

Special Education Teacher Interview Write Up

Jennifer Aussicker

3 May 2023

EDPS 582: Practicum in the Assessment of Behavioral and Social-Emotional Needs

Dr. Karen Gischlar

Special Education Teacher Interview Write Up

Interview

For this assignment, a special education teacher named Christeen was interviewed. Christeen has been working with this population of students for 20 years. In the beginning of her career, Christeen worked as a 1:1 paraprofessional. P, Christeen works as a special education teacher in a specific learning disabilities (SLD) classroom. Christeen teaches a range of first to third grade students, with various needs, levels of learning, and abilities. Generally, there may be anywhere from one to four students in the classroom. The teacher works with students who have behavioral, social, and emotional needs, as well with students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Throughout the year this number of students may change, with students being assigned a SLD environment, or they move to a less restrictive environment such as an in-class resource (ICR) classroom or general education classroom.

The schedule of Christeen's room varies day by day, but generally looks somewhat similar throughout the week. The school day starts at 9 am, but her first two students (first graders) arrive in her classroom around 9:45 am after their morning meeting. These students do some morning work and ABA while they wait for the other students to show up. Around 10 am, the second grader joins the class after he eats snack with his homeroom class. Last, around 10:30, the third grader arrives at Christeen's room.

There is a routine in the classroom- the day begins with discussing the calendar, then talking about which day of school it is, followed by a good morning video on the SmartBoard. If there are any important dates such as holidays or birthdays, those are discussed as well. Christeen tries to include all students as best she can when doing her morning meeting,

oftentimes calling on each student to help with some aspect of it. After the video, sight words and sounds learned are reviewed. After the morning routine, centers open up and the independent work begins. Midway through the day, first and second grade students have lunch and recess, and the third grader stays back for ABA services. After lunch and recess, students return to Christeen's room and either have a group lesson or continue in centers. Generally, morning is for math and science lessons, and the afternoon is for English language acquisition (ELA). For the most part, the schedule Christeen follows revolves around the first grade schedule, since the majority of her students are first graders. After math time, most students go to their specials (ex. gym, art, library), then back to their homerooms, and pack up for the end of the day.

Best Practices: Physical Space

The general set up of the classroom is a smartboard on the front wall, two tables with four seats surrounding them face perpendicular to the board, and the teacher's table is behind the two tables. To the right of the tables houses the ABA desks, play carpet, and sensory areas. The ABA desks are two desks where ABA services are provided to Christeen students (depending on their IEPs), independent of Christeen's teachings. The carpet area is more play-focused, with games, a play kitchen, and various manipulatives for the students. Additionally, on the wall of the rug area the token boards and center visual aids are hung up. Next to the carpet area is the sensory area, equipped with foam mat flooring, a yoga ball, sensory materials on the wall, sensory toys and fidgets, some books, visual aids of emotion identifications, and scoop chairs. The sensory area is separated from the rest of the classroom using portable dividing screens approximately 3 feet tall by 5 feet long. Having these dividers is useful to keep the children receiving sensory time in their correct area, as well as not distract the students who are still working. The sensory area also

doubles as a calm-down corner for all students, especially those with behavioral and emotional needs.

In addition to the sensory area, portable dividing screens are utilized in areas of the classroom where students seem particularly distracted. Oftentimes, this can look like placing the screen between the ABA desks when Christeen is showing a video on the SmartBoard, so as not to distract the ABA therapist or the student she is working with.

With regards to seating, Christeen found that tables are the best fit for her students' needs- desks move around constantly, fingers get pinched, and tables are harder to push around. With the use of seat sacks, materials such as math journals, clipboards, noise canceling headphones, and spare visual aids are better kept rather than out on the table. Sensory pads and rubber seat bands are tools utilized by Christeen in her classroom for her students that have sensory needs. The sensory pads sit in between the child and their chair, and allows sensory input from them rocking back and forth on them while learning. Chair fidgets that promote leg movement were found to increase energy exertion by approximately 20% (Koepp et al., 2017). Rubber seat bands are placed at the base of the chair's front two legs to provide sensory input for the students' legs while working.

Bins for working materials- such as pencils, highlighters, crayons, markers, glue sticks, and scissors- can be found on each table. Small plastic cups keep these materials organized within the bin, and are taped down to ensure materials remain in the bin when not in use. Christeen has wide options for materials in her classroom, including small pencils with large round grips, dot markers, and scissors with easy-gripping handles. A large portion of Christeen's students have services like occupational therapy (OT) and physical therapy (PT). Generally,

students with one or both of these services may face difficulties with everyday tasks or motor abilities, thus, having a wide array of materials available to them can be extremely helpful.

Color coding is a tool used by Christeen in her classroom. Each student has their own color which then corresponds to their seat sack (aids in showing whose seat is whose), their work folders, and take home bins. Using these colors helps the kids quickly identify their materials, even if they have lower reading abilities.

Best Practices: Instructional Practices

A main objective of Christeen's classroom is to generalize ABA principles and practices into her everyday classroom. Some of these practices include hands on centers, boom cards, centers sheets, and flash cards. Ultimately, the materials used depend on the students' levels of ability and need. In addition to ABA practices, Christeen makes sure to follow the outline of students' IEPs, or individualized education programs. Each IEP has goals set for that student to achieve, and these goals are incorporated into daily teaching strategies to help students succeed.

Earning breaks are given to students for earning six tokens on their individual boards as part of a token economy. Token boards are hung up on a wall next to each other, and tokens are earned for working nicely and quietly. Typically, earning intervals for each token is about every 10 minutes, with some variation depending on the student and their individual needs. When all six tokens are earned, the student tells the teacher, they set the timer for five minutes, and choose something from the rug area to play with. When the five minutes are completed, the student turns off the timer, cleans up the rug area, and returns to the station they were at previously. The token economy set in place does not expand to children with their own earning systems, normally outlined in their BIPs, or behavior intervention plans. In the case of a student having their own

token economy, Christeen and the other staff work together to fulfill the needs of giving tokens and provide earning time for those students as well. Token economies are notably effective, “The overall Tau-U was large ... results provide preliminary evidence that a [token economy] is an effective intervention” (Soares et al., 2016). By using token economies as an intervention strategy, students learn that their following directions and working nicely earns them a preferred activity, reinforcing their behavior.

Sensory breaks are given to students for sensory needs. Some students are on ‘sensory diets-’ or regularly scheduled sensory breaks to incorporate movement in their day and enhance their learning experience by inputting sensory information and aids in their focus and endurance with school work. With regards to sensory breaks, it has been found that “Sensory diets administered in brief sessions in the school day appear to be effective in improving children’s sensory processing, psychosocial, and classroom engagement behaviors and may have a continued beneficial effect” (Pingale, Fletcher, & Candler, 2019). Typically, students with sensory diets in Christeen’s room have movement breaks every hour or so, or more frequently depending on the needs of the individual student. Sensory breaks are taken in the sensory area of the classroom. Along with sensory breaks, Christeen implements full-classroom movement breaks with the use of videos on the SmartBoard that aim to get the students moving and focused again.

During math lessons, Christeen turns the activities into games in order to keep attention and make learning fun. One example of this is students working on recognizing patterns, then playing UNO at a station during center time. The students still practice this skill, while playing a game with their classmates and have fun while doing it.

There are three centers set up in the classroom: center 1 is located at the teacher's table in the back of the room, and centers 2 and 3 are located at the tables by the SmartBoard. At center 1, the teacher works in small groups or 1:1 with students, and monitors their progress. Generally at centers 2 and 3, there is a classroom aide at each table for assisting the students. All centers have work that revolves around the group lesson taught before center time. Each center also has individualized work for the students, which is beneficial when students are all at different levels of learning. Having more customized material helps best fit the students' needs. These characteristics fall in line with research surrounding center-based learning, "... learning centers should be organized based on children's needs and interests and flexible and adaptable ..."

(Ramazan, Çiftçi, & Tezel, 2018). As Christeen keeps the centers filled with new material for learning that is also an appropriate level for the student, she is encouraging their learning.

Christeen uses many visual aids in her classroom. Along the walls, there are visual aids spanning from the daily calendar, shapes, numbers, colors, and center boards. Visual aids can be essential when it comes to "decreas[ing] the demands of internal representation in short and long term memory by providing an external representation ... external representation promotes cognitive efficiency by off-loading information and freeing-up limited resources that can be used to analyze and interpret to-be-learned information" (Schraw & Richmond, 2022). Next, center boards are visual aids that have two columns: the first houses all three center squares. When Christeen says to rotate centers, a student finishes their work and moves their corresponding center square (ex. center 1, center 2) to the finished column. This aids the students in understanding what is finished and what is left to do, as well as providing a visual for which center to move to next. Other visual aids are rules of the classroom, which are displayed on the white board. There are individual rule cards for students with behavioral needs, but too much can

also be a bad thing. Christeen uses only a few rules to focus on (ex. keep hands to yourself, quiet voice, wait nicely), and keeps this rule card in their working space as a visual reminder of the rules they are expected to follow.

Another component of her classroom that is of importance is the volume level. Christeen has found that volume level can greatly impact how children study. For this reason, only normal talking voice is allowed in the classroom. Christeen aims to use a monotone, but excited, voice when teaching in the classroom in order to keep the students calm but also remain animated and interesting. Christeen also often plays classical music or instrumental versions of songs in the background while students are working. She finds this music to be calming and keeps the students engaged as they work. Classical music has also been found to decrease behaviors in the classroom, as well as increase the quality of student work (Waugh & Riddoch, 2007). If a student has a particularly hard time with sounds, they are able and encouraged to go for a walk, or take some time in the calm down corner where it is a little quieter, given the dividing barrier between the classroom and the sensory area.

Conclusions

This interview was an enlightening experience for me. I have worked with Christeen here and there during the last eight months professionally, but to hear her speak so confidently and passionately about her teaching practices was inspiring. Christeen has so much love in her heart for her students, and it is clear that she only wants to create an environment that will inspire growth emotionally and academically.

With reference to best practices, I do not have any recommendations. Christeen is well versed in token economies, flexible seating, sensory input, movement breaks, organizational

skills, color coding, keeping a consistent schedule, and incorporating games into learning. As time goes on and more research comes about for various practices that seem to be most successful, those can be reviewed and put into practice. Until then, it is in my opinion that Christeen should continue teaching as normal, and continue to foster a classroom of kindness, calmness, and learning.

References

- Gabriel A. Koepp, Graham Moore, & James A. Levine. (2017). An Under-the-Table Leg-Movement Apparatus and Changes in Energy Expenditure. *Frontiers in Physiology*, 8. <https://doi-org.rider.idm.oclc.org/10.3389/fphys.2017.00318>
- Oya Ramazan, Hande Arslan Çiftçi, & Merve Tezel. (2018). The determination of conditions of learning centers in preschool classrooms and the analysis of teachers' views on learning centers. *Erken Çocukluk Çalışmaları Dergisi*, 2(2), 213–233. <https://doi-org.rider.idm.oclc.org/10.24130/eccd-jecs.196720182258>
- Pingale, V., Fletcher, T., & Candler, C. (2019). The Effects of Sensory Diets on Children's Classroom Behaviors. *Journal of Occupational Therapy, Schools & Early Intervention*, 12(2), 225–238. <https://doi-org.rider.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/19411243.2019.1592054>
- Schraw, G., & Richmond, A. S. (2022). Using Visual Displays to Improve Classroom Thinking. *Educational Research: Theory and Practice*, 33(2), 80–102.
- Soares, D. A., Harrison, J. R., Vannest, K. J., & McClelland, S. S. (2016). Effect Size for Token Economy Use in Contemporary Classroom Settings: A Meta-Analysis of Single-Case Research. *School Psychology Review*, 45(4), 379–399. <https://doi-org.rider.idm.oclc.org/10.17105/SPR45-4.379-399>
- Waugh, R. F., & Riddoch, J. V. (2007). The Effect of Classical Music on Painting Quality and Classroom Behaviour for Students with Severe Intellectual Disabilities in Special Schools. *International Journal of Special Education*, 22(3), 2–13.