.” As we left the room, I made a mental note to follow up with regard to Malyka’s comments and Lorraine’s reaction.

In my office, I asked Cheryl about Malyka. “Why does Malyka feel that she has been here for too long?”

“No time for that story. You’ll find out soon enough. Right now we should talk about subsidies and fees.” With that response, Cheryl launched into her fee structure overview.

Throughout the following week, I checked in with staff each morning by dropping by their rooms. Most of them also stopped by my office during the day just to have an informal chat.

Even though I’ve been in the child care field for over 25 years, I was taken aback by the number of comments and stories that colleagues shared about Lorraine. Jordan, an RECE who has worked at the centre for over 20 years, told me that Lorraine once gave a child medication when they weren’t even supposed to have medicine, and Cheryl did nothing about it.

One morning when I was in the preschool room, Eleanor, the early childhood assistant, commented, “I know you can’t change staff around here Janet. The union won’t let you. None of us want to work with Lorraine. She’s crazy you know.”

Marsha, an early childhood assistant who works in the toddler room, said, “We lock our cupboards because Lorraine steals. She stole the blocks from my room and wrote her name on them. You can’t let her do this anymore.”

After nearly one week at the centre and being inundated with stories from staff, I began to second guess my decision to accept my new position as supervisor. However, I wasn’t going to give up. Determined to get to the bottom of the staffing issues, I decided to go through the office files to see if I could locate any documents that substantiated the stories staff members were telling me.

The only documentation I could find was a file from five years ago that referred to communication issues between Lorraine and Malyka. The record indicated that at the time, Cheryl was supporting the two staff members by meeting with them once a month to help resolve some of the issues.

**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.*

The office records also appeared to reveal that no performance appraisals had been carried out during the last three years. I found this shocking. On the afternoon of her last day at the centre, I approached Cheryl with my concerns about the staff's feedback on Lorraine and the apparent lack of recent performance appraisals. Her response was curt.

"The staff members are protected by the union. Don't waste your time trying to do anything about what's going on around here." Cheryl then picked up her coat, walked out of my office and left the centre. The week was over and I was on my own. What was I was going to do?

I developed an action plan and began to put it in motion. I spent as much time as I could in the toddler room monitoring Lorraine and Malyka's team interaction, their relationship with the children and their program. I observed wonderful interactions with the children. It appeared to be a well-run toddler program.

After three weeks, my time spent in the toddler room decreased as I had other supervisory responsibilities requiring my attention. I ensured that staff members knew that my door was always open and that they were free to come and speak with me at any time.

A few weeks later while I was in my office, I overheard Malyka and Eleanor talking in the hall. As their conversation progressed, their voices became louder. "Is everything alright?" I asked.

Eleanor shook her head in disbelief and exclaimed "Do you know what Lorraine did with Malyka's flowers? She threw them out. That's what she did."

"Please come into my office where we can talk in private. Malyka, can you tell me more about what happened?"

Eleanor flipped her hair back and repeated what she had said, using an accusatory and impatient tone, "I told you that she threw out Malyka's flowers. Didn't you hear me? Malyka, tell her what she said about your clothes the other day. Tell her. She won't believe this."

"Eleanor, I'd like to hear about this from Malyka". My voice was calm but firm. "Lorraine threw out my flowers."

"Malyka, how do you know for sure that it was Lorraine who threw them out?"

"They were on the table when I left work yesterday and when I came to work this morning, I saw them in the garbage can. Lorraine was here before me."

"Did you ask Lorraine if she knew how your flowers got thrown in the garbage?" I inquired.

"You just don't ask Lorraine those kinds of questions." Malyka shook her head and averted her eyes.

"Malyka, I will speak with Lorraine about the flowers and get back to you."

When I approached Lorraine and inquired about the flowers, she said quite decisively, "They were in the garbage when I came to work this morning. Everyone here hates me and makes up stories about me, so don't believe what they say. It's always been that way and they are just trying to get you on their side."

I wondered why everything appears to be just fine when I'm in the toddler room, but as soon as I am not there, everything falls apart.

Over the next few months, staff members continued to imply that Lorraine was responsible for items going missing in the child care centre and continued to share stories about her incompetence in caring for the children.

Lorraine maintained that she was innocent of these accusations. "They all hate me and this has been going on for years. Why do they hate me? You need to help me."

When I followed up on each situation, I was unable to find any direct evidence that implicates Lorraine. To try and create a more positive and professional working environment, I held staff meetings that focused on the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice*, team-building activities and set clear goals and expectations for the entire team.

As the end of October approached, I prepared for our annual Child Care Worker & Early Childhood Educator Appreciation Day and printed certificates for all staff members. The certificates were placed in their rooms before they arrived that day. Later in the afternoon, as I walked by the staff room, I could hear someone crying. I walked in and found Malyka.

“Are you okay?” I asked. Malyka handed me a pile of paper and said, “She ripped it up and screamed, “You’re not an ECE so you don’t get one of these.”

“Who said that?” I asked.

“Lorraine.”

As I left the staff room, Eleanor ran up to me and blurted, “You need to talk to Lorraine. She has really lost it. At the end of the day yesterday, she told me that because there were only nine toddlers and two preschoolers left, she was going to do some work in her room. She ended up leaving me with all the children. Who does she think she is? She knows that I can’t be left with all those children. She did it anyway.”

It was time for me to have another meeting with Lorraine. The next day I made arrangements to have someone cover for Lorraine and met her in my office before her lunch break. When she entered my office, she had a puzzled look on her face. “What did you want to see me about?”

“Please take a seat Lorraine. We have met on a number of occasions to discuss the concerns brought to my attention by staff. I have brought you in again today regarding two situations that have come to my attention recently. First of all, Malyka told me that you had ripped up her

certificate from Child Care Worker & Early Childhood Educator Appreciation Day.”

Lorraine did not wait for my invitation to respond. She stared right through me and in a flat voice said, “Yes, I did. Malyka’s not an ECE.”

I explained that the purpose of Appreciation Day is to recognize both early childhood educators and early childhood assistants, and that she was showing disrespect for Malyka by ripping up her certificate.

I also questioned Lorraine about leaving Eleanor alone with 11 children. Lorraine replied in the same monotonous voice. “I had work to do and you don’t give me enough time during the day to get everything done. So I did it.”

“Lorraine, you know that leaving an assistant with the responsibility of looking after 11 children is not only a safety issue for the children but also in violation of your professional responsibilities.”

Lorraine stood up and pushed her chair against the wall. “Whatever.” She stormed off, slamming the door on her way out.

I realized that a letter of discipline had to be my next course of action. While the events of the day were still fresh in my mind, I stayed late to complete the letter.

The next day, I once again made arrangements for someone to cover for Lorraine and met her in my office. She walked in and locked eyes with me. “What have I done now?” she snarled.

“Lorraine please sit down. As a follow-up to our meeting yesterday, I have prepared this letter of discipline for you. Please take a moment to read it over. If you have any questions, I would be happy to answer them for you.”

Lorraine looked at the letter, looked up and looked right through me. “You expect me sign this? I’m not signing it and you haven’t heard the end of this.” She threw the letter on my desk, turned and walked away.

Case Study Reflections

1. What are the key facts in this case?
2. What dilemmas exist for the case writer and Lorraine?
3. What impact might these dilemmas have on the children and families in the centre?
4. Analyze the steps the case writer has taken to address Lorraine's behaviour. In what ways and to what extent does the case writer fulfill, fall short of or exceed your expectations for professionalism?
5. In what ways do you think this case reflects the collective experiences of other members of the early childhood education profession?
6. How are the ethical and professional standards reflected (on not reflected) through this case?
7. Lorraine refuses to sign the letter of discipline prepared by the case writer. What advice would you give the case writer?

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