School Psychologist Interview Project

Cathy Hunter is a school psychologist in the Whitley County Consolidated School District. She is responsible for four elementary schools, two middle schools and one high school in her district. She kindly took time out of her busy schedule to be interviewed by me and four of my fellow classmates, after school on April 24, 2007. Cathy graduated from Manchester College with a bachelor’s degree in psychology. She had to go on to get her masters degree at Ball State University to become a school psychologist. Cathy met with us at Indian Springs Middle School in Columbia City. She had done interviews in the past and kindly came to our meeting well prepared with all of her tests and bookmarked places to highlight within the tests. She wasted no time in beginning to dispense her wealth of information. She explained that she preferred to use mostly norm referenced and standardized assessments. Cathy talked us through the basics of what we needed to know about the Behavior Assessment System for Children, a norm-referenced test, the Woodcock Johnson Test of Achievement, Kaufman Brief Intelligence Test, Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children and Developmental Test of Visual and Motor Intelligence which were all standardized tests. Before we concluded our interview we were also able to discuss methods of informal assessments that Cathy uses such as behavioral observations she makes while administering tests and frequency counts she sometimes does when observing a child in class.
The first test that Cathy introduced us to was the Behavior Assessment System for Children 2nd Edition which is often abbreviated as the BASC-2. The BASC is a norm-referenced test that seeks to identify students whose behavior is different than that expected of an average person their age. The BASC looks at characteristics such as hyperactivity, aggression, depression, anxiety, attention span, atypicallity, withdrawn behavior and more. The test results come in the form of t-scores which can be compared to the mean. One of the great things about the BASC, as Cathy pointed out, is that it comes with a computer program that helps the data be interpreted. In the computer printout each behavior is given a score. 50 is an average score and scores can lie above or below the mean. High scores on some behaviors like attention span would be a good thing and would indicate that the child does exceptionally well at staying on task. On other categories such as withdrawn behavior, if a child scores high this may indicate a problem such as depression. On the computer print out of the results each score in each category is marked as either normal, at risk or clinically significant. These results can then be easy discussed with parents. Another great aspect of the BASC is the teacher and parent survey on child’s behaviors. The computer software also makes the results of this test easy to interpret because it automatically prints out a graph showing the results of the parent survey as compared to the results of the teacher survey. Cathy loves the BASC-2 because it is not simply a checklist focused on one behavior issue, but rather it covers all the possible behavior problems that could be present in a child. Cathy explained that the BASC-2 is designed for ages 2 through 21-11. She said there is also a self-report version of the BASC for 6th graders through college age. Cathy further explained that when she originally began as a school psychologist she looked for results on tests
such as the BASC that were discrepancies between ability and achievement. She went on to describe how she has now had to change her thinking process and instead gear her mindset towards focusing on response to intervention.

The BASC is a great test to help educators and psychologists determine if a behavior problem that is being seen in the classroom is actually significant based on statistics. After learning about this test I would recommend using it for any student that has a suspected behavior issue of any kind because it is designed to measure every type of behavior problem. This could be used before a Case Conference Committee meeting but could also be used after a child is diagnosed with an emotional disorder to determine if his emotional well being has gotten better or worse. Any child who scores in the “clinically significant” range should most likely be recommended for services. Children who score in the “at risk” should be considered for services but other assessments should still be considered.


The second test that Cathy introduced us to was the Woodcock Johnson Test of Achievement. Cathy likes how this test starts off very basic and then progressively gets more difficult. The Woodcock Johnson uses a flip chart and individual student protocols to help assess a child’s word identification skills, reading comprehension and math computation. There are three different levels of skills tested. The test begins with basic skills, progresses with more in depth skills and finally advances to fluency skills. The flip chart tested the child’s word identification skills by having them read words or identify a word that corresponded to a picture. The reading comprehension section used sentences such as “You can eat an apple” and asked the child to circle on their student protocol whether this statement was true or false. Cathy said that
she usually uses this test on elementary students but uses it in high school settings too. The test can be used on ages 2 through 80. Next, she showed us the math portion of the test. I was surprised by how overwhelming the pages were. One page was completely filled with probably 70 multiplication problems. Cathy explained that this test can be very intimidating for kids to look at a page so full of math problems. She said that she usually tries to make them feel more comfortable by telling them that it’s okay if they don’t know how to do all of them because even she doesn’t know how to do them all! To score the Woodcock Johnson you must subtract wrong answers from right answers which Cathy said she didn’t think was fair but made sense in the result determination. We asked Cathy how she determined where a child should start taking the test. She answered that she uses the test protocol to determine this and that she often will start a child lower than she thinks they need just so that they can gain confidence and relax a little. On the section that tested writing fluency the Woodcock Johnson gives writing prompts and asks the subject to write as many sentences in 7 minutes as possible. The subjects are given so that this section is not testing retrieval but simply fluency. Lastly there is a writing sample section which once again gives the subject prompts and asks them to write without counting spelling errors against them. Cathy said that sometimes she sees that kids do not do well with retrieval on the word fill in the blanks but do well on the writing fluency section. She then will often give the student a second test, different than the Woodcock Johnson to try to determine where their ability level truly is. After learning about this test I think that it would be a great assessment to use for children that might be considered for a Learning Disability or Mild Mental Handicap. The reason for this is that it is an assessment that looks at a total picture of the child’s intelligence but also isolates individual areas of skills that children could have strengths or weaknesses in. If a child is struggling with any aspect of reading, as a special educator I would request that this test
be administered because it really gives a variety of assessments focused on literacy skills. I did not like how the math portion of the assessment was set up because it seemed overwhelming to me as a college student, much less a young child. I would probably look at the results of the math portion of this test but explain to parents in a CCC meeting that this assessment can be very overwhelming to students. I would definitely request that a student be tested with another test if they scored lower than average on the math portion of this test.


The Kaufman Brief Intelligence Test or KBIT, is a standardized assessment that Cathy often uses if one of her first intelligence tests indicates that a child is in an average ability range. This means that she would never use this test for a child that may be a candidate for Mild or Moderate Mental Handicaps. This test really caught my eye because it consists of a flipchart with many bright and colorful pictures that made all the other flip charts look boring! One of the example questions that she showed us was a card that had 6 different animals on it. The instructor was prompted (on the back of the card) to ask the student, “Which of these animals is furry?” The administer then would mark whether the child got the question right or wrong on their answer sheet. Another way this test assessed children was through oral riddles in which the test administrator would give the child 6 characteristics about something and the child would have to identify what was being talked about. For example one of the clues for the answer “dog” was “what is something that wags it’s tail and barks?” One of the neat things that we noticed about the KBIT is that there are answers in Spanish on the administrator’s guide. Cathy said that the KBIT is designed to test the receptive language, auditory input, and nonverbal pattern and comparison skills of people from age 4 to 90. In the words of the test booklet, the KBIT is a, “Brief individual assessment of verbal and nonverbal cognitive ability.”
This test would be a great test to use for children who are English Learners or who are Bilingual. I think that it should still be administered by someone who knows a good degree of Spanish to give the child a fair chance. Cathy said that she used this test to assess a child who had been adopted at age 6 from Russia. She said that she still needed to get an interpreter from Fort Wayne to help her. I think this test would be a good test to test any child who might possibly have a learning disability. Cathy also noted that she often uses this test for children who might have or do have autism because of the nonverbal portion. I found this very interesting; It is a good thing to keep in mind for future planning.


The WISC-4 is a standardized assessment for ages 6 through 16-11. There is also a version for 2 through 6-11 called the WIPSY and a version for 16 through 89 called the WAISC. Cathy said that she likes the way that this test overlaps in its age brackets. The WISC tests four different areas. It tests verbal comprehension, perceptual reasoning, working memory and processing speed. The test also gives a full scale IQ score as well. One of the really cool things about the WISC is that it includes manipulative in the form of red and white blocks with different shapes on them. Subjects that take this test are asked to replicate a pattern that they see with these blocks. For young children, the pattern is demonstrated with blocks by the administrator. The test gets progressively more difficult as subjects are asked to copy from a picture which has varying levels of difficulty. As the test advances in difficulty the subject begins to be timed. Bonus points are added to the subject’s IQ score if he completes the puzzle faster. This test is great for people who have excellent spatial skills. Another aspect of the test asks the subject to
make generalizations about two things. In other words, they must describe how two things, such as the colors red and blue, are alike. For this section of the test young children may receive a couple prompts on their first few questions. There are asterisks next to questions that the administrator may prompt on. One of the most confusing parts of the test was the section that tested working memory. This section consisted of series of digits that subjects must memorize and repeat forwards. As the test became more difficult the series became longer and the subject was also asked to repeat the series backwards. Cathy let us try to take part of the WISC which was a neat experience. We got to look at a colorful flip chart that had 3 different rows of pictures. We had to pick one picture from each row that went with an overall theme. It was very difficult! Another interesting part of the assessment was the part that tested visual memory. This section asked the subject to match symbols to numbers and draw symbols in patterns. The subject was allowed 2 minutes to complete as many parts of this section that they could. The test also included a vocabulary section in which the subject was given a word and then were asked to give a definition. Lastly, Cathy showed us a number sequencing section in which the subject had to order things from smallest to larger and also look at matrix reasoning pictures and figure out the relationships between many different elements of the picture. I really like the many different aspects of the WISC. It was my favorite test that we were able to experience because of the variety of methods used to assess. It appeared to me to be very thorough, well research, and almost enjoyable to take. In fact, as we practiced taking it, I thought to myself, “They could make a fun board game out of these puzzles. I would buy it!”

Because this was my favorite test and was, in my opinion, by far the most engaging of all the tests, I would request this test be administered to my students. I made a note to myself that any child who may be struggling in academic subjects but who shows competence in art might
really be a great candidate for this test because it relies heavily on spatial abilities. I also like how this test is broken into easily digestible sections. I believe that it would be excellent for children with ADD. Cathy said that she usually uses this as her second test but I think it could also be used as a first form of assessment as well. As a special educator I feel like I could trust the results of this test more than any other.


The standardized assessment that Cathy showed us was the Development test of Visual Motor Integration or DVMI. We only discussed this test briefly. She said that she liked this test because it was non threatening to the kids because they got to draw. She often uses this test as a second form of assessment after she has already done one standardized assessment. This test helps her see if the kids have poor planning skills in drawing shapes and other objects. One of the things she didn’t like about this test is that it does not allow children to use erasers which can be very frustrating for children.

This test would be a great test for very young children because of its non threatening nature. I would recommend this for 2nd graders and down. I would also recommend it for children with handwriting and fine motor problems or children with more significant disabilities who are not capable of math computation or reading yet.

Informal Assessment: Behavioral Observation

(C. Hunter, personal communication, April 24, 2007)
At first when we asked Cathy about informal assessments she said that she did not do any informal assessment. We then further clarified what we were looking for and she quickly began to explain some of the methods she uses. She said that during the administration of a standardized or norm referenced test she likes to watch the student carefully. She usually jots notes down to herself about how the subject acted. One of the things she always looks for is if the child uses their fingers to count. This can tell a lot if the subject is in high school, but would be normal for a 1st grader. She told us about one child that came in and sat down across from her with his arms crossed, refusing to take the test. Of course then she was able to write about this in her report for the Case Conference Committee meeting. She pulled out one of her reports and read something that she had written about a child, “She was cooperative during the assessment. I noticed that she verbalized sentences before writing.” Cathy said that she likes to include as much supplemental information in her reports as possible because many times students will behave differently in their one on one session with her than they will in the classroom or at home.

This type of informal assessment is the kind of thing that will be very useful at the case conference. As a special educator I will pay special note to how the child behaved his or her one on one session with the school psychologist and compare this with how he or she behaved in other settings. This is important because it might give insight to how the child learns the best. Informal assessment of behaviors is something that is going on constantly in any good teacher’s head and that also must be constantly documented by a special educator.

Informal Assessment: Frequency Count

(C. Hunter, personal communication, April 24, 2007)
We asked Cathy if she ever did any sorts of observing outside of her pullout sessions with students. She said that because she moved around from school to school so much that she didn’t have much contact with kids other than times that she was scheduled with them. She said that sometimes she did do frequency counts at the request of a teacher or administrator. To do these she would be invited into a classroom and would sit quietly and observe. The goal of this kind of informal assessment is to make a record of off task behavior and to determine how often it occurs. Cathy said that she usually does this assessment by bringing a form with blank lines on it and a place to check “on task” or “off task.” She begins by marking the time that she starts the session. Every minute she looks at the subject and marks him as either “on task” or “off task.” Then on the corresponding lines she write what his actual behavior was in comparison to what he should have been doing. She said that she usually does this for a section of time that is natural to the flow of the classroom setting. Cathy also said that she likes to do this during times that most of the problems are occurring. For example, if a lot of issues were happening during gym, that’s when Cathy would go to observe. She said that she has used this kind of informal assessment most often on subjects that had been diagnosed or were being considered for a diagnosis of ADD.

I have done one frequency count while conducting my functional behavior assessment. This kind of informal assessment should be included in the school psychologist’s report as it can supplement the test results from a standardized test such as the BASC-2. It could also be used in setting IEP goals. For example, a goal could be that in a one hour period, the student will be on task 90% of the time. This goal could be based on the results of a frequency count. After a significant time had passed I would ask a school psychologist to conduct another behavior assessment and compare the results of the two to see if improvement was made towards the goal.
Conclusion

I am so glad that I had the privilege of meeting with Cathy. She was an excellent person to interview because she was warm, friendly, and well prepared for our meeting. She wasted no time in getting us the information we needed and I think that she enjoyed showing us the processes that she goes through. After talking with Cathy I am now 110% more comfortable talking about standardized and norm referenced test. I certainly gained a great deal of insight into the testing processes that I strongly believe will help me in my future career as a special educator.