

CASE STUDY 10.2

Jim Colbert

Jim Colbert walked up Seventh Avenue toward Converse Street, appreciating the relative calm of the early October morning. In less than an hour children would be walking this same street on their way to school, passing the dreary, run-down, and often abandoned buildings that were now occupied by drug dealers, addicts, and the homeless. “Amazing,” Jim said to himself. “Some of the kids in my class call these buildings ‘home’.” Jim had been teaching at P.S. 111 in Metropolitan, a large city in the Northeast, for four years, but the conditions in the neighborhood still appalled him.

As Jim turned onto Converse Street, he saw a police car slowly cruising the block. Jim continued down the street, glanced at the garbage-strewn fronts of the row houses on each side, and then climbed the steps to P.S. 111. Watching the rats scurry across, he looked into the school yard next to the building, at the dilapidated apartment building next door, and then to the ever-present drug dealers already hawking their wares. The police patrol had done little to discourage their activity at the end of the block where Converse met Edgar Boulevard. Once school began, the police would become more visible, providing the image of a barrier between the school and the inner-city life around it.

Jim entered the building, the clean and colorful interior offering a welcome contrast to the bleak atmosphere of the street. On the way to his classroom Jim walked at a leisurely pace, enjoying the student work that covered the walls. He passed the other two third-grade classrooms, the 3-C class for “below average” students and the 3-B class for “average” students. Jim had been assigned the 3-A class for “bright” students.

He entered room 308 and quickly set out the materials the students would need for the morning’s work. While school policy required at least three learning centers in each room, Jim was currently using five: writing, library, math, listening, and art. Each was equipped with task cards based on the weekly lesson, the materials required to do the assignment, and a time schedule for each group.

The school district required the elementary school teachers to group students by ability for reading instruction, using the same basal reading program. Jim had divided the class into two reading groups, a 2-2 basal group with thirteen students, and a 3-1 basal group with ten students based on testing done at the beginning of the year. The desks were clustered in groups of three, four, or five and students sat with others who were in their reading group. Each student had been provided with a basal reader and a workbook.

Because the district needed to reuse them, the students were not allowed to write in their workbooks.

Jim crossed the room to his desk, sat down, and opened his plan book to review the schedule for the day. The beginning was always the same. Everyone would complete a spelling lesson, and when that lesson was completed one group would go to the assignments at the centers and the other would meet with Jim. When Jim finished with the first group they would go to their center assignments, and he would meet with the other group. Because this was Monday they would be starting a new lesson from the spelling book. The class would get ten “words for the week” and would be tested on these words on Friday. The writing center activities were designed to use these words.

After taking attendance and getting a lunch count, Jim began the spelling lesson. “This week we’re going to be working with words that identify the *cause* of an event. These are words that help us figure out *why* something has happened. Here’s an example: ‘It was raining out, so Carlos played *Nintendo*.’” This was greeted by giggles as the children looked toward Carlos, who was clearly enjoying the attention. “What did Carlos do?” Jim asked.

“He played *Nintendo*,” a student answered.

“Right, Now tell me *why* he played *Nintendo*.” Several hands went up. “Maria, tell us why.”

“He played *Nintendo* because it was raining.”

“Good, Maria. What word in the sentence told you that?”

“What was the sentence again?”

“It was raining out, so Carlos played *Nintendo*.”

“So.”

“Great! Here’s another: ‘Isaac ate dinner quickly because he was hungry.’ What did Isaac do?” Jim paused, then motioned to Tony.

“He ate dinner.”

“OK, can you tell us *how* he ate dinner?” Jim probed.

“Yeah, he ate dinner real fast.”

“Good, he ate dinner real fast, or quickly. Now Isaac, *why* did you eat dinner quickly?”

“‘Cause I was hungry.”

“Good. What word in the sentence told us *why* Isaac ate his dinner quickly?”

Several hands waved, and Jim turned to Anton.

“Because.”

“Good. Now, let’s try to say the same thing in a different way. Let’s start with ‘Isaac was hungry . . .’”

“Oh, I know!” called out Maria.

“OK, Maria, let’s hear it.”

“OK, ‘Isaac was hungry so he ate dinner quickly.’”

“Terrific! We used the words *so* and *because* to help us identify *why* something happened.” Jim continued with several more sentences using his stu-

dents' names. He followed this introduction with a page from the workbook where students matched the beginnings and endings of sentences. Their homework was to complete five sentences using *so* and *because* and to draw a picture of the event illustrating what they had written.

The following day Jim went over the homework with the 2-2 group. Each student read his or her answers and showed off his or her drawings. Jim checked each notebook, and when he got to Carlos's work he noticed Carlos had spelled *because* as "becuz." Spelling and phonics had been a problem for Carlos since the beginning of the year. Jim had worked with Carlos on these skills, but he was worried that Carlos wasn't making any progress. He reviewed the correct spelling with the group and asked them to complete one more sentence. This time Carlos spelled the word correctly.

For the remainder of Tuesday's reading lesson with the 2-2 group, Jim introduced and reviewed the vocabulary words from the story, *That's What Friends Are For*. Jim introduced each word using a personal context sentence, then went over syllables, decoded each word, and read it in context. The students then did a workbook exercise in which they were asked to write the correct meaning of the underlined word. Homework was to categorize the words by the number of syllables and to put each word into a sentence.

Checking the homework on Wednesday confirmed Jim's concerns about Carlos. His oral reading showed understanding about syllables, and Carlos had written acceptable sentences for each word. However, when Jim checked his workbook he saw that Carlos was spelling words the way they sounded. One sentence read, "I rote that cilly storey about rekreashun club."

At lunch that day Jim spoke with Paul Touron, another third-grade teacher, about Carlos. "I'm worried about him, Paul. His comprehension is good, but his phonics and spelling are so far behind."

"Too bad," Paul said. "Last year you could have sent him to a remedial class, but with the budget cuts they've all been canceled."

As they left the faculty room Jim made a mental note to talk with Carlos when he got back to class. As the children burst into the room, energy renewed from recess, Jim called Carlos over to his desk. "Carlos, I'm really pleased with how well you are coming along with the work we've been doing in class. You also did a great job with the sentences you had for homework last night. I'm worried about your spelling though. Do you think you could get some help at home?"

"I don't think so. My parents, they speak Spanish."

"Does anyone in your family speak English?"

"Sometimes my sister, she visits and she speaks English to me. That's all."

"What about your friends?"

"Everyone, they speak Spanish. I only use English in school."

"Do you have books in English?"

"No, just what I need for school."

“Well, I’m going to give you this dictionary to take home. Use it to check your spelling when you are doing your homework, OK?”

“Yeah, sure, Mr. Colbert. Thanks.” Carlos grinned as he rushed to put the book in his desk.

Carlos’s homework was better the next day. The assignment was to answer a series of five reading comprehension questions. Carlos’s sentences were basic, but sound. As Jim went over his notebook he thought, “Carlos must be using the dictionary; the spelling is much better.” Once the homework review was completed the students took turns reading aloud while Jim asked comprehension questions and assessed oral reading skills. When it was Carlos’s turn to read, he stammered and mispronounced many words. Jim noted he could barely get through a five-sentence passage. However, when Jim asked him about the reading, Carlos’s answers indicated that he understood the passage despite his pronunciation problems.

That day at lunch Paul asked about Carlos. Jim told him about the oral reading. “How can he have such a hard time reading but understand what’s happening? I remember when I tested him at the beginning of the year his reading was filled with stammering. He couldn’t read a 3-1 basal and the 2-2 was still pretty choppy. My first thought was that he was nervous. I talked with him about relaxing and joked with him a little. He seemed to loosen up, but when he attacked the 2-2 passage again the stammering was back. I tried a 2-1 basal and he could read it with ease. So I had to decide if I would send him out of the class to a 2-1 reading group or challenge him in my class with the 2-2 group. I really felt good about him, he had such a willingness to try, and his comprehension was so good I decided to keep him in the 2-2 group. I gave him extra phonics worksheets to do at home, but they usually came back with mistakes. Now, I’m not so sure I did the right thing. Perhaps he should be in a lower group.”

“What’s your plan now?” Paul asked.

“I’ve got to immerse him in print. He must take home a library book each night and provide me with a mini-book report. I also want him to create his own stories. He can read or write about anything he wants, comic books, super heroes, anything! I just want that kid reading and writing!”

“Sounds good, Jim. By the way, do you know June Rush? She’s a retired school teacher who works as a floating aide. She’s here mostly to help out the first-year teachers, but maybe she can give Carlos some time.”

“Good idea. I recommended him for the after-school reading program back in September, but he hardly ever shows up. He won’t be able to escape Mrs. Rush so easily.”

Two weeks later Jim and Paul were on recess duty together. As they headed toward the courtyard behind the school Jim thought back to one of his early conversations with Paul. When Jim first came to P.S. 111 Paul had explained to him why the school never used the large yard next door. “We stopped using it about three years ago, it was just too dangerous for the stu-

dents to be in such close proximity to the drug dealers at the end of the block. Instead, the kids have to play in the small courtyard behind the school. All in all, it's probably for the best considering there've been about ten shootings in that side yard, and that doesn't include summer when school's not in session." Jim had come to appreciate how true this was in June of that year. He was monitoring recess in the back courtyard when there was the sudden blast of firecrackers from the front of the school. Every student in the courtyard had fallen to the ground, hands over their heads, thinking it was gunfire. Jim had stared in amazement at the yard of students lying on the ground, instinctively trying to protect themselves. Now, as the students rushed out to the courtyard, Jim saw Carlos head for the basketball court.

Paul interrupted his thoughts, "Isn't that Carlos? I heard he was working with Mrs. Rush. How's it going?"

"You mean, 'How *was* it going?' More budget cuts, Mrs. Rush is gone, and Carlos is back in the cycle of good work at school, terrible work at home," Jim answered, the frustration apparent in his voice. "But I learned a few things about him in the last few weeks."

"What did you learn?"

"Well, I knew Carlos had repeated second grade, so I went and looked at his file to see if I could get some more information. He was in the average second-grade class the first time. Unfortunately his teacher from that year isn't here anymore so all I know is what's in the file. His second year he was still in the average class. I spoke with the teacher, Mrs. Ortiz. She said he was a good kid, he did his work and then some. His math was above average—the first year he scored at the 79th percentile on the math test, and the second year his score was at the 75th.

"Reading was another matter. The first year in second grade he took a phonics-based test, prefixes, suffixes, and tenses. His score was at the 5th percentile, and since passing is 10th he was held back. The next year the test was changed to a cloze format, and he scored at the 26th percentile and was promoted."

"Why was he put in a 3-A class?"

"I wondered about that. The principal said that because of his math skills plus his potential, they thought he'd be better off in the higher achieving group. In some ways, he really fits there. Just not in reading, unless it's reading comprehension. I've been watching him in the classroom. When he does the SRA cards in the writing center I can see that he really likes that stuff. They're mostly fill-in-the-blank or true/false exercises, and they don't require him to elaborate on his ideas. Since his comprehension is good and the words are all there, these are easy for him."

"Anything else in the file?" Paul asked.

"Well, his family may be part of the problem. His parents are in their fifties; Carlos was a 'change-of-life' baby. They don't speak English and don't

intend to learn. Their 30-year-old daughter interprets whenever I need to speak to them. She also helps Carlos with homework when she has a chance. It's like his parents feel they already did their job raising Carlos's three older sisters, and it's the school's responsibility to take care of Carlos.

"Just living in this part of Metropolitan is another problem. Carlos's family has to worry about their next meal, hot water, clothes, and shelter.

Reading and writing aren't very important, I guess. The poor kid's lucky if he can sleep through the gunfire in his neighborhood, then he comes to school, and we expect him to read and talk about places and things he's never seen or thought about."

Paul was listening closely to Jim as he spoke. After a long pause Jim said, "I guess what I'm trying to say is that I don't know how we can expect Carlos's reading and writing skills to improve, given the reality of his life and the limited resources here. I just don't know what to do to help him."