

CASE STUDY 3.1

Helen Franklin

“She said what?” Helen exclaimed.

“She told the superintendent that her daughter was not being challenged and was spending her day doing busywork. That’s practically a direct quote. I was sitting right next to her!” replied Doris Baxter.

Helen Franklin was a first-grade teacher at Roosevelt Elementary School in Littleton, and Doris Baxter, the mother of one of her students, had been helpful and supportive of Helen’s efforts all year. Doris served as a minority representative on one of the district superintendent’s parent committees. It was at a committee meeting that she heard the criticism she was now sharing with Helen.

“Well, thank you for telling me,” said Helen, trying to decide how much she should tell Doris of her problem. “You know I have lots of parent volunteers in my classroom, and Jane Isaac has been in the class as a volunteer since October. Apparently she hasn’t liked what she’s seen.”

“Well, I knew she was working with you from Tom,” Doris offered. “In fact, he said Mrs. Isaac doesn’t like him.”

“Listen, Doris, I knew I had some problems with Jane, but I had no idea any of it was apparent to the children. If it comes up again, please assure Tom that I don’t think that’s true. He’s a pleasure for all of us to have in class!”

“Don’t worry about that part of it,” Doris said. “He’s a pretty confident kid. But you might keep an eye on her when she works with some of the other black children.”

“Good Lord,” thought Helen. “There it is. Doris thinks I’ve got a bigot in my classroom. What a mess.” But to Doris, Helen replied, “Oh, I don’t think that’s it at all. I just think Mrs. Isaac is so concerned with her own daughter’s progress that she doesn’t pay much attention to the other kids. Anyway, thank you for the feedback.”

As Helen hung up after her conversation with Doris, she tried to control her rising anger. The children would be arriving momentarily, and Helen had to get back to her classroom and begin the day. She remembered with a shudder of distaste that Jane Isaac was scheduled as a volunteer this morning. “I can’t believe that witch has caused me this much grief,” she thought, realizing as she fumed that she had to calm down and handle Jane Isaac carefully.

Helen understood that she had two problems with Jane and that both of them could affect the children—maybe they already had. Helen was well

aware that Jane was dissatisfied with her daughter Emily's curriculum. More than once she had offered a side comment, posed a direct question, or, in conferences, voiced specific criticisms of the job Helen was doing with Emily. Helen felt that the curriculum and instruction she was giving Emily were appropriate, and she had told Jane as much. Helen was really miffed that the woman had taken her complaint to the central office. And now that the specter of racism had been raised, Helen wondered if she had to confront that issue quickly. She struggled to put Jane Isaac's criticism of her and the superintendent's possible reactions in the back of her mind.

While parent volunteers always introduced a level of complexity, Helen had not had a serious problem using volunteers in all her nineteen years of teaching. In fact, the way Helen managed her classes, volunteers were crucial. Every October at Open School Night Helen solicited help from the parents and always took all the help she was offered.

Helen ran what some people referred to as an "open classroom," but she objected to that label because it implied, to some, a lack of structure. Helen felt that her children's days were very structured, and one of her principal goals was to help her students develop a self-reliance and self-discipline that would serve them well throughout their school years.

Each morning when her students arrived, they found their work waiting for them on their desks. After welcoming the students, Helen would present their desk work for the morning. She would explain to them their reading lesson, their math lesson, a language arts assignment—whatever she had planned for that morning. Sometimes the work centered on reviewing material Helen had taught the previous day, and sometimes it involved practicing new information. If the latter was the case, Helen would teach the new material to the class as a whole and then explain the worksheet assignment, which provided practice in applying the new concept.

After taking her class through each assignment, Helen would encourage the students to ask any questions they might have and then she would turn them loose to do the work independently. As they did so, Helen and her volunteers reviewed the children's homework by moving individually to each desk. Concepts practiced in homework, such as mastery of new vocabulary words, were often crucial to the children's ability to complete their seatwork for that morning, and Helen had to be sure that each child understood one concept before expecting him or her to work independently on the next. This tour of the room was also Helen's opportunity to differentiate seatwork assignments if necessary. The slower students might be given extra explanations or even different worksheets, and the brighter children might be assigned extra activities on which to work if they finished their other lessons early. Helen spoke Spanish, and she always offered instruction and explanation to her bilingual students in Spanish at this time.

The children could work at their desks, on the floor, or back in the "private corner," but Helen expected them to do the work they had been given

on their own. They could do the lessons in any order they chose; her only rule was that they were not to work on the same thing as their neighbor at the same time. Once her students were peacefully occupied at their desks, Helen began reading groups or gave individuals special instruction.

The help of volunteers was the magic that made this system work. While Helen was busy conducting a reading circle or giving individualized instruction, volunteers in the classroom could go from desk to desk helping children with their work or could do special drills for certain children. They also helped Helen “check out” each student’s desk work as he or she completed it, after which the child could do special activities like work on the computer or play in “puppet alley.” Essentially, the volunteers helped Helen keep this system of organized chaos organized. It had always worked beautifully, until now.

The twenty children in Helen’s class represented a broad range of backgrounds and abilities. The school served affluent and working-class neighborhoods, and Helen’s class had a healthy socioeconomic and racial mix. The families of the children in her class represented a range of incomes, but there were no very rich or very poor children in the class. Racially, the class was approximately half white and half minority; of the minority children, half were black and half Hispanic. She also had some children who were not yet comfortable with English.

Unlike most years, when the students in Helen’s classes had a gradual range of abilities, this year she had some unusually slow children at one end of the continuum and three extraordinarily bright children at the other. Jane Isaac’s daughter, Emily, was one of three girls who had known how to read when they started the year. After only one week of classes, Helen had telephoned the parents of the three girls and had explained that she recognized their children’s abilities and didn’t intend to waste their time. She was using more advanced readers with the girls and expecting more of them in general. That should have pleased Mrs. Isaac, but unfortunately it wasn’t that simple.

Of the three girls, one—Kate Delbrook—was particularly advanced. Helen had decided by November that Kate could easily complete two years in one, and she had told Kate’s mother of her plan by January. Helen provided Kate with individualized academic instruction and extra homework; she believed strongly that if a child showed unique capability, she should “go with it” and help the child fulfill his or her native potential. But neither Helen nor Mrs. Delbrook had breathed a word to anyone of the plan to have Kate skip a grade, and Helen was sure Mrs. Isaac knew nothing of it.

Meanwhile, Helen had recognized early in the year that Emily Isaac had some unique emotional needs, which Helen had tried to meet. Emily was nervous and meticulous to a fault; she would work too slowly in a misplaced need to color exactly within the lines or to keep a letter precisely between

lines on the paper. Emily seemed insecure and pressured, and Helen felt that sometimes just drawing a picture or doing other nonacademic work was a welcome relief for Emily. The child needed her curriculum customized socially as much as Kate needed hers customized academically, and Helen wanted to help Emily learn to relax and enjoy school.

“But is Jane jealous of the time I spend with Kate?” Helen wondered as she sat down in the teachers’ lounge and looked out at the winter landscape. The fact was, Mrs. Isaac seemed interested only in the work that her daughter and the other high achievers were given on the days she volunteered. Therein lay the other problem.

Helen honestly didn’t know if Mrs. Isaac’s motive was racism or a preoccupation with what Emily was doing, but Mrs. Isaac refused to work with the low-ability groups in Helen’s classroom. If Helen asked Mrs. Isaac to do something with one or another of the low achievers as they started the day, Mrs. Isaac would assume a slightly pained expression. Although she would begin to do what Helen asked, she would soon find an excuse to work with the brighter children, leaving the slower ones unsupervised.

After observing this several times, Helen started ducking the issue by asking other volunteers who were in the room to work with the slow children or by working with them herself. But the fact that some of the students in the lower groups were black and that all three of the brightest children were white now sowed a bitter seed of doubt in Helen’s mind. She had been willing to give Mrs. Isaac the benefit of the doubt and believe that she just didn’t have the patience to work with the slower children—after all, Mrs. Isaac was an uptight, nervous, hurried type—but Doris’s comments now forced Helen to face the other possibility.

Helen looked at her watch. This morning was going to be difficult. Mrs. Isaac and another parent were the volunteers. Helen had to manage the two of them, her children, her own anger, and a charge of racism. Should she continue to try to ignore Mrs. Isaac’s refusal to help the slower children? Her other volunteer would gladly help them instead. Should she also ignore Mrs. Isaac’s continued criticism of her work with Emily? Helen felt that she was the professional and that she knew what was best for Emily, but if the superintendent was involved, maybe she should change Emily’s work. Should she confront Mrs. Isaac on either issue, or try to let the matter slide? Accusing Mrs. Isaac of racism now might look like retaliation for her criticism to the superintendent. As Helen stood up and headed toward her classroom, she searched for answers.