

# Teacher Spotlight: Ma

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By [Gina Fugnitto](#) | Categories: [SIPPS](#), [Interviews](#), [Teacher Spotlight](#), [Thought Leadership](#)

*Collaborative Classroom* is honored to feature special education teacher [Mariko Wesley-Fagundes](#), from Union High School District in West Sonoma County, California, for this Teacher Spotlight. Mariko explains why it is essential to provide materials uniquely designed to support older readers like our [SIPPS \(Systematic Instruction in Phonological Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words\)](#) program.

**What experiences have you had as an educator and a teacher of *SIPPS*?**



I am a special education teacher in Union High School District in West Sonoma County, California. For 23 years, I have been teaching in a special day class with kids who are between grades 6 and 8 on a general education campus. My students have a variety of diagnoses including Cerebral Palsy, Down Syndrome, intellectual disability, and autism. My

students' reading abilities range from pre-K to grade 6 level.

This is my third year teaching *SIPPS* Plus and my second teaching *SIPPS* Challenge. I teach three to four *SIPPS* groups per day, five days a week. It has fit seamlessly into my classroom routine and was incredibly easy to implement.

**From your perspective as an education specialist, why is it important to provide materials uniquely designed to support older readers?**

It is incredibly important to have materials that are age-appropriate, respectful to older students, and matching the age and interest level of the students we are teaching.

Dr. Seuss is great for kindergarten and grade 1 but once a child is older, it is demeaning and crushing to students who are struggling readers to see that they are still trying to sound out "red" in a "baby book."

The *SIPPS* hi-lo fluency libraries are ideal, high-interest, low-reading-level books to supplement the reading students do during lessons and help foster and cement their love of recreational reading. For the first time in my teaching career, I have students reading meaningfully during silent reading time, not just pretending to read or choosing picture books.

**What has been the academic, social, and emotional impact on your middle-school students?**

The academic impact of this program has been astounding!

My students have been in special day classes for most of their lives and many of them have low self-concept when it comes to academics. They feel less-than and there is a sense of learned helplessness. Previously, before *SIPPS*, some students would not even look at the page while reading and instead, waited for an adult to mouth the words they didn't know. They did not have any way of approaching an unknown word that they did not already know as a sight word. Since my students have significant working memory issues, it was very hard for them to remember all words as sight words—making them hesitant to read aloud in front of their friends and peers, hesitant to read at home in front of their siblings, and hesitant to read in general.

Due to a lack of automaticity (fluent reading), the students had a very hard time comprehending the material they were reading. For example, students were reading a sentence like "The black and white cow was running on the field" at a rate of 10 words a minute. And the struggle to decode just prevented them from understanding what they read.

Now, after *SIPPS* implementation, students who swore that they can't read or that they dislike reading now say that they enjoy reading or enjoy coming to *SIPPS* group! My readers are confident, feel good about reading, volunteer to read aloud, and have the skills to approach unfamiliar words with learned strategies.

The data is also showing measurable growth; every single student has made some measure of progress. For example, a student who tested at a 1.5 reading level coming into grade 6 is now (three years later) reading at a 6.3 reading level. This is a serious success story!

It may sound challenging to make time to plan for and teach four *SIPPS* groups, but when students can start to be motivated in reading, it unlocks a world of learning for them, and it has been well worth it! I am very proud of the progress my students!



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