

CASE STUDY

Carol Brown

A first-grade teacher, after socially integrating an extremely heterogeneous class, sees her efforts threatened when a child's pencil case disappears and is thought to have been stolen.

Carol Brown locked her car and turned her collar up against the cold January wind as she rushed toward the school. At the outer doors of the building, Carol reached down and picked up a red mitten that must have been dropped as students raced to their buses the night before. She tucked it into her pocket, making a mental note that later she would take it to the lost and found.

Her mind was already on a situation that began yesterday in her first-grade classroom. As the class settled in, John Casey realized that his pencil case was missing from his desk. Some of the children suggested that it had been stolen, but Carol assured them that it was probably misplaced and would turn up soon. However, by the end of the day the pencil case had not been found, and Carol remembered how upset John was when school was dismissed.

Hanging up her coat in her classroom, Carol heard an argument just outside her door. She stepped into the corridor and found two of her students shouting at each other. Managing to separate them, Carol asked the boys what the problem was.

"Robert stole my mitten," yelled Brian.

Robert interrupted, "I didn't steal nothin'."

Brian explained to Carol that he had both his mittens in his pocket the day before. He sat with Robert on the bus going home, and when he got off the bus one of his mittens was gone.

"He's lying. I never took his dumb mitten." Robert seemed very upset at the accusation.

"Brian, what does your mitten look like?" Carol asked as she walked the two boys into the classroom and showed them the mitten she had retrieved from the sidewalk earlier.

Brian grabbed the mitten and said, "That's mine. That's my mitten. Where was it?"

Carol knelt down and pulled both Brian and Robert to her. She looked at Brian and said, "I found it right outside the building when I came in this morning. Don't you think you owe Robert an apology?"

Brian looked down at his feet and then at Robert. "I'm sorry," he said. Brian spoke quietly, but it seemed clear that he really was sorry.

"It's good that you could apologize, Brian. See how bad you made Robert

feel by accusing him of stealing? You guys are such good friends, it would really be a shame to lose a friend because you accused someone unfairly. You won't do that again, will you?"

Brian shook his head to indicate that he would not. Carol turned to Robert. "Do you accept Brian's apology?"

Robert shrugged and said, "Yeah, OK."

Carol hugged the children and said, "Let's seal it with a high five."

Both boys giggled, slapped upraised palms, and left the classroom to wait in the gym for the morning bell.

Carol watched them leave and thought to herself, "Why would Brian automatically suspect that his mitten had been stolen? What a strange reaction from him." But, as she remembered the missing pencil case, she suspected that it was more than coincidence that stealing was on Brian's mind. Carol knew that the children had been consumed the day before with talk about the "stolen" pencil case, and she feared it would not be quickly forgotten.

John had brought the pencil case to school just after Christmas, and the whole class had demonstrated an appreciation for what a treasure it was. John did not hesitate to share the case with other students. It was not unusual to see the other children carrying it around, using the ruler or protractor or stapler that were part of the case. Yesterday morning John came back to school after being absent the day before and found that the pencil case was not in his desk where he had left it.

At first, Carol suggested that perhaps someone had borrowed the case and forgotten to return it. To Carol's dismay, none of the students resolved the problem by bringing forth the missing item. When Carol suggested that maybe it had simply been misplaced, John became frustrated and angry. The child was upset about his loss and in his anger did not hesitate to announce openly to the rest of the first-grade class that someone had stolen his property.

The other children seemed affected by the situation because the missing item was something that they all enjoyed using. The class was quick to rally around the idea that this was a theft, and some children began to name possible "suspects." In only one day, Carol Brown's happy, close-knit class of twenty-four children became accusatory and mean.

In the beginning of the year, this class had presented a real challenge for Carol, because the children came from such diverse backgrounds. Of the fifteen girls and nine boys in the class, eight came from economically disadvantaged homes. The school system had implemented its racial balance program in such a way that this school drew its students from the richest section of the city, where the school was located, and from the poorest areas, from which a sizable number of students were bused. There was only a small representation of middle-class children to buffer these disparate groups. Students in Carol's class who were driven to school in Mercedes sat next to others whose parents could not afford to provide warm winter coats.

At first, as would be natural, the children from the affluent neighborhoods tended to associate with one another, and the children from the poorer areas felt more comfortable with friends from their own neighborhoods. This natural tendency, coupled with the fact that the children shared very few common experiences, made it difficult at first to break down the barriers and create a unified class.

In the first few months of school, Carol implemented as many strategies as she could to help the students interact and to provide shared experiences in the classroom. Early in September, she established cooperative learning groups. She made certain that the groups were balanced socioeconomically and that each group contained no more than three or four students so that small cliques within the groups could not form. The types of activities she created required that the children work together in order to get the most from the tasks. She changed the group composition every two weeks.

Carol also established centers that only a few children at a time could work in. There were centers for playing dress-up games, for building with Lego blocks, for listening to talking books, for working at the computer, for doing art projects, and so on. Children drew lots for which center they could go to, guaranteeing that there would always be a diverse population at each one. Since the children typically had “center time” twice a day, there were many opportunities for the children to interact and to get to know and trust one another.

The classroom also featured what Carol called “the author’s seat,” which allowed all the children to share stories they had written. This helped the students get to know one another and begin to understand each other’s backgrounds. Carol’s early efforts paid off, and by Thanksgiving the children were mingling easily and interacting across socioeconomic groups on their own.

This was an accomplishment Carol felt very proud of because her approach to teaching had always stressed respect. In her class, Carol often discussed the importance of individuality and the ways in which all students shared equal rights within the classroom community. But the current incident certainly put her philosophy to the test. In just one day the missing pencil case created an air of suspicion among the students that Carol feared would undermine the integration she had achieved.

Carol began to wonder what had really happened to the pencil case. It was clear that John’s friends thought that one of the poor children had stolen it, and Carol nurtured the same suspicion. While all the children coveted the special pencil case, Carol understood that the affluent children had many treasures and the poor children had few.

Carol had been teaching for many years in elementary classes. Early in her career, she spent three years teaching in an economically deprived urban area and encountered many situations involving classroom theft. She understood the pressure and sorrow of poverty and knew that the egocentrism of children could translate envy into action. This very heteroge-

neous class, however, added a new dimension to this classic problem. Before, she had been able to handle a theft situation without worrying about whether it would undo the foundation of a successfully integrated group.

Carol looked at the clock and saw that class was about to begin. She knew that she had to handle the pencil-case situation today and that she had to do it very carefully. More important to Carol than the \$10 pencil case was the preservation of trust among the students. How could she carry on her investigation discreetly in order to solve the problem of John's missing property and perhaps further her agenda of mutual trust and respect?

As the children spilled into the room and began to sit in a circle on the area rug where the class always started its day, Carol resolved to use the pencil-case incident as a means of strengthening the class's unity rather than permit the situation, through inaction, to cause divisiveness. She also knew this was an ideal opportunity to use a real-life situation to help the children grow. "A good offense . . ." Carol thought as she took her place in the circle.

"Good morning, boys and girls. Are you all warm now that we're inside and together?"

"Yeah." "Sure." "It's so cold!" A chorus of replies rang around Carol.

"What day is today, Fernando?"

"Um . . ." Fernando, a dark-skinned Puerto Rican child dressed in an oversize sweatshirt looked toward the poster-board calendar that hung on the wall above the play area shelves. "Um . . . Wednesday."

"And what number day is it?" Carol continued addressing Fernando.

"Numero 15. Of January."

"Good! Would you go put the number 15 in the Wednesday slot so that we can all remember the date?" As Fernando uncurled himself to update the calendar, Carol turned her attention to the rest of the children.

"Today we are going to finish the story we began yesterday about Eskimos, and we are going to make pictures of igloos and snowmen at art time using cotton and glitter. Then after recess we're going to bring some snow inside for science time and look at it and feel it and talk about what happens when we heat it up. But, first, I want to talk to all of you about something I think is on our minds—John's pencil case, which we lost yesterday."

"Somebody took it," a girl with blond pigtails called out indignantly.

"Did you find it?" John Casey asked excitedly.

"No, it was stole. It's gone," Fernando said to John with a "forget it" gesture.

"Well, children, I don't know where it is, and we may not find it. But let's talk about your feeling that the pencil case might have been stolen. Karen, you said you think someone took it. Why do you think that?"

"Because it was so nice and somebody that wanted it an' couldn't buy it would just take it."

"Would you take something that you didn't have the money to buy?" Carol asked.

“Well, maybe, if I really wanted it.” Karen seemed to sense she was on thin ice with this admission but obviously answered honestly.

“Then you’d get caught an’ go to jail!” cried Brian. “You can’t steal, or you go to jail!”

“Why do we send people to jail for stealing, Brian?” pursued Carol.

“Because it’s wrong!”

“Yes, it is wrong to steal. But why is it wrong? Yusef?”

“Cause you might go to jail. My brother is in jail ’cause he tooked some stuff ain’t his. He ain’t never comin’ home!” Yusef’s eyes were huge and hurt, and a few of the children looked frightened and subdued as they digested this information.

“That’s dumb. Kids don’ go to jail,” ventured Robert confidently.

“An’ if nobody was looking an’ you knowed you wouldn’t go to jail you might take it,” Janey spoke quietly.

“Sure, you only go to jail if the teacher sees,” volunteered Arlene.

“Well, we already said that children don’t go to jail, Arlene, and certainly teachers are here to help children learn what is right, not to catch children or punish them. But I want you to think about whether or not there are other reasons not to take something that is not yours.” Carol’s manner was warm and encouraging as she smiled at her class.

There was silence in the circle as the children thought. “Well, just if you get in trouble,” Robert finally concluded.

“And if John is sad his case is gone,” Brian mused.

“Yeah, if your mother finds it or you get caught!” Another student’s elaboration on Robert’s point drowned out Brian’s contribution.

“What if we all took each other’s things whenever we wanted?” prompted Carol. “What would happen then?” Again the students concentrated on their teacher’s question. The seconds ticked by, and Carol fleetingly thought about getting through story time and art before recess.

“Well, we’d all get in trouble, I guess,” speculated Yusef.

“Yes, that’s right,” agreed Carol. “Classrooms need rules just like grown-ups do so that students can all work together happily and not worry about their things being taken. We need to trust each other and care about each other.” Carol studied the open faces turned toward her in an attempt to read the children’s reactions. She saw acceptance in their eyes because she was the teacher, but she felt a nagging doubt that they really understood or believed her.

“So who took my case?” John suddenly called, addressing his classmates accusingly. They looked at him miserably, and Carol saw that the discussion hadn’t served its intended purpose.

“What,” she wondered, “do I do now?”