

Case Study 9

Once We Were Friends



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*.

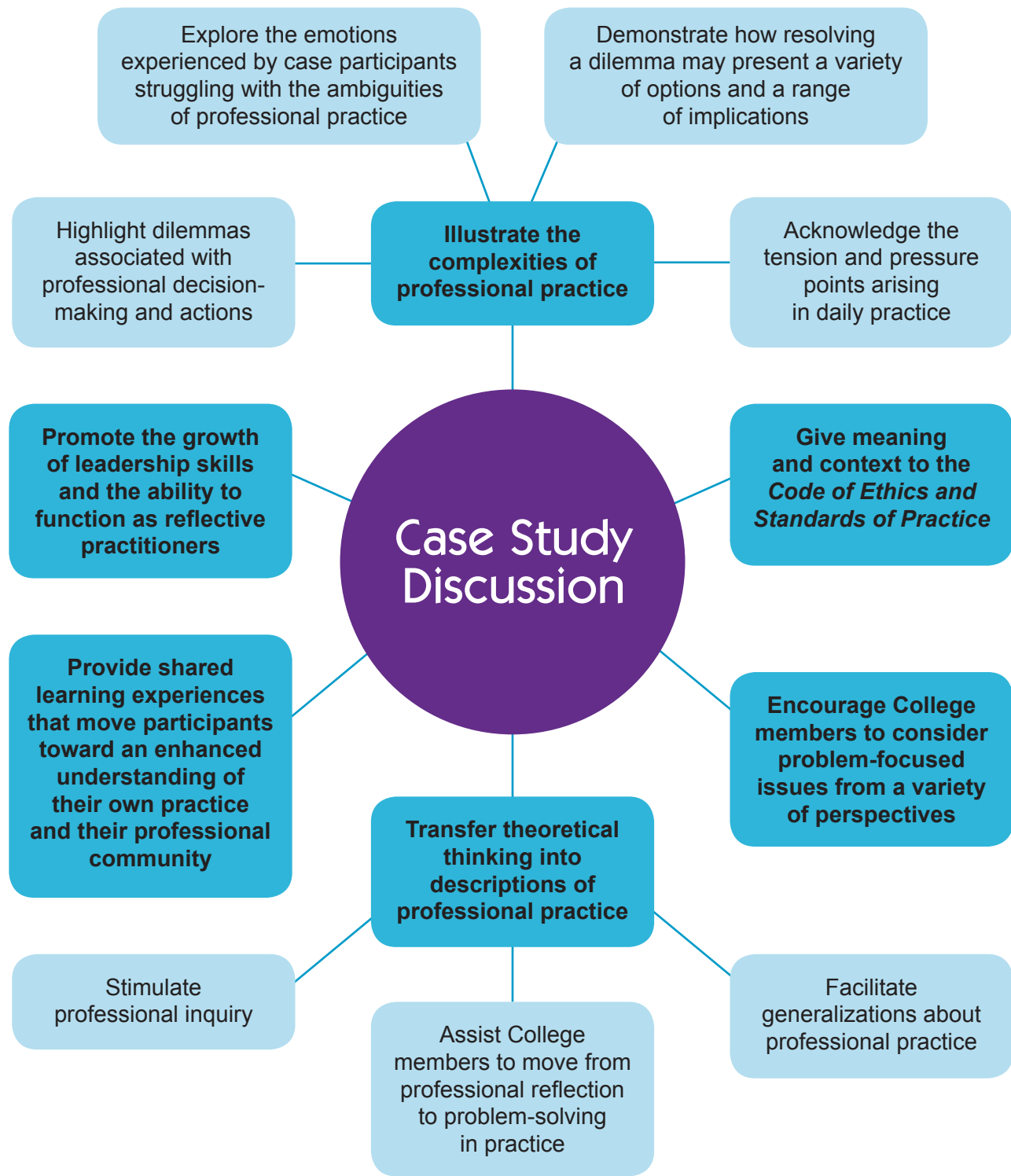
Case studies give meaning and context to the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice*. They transfer theoretical thinking into the realities, complexities and ambiguities of professional practice. They highlight the dilemmas and emotional tension associated with professional decision-making and action.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



Once We Were Friends

I love working with people. I often form meaningful relationships with colleagues and Jamie was one of them. We worked together for over a decade and our families often saw each other for birthdays or summers at her cottage. I considered her to be a close friend.

We worked at a small child care centre that was close-knit. It felt like a community where staff members were committed to the workplace. Although I enjoyed my time there, I decided to make a change. I took a risk and went back to school. Afterwards, I was fortunate enough to work in a variety of child care settings where I formed mentoring relationships.

During this time, Jamie and I stayed in touch. We saw each other at social events and she kept me up-to-date on gossip from the centre. As the years passed, we saw less of each other and rarely spoke.

One day, while at a workshop, I ran into Jamie. “Hey! How are you?” she asked me with the warmth of an old friend.

“I’m great! How about you? How is the centre doing?” I happily responded.

“We’re on the hunt for a new supervisor. Our current supervisor is on sick leave and I’ve stepped in as acting supervisor.” Jamie paused and smiled. “You should apply! I think you’d be a great fit for the centre given your history there,” she said encouragingly.

That evening, I considered Jamie’s suggestion. Feeling ready for a new challenge in my career and equipped to handle the role of supervisor, I applied.

Months went by and I was finally called for an interview. When I arrived at the centre, I realized Jamie was part of the interview team. I felt a bit uncomfortable with this, given our past friendship, but I put my concerns of the potential implications aside. The interview went well and I got the job!

My first task was to meet with the Board of Directors. I was surprised to learn that the role of the staff and the board had become blurred. In the past, the centre staff, supervisor, families and Board of Directors communicated well. They worked collaboratively on committees and made decisions together.

I was directed to create boundaries and operate the centre in a more effective and transparent manner. I was confident that this goal was achievable. Little did I know this would be the biggest challenge ever!

During my first few weeks, it became clear that Jamie felt as though she could take advantage of our past friendship. She would come into my office during lunch to share the workplace gossip.

“Did you hear that Dan and Grace are separating? I think Dan is really good looking,” Jamie said with a grin.

“Jamie, you shouldn’t be speaking about parents like that. They are part of our centre’s community and that’s inappropriate,” I responded in an effort to set boundaries.

**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.*

“Oh please, we used to talk like this all the time,” she retorted.

“Look, Jamie,” I said, “It has been great working with you again and I’ve missed our friendship. Things are different now that I’m your supervisor. It is unprofessional for me, or anyone else, to gossip about colleagues and families.

“Fine,” she snapped. She quickly got up and left my office, slamming the door behind her.

Despite our talk, Jamie still had difficulties respecting my authority. She often asked to leave early and expected special treatment. I did not want others to get the idea that I was treating her differently because of our friendship.

Jamie began acting spiteful during staff meetings. She would question me constantly and try to undermine my role as supervisor. Each time I tried to implement new operating procedures, Jamie would get angry.

“We never did things like that. Why are you implementing these changes? Does the Board know?” Jamie would say in front of everyone.

Staff meetings quickly turned into arguments.

I stood my ground and the other educators began gossiping saying I was too hard on Jamie and that I picked on her. This made it increasingly difficult to address Jamie’s behaviour, which was becoming more hostile. She would purposely do things to aggravate me. Every note I wrote was photocopied. She would have a notepad and take notes when I popped by her room. It was exhausting.

For a while, I stopped holding staff meetings. Things had become too tense and Jamie was manipulating colleagues into taking her side. Every time I spoke, I could hear her whisper under her breath, “Who does he think he is?” Finally, the aggression calmed down and I was able to regain some of my control as supervisor.

Despite my sour relationship with Jamie, I settled into the job and started to create positive professional relationships with other colleagues. I hired a new assistant supervisor, Monika. We worked well together and it was encouraging to find someone who shared my professional values. I grew as a supervisor and, with the staff’s support, the dynamic shifted. I learned to ignore negativity and proceed with a shared vision for the centre.

I’m proud to say the centre began to thrive! I found courage in my role as supervisor and made changes that affected the centre in a positive way.

Jamie and I continued to work together for several years. Every once in a while I would have to address her inappropriate behaviour, but it never seemed to make a difference. Jamie’s behaviour made it difficult to mentor or support her like I hoped to. She did not want to participate in any team building activities or professional learning experiences. For the most part, we just avoided each other.

Last autumn, Monika and I attended a workshop called “How to Deal with Workplace Challenges.” I thought it would be helpful to acquire new strategies for communicating with Jamie. She was still at the centre and still acting negatively towards me.

During the conference, Monika confided in me. “I don’t want to upset you, but I thought you should know that I recently heard Jamie call you her ‘arch enemy’ to another colleague,” she said shyly.

I felt hurt and disappointed that, even after all this time, my relationship with Jamie had not improved. Maybe I wasn’t as good of a supervisor as I thought.

“Thank you for telling me,” I replied. “I need to address the situation.”

That afternoon, I left a note for Jamie requesting a meeting. I tried to be friendly and suggested we talk over coffee. I encouraged her to bring a colleague if she needed support. My hope was that this meeting might improve our professional relationship and help us communicate more effectively.

The next morning I received a startling phone call from Monika.

“Is everything okay?” I asked when I heard her distressed voice.

“I got a call from Jamie at 8:30 this morning. She was screaming at me and called me a rat. She said she’d get back at me and that she hated me,” Monika said in a panic. “Monika, there is something you should know. Yesterday, I left a note for Jamie asking if she would meet with me to talk about ways to improve our professional relationship.” I sighed, “I guess Jamie figured that you must have said something. I’m really sorry that you got this kind of phone call at home.” As we hung up, I reassured her that I would look into Jamie’s behaviour.

When I arrived at the centre, I asked what happened that morning. A staff member who was present during the conversation informed me that Jamie had made the call. She was in the program at the time and the children present may have heard the phone call.

I called the Board of Directors and notified them of the incident.

After speaking with the Board, I popped by the program. Jamie was there, smiling and singing a song. She paused and looked up at me. “Good morning!” she said in a cheerful tone, as though nothing had happened. “Did you have fun at your workshop?”

“Jamie, I’m going to need to see you in my office,” I answered.

Case Study Reflections

1. What are the key facts in this case?

2. Analyze the case from the perspectives of the case writer and Jamie. How do their perspectives differ?

3. What dilemmas exist for the case writer and Jamie? What impact might these dilemmas have on the other staff in the centre's program?

4. What ethical and professional practice standards could support the decision-making and actions undertaken by the case writer?

5. How might the relationship between the case writer and Jamie affect their future careers at the centre?

6. How are the ethical and professional standards reflected (or not reflected) through this case?

7. The case writer is frustrated with Jamie's behaviour and has asked to see her in his office. What do you think the case writer should do to address Jamie's behaviour?

Contact Us

College of Early Childhood Educators

Telephone: 416 961-8558

Toll free: 1 888 961-8558

Fax: 416 961-8772

info@college-ece.ca | college-ece.ca

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