



Case Study 1

Sarah's Confusing Behaviour

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.

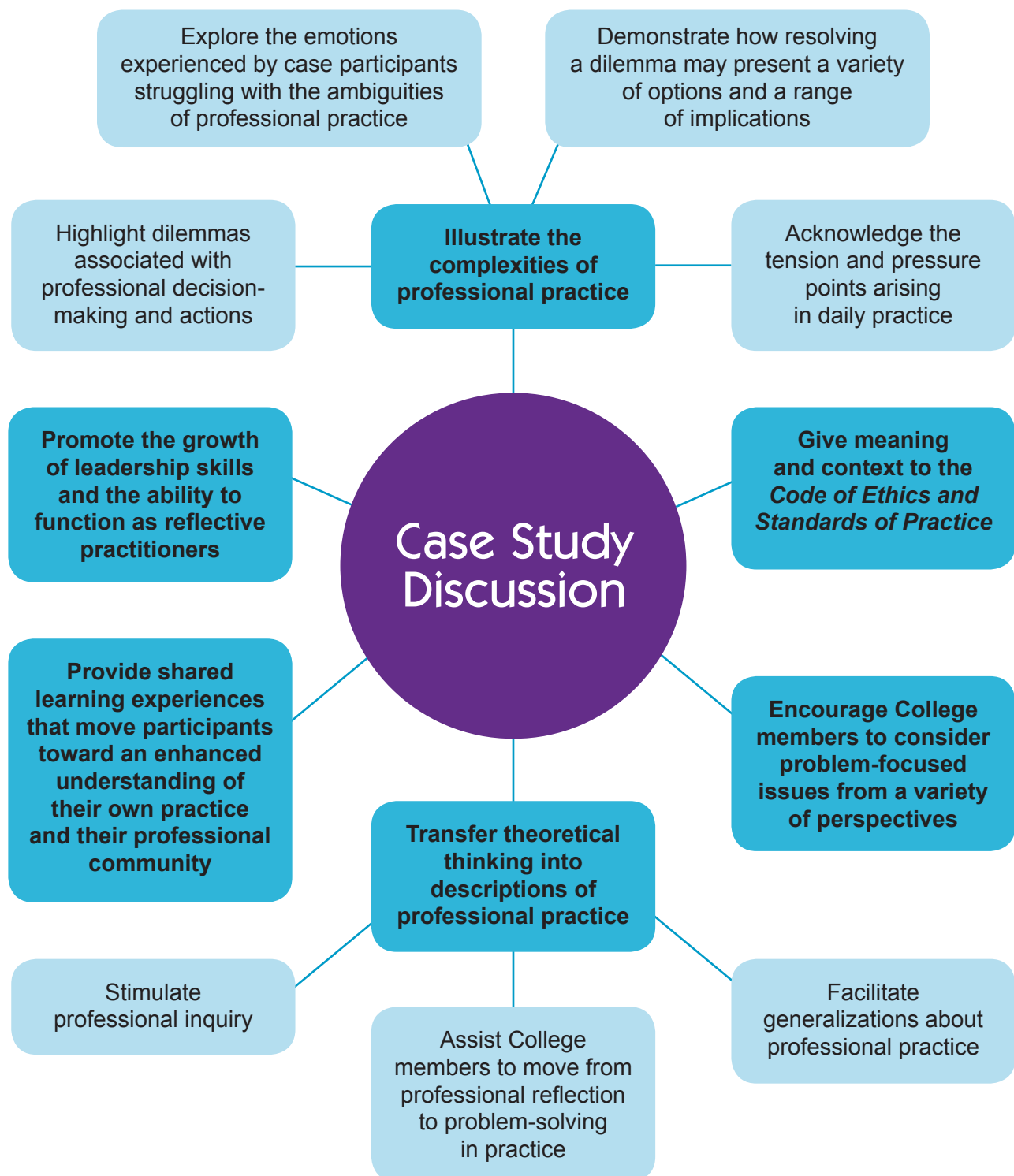
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Enhancing Professional Practice through Case Study Discussion



Sarah's Confusing Behaviour

"Queer families are an abomination... a threat to the natural order... Their blood will be on their own heads."

I stare at my computer screen in disbelief. My eyes frantically scan the page in front of me, desperate to discover if I've mistakenly been re-directed to the site of some homophobic hate group. After what feels like an eternity, I sadly realize this is not what happened. In full colour, at the top left corner of my screen, a familiar face smirks back at me – the face of my preschool room partner, Sarah*. She has posted on the wall of a social media site set up by a conservative religious organization that supports traditional images of what constitutes a family.

My mind's eye retreats to the past year of my professional life when I began my work as an early childhood educator. In particular, I am recalling the day I was first introduced to Sarah, a senior staff member in the preschool program where I was hired.

My supervisor had assured me that Sarah would be delighted to work with someone as committed to issues of equity and inclusion as I was. I had just graduated from a program in early childhood education with a research interest in broadening approaches to multicultural curriculum. My focus included the full scope of human diversity that characterizes contemporary Canadian society.

Sarah was from a Caribbean island and had a reputation for ensuring that racial, ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity was an integral part of the centre's programs. She received an award of distinction for this reason.

One of my first tasks as her room partner was to assist her with the planning of the organization's upcoming African cultural celebration, an annual event that recognizes and celebrates African culture. As a novice employee, I intended to

learn from this woman who had several years of experience at this centre, demonstrated leadership skills and earned an assistant supervisor position shortly following her hiring.

Sarah stood directly in front of me. She was a thin woman, but with broad shoulders and thick arms. Her engaging smile and booming voice conveyed a depth of knowledge and insight. Truthfully, in spite of all my work and research in equity, I was a bit awed by her. I really did hope we might become more than just professional colleagues. But even then, there was something about Sarah that bothered me.

I remembered the words on my computer screen. My initial confusion shifted as memories of my work with Sarah over the past year flooded my consciousness. Slowly, I recalled events that might be representative of the blatantly ugly words posted on the social media site.

"Welcome to our preschool room!" Sarah sang out enthusiastically. "As you can see, the children are busy creating art work for tomorrow's celebration. Feel free to jump right in!" She danced to the bookshelf to replace some of the current titles with children's books that prominently featured black characters.

I had accepted Sarah's invitation to "jump right in" and opened the cloth bag I carried, clapped my hands in delight and cried out, "I've got some books for you!" I pulled out two titles that were personal favourites: *Asha's Mums* and *My Princess Boy*. Each, I believed, would support Sarah's commitment to racial diversity while simultaneously infusing gender and sexuality into the curriculum. I handed the books to Sarah, anticipating immediate confirmation of her approval.

Instead, as Sarah surveyed each cover, an incredulous expression replaced her wide smile. Shifting her gaze to my expectant face she remarked, quite matter-of-factly, "Thanks, but the children selected these books themselves. As you can see, there's hardly enough room on

**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 shelf for them as it is.” She thrust the books back in my direction and returned to her work, visibly uncomfortable. I wondered if I’d been too presumptuous in assuming that Sarah’s commitment to diversity extended beyond theoretical support for race, ethnicity, culture and language. However, I grinned in her direction, eager to show her that I understood.

As the months progressed, there was nothing that really rankled me. Sometimes I wondered, however, why our relationship hadn’t developed beyond the professional. Sarah was never blatantly disrespectful, yet she failed to make any real effort to get to know me. Our daily exchanges were limited to discussions about the program, the children and the families we supported. Until now, I had never questioned the deliberate distance she had maintained. Perhaps I was still in awe of a reputation that had appeared, at least initially, to support my values of inclusion.

In early October, we welcomed Rory, a post secondary student in an early childhood education program, to our room. Sarah greeted the announcement of his pending start with overt annoyance. “Another student? And a male no less! Shouldn’t he be assigned to Jonas’s room?”

“I thought you enjoyed having students,” I replied. “I’m excited to have a male presence in our program. Aren’t you?”

“Hmmmph,” she scoffed, “For the life of me, I’ll never understand why a man would want to work at a job that women do so naturally. To each his own I guess.” With that, she turned on her heel. These interchanges were typical of our conversations when our views collided. Still, she was beginning to express her views with increased candour. This suggested to me that our relationship had finally deepened! After all, why would she so openly share such controversial thoughts?

Rory began his placement experience with us, much to the delight of the preschoolers. Lauren, in particular, followed him around the

room like a shadow, sitting on his lap every chance she got and offering incessant displays of affection. Just before lunch Sarah, scrutinizing the room, snapped, “Lauren, you need to sit on the carpet like all of the other children! Please move your body so that Rory can start the story!” Lauren’s bottom lip quivered. Clearly saddened, Lauren slowly slid from Rory’s lap. She sat on the floor to his immediate right, her head hung in disappointment.

Later, as the children ate lunch, Lauren asked Rory to take her to the washroom. Without pausing, Sarah quipped, “I will take you to the washroom, Lauren. Rory, placement students are not allowed to be alone with the children.” Dismayed again, Lauren took Sarah’s hand and followed her to the washroom, a pained look on her face.

When Rory’s gaze shifted in my direction, I’m sure he noticed my quizzical expression. Although Sarah and I had mentored students before, I had never experienced such an abrupt reaction to a child’s growing fondness for a placement student. I took in the faces of the other children in the room as they noted Sarah’s demeanour and reacted to the authority in her loud voice. I also caught the glance of one of my colleagues just outside the door, who was nodding her head in seeming disapproval of the scenario.

The washroom is located within the classroom space. There was no policy that I knew of that prohibited placement students from assisting children with their washroom needs unsupervised. Sarah’s bad mood was palpable that day so I decided to remain silent, brushing it off as just another isolated incident.

A few months later, three children were playing in the drama centre. A wedding was about to take place! Tissue paper flowers decorated the wall. Confetti littered the carpet. The children had planned and worked hard at designing such a wonderful space. There was no question that the children had clearly assigned roles. Tara, one of our senior preschoolers, was set to officiate at the mock union. She stood before two young boys, each of whom wore oversized lace dresses and held bouquets of silk flowers.

Just as the ceremony commenced, Sarah skipped into the room from her break and in her booming voice announced, “Miss Sarah’s back! Ten minutes to tidy up!” She toured the room, greeting children at each of the learning centres. As she approached the drama play space, the hop in her step ceased. Frozen in place, Sarah turned to me and demanded, “What’s going on here?”

“It’s a wedding! Doesn’t everyone look beautiful?” I exclaimed, ignoring her tone.

Sarah shook her head in disbelief. “Feng is not allowed to wear dresses. His father gave me explicit instructions to redirect this behaviour. In fact, he’s told me on several occasions that Feng is to refrain from using this space altogether. The neighbourhood children are already teasing him for playing with dolls. The last thing he needs is encouragement to dress like a girl!”

I was not sure if Sarah had merely forgotten to share this parent’s instructions, or if the entire story was fabricated. Giving her the benefit of the doubt yet again, I decided to wait for a more opportune time to discuss the matter. After all, if what she revealed was true, surely Sarah would have wanted an opportunity to educate a parent about a child’s need to explore his or her identity.

Sarah turned back to the children, whose engagement in play had resumed. “Time to tidy up! You’ve made quite the mess here.” I smiled weakly at the saddened faces. Tara, with downcast eyes, struggled to return furniture to its original configuration. Sarah practically ripped the dresses from the boys’ skinny bodies.

Resilient little Marlon, still undeterred by Sarah’s contempt, looked squarely into her face, now rife with indignation, and announced brightly, “Mommy says that when a man loves a man, they sometimes get married. Uncle Rinaldo and Uncle Michael are getting married! I get to hold the rings!” Marlon’s news seemed to disturb Sarah further. Her eyebrows furrowed and her lips pursed.

I searched in my head for previous examples of this behaviour. Was the policing of gender I had witnessed representative of the responsive and inclusive framework integral to our centre’s philosophy? Surely she had not meant to solidify old stereotypes, especially when most of the parents in our program were very open-minded.

Ever more certain of the ordeal I now faced, my mind returned to the present. I once again contemplated the social media posting: “*Queer families are an abomination ... A threat to the natural order...*” What was I to do with this information? Should I respond? I grappled with potential answers.

Then, reality struck me. “What will she make of my sexual orientation and the fact that I have concealed it this long?”

The words blazed across my computer screen again. “*... Their blood will be on their own heads.*” Sarah’s words and actions haunted me for the remainder of the day and haunted my dreams that evening.

Case Study Reflections

1. What are the key facts in this case?
2. What dilemmas exist for the case writer and for Sarah?
3. What impact might these dilemmas have on the children in the centre's program?
4. How might the placement student be affected by Sarah's attitude and actions?
5. What professional values and issues surface through this case?
6. How are the ethical and/or professional practice standards reflected (or not reflected) through this case?
7. The case writer feels haunted by Sarah's words and behaviour. What impact might these feelings have on professional practice? How do you think these feelings could be mitigated?

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