

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

The research conducted in this study provides a description of the teaching practices used by special and general educators with students with LD in inclusive instructional settings at the middle school level. This chapter summarizes the overall findings from the special educator and general educator focus groups, examining discrepancies and similarities among their responses.

This chapter begins with a description of the demographic information collected from all participants. The description specifically provides information on the educational background and experiences of these educators. Following this profile, responses to questionnaire items regarding the critical components of special education are shared. In addition, an overall description of the common characteristics of most middle school students with LD in inclusive instructional settings is discussed from the perspective of both special and general educators.

Data from the focus group discussions are organized by common themes that emerged throughout both special and general educator interviews. As suggested by Merriam (1998), these themes are explained on three levels. First, a general description of each theme is provided, identifying particular patterns seen in the data. Next, patterns of each theme are illustrated with supporting quotations from group participants. Lastly, information gathered from conversations between the moderator and assistant moderator at the end of each focus group is discussed to demonstrate group dynamics, including participant behavior.

As the findings of this study are reported throughout the chapter, two codes have been established so that quotes can be attributed to teacher groups. For special educator, SE is used; and for general educator, GE is used. For example, a quotation cited from a participant in the

first general educator focus group is coded as GE Group 1. Such codes, however, will only be used to reference the source of the quote.

### Profile of the Participants

Demographic information was collected from participants at the beginning of each focus group through their completion of a form that requested participants to respond to several questions about themselves, including educational background and experience. Table 1 provides a comparison of the two groups of educators based on demographic characteristics noted on the forms.

Table 1

Demographic Information of Special and General Educators

	Special Educators		General Educators	
	No.	%	No.	%
Total No. Participants	14	41%	20	59%
Race				
Black	5	35%	6	30%
White	9	65%	14	70%
Sex				
Females	14	100%	18	90%
Males	0	0%	2	10%

Table 1 (Continued)

	Special Educators		General Educators	
	No.	%	No.	%
Years Teaching Experience				
0 - 3	1	7%	7	35%
4 - 7	4	29%	3	15%
8 - 12	3	21%	5	25%
13 -15	2	14%	2	10%
<15	4	29%	3	15%
Years Experience in Inclusive				
Setting				
0 - 3	9	65%	10	50%
4 - 7	1	7%	4	20%
8 - 10	1	7%	4	20%
<10	3	21%	2	10%
Licensure				
Provisional	3	21%	3	15%
Bachelor's	5	35%	7	35%
Master's	3	21%	9	45%
Master's plus 30 hours	3	21%	1	5%
Multiple Endorsements	12	86%	1	5%

A total of 3 special educator and 3 general educator focus groups were conducted for this study. The 3 special educator focus groups consisted of a similar number of participants. The first two groups had 5 participants, and the last one had 4 participants. In the last group, 2 additional special educators confirmed the day before that they were going to participate in the focus group, but they failed to attend the session. The general educator focus groups also consisted of a similar number of participants with the first two groups having 6 participants and the last group having 8 participants. Of the approximately 65 special educators working in inclusive instructional settings, 14 (21%) of the selected agreed to participate in the focus groups. Of the approximately 270 general educators working in inclusive instructional settings, 20 (7.5%) of the selected agreed to participate in the focus groups. The 14 special educators represented 41% of the sample in this study, and the 20 general educators represented 59%. In addition, racial and gender representation was similar in both special educator and general educator focus groups. However, special educators were represented by all females, and 10% of the 20 general educators were males.

As indicated by Table 1, more general educators (35%) fell into the 1-3 three years of teaching experience category than special educators (7%). However, more special educators (29%) had greater than 15 years teaching experience in comparison to general educators (15%). In addition, the majority of special educators (65%) and general educators (50%) participants had only 1-3 years experience teaching in the inclusion model at the middle schools.

With respect to licensure, three special educators (21%) and three general educators (15%) held provisional teaching licensures. Licensures based on possession of a Bachelor's degree were held by 35% of special and general educators. Postgraduate licensures were held by 50% of general educators, with 45% possessing a Master's degree and 5% possessing a Master's

degree plus 30 hours. Postgraduate licensures were held by 42% of special educators, with 21% possessing a Master's degree and 21% possessing a Master's degree plus 30 additional hours.

Furthermore, 86% of the special educators held multiple endorsements with 10 certified to teach other exceptionalities besides LD, and 2 certified to teach disciplines other than special education (marketing and health/physical education). Only 5% of the general educators held multiple licensures, with one general educator being endorsed in special education along with reading and computer applications.

### Critical Components of Special Education Questionnaire

Prior to the discussion, focus group participants within each group worked together to complete a questionnaire on the critical components of special education, addressing the purpose of the IDEA, the definition of special education, purpose of an IEP, the meaning of FAPE, and the intent of LRE. See Appendix N and O for individual group responses to each question. These data were collected to get a sense of how these different sets of educators understand special education. Such information is an important foundation needed to interpret the perspectives of these groups with respect to providing instruction to students with LD in the general education classroom. Legal definitions of the above mentioned components can be found in the Definitions section of Chapter 1.

The first question of the questionnaire addressed the purpose of the IDEA. Special educators mentioned that the purpose was to provide students with LD a free and appropriate public education through services in the LRE. In addition, special educators focused more on curricular accommodations, modifications, and supports needed for students with LD instead of focusing on meeting their unique disability-related educational needs. SE Group 1 even stated the IDEA was developed to ensure that “individuals with disabilities have equal access to the

same programs as others,” which is not even a provision of the IDEA. General educators also discussed that the purpose of the IDEA was to provide similar opportunities to students with disabilities, as well as to include students with disabilities in the LRE. GE Group 2, however, stated that the purpose of the IDEA is “to afford students with disabilities individualized programs to meet their educational needs in the least restrictive environment.” This group captured the importance of individualization but made no mention of the accommodations, modifications, or supports to address the curriculum.

For the second question, the majority of the groups provided a very basic definition of special education, stating that special education should meet the needs of students with LD. Only one special educator group, SE Group 3, defined special education as specialized instruction. SE Group 1 expanded upon this stating “special education is an educational program that provides a cascade of services to assist students with disabilities so they can participate to the greatest extent possible in mainstreamed educational settings.” Although the correct phrase should be to the greatest extent appropriate in the general education curriculum, this group’s response in combination with the response from SE Group 1 captures the spirit of special education according to the IDEA.

In response to the third question, which addressed the purpose of an IEP, all groups with the exception of the third special educator group stated that IEPs serve as outlines, mapping out how to educate students with disabilities. SE Group 3, more specifically, described the IEP as the following:

A legal document that identifies a student with a disability’s present level of performance, the extent to which the disability impacts the student’s ability to participate in the general education environment, and the strategies, accommodations, modifications,

and related services to be provided to assist the student access the general education curriculum.

This definition, however, addresses primarily general education access as opposed to meeting the unique educational needs of students with LD.

For the fourth question, concerning the meaning of FAPE, several of the groups focused on the fact that FAPE guarantees students with disabilities simply a free education, whereas several other groups refined this idea with its legal intent, stating that FAPE ensures students with disabilities services or a program to meet their individual needs so that they can benefit to the fullest from their educational program.

The last question addressing the critical components of special education concerned the intent of the LRE. Special educator responses, generally, focused on educating students with disabilities with their nondisabled peers to the greatest extent appropriate. General educator responses, however, focused on the benefits of students with disabilities being educated in the general education classroom--the setting they considered to be the LRE.

The above data were collected because it is important to understand how special and general educators understand their instructional roles and responsibilities under the law for teaching students with LD. Although it may be suspected that special educators have a better understanding of these components, responses exhibited that, overall, special educators are no more knowledgeable of these components than general educators. Additionally, both sets of educators were more concerned about the imperatives of the general curriculum instead of meeting the unique educational needs of students with LD.

## Common Characteristics of Students With LD

As it is important to get a sense of how special and general educators understand major components of special education law, it is also necessary to know how these two sets of educators characterize students with LD prior to data interpretation. Although Turnbull et al. (1995) noted that “there is no such thing as a typical profile of students with learning disabilities” (p. 146), there are common characteristics shared by students with LD. Students with LD often have poor basic academic skills in reading, written language, or math; poor memory skills; deficits in metacognition; attention problems; behavior problems; and weaknesses in specific social skills (Turnbull et al). It is important to note, however, that not all students with LD possess all of these characteristics.

Special educators described students with LD as lacking both organizational and study skills, possessing poor writing and reading comprehension skills, needing much encouragement and praise, and needing key concepts broken down into smaller parts. In addition, special educators reported that students with LD often do not complete assignments or fully participate in classroom activities and discussions.

As did special educators, general educators also described students with LD as disorganized. General educators further noted that students with LD are inattentive and unable to focus during various academic activities. According to these educators, such students have poor self-esteem and are less confident than their nondisabled peers. General educators stated that students with LD often have poor reading and basic math skills as mentioned by special educators, but they also noted that students with LD have evident strengths. In addition, general educators stressed that students with LD lack an understanding of their disability.

Although there were a few similarities between the above two descriptions, there were also differences. Special educators focused on the skills of the students with LD and their academic performance in the general education classroom. General educators, on the other hand, discussed both the level of self-esteem and confidence of students with LD but also made a point of noting that students with LD have strengths along with their weaknesses.

### Overview of the Findings

Six major themes emerged during focus group discussions with special and general educators working in inclusive instructional settings at middle schools. They consisted of the absence of planning time, the use of whole group instruction rather than specialized instruction, the controversy surrounding adjusting the instruction for students with LD, the unshared responsibility of classroom management, the importance of educators showing students with LD that they care, and the limited monitoring of the academic progress of students with LD.

Because there is no common planning time built into the school day for these two sets of educators to plan together, plans of general educators are either not shared at all or they exchange hands between the two sets of educators without discussion. In addition, the allotted daily planning time of special and general educators is not equitable. General educators often have two daily class periods designated for planning, and special educators have only one.

As a result of no common planning time and general educators being the one in charge of classroom instruction, it was reported by focus group participants that whole group instruction is common practice. Instruction in the inclusive classroom is also described as inflexible because general educators follow a strict curriculum map guided by state standards; however, various instructional strategies used by general educators in inclusive instructional settings benefit students with LD. Special educators in this study find that their time in the general education

classroom is dominated by accommodating students with poor reading skills. They spend little time providing specialized instruction even in resource class because the focus is on reviewing content material and making sure students have completed assignments. In conclusion of this topic, both special and general educators recognized that they do not fully understand the roles and responsibilities of each other in inclusive instructional settings.

Another major theme that emerged during focus group discussions was the controversy surrounding instructional adjustments for students with LD, which included the participation of general educators in the development of IEPs. From the perspective of special educators in this study, the responsibility of doing accommodations for students with LD falls on them; however, general educators expressed it is a shared responsibility. Additionally, special educators reported that the participation of general educators in IEP development involves only a signature, whereas general educators stressed that their involvement in this involves more than just a signature.

The fourth theme that surfaced is that classroom responsibility is not shared between special and general educators. Special educator participants reported that classroom management is often solely their responsibility; however, both special and general educators agreed that classroom management, particularly the use of routines, is important for students with LD to be successful in the general education classroom.

Educators showing students with LD that they care about them and their educational success is the next major theme that appeared during data collection. Special and general educator participants equally stressed the importance of providing students with LD praise and encouragement to keep them motivated in the general education classroom. General educators added that discussing individual differences with the class also made students with LD feel comfortable, as well as accepted, in the inclusive instructional setting.

Finally, the last theme discovered was that special and general educators do limited monitoring of the learning and academic progress of students with LD. Special educator participants briefly discussed the need for progress monitoring to determine what must be focused on in resource class. General educator participants emphasized that legally they feel obligated to monitor progress of students with LD but that this is really the responsibility of special educators. General educators, however, noted that some monitoring on their part is necessary for planning and instruction.

The above description represents a brief overview of the findings that emerged from the data collected in focus group discussions with middle school special and general educators working in inclusive instructional settings in one urban school district. The next section provides an in depth look at each theme, discussing responses of participants during focus groups.

#### Description of the Findings

In Duke's (1987) vision of teaching excellence, he identified six teaching situations crucial to student achievement and development: planning, instruction, classroom management, progress monitoring, clinical assistance, and care giving. These six teaching situations, which represent "professional spheres of responsibility requiring sound judgment and frequent introspection" (p. 67), are encompassed in the conceptual framework of this study, representing the main areas in which the practices of special and general educators working in inclusive instructional settings need to align to meet the needs of students with LD. Data from focus groups naturally fell into these categories since Duke's six teaching situations guided the development of the questions asked of focus groups participants; however, emphasis placed on each teaching situation varied within and between special and general educator focus groups.

As displayed in Table 2, overall themes were consistent between special and general educators; however, identified patterns within these themes are where the perspectives of general and special educators diverge. Some patterns were found only in the data provided by special educator participants, others were found only in the data of general educator participants, and some were found in the data of both sets of educators.

Table 2

Comparison of Special and General Educators Thematic Patterns

Themes	Patterns	Focus Groups	
		SE	GE
Common Planning Time is Wishful Thinking	No Time for Common Planning	X	X
	Inequitable Planning Time	X	X
	Poor Communication	X	
	Little Time for Differentiation		X
Whole Group Rather than Specialized Instruction	Following the Lead of General Educators	X	
	Inflexible Instruction	X	X
	Playing Catch Up	X	
	No Time for Review		X
	Making Up for Poor Reading Skills	X	X
	Instructional Strategies	X	X
	Understanding Roles and Responsibilities	X	X
	Lack of Content Knowledge	X	X

Themes	Patterns	Focus Groups	
		SE	GE
Adjusting Instruction is Controversial	Classroom Accommodations	X	X
	Testing Accommodations		X
	Development of IEPs	X	X
Classroom Responsibility is Not Shared	Classroom Routines	X	X
	Glorified Teacher Assistant	X	
Show Them How Much You Care	Praise and Encouragement	X	X
	Equal Treatment	X	X
	Going the Extra Mile	X	
How Are They Doing	Monitoring for Review	X	
	Legal Responsibility		X

*Common Planning Time Is Wishful Thinking*

Duke (1987) described planning as “the obvious starting point” (p.67). He emphasized that educators must make careful use of the limited time provided to them for selecting content, organizing content, and designing assessment procedures. While doing so, Duke stressed the importance of also taking into account the diverse abilities and backgrounds of students in the class.

During discussions on the topic of planning several patterns emerged among focus groups. First, every group stressed the importance of planning in the teaching process, but each

group also stressed that common planning for general and special educators does not exist. In addition, both special and general educators discussed that there was an inequitable amount of planning time allotted to general and special educators in the school day, with general educators having two class periods for planning and special educators having only one.

Of the last two patterns in this theme, one was specific to special educators and the other to general educators. Special educators reported that general educators do not communicate with them about instructional planning, whereas general educators admitted to not differentiating plans to meet the needs of students with LD but reported that they were willing to change plans as needed throughout the day if students struggled with what they planned.

#### *No Time for Common Planning*

Special educators referred to several problems posed when no time is made for co-planning. Special and general educators explained that copies of the lesson plans created by the general educator are typically provided to the special educator at the beginning of the week. Most of the time these copies are placed in the mailboxes of the special educators, but, some times general educators will physically hand the lesson plans to the special educator. Members of each focus group noted that special educators are supposed to receive plans by Monday. At many schools, the special educators are required to add any accommodations needed by students with LD to the bottom of these plans, and, subsequently, turn the lesson plans into their department chairs later that morning. But as one participant exclaimed, “Or Wednesday, since it is Wednesday now, and I do not have my subject area plans yet” (SE Group 1, p. 1)! Thus, special educators are not able to meet their deadlines because general educators are not complying with ones set in place for them.

Group members noted that there is typically no discussion about lesson plans as they exchange hands from general educators to special educators. Discussions that may take place about lesson plans are usually quick and done when the special and general educator run into each other outside the classroom during and after the school day or when students are working independently on assignments within the classroom. One special educator commented, “If any discussion was done prior to this between special and general education teachers, it was done informally in the hallway, during lunch, or after school hours” (SE Group 1, p. 1). In general, group members noted that they plan whenever they can.

Several general educators commented that they had the benefit of sharing a room with the special educator working with them. Therefore, they had some opportunity to do some co-planning:

We share a room together . . . I’m lucky. We are constantly talking about what we are going to do. She makes sure that if there is some strategy that she has used that has been successful in the past, we do it. My co-teacher last year taught me numerous ways to use hands-on manipulatives that worked for her students that I now use across the board with all students. (GE Group1, p. 1)

Both special and general educators did note that occasionally general educators will find the time to talk to special educators ahead of time before they begin planning for a lesson, but this is not a regular occurrence. As put by one special educator who has experienced this, “Sometimes general education teachers will ask me ahead of time what I think of an idea before they plan for it. I guess if you wanted to stretch it, you could call that co-planning” (SE Group 1, p. 1). Other group members noted that this seemed to occur during certain circumstances such as the introduction of a unit that involves difficult concepts or when interactive activities are going

to be used during a daily lesson. A general educator declared, “Sometimes I plan with special education teachers on specific tasks that I think will be difficult for students with disabilities” (GE Group 3, p. 1).

From the perspective of special educators focus groups, inclusion for most students with LD can be successful if there is common planning time available for special and general educators. As one participant stated, “Given the right planning time, this model works great! We had the planning time before” (SE Group 1, p. 1). A general educator also remarked, “There is no common planning time. When there was common planning time, it enhanced plans for all students.” (GE Group 3, p. 1). Another general educator commented on the benefits of common planning time:

The best way to be informed about what students with LD need to be successful in class is to have collaborative planning time. This allows you to talk one on one with a special education teacher and really learn what is going on with the students and what works best for them. When we used to have co-planning, the special education teacher taught us that as general education teachers, we are responsible for these students. She also taught us how to work with [students with LD]. (GE Group 3, p. 2)

### *Inequitable Planning Time*

Special and general educators in these groups also expressed that there was an inequitable amount of planning time allotted to special and general educators. General educators have two class periods a day set aside for planning, whereas special educators only have one. They lose one of them to a resource class. Often times, the planning period they do have is used for IEP and triennial meetings. One general educator voiced her concern about the little planning time that special educators have when stating, “[The special educator] does not have any time to plan,

and I think it is a huge problem that most regular education teachers in my building do not understand this” (GE Group 1, p. 3)!

Another problem recognized by general educators was the number of content areas that special educators have to work with in one year. Most special educators work with a cluster of teachers, consisting of an English, math, science, and social studies teacher. Therefore, special educators are often responsible for four content areas. One general educator when commenting on the work load of special educators suggested the following:

There needs to be a different set-up for planning based on how the special education teacher’s time is divided. Some special education teachers use their planning time to spend additional time with their students. The teacher I work with has no planning bell. She splits her students in resource class in half, and now sees half of them during her planning time because her students needed more individual time. Special education teachers should not be responsible for all subjects. They should work with the most two subjects. (GE Group 1, p. 3)

#### *Poor Communication*

According to special educators involved in this study, poor communication is another major reason that little planning occurs between general and special educators. One participant noted the importance of communication when stating, “Communication is the key to planning” (SE Group 3, p. 1). Special educators, however, expressed that communication is a huge issue and that if the needs of students with LD are going to be met in inclusive instructional settings, it must improve. One special educator discussed that even when special educators are able to join general educators for planning, communication continues to be a problem. She shared, “General education teachers are protective of their material as if we are going to steal their ideas. Many of

them have no idea how to begin to collaborate” (SE Group 1, p. 4). Thus, from the perspective of special educators in this study, the lack of communication impedes the planning process even when special and general educators have the opportunity to plan together.

### *Little Time for Differentiation*

General educators in this study stressed the importance of differentiation in instruction for students with LD, recognizing that differentiation is needed much more than it is done; however, they stated that they did not generally plan any differently for students with LD. They specifically noted that it is the special educator’s job to may make the necessary adjustments to plans based on the individual needs of the students with LD. As one general educator stated, “We may try to plan for differentiation in lessons to meet the needs of various students, but we really rely on special education teachers to accommodate the plans to meet the specific needs of students with LD” (GE Group 3, p. 1). However, one general educator expressed what she considered some form of differentiation in the following manner:

We all change our plans or alter activities as the day progresses. Changes are always made through the day. Also, if it works for special education students, it will work for all students and usually help them all to understand [the lesson] better. (GE Group 3, p. 1)

Overall, though, most general educators reported that they do not individualize specifically for students with LD. According to general educators, for the most part, planning is done for whole group instruction.

Although from the perspective of the general educators they did not plan to differentiate lessons for students with LD, a few comments made suggested they did this to some extent. Several group members discussed how they take into consideration the reading level of students.

They discussed that they plan to read stories aloud in class to accommodate students with poor reading skills. Another general educator commented on some differentiation seen in her plans:

In terms of making it unique, I try to find things or lessons that I think would appeal to them or help them focus, whether it is an activity or giving them computer time to type rather than write. Since some [students with LD] have difficulty with writing, sometimes they dictate to me what they want me to write or I have students pair up to do this in class. (GE Group 2, p. 1)

### *General Observations*

General and special educators emphasized the importance of planning in the teaching process. Discussions around planning in all three special educator focus groups were short and direct. Participants quickly identified problems without much emotion attached to the issue. Overall, special educators seemed somewhat passive and accepted not being included in planning with general educators.

General educators, on the other hand, discussed planning at much more length and were more enthusiastic about it. When asked how and when they plan with special educators, the tone of their voices changed. At first, they became much quieter in their comments. This reaction was not observed with the third group of general educators, though. These participants maintained the same tone of voice across the subject of planning. They were passionate about how co-planning would benefit not only students with LD but also all educators working in inclusive instructional settings.

In addition, general educators would often times not directly answer questions about how special educators are involved in the planning process. Instead, general educators would talk about what *they* do for planning in general, ignoring the specifics of the question.

### *Whole Group Rather Than Specialized Instruction*

Instruction, which is the delivery of content material, has several major components, including introducing new content, reviewing and reteaching content, demonstrating new skills and procedures, and communicating academic expectations (Duke, 1987). However, Duke stressed that to do these components educators must have a collection of instructional strategies that will assist in meeting the demands of a very diverse group of students.

Analysis of focus group discussions on instruction revealed the following patterns: following the lead of general educators, inflexible instruction, differentiation in expectations, playing catch up, no time for review, making up for poor reading skills, instructional strategies, understanding roles and responsibilities, and lack of content knowledge. Although the majority of these patterns emerged during special and general educator discussions, a few were unique to each set of educators.

Special educators in this study were the ones to emphasize that general educators are typically in charge of classroom instruction, but both general and special educators agreed that the basic format of classroom instruction is whole group instruction, which was characterized by both sets of educators as inflexible. General educators also stressed the need to stay within the confines of the core curriculum and adhere to pacing guides. Therefore, any of specialized instruction that takes place to meet the unique educational needs of students with LD occurs during the resource setting.

From the perspective of both special and general educators, too much instructional time is “wasted” when educators have to compensate for students with poor reading comprehension and decoding skills. In addition, all groups discussed the use of various instructional strategies, but there was some disagreement between special and general educators about the effectiveness of

the strategies built into daily instruction. Special educators also stressed the importance of teaching students with LD learning strategies to help these students with their individual needs.

Finally, special and general educators conveyed that there is a lack of understanding between them that can get in the way of instruction. This lack of understanding has contributed to the confusion of the roles and responsibilities of special and general educators in inclusive instructional settings. General educators also expressed some concern about the lack of content knowledge of special educators, particularly when they are working in more than one content area. Special educators shared this concern.

#### *Following the Lead of General Educators*

Overall, special educators stated that they follow the lead of general educators when co-teaching in the general education classroom. Simply stated, general educators teach the content and plan for daily instruction. Special educators assume a subordinate role in instruction, doing what is accepted by general educators in *their* classrooms.

As noted throughout special educator focus groups, there was a wide range of teaching responsibilities among special educators in the general education classroom. Some special educators do warm-up and wrap-up exercises with the entire class. Others noted they spend most of their classroom time working with small groups or individuals with disabilities, whereas a few others shared in the direct instruction of content material on a regular basis. However, because there is no common planning time for special and general educators, special educators described most of the instruction they do as “very reactive, not proactive” (SE Group 1, p. 1) or “on the spot instruction” (SE Group 3, p. 1).

The few special educators that shared in the direct instruction of content material for all students were responsible for planning the units that they teach. As one participant stated:

I am expected to teach, but I do not get any plans ahead of time. I am just quick on my feet. Also, because I spend most of the bell in the classroom, I know what I think is going to happen next. I am most effective when I am in the field--when I am participating in the daily instruction, even if it is doing just a wrap-up or an intro to a lesson. (SE Group 3, p. 2)

This special educator believed that in leading instruction she is able to use practices proven to be effective for all students with LD.

From the perspective of special educators, general educators provide the framework for content instruction, as well as decide what instructional practices will be used during academic time. In response to this, one special educator remarked, “The style of instructional delivery by the general education teacher makes a huge difference in the academic success of students with LD” (SE Group 3, p. 2). Another special educator expressed concerns about the appropriateness of instructional delivery for students with LD in these co-taught classes when stating, “As special educators we cannot change the instructional style of the general education teacher, and we certainly cannot make up for it all either” (SE Group 3, p. 2).

### *Inflexible Instruction*

General and special educators claimed there is little flexibility and responsiveness to students’ needs seen in daily instruction because of the expected amount of material to be covered in one year. From the perspective of both sets of educators, curriculum pacing guides tied their hands from differentiating instruction to meet the needs of students with LD. Thus there is not enough time built in to differentiate. But in response to discussions on inflexible instruction, special educators insisted that differentiation is needed much more than it is done now, particularly if students with LD are going to meet rigorous state standards. General

educators recognized that not all students are grasping the concepts that they teach on a daily basis. “Most of the time we teach to the middle or to the majority. I know we lose students. We can’t do a lot of differentiation because of time and state standards” (GE Group 1, p. 3). Overall, general educators expressed that pacing guides set in place to ensure all necessary standards are covered do not allow general educators to be flexible and respond to the needs of individual students.

However, a few special educators said that, at times, general educators that teach certain content areas can be flexible. One special educator stressed some content area teachers are more flexible than others:

Some [general educators] are flexible. Teachers I work with come to me ahead of time and tell me what we are going to do. They will see if I think it is going to work and ask me if there is something that should be changed. This is more true for English and math teachers. Social studies and science teachers pretty much have a regimented thing they are going to do--that they have done for years. (SE Group 1, p. 1)

General educators also described their practices as flexible, at times, because they differentiate assignment requirements. As one general educator put it:

I am flexible in expectations of academics because I want students to see success.

Projects are designed so there is a minimum that all must do to get the basics, but there are other requirements for others that need the challenge. Sometimes students with LD will also do the maximum. (GE Group 2, p. 2)

Thus, the minimum requirements are assigned to most students with LD, and sometimes these students will exceed these requirements by doing more.

Nonetheless, there were those special educators who disagreed with this perspective. In fact, there were those who felt that not only are general educators inflexible in their instruction but that general educators also waste instructional time. One special educator described examples of how time is wasted when stating, “Time in the beginning of class is often wasted with the students having to write down the objectives of the class and coordinating SOLs, too. There is no purpose to this” (SE Group 2, p. 1)!

#### *No Time for Review*

Most general educators stressed that curriculum pacing guides do not allow time to review concepts that students do not grasp during lessons. From their perspective, a certain pace has to be maintained, prohibiting them from slowing down even when students are not getting what is being taught. However, there were a few general educators who discussed how they got around this hurdle. One general educator described how to fit in reviewing and reteaching in this way:

Not all standards are created equal. You need to pick out the important ones and weave concepts that students are not grasping into future plans. You can creatively review and reteach while maintaining a certain pace. Teachers need to stop using this as an excuse.  
(GE Group 3, p. 3)

#### *Playing Catch Up*

Because general educators do not allow time for reviewing and reteaching within the general education classroom, special educators have to find time to do this while also meeting the specific needs of each student with LD. One special educator declared, “We have to play catch up in resource classes, meeting the academic needs of students with LD and making sure that students with LD understand content material.” (SE Group 1, p. 1). Much of the specialized

instruction for students with LD is done behind the scenes in resource class or after school. As exclaimed by one special educator, “That is why most people do not understand what we do. In fact, it is why many think we do nothing” (SE Group 1, p. 1)! “Resource time allows special education teachers to check student planners and understanding of content material. It is also a great time to review for tests” (SE Group 2, p. 3). Thus, many special educators feel it is a disadvantage for students with LD not to have resource class everyday, but as it stands, most students have it every other day. Therefore, according to these special educators, it is important for case managers to work with their own students during resource class to ensure that students with LD are meeting class requirements.

### *Making Up for Poor Reading Skills*

Special educators feel that a large portion of instructional time within the general education classroom is used for reading material aloud or accommodating those students who have poor decoding and comprehension skills. According to special educators, they, however, are responsible for doing this. They perceived that general educators do not take the time to assist with this unless there are students without disabilities having difficulties, too. One special educator exclaimed, “Reading is a huge issue. It is a significant part of the frustration of students with LD. Textbooks are way above the reading level of students with LD” (SE Group 1, p. 4). Therefore, special educators do a lot of oral reading in the classroom so students with LD can get a better understanding of content material. One special educator commented in reference to these concerns that “there needs to be more support of the four content areas in reading classes to assist with this” (SE Group 1, p. 4).

General educators agreed that poor decoding and comprehension skills of students with LD interfere with daily classroom instruction. One general educator noted, “This makes instruction difficult and puts a lot of work on the special education teacher” (GE Group 2, p. 4).

### *Instructional Strategies*

General and special educators discussed the use of various instructional strategies throughout all the focus groups. General educators stressed that they use instructional strategies during daily content instruction to promote the success of students with LD in the general curriculum. Special educators, on the other hand, emphasized it is their responsibility to ensure certain instructional and learning strategies are used in the general education classroom to meet the needs of students with LD. According to these special educators, they have lost the time to do this.

General educators discussed that the instructional strategies they use daily help students with LD; however, such strategies are not implemented specifically for these students. There was little evidence to support that general educators felt students with LD needed something different. Therefore, the focus was on the greater number of nondisabled learners. As one general educator described, “Strategy instruction is used as typical practice in the middle school classroom, not just for students with LD. We do a lot of reading strategies and test-attack plans” (GE Focus Group 1, p. 1). Nevertheless, general educators recognized strategies that they feel work best for students with LD. They discussed the importance of addressing all learning modalities in a lesson and simplifying instructions. Specifically, as described by another general educator:

Strategies used that work best for students with LD are those that are multi-sensory and kinesthetic activities. Really any activity that allows them to be active works best. The

more you do; the more you learn, and many of these students need to do, do, do. (GE Group 3, p. 1)

A general educator in another group also stressed the importance of addressing all learning modalities when stating, “They need to touch something, look at something, hear something--to cover all modalities and reach all students, not just special education students” (GE Group 1, p. 1).

General educators also talked about specific strategies they use in the inclusive instructional setting. Strategies they stressed work for *all* students. They discussed using visuals, manipulatives, cooperative learning groups, graphic organizers, study guides, interactive notebooks, literary circles. They also talked about breaking down multi-step problems, limiting notes to major concepts, and repeating major concepts as much as possible.

General educators talked about getting students to think out loud, too. One general educator discussed how she gets students to think out loud:

I call it opening your suitcase. It is basically sharing how you really feel about something read or discussed. It allows the students to see how I am or other students are relating to a story. I have even had students cry. (GE Group 3, p. 2)

Another general educator noted the importance of establishing thinking routines in the classroom when stating:

[Establishing thinking routines] helps students to know the expectation of thinking in the classroom--what actual thought processes you expect them to go through. Teachers need to share their thought dispositions with the class as examples. For example, you can reflect on lessons out loud so students see how to do it--think alouds. (GE Group 3, p. 2)

Special educator participants also discussed specific instructional strategies that they feel benefit students with LD. Such strategies included graphic organizers, interactive notebooks, memory art, two-column note taking, cloze paragraphs, slot notes, mnemonics, and hands-on activities. However, special educators in this study felt that the responsibility of using such strategies falls on them, not general educators. They did not feel that general educators were using research-based instructional strategies in the general education classroom to assist students with LD. One special educator commented on the instructional practices of general educators when stating, “If something needs to be done ‘special’ just for our students, it is not done unless we do it ourselves” (SE Group 1, p. 2).

Special educators in this study also discussed the importance of teaching students with LD learning strategies that these students can use to assist them with their academics. However, special educators felt that they have lost the opportunity to focus on strategies with students with LD because time in resource class is dominated with making sure students are keeping up with their assignments and doing some reviewing of key content concepts. One special educator noted that strategy instruction is different at each grade level too:

Strategies used to be more of a focus in resource class. This is not the case now. It is used more for catch up because of the lack of planning. [Strategy instruction] worked with seventh graders. They are getting in tune with their disabilities. They know their strengths and weaknesses. They know what areas they need help in; they are maturing in that regard. In the sixth grade, it is a different ball game. They are not willing to accept the help. They do not want to learn strategies to help them globally. They just want to know what the answer is to number five. (SE Group 1, p. 2)

### *Understanding Roles and Responsibilities*

Many group members shared that they feel there is a lack of understanding about the roles and responsibilities of special and general educators working in inclusive instructional settings, which causes some problems. Special educator participants do not think general educators appreciate their approach to instruction, and general educator participants stated that special educators generally do their own thing in the classroom. More specifically, special educators expressed that they did not feel that general educators are receptive to their ideas, particularly when it comes to instruction. Special educators remarked that many of the instructional strategies they want to use involve group work and movement in the classroom. General educators, however, want students in their seats, and they want the room quiet as students work independently. One special educator described such problems in this way:

My way is not always totally controlled, and the [general educator] wants control. This makes it awkward. But you want the general education teacher to be comfortable. It is important to build a rapport with [general educators]. This is important for our students' success. (SE Group 3, p. 2)

General educators had a range of opinions about special educators and their participation in classroom instruction. One general educator commented on how special and general educators working in inclusive instructional settings work independently of each other when stating, "I do my own thing, and the special education teacher does her own thing. But it all comes together because she is such a good teacher" (GE Group 1, p. 3). Other general educator comments were not as positive. These general educators did not understand what the special educators were supposed to do in the general education classroom. One remarked in reference to this concern:

The special education teacher I work with is not teaching, instructing, or managing in any way. She works one on one or in small groups with students. Maybe I should speak up and find out if the special education teacher wants to do more. (GE Group 1, p. 3)

Another general educator explained that students with LD become too dependent on special educators and what they do for these students. “The special education teacher is a crutch for special education students. [Special educators] need to spend more time out of the room so these students do not become so dependent on them” (GE Group 1, p. 3). Many general educators in this study felt that there were times when special educators did too much for students with LD.

General educators also referred to how personality differences can impact the roles and responsibilities of special and general educators working in inclusive instructional settings. One general educator shared that in previous experiences special educators did not tell general educators how they wanted to participate in the general education classroom:

I think special education teachers are intimidated or reluctant to tell [general educators] when they want to have a more active part in the classroom. Personality makes all the difference in the world in this model. Maybe someone needs to interview teachers and do a better job of matching up personalities. (GE Group 1, p. 3)

This general educator felt that if administrators took more time to match up special and general educators that had similar personalities, roles and responsibilities would not seem as confusing.

#### *Lack of Content Knowledge*

Both special and general educators referred to the problem posed by special educators not knowing content material. From the perspective of special educators, general educators are uncomfortable with the fact that special educators are not certified in a content area. However, special educators understood the importance of knowing the content material. One even

demonstrated her understanding when stating, “You need to know the content before you can have an effective bag of tricks” (SE Group 3, p. 2). General educators also expressed concern about the content knowledge of special educators. They noted that special educators are often moved around within the building; thus, they do not necessarily work at the same grade level or within the same content areas as they did in the previous year. This movement does not provide special educators the opportunity to learn content material. One general educator stated, “If special education teachers could stay put in one content area, it would be best. It allows them to invest in the content” (GE Group 2, p. 2).

### *General Observations*

The topic of instruction dominated the discussion in all three special educator focus groups. Special educators were very emotional and often quite agitated when talking about the instructional practices taking place in the general education classroom. Their body language changed from relaxed to very uptight when moving from the previous discussion on planning. Conversations became heated when they talked about reteaching content material and meeting the needs of students with LD. Several special educators in one group were observed to be angry when discussing the instructional time wasted in the general education classroom with students having to write down classroom objectives and state standards. These participants sat up straight with their arms crossed, sighing, and raising their voices when speaking.

General educators spent as much time talking about instruction as they did about planning. In fact, they had to be directed to move on to the next topic. When cued by questions that were of a different topic, several participants rushed to get a few additional comments on instruction in before moving on. These general educators admitted to not differentiating their plans to meet the needs of students with LD; however, when asked about meeting the needs of

these students during classroom instruction, they sat up in their seats and responded to questions with confidence.

### *Adjusting Instruction Is Controversial*

Duke discussed that, at times, teachers have to provide students assistance that is of a “clinical nature” (1987, p. 69). Such assistance requires teachers to deal with the individual needs of students, which is similar to some of the provisions of individualized instruction such as accommodations and adaptations that students with LD receive to help them access the general education curriculum.

When discussing provisions of individualized instruction, several patterns emerged. First, both sets of educators discussed the classroom accommodations received by students with LD, as well as the participation of general educators in the development of IEPs. The last pattern that developed was specific to general educator focus group discussions. They discussed the accommodations received by students with LD in testing situations.

According to special educators in this study, the responsibility of doing the accommodations needed by students with LD falls solely on them. As case managers, they are legally responsible for ensuring that students with LD receive their accommodations. The general educators, however, did not share this opinion. These general educators believed it is a shared responsibility of both special and general educators to make accommodations for students with LD. A few general educators even remarked that they are capable of doing accommodations more readily than special educators because general educators are more knowledgeable about content. General educators also strongly expressed concerns about the testing accommodations of students with LD. They perceived that tests modified by special educators are watered-down, giving students with LD an unfair advantage over their nondisabled peers.

In addition to accommodations, general and special educators discussed the involvement of general educators in the development of IEPs. Although special educators, in general, felt that general educators participate in IEP meetings by just signing, general educators expressed that their involvement in the IEP process does, at times, exceed a signature.

### *Classroom Accommodations*

Most special educators stated that they provide a list of the accommodations needed by students with LD at the beginning of the year to general educators. Several other special educators said they do it more frequently, providing updated lists at the beginning of each quarter. A few special educator participants added that they meet face-to-face with general educators to review accommodations and discuss the needs of students with LD in a formal meeting. One special educator described how they are supposed to inform general educators about the accommodations of students with LD:

At our school, we are required to actually sit down and meet with general education teachers at the beginning of the year, review accommodations and modifications for students with disabilities, and then have them sign a paper stating that this was done. (SE Group 2, p. 2)

Special educators noted that information on students with LD is shared with general educators in hope that they will take this into consideration when planning, but special educators did not feel this is the case. Special educators felt that this is because general educators do not share in the accountability of meeting the needs of students with LD. But as pointed out by one special educator in response to this problem, “It is our responsibility as case managers to ensure that the needs of students with LD are met in the general education classroom. It is our legal responsibility as case managers” (SE Group 2, p. 1). Several special educators remarked that

they work with a great group of general educators, but these general educators did not keep up with the accommodations needed by each student. As stated by a special educator who has experienced these problems, “General educators default to special educators in this area. So if I am not there, then nothing is done” (SE Group, p. 2). Special educators discussed that this is the biggest problem surrounding accommodations. In most circumstances, they noted that certain accommodations do not continue when the special educator leaves the room.

General educators, however, expressed that they shared the responsibility of ensuring that students with LD receive the necessary accommodations to access the general curriculum. Several general educators felt that special educators do most of the accommodations, but a few others believed that general educators actually do more. One general educator attributed this to the lack of content knowledge of the special educator. “I probably do more of those because the special education teacher that I work with does not know the content that well. Meaningful accommodations can’t be made if [special educators] lack content knowledge” (GE Group 2, p. 2).

General educators also briefly discussed the accommodations students with LD receive as part of daily classroom instruction and how they are informed about these. Just as special educators shared in their focus groups, general educator participants stated that they are provided a list of the accommodations needed by the students with LD at the beginning of the year. However, there were those general educators that remarked that they do not receive any information about the accommodations needed by students with LD in their classroom. One group member even commented that they are only made aware of accommodations and other provisions of the IEP when they attend the actual IEP meeting.

General educators had concerns about how accommodations impact daily instruction. They reported that many of the accommodations slow down the pace in the classroom so it is difficult for general educators to adhere to pacing guides. General educators also questioned whether students with LD actually need all the accommodations they receive daily. They expressed that many students with LD are capable of doing the same academic work as their nondisabled peers. One general educator questioned how educators are preparing students with LD to be independent learners if so much is done for them. She remarked, “IEPs can be an asset or they can hinder a student’s progress” (GE Group 3, p. 3).

### *Testing Accommodations*

General educators were unique in discussing the testing accommodations received by students with LD during conversations on instruction. They complained that special educators modify tests and the end product is often watered down. As one general educator exclaimed, “Multiple choice answers are too obvious. Items are dumbed down--it is insulting” (GE Group 2, p. 3). Another general educator remarked that as a result of students with LD taking modified tests, they frequently perform better than their nondisabled peers:

Students with LD are pulled from my class. They take a totally different test--one that is very watered down. The regular education kids are getting 80 – 90%, and the special education kids are getting 90 – 100%. They are walking away with As. My fear is that they all have to take the same [state assessment] in the spring. The special education kids are not going to be used to the test format. (GE Group 2, p. 3)

A third general educator questioned whether special educators were leading students with LD to answer items correctly when reading the tests to students with LD:

All students take the same test. Sometimes the special education teacher breaks it down or the students may take it over two days. This is okay . . . at least they are taking the same test. Sometimes the special education teacher reads it to them, but are they reading it to them or giving them the answers? (GE Group 2, p. 3)

### *Development of IEPs*

Another aspect of the IEP that was the focus of discussion in all groups was the involvement of general educators in the development of IEPs. First of all, the special educators felt that IEP meetings were not necessarily set up to involve general educators in the process. Many special educators stated that they have to turn in completed IEPs a few days prior to meetings, limiting general educator involvement. According to special educators, general educator involvement in IEP development, overall, is minimal; however, it is not completely their fault. Several special educators felt that general educator participation varies depending on the grade level taught:

In the sixth grade, [general educators] do not care what you do to get the students to turn in assignments, as long as they turn them in. But in the eighth grade, the pressure is to get [students] prepared for high school. They have to pass state assessments. Thus, what can we do to help students accomplish this. (SE Group 1, p. 4)

Additionally, the perception of the special educators was that general educators came to meetings with the intention of only signing. One special educator pointed out how the involvement of general educators varies in the development of IEPs:

Sometimes I ask general education teachers to read over specific objectives and provide input. Other times, it is just getting the general education teacher to sign their name on

the document after they speak about the student's strengths and weaknesses (SE Group 2, p. 3)

At times, general educator involvement included providing special educators feedback about strategies that have promoted the success of students with LD in the general education classroom. In a few situations, special educators were able to get general educators to review specific objectives. One special educator remarked that in past experiences she had a general educator actually assist in developing IEP objectives:

[General educators] are sometimes very involved in developing specific objectives. Last year, I had several teachers who actually sat down to assist me in developing specific objectives for a handful of students. I do not know if that is a rarity. Was that because of their personality or our relationship? (SE Group 1, p. 3)

General educators also discussed their involvement in the development and implementation of IEPs, emphasizing that they contribute very little in this process. One general educator, in describing her experiences with the IEP process, emphasized that general educators need to be more assertive when they disagree with the content of an IEP:

I have little involvement in IEPs. They are pre-done before I get to the meeting . . . We need to be more assertive about our feelings about IEPs. IEPs can be changed and adjusted. IEPs at times need to be changed because sometimes they limit the students. (GE Group 3, p. 3)

General educators in this study felt that sometimes IEP objectives set expectations that are too low, and they understand that they can exercise their rights and question them in IEP meetings. They, however, do not usually do this. Therefore, many admitted that they say a few words about the student's performance in class and then sign their name to the document.

### *General Observations*

The tone of the special educators when discussing the provisions of individualized instruction was often indifferent. They exhibited no signs of frustration when discussing how they take on the responsibility of ensuring all accommodations are made for students with LD in the general education classroom or that the contribution of most general educators in an IEP meeting is just a signature. The volume of their voices increased and the conversation became more emotional when they talked about how accommodations need to take place even when special educators are not present in the room.

Conversations about individualized instruction and, particularly, accommodations during general educator focus groups were much shorter than those during special educator focus groups. General educators often attempted to revert conversations back to discussions on general instruction instead of specifically answering the questions around individualized instruction. Some general educators became agitated when discussing accommodations needed by students with LD, particularly during testing. There was also not as much involvement from as many general educators in this discussion as during other topics. Several general educators set back with their arms crossed and did not contribute much to the conversation at all.

### *Classroom Responsibility Is Not Shared*

“To make certain that a minimum of instructional time is lost, good classroom management is vital” (Duke, 1987, p. 68). This is particularly important in today’s diverse classrooms where maximum exposure to instruction is necessary to meet the needs of many students.

During focus group discussions on classroom management, two patterns developed. The first of these, the necessity of classroom routines, was found among all focus groups. Each one

stressed that one of the most important components in managing middle school classrooms is routines. This is even more important for students with LD in inclusive instructional settings. General educators emphasized that routines allow students to know what to expect, which increases their comfort level in the classroom. They also stressed the importance of using student planners to assist students with organization, as well as setting routines for turning in class work and homework assignments, for mapping out daily activities, and for setting behavior expectations. Special educators felt it was important to use planners too; however, they felt it was important to use weekly progress reports as part of the routine for students with LD.

The second pattern, glorified teacher assistant, transpired during only special educator focus groups. Special educator participants discussed that they take on the majority of responsibility for classroom management. From their perspective, they are used by general educators as teacher assistants, requiring them to do remedial housekeeping tasks in the classroom, such as taking attendance and passing out and collecting papers.

### *Classroom Routines*

General educators focused on the importance of keeping routines consistent each day. Although they noted that consistency is needed by all students, they stressed that it really helps students with LD. A general educator described the overall importance of routines in this manner:

It is good for teachers to establish routines at the beginning of the year. This helps with housekeeping. Students get accustomed to routines, and they feel comfortable because they know what to expect. It is good to set routines for what is allowed and accepted in the classroom and what is not. (GE Group3, p. 3)

Thus, according to general educators, the date, objectives for daily lessons, and homework are consistently written in the same area on the board. General educators emphasized that classroom activities often follow routines, too. As one stated, “Students come in, do their journal activity, we do a mini strategy lesson as a whole group, and then the students break up in their smaller groups to do centers” (GE Group 3, p. 2). At the end of each class period, many general educators make random checks of student planners to make sure that students have written down their homework assignments. General educators discussed that this is a routine used to help students stay organized.

. According to the special educators, routines are the most important component of classroom management, especially for students with LD in inclusive instructional settings. Routines are needed to maintain a structured environment where students know what is expected of them and also know what to expect. Special educators also noted that routines, such as using weekly progress notes and planners, help in monitoring the progress of students with LD. In describing the importance of using these routines, a special educator remarked, “Weekly progress reports are used to keep track of the academic progress of students with LD, and planners help with organization and with parent communication” (SE Group 2, p. 3).

Special educators also discussed that they have their own routines during daily classroom activities to assist students with LD. Many of them discussed how they gather information shared with students in general education classrooms. “I take notes and gather all the work sheets given in class so it can all be reinforced in resource class” (SE Group 3, p. 2). This allows them to provide students with teacher’s notes or copies of worksheets they may have lost or not completed in class. Additionally, special educators often keep model notebooks with copies of notes, handouts, class work, and homework, which serves as a reference tool for many students.

### *Gloried Teacher Assistant*

Special educators in this study felt that they are often used by general educators as a teacher assistant to run errands, make copies, write up discipline referrals, and escort disruptive students out of the classroom. Although special educators expressed that they did not care for the way they were used by general educators in the classroom, they recognized that “if discipline is not in check, it is too hard to manage a classroom and get done what we need to do” (SE Group 3, p. 3). In addition they noted advantages to handling discipline in the general education classroom. If the disruptive student happens to be a student with LD, then as stated by one special educator, “It is best for us to intervene because we have more of a personal interest in students with disabilities” (SE Group 1, p. 2).

### *General Observations*

For general educators, conversations on this topic were quick. When the first question on the topic was asked, many general educators sat quietly with puzzled looks on their faces. They looked at each other, waiting for someone else to respond.

The special educators were indifferent when discussing the topic of classroom management. A few participants became agitated when discussing some of the tasks they do in the classroom that did not deal with helping students with LD. Tasks that they considered more associated with “housekeeping” in the classroom. Special educators were more passionate about the routines they do daily in the classroom to help students with LD to be successful in the general education classroom.

### *Show Them How Much You Care*

According to Duke (1987), if students do not sense that they are cared for, they will not be able to take advantage of the learning opportunities offered to them. Therefore, the “affective

dimensions of instruction” (p. 69) are just as important as the other components in Duke’s vision of teaching excellence.

Several patterns developed during focus group discussions on caring. Patterns included praise and encouragement, equal treatment, and going the extra mile. The first two patterns emerged during special and general educator focus group discussions. Both sets of educators strongly expressed the importance of showing students with LD that they cared about them. Group members emphasized that students with LD need constant praise and reassurance to keep them motivated in academics. Both agreed that it is also important for students with LD to perceive that they are being treated like their nondisabled peers.

The last pattern, going the extra mile, was only discovered during special educator discussions. They expressed that educators must be willing go the extra mile for students with LD. Special educators explained that they take on daily battles within the general education setting to make sure that students with LD receive what they need to be successful in the general education classroom.

### *Praise and Encouragement*

Special educators stated that most students with LD lack self-confidence; therefore, students with LD need to know that teachers are interested in their success and are willing to provide them the support needed to be successful. Although all group members recognized the importance of this, one special educator commented on times when this may not occur:

Most general education teachers give praise and encouragement, in particular, to students with disabilities to help keep them motivated in academic assignments. However, if the student is a behavior problem, then the responsibility of this falls on the special education teacher. (SE Group 1, p. 2)

From the perspective of general educators, all middle school students want to be accepted. However, they did note that students with LD often hunger for more attention than their nondisabled peers. General educators expressed that students with LD are often more sensitive so they need additional encouragement.

### *Equal Treatment*

Special educator participants indicated that they try to make it look as if all students are treated the same. As one special educator explained, “On the surface it looks as if we treat all students the same, but we do all those extra things for students with LD behind the scenes, helping to level the playing field” (SE Group 3, p. 2). On the other hand, there were mixed feelings about whether general educators do the same. When commenting on this, a special educator said, “Sometimes general education teachers are too hard on students with disabilities and ask them to do things beyond their capabilities. So [special educators] have to step in to stop this sometimes so the student does not get too frustrated” (SE Group 1, p. 2). Other special educators, however, felt that general educators do give all students equal treatment.

General educators reiterated how important it is for students with LD to perceive that they are being treated like their peers. General educators described that in doing this, students with LD will work towards expectations set for their nondisabled peers. As one general educator said, “I think students with LD often have a better work ethic. I have always treated them equally, and they have always done as good if not better than other students” (GE Group 1, p. 2).

In addition, several general educators discussed how at the beginning of the year they have a class discussion on learning differences. From the perspective of one general educator, having this discussion makes the general education classroom more amenable for students with LD. She explained, “When student differences are discussed at the beginning of the year, it is

easier to maintain an atmosphere of respect” (GE Group 3, p. 3). Therefore, when students with LD are participating in activities with accommodations, other students do not question why.

### *Going the Extra Mile*

Over all, special educators accentuated that it is imperative for students with LD to know that you care for them and that you are willing to go the extra mile. A special educator stressed, “You have to get to know your students. Show them you are interested. This makes all the difference in the world to them!” (SE Group 3, p. 3). Several special educators discussed how hard they work for the students with LD to ensure that they get what they need to be successful in inclusive instructional settings. One special educator described how they accomplish this:

As a special education teacher, I am a magician and a juggler --anything to help [students with LD] . . . . There is no correct answer to any one problem or one correct way to help a student. You must be flexible, creative, and willing to do different things to help students with special needs be successful. (SE Group 3, p. 3)

### *General Observations*

Special and general educators discussed passionately that all students need to know that their teachers care about them and that students with LD need to know it even more. Although general educators talked about this topic at more length, special educators exhibited more signs of excitement, raising their voices and pointing their fingers when speaking. Special general educators were very enthusiastic when talking about going the extra mile for students with LD. They strongly emphasized that there is more to it than just telling students with LD that you care.

### *How Are They Doing*

In determining if students understand content and are meeting instructional objectives, Duke (1987) stated that student progress must be monitored closely and frequently. According to

Duke, data collected from this monitoring should then be used to make instructional decisions, one of which should be taking time to remediate concepts that students have not mastered.

When talking about progress monitoring, a specific pattern was discovered in each set of focus group discussions. Special educator discussions reflected a pattern of monitoring student progress for review, and general educator discussions reflected a pattern of legal responsibility.

Special educators briefly mentioned progress monitoring as it relates to what needs to be reviewed in the resource setting for students with LD. Therefore, progress monitoring dictates for special educators the curriculum and specialized instruction that they will use in resource class for students with LD.

General educators, on the other hand, explained that they feel a legal obligation to monitor the progress of students with LD. However, they felt the ultimate responsibility of this falls on special educators. General educators also stressed the need to monitor the progress of students through informal and formal assessments for the purpose of planning and instruction.

#### *Monitoring for Review*

To determine what needs to be focused on during resource class, these special educators felt it is important to do continuous progress monitoring. Several special educators discussed their opportunity to monitor the progress of their students daily. Most special educators spent the entire day with the students with LD on their caseloads. Thus, special educators are aware of the progress of students with LD in each class. Special educators noted that they monitor the academic progress of students with LD by work product, as well as classroom participation, so they know what concepts need to be reviewed in resource class. One special educator commented on why it is so important for special educators to review and reteach in resource class:

We have to reteach in resource. Reteaching is not done in the general education classroom at all because [general educators] feel they have to stay within the curriculum map . . . . Regular education teachers just keep moving on. They do not seem to care if the students have retained the basics. (SE Group 2, p. 3)

### *Legal Responsibility*

General educators stated that they feel legally responsible to monitor the progress of students with LD. As said by one general educator in describing this obligation:

Progress monitoring is the same for all students. But I do . . . feel like I am legally held to a higher standard to make sure that I check on special education students . . . and make sure students and parents are aware of what is occurring in the classroom. (GE Group 1, p. 2)

A member from another group described that “it is human nature that if you are aware that a student has special needs that you check on them more often” (GE Group 3, p. 3).

Despite the fact that general educators feel they have a legal responsibility to monitor the progress of students with LD, they believe that special educators have specific responsibilities in this area. One general educator expressed this when stating, “Special education teachers monitor the progress in resource class and on IEPs. It is their job! Work progress is monitored the same for all students by [general educators]” (GE Group 2, p. 2).

In addition, general educators talked about how monitoring the progress of students impacts overall planning as well as daily classroom activities. When describing this, one general educator stated, “It is important to know where students are performing by evaluating progress through informal and formal assessments. This helps in planning what we do each day” (GE

Group 3, p. 1). However, group members explained that is really hard to monitor progress daily or even weekly.

### *General Observations*

General educators discussed progress monitoring more than special educators. Special educators only briefly noted how they monitor the progress of students with LD for resource class purposes. General educators showed signs of nervousness when discussing that they are legally liable to monitor the progress of students with LD, but also strongly stressed that it is the responsibility of special educators to carry out this task.

### *Summary of the Findings*

Similar themes emerged throughout special and general educator focus groups. Such themes surrounded planning, classroom instruction, progress monitoring, provisions of individualized instruction, classroom management, and caring. Patterns within the themes portrayed how perspectives of special and general educators diverge. In addition, the behavior of special and general educators during focus group discussions varied depending on the topic at hand.

In interpreting these findings, it is important to note at the end of the three special educator focus groups, several participants questioned when the general educator focus groups were going to take place. They expressed interest in what questions the general educators would be asked during their focus groups. When told that the general educator questions would be similar to the ones they answered, they became defensive of the roles of special educators in the inclusive instructional setting. One special educator even commented on special educators being blamed for any problems occurring in the inclusion model.

General educators, on the other hand, never expressed any interest in the special educator focus groups. Several, however, did comment that they hoped results of the study would be shared with the appropriate people so changes could take place within the buildings to make the inclusion model more effective for all those involved.

### Discussion

The conceptual framework of this study was based on Duke's six teaching situations, which include planning, instruction, classroom management, progress monitoring, clinical assistance, and caring for students, and specifically how the alignment of the practices of special and general educators in these areas promote a free appropriate public education for students with LD. These six teaching situations guided the development of the questions asked of special and general educators that participated in focus groups. Data collected from these focus groups were then used to describe how teachers in inclusive instructional settings with students with LD characterize their teaching practices. More specifically, focus group data were used to examine: (a) how special educators describe their teaching practices, (b) how general educators describe their teaching practices, and (c) how the teaching practices of general and special educators compare in inclusive instructional settings.

### *Planning*

It was found that general educators plan for whole group instruction. They plan the same for all students, targeting those students that are cognitively in the middle. Thus, they do not take into consideration the needs of students with LD when planning. General educators, however, discussed that they would adapt daily plans in response to students needs. This, however, was if the majority of students were struggling with an activity or assignment. These findings are in agreement with Schumm and Vaughn (1992), Vaughn and Schumm (1994), and Schumm et al.

(1995), and suggest that general educators do not preplan for students with LD but that they will, at times, make changes to plans based on student progress throughout the lessons. But just as found by Schumm et al., general educators typically maintain an instructional pace dictated by state standards. Overall, plans are not altered if students are not grasping key concepts. General educators feel it is more important to stay within the curriculum map.

Both special and general educators emphasized the need for common planning time, but, for the most part, stated that this does not exist in their schools. However, in accordance with Dettmer, Thurston, and Dyck (2002), “without co-planning, co-teaching often becomes a special educator helping the classroom teacher, or ‘turn-taking’ at best” (p. 251). Special educators noted that this is exactly what takes place in the general education classroom. They simply end up assisting the general educator to facilitate the lesson. Due to the lack of planning, special educators also end up reacting to the daily instruction taking place in the general education classroom, trying to meet the needs of students with LD as the lesson is in progress. But as noted by Strieker, Salisbruy, and Roach (2001), if common planning time were provided to special and general educators working in inclusive instructional settings, it would minimize “the amount of ‘retrofitting’ that must be provided by the special education personnel working to support students in general education classrooms” (p. 5).

Special educators felt that poor communication between special and general educators also interfered with planning. Such concerns are confirmed by Pugach and Johnson (1995) who noted that for co-planning to occur and to be successful, special and general educators need to communicate frequently and effectively with each other. In fact, Klinger and Vaughn (2000) found that the success of a special educator’s role in the inclusive instructional setting depends greatly on the interpersonal and communication skills of the special educator.

### *Instruction*

“One-size-fits-all instruction is no longer viable” (Schumm, 1999, p.1). This is especially true with the number of students with LD receiving the majority of their education in the general education classroom. Therefore, unless general educators are exercising the use of a variety of instructional strategies that reach a full range of learners along with instruction that is “focused, intensive, urgent, precise, structured, and continually monitored” (Heward, 2003, p. 201), students with LD in inclusive instructional settings will “find themselves blocked from access to essential aspects of the curriculum” (Kame’enui & Simmons, 1999, p. v).

Although both special and general educators involved in this study mentioned a few of the effective instructional practices for students with LD specified by authors such as Vaughn et al. (2000) and Heward (2003), the gap Heward indicated between research-based practices and actual practices that occur in the general education classroom exists within the inclusive instructional settings represented by the focus group participants. This study, however, reveals an additional gap between the instructional practices used by special and general educators in these inclusive instructional settings.

### *Following the Leader*

Just as found by Weiss and Lloyd (2002), special educators take a back seat to the general educator in the direct instruction of content material. Special educators felt that they have no control over the instructional practices that occur in the general education classroom. Special educators follow the lead of the general educator, taking on a subordinate role. Special educators also follow along with whole group instruction of content material, monitoring student progress during activities and answering individual questions of all students. These same actions were described by Boudah, Schumaker, and Deschler (1997) who observed that special educators in a

co-teaching situation circulated the room, managing behavior, and re-teaching content material while the general educator delivered whole group instruction.

### *Instructional Strategies*

General educators reported the use of certain instructional strategies that assist students with LD in the general education classroom. Although lessons used whole class activities, general educators stated the necessity of using strategies that address all learning modalities to meet the needs of a diverse group of students. Specifically, general educators emphasized the use of organizational strategies, such as interactive notebooks, four-square writing models, and two-column note-taking, as well as the use of visual aids such as graphic organizers. In addition, general educators talked in detail about one strategy, think alouds, specifically noted by Vaughn et al. (2000) as an effective instructional intervention for students with LD. Such a strategy provides students with a guide of how to think with an explicit and visible example. General educators also briefly mentioned the need to talk with special educators about the academic needs of students with LD.

Special educators also talked about the use of various instructional strategies, but they stressed the importance of teaching students with LD learning strategies to help them with their individual needs. Students with LD have shown marked improvement in general education classrooms after implementing the use of learning strategies (Dettmer et al., 2002). However, special educators stressed that resource class, which was once used to teach such strategies, is now used to assist students with LD complete assignments and sometimes to review key concepts. Additionally, special educators noted that, as found by Schumm and Vaughn (1991) and Ellet (1993), those instructional strategies necessary for students with LD to be successful in

the inclusive instructional setting do not happen because they are perceived by general educators as undesirable and infeasible.

### *Resource*

Resource class is the only time that special educators can meet the individual needs of students with LD. Special educators declared that this is the only time that they have the freedom to break down material into key components, deliver instruction at a slower pace, and overall provide students with disabilities the specialized instruction they are entitled to as students eligible for special education services. This finding is in agreement with Weiss and Lloyd (2002) who observed that special educators often have to teach the same content as is taught in the general education classroom in a separate classroom. According to Weiss and Lloyd, special educators play this role because students with LD require greater modification than is available in the general education classroom. However, this study also found that meeting the needs of students with LD often comes in the form of assisting them to complete assignments.

### *Reading*

Special and general educators indicated that the poor reading skills of students with LD make it difficult, at times, to teach content material. Due to their poor decoding and comprehensions skills, material from textbooks often has to be read aloud to students with LD, taking up valuable instructional time. In general, the expectations of most special and general educators in this study is that students with LD should have the necessary reading skills to access the general curriculum and participate in daily classroom instruction. Students with LD are expected to be able to read as well as understand test material that is increasingly more difficult (Bryant, Linan-Thompson, Ugel, Hamff, & Hougen, 2001).

These same concerns were expressed by teachers in a study conducted by Bryant et al. (2001). Specifically, teachers explained that the limited vocabulary and comprehension skills possessed by middle school students with LD created barriers for teaching content material with text-based materials. These teachers also indicated that they presented material orally when possible to accommodate students struggling with reading. Overall, Bryant et al. found that teachers were quite overwhelmed with meeting the learning needs of students with low reading abilities “coupled with the pressure to make sure students perform reasonably well on the high-stakes assessment” (p. 261), particularly since these teachers noted that “middle school is the last chance for struggling readers” (p. 263).

### *Role Ambiguity*

Special and general educators pointed out that there is a lack of understanding of what is expected of them in the inclusive instructional setting. Roles are not clarified, and responsibilities are not provided. Special educators find that general educators are not receptive to their ideas, and general educators are not sure what special educators are doing when they are in the classroom. Therefore, as general educators noted, special and general educators end up working independently within the same classroom, assuming what they believe are their responsibilities. But as in this study, Weiss and Lloyd (2002) found that special educators view the general educator as the content specialist, and, therefore, they are there only to assist, often taking on the role of a paraprofessional. This misconstrued perception of roles is a leading factor that interferes with the ability of special educators to teach students with LD effectively in inclusive instructional settings (Crockett, in press).

### *Classroom Management*

Both special and general educators stated that routines are an integral part of classroom management in the inclusive instructional setting. Both instructional and housekeeping routines provide order in the classroom, allowing students to be aware of daily expectations. According to researchers such as Doyle (1986) and Duke (1987), routines establish order so teachers can teach. Schumm and Vaughn (1991) found that general educators felt that establishing routines appropriate for students with disabilities that promote their success and establishing expectations for students with disabilities were feasible.

The special educators in this study also specified that the responsibility of classroom management falls on them in the general education classroom. They become the disciplinarian. Special educators noted in certain circumstances this works out best for students, particularly those with LD, because they feel that special educators are more understanding than general educators. General educators can be quite punitive; however, special educators look at incidents that involve student misbehavior as a learning experience for that student (Smith, 1983).

### *Progress Monitoring*

Special and general educators briefly discussed the topic of progress monitoring used in co-taught classes. Special educators talked about the need to monitor the progress of students with LD to determine what they would cover in resource. General educators stressed that they feel legally responsible for monitoring how students with LD are doing in content classes, mainly to share with parents. General educators also mentioned that progress monitoring is important for planning purposes. However, neither special nor general educators specifically mentioned the need to monitor the progress of students towards learning standards outlined by the state.

With the pressure of high stakes assessment, “where students’ scores on statewide assessment are used to make decisions about promotion, tracking, and graduation” (Strieker et al., 2001, p. 8), educators should be routinely assessing student progress towards state standards throughout the year. This is particularly important in today’s classrooms where diversity is now the norm, and students exhibit an extremely wide range of cognitive abilities. Therefore, progress monitoring should be common practice in the classroom to ensure that all students are benefiting from the instruction because there is always that small group of students that “warrant more intensive, adapted instruction” (Bryant et al., 2001 p. 267). This, however, was not found as a common practice of special and general educators in this study.

In addition, special educators did not discuss monitoring the progress of students with LD towards individual IEP objectives to report progress to parents and provide data for annual reviews. These findings are in agreement with those found by Cooke, Heward, Test, Spooner and Courson (1991). They found that special educators do not collect data on student performance because it is hard work, and it often reveals that additional work has to be done for students to experience success. However, frequent monitoring is essential in inclusive instructional settings where the special educator does not provide the majority of the content instruction (Dettmer et al., 2002). Dettmer further noted that progress monitoring “might be the most important function performed by the special educator in inclusive schools” (p. 279).

With recent legislation such as NCLB, there is an increased demand to focus on the academic growth of students with LD. Therefore, as stated by Deno (1985):

Teachers require simple, valid, and efficient procedures that they can use to observe student performance in the curriculum of the school--procedures that function as the

‘vital signs’ of student educational health--so that they can make judgments regarding the effectiveness of their efforts to instruct individual students rather than groups. (p. 230)

Additionally, student performance should be measured with direct, objective, and frequent measurement to not only evaluate instruction but to guide changes in instructional practices and materials (Heward, 2003).

### *Clinical Assistance*

Under the topic of clinical assistance, which addressed IEPs for students with disabilities, both special and general educators focused on the accommodations needed by students with LD, as well as the participation of general educators in the development and implementation of IEPs. From the perspective of special educators, general educators have little involvement in the IEP process. They discussed that usually general educators are present at IEP meetings to sign the document and that they see it as the job of the special educator to do what is specified in the IEP in the general education classroom.

Even though special educators share with general educators the accommodations of each student with LD at the beginning of the year, these accommodations are not provided to students with LD when special educators leave the room. Thus, special educators see themselves as the sole provider of accommodations. These findings are in accordance with information provided by Bryant et al. (2001) and Mastropieri and Scruggs (2001). Both studies discovered that general educators depend on special educators to provide students with disabilities the accommodations necessary for them to access the general curriculum. Thus, when special educators are not present, students with LD are on their own, usually with no support.

General educators, on the other hand, see it as a shared responsibility. In fact, general educators feel that as the content specialist they are better prepared to make these

accommodations. As Klinger and Vaughn (2002) stated, “an inclusion teacher must be knowledgeable about the general curriculum, skillful in anticipating student difficulties with learning tasks, and adept at providing ongoing adaptations and accommodations (p. 29).

General and special educators also differed in opinion about the involvement of general educators in the IEP process. Most special educators expressed that general educators want little to do with the IEP. From the perspective of special educators, general educators understand that they must be present to sign the document, but most want nothing to do with the development or implementation of IEPs. However, special educators expressed the need for more feedback from general educators. Similar results were found in studies conducted by Pugach (1982), Nevin et al., (1983), and Menlove (1999), although Nevin et al. discovered that general educators were actively involved in the implementation of IEPs through daily instruction.

General educators, however, declared that they provide input in addition to their signature. In fact, several of them mentioned that they should exercise their right to speak up more in IEP meetings. Some general educators also felt that IEPs are not connected to what was going on in the classroom. Several went as far as stating that IEPs can hinder the progress of students with LD in the general curriculum because accommodations enable students with LD. Menlove (1999) also uncovered that general educators believe that although the IEP is an important document, it does not benefit them in the instruction of students with LD.

### *Care-giving*

Both special and general educators emphasized the importance of expressing to students with LD that you care about them and their educational success in the general education classroom. They stressed the need to give students with LD additional praise and encouragement to maintain their motivation in school. Both also noted that this is not difficult to do because all

students in middle school need this. Such findings are in agreement with Olson et al. (1997), Ellet (1993), and Schumm and Vaughn (1991). These studies specifically found that educators believe that it is important to provide an environment that fosters student development by teachers demonstrating interpersonal warmth and acceptance for students with LD (Olson et al.) and that it is desirable and feasible to provide students with LD reinforcement and encouragement as well as establish personal relationships with them to promote feelings of acceptance in inclusive instructional settings (Schumm & Vaughn; Ellet).

Due to the low self-esteem of many students with LD, special educators declared that it is imperative for students with LD to know that educators are on their side. How educators treat students with LD in the inclusive instructional environment not only impacts their success in the general curriculum, it also impacts the intellectual and emotional development of these students (ASCD, 2000). It has also been found that one of the major factors that contributes to students with LD dropping out of school is that they do not believe that school personnel care (Scanlon & Mellard, 2002). This lack of caring is of particular concern at the secondary level because research has shown that secondary educators often have a poor attitude towards inclusion efforts (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001).

It was also mentioned by several general educators that they discuss individual differences at the beginning of the school year so students will begin to understand that everyone does not learn the same way. Therefore, when students see certain students using different materials or doing a lesson in a different way than others, they will not question it. General educators felt that creating an environment that positively accepted individual difference was important for the success of students with LD in the general education classroom. This idea is supported by findings of Mastropieri & Scruggs (2001).

## Chapter Summary

The teaching practices of special and general educators working in inclusive instructional settings have more discrepancies than similarities. General educators spend a great amount of time planning for whole group instruction that is dictated by state standards. Special educators do not participate in planning with general educators due to the lack of common planning time. Special educators react to the daily instruction of general educators, helping students with LD to complete assignments and activities. When specialized instruction does take place for students with LD, it is done in the resource room. In addition, the special educator ensures that students with LD are provided the accommodations they need. Additionally, both special and general educators believe that routines play an integral part in managing the inclusive instructional setting, but special educators often assume the role of the disciplinarian. Special and general educators also both believe that it is important for students to know that you care about them and their success, particularly students with LD.