

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion, Implication, and Recommendations**

#### **Introduction**

This study investigated how the three stages of classrooms instruction, assessment, planning and implementation, were provided in preschools for CSN. The previous chapter contained elaborate, detailed descriptions of the three stages as observed in the classroom. This chapter connects the descriptions to the recommended practices, to help build an informed interpretation of the instruction provided in these three preschools, answering the fourth research question: “How are the recommended practices in the field used in classroom instruction?” The conceptual framework (Figure 2.2), and questions such as the following: “Is there a link between the stages exhibited in the teachers’ delivery of instruction? How did the elements of focus for each stage of classroom instruction together with their criteria relate to the recommended practices?” helped in this discussion exercise. The implications stress on the consequences, if instruction is continued in this manner. Recommendations include, suggestions for practice in the MOE, further research and a framework for providing instruction for CSN in preschools. This framework incorporates research findings and recommended practices, thus helping to bridge the gap between research and practice.

#### **Summary of Findings**

Initial observations gave the impression that instructions provided at the three preschools were distinctly different.

Kayla followed a specific routine when providing instruction in the classroom. There was a distinct beginning and ending to her method of carrying out instruction in the classroom. The routine was sometimes altered slightly to incorporate new activities or to attend to students displaying temper tantrums; but was never changed or ignored altogether. The students were taken from one activity to the next in a smooth manner. The daily quota of three and a half hours was neatly packed with sufficient activities.

Marla's classroom instruction was an entirely different scenario. Like Kayla, she too carried on constant conversations with her teacher assistant and students, but, she had the parents to contend with as well. Students and adults were present in different places in the classroom, at all times. Activities were not carried through fully, sometimes starting with one concept and ending with another. Much time was spent in trying to prevent the students from misbehaving, or cajoling them to complete an activity. Instructions to the students were issued by two mothers as well as the teacher assistant, besides Marla, giving the impression that there was more than one teacher in the classroom. Each day in Marla's classroom differed from the previous or the following day, unlike Kayla's and Sheila's classroom where a set routine was the guide for activities. Marla frequently tried to engage all her students in carrying out one common activity but this was a difficult feat when all the nine students were present for the day. Marla rarely forced her students to carry out an activity. Usually she turned an activity in which one student was involved into a group activity, even though it was not meaningful to the students.

Instruction in Sheila's classroom, like in Kayla's, followed a fixed routine, but the similarity ended there. Sheila made sure that her students followed her instructions at all times, unlike Kayla who allowed her students some freedom in playing with toys of their choice after they had completed their work. Any one of them who left the

circle while she was carrying out an activity, was immediately brought back into the fold. Sheila frequently raised her voice in order to maintain discipline in her classroom. Students' participation in activities was closely guided. Her high functioning students were usually involved in completing worksheets related to academia, throughout the time they were in the preschool. They frequently were not allowed to participate in Aesthetics and Creativity activities because Sheila believed that having fun would prevent them from concentrating on their academic work.

Kayla always incorporated theories, methodologies and recommended instructional strategies for CSN when providing instruction. Having being exposed to Developmentally Appropriate Practice during her degree programme, she used the knowledge when providing instruction for the preschool CSN. Marla, on the other hand was aware of the recommended practices for instruction to CSN, as some of these were already in the Curriculum Specification. She frequently talked about using these strategies and teaching material to improve specific developmental areas for CSN. In practice however, she focused on the students' social-emotional development and used talking as a method to help develop this area for most of the students. Sheila admitted that she was sometimes confused about the information she received on the instructional methods used for providing classroom instruction and bemoaned that she was not creative.

Hence, on the surface level, instruction in the three preschools seemed different. But, multi-level analysis of the data helped arrive at the conclusion that in principle, classroom instruction was the same in all three preschools.

Planning was the first stage in all three teachers' preparation. The heart of their planning stage was the lesson plans, the activities, the teaching materials and the arrangement of the physical setting of the classroom. The second stage, implementation, focused on carrying out activities using instructional strategies and

teaching materials as well as managing behaviour problems. Assessment, the third stage, was generally carried out during implementation. Assessment focused on obtaining, documenting and reporting the information. The assessment results were used for two purposes, first to adjust the level of the activities to cater to the students' abilities during implementation and second, to write reports about the students' performance. Although the focus was similar in all three preschools, differences were obvious in each teacher's perception and interpretation of how they carried out each stage.

In general the lesson plans and teaching materials were devised, based on the LOs in the Curriculum Specification. Activities were carried out to teach the LOs to the students using teaching materials and various instructional strategies to provide instruction according to the varying abilities of a class of students. Assessment, which is the measurement of a student's performance or achievement in each LO, was carried out during the implementation. The assessment results were documented in a checklist and used to write the progress reports.

In a nutshell, classroom instruction involved i) planning to teach a selected LO; ii) devising and implementing activities to teach and help the student master the LO; and iii) observing the students to assess their degree of achievement in acquiring the skills related to achieving the LO. This manner of providing classroom instruction is compared to the conceptual framework which is derived from established research and practices for preschool special education.

### **Discussion**

Investigating how the three related stages in classroom instruction, planning, implementation and assessment were carried out in context was an eye opening experience because it revealed the actual scenario in the preschools. This study also

provides an in-depth understanding of how the recommended practices were used in the local preschools for classroom instruction to give a holistic picture. The discussion of the findings drew on the wealth of information available, related to classroom instruction as outlined in the conceptual framework (Figure 2.2). The information is based on literature pertaining to classroom instruction for CSN, especially taking into account those that stressed eclectic practices stated in the tenets (Odom & Wolery, 2003), attributes (Dunlap, 1997) and strands (Sandal, McLean & Smith, 2000).

Analysis of classroom instruction in the three preschools showed that by default, the teachers did use recommended practices in classroom instruction. These practices were already stated in the Curriculum Specification of the PSECLD programme, specifically the components, teaching approaches and arrangement of the physical setting of the classroom.

For instance, teachers have been instructed to include the nine components from the Curriculum Specification namely, Self-Help Skills, Social and Emotional, Physical, Malay Language, English Language, Cognitive, Religious Knowledge (for Muslim students only), Moral Education (for non-Muslim students only) as well as Creativity and Aesthetics, in their daily teaching repertoire. Some of these components, such as Self-Help Skills, Social and Emotional, Physical, Communication and Aesthetics and Creativity are also stressed in recommended practices (Odom & Wolery, 2003; Dunlap, 1997; Sandal, McLean & Smith, 2000). The suggested teaching approaches, such as the integrated method, learning through play and the thematic approach are practices equally recommended (Gestwicki, 1999). So, recommended practices were used, but differed in how each teacher interpreted or actually implemented them in their classroom.

The discussion is two-pronged.

First, it highlights the recommended practices that were used in classroom instruction provided in these three preschools. The three teachers were wont to use an eclectic approach in carrying out classroom instruction, incorporating practices from various theories. However, the use of recommended practices was neither constant, consistent, nor followed through in the three local preschools. My findings confirmed what had been researched and discovered by Odom et al (2005) and Guralnick (2000

Second it brings out the recommended practices that were not followed in the three preschools. Although, the analysis of the individual stages of classroom instruction revealed usage of recommended practices, the overall picture bore out the conclusion that the instruction did not hold to the core principle of providing classroom instruction, that is, to meet the individual needs of the students. The links between the stages are highlighted in this part of the discussion.

### ***Use of Recommended Practices in Classroom Instruction***

My findings revealed that planning was directed mostly towards preparing lesson plan and teaching materials, designing activities, and arranging the physical setting of the classroom. The focus of the implementation stage was in accomplishing the planned activities using the teaching materials. It would not be correct to say that recommended practices were not used in these instances I have just described. Rather I would say that the three teachers did not use the recommended practices in its entirety. This bears out my statement that the use of recommended practices was neither constant, consistent nor followed through. In addition, the teachers' understanding of the practices also played a role in how the practices were used.

Teaching materials must cater to the interest as well as the ability of the students (Odom & Wolery, 2003; Sandal, McLean & Smith, 2000). In addition, the teaching

materials needed to be colourful, interesting, suitable and convenient for the students to use (Bailey & Wolery, 1992). As per the requirements stated in the recommended practices (Odom & Wolery, 2003), Kayla's worksheets were colourful, two or three dimensional, interesting and durable (Appendix J). Marla's and Sheila's though were in direct contrast to Kayla's (refer to Appendix K and Appendix L respectively). They said that time and budget constraints did not allow them to prepare better worksheets. Sheila also added that she needed to improve in being creative, since it was necessary to designing good activities and teaching material.

Kayla and Sheila prepared different worksheets for their students, catering to their different abilities in being able to perform the LO as designed in the worksheet. Marla, had standard worksheets for all her students, preferring to vary the amount of support given to each student in completing it. However, the worksheets prepared by all the three teachers in actuality, did not always cater to the individual needs of the students. The teachers believed that by focusing on teaching the LO, they were providing instruction that met the needs of each student. This was in direct contrast to the recommended practices which stressed on providing individualised teaching materials to meet each student's needs, in order to provide individualised, goal-directed instruction as highlighted by (Odom & Wolery, 2003; Dunlap, (1997).

The physical setting of their classrooms followed the guidelines suggested in the Curriculum Specification. All the three teachers used the physical setting to provide a routine in classroom instruction as suggested in the recommended practices (Sandal, McLean & Smith, 2000). But, the students were not always able to learn independently from the setting, as suggested in the strands proposed by the DEC recommended practices (Sandal, McLean & Smith, 2000) due to lack of space, furniture and appropriate teaching material.

As described in Chapter Four, the teachers used a variety of strategies to provide instruction to the preschool CSN. Four strategies stated in the Curriculum Specification are i) thematic teaching; ii) learning through play; iii) integrated teaching; and iv) smart teaching. Of these strategies, the three teachers used integrated teaching extensively. According to Sandal, McLean and Smith (2000), CSN have to be equipped with skills to help them function more effectively and independently in their natural environment. Integrated teaching, where some LOs or components were integrated into an activity, provided the students with real-life experience.

One-to-one instruction, task analysis and repetition as proposed by the behaviourist model, and also suggested in the Curriculum Specification, was a favourite strategy among the teachers. However, these instructional strategies were not used constantly to help the students achieve the target set for them. Time, and too large a number of students with a wide variety of needs, did not allow the teachers to do so.

Learning through play was also frequently used but, Sheila's interpretation of play was different from that of Kayla's and Marla's. She did not allow the students to select their own toys to play with, unlike Kayla and Marla. Toys, both educational and play as well as worksheets, were frequently used as teaching materials in the three preschools. Both Kayla and Marla did allow their students to select toys of their choice and interest as per recommended practices; however, Sheila did not believe in doing so, contradictory to what is stated in the recommended practice, "...materials are structured and adapted to promote engagement, play, interaction, and learning by attending to children's preferences and interests..." (Sandal, McLean & Smith, 2000, p.34). She believed that allowing the students to play with toys whenever they liked disrupted the sense of discipline that she wanted to instill in the students.

Kayla was the only one among the three to adhere strictly to thematic teaching as proposed by DAP. But her themes were not selected based on the children's interest



as suggested by Herr and Libby (1995). She improvised by selecting themes which were easily understood by the students. All three of them did provide the students with meaningful experiences as warranted by DAP, designing and implementing activities that relate to the students daily routine, but not always to their needs.

The integrated teaching approach from the Cognitive Model was a favourite among the three teachers because by default, this approach incorporated more than one component into the activity they were carrying out.

The earlier part of this discussion highlighted the fact that some forms of recommended practices were used in classroom instruction, either by default or by choice. The three teachers often lamented the fact that constraints on time and too large a number of students prevented them from providing better instruction in the classrooms. These observations crystallised into two main findings, closely related to recommended practices. First, non conformance to the established sequence of instructional stages; and second, the absence of an IEP, a document that describes a teacher's plans for meeting a student's educational needs (Gibb & Dyches, 2000), and to ensure that the student received an appropriate programme (Spodek & Saracho, 1994).

### ***Non-Conforming Sequence of Instructional Stages***

Assessment is vital to measure the students level of ability at the very outset, to be used as a baseline for planning the range of activities that addressed the student at his/her performance level, to be then suitably implemented by the teacher. Therefore, assessment must needs be the first step to providing quality instruction, followed by the planning of IEP (Wolery, 1991) to be implemented in the classrooms in the form of daily lessons.

Planning that is done without taking the assessment results of the individual student into consideration, will not cater for individualised and goal-oriented instruction (Dunlap, 1997; Odom & Wolery, 2003; Sandall, McLean, & Smith, 2000), the two most important criteria which define the quality of instruction provided in the preschool classroom.

However, in the three preschool classrooms the teachers followed the sequence of planning, implementation and with assessment, as the first step instead of the last.

They used the LOs stated in the Curriculum Specification of the PSECLD as the basis for planning lessons, instead of input from the assessment. The teachers' planning comprised first, of selecting the LOs, then designing activities and preparing teaching materials to teach the LOs. They believed that by teaching the LOs, or by getting the students to participate in activities into which LOs were incorporated, they were ultimately equipping the students with the skills required for a six year old to enter mainstream education. They also believed that in so doing, the students' individual needs were automatically being met.

Implementation focused on teaching targeted LOs, either directly or indirectly, through the activities designed to incorporate them, during planning. Teaching materials were also used to assist in teaching these LOs.

Assessment was then carried out during implementation of the lesson plans. Teachers observed the students to check their performance against a list of LOs from the Curriculum Specification, but not against all at the same time. Performance was measured by awarding 'stars'. One 'star' meant that the student was in the process of achieving the LO; two 'stars' meant that the student had almost achieved the LO; and three 'stars' meant that the student had achieved the LO.

Curriculum-based assessment has been accepted as the best means for providing information for planning (Bagnato & Neisworth, 1991) where a part of the curriculum was deemed suitable for a student's needs and selected to be taught to that particular student. This study discovered that the teachers preferred instead, to use the entire list of LOs from the Curriculum Specification as a baseline, against which students were compared. The students' performance in each LO was simply noted against the checklist. The validity of the grading was questionable because it depended on the teacher's perception of the students' performance, since the LOs were themselves not in measurable units. The argument also supported the point of view that this type of assessment did not correctly indicate the students' actual performance. In addition, the teacher oftentimes needed to commit the assessment observation details to memory and checklists were completed at later convenient times when teachers had time.

Further, this assessment information, inadequate at best, did not make its way to the planning stage. It stopped, after the observations, at the implementation stage. The teachers, instead used the information gained from these observations to make invalid adjustments during implementation, to further support their lesson plan that was geared to push the ability of the students, and get them to learn and achieve specific LOs in any manner. This concurred with the discovery made by Heward (2003) that many special education teachers did not use actual student performance data to make instructional decisions.

Although their planning contributed towards implementation of the required instruction, it was a one way relationship, and only the relationship between implementation and assessment was cyclical.

This sequence of the stages was akin to how instruction is provided in the mainstream classrooms, where all the students are taught the same LO and where

meeting the individual needs of the student was not as vital a requirement as it is in PSE.

This teacher-adapted, non-conforming sequence of instruction stages of planning, implementation, and assessment did not cater for instruction that addressed individual needs, nor was it goal oriented (Dunlap, 1997; Odom & Wolery, 2003; Sandall, McLean, & Smith, 2000), the two most important criteria which define the quality of instruction provided in the preschool classroom.

### *The Absence of an IEP*

Assessment, planning and then implementation is the established sequence in developing an Individualised Education Plan (IEP) for preschool CSN. The IEP is an invaluable planning and assessment tool for carrying out suitable, prescribed, instruction for these students.

The concept of IEP was formulated by a team of professionals who were involved in providing instruction for the students with LD (Gargiulo & Kilgo, 2000). Initial assessment was recorded under the student's performance level on entry into preschool. Based on this, the team selected the instructional objectives which addressed student's particular educational needs. This formed the student's IEP which became the foundation for the daily instruction that the student needed to reach the level the student was capable of.

But, my study discovered that no IEPs were prepared in the three preschools. I also found that usually only one generic lesson plan was prepared to cover the whole class of eight or nine students.

The absence of the IEP, and preparation instead of the one daily lesson plan was not in line with the recommended practice which required instruction to recognise

the child's individuality, to ensure appropriate goals are prepared and practices are adapted to it (Dunlap, 1997; Sandall, McLean, & Smith, 2000).

The three teachers wrote the lesson plans according to the format provided by the MOE. The format did not focus on the individual needs of each student. Sometimes the LOs the teacher selected, by chance, met the individual needs of a few of the high functioning students. This then was taken as an indication that individualised instruction was being provided. But instances like these were rare and were not documented. Discussions with the three teachers revealed that they were aware of each student's level of performance, abilities and interests. In addition, they had established goals for each student in their mind. They executed instruction in the classroom according to these mentally-formulated goals, for each student but had not documented in the lesson plan.

Recommended practices require teachers to record assessments when made, and to record the students' achievement only in the selected instructional objectives as documented in the IEP. The IEP as a planning and assessment tool is also supposed to inform the stakeholders of the instructional objectives or the LOs that were to be the focus for that student, and the student's assessment results in those specific LOs.

The three preschool teachers instead, preferred to use a checklist which listed all the LOs stated in the Curriculum Specification. They found it easier to evaluate achievement by awarding stars according to whether the students could perform that LO or not, rather than describe the students actual level of achievement in each of the LO. These stars in no way indicated the actual improvement, or lack of, made by the student.

Experts in the field stated that instruction in PSE should not only be individualised, but should also be intensive and goal-directed (Dunlap, 1997; Heward, 2003; Odom & Wolery, 2003; Sandall, McLean, & Smith, 2000). Instruction provided

in the three preschools was, as mentioned before, sometimes individualised and goal-directed, albeit through chance, but very rarely was it intensive. This was because the teachers had to cater for a large number of students with varying disabilities. They were not able to provide intensive instruction for each student due to constraints of time.

Without an IEP, it difficult to gauge whether the instruction provided in the classroom was directed towards a set goal(s) for each student. The teachers did talk about the goals that they wanted all or some of their student to achieve. But these were not documented nor did the daily lesson plan make any reference to addressing any planned goals for any student in the classroom.

Since there was only one lesson plan for the whole class, individual assessment results were not utilised to inform or prepare the planning document. So it was clear that planning for classroom instruction was not based on individual assessment results, but rather was based on the idea of teaching LOs selected from the Curriculum Specification. So, the whole point of preparing a lesson plan was moot, since a single plan covering multiple students of varying abilities did not serve the purpose of providing PSE. The error is further compounded because the individual student's assessment could not be linked to the lesson plan, which is the most important recommended practice (Wolery, 1991).

The results from the individual assessments should be used to identify the strengths, abilities and weaknesses of the students and used to plan the IEP. The goals and objectives of the IEP, which are stated in behavioural terms, will clearly inform the teacher on what and how to teach the student. This brings about a close relationship between assessment and instruction that will result in effective teaching (Lerner, 2003). The IEP could also be used as an assessment tool to document if and when the student did master the learning outcome or skills selected at the start of the

students' education. The lesson plans prepared in the three preschools though, represented neither a planning nor an assessment tool.

The teachers were not in favour of preparing the IEP. This reluctance concurred with the findings of Campbell and Halbert (2002) who said that teachers would reject recommended practices that did not match their beliefs, or would filter the ways in which these practices were interpreted and implemented, based on their personal perspectives and convenience.

Sheila said that it was difficult to prepare the IEP. She added that each time she attended a course; she was given a different format for preparing the IEP which had further added to her reluctance to prepare them. Kayla, held the incorrect view that teachers did not have to prepare IEP for all the students because the Curriculum Specification was the IEP for all preschoolers. She also felt that, at most, they had to prepare the IEP only for the low functioning students. However, she did not do so for her low functioning students due to constraints on her time, an excuse which was shared by Sheila and Marla. They also opined that they had too many students with widely varying disabilities and level of performance besides temperament.

Each student's ability was entrenched in the teacher's memory. Kayla asserted that having an IEP for each child was always on her mind, another point that was shared by Marla and Sheila. All the three teachers, especially Kayla spoke of specific goals for each of her student but these intentions and goals were not recorded. All of Kayla's students participated in the same activity at all times but she had set different goals for each of her students. Sheila also had goals but only for some of her students. She concentrated on academic activities for the high functioning students but did not give as much attention to her moderate and low functioning students. Marla stated that she provided individualised instruction for her students, but she did not set specific goals for any of her students.

When they prepared their one lesson plan, the LOs were selected for the class as a whole, and not for a specific student. With students of differing abilities in their classroom the teachers had to, more often than not, leave some students who were not at a level to attempt the LO, totally out of the lesson. Sometimes the teacher adjusted to include the student in the activities. These adjustments were in the form of teaching materials and other instructional strategies as explained in detail in Chapter Four.

### **Implications**

Instruction in the three preschools was provided according to the abilities of the students in performing the LO as stated in the Curriculum Specification. Teachers adjusted the activities during implementation to cater to the differing levels of ability among their students. Although instruction catered to the ability, it was still not appropriate or sufficient because it did not meet the needs of the students. According to Guralnick (2001) the quality of instruction is marked by how well it caters to the needs of the students. If that is the definition of quality in providing instruction for CSN, then the three preschools have not achieved it yet.

This state of affairs can be improved by ensuring that students received instruction that was individualised to their needs, not only in deed but also in action by making the IEP a ‘must’ document in the preschools.

The IEP will also address the issue of accountability in classroom instruction. In the mainstream preschool education teacher’s accountability can best be gauged by the students’ performance in the school-based examinations. However, no examinations are conducted in preschools for CSN to measure their achievement. Being accountable for classroom instruction is key in preschools for CSN; and teachers must ensure that they have the appropriate documentation in order to be able to present their case. They must document students’ entry level of achievement; hold



discussions with the parents and determine the students' needs with reference to classroom instruction; state the goals that they require their students to meet by the end of the year; ascertain the short term objectives that the students need to achieve to reach those goals; and finally, keep a record of their ongoing assessment results based on the achievements of the short-term objectives and long-term goals to monitor students' progress. The IEP is also a document that can highlight the teachers achievements in the preschool classroom.

### **Recommendations**

Recommendations are for further research and for establishing better practices in the MOE. Research on preschool special education classroom instruction, is sorely needed to understand and address any gaps in the delivery of the PSECLD programme to assure and maintain the quality of the programme. Though this study would have presented a hitherto uncharted view of classroom instruction in the PSECLD programme, there is still a dearth of information.

Classroom based research will able to identify and find answers to future problems that may be faced by teachers. Research must have ongoing conversations with practice, so that with the combined knowledge, great strides may be achieved in providing quality instruction for preschool CSN. Some of the classroom based research that can bring about changes in this service are: i) a study of the working relationship between the teacher and the teacher assistant to improve classroom instruction; ii) the role of the physical setting in promoting independent learning; and iii) ways to provide instruction for children with varying disabilities and performance levels in a group.

A recommendation for better practices is to increase coordination between the MOE and state, as well as district education departments. This would ensure that the

quality of the classrooms, teaching materials and the instruction are maintained. The MOE must also consider great changes in its training programmes to include changing teachers mindset from mainstream mode of teaching, to providing special education. Another main recommendation of my study is the framework I suggest for providing instructions to preschool CSN. This framework combines my research findings with recommended practices.

### ***Combining Research Findings with Recommended Practices***

The core of preschool special education is that planning must be based on assessment. Instruction implementation for each student must be intensive and goal oriented and the document to ensure the compliance to both these golden rules is the IEP, which is both a planning and an assessment tool.

Although classroom instruction in all the three preschools did not adhere to these two core principles of providing PSE, the three teachers had used evidence-based instructional strategies and teaching material to carry out activities in the classroom. The findings of this study, combined with the recommended practices were useful in building a framework that could be used to provide instruction in preschool classrooms.

The framework as shown in Figure 5.1, suggests practical ways of incorporating recommended practices into the three stages of classroom instruction.

Some few years down the road, if and when another researcher who upon using this suggested framework as an instrument to investigate the state of classroom instruction for preschool CSN, finds that my conclusions no longer held true, then one can say that preschool special education will have achieved the quality that it had always meant to do.

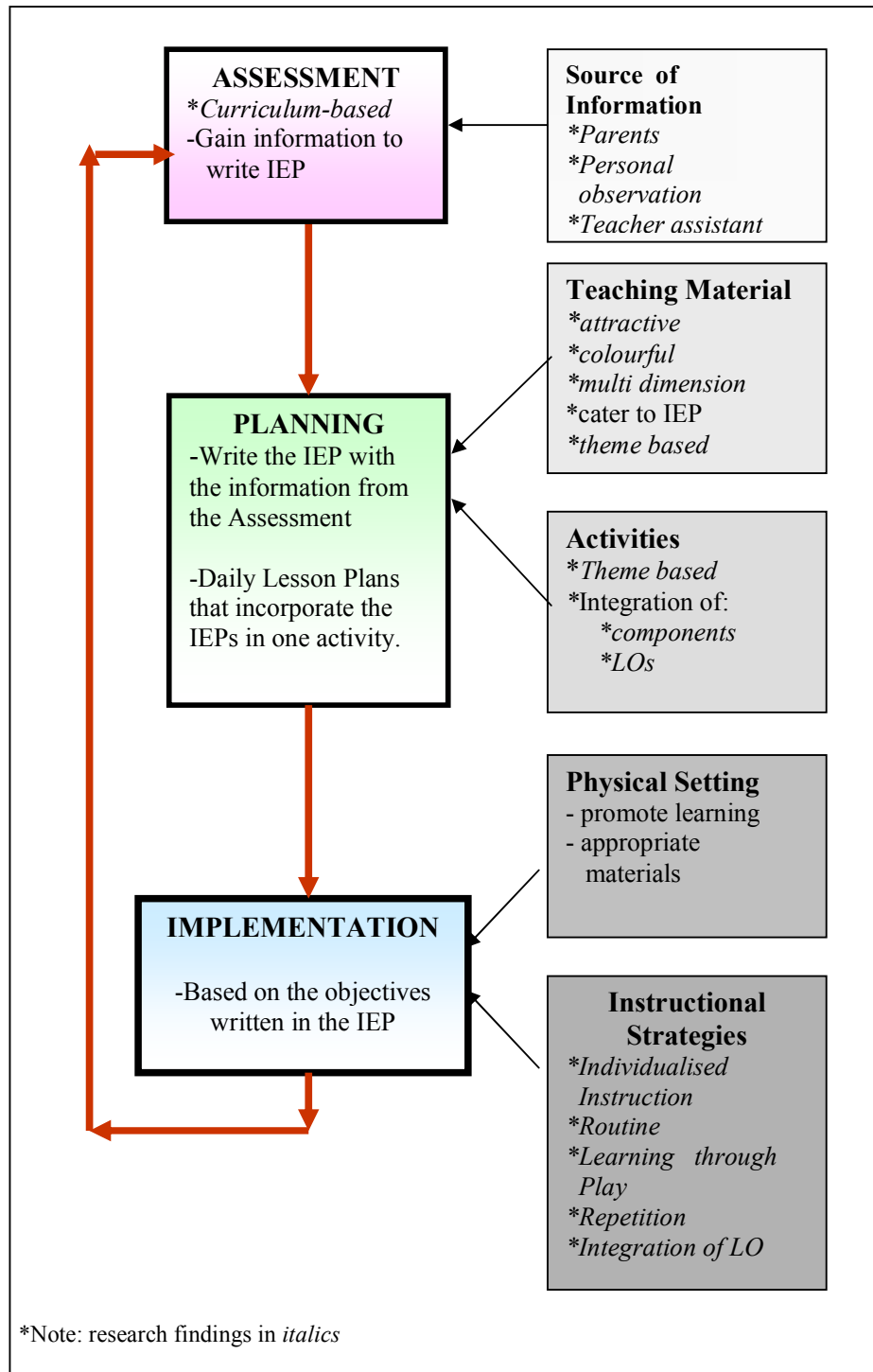


Figure 5.1 Suggested Framework for Providing Classroom Instruction:

Combination of the Findings and Recommended Practices