

CASE STUDY 2.3

Joan Martin, Marilyn Coe, Warren Groves

Joan Martin looked out on her empty fourth-grade classroom and rubbed her temples. She walked over to Donald's desk, ran her hand over its scarred top, and squeezed her bulky frame into the seat. Despite her concerns, she smiled to herself, realizing she had sat down at Donald's desk hoping to understand him better by putting herself into his physical place in her room. She was looking for a solution to what she had come to think of as "the Donald thing."

Joan had been teaching elementary school in Littleton for fourteen years, and this fall she began her sixth year teaching fourth grade at Roosevelt Elementary School. Now approaching 45, she was distressed to find herself with a problem that she could not resolve, a problem for which her experience and skills had not prepared her.

The previous spring the Committee on Special Education (CSE), principal Warren Groves, and special education teacher Marilyn Coe approached Joan and asked her to mainstream three special education students into her social studies class during the upcoming school year. She agreed without much hesitation. She was flattered that they had chosen her from among the five fourth-grade teachers in her building, and she believed at the time that she needed and could handle the challenge of these students. Sitting at Donald's desk, she wondered how she could have so seriously misjudged her own situation.

Joan completed her teacher preparation program at a small private college in New York more than twenty years ago. She taught for the two years following her college graduation and then left teaching to marry and raise a family. She returned to the classroom when her youngest children (twin sons, now juniors in college) entered first grade.

Since her return to teaching, Joan had been working in a system in which students with serious learning problems were served in special classes. Therefore, her classroom problems were limited to an occasional outburst of frustration or anger or to the prepubescent silliness associated with 9 and 10-year-olds. One of the reasons she enjoyed teaching in Littleton was the quality of the support services available to students with real needs. Joan's feeling was that these services enabled her to be more effective with the students assigned to her classroom. Over the years she earned a reputation in the district for being a creative, demanding teacher who was able to challenge her students successfully. Parents of gifted fourth-graders often requested her, feeling she would enrich their child's curriculum.

For Joan, fourth grade had become somewhat boring, and she was considering asking for a change of level. When she was approached to mainstream the special students, she readily agreed, partly to have a new challenge in her teaching. While two of the mainstreamed students, Barry Frederick and Michael Neafe, were not presenting many problems, Donald Garcia was proving to be more of a challenge than she anticipated.

Donald was a learning-disabled (LD) student who had spent most of his school years in a self-contained classroom for students with learning disabilities. Joan knew that he, Barry, and Michael were being mainstreamed for the first time and that Donald was the least skilled of the three. She had been “briefed” about the students by the CSE and Marilyn Coe at a meeting the previous June, just before school ended for the summer.

Aware that the students might feel a little awkward in her class, Joan made sure each had a desk “right in the middle of the action” and that their desks were nearer to the other students than to each other. She welcomed them warmly when they started and then tried not to treat them any differently than she treated her other students.

However, it was clear almost immediately that the three students, particularly Donald, were very different. All of them seemed to need more attention than the typical fourth-grader. None of them was very outgoing in the class, and they were hesitant about their work, asking many questions and regularly seeking reassurance that they had the correct answers or were doing the right task. Donald took much longer than the other two to complete any in-class assignment, and he never volunteered to read in class.

When Joan gave her first surprise quiz, something she did regularly to keep the students on their toes and actively involved in the daily assignments, Donald was unable to answer any of the questions. While Barry and Michael did poorly on the quiz (as Joan had anticipated), they tried to answer the questions and showed some evidence of preparation. Joan was so startled by Donald’s blank paper that she went to see Marilyn Coe to discuss his quiz.

Marilyn explained, “Donald probably couldn’t read your test. You know that he reads on the first-grade level.”

Joan reacted immediately. “He shouldn’t be in fourth grade if he can’t read the work! I just can’t imagine how a child that poor in reading can stay in my class.”

It was clear to Joan that her reaction troubled Marilyn, who responded to Joan in a very soft voice. “Yes, Donald can’t read very well. But he’s a very nice little boy who has been isolated from his peers for a long time. If he doesn’t have an opportunity soon to get to know kids his age, he’ll start middle school isolated and probably acting inappropriately. And you must be making some progress with him. He actually has begun doing some things with other kids that he didn’t do before he went into your class. I saw him on

the playground with a bunch of your students, and he talks about your class and his new friends a lot when he's in my room."

Joan quickly retreated from her hard-line position. She nodded at Marilyn and said, "OK. I'll try to help him with the content. And I won't give any surprise quizzes without warning you."

For the next few weeks Joan observed Donald closely in her class. He contributed in class discussions if she called on him, and he participated in small-group activities. (In the first marking period the students were creating murals depicting the growth of the American colonies.) However, she also noticed that he did none of the reading or writing activities, nor did the other students ever ask him to contribute to the academic aspects of his group's project. When it came time to reorganize work groups, no group actively chose Donald, and Joan had to ask one of the students to include him. The student did so willingly, mentioning that Donald was a nice kid but not too smart. The only appropriate work he turned in was done with Marilyn Coe's help. He continued to fail Joan's tests.

Joan often described her teaching by saying that she believed that her students' reach should exceed their grasp and that she continually asked more and more from her students. They knew and expected that from her and were even disappointed if one of her assignments turned out to be "easy." But Donald was unable to achieve even her simplest goals. To ask more from him would mean increasing his frustration level. Yet she couldn't decrease her expectations for the class as a whole or for the small groups. And if she created individual assignments for him, she would be defeating the purposes of mainstreaming by setting him up as different and less able. As the days passed, she came to believe that Donald did not belong in her class. She felt strongly that mainstreaming was not good for students if they ended up hating the class and school or if they felt "dumb" as a result of the mainstreaming. Though he did not seem to be unhappy in the class, Joan suspected that Donald was feeling that way. Given her classroom requirements, it was clear that Donald was failing social studies and that Joan would have no choice but to give him an F for the marking period. It wasn't that Joan thought Donald was a failure; he just could not meet the reading and writing demands of her class.

Feeling frustrated and angry that she had brought this on herself, Joan met with Warren Groves for some advice. Warren had been her principal for nine years, and they liked and respected each other. His response was straightforward: He told Joan that if Donald could not do the work, he did not belong in her class. Warren volunteered to make that position clear to Marilyn and the CSE, but Joan felt that was her responsibility. She arranged to meet the next day with Marilyn to discuss returning Donald to the LD classroom. Although she had been meeting with Marilyn regularly and knew this would come as no surprise, Joan was feeling terrible about making this request. She understood why Marilyn felt Donald needed to be mains-

treamed and she appreciated that Marilyn had chosen her as the teacher to accomplish this. She also knew that Marilyn had a lot riding on Donald's success and that this would be a blow to her mainstreaming efforts in the school.

Joan sighed and got up from Donald's seat. She returned to her desk and packed her briefcase with work to take home. She knew that even though there were no papers in her bag to indicate it, most of her thoughts that evening would center on Donald and her meeting with Marilyn the following day.

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Marilyn Coe sat in her classroom thinking about tomorrow morning's meeting with Joan Martin. She realized that she might have blundered when she decided to mainstream Donald Garcia into Joan Martin's fourth-grade social studies class this fall. Marilyn knew that Joan was upset by Donald's poor reading skills and that, despite his efforts, Joan was going to give him a failing grade. At the moment, however, Marilyn felt that it was she who had failed, and now she was wondering if there was anything she could do to remedy the situation. She didn't have much time to figure out a solution: She and Joan were meeting in the morning, and it looked like the only option Joan would offer would be for Marilyn to remove Donald from her class. Otherwise, Joan would have to give him a failing grade in social studies for the first marking period.

Marilyn understood many of Joan's reactions because she had spent nine years as an elementary school teacher before beginning a new career in special education. Now 39, she had "retired" from teaching for several years to raise her children and had spent three years tutoring remedial students before returning to a local university to complete a master's degree and become certified in special education.

She was remembering just now the excitement she felt last January as she approached her return to full-time teaching after accepting a midyear position in a self-contained LD classroom in the Littleton school district. With some trepidation, but also with lots of excitement, Marilyn started her new assignment.

Marilyn found herself in a medium-size elementary school supervised by Warren Groves, a very professional principal, and staffed by conscientious, hardworking teachers. Marilyn's class was one of two self-contained learning disabilities classes in the building. There was also an LD resource room in the school. Because there were two types of LD classes in the building, many teachers thought the children in the two self-contained classes were too difficult to mainstream.

Marilyn tried to set up a classroom that was visually appealing and educationally interesting and stimulating. She was determined to find success in

her new position. By March, Marilyn felt that the class was doing well and that things were going smoothly. The students, all boys ranging in age from 6 to 9, settled into a consistent routine and seemed happy in the structured classroom environment Marilyn had created.

When Marilyn took over the class, she was surprised to learn that none of the boys was mainstreamed into any regular education classes. In May, as Marilyn prepared to meet with the CSE to make recommendations for the following school year for her students, she wanted to suggest that several of her students be mainstreamed into some academic subjects. However, Marilyn found herself hesitating, since she had so little experience with this type of decision. The CSE was available to guide her but felt the final decision to mainstream should be left to her. As she tried to make up her mind, Marilyn was feeling the double handicap of her inexperience in special education and her brief time in the school.

When she turned to the principal for guidance, Warren Groves offered his views on mainstreaming but avoided the actual decision. He told Marilyn that he did not know enough to make appropriate recommendations; he felt that was her job, in cooperation with the CSE. However, he did tell her that he believed that students should be mainstreamed primarily for reading and math and only when success could almost be guaranteed so that the children would not have to deal with more failure. The CSE's attitude was that more mainstreaming should be attempted in all areas; it felt that too many children were placed in self-contained classes in the district. When Marilyn asked why so little mainstreaming had occurred with her students, the CSE explained that it didn't want to take a position that the principal might not support unless it had a strong special education teacher behind the mainstreaming effort.

After spending a lot of time going over student records and talking with anyone who might help her, Marilyn decided to mainstream two of her students for math. Both boys had developed enough competence in the subject area to be successful in the regular class, particularly if she provided a little additional help in her classroom.

Marilyn also decided to mainstream the three oldest boys in the class, Barry, Michael, and Donald, into the fourth-grade social studies class even though one of them, Donald, was very weak in reading skills. Her rationale was based on three premises. First, in three years these students would start middle school, and it seemed that the present time was not too soon to begin preparing them for the demands they would face there. Second, Marilyn felt that she "cheated" her students in the areas of science and social studies, since reading, math, and language arts took up the largest part of each school day in her class. Third, all three boys were shy children who had spent most of their school years apart from their same-age peers. Marilyn felt they needed more time with other 9-year-olds, who could serve as models.

All her recommendations were agreed to by the CSE and the principal. They suggested that she closely monitor the students mainstreamed into so-

cial studies. Warren paid particular attention to Donald's case when she presented her ideas to him. That reinforced for Marilyn that the principal was "tuned in," since Donald had been her greatest concern.

Donald, a 9-year-old, had spent two years in the self-contained LD class. He was an only child, living with his mother and father. Donald's original psychological report confirmed his academic deficits and described him as "immature, with a short attention span." There were no reported health, financial, marital, interpersonal, housing, or community problems; nor were any significant birth, medical, or developmental difficulties reported.

The CSE report noted that Donald's mother, whose native language was Spanish, spoke English with some difficulty. Donald understood but did not speak Spanish. Donald's father reported that he had experienced difficulty reading when he was in school. The parents had always been supportive of the CSE decisions and welcomed help for Donald.

The main drawbacks for mainstreaming Donald were his primer reading level and his shyness and low self-esteem. However, Marilyn knew that despite his reading difficulties, Donald was able to understand concepts presented at his age and grade level and had very good listening comprehension skills. He was aware of current events, and he would bring a wide range of educational and cultural experiences to the class. He had traveled to South America with his parents several times and could relate those trips to other experiences. Yet Marilyn knew that Donald did not fit Warren's "model" for mainstreaming.

Joan Martin, the fourth-grade teacher whose class Donald would join for social studies, had a reputation for creativity and flexibility, but she was known for teaching to the upper levels of her class and holding high expectations for all her students. She was selected on the basis of Warren's recommendation and a meeting with the CSE at which the committee recognized that she was willing to accept all three of Marilyn's fourth-grade students.

In September, Joan welcomed the three self-contained LD students warmly, giving each his own desk and materials. The students were so enthusiastic about attending the fourth-grade class that Marilyn began to relax about her decision.

Her sense of comfort was short-lived, however. At the end of the third week of school, Joan came to see Marilyn to discuss Donald. She showed Marilyn the results of the first social studies quiz, given as a surprise to make sure all the students were keeping up with the reading. Donald had not responded to any of the questions. When Marilyn reminded Joan of Donald's reading level and explained that he probably could not read the test questions, Joan reacted strongly. "He shouldn't be in fourth grade if he can't read the work. I just can't imagine how a child that poor in reading can stay in my class."

Marilyn was shocked by the strength of Joan's response. She decided to try to focus on Donald's needs, not his weaknesses, as she answered Joan.

“Yes, Donald can’t read very well. But he’s a very nice little boy who has been isolated from his peers for a long time.”

Marilyn went on to explain Donald’s social needs for being in the class, and she discussed how important it was to prepare classified students for their next educational level. She also told Joan that she had noticed that Donald was now involved with other fourth-grade students on the playground. Marilyn concluded, “He talks about your class and his new friends a lot when he’s in my room.”

Marilyn realized her explanation had made an impact when Joan responded by agreeing to keep Donald in her class and to try to help him with the content. Joan observed that his contributions to class discussions were very appropriate and said she would watch him in class to see if he made any progress.

After the meeting with Joan, Marilyn began to work with Donald in her class on his social studies assignments. She knew that the best solution would be for Donald to learn to read the social studies material, but Marilyn also knew that she would not be able to bring him to grade-level reading. She continued to meet with Joan to talk about Donald’s progress and to see if Joan would consider changing her grading procedures to accommodate Donald’s needs. Marilyn knew that she had to go slowly, since she was an untenured teacher and it was not her role to tell other, more experienced teachers how to handle their classes. She did not feel that she was making much progress with Joan, since Joan kept talking about Donald’s failing grades.

Marilyn decided to talk with the principal and the CSE to see if they could help her find a solution to the problem. It was clear to Marilyn that Joan was not comfortable making an exception to her strict grading policies for Donald.

When Marilyn met with Warren, she felt she was receiving mixed messages. On the one hand, the principal told her that she, not he, was the expert in special education and mainstreaming. Yet he reminded her that he believed that students who could not be successful in meeting the teacher’s demands should not be mainstreamed.

On the other hand, the CSE supported Marilyn’s decision to keep Donald in fourth-grade social studies, since the committee had also noticed the difference in his social interactions. The CSE was willing to meet with Joan to support Marilyn’s position.

Marilyn appreciated the support of the CSE but did not think that it would affect Joan’s position on her grading policy. As long as Donald had to meet Joan’s standards, he was bound to fail, and Marilyn felt she would appear stubborn if she insisted that he remain in the class even though he would fail. It seemed to her that Joan’s grading system was the key to solving the problem. However, Marilyn did not know how to convince Joan to alter the system.

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Warren Groves watched Joan Martin leave his office; as the door closed behind her, he sat down heavily in his chair and sighed aloud. In the past week two of his strongest teachers had come to him to discuss the same child, Donald Garcia. It was clear to him that these two caring, sensitive teachers were on a collision course over the best setting for Donald. Warren knew that one of his responsibilities as the principal would be to mediate if they could not reach an amicable, appropriate solution.

Warren tended to trust his teachers and preferred to let them make their own decisions. He typically offered an opinion that would not tie a teacher's hands and then suggested that the teacher was the front-line expert. He only took a firm stand when he saw that a teacher's decision would lead to a real problem or when there was a conflict that the parties were unable to resolve without his intervention. The problem with Donald seemed to be leading him to the latter situation.

As Warren retraced the events that led to his meeting with Joan today, he reminded himself that he could have prevented this entire situation last May if he had told Marilyn Coe then that Donald was not an appropriate candidate for mainstreaming. When Marilyn and the CSE met with him to discuss mainstreaming some of the students from Marilyn's self-contained LD classroom, it was obvious that Donald did not have the reading skills necessary to deal successfully with a fourth-grade social studies text. But Marilyn made a strong case for social mainstreaming for this student, a case that Warren knew made sense as a long-term solution to Donald's problems. As long as Donald remained in the self-contained setting, he would not have the opportunity to make friends with the nonclassified students, nor would he have those students as models for the behaviors that preadolescents needed to learn.

Warren went along with Marilyn for a second reason. In addition to believing that her social mainstreaming argument was a good one, Warren wanted Marilyn to know that she could have the opportunity to implement her policies without having to fight for each one. Although she was a new teacher, she had the potential to be one of the strongest teachers in his building. Warren knew that if he encouraged and supported her, she would gain the confidence needed to emerge as a leader within the school. Since he believed that strong teachers were an asset to a school, he wanted to help Marilyn try to implement her ideas.

He suggested that Joan Martin be the teacher who mainstreamed the three fourth-grade students because he wanted Joan to have a new challenge. Joan was one of those teachers whose classroom could make any principal look good, and Warren appreciated her skills. He knew, however, that she was easily bored and that he did not have another opening in his school for her. He feared that Joan would leave his school for a more interesting

classroom if he could not provide one for her. He hoped that she would rise to the challenge of these hard-to-teach students and, in doing so, find sufficient reason for remaining in his school.

But now Warren had the feeling that his plans had backfired. Although he had warned Marilyn that mainstreaming Donald could prove to be a difficult undertaking, Marilyn had not taken that warning seriously enough. She should have better prepared both Donald and Joan for their mainstreaming roles. Was it too late to help her save her plan and keep Donald in a regular fourth-grade social studies class?

Additionally, he should have given Joan more incentive to guarantee that the mainstreaming of these students would be successful. He wondered if it was too late to do that now. Would Joan be willing to rethink her position about grading just days before the report period ended?

Warren knew that the two teachers were meeting the following day. He called to his secretary and asked her to find out when their meeting was scheduled. He realized he was about to spend the remainder of the day trying to come up with an idea that would help them resolve their conflict over Donald. His plan would have to meet two goals: It would have to be in Donald's best interest, and it would have to allow both Joan and Marilyn to save face and leave the meeting feeling that their professional beliefs had not been compromised. Warren was not sure he could accomplish that. He sighed again. It was days like this that made Warren wonder why he had not gone into his father's insurance business.