

CASE STUDY 2.2

Carolyn Davis

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On a warm spring afternoon in early May, Carolyn Davis was working in her first-grade classroom after school when Carlos Allende, the director of special education for the Littleton School District, stopped in the doorway.

“Hello, Carlos,” Carolyn said, wondering if her surprise registered in her voice. She had met Carlos at the district office a few times, but he had never visited her class.

“Hi, Carolyn. Mattie was sure I’d find you here, even at this hour. Do you have a few minutes to talk?”

“Sure. Let me get you a chair.” From the reading table, Carolyn retrieved the only other adult-size chair in the room and placed it across from her own.

“Carolyn, I was just in Mattie’s office going over plans for next year’s placements.” Mattie Gaines was the principal of Jackson Elementary School in Littleton. “I was telling her that two teachers from the South Mayfield district are interested in visiting Carter to observe our inclusion program. They’re particularly interested in the relationship between a regular class teacher and a consulting teacher (CT). So, I thought of you and Joanna Hurley. Would you be willing to have them spend a day in your class? They would like to have dinner with you the same day; their district will pick up the tab. You and Joanna can choose any restaurant you want, if that’s an inducement.”

“What did Mattie say?”

“It’s fine with her if you’re OK with it.”

“And have you spoken to Joanna?”

“Not yet. I wanted to check with you first, since it’s your classroom that will be invaded for the day.”

Carolyn ran her fingers through her short, curly hair. She was anxious to head for home. It was after five o’clock, and she had been at work since 7:30 that morning. While she was happy to open her classroom to visitors, she felt it was an imposition to extend her day into dinner. She shared that last thought with Carlos.

“They’re more than welcome to visit my room. I’m not sure about dinner.” “The thing is, they’re going to want to talk to you and Joanna. They

know they'll have lots of questions. Dinner seemed to be an opportunity to talk and a way to thank you for giving them your time. Wouldn't you have liked to visit an inclusion classroom before you took it on?"

"Yeah, sure." Carlos raised his eyebrows and smiled at her.

"OK, OK, I get it." Carolyn had the grace to laugh. "I'll do it—dinner and all. And I'll think of a place to eat that Tim and I can't afford. When are they coming?"

The following Thursday afternoon, Carolyn and Joanna sat at a corner table at Chez Emilio's with Beth Gross and Kerry Shelton, the teachers from South Mayfield. The two visitors had just spent the day in Carolyn's class. Beth, an experienced second-grade teacher, turned to Carolyn. "I really loved your classroom. Thanks for letting us spend the day. I know how disruptive that can be." Smiling at Carolyn, she went on, "You were a real sport. And you make inclusion look so easy. How long have you been doing it? I know it must be harder than it looks."

"I've done inclusion for three years now, and at times it has been a wonderful experience. But it has also been exhausting, and I'm feeling worn out." The three women looked startled by Carolyn's words. In truth, Carolyn was surprised at her own honesty. The words just slipped out.

Joanna jumped in. "Carolyn's probably worn out because she works harder than any teacher I've ever seen. She was our first teacher to volunteer for inclusion, and the entire faculty knows that she's succeeded with students who just a few years ago wouldn't have been mainstreamed, never mind included."

Carolyn smiled her thanks at Joanna. "I think Jo is right. I'm just tired. It's been a particularly tough year."

"What would have made it easier?" Beth asked.

"For starters, fewer children with special needs. I have four included children this year—three who are classified as learning disabled and one who has multiple disabilities. The three students with learning disabilities have serious language deficits. These aren't children who are having difficulty learning to read; they're children for whom forming clear sentences is a struggle, who have trouble processing simple oral directions. Joanna works wonders with them during the hour a day she's assigned to my class. But I'm responsible for ensuring that they really are included, which to me means participating meaningfully in instructional activities for the other five hours each day."

Beth looked serious as she asked, "And your other included child?"

"The fourth inclusion child is Matt," Carolyn continued, "who has a full-time aide because of his physical disabilities. His current aide is terrific; she transfers and toilets him with no problem, and she understands when he needs help and when he should be encouraged to be more independent. You saw her today."

The other women nodded. Kerry said, “She seemed terrific.”

Carolyn agreed. “But when she’s absent and we have a substitute, I spend nearly as much time instructing the sub as I do teaching my twenty-four students.”

“I understand that four included students seems like too many,” Kerry said. “But if inclusion’s going to work, we have to cluster children with special needs in order to make the most efficient use of our resources. I’ll be the consulting teacher in our program, and if we put just one included child in each class, I could serve only five students a day instead of twenty. Same for you,” Kerry said, nodding at Joanna. “That’s a luxury South Mayfield could never afford.”

Joanna picked up the discussion. “Carolyn and I talk about this all the time. A lot of special educators believe it’s harmful to have only one included child in a classroom. They say a child needs to be with other children who are also receiving special help, so he doesn’t compare himself only to typical children.”

“I know that’s true,” Carolyn responded, “but it doesn’t reduce my sense of being overloaded. In addition to the four included children, I have two who go out for Reading Recovery every day. The speech therapist, who comes in for half an hour twice a week, sees a total of seven children. There are times when my room is crowded with adults.” She gave Joanna a rueful look. “You know I don’t mean you. I don’t know what I’d do without you. You could spend *all day* in my room—in fact, I wish you would!”

Joanna reached out and touched her colleague’s arm. “I didn’t take it personally. It’s true, you do have a lot of kids with real issues and lots of adults in and out.”

“Maybe it’s because I see and speak with all the special service people so often that I have a heightened sense of accountability for the children we share,” Carolyn continued. “I confer with Matt’s aide every morning before school. Joanna and I meet to review the four included students every week. I meet with the speech therapist and the reading teacher once every other week, and I try to see the occupational therapist regularly, too. I know I’m responsible for ensuring progress for all twenty-four of my students, but the students with special needs get the lion’s share of my attention. I’m always aware that, before the week is out, one of my colleagues will be asking me about these children, and I want to be able to respond professionally.”

Both of the South Mayfield teachers looked a little surprised. “It’s ironic,” Kerry commented quietly, “that you’re describing frequent planning meetings as a burdensome aspect of inclusion. The other school we visited and the literature we’ve read cite lack of planning time as a major obstacle to successful inclusion.”

Carolyn wondered if the visitors thought she had been whining. Softening her tone, she said, “I see it as ironic, too, because the opportunity for collaboration was a major reason I favored inclusion. Working with Joanna

has been terrific; I'm a better teacher because of what I've learned from her. Every year I see more growth in the special needs students than I've dreamed possible. Joanna and I hold high expectations for the inclusion students, we work very hard to help them meet those expectations, and they never disappoint us. Sharing in their success has been incredibly gratifying for me."

Beth looked at Carolyn with interest. "But?" she asked. "Clearly, there's a but."

"Yes," Carolyn continued, "I can't shake the feeling that, because the included students are getting so much of my attention, the other students aren't getting enough."

Kerry responded, "My response when parents say that is to tell them that if the other students don't have disabilities, they probably don't need as much attention. That seems reasonable to me. It sounds like the included students are getting more of your attention because they need it."

Carolyn nodded. "For sure they need more: more hands-on experiences, more precise teaching, more interaction with teachers during instruction, more teacher monitoring during practice activities. I can't help thinking they would get more of those things in a resource setting. In a resource room, students and teachers can be free of the hundreds of distractions that are an unavoidable part of typical classroom life. I think it might be better for students with attention deficits to get at least a part of their instruction in a room with a lower noise and activity level, from a teacher who can give them undivided attention."

Beth said, "It sounds like you don't support inclusion. What you described is what we're moving away from."

Kerry spoke again. "And while what you described is what we'd *like* resource programs to provide, it seldom works out that way. Students don't spend any more time on task in resource rooms than they do in their regular classrooms. Instruction in the resource room too often is totally unrelated to what's happening in the classroom. I know because I've been a resource room teacher for eleven years. I guess I've become an advocate of inclusion as a way to reduce the fragmentation of a child's learning. I'm terribly aware of the shortcomings of resource rooms. After watching your class today, I'm even more sure that inclusion works. I think children's lives in school are better when they are in inclusive settings. That's certainly true for your kids."

"There's no denying there are advantages," Carolyn said, "especially for the children without disabilities. I continue to marvel at how generous they are to the children with special needs. Inclusion affords the kids tremendous opportunities for personal growth. In many ways, inclusion has helped me to grow also. But there are also ways in which I've been restricted, and the restraints are beginning to chafe."

At this comment, even Joanna looked surprised. "I'm not sure what you mean, Carolyn," she said.

“I’ve told you about my major concern: the nagging doubt that my nondisabled children aren’t getting the attention they deserve. But the biggest problem for me has been the loss of spontaneity in my teaching. Before inclusion, I could change my plans as soon as I saw the need. If there was an item on the evening news that related to our unit, I could draft a new lesson and incorporate the news item into the next day’s instruction. If a unit wasn’t working as well as I hoped, I could scrap it and begin something new, right on the spot. I could take advantage of and even create teachable moments.”

“And now?” Kerry and Beth asked at the same time.

“If I were to do that today,” Carolyn said, “it would be a major inconvenience for Joanna and the other specialists I collaborate with. I have to keep in mind that my willingness to spend hours revising plans may not be shared by my colleagues, who may be perfectly happy with the plans they made.”

No one made a response, and the silence became uncomfortable. “Perhaps it seems trivial,” Carolyn said haltingly, “but it’s something I deal with every day.”

“Not trivial, but not insurmountable either,” Kerry said. “Is it enough of a reason to give up an inclusion program that’s a model in this area? Have you talked with Joanna about this?”

Joanna just shook her head. “I would do anything Carolyn asked, but I know what she means. When you plan with someone, you feel a strong obligation to go with those plans. At least,” Joanna realized she had just sighed, “Carolyn and I do.”

Kerry picked up on the sigh. “Since we spent the day with Carolyn, we really only saw you in that class. I’m guessing not all of your inclusion teachers are like Carolyn.”

Joanna laughed. “That’s an understatement.”

“Can you give us an example?”

“Rosemary, one of the third-grade teachers, is typical,” Joanna said. “Each week we meet to plan together, and I use my best consulting skills to try to get her to be more reflective about her writing instruction. I think I’ve taught at least a dozen lessons to the whole class, each time using a process approach to writing. After every lesson she smiles, says the students really seemed to enjoy themselves, and thanks me. The next day the workbooks are back. It’s May, and I don’t think she’s taught much more than capitalization, punctuation, and sentence structure. You can imagine what a joy that is for my included students.

“Not all the teachers are like Rosemary,” Joanna hastened to add. “I don’t want to embarrass her, but working with Carolyn really is a pleasure. We truly collaborate; some of the lessons we’ve planned and taught together have been high points of my professional life. But when I leave Carolyn’s class I go to Nina’s, and there I hit a brick wall.”

“Really?” Carolyn asked. “I thought Nina was a good teacher. She told me herself that many of the students are in her class because their parents specifically requested it.”

“Well, parents do request Nina,” Joanna replied, “especially parents of kids in the talented and gifted (TAG) program. She gives students lots of latitude to pursue their interests independently, and they often work on their TAG projects in class. She is superbly organized; I’ve never seen a more orderly classroom in my life. Someone watching Nina might think she’s teaching tenth-graders instead of fifth-graders. She uses the overhead projector and commercial transparencies for every lesson, and her primary teaching mode is lecturing. She follows up the lecture with a worksheet or practice assignment from the text, then goes to her desk to correct homework or worksheets from earlier lessons. Students know better than to approach her when she’s working at her desk. What really galls me is that when she’s being observed by the principal or a student from one of the colleges, she’s completely different. She doesn’t return to her desk after the lecture. Instead, she circulates around the room, monitoring, praising, correcting, even calling two or three students to a side table for a minilesson. So her annual evaluations by the principal are good, and so are her Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) scores because she’s got so many strong students in the class. The most frustrating part is that she barely acknowledges my students.”

“What do you do when you are in Nina’s class as a consultant teacher?” Kerry asked.

“I usually take my students as a small group and reteach them whatever Nina lectured about. I might use a demonstration or a group activity to cover the same topic, and I always abbreviate the worksheet.”

“I’m sure you’ve talked with Nina about this. . . .”

“Yeah, I have,” Joanna sighed. “She says, ‘Joanna, you have your style and I have mine. Mine has worked very successfully for me for ten years and I’m not going to start tinkering with it now.’”

“How many classrooms are you in?” Kerry asked.

“Five altogether. I have one other teacher like Carolyn—not as spectacular, but really thoughtful and committed to the kids. So there are two terrific teachers, there’s Rosemary and Nina, and. . . .”

“OK, you’ve been too honest not to finish this,” Kerry urged Joanna.

“Let’s just say I’m sick to death of being treated like an aide,” Joanna said. “But then I have a colleague at the middle school who would love to be treated like an aide,” Joanna added. “Most of the time in one of her classes she feels like a student.”

“What does she mean?” Kerry asked.

“One of the examples she gave was a seventh-grade science class that’s one of her CT assignments. The class usually starts with a lecture or demonstration, which is followed by independent or small-group work. She circulates to help the students with the follow-up assignment. Yesterday, the

teacher lectured the entire period. She kept sitting there, perched on the radiator in the back, expecting that at any moment he'd break them into groups and she'd see some action. When the dismissal bell rang, he said he hoped he wasn't too boring for her, but he figured she could use the content review anyway."

"That's incredible! What did she say?" Kerry asked.

"I asked her that. She told me that at the moment she was too shocked to say anything. After school she thought of a dozen things she should have said, naturally."

"Will she say them at their next planning meeting?"

"Probably not. CTs have to be very politic, for the kids' sake. But you already know that."

The teachers had been lingering over coffee as Joanna told her story. The waiter took their cups away, and Kerry spoke, "You two have given us some amazing insights. You would never know from watching Carolyn's room what the real story is. Thanks for being so candid with us."

The four women walked out of the restaurant together and got into their cars. Driving home, Carolyn thought to herself, "They thought I was candid, but I neglected to tell them that I've requested a noninclusion first grade for next year. I wonder what they would make of that news."