Practice Note

college of early childhood educators

Beliefs and Biases

Practice Notes support Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs) in understanding and applying the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* by examining a specific topic and providing practical guidance.

Standard IV says that RECEs understand the value of reflective practice and leadership development and how continuous professional learning supports their professional growth and contributes to improving the quality of early childhood education for children, families and communities (B.3).

RECEs have an ethical responsibility to be equitable, inclusive and respectful of diversity. To uphold their responsibilities to children, families, colleagues and the profession, RECEs need to critically reflect on how their beliefs and biases influence their professional practice. This practice note is designed to support you in the ongoing process of identifying and addressing your beliefs and biases. This process can help you make subtle or significant changes that improve your practice and the experiences of children, families and colleagues.

It is critical to learn about the beliefs and biases that underpin:

- your thoughts, behaviours and actions;
- your decision-making processes;
- your professional judgment;
- how you communicate, collaborate and socialize with others who hold their own beliefs and biases;
- the pedagogical observations and documentation that inform curriculum; and,
- how you develop and implement policies, programs and services for children and families with your colleagues.

As an RECE, you are responsible for co-creating physical and social environments that respect and value all members of the community. Ethic A says that RECEs make the well-being, learning and care of children their primary focus while creating learning environments where their rights are valued and they can all experience a sense of belonging and inclusion.

One way to uphold this responsibility is to engage in an important element of lifelong learning: critical reflection. Looking inwardly and learning more about our beliefs and biases can be uncomfortable; however, without that awareness, we may also be unaware of the potential harms that result when these biases inform our decisions and actions.

Critical reflection is defined in the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice (2017)* as a "way of reflecting that requires RECEs to consider and challenge the beliefs, assumptions and understandings that frame how they view and respond to children and that shape learning experiences they make available for them. Critical reflection involves the active process of engaging with difficult concepts, tensions and uncertainties and changing practice as a result."

RECEs engage in critical reflection, both individually and collaboratively. Intentional critical reflection can involve engaging with some difficult concepts and may:

- expose ways that power structures operate and oppress peoples and groups;
- lead you to question familiar and/or longstanding knowledge and practices;
- reveal elements of ourselves that we find difficult to acknowledge or change;
- bring up uncomfortable emotions;
- make us aware that we need to further engage and learn with families and communities;
- open up different viewpoints, knowledge and perspectives; and,
- draw our attention to a need to change, acquire knowledge and reframe our thinking and practice.

These conversations are complex. Adding an additional layer is that children, families and colleagues hold their own beliefs based on their experiences, the information and knowledge they have, and the historical, political, social and cultural context in which they are situated. This means they will have similar and differing beliefs about many of the following practice-related areas:

- children and childhood;
- teaching and learning;
- families and parenting;
- social and cultural groups; and,
- equity, diversity and inclusion.

To support you in the reflection process and in co-creating inclusive and respectful learning environments, it may be helpful to learn more about the historical, social and political structures that influence beliefs and biases. By acquiring knowledge about how privilege and power operates to marginalize certain people or groups, RECEs can identify actions that may cause harm. With this growing awareness and knowledge, you are able to work toward dismantling oppressive, racist and discriminatory structures that may be present in policy, programs and practice.

What are some ways in which you can do this? Try taking action in some of the following ways:

- engage in critical reflection on all policies and practices using anti-biased and anti-racist approaches;
- involve members of diverse communities and groups to include various perspectives;
- work with others to revise and develop anti-biased and anti-racist policies, practices, pedagogy and curriculum;
- talk about and address racism and discrimination with children and families, as well as colleagues and community members;
- support children to develop the language and actions they need to advocate for change; and,
- model an anti-biased and anti-racist approach in all that you do, including being accountable for your decisions and actions, and supporting colleagues in being accountable for theirs.

The profession's ethical values

The Code of Ethics reflects the profession's core set of beliefs and values of *care, respect, trust* and *integrity*. These beliefs are integral to an RECE's professional practice and are modelled in their professional relationships, judgment and decision-making processes. They're also portrayed through their pedagogical practice and curriculum and policy design. As an RECE, you understand that your conduct — informed by your beliefs and ethical values — reflects on you as a professional and on the profession as a whole, at all times (Standard IV: C.4).

To ensure the profession's core values are demonstrated, consider regularly examining your beliefs and biases to understand how they impact your professional practice and your relationships with children, families and colleagues. With this awareness, you can adapt your practice to reflect an anti-biased and anti-racist approach.

What do the values of the profession — *care, respect, trust* and *integrity* — mean to me? How do I demonstrate these beliefs in my daily practice?

What are beliefs, assumptions and biases?

Bias: A subjective opinion, preference, prejudice, or inclination, often formed without reasonable justification, which influences the ability of an individual or group to evaluate a particular situation objectively or accurately (Canadian Race Relations Foundation).

Your personal values and beliefs are powerful filters that shape how you perceive the world, yourself and others. If your professional practice is unknowingly shaped by stereotypical ideas or biases, it hinders your ability to provide a nurturing, welcoming and supportive learning environment. Without considering how biases guide your thoughts, words, actions and professional practice, you run the risk of unintentionally harming others (*Practice Guideline on Diversity and Culture*, 2020).

Ask yourself the following:

- What is the relationship among beliefs, biases and the assumptions you make?
- Why is it important to become conscious of them and to address harmful ones?
- What confirms and solidifies them?
- What safeguards and propels them?

Having beliefs and biases are a part of being human. What an individual learns about the world and how society is structured and functions is formed by the early and consistent messages received from family, peers, educators, mentors and a wide range of media sources. But often, in both obvious and subtle ways, society conveys inaccurate messages.

Among other things, these messages stem from longstanding beliefs and views about:

- who and what is valued in society;
- who is capable and who needs help; and,
- the ways peoples and groups are supposed to function.

These dominant messages strongly influence the ways people behave and the beliefs they establish, nurture and safeguard.

Intentionally and unintentionally, people seek out ‘evidence’ that confirms their beliefs. This is confirmation bias; a type of cognitive bias that involves favouring information, people or groups that confirm an individual’s existing beliefs or biases while ignoring or failing to seek information that could counteract or disrupt those existing beliefs.

Note how often, and in what ways, messages about what is viewed as acceptable, common and appropriate in society surface in:

- the media;
- conversations with family and peers;
- exchanges with colleagues, families and children; and,
- policies and practices in your workplace.

Dominant messages infiltrate our day-to-day experiences which make them very powerful. They can be harmful in general, but may be *more* harmful when they go unnoticed. Bringing them to light and critically reflecting upon them can support change and growth.

Below are some examples of powerful messages that are often conveyed in subtle ways. Review the list and consider other biased messages you may encounter. Share your observations with your colleagues and consider the impact of these assumptions on your professional practice and the people in your learning environment:

- Marriage is a union between a man and woman
- If women have children, they are married
- Christmas is the most significant holiday
- Children don't see race
- Being thin is healthy
- Families have access to transportation

- All children have opportunities for play
- Drinking water is safe everywhere
- Gender is revealed at birth
- All people can walk
- All families travel on summer holidays
- People who speak with accents aren't from Canada
- Canadians are not racist

Consider whether any of society's powerful messages may be influencing your beliefs or biases and, as a result, have the potential to harm a child, family or colleague. In certain instances, identifying some of your *conscious* beliefs may seem relatively easy but reflecting on these conscious beliefs can assist you in becoming aware of your *unconscious* beliefs, too.

Here's an example related to the practice of early childhood education.

As an RECE, your education exposed you to information, research and practical experiences that highlighted the value of play-based learning and care. You established, and continue to nurture, this belief through continuous professional learning centred on the value of inquiry and play. Your pedagogical practice and inclusive curriculum design is influenced by your beliefs about the value of play.

During conversations with families, you articulate these beliefs and encourage them to play with their children. You assume they will share your passion and beliefs and, therefore, will make time for play.

Some families share positive stories with you about their experiences with inquiry and play, which further confirm your beliefs about its value. Because the family made time for play, you may also assume that they care deeply about their children.

In contrast, some of the other families either do not share their experiences or they express frustration with play. You strongly believe in the value of this learning activity and believe that families who play with their children truly care. Therefore, you may be at risk of making assumptions that families don't care if they:

- don't play;
- don't try to understand the importance play;
- don't play in a way that you believe in; or,
- don't talk about play.

Your beliefs about the value of play and each family's approach to play lead to assumptions that generate biases about specific children and their families. These biases can unconsciously, or consciously, affect the way you interact with them.

In the example above, the RECE is conscious of their beliefs about play. These conscious beliefs and biases influence the RECE's assumptions about the families and their varying responses to play. But the RECE's practice is also influenced by beliefs they may not be aware of. These unconscious beliefs and biases can further influence the RECE's practice. It is clear that a deeper investigation is needed to uncover them.

While it's important to look at your *conscious* beliefs and biases, it is perhaps even more vital to dig deeper and become aware of your *unconscious* beliefs and biases. Everyone has them and, as the term suggests, these beliefs and biases are potentially harmful because they are less obvious or not obvious at all.

Standard IV says that RECEs model professional values, beliefs and behaviours with children, families and colleagues. They understand that their conduct reflects on them as professionals and on their profession at all times (C.4).

Investigating Assumptions

EXPLORE

Reflect on where your beliefs came from and why you still have some while others have changed.

CONNECT

Deepen your awareness of injustices, biases and privilege by learning with others.

REFLECT

Consider how your beliefs have influenced your practice. Seek out information that provides varying points of view - not just those that confirm your current beliefs.

Remember that ***everyone*** **has beliefs and biases** that impact their decisions and behaviours. As you consider your beliefs, assumptions and biases, the following steps can serve to guide you in the process of becoming more aware. These questions may be challenging, but by reflecting on them and taking action to positively influence your practice, they can prevent potential harm to children, families and/or colleagues.

Taking Action

"Once we know and accept we have bias, we can begin to recognize our own patterns of thinking. With awareness and a conscious effort, we have the power to change how we think and to challenge the negative or harmful biases within ourselves."

National Museum of African American History and Culture: Talking about Race

Click here to download the Taking Action section as a fillable PDF.

Practice self-awareness

Think about your own identity in relation to age, disability, family structure, gender, immigration, language, legal status, race, religion or socio-economic status.

- Reflect on your own experiences with injustice, racism or discrimination

- Reflect on your own experiences in relation to any advantages or privileges you have
- Recall a situation that first made you aware of your identity in relation to:
  - Society and what it portrays as valuable, 'good' or 'bad' (through messages in media, books, advertising, access to particular foods or care products).
  - your peers
  - your educators
  - your community
  - other family members
  - learning materials or visuals
- How did/does this make you feel?
- How have your experiences influenced your professional practice?

Where did your beliefs come from?

- While growing up, what did you learn about human differences (e.g., race, sexuality, gender, gender roles, language, socio-economic status or religion?). What messages were conveyed through:
  - family members, mentors, educators or peers?
  - learning materials, images, books, social and physical environments?
  - society, media, radio, music, cartoons or movies?
- What messages impacted you the most, both positively and negatively?
- Recall when you became aware of human differences. How did you respond or feel?
- Can you describe an interaction with someone that changed your perspectives and professional practice?
  - What was the context? What was the outcome?

What reinforces your beliefs?

- How do you feel when an assumption you make about someone proves you right? What about when it proves you wrong?
- Being 'right' is known as confirmation bias - why can it be problematic?
- Choose a new media source you don't typically reference for a different point of view. What has that process been like for you?

Think about your beliefs today

- Have any of your early beliefs changed? What happened to change it/them?
- What did you learn about yourself and how did it positively influence you?
- What early beliefs remain for you and why?
- In what ways is your practice shaped by your assumptions, beliefs and biases?
- What beliefs positively support your practice?

- Which ones hinder our practice and need to change?
- Do you treat anyone in your practice setting differently based on your beliefs about them or their family? What are the potential impacts?
- Do you *interact* with the 'good' children while *managing* children you view as 'challenging'?
- Do you exclude or avoid anyone based on your beliefs and biases?
- Do you favour any person or perspective based on your beliefs and biases?

Make a commitment

With this new and growing awareness about the impact of your beliefs and biases, what steps do you need to take to change your practice? There are a wide range of resources written by local, national and international organizations to help guide your learning and support you in becoming aware of how beliefs and biases influence your thoughts and actions.

Seek resources and information to:

- deepen your awareness of the historical, social and political injustices and privileges that exist for certain individuals, groups and communities;
- look for information sources that:
  - provide views that differ from your own; or,
  - amplify voices of people from marginalized communities;
- connect with others and learn from and with each other;
- discuss how your beliefs and biases influence or have influenced your practice, decisions and behaviours, and;
- be sure to pause, resist judgment, and consider your response when confronted with new ideas and information.

Additional Resources

For further opportunities to reflect on, identify and address your beliefs and bias in practice, review and discuss the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* along with the following College resources:

- *Reflection Guide on Beliefs and Biases*
- *Practice Guideline on Professionalism*
- *Practice Guideline on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities*
- *Practice Guideline on Diversity and Culture*
- *Practice Note on Professional Judgment*
- *Practice Note on Ethical Decision Making*
- *CPL Resource: Reflective Practice and Self-Directed Learning*
- Amplifying Voices: a blog series (previously known as Elevating Voices)
- Black Experience and Disabled Childhoods: Comparison of Federal and Provincial Policies (2020) to further understand the experiences of Black Canadians and their children.
- Search for 'belief' or 'bias' on the College Talk blog for relevant articles.

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