Artifact #3

M8: Course Assignment: Field Interview Final Assignment

SP 730: Characteristics, Methods, and Assessment: Introduction to Struggling Learners & Students with High-Incidence Disabilities

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Insights into Special Education: A Field Interview

In my pursuit to better understand the best practices in special education, I interviewed Mrs. Vidhya Krishnamurthy, an accomplished intellectual disability teacher with a strong commitment to inclusive education at South County High School in the United States. Drawing from my background as a general education teacher in Singapore, I embarked on this interview with Mrs. K with a strong desire to broaden my knowledge and gain valuable insights into the practical aspects of being a special education teacher in an inclusive classroom. My motivation was twofold: firstly, to understand everyday challenges and strategies employed by special education teachers like Mrs. K, and secondly, to explore evidence-based practices that have proven effective in supporting children with diverse needs.

This field interview assignment will provide an in-depth analysis of my conversation with Mrs. K. It will also delve into two topics that piqued my curiosity during the interview, offering critical insights and addressing special education practices in inclusive settings.

Interviewee’s Background, Qualifications, and Certifications

Mrs. K's remarkable journey into teaching begins with humble roots in a Sunday school, nurturing young minds through music and storytelling. As she transitioned from volunteering as a classroom parent to becoming a substitute teacher and then an instructional assistant at a middle school, she discovered her affinity for teaching children and mathematics. During her graduate studies, she observed educators in the high school, reconnecting with students she taught earlier. This journey resonates with my transition from a software programmer to an early childhood educator, strengthening my determination now to pursue a Ph.D. in Education.

Since 2018, Mrs. K has excelled in teaching students aged 15 to 18 in inclusive settings, including self-contained and pull-out programs. Her expertise encompasses various exceptionalities, focusing on Intellectual Disabilities (ID). Specializing in Algebra One and Two, she currently instructs 14 out of 29 students in the inclusion classroom. Her rich qualifications and experience uniquely position her to cater to diverse student needs.

Collaboration with Multidisciplinary Team

In this setting, Mrs. K thrives on a culture of close-knit collaboration with a multidisciplinary team, which includes general education teachers, case managers, speech therapists, occupational therapists, counselors, and parents or guardians. Mrs. K, working in tandem with her dedicated case manager, ensures that parents are not just passive observers but active partners in their child's educational journey as they gather valuable input and expertise to create a comprehensive IEP tailored to each student's unique requirements. Through continuous updates, progress reports, weekly emails, and ongoing dialogues, parents gain invaluable insights into their child's IEP. Mrs. K champions the academic journeys of students with disabilities, enriching their lives one tailored step at a time. Mrs. K's collaborative approach and effective practices in addressing the needs of her students with disabilities align with my coursework, fostering a strong desire to engage and empower students and their families through effective communication in my future role as an educator.

Assessment and Data Analysis

Mrs. K meticulously reads and analyzes each student's IEP during the start of the year and is actively engaged in assessing and evaluating her students' educational needs and progress. Data is collected through assessments that include screeners, scholastic math inventory tests (at the beginning of the year and then 2-3 times during the year), and standardized assessments (Performance Matters – once in a quarter). These are then analyzed to understand student progress and identify gaps where students may require additional support or accommodations. Mrs. K meaningfully integrates these into the student's educational plan to remove learning barriers and ensure that every student has equitable access to the curriculum.

Mrs. K's school adapts the curriculum (aligned with state and county standards) to meet students' individual needs. Students with IEPs follow the same curriculum as general education students and take the same year-end exams but may receive additional support (they may be given graphic organizers). Self-contained classrooms have a modified pace and assessments, not bound by inclusion classroom requirements. For example, in Algebra One, Mrs. K's self-contained classes may skip topics like direct or inverse variation, which inclusion students cover. Inclusive classrooms use traditional paper-and-pencil teaching methods, while self-contained ones rely on calculators to cater to students' specific needs.

What I find particularly insightful is how Mrs. K translates this data into actionable steps by identifying gaps and implementing personalized strategies to support her students effectively. This experience has deepened my understanding of the crucial role of individualized assessment and strongly reinforces the principles I've been studying in my course.

Classroom Structure and Teaching Approach Using Evidence-based Strategies.

The general education classroom in Mrs. K's school follows a flexible structure where students receive whole-group instruction, followed by hands-on station rotation activities to reinforce the concepts learned during the whole group. Mrs. K emphasizes the importance of intentional scaffolding and providing one-on-one or small-group instruction for students when intensive support is warranted. Students with IEPs may be pulled out for additional instruction, double blocks, or everyday math instruction based on their needs. She uses whole-group instruction even in the self-contained classroom and incorporates frequent breaks. The teacher-student ratio is maintained below ten students per teacher. Inclusion and self-contained classrooms have different pacing and adaptations based on students' needs.

Mrs. K conducts one-on-one advisory sessions in self-contained classrooms for students needing more intensive support. In the pivotal first half-hour of a 90-minute session, dedicated case managers examine progress reports and scrutinize each student's academic journey. Armed with insights, they embark on tailored interventions for the subsequent hour.

Mrs. K also highlights the significance of using evidence-based strategies like visual aids and graphic organizers to enable students with ID to access the math curriculum effectively. She scribes for her students when they need additional help. She presents math content diagrammatically, wherever possible, in graphs, lists, flow charts, concept maps, etc., and presents real-world examples to support and enhance students' learning. She uses colors to highlight and differentiate words and concepts. This hugely benefits children with intellectual and learning disabilities (Unit 4: Teaching Strategies for Students With ID, n.d.).

To include various options for expression, she presents math concepts in various formats (handouts, worksheets, and videos). She tries to incorporate more interactive visual activities like Desmos (online calculator), especially for math, to engage children and make them more successful at grasping the concepts. Mrs. K incorporates explicit teaching and modeling strategies such as the "I do, We do, You do" model to drive a concept. She focuses on progressive stepwise learning (breaking down lesson tasks into small steps to reduce student anxiety and prevent them from getting overwhelmed) and immediate feedback. She allows the use of a dictionary for students with disabilities, explicitly highlights key concepts, and provides detailed and repetitive explanations of key terminologies. She ensures the sequences are clear, jargon-free, and explained in verbal and written forms. Mrs. K actively uses reinforcement and rewards like edibles and free time for a task well done to motivate students.

To help students manage their emotions and improve their focus, she maintains a supportive classroom environment, closely observes students' moods, uses strategies like positive reinforcement and effective communication, and discreetly provides them with options for taking breaks (using a timer displayed on the whiteboard) when needed. A "flash pass" system (Oettinger et al., 2023) indicates when students feel overwhelmed and desperately require time to themselves.

Mrs. K's school has adopted MTSS, a county-recommended platform that recommends resources for students, which takes 6 to 8 weeks. They also employ RtI, providing interventions tailored to individual needs before and after school, during study hall, and through peer tutoring. Mrs. K chose not to elaborate on this further.

Mrs. K's comprehensive overview of these evidence-based strategies equips me with valuable and practical insights for seamlessly integrating best practices. This wealth of knowledge aligns with what I've already learned about best practices and enhances my understanding by providing practical tools and strategies to better support children with disabilities in accessing the curriculum.

Professional Development

Mrs. K's school prioritizes comprehensive instructor training, covering CPR, dyslexia, anaphylaxis, restraint and seclusion, gender-based training, and EpiPen. Special education teachers receive ongoing updates on IEP development. The county supplies resources like Blackboard, Schoology, and Google tools, with some costs subsidized. Mrs. K actively participates in professional development, including recent Math Space training.

Key Insights from the Interview

Issue 1: Challenging Preconceptions About Intellectual Disabilities and Math Proficiency

During the interview, Mrs. K recounted experiences of students with intellectual disabilities excelling in math, which contradicted my assumptions. This piqued my interest due to Mrs. K's initial uncertainty and the general lack of clarity regarding these disabilities and assumptions about math proficiency. Such assumptions are rooted in the belief that mild or borderline intellectual disabilities (IQs between 55 and 79) often result in challenges with math and spatial skills.

To gain a deeper understanding, I conducted research to shed light on these intriguing insights further. Research and findings support this variability, emphasizing the need for tailored educational assessment and support for students with ID. Additionally, the mention of strong math skills or exceptional abilities in specific cognitive domain areas like math or problem-solving could align with high-functioning autism (HFA) or Asperger's syndrome (Sohn, 2022), highlighting the importance of recognizing “dual exceptionalities” (heterogeneity within the ID category) (Prior, 2014). Individuals with HFA often have average or above-average intellectual abilities and strong math skills due to their logical thinking despite social and communication challenges.

Issue 2: Embracing Technology for Enhanced Math Instruction

Mrs. K initially hesitated to use technology like visual math apps and games, fearing distractions prompting questions about their effectiveness in special education. Although she incorporates the app Desmos, she remains reserved about fully utilizing math apps and games for varied representation and enhanced engagement. My conflicting view drove further research, reinforcing the significance of these insights. Research (Ryder & Ryder, 2023), along with my KU Master's program studies, highlights the benefits of integrating technology in math education for special needs students. Technology, aligned with Universal Design for Learning (UDL), offers diverse methods for presenting math concepts. Adaptive apps customize the content, matching individual student abilities. Engaging games with gamified elements motivates and enriches learning. Accessibility features aid students with disabilities, while data-driven instruction and research evidence enhance math skills and confidence. Despite Mrs. K's concerns, amplified by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, evidence supports judicious technology integration for enriched math education in inclusive environments.

Teaching Philosophy, Future Goals, and Advice for New Special Needs Teachers

Mrs. K's journey into special education stemmed from her passion for teaching and her experiences volunteering and working with children. Her teaching philosophy revolves around mutual respect between teachers and students, and she tries to establish a classroom culture of mutual respect, where teachers show respect to students, encouraging them to reciprocate. She passionately advocates for creating an inclusive and nurturing educational environment, emphasizing open communication, acceptance, mutual respect, trust, and the unwavering belief that educators are the staunchest advocates for their students. She underscores the importance of showering students with genuine care and belief in their abilities, which are essential for their academic and personal development and ultimate success. Mrs. K believes that building strong relationships with parents, colleagues, and administrators is crucial for success in special education, teaching, and professional growth. This is her message for aspiring special educators like me. For me, this course and Mrs. K's insights have underscored the vital importance of prioritizing students in teaching. Strong student relationships drive effective teaching practices and enhance staff collaboration, benefiting both students and educators.

Mrs. K envisions herself staying in the classroom rather than pursuing leadership. She envisions herself continuing to work in the classroom and becoming an instructional coach, helping students and teachers.

Conclusion

In retrospect, upon concluding this interview, I not only delved into Mrs. K's professional journey but also acquired invaluable knowledge and a firsthand perspective into the practicalities on what to anticipate when I embark on my own special education teaching journey. From her classroom strategies to collaboration with stakeholders, the interview has significantly challenged my assumptions, enriched my understanding of the multifaceted role and responsibilities that come with being a special education teacher, deepened my commitment to providing quality education and support to students with special needs, while ultimately shaping my future approach to teaching.

The insights gleaned from this interview reminds us that each student, regardless of their abilities, deserves a supportive and enriching educational experience. As educators, advocates, and learners, we embark on this journey together, armed with knowledge and a shared commitment to the betterment of all students.

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Field Interview Questions

I have structured the questions to cover the following topics:

- **About the teacher,**
- **Her Inclination to this field of special education,**
- **about her classroom management style and**
- **how she manages her diverse learner's needs and**
- **Finally, about her advice to me as a future special education teacher.**

♦ **About The Teacher**

1. Name of your school?
2. Your current designation?
3. Did you join this school in your current role?
4. How long have you been working at this current school (with this current role)?
5. What has your career progression been? Were you a special needs teacher all along?
6. In what areas are you certified and/or experienced?
7. What age/grade level have you taught?

♦ **What is your Inclination to the Field of Special Education**

1. What is your philosophy of teaching?
2. Do you have any personal ties to special education?
3. In your opinion, what are the rewards of being a special education teacher?

4. How has serving students who (are differently abled) have disabilities changed your perspective?

5. What made you choose this profession? Have you always wanted to be a special education teacher?

♦ **Classroom Management style and assessment of Learner variability needs**

1. Do you work in a fully inclusive classroom setting or do the children receive services through a pull-out program or are they in a self-contained setting?

1 a. If it's a pull-out program, then can you please specify for what and for how many hours during a day?

1 b. If it is a self-contained setting, how many hours do the children spend per day in the General education classroom?

2. How many students are there in your class?

2 a. How do you determine the specific needs of your students with challenges, and how to best support them?

2 b. How do you determine what their challenges are?

2 c. What framework and curriculum does your school adhere to? Do you use UDL or blended learning? Do you integrate MTSS?

2 d. What do you do to meet the needs of ALL learners (especially those with disabilities)? Do you adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of the learners?

2 e. What steps do you take to establish and maintain a good working relationship with your students?

3. How have you structured your classroom to serve the needs of your students better?

4. What interventions do you use?

4 a. What evidence-based practices do you use to address learning, behavioral, and/or physical needs (assistive technology, mobility issues, etc.) of the student with a disability as well as his/her non-disabled struggling peers?

4 b. In your experience, what strategies do you use that work best for the students you currently support?

5. What forms of monitoring do you apply (tests, records, etc.)? How often do you take data and write IEPs?

6. In what ways do you collaborate, and with whom do you collaborate (therapists etc.) to meet the needs of the students?

6 a. Do you have good communication and working relationships with other teachers you work with?

6 b. How is the communication between other stakeholders?

7. What types of interactions do you have with parents and family members (do you have a communication log/sheet sent home daily, or do you call them/home visits etc.)?

7 a. In what ways has it personally helped you now to learn more about your students?

7 b. How have you involved them in the IEP process?

7 c. How do you extend their learning to their home environment?

8. What challenges have you been faced with, and what have you learned?

9. Does your school conduct professional development to improve the quality of education and the knowledge of their teachers?

♦ **Personal advancement and Guidance**

1. How do you continue to evolve as an educator?

2. What research did you (or did you) participate in as you learned to become an educator?

3. What advice do you have for me as a future special education teacher?

- **After Reflection - Questions about Instructional Practices**

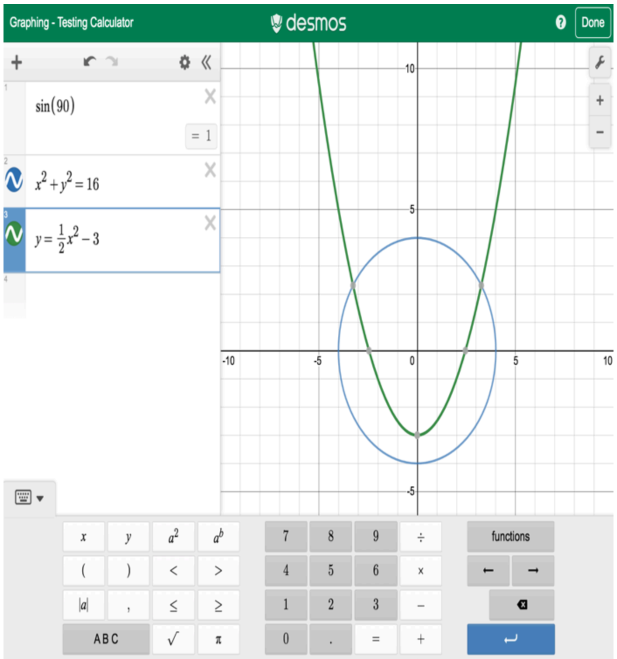
    1. How do you modify culturally responsive teaching methods and materials to both honor diverse identities and accommodate the cognitive and developmental needs of your students?

    2. Can you share examples of lessons or activities where you successfully integrated students' cultural backgrounds?

    3. What strategies do you use to continually learn about and understand your students' cultural backgrounds, values, and unique needs?

Figure 1 – Inclusion

Figure 2 – Desmos Graphing Calculator. **Figure 3 – Graphic Organizers for Math**



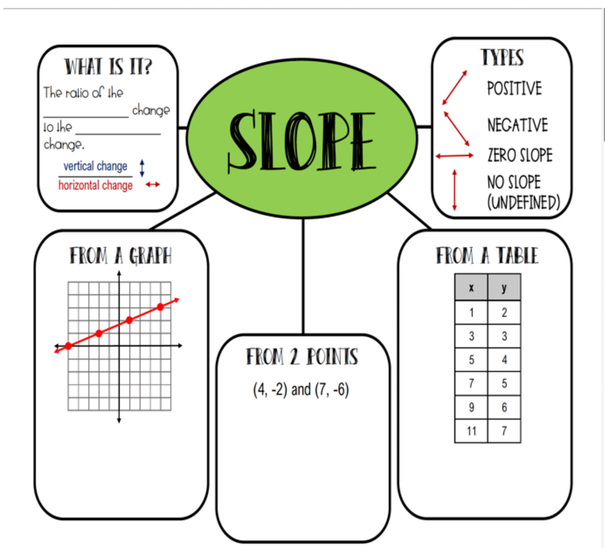


Figure 4 - Performance Matters Standardized Tests

Figure 5 - Scholastic Math Inventory

Performance Matters Assessment

Support student growth with assessment tools for your district

Boost student achievement with a districtwide assessment tool that makes it easy to develop content across all subject areas and assessments. Deliver consistent assessments across schools and secure and accurate student learning data—so curriculum teams, instructional leaders, and teachers can focus on student achievement.

Key Modules and Features

Secure assessment delivery
Deliver assessments online or by plain-paper scanning and score quickly with GradeCam integration, machine scoring, and flexible, performance-based scoring.

Item banks
Use the item bank or create custom technology-enhanced items that are fun, rigorous, and engaging. Access items for common core and state-standard alignment*. Vary your item types with authoring tools and access third-party content from providers with QTI options and certification.

Teacher/Principal dashboards
Easily monitor cohort progress, drill down on detailed student information, and aggregate class views to review assessment results and other indicators for each student.

Reporting
Get instant results and detailed feedback on student assessments. See aggregated performance with a comprehensive view in our standards heat map. Automatically score responses from math equations, visual items, graph plots, and more.

Performance-based scoring
When assessment calls for a 'less than typical' scoring mechanism, we offer performance-based scoring options designed to be as flexible as you need with your grading.

*Available for a limited number of states

Key Benefits

Build districtwide assessments
Provide educators with time-saving frameworks to build consistent assessments across the district. Use technology-enhanced items and performance.

Simply control and deliver assessments
Easily score online, paper, and non-traditional assessments like essays, musical performance, foreign language, and experiments to save time and improve outcomes for all types of learners.

Boost achievement with more accurate data
Identify performance trends to guide and personalize instruction and improve assessments with reliable insights.

Engage families in student learning
Provide families secure access to review student learning insights in student and parent portals. Online portal also includes additional support and resources for students with Khan Academy integration.

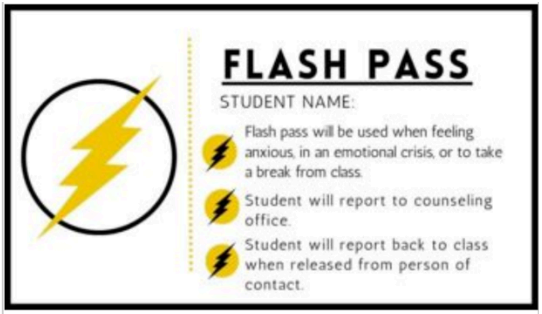
Scholastic Math Inventory (SMI)									
	Previous (2012-13) Achievement Levels					New (2013-14) Achievement Levels			
Grade	Below Basic	Basic	Proficient	Advanced	Grade	Below Basic	Basic	Proficient	Advanced
2	EM - 100	105 - 215	220 - 420	425 - 600	2	EM - 210	215 - 375	380 - 585	590+
3	EM - 215	220 - 395	400 - 520	525 - 800	3	EM - 340	345 - 495	500 - 710	715+
4	EM - 350	355 - 465	470 - 720	725 - 900	4	EM - 455	460 - 670	675 - 790	795+
5	EM - 550	555 - 675	680 - 820	825 - 1000	5	EM - 535	540 - 705	710 - 920	925+
6	EM - 640	645 - 775	780 - 950	955 - 1100	6	EM - 640	645 - 785	790 - 955	960+
7	EM - 700	705 - 885	890 - 1040	1045 - 1150	7	EM - 670	675 - 850	855 - 980	985+
8	EM - 800	805 - 1025	1030 - 1140	1145 - 1250	8	EM - 695	700 - 870	875 - 1020	1025+
9	EM - 865	870 - 1095	1100 - 1220	1225 - 1350	9	EM - 755	760 - 935	940 - 1095	1100+

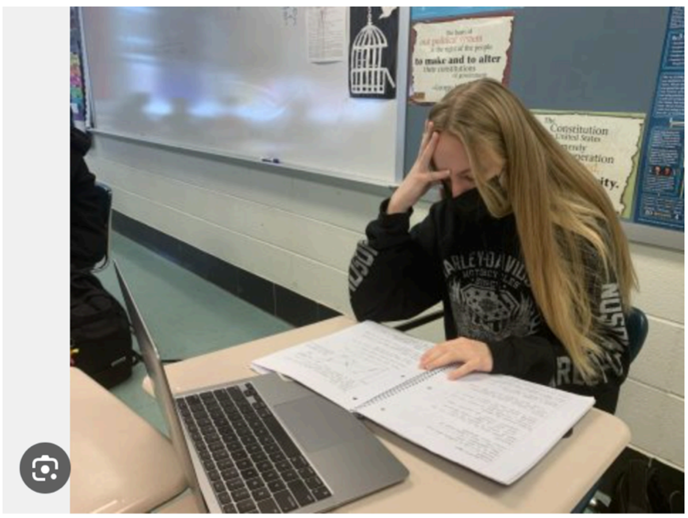
The new achievement level cut points are an improvement over previous cut points in their ability to predict performance, but they are not perfect predictors. DMPS schools and teachers should expect a 15 percent misclassification rate when predicting Iowa Assessments proficiency with the SMI and SRI basic achievement level cut point. Approximately 15 percent of all students will either be at or above the basic achievement level but not proficient on the Iowa Assessments or below the basic achievement level but proficient on the Iowa Assessments.

For more information about the SRI, SMI and Iowa Assessments, visit the websites below:

- Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI): www.scholastic.com/sri/
- Scholastic Math Inventory (SMI): http://teacher.scholastic.com/math-assessment/scholastic-math-inventory/

Figure 6 and 7 – Flash pass





Flash passes offer important breaks: Students with mental illness gain relief system – The Pitch

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