CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore the teaching practices of special and general educators in the planning, instruction, classroom management, progress monitoring, clinical assistance, and caring of middle school students with LD in inclusive instructional settings to examine whether they are aligning their practices to ensure FAPE for these students. This study involved the collection of data through focus group discussions with special and general educators, from eight middle schools within an urban school district. Focus group questions regarding the teaching practices of special and general educators were guided by the review of literature and the conceptual framework of this study, which is based on Duke’s (1987) vision of teaching excellence. Similarities and differences in special and general educator teaching practices were reported after data analysis.

This chapter begins by describing conclusions drawn from these data. Following this discussion, implications and recommendations for practitioners are described. Next, recommendations for future research are discussed, and finally, personal reflections about conducting this study are shared.

Conclusions

Data concerning the teaching practices of special and general educators were obtained from six focus groups, three consisting of special educators and three consisting of general educators. The six major themes that emerged during focus group discussions are comparable to the six teaching situations of Duke’s (1987) vision of teaching excellence. This relationship is displayed in Figure 3. The results of this study corroborate as well as add to the findings of research studies discussed in the literature review, too. In general, the conclusions revealed that
Figure 3. Visual display of how the six major themes of this study are similar to Duke’s (1987) six teaching situations.
there was little alignment in the teaching practices of these special and general educators in inclusive instructional settings. In addition, emphasis placed on the six teaching situations varied between special and general educators.

*Working in Isolation*

Duke’s (1987) vision of teaching excellence encompassed six teaching situations necessary to promote student achievement: (a) planning, (b) instruction, (c) classroom management, (d) progress monitoring, (e) clinical assistance, and (f) caring. In a visual display of his vision, these six teaching situations are displayed in boxes of equal sizes, possibly inferring that these situations have equal importance in the overall vision. Although data gathered from focus group discussions in this study can be categorized in these same six situations, varying emphasis placed on each one indicates that the six teaching situations did not have equal importance to the educators working in inclusive instructional settings in the eight middle schools represented in this study. Additionally, special and general educators did not always stress the importance of each situation similarly either.

Similarities and differences among the six teaching situations for the general and special educators of this study are displayed in Figure 4. As indicated by the sizes of the boxes in this figure, general educators emphasized the importance of planning more than special educators. Progress monitoring also received a greater emphasis by general educators; however, the box size signifies that according to them, progress monitoring is a teaching situation of lesser importance. Special educators, on the other hand, accentuated the significance of another teaching situation, clinical assistance, much more than general educators. Despite these differences, both sets of educators placed similar emphasis on the last three teaching situations,
Figure 4. Visual display of the varying emphasis placed on the six teaching situations and where alignment occurred.
instruction, caring, and classroom management. Although as illustrated by the boxes representing these three teaching situations in Figure 4, instruction was seen as the most important, classroom management as the least important, and caring for students with LD fell in the middle. In addition, this figure illustrates that it is uncommon to see alignment in the practices of general and special educators in these six teaching situations as their practices align only in classroom management and caring.

**Planning**

In planning, there is little alignment because there appears to be no common planning time set aside during the school day for special and general educators to work together; therefore, general educators described planning for classroom lessons and activities, and special educators described reacting to whatever instruction took place in the general education classroom. Therefore, general educators viewed planning as an integral component of the education process. Special educators, on the other hand, seemed to function without it but stated that common planning time would enhance the learning of students with LD.

Duke (1987) emphasized that planning should take into account the abilities of the individual students within the class. Even though other researchers have stressed that planning is an integral component in inclusive instructional settings, particularly if the needs of a diverse student population are going to be met, their research supports that general educators do not preplan for the individual needs of students with disabilities (Schumm et al., 1995; Schumm & Vaughn, 1992; Vaughn & Schumm, 1994). This study confirms this finding, but it also reveals that not only were special educators not participating in the planning of instruction in inclusive instructional settings, they often were not even aware of what activities would be taking place daily in the classroom until they physically stepped foot in the classroom.
Instruction

Little alignment was seen in the instructional practices of special and general educators either. General educators, for the most part, reported using whole group instruction, so special educators described being left to do what they could to assist students with LD on whatever activities were taking place in the general education classroom. Because whole group instruction does not usually meet the specific needs of students with LD, special educators had to do the specialized instruction these students needed in their resource class. However, instead of being used to provide specialized support, this instructional time was used predominately for students to catch up on assignments. Therefore, although both special and general educators found instruction to be one of the most important teaching situations, the instructional focus of these two groups was quite different.

Duke (1987) emphasized that as part of instruction, teachers should possess a repertoire of instructional strategies to address the needs of all students. He also emphasized that although introducing new content material is an important component of instruction, reviewing and reteaching content is also essential. This study found that little time was used for reviewing and reteaching material within the general education setting. General educators stressed that there was just not enough time to cover the standards mandated by the state. Many special educators also noted that there was limited time to do any reviewing and reteaching because by their choice they were usually helping students complete assignments. Thus, special and general educators used different instructional practices, but neither one reported doing much reviewing nor reteaching.

It is interesting to note that general educators discussed instructional strategies that they used in general education classrooms to assist diverse groups of students. Special educators, in
contrast, were not impressed with the strategies they observed in general education classrooms and, ultimately, described having to ensure that certain more specialized strategies were employed. In summarizing the critical findings from several research syntheses, Vaughn et al. (2001) discovered that students with LD need specific instruction and support in basic or fundamental skills, as well as ample opportunities to practice strategies and receive quality feedback, if their use of strategies is to be successful.

Classroom Management

Some alignment in practices is seen in classroom management as both special and general educators stressed the importance of routines. In addition, both sets of educators placed fairly equal emphasis on this teaching situation. However, special educators described that they were often used as paraprofessionals to complete many of the tasks that maintain the structure needed for these routines, taking away from their instructional time in the general education classroom.

As noted by Duke (1987), maintaining an orderly environment is extremely important for classroom management, and routines play a large role in this regard. Research also supports that special educators often serve as the disciplinarians in inclusive instructional settings (Weiss & Lloyd, 2002).

Clinical Assistance

With regard to clinical assistance, data revealed that the practices of special and general educators were again not aligned. Although both sets of educators discussed the implementation of accommodations for students with disabilities, it was generally a responsibility of the special educator to ensure that they were used in the general education classroom. Special educators also found the provision of clinical assistance to be a critical part of their job; therefore, they spent
much more time discussing this teaching situation during focus groups. General educators, however, felt that they contributed to the implementation of accommodations to some degree because they are the content experts. Possibly due to a lack of their understanding of clinical assistance in combination with them not collaborating with special educators, what some general educators did for students with LD did not meet the unique educational needs of these students.

Clinical assistance, according to Duke (1987) requires teachers to deal with individuals opposed to the whole group. The general educators in this study did not report doing this. Even though they might have assisted with accommodations, the responsibility of ensuring accommodations daily in the general education classroom belonged, in their practice, to the special educators. In fact, in accordance with other research, accommodations often did not take place when special educators walked out the general education classroom door (Bryant et al, 2001; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2002). Thus, the practices of clinical assistance for these special and general educators did not align.

Care-giving

Caring is a teaching situation that both general and special educators felt was important for all students at the middle school level but, mostly, for students with LD. Caring, as a teaching situation, was equally emphasized by special and general educators. Many practices reported by both sets of educators aligned in this area, helping to make the general education classroom more amenable to students with LD.

Using approaches described by Duke (1987), special and general educators in this study discussed the significance of recognizing and reinforcing not only when students with LD perform well but also when they made the effort to perform. General educators also believed that it is important for students to understand and respect the differences of others. As other
researchers have suggested, perhaps practices aligned in this teaching situation because these human factors are easier and less technical to employ in comparison to other teaching situations (Ellet, 1993; Olson et al., 1997; Schumm & Vaughn, 1991).

**Progress Monitoring**

Practices of special and general educators again diverged in monitoring the progress of students with LD. General educators discussed the monitoring of student progress more than did special educators. On the whole, general educators reported that they did not do anything differently for students with LD than they did for all other students when it came to progress monitoring. General educators reported that they monitored the progress of students to assist with planning for instruction—that is whole group instruction. They did not discuss monitoring the progress of students towards state standards, but yet they continually stressed that these standards dictate their instruction. Special educators, in contrast, briefly discussed the topic of progress monitoring, but mostly in how monitoring the progress of students with LD can assist them with planning for resource class. None of the special educators involved in the focus groups discussed the importance of monitoring the progress of students with LD to assess individual instructional needs, update IEPs, or plan for annual reviews. In fact, special educators rushed through discussions on this teaching situation.

According to many researchers, it is imperative for students to receive continuous feedback about their academic performance (Deno et al., 2001; Duke, 1987; Fuchs et al., 1989). In doing so, careful monitoring not only allows students to be aware of their progress, it also allows teachers to identify instructional needs. In the age of accountability, this teaching situation warrants much more time and alignment than currently given by both special and general educators in this study.
Little Alignment

Results of this study show that special and general educators in inclusive instructional settings are working side by side in general education classrooms in almost complete isolation. If practices align, it is more by happenstance than it is a preplanned idea to ensure FAPE for students with LD. Thus, something must be done to encourage special and general educators to align their practices so that students with LD actually receive the education to which they are entitled by the IDEA. Something should be done to converge these two independent teaching roles.

Special Educators Assume Subordinate Roles

In inclusive instructional settings it is important for all educators involved to understand special education and why it is necessary. Their understanding of the critical components of special education, such as the purpose of the IDEA, the definition of special education, the purpose of an IEP, the meaning of FAPE, and the intent of LRE, impact how special and general educators understand their roles and responsibilities in inclusive instructional settings.

Another conclusion that can be drawn from the data generated by this study is that special and general educators did not understand their roles and responsibilities because special educators assumed subordinate roles to general educators in many of the inclusive instructional settings represented in this study. Both special and general educators reinforced this theme indirectly throughout focus group discussions. General educators did not seem to understand the roles and responsibilities of special educators; therefore, special educators were often used as paraprofessionals in the general education classroom. In addition, because general education classrooms were seen as just that and not as inclusive instructional settings, special educators did not see it as their right to correct or even make suggestions about what general educators were
doing in the classrooms. The power was in the hands of the general educators—the content teachers. General educators also recognized this power relationship because they noted that special educators were often too intimidated to talk to them about instructional issues.

This conclusion is supported by Weiss and Lloyd (2002) who specifically found that in inclusive instructional settings, special educators were more responsible for monitoring student behavior than they were for instruction and assessment, reflecting the role of a paraprofessional as opposed to the role of a teacher. This implies that the roles and responsibilities of special and general educators working in inclusive instructional settings should be defined so that key players on inclusive teams will know what to do and what to expect from each other. However, instead of making major decisions in isolation, administrators should collaborate with special and general educators and actively engage them in this process (Pugach & Johnson, 1995).

McLeskey and Waldron (2000) suggest the development of inclusion planning teams, involving educators, administrators, and other stakeholders to assist with such tasks.

*Time Constraints Hinder Planning*

Another major conclusion that can be drawn from the data is that time constraints hinder the planning and collaboration of special and general educators working in inclusive instructional settings. This in itself might have affected the other teaching situations discussed in this study. Thus, time must be provided so special and general educators can sit down, talk, and plan collaboratively for instruction, allowing them to become comfortable with each other and the inclusive practices.

There, however, was no time for collaborative planning built into the school day at these middle schools, although several participants noted that there had been in the past and that it did make a difference. These findings argue that time must be provided for educators working in this
model to talk, to plan, and to learn how they can benefit each other in the best interest of all students for without the time for co-planning, inclusion can not be done right (Dettmer et al., 2002).

*Little Specialized Instruction Is Taking Place*

Another conclusion drawn from the data of this study is that there seems to be little specialized instruction taking place in the general education classroom and resource setting. Boudah et al. (1997) discovered that special educators do more specialized instruction in their own classrooms than in inclusive instructional settings; however, this study discovered that special educators were doing little specialized instruction in the resource setting either.

Although special educators discussed teaching and learning strategies to be used with students with LD, the focus of conversation when discussing instruction and clinical assistance seemed to be on accommodations. It was as if accommodations needed by students with LD were the central focus of special educators within the general education classroom. In addition, in the resource setting, where many would think specialized instruction takes place, time was used mostly for students with LD to catch up on incomplete assignments. Therefore, accommodations seemed to be what most educators in this model saw as specialized instruction.

As a result, accommodations were viewed as primarily the responsibility of special educators, taking place only in their presence; therefore, when special educators left the classroom, general educators usually discontinued the use of the accommodations. Similar findings were discovered by Mastropieri and Scruggs (2001) in their review of the characteristics of inclusive instructional settings at the secondary level.

These findings suggest that special educators must be reminded that their primary responsibility is to provide students with LD specialized instruction, as well as accommodations.
Most importantly, it should be clarified that ensuring accommodations within the inclusive instructional setting is not what is meant by specialized instruction. Accommodations may make access to the curriculum possible, but specially designed instruction makes the curriculum accessible to the unique needs of the student (Crockett, 2001).

**Inclusive Practices Are the Responsibility of Special Educators**

One more conclusion that can be drawn from these data is that inclusive instruction designed to address the unique educational needs of students with LD is still primarily the responsibility of special educators. General educators in this study were only concerned with covering the content material outlined in pacing guides through whole group instruction. The inclusive instructional setting, therefore, is really just a general education classroom where students with LD are allowed to attend. In their remarks, general educators did not consider students with LD “their” students. They took on little responsibility for ensuring that students with LD were receiving an appropriate education. According to these general educators, serving students with LD in the general education classroom was the ultimate responsibility of special educators.

Special educators who participated in this study were extremely interested in what general educators had to say about the inclusive instruction. A few participants at each special educator focus group questioned if general educators were going to be asked similar questions to those asked of special educators. Special educators also wanted to know if they would be informed about what the general educators said during their focus groups. Special educators expressed that they were fearful of being blamed for weaknesses identified in the inclusive instructional setting during this study because general educators believed the responsibility for educating students with LD belonged to special educators.
Little Connection Between IEP and State Standards

Data suggest that there is little connection between the IEPs of students with LD and state standards that dictate the pace and actual curriculum used in the general education classroom. This problem appeared to exist because special educators were taking on the responsibility of developing the IEP, with little to no input from the general educators working with the students with LD. Thus, those referred to as the content experts were not providing input about what students with LD might need to access the general curriculum. Basically, general educators were responsible for delivering the content, and special educators were responsible for developing adaptations to it. However, general educators, in turn, did not always agree with what special educators did for students with LD in the inclusive instructional setting—and vice versa.

General educators have to move quickly through large amounts of curricular material to cover all that is expected by the state. From this perspective, IEPs hinder their pace. General and special educators may feel that they have to abandon specialized teaching to cover the content on state assessments (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001). Such findings demonstrate that special education leaders and school administrators must work together to provide special and general educators the time to collaborate on many more issues and also provide staff development that addresses the connection of IEPs to the general education curriculum.

General Educators Still Have Little To Do With IEPs

Although the law requires participation of general educators in IEP meetings, these data support that general educators were present most times to merely sign the IEP. They were not truly participating in the development of the IEP. Some general educators participants noted that they did not understand the process. This lack of understanding translated into general educators doing little to implement the IEP in the classroom. Most general educators were not aware of the
specific IEP objectives for students with LD in their classrooms because accommodations were the only material from the IEP shared with them after the meeting took place.

General educators often do not see the relevancy of IEPs (Menlove, 1999). Additionally, as discovered in this study, general educators did not believe that IEPs related to what was going on in their classrooms. Why then should general educators feel the need to support IEPs? This suggests that professional development should be provided to general educators on the importance of IEPs, the relevancy of IEPs to the general education classroom, and why it is important for general educators to participate more actively in IEP meetings. Time must also be provided so that general educators can participate in IEP meetings as required by law.

Special Educators Are Not Monitoring IEP Progress

Another conclusion drawn from the data is that special educators are not monitoring the progress of students with LD towards their IEP objectives. When discussing the topic of progress monitoring, the focus of special educators was on work completion. Special educators spoke of monitoring what the students with LD were doing or not doing in the general education classroom to determine what assignments they would need to assist them in completing in the resource setting. Thus, work completion seems to have been more important to them than the delivery of specialized instruction.

These findings corroborate work by Cooke et al. (1991), which discovered that the majority of special educators do not collect data to make instructional decisions or to determine if students are meeting IEP objectives. Anecdotal observations and subjective measures, such as grades, are often used to determine if students are meeting IEP objectives. These practices violate the prescriptive nature of individualized programming, negating legal correctness and educational usefulness as described by Bateman and Linden (1998). Additionally, by not
monitoring the progress of students with LD, special educators are avoiding what Dettmer et al. (2002) identified as the most important task of special educators in inclusive schools. Thus, these findings stress the need for special education administrators and school administrators to require performance data to support IEP updates.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

Several implications and recommendations for practice that may be valuable to teachers, school administrators, and special education administrators are listed below. The implications are drawn from self-reported data, and the recommendations are qualified in that regard as well. They are as follows:

1. **Implication:** Not only should the distribution of labor between special and general educators be clearly defined so key players on inclusive teams understand their roles and responsibilities in the general education classroom, the distribution of labor should not empower one of the key players over the other.

   **Recommendation:** School administrators should cultivate learning communities in their buildings where educators learn from their peers, and they work as equal partners with other educators and administrators to solve problems (Pugach & Johnson, 1995), such as defining the roles and responsibilities of special and general educators in inclusive instructional settings. However, those in leadership positions should provide direction in defining roles and responsibilities. Finally, the states should consider making it a licensure requirement for general educators to take coursework in collaborative principles just like special educators.

2. **Implication:** The teaching practices of special and general educators should complement each other, emphasizing the importance of their collaborative relationship in meeting the educational needs of students with LD in inclusive instructional settings.
Recommendation: The focus of staff development should be redirected so that special and general educators attend inservices that address the integrated nature of their work. Training involving both special and general educators who work together would allow these key players to hear the same information at the same time. It would also provide time for these professionals to work through some issues collaboratively and continue to improve upon those skills necessary to meet the needs of students with LD in inclusive instructional settings. In addition, in preparation for their roles on inclusive teams, special educators should be knowledgeable about the general curriculum and how to adapt it, knowledgeable about various instructional approaches, and knowledgeable about providing intensive, individualized instruction to students with LD (Klinger & Vaughn, 2002). General educators should also be experts in the general curriculum and knowledgeable about learning approaches appropriate for a diverse group of students (Klinger & Vaughn).

3. Implication: Special and general educators should be given sufficient time to collaborate with each other to ensure that they address the unique educational needs of students with disabilities.

Recommendation: Administrative support is necessary to find ways that provide the time needed for special and general educators to plan together. Without co-planning, educators will struggle to make inclusive instruction successful (Dettmer et al., 2002). Chalmers and Wasson (1993) offered several suggestions for providing special and general educators collaborative planning time, including the use of paraprofessionals, student teachers, and community volunteers to supervise students and conduct classroom activities and hiring “floating” substitutes for one day a week on a regular basis so small groups of educators can have blocks of time to collaborate.
4. **Implication:** In the age of accountability, special and general educators should be routinely monitoring the progress of students with LD, allowing for instructional decisions to be data-driven.

**Recommendation:** School administrators should require special and general educators to assess the academic performance of students with LD on a regular basis through data collection to determine whether students are making progress. CBM, a form of progress monitoring, produces accurate, meaningful data information about the academic level, as well as the academic growth, of students (Fuchs, 2003), which can then be used to make planning and instructional decisions that enhance educational programs and improve educational outcomes for students with LD. However, training opportunities in data collection and disaggregation should be provided so that special and general educators know how to do this correctly.

5. **Implication:** Inclusive instruction should not be viewed as a responsibility of special educators; it should be viewed as an opportunity to make changes in the instructional practices generally used in general education classrooms to improve the educational outcomes of all students.

**Recommendation:** In preparing special and general educators to work in inclusive instructional settings with students with LD, school administrators should provide these educators with intensive, well-planned professional development opportunities on inclusive practices. This is very important in inclusive instructional settings because educators are being asked “to accept new responsibilities and to expand their roles into ... new and, perhaps, personally threatening areas.” (Fox & Ysseldyke, 1997, p. 96). In addition, inclusion involves significant changes in the way that educators work, as well as teach (McLeskey &
Waldron, 2000). Therefore, professional development activities provided to special and general educators working in these settings should be collaborative, relevant to the daily lives of educators, and school-based so that activities can be tailored to meet the individual needs of the school (McLeskey & Waldron).

6. **Implication:** The focus of special education should be on providing intensive, individualized instruction that meets the unique educational needs of students with LD instead of just on the necessary accommodations and modifications needed to help these students access the general curriculum.

**Recommendation:** School and special education administrators must ensure that both special and general educators understand the difference between curricular accommodations, modifications, and supports, and the specialized instruction needed to meet the unique, disability-related needs of students with disabilities. In addition, when doing observations and evaluations of special and general educators working in inclusive instructional settings, school administrators should be looking for specialized instruction as well as accommodations, modifications, and supports used to teach students with LD.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

As the number of students with disabilities served in general education classrooms increases, the responsibilities of special and general educators continue to change. Despite these changes, the self-reported practices described by these special and general educators working together in inclusive instructional settings did not seem to align in key areas of the educational process to best serve students with LD. However, since this study involved eight middle schools in only one urban school district, future researchers are encouraged to replicate this study to see if similar results are described by educators in other districts.
In addition, future research is needed to determine the teaching practices of special and general educators working in inclusive instructional settings at different levels of schools. This particular study addressed middle schools only. Research shows that educators at the elementary level and to some degree the middle school level provide a support system addressing more individual needs of students with LD than those at the high school level (Schumm et al., 1995). Therefore, future studies involving elementary and high schools could produce descriptions of teaching practices of special and general educators at these levels.

The data obtained in this study were self-reported by special and general educators. In future studies, observations of teaching practices in inclusive instructional settings, conducted by independent observers, would provide more detailed descriptions and verifications of the actual practices occurring within general education classrooms. Future research could investigate in more detail the practices incorporated into the daily routines of special and general educators working in inclusive instructional settings.

Finally, future research investigating how management issues, including the allotment of planning time, affect the teaching practices of special and general educators. Many participants noted that the lack of planning time, as well as the schedule of special educators, affects their instruction within the inclusion model. This shortage of planning time is rampant in the literature, as well.

Personal Reflections on the Research Process

Reflecting on the process used to conduct this study, I can now identify some aspects that I think should be modified if future researchers were to replicate this study. First, I would make face-to-face contact with principals to discuss briefly the purpose of the study instead of sending out letters. I had difficulty getting several principals to respond. In fact, my principal assisted me
in getting a few of them to respond to my e-mail. Second, I would also make face-to-face contact with special education department chairs at each school, ensuring that they understand the significance of the study to them, the school at which they work, and the overall district. Several schools had low turnouts. These were also the schools where department chairs were slow to respond to my initial contact. Third, I would not have focus group participants complete the critical components of special education, at least not at the beginning of the focus group. Even though participants did this as a group, several participants were intimidated by the questions.

Concluding Statements

Overall, these data suggest that there was little alignment in the teaching practices of these special and general educators working in inclusive instructional settings. From their remarks, these educators worked together daily in the same room in almost complete isolation from each other. Although many stated that if they had time to plan together, they would be able to do more for students with LD, the collaborative effort to align teaching practices to ensure FAPE for these students was not evident from their conversations. Overall, general educators blamed administrators for not providing planning time and for spreading special educators to thin, and special educators noted that they did all they could to help students with LD be successful.

In addition, the two independent roles that special and general educators lead in the inclusive instructional setting has reinforced the notions of “your” students and “my” students, with general educators taking responsibility for nondisabled students and special educators taking responsibility for students with disabilities. Unfortunately, until they become “our” students, inclusive instructional settings will not produce the best educational outcomes for students with LD.