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# Preparation of Students with an EBD for Life Post-Graduation: The School Social Worker Perspective

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Preparation of Students with an EBD for Life Post-Graduation: The School  
Social Worker Perspective

by

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MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Social Work  
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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Social Work

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with the basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to collect data from the perspective of licensed school social workers regarding the preparation of students with an EBD for life post-graduation. This study conducted six interviews with licensed school social workers to learn about their perceptions of post-graduation preparation, strengths, weakness, transition planning and unmet needs. This research study, like other studies found that students with an EBD are unprepared for life post-graduation. Themes noted were the overall lack of preparation, the skill of survival skills, the lack of preparation for further education, lack of realistic goals and expectations, skills learned, lack of parent involvement and unmet needs in the areas of resources, programming and overall communication and connection. Implications for social workers and recommendations for future research are to define a more universal social work role, to connect skills learned in high school to adult life, the need for more resources and programming for this group of students and to gain the perspective of other key stakeholders, such as students, parents and teachers.

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Preparation of Students with an EBD for Life Post-Graduation: The School Social  
Worker Perspective

“An educational system isn’t worth a great deal if it teaches young people how to make a living but doesn’t teach them how to make a life” (Anonymous, 1997). When beginning research for this study, the preparation of students with an emotional behavioral disorder (EBD) for adult life, it is important to first understand the role that schools play in the transition from high school to the adult roles, what an EBD is, how special education classrooms and settings are organized, and finally what Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is and what the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) does to help this group of students.

Schools are important systems when shaping the lives of our youth. Students spend the majority of their day in the school setting. Students learn academic skills, social skills and vocational skills that begin preparing them for their adult lives. Specifically, students with an EBD have a much more difficult time transitioning to adult life than students without this educational diagnosis due to higher drop-out rates (Carter, Trainor, Sun, & Owens, 2009; Cheney, 2012; Karpur, Clark, Caproni, & Sterner, 2005; Lemarie, Mallik, & Stoll, 2002; Mueller, Bassett, & Brewer, 2012; Scanlon & Mellard, 2002; Wagner & Blackorby, 1996; Westerlund, Granucci, Gamache, & Clark, 2006), difficulty with relationships (Bradley, Doolittle, & Bartolotta, 2008; Bullis & Cheney, 1999; Cheney, 2012; Curtin & Garcia, 2011; Lane & Carter, 2006; Westerlund et al., 2006;), and lack of integration and use of service within the community (Bullis & Cheney, 1999; Lane & Carter, 2006; Wagner & Blackorby, 1996; Westerlund et al., 2006). As evidenced, the transition for students with an EBD is challenged in many ways; legislation has been put in place by the United States Department of Education to

better serve students. The legislation, IDEA, requires schools to provide a satisfactory education to students with disabilities and to sufficiently meet their needs (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2013). Provisions for this are outlined in a student's IEP, as well as a specific transition plan for the transition from high school to adult life within his or her IEP (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2013).

### **Research Gap**

In school students begin to learn the skills and behaviors needed to become successful when they enter the adult world. Unfortunately, many students are ill-equipped to enter this adult world, and often times their transition needs are not given the amount of attention needed. Students with an EBD are more difficult to serve in schools due to their emotional reactivity and their behaviors; therefore, their transition needs do not receive as much attention (Committee on Disability in America, 2007).

Research reviewed for this study has indicated many barriers that students with an EBD face when transitioning to life after high school. Many studies within the literature focused on work programs (Bullis & Cheney, 1999; Cheney, 2012; Curtin & Garcia, 2011; Guy, Sitlington, Larsen, & Frank, 2009; Karpur et al., 2005; Lemarie et al., 2002; Michaels & Ferrara, 2005; Westerlund et al., 2006), and others focused on the need yet to be addressed in present day, such as programming, adequate assessment, supports, social skills and others (Bradley et al., 2008; Bullis & Cheney, 1999; Carter et al., 2009; Carter & Lunsford, 2005; Carter, Trainor, Cakiroglu, Swedeen, & Owens, 2010; Cheney, 2012; Collet-Klingentert & Kolb, 2011; Curtin & Garcia, 2011; Kohler & Field, 2003; Landmark & Zhang, 2013; Lane & Carter, 2006; Mueller et al., 2012; Scanlon & Mellard, 2002; Trainor, 2010; Westerlund et al., 2006). However, there was a gap in the research; the voices of students or perceived voices of students with an EBD who are

preparing for adult life have not been studied. The focus of this study is to explore the preparation of students who have an emotional behavioral disorder for life after high school based on the report of school social workers. School social workers were chosen because of the close working nature that they have with students who have an EBD. This exploration will be accomplished through qualitative interviews with various school social workers throughout a Midwestern metropolitan area. The results of this study will provide teachers, administrators, counselors, mentors, and social workers with the knowledge of the school social worker perception of student preparedness for life post-graduation, and what can be done to close this gap and better prepare students for life post-graduation.

### **Literature Review**

Background information provided a foundation for understanding the framework of the education system. Most importantly, an explanation of how an EBD is defined by the United States Department of Education will be given. The role that schools play in the education of students and how they are required to adequately provide an education is crucial to helping students develop life-long knowledge and skills. The factors listed above are important in order to best serve students and work to adaptively meet their unique needs. The provisions of adaptive services have been mandated through IDEA, so that schools provide certain services for students with unique needs.

### **Explanation of EBD**

An EBD is identified as an emotional disturbance by the United States Department of Education. The United States Department of Education (n.d., para. 300.8c4i) defines an emotional disturbance as:



A condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a student's educational performance:

- A: An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.
- B: An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.
- C: Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.
- D: A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.
- E: A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.

As explained by Smith (2010), an EBD has two components, an internalizing part and an externalizing part. Internalizing behavior includes symptoms of depression, anxiety, social withdrawal, unhappiness, fear, isolation, phobias, and low self-esteem. Externalizing behavior includes conflicts with others, delinquency, over activity, disruption, aggression, and other forms of acting out (Smith, 2010).

Unfortunately, there is no standard tool used to assess for prevalence of EBD as there are for other educational disabilities. However, many tools can be used for guidance when doing an assessment. A diagnosis of an EBD is more of an assessment based on judgment and comparison to past and present behavior of other students around the same age group (Smith, 2010).

### **Role of Schools**

Since students spend a large portion of their day at school, they are learning many new academic and social skills and continuing to practice learned skills there. The graduation requirements for the state of Minnesota only include academic standards for language arts, math, science, social studies, and the arts, with no mention of life skills or acquisition of skills for life after high school (Minnesota Department of Education, 2012). The goals of the educational system seem to be aimed at creating a well-educated work force, or creation of the foundation for a student to continue onto further education and assisting students in the expansion knowledge of how to become a suitable adult in our society. It can be said that the preparation of our youth for adult life is especially critical in this age of technology and fast-paced environments where the workforce is getting increasingly competitive.

### **Special Education Settings**

As a way to reach students with more complicated needs, schools use special education classrooms. Special education classrooms provide more individualized instruction time by lowering the staff-to-student ratio. In 2011, over six million students were receiving special education services in the United States, and of these students, 2.2 million students had an identified learning disability (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2013). Disabilities can include a learning disability (LD: reading, writing, or mathematical disability) or an EBD, Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), or other disability category (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2013).

Within the school system, there are levels of special education services, referred to as Federal Instructional Settings (St. Paul Public Schools, n.d.). The settings serve students with various levels of disability based on their need and how much individual

attention they require throughout the day. The eight Federal Instructional Settings, referred to as levels, according to St. Paul Public Schools (n.d.) are:

Level 1: In a regular classes; less than 21% of the school day in special education classroom/setting

Level 2: In a resource room or self-contained; 21 – 60% of the school day in special education classroom/setting

Level 3: In a separate classroom; in special education classroom/setting more than 60% of the day

Level 4: In a public separate day school facility, especially designed for students with disabilities for more than 50% of the school day

Level 5: In a private separate day school (at public expense) especially designed for students with disabilities for more than 50% of the school day

Level 6: In a public residential program especially designed for more than 50% of the school day

Level 7: In a private residential facility (at public expense) for more than 50% of the school day

Level 8: In a homebound or hospital setting.

Students with EBDs receive educational services in one of the eight settings listed above because they have higher and more unique needs than students in the general education population. The more unique needs of students with EBDs can more adequately be met by individual instruction that is provided in the various levels of special education settings.

### **IEPs and IDEA**

When a student has a documented disability he or she is able to receive special services provided by the school. The IDEA legislation ensures that students with the special needs are receiving adequate services. Students who receive special education services are outlined in a document called an IEP.

An IEP is a “formal contract outlining the services and supports the school will provide in order for the child to benefit from the educational program” (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2013, para. 5). The IEP is drafted through collaboration among the student, parents, and school team. However, before an IEP can be written, a student must qualify for special education services based on individual needs. Student needs can include LD, developmental cognitive delays (DCD), EBDs, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and many more. An IEP must be updated annually. In 1990, the legislature mandated that planning for the transition from high school to adult life be included in a student’s IEP. The transition plan must be updated every three years (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2013).

The IDEA legislation is the federal special education mandate that ensures schools provide adequate services to students with disabilities (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2013). The services provided to each student with a disability must be outlined in his or her IEP, and then adequately met by school staff. The IDEA legislation also mandates that a student be provided a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment possible (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2013). Therefore, if a student could potentially be educated in a Federal Instructional Setting level three, but the student is currently educated in a Federal Instructional Setting level four, provisions must be made for a transfer, or reasoning given for educating the student at the setting four facility.

### **Transition Literature**

The literature on the preparation of students transitioning out of high school into adult life was varied, but the majority of literature reviewed was of descriptive articles and focused on the challenges that students who suffer from an EBD have when transitioning to life post-graduation and where education could be improved. Main themes discovered centered on the important key domains within transition plans (employment, education, independent living, community living, etc.) (Bullis & Cheney, 1999; Carran, Kerins & Murray, 2005; Carter et al., 2009; Karpur et al., 2005; Kohler & Field, 2003; Mueller et al., 2012; Trainor, 2010; Wagner & Blackorby, 1996), evaluation of programs in place (Bullis & Cheney, 1999; Cheney, 2012; Curtin & Garcia, 2011; Guy et al., 2009; Karpur et al., 2005; Lemarie et al., 2002; Michaels & Ferrara, 2005; Westerlund et al., 2006), and the needs of the student yet to be addressed (Bradley et al., 2008; Bullis & Cheney, 1999; Carter et al., 2009; Carter & Lunsford, 2005; Carter et al., 2010; Cheney, 2012; Collet-Klingentert & Kolb, 2011; Curtin & Garcia, 2011; Kohler & Field, 2003; Landmark & Zhang, 2013; Lane & Carter, 2006; Mueller et al., 2012; Scanlon & Mellard, 2002; Trainor, 2010; Westerlund et al., 2006). The themes of the literature can best be viewed through the conceptual frameworks of social learning theory and person-centered theory.

Two theories that lend themselves well to the study of preparation of students with an EBD for life post-graduation were the social learning theory and person-centered theory. Social learning theory was relevant to this topic due to the importance of modeling and observation of behaviors so that youth can begin to learn what behaviors and actions are acceptable in society and what it looks like to routinely use these behaviors to be successful in adult life (Bandura, 1971). Person-centered theory was also

relevant to the literature reviewed due to the success of students if they feel their education and transition plan has been designed around their unique needs, wants, wishes, and goals (Rogers, 1979).

### **Social Learning Theory**

Application of social learning theory was important for students who have an EBD because, for students to be effective in life post-graduation, they need to learn what behaviors are and are not acceptable in college, technical school, at the workplace, and within other realms of community life. One way to understand this type of learning of acceptable behavior has been through the lens of the social learning theory developed by Albert Bandura. According to Bandura (1971), social learning theory has been based around three core concepts: learning through observation, consideration of one's mental state when learning, and knowledge of information does not necessarily lead to a change in behavior. Learning through observation has been categorized into three groups: through watching an individual model a behavior, listening to an instruction of a behavior, and learning through watching other characters, such as cartoons, model behavior. Behavior has been learned the best through reinforcement. Reinforcement of such behaviors has been given through internal stimulus, such as pride or happiness, or external, such as a tangible reward or prize. Therefore, one's mental state is key when learning and remembering how great the positives have felt. Unfortunately observing and reinforcing positive behavior does not always lead to a change in behavior. Bandura (1971) stated that four steps must be completed for behavior to change long term; they were attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation.

### **Person-Centered Theory**

Carl Rogers (1979) developed the person-center theory with the belief that each individual has within himself or herself the “resources for self-understanding, for altering the self-concept basic attitudes and his or her self-directed behavior-and that these resources can be tapped if only a definable climate of facilitative psychological attitudes can be provided” (Rogers, 1979, p. 1). A central premise to this theory was self-concept. Self-concept has been defined as the way in which one views himself or herself. The environment under which Rogers believed this relationship for work could have been attained included three qualities. The therapist would need to have an “unconditional positive regard” (Rogers, 1979, p. 2) for the client, in this setting this would be allowing the student to be whatever the student wants to be in the moment, and supporting whoever the client wants to be and whatever he or she wants to make for themselves. This can be applied to the social worker and student roles also. The therapist would also need to have been genuine and caring acting as himself or herself, and not putting on a false face. Third, the therapist must have had “empathic understanding” (Rogers, 1979, p. 2) when working with the student. Rogers (1979) also stated the therapist should mirror for the student allowing the student to see his or her own thoughts and perceptions more clearly and feel understood.

Person-centered theory was relevant to the topic of student preparation. When deciding what a student’s life might look like post-graduation the individual in the best position to make the decisions would have been the student. If the student does not feel he or she has the power to decide and be heard about what the student wants the future to hold, the student might not buy into the process, and therefore, adequate work might not be done toward preparation for adulthood.

### **Key Domains in Transition Planning**

When planning for a student's transition from the structured high school environment to independent adulthood many areas, such as employment, education and independent living, have been the focus of attention throughout the literature. Literature reviewed by Bullis and Cheney (1999); Carran et al. (2005); Carter et al. (2009); Karpur et al. (2005); Kohler and Field (2003); Mueller et al. (2012); Trainor (2010); Wagner and Blackorby (1996) was varied on what areas were of the highest importance, but the majority of the literature focused on seven key domains: community areas of living, daily independent living, social functioning, employment, education, supports, and personal skills.

Community areas of living were perceived as important throughout the literature reviewed. An individual must also be an active participant within the community (Bullis & Cheney, 1999; Carran et al., 2005; Carter et al., 2009; Karpur et al., 2005; Trainor, 2010).

Another area important for successful transitions from high school to adult life was independent living skills. Daily independent living, which included activities such as maintaining adequate health, housing and quality of life, was found to be important by Carran et al. (2005), Carter et al. (2009), Karpur et al. (2005), Mueller et al. (2012) and Trainor (2010).

In addition to skills required for adult life, social functioning within the adult system was noted as crucial for success. Social functioning as demonstrated by the examples of participation in extracurricular or group activities (Kohler & Field, 2003), interpersonal relationships, the ability to communicate and the ability to participate in leisure activities (Carter et al., 2009), social and civic fulfillment (Mueller et al., 2012)



and general social abilities (Bullis & Cheney, 1999) were deemed to be relevant skills necessary to function in adulthood.

Employment and education were found to be important throughout the literature as demonstrated by inclusion in, or as the focus of, multiple studies (Bullis & Cheney, 1999; Carran et al., 2005; Carter et al., 2009; Karpur et al., 2005; Kohler & Field, 2003; Mueller et al., 2012; Trainor, 2010; Wagner & Blackorby, 1996). Important factors of the key domain of education included career orientated education, graduation, a plan to participate in post-high school education or training, vocational courses, time spent in general education rooms, and tutoring (Bullis & Cheney, 1999; Carran et al., 2005; Carter et al., 2009; Karpur et al., 2005; Kohler & Field, 2003; Mueller et al., 2012; Trainor, 2010; Wagner & Blackorby, 1996).

Aside from community and independent living skills, and employment and education for success, support systems were also noted as important factors. Kohler and Fields (2003) identified systems that support students, including interagency collaboration and parental involvement for successful adult outcomes.

Personal skills that were determined to hold importance through the literature were personal effectiveness (Karpur et al., 2005) and self-determination (Carter et al., 2009; Trainor, 2010). These seven domains, community living, independent living, social functioning, employment, education personal skills and support make up the basis of the transition plans and programs implemented throughout the literature.

### **Program Evaluations**

Numerous studies (Bullis & Cheney, 1999; Cheney, 2012; Curtin & Garcia, 2011; Guy et al., 2009; Karpur et al., 2005; Lemarie et al., 2002; Michaels & Ferrara, 2005; Westerlund et al., 2006) reviewed what programs were available and what helped

students with an emotional behavioral disorder become successful and why. Studies uncovered four main categories: person-centered planning, holistic programs, programs for employment preparation while still in high school, and job training programs.

**Person-centered planning.** A framework underlying successful transition planning studied at length by Michaels and Ferrara (2005) was person-centered planning. Person-centered planning was described as a process of identification of the problem, analysis of the problem, implementation of the plan, and accountability and follow-up. In the school setting person-centered planning was based around the student, and including input from the family, with everyone holding a shared vision for future goals; integration of student, family and community strengths and supports; use of and building upon existing community supports and connections; and finally, the importance of accountability of all with adequate follow-up. The authors determined that with a paradigm shift in which the goals and outcomes of the student would be shared by the student, family, school staff, as well as others involved with the student, this would prove to produce a greater number of successful outcomes (Michaels & Ferrara, 2005).

**Holistic programs.** To help students be as successful as possible post-graduation, the literature suggested the use of holistic transition plans and programs, which should include: academic instruction, community experience or employment, assistance with related services, such as housing, daily living skills, and functional and vocational evaluations (Cheney, 2012; Karpur et al., 2005; Lemarie et al., 2002).

An example of this type of program was called Expanding Horizons, which was a holistic employment-based program based in Maryland. Expanding Horizons had three main goals for participants: gain the ability to find at least three community supports, obtain a general equivalency diploma (GED), and begin vocational training (Lemarie et

al., 2002). Expanding Horizons found success in helping participants achieve goals and become successful in adulthood (Lemarie et al., 2002).

Karpur et al. (2005) evaluated two holistic programs. The first was Project ARIES (Achieving Rehabilitation, Individualized Education, and Employment Success), a community and school-based program in suburban Oregon that showed success in helping students graduate, become competitively employed, and avoid incarceration. The second, Project RENEW (Rehabilitation, Empowerment, Natural supports, Education, and Work), studied in New Hampshire, was also successful helping students graduate from high school, become competitively employed, attend post-secondary education, and increase satisfaction with school, employment, handling life's challenges, and movement toward their goals. The basis of Project RENEW, which made it successful, was that it focused on flexible high school and post-high school curriculum, future planning, employment supports, and interagency collaboration (Karpur et al., 2005).

**Employment preparation in high school.** Guy et al. (2009) explored implementation of two types of school-based employment programs in a Midwestern state. One program revolved around classroom-based courses that were based on a foundation of lecture and experimentation with technical skills. The other was a work-based program that promoted employability skills and practices, which were found to help this group of students be successful in post-graduate jobs (Guy et al., 2009).

**Job training programs.** Four types of job training programs were identified: peer mentorship programs, Job Designs, programs that used the service-learning model, and programs based on the paid-internship model. The peer mentorship program was found successful by participants because it built interest in the selected vocational area,

and created a nonthreatening environment where students learned work-related skills as well as task and social expectations (Westerlund et al., 2006).

A job training program in Florida, Job Designs, as reviewed by Bullis and Cheney (1999), promoted vocational and transitional skills through demonstrations and social skills classes. Job Designs had a positive impact on the dropout rate and employment statistics of participants with only a 21% dropout rate and 71% of students from the program placed in competitive jobs (Bullis and Cheney, 1999).

Curtin and Garcia (2011) compared the two final models, the paid-internship model and the service-learning model in Washington D.C. and Baltimore, Maryland. The paid-internship model included job coaching, career development, and competitive wages. The paid-internship model showed improved social competence of participants. The service-learning model was comprised of a job shadow/apprenticeship, job coaching, and had more of a community basis, career availability awareness aspects. The service-learning model showed an increase in work performance and social competence of participants and was found to be the superior model, noting more significant changes for participants (Curtin & Garcia, 2011).

Despite the many studies into person-centered planning programs (Michaels & Ferrara, 2005), holistic job training programs (Cheney, 2012; Karpur et al., 2005; Lemarie et al., 2002), programs for employment preparation while still in high school (Guy et al., 2009) and on-the-job training programs (Bullis & Cheney, 1999; Curtin & Garcia, 2011; Westerlund et al., 2006) there are still many unmet needs for students who have an EBD who are transitioning from high school to adult life. In order for students to be successful when transitioning from high school to adult life, more research must be done to continue to find ways to meet their needs.

### **Needs Yet To Be Addressed**

When preparing students for the transition from high school to adulthood, the literature revealed five major areas yet to be thoroughly addressed. The five areas include programming and environment changes (Bullis & Cheney, 1999; Carter et al., 2010; Collet-Klingenberg & Kolb, 2011; Kohler & Field, 2003; Lane & Carter, 2006), better assessment and IEPs (Bullis & Cheney, 1999; Carter et al., 2009; Cheney, 2012; Kohler & Field, 2003; Landmark & Zhang, 2013; Trainor, 2010), better support system (Bullis & Cheney, 1999; Carter & Lunsford, 2005; Cheney, 2012; Lane & Carter, 2006; Kohler & Field, 2003; Westerlund et al., 2006), better academic intervention strategies (Bradley et al., 2008; Lane & Carter, 2006; Mueller et al., 2012; Scanlon & Mellard, 2002) and skill work (Carter & Lunsford, 2005; Cheney, 2012; Curtin & Garcia, 2011).

**Programming and/or environment.** The literature suggested more could be and should be done to increase the programming options and improve the learning environment of the students. Kohler and Field (2003) believed that high value should be placed on the importance of program structure and attributes for more student success in high school. Similar to program attributes, Lane and Carter (2006) and Bullis and Cheney (1999) stressed the importance of adding career-building programs into the structure of school programs as part of the transition process, with the belief that access to more training and vocational programs, plus flexible career experiences were essential for positive transition outcomes to occur.

Carter et al. (2010) studied transition programming of 34 urban and rural high schools. They found that there were limited career development activities offered to the students, and also limited professional development opportunities available for educators who were working with this population. Programs most commonly offered to the

students were career interest assessments, tours of colleges and technical schools, job shadowing, interviewing and resume writing practice, and guest speakers from local businesses. Least offered activities were mentorship programs, job placement services, school-based businesses or enterprises, and cooperative education programs (Carter et al., 2010).

In a similar study into unmet needs within the school system, Bullis and Cheney (1999) suggested incorporating various environmental changes into programs such as a lower staff-to-student ratio, providing unconditional care, and connecting with more community-based programs for those who are school-phobic. Additionally, Collet-Klingentert and Kolb (2011) suggested more funding for programs to prepare students for life after high school and adequate transportation would be necessary to best serve the students.

**Assessments and IEPs.** Various ways for improving assessment and preparing an IEP were suggested (Bullis & Cheney, 1999; Carter et al., 2009; Cheney, 2012), with the goal of offering better support to each student during his or her unique journey for success. The literature suggested the intake process could be improved upon by incorporating better assessment strategies (Bullis & Cheney, 1999; Carter et al., 2009; Cheney, 2012). The assessment strategies to consider were more inclusion of a functional assessment (Bullis & Cheney, 1999); use of all seven areas of the Personal Futures Planning assessment: history, past approaches tried, current situation, goals, fears/challenges, supports and resources, and an action plan (Bullis & Cheney, 1999; Cheney, 2012); and the use of a transition assessment, which should be a broad, comprehensive, strengths-based document that incorporates multiple perspectives (Carter et al., 2009).

In a study on transition education Kohler and Field (2003) suggested a student's IEP should be a uniquely created document, student-focused and student-developed, centering on goals that include preparation for eventual adult outcomes. The IEP also should match the student's needs and wishes based on his or her individual personality and disability (Trainor, 2010). Cheney (2012) suggested the IEP should be more closely linked with, or even include, the student's transition plan for life post-graduation. Thus, the student and those assisting the student could begin to work toward what the student needs and wants for adulthood while still in high school (Carter et al., 2009; Cheney, 2012).

However, in a study Landmark and Zhang (2013) performed on compliance practices of the IDEA on inclusion of transition planning in IEPs in a seven county region of Texas, showed that full compliance of IDEA requirements were low (41.5%), with only 44.8% of IEPs containing post-secondary goals. This study also showed students who had an EBD were less likely to have an IEP that was compliant with the requirements of having measurable annual goals for education, employment, and independent living (Landmark & Zhang, 2013).

Finally, Bullis and Cheney (1999) performed a study on the need for services to be provided for adolescents transitioning from high school to adult life within the community. They suggested the most beneficial services would be community-based, wrap-around services where community services, school services and the family would collaborate in meeting the student's distinctive needs (Bullis and Cheney, 1999).

**Support systems.** Support systems have had a major impact in the lives of students. Support systems in the literature included family support (Carter & Lunsford, 2005; Lane & Carter, 2006; Kohler & Field, 2003), natural supports within the

community, such as community outreach programs, mental health centers, vocational rehabilitation (Carter & Lunsford, 2005; Cheney, 2012; Westerlund et al., 2006), and workplace support systems (Carter & Lunsford, 2005). Suggestions within the literature were made for more long-term support and follow-up with students throughout the transition period (Bullis & Cheney, 1999; Lane & Carter, 2006), as well as interagency and interdisciplinary involvement for more successful outcomes (Kohler & Field, 2003). With support systems in place, student success in transitioning to adulthood would likely increase (Carter & Lunsford, 2005; Cheney, 2012; Lane & Carter, 2006; Kohler & Field, 2003; Westerlund et al., 2006).

**Academic intervention strategies.** The literature suggested more academic interventions should be used with the students; the impact of knowledge and skills learned during this time on adulthood would be very long-lasting (Bradley et al., 2008; Lane & Carter, 2006; Mueller et al., 2012; Scanlon & Mellard, 2002).

Academic interventions, especially those focused on dropout prevention, more options for skill building, and career opportunities, were thought to be beneficial (Lane & Carter, 2006). Dropout factors of students who have an EBD were explored by Scanlon and Mellard (2002), with findings that showed more must be done to address the attendance needs of school-phobic students, create a culture where graduation would be the only acceptable option, and increase students' understanding of themselves and their disabilities.

Another academic intervention studied was the use of behavior intervention plans (Mueller et al., 2012), including the use of Response to Intervention (RTI), Early Intervention Service (EIS), and Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) as noted by Bradley et al. (2008). These behavior intervention programs tied directly to the



social learning theory, where positive behaviors were learned through observation, reinforcement, and a correct mindset according to Bandura (1971).

**Skill work.** Carter and Lunsford (2005) identified four skill areas, that they found improved outcomes of students with and EBD label. Key skill areas included social skills training to aid in gaining skills, adequate performance of skills and improved deficits; vocational skills training with both on the job training and high school preparation courses offered; academic skills training focused on core skills and graduating or obtaining a GED; and finally, self-determination skills, such as social and work behavior management skills. It was also suggested that working on skills such as self-determination as seen in person-centered theory where the wants, wishes, and needs of the client are of utmost importance, would improve the use of self-advocacy and goal-setting (Cheney, 2012). Social and interpersonal skills were believed to be of great importance for a more successful transition to adult life (Curtin & Garcia, 2011).

The major areas of need found throughout the literature were programming and environment changes, better assessment and IEPs, better support system, better academic intervention and skill work. This not only included improvement by the school social workers to better identify the areas of need, but also the students' academic teams in school to better serve them in that setting, and the community in which they will integrate, as well as friends and family for social supports.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the foundation of social learning theory and person-centered theory, as well as incorporation of the major themes that emerged from the literature, which included the important components of programs, program evaluations of existing programs, and the areas that still require some more in-depth work, an area of need has

been discovered. This qualitative research study will explore the perception of student preparedness for life post-graduation.

## **Methods**

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to collect data from the perspective of licensed school social workers regarding the preparation of students with an EBD for life post-graduation. The goal of this specific study was to use a qualitative method to gather insights from the school social workers that work directly with students with an EBD to better understand the areas of life post-graduation in which the school social workers perceive the students felt were areas of strength and areas of weakness and also the areas that the school social worker felt were students' strengths and weaknesses. Additionally, the goal of this study was to uncover what more could be done to help the students with an EBD to successfully transition to life post-graduation.

### **Research Question**

The primary research question for this study was: What is the school social worker perception of student preparedness for life post-graduation? To better understand the primary research question, several subgroups of questions were asked. Groups of questions included demographics, questions about preparation for life post-graduation, transition preparation steps, and what more can be done to help this group of students.

### **Research Design**

The research design for this study was qualitative. The qualitative research design was chosen because data gathered had the potential to "be more exploratory in nature" (Monette, Sullivan and DeJong, 2010, p. 92). Therefore, the data gathered from the participants was also more subjective in nature. The questions were based on the

students the school social worker worked with and what areas were strengths and what areas were weaknesses, as far as post-graduation preparation of students. The data from the subgroups of questions were gathered in a broad fashion and analyzed to find more specific data. This helped to identify the unmet needs of students with an EBD label as they prepare for life post-graduation. Additionally, this study identified what more social workers can do when working with this population.

### **Sample Population**

A nonprobability type of sampling was used to obtain participants because the goal of this study was to better understand the perspective of a specific group, school social workers (Monette et al., 2010). More specifically, an availability sampling method was used. This researcher used participants that were readily available and obtainable through school websites via the Internet. For the purpose of this study only school districts that were currently serving students with an EBD label in a Midwestern metropolitan area were included.

This method of nonprobability sampling through availability had both strengths and limitations. A strength of this sampling method was the expertise of participants contacted, since only those serving students with an EBD were included in the sample they have known this group of students well. Another strength was the potential for rich data coming from the participants who work first hand with this group of students.

A limitation of this sample method was the generalizability of the data. Since the sample was so concentrated by students' diagnoses, age of students served, specificity of school social worker perspective, and geographic location, the data were not easily generalized to other settings, categories, or locations. Another potential limitation was the overall number of participants available for interviews.

**Participants**

This researcher contacted licensed school social workers from publically available lists via the Internet that were working with high school students who had an EBD label. A letter was sent in early January 2014 to the mailing address of each school where a school social worker was employed detailing this study and noting that a follow-up phone call would be received in the coming weeks. The follow-up phone call was made mid-January, and again detailed this study and asked for school social workers to participate. A copy of the letter and phone call script to potential participants is included in Appendix A and B. There were 19 potential participants contacted and seven expressed interested. A date and time for an interview were arranged. However, one participant had scheduling problems and was not able to participate, for a total of six participants.

**Measures for Protection of Human Subjects**

All precautions were taken to minimize the risks of participation to human subjects in this study. Adequate measures were taken to guarantee safety of each participant throughout the course of this study. There were no risks or benefits associated with participation in this study. The questions asked are non-intrusive and related to professional opinion, not personal information. The questions asked did not relate to any specific students, but to the students with and EBD in general terms. Participation in this study was voluntary, and participants were able to withdraw at any point up to one week after their interview.

Information used to contact potential participants was obtained through public websites and contacts. Confidentiality for all participants and the school where they were employed was maintained throughout the entire research process, and will continue to be afterwards.

Informed consent (Appendix C) was obtained prior to the beginning of each interview. If informed consent had not been given from the participant, the interview would not have taken place. Confidentiality of each participant will remain intact regardless of participation in this research study. This research study and the process of the interview was explained to each participant, and this researcher reviewed the informed consent with each participant to ensure that he or she understood his or her own rights.

Information gathered through the interview process was transcribed as soon as possible; after transcription the recording was deleted. All identifying information was removed and participants were assigned random initials that they were referred to in this study.

### **Data Collection**

An exploratory study with open-ended questions was performed (Monette et al., 2010). Nonscheduled-standardized interviews, which are interviews with structured questions, but where the interviewer is able to ask additional questions or probe for more details, was performed (Monette et al., 2010).

The interview guide was found to be reliable and valid. Testing ensured reliability and that the questions were asked in such a way that they gather correct information. Validity of the interview guide was determined prior to use by peer review and establishing clarity in questions.

As stated earlier the primary research question for this study was: What is the school social worker perception of student preparedness for life post-graduation? There were subgroups of questions asked to each participant: demographics, questions about preparation for life post-graduation, transition preparation steps, and what more can be

done to help this group of students. A copy of the basic interview guide is included in Appendix D.

### **Data Analysis**

Data obtained through interviews with each participant were audio recorded. A verbatim transcription was promptly completed after each interview by this researcher. Qualitative data from each individual interview was coded based on content, and then codes were analyzed for common themes.

Themes of importance were grouped based on question asked, which were the overall preparation, the areas of strength and weakness perceived by the school social worker, and areas that the school social worker believed the student felt were their strengths and weaknesses. The data was also analyzed for trends in what was currently being done to prepare students for transition post-graduation and advice that school social workers feel was important for future work with students with an EBD.

### **Results**

Six licensed school social workers that worked with high school students with an EBD were interviewed for this research study. All participants were from a Midwestern metropolitan area. Each participant was asked 15 questions during an individual interview (Appendix D). Questions were related to demographics, preparation for life after graduation, transition, and unmet needs. Results are disseminated below.

### **Participant Demographics**

All participants interviewed were licensed school social workers that worked in a high school and served students with an EBD. Of the six social workers interviewed, five worked with just special education students specifically, and the other served both special education and general education students. When asked about length of time in their

current position, responses ranged from 4-16 years. There were five females and one male interviewed.

### **School Social Worker Role in the Transition Process**

Participants all had roles in the process of transitioning students from high school to life after graduation. However, roles in this process varied from participant to participant. One school social worker stated her role is growing based on the district becoming aware of the growing need, another stated that her role was to empower the students and have conversations about how important planning and further education are when transitioning to adult life and responsibilities.

*“I think now within our district my role has probably become bigger in the transition area just because it’s often being recognized as such a huge need. We do a lot more evaluation specifically in the transition area. But EBD specifically, right now I can say that I am working with students on matching their skills and abilities with potential careers and interests. And whether or not they are college ready or if that’s a realistic goal. So we really take a look at their IEP needs, their identified needs, their disability area and we learn about that disability and the accommodations that might help them be successful at a college level or on the job. That’s probably the bulk of what I am working on in the transition area. Also, doing some community participation kinds of things, like using our community ed. bulletin and finding classes or things that might be interesting. I don’t really do a lot like of home living or anything like that right now. Make referrals for other community agencies to parents, things like that.”*

*“I’m kinda just the cheerleader about it. We talk about how important it is, and that you can’t really get a good job, make a living, support yourself without some sort of higher education, even if it’s just a 2 year, or technical school or whatever.”*

### **Preparation for Life Post-Graduation**

All participants were asked how prepared they perceived students with an EBD to be for life after graduation. Participants were also asked if the students had any specific areas where they were more or less prepared for life after graduation. Additionally, participants were asked how prepared they believed the students with an EBD feel for life after graduation, and again what areas they believed the students feel are areas of strength and weakness. The ideas that emerged include: lack of preparation, surprising motivation in the work setting that is not present in the school setting, survival skills, lack of ability to obtain further education, unrealistic views, student-perceived strengths and student perceived weaknesses.

**Lack of preparation.** Each school social worker that participated in this research study was asked, “In general, how prepared do you believe the students with an EBD are for life after graduation?” School social workers felt that, in general, students were not adequately prepared for life after graduation. The respondents noted that students did not have realistic goals and expectations for what their lives would look like after they graduated from high school.

*“I definitely think that they could be more prepared. I think that a lot of students leave here with pretty lofty goals and that might be unrealistic.”*

*“Like they say they want a job but they have no idea what that means. They have no idea, ya know, being on time, having to get along with people, having to deal with people even if they are rude to you, that you’re not rude to them, how do you deal with coworkers, ya know, they just have no concept for that, then don’t understand why they got fired.”*



**Motivation in the work setting.** Despite the feeling of overall lack of preparation for life after graduation, in a few cases participants stated that when students did enter the work force they were pleasantly surprised at how well the students were able to perform on the job site. Something made a connection for these students. Whether it was the motivation of the paycheck, a change of environment, doing something that they enjoyed more than school, or a fresh start, something clicked for students and they were highly motivated to perform on the jobsite.

*“But what I have found also is that some kids that have a lot of difficulty in the school environment do very well when they find jobs, and I’m not talking about long-term jobs, as much as just part-time jobs.”*

*“I think that students who have been in a center-based program for the majority of their school career sometimes surprise us at how well they do on a job site and how well they do when they’re not in a school setting, that they can do really well when they’re working for money... It makes a connection for them.”*

**Survival skills.** Each school social worker that participated in this research study was asked, “In general, what skills do you believe the students are most prepared?” The school social workers’ perceptions of students’ strengths were similar from participant to participant. The response of “street smarts” or “street skills” was noted by 50% of the participants as a strength of this group of students. They responded that students know how to get by when times are tough. They have the skills to survive. Those interviewed noted the students who had difficulties growing up were sometimes more prepared in certain areas of adult life. This may be because they had to play the adult role in their family or because they have lived through the hardships with their families and had to

develop certain life skills early, and therefore, understand how much hard work goes into adult life.

*“Street savvy...some of the kids...the higher needs EBD kids have had a lot of responsibilities at home that may be your typical student wouldn't have. So they may have developed some of those life skills, like cooking.”*

*“Street smarts, street skills. They are going to get by because that is what they have had to do for so long.”*

**Further education.** Each participant was asked about the weakest areas of preparation for students with an EBD. The specific question asked was, “In general, what areas do you believe the students are least prepared?” School social workers believed that students were least prepared to enter the world of further education. Some respondents noted that students who had gone on to further education after graduation were not in enrolled any longer. Students are just not prepared to perform at such a high rigor or pace. This is unfortunate for students because additional education, whether it be a training school or a college or university, education is the gateway for an improved quality of life.

*“Further education I think is probably the biggest or one of the biggest. I'm thinking about since I've been here, whose of the setting three, the highest need kids, who has gone to college, I know of one. And he's not in college anymore, so yeah.”*

*“I would say that one of the biggest areas of weakness are being able to perform academically at a higher level.”*

**Unrealistic views.** Participants also believed that unrealistic views of life post-graduation were holding students from taking more steps to be prepared for adult life. Many students had unrealistic career goals, housing goals, and economic goals. The

students were not as self-aware as they can be or should be and this hindered their ability to form realistic goals. Additionally, lack of self-awareness hindered students' abilities to understand what their skills were, and where their strengths lied. A more accurate perception of goals and strengths can inform their ideas for what realistic goals for post-graduation can be.

*“The kids at least that I encounter don't seem to have the kind of self-awareness that I would like them to have to some degree. Like what are the realities, like what is it going to be like if I don't have some of these things in place.”*

*“They don't understand how much it costs and all of that. So, I'd say a lot of them will have a very bumpy sort of time, where I see the most promise is when the parents are involved.”*

**Student perceived strengths.** Each school social worker was asked, “What skills do you believe the students feel most prepared?” Participants felt as though the students believed that they were, overall, confident and prepared for most, if not all, areas of adult life. They believed that students feel confident in their abilities to run a home, interview for a job and acquire a job, and manage life well. This may go back to their unrealistic views and expectations about adult life and their unrealistic ideas of their skills and abilities to perform well in life post-graduation.

*“They probably think like good communication, interviewing. I think that they think they really have it all figured out. Like they have a plan in their head and there is no way that anybody is going to tell them otherwise.”*

*“They feel pretty confident, I think some are acting, they seem pretty confident but they really aren't, and I think some are completely clueless. I think a lot of them believe they will be fine...”*

**Student perceived weaknesses.** The participants were also asked what they perceive the students to feel are their weaknesses with the question, “What skills do you believe the students feel least prepared?” The school social workers noted that they believe students feel that their disability is their greatest weakness when preparing for life post-graduation. Students wonder if they have to disclose the information about their disability to landlords, employers, educators and others and they worry about how this may impact how others will perceive them. Maybe their disability makes them feel inadequate or insecure, like they do not measure up to the rest of their peers or coworkers. This could also be improved by returning to the idea of helping students find their areas of strength and ability and capitalizing on them so that they do not perceive that their disability is holding them back.

*“Their mental health issues that have gotten in the way for them. It is their disability, and that they feel, that puts them at a vulnerable place.”*

Other responses include weaknesses such as:

*“It’s just valuing education, valuing themselves enough.”*

*“I hate to say that they don’t have a lot of skills, but they don’t. I mean it really, it really needs to come from their value system from home.”*

### **Transition**

All participants were asked about the transition process leading up to life after graduation. Participants were asked about the skills that the students with an EBD work on in preparation for transition to life post-graduation, the social workers stated that they work with the students on transition skills and traditional social skills. Participants were also asked about parent and student involvement in the transition process, to this the overall response was lack of involvement of parents in the transition process.

**Skills.** When school social workers were asked about transition skills students learned to prepare them for adult life the majority noted that skills were lacking and if they can be improved it would greatly affect the outcomes of preparation for life post-graduation. In general, students learn traditional social skills, such as ways to cope, problem solving, decision-making and managing emotional and behavioral expectations. Students also learn transitional skills, such as matching their interests to potential jobs, understanding what type of environment they would be best suited for and incorporation of living skills into class material (balancing a checkbook).

*“So with transition skills it would probably be looking more at coping with anxiety, coping with depression, coping with whatever is going on in their life versus teaching the specific how do you ride a bus, how do you cook dinner, or the specific job skills, interviewing skills. There are classes that do that. So I think my role would be more helping them be emotionally ready...connect with community...helping to make a decision about whether they need to go to a transition, an 18-21 program or graduate.”*

Work around traditional skills are illustrated by the following responses from participants:

*“Actually traditional social work sorts of things. I mean I work a lot with students with, with, ya know, with problem-solving skills, with decision-making skills, with self-calming kinds of things, so those, those kinds of traditional things.”*

*“Typically the needs that I cover are in the social area, problem solving, expected behavior, language, discipline, all of those things that might trip them up in life after high school. And also just, ya know, the high school drama kinds of things.”*

**Parent and student involvement.** School social work participants were asked, “How involved are the students and parents in transition preparation?” They noted that

parent involvement is another area of improvement in the transition process. Participants reported that the parents of students with an EBD are some of the most “disconnected” and uninvolved group of parents they see. This could be due to a number of reasons. Improvements that could be made are to limit the ongoing negative association with the school due to their child’s behavioral and emotional concerns throughout school. Another factor could make interest in their child’s transition difficult are the daily challenges that they are facing and that other things are more important than their child’s transition planning. Whatever it may be more support of parents and for parents throughout this process could have a very positive impact on the transition of students to adult life.

*“Speaking EBD specific, not very. That is probably one of the hardest categorical, under the umbrella of special ed. to get parents involved...and sometimes, honestly, those families have bigger fish to fry. Like they are dealing with their own mental health needs, or other things, they are not really thinking about the future, they are just in in the moment.”*

*“Some kids, their parents are kinda done at that stage with, ya know, dependent on the kid. Sometimes the kid is done, they just want out, ya know, ‘Leave me alone.’”*

### **Unmet Needs**

Each participant was asked about the needs that are not being met when serving students with an EBD who are transitioning from high school to adult life. The specific question asked was, “What more can be done to help this group of students?” School social workers identified three major areas of need when preparing students with an EBD for life post-graduation. The three areas identified were lack of resources, lack of connection and communication, and lack of programming.

**Lack of resources.** Respondents indicated the lack of available or lack of awareness of available resources impacts this group of students. Many may come from a lower socioeconomic status or even generational poverty. They may lack the resources to survive their daily lives, let alone be prepared and think realistically about transition to life post-graduation. If families could be more connected to resources while in school and also during the transition process and after they would have a better foundation to start their transition to adult roles. Respondents noted there is a gap in disability resources allocated to this group of students. They are not cognitively impaired enough to qualify, nor do they have a large enough need for resources based on a disability.

*“[A] disproportionate amount of EBD kids, or students of color, students in poverty, and so generally they have fewer recourses.”*

*“There’s no community resources for them. They’re not low enough to have a case manager for DCD, they’re not sick enough to have a case manager for SED...”*

**Lack connection and communication.** As noted earlier, respondents indicated there is a lack of connection and communication within the systems that support this group of students. The parents are disconnected from the school and the student, the student and family are disconnected from the community, the need of the school, the student and the families are disconnected from society. This has a large impact on the outcome of students’ lives after graduation. The importance of connection and communication with parents is crucial for support and success. With community support we can support parents and families in raising their child, providing positive role models for children and additional caring adults for them to seek out. The disconnection from society has an impact on student lives too. Society’s lack of understanding leads to lack of funding, lack of support for students, parents, communities and schools, lack of

adequate programming and much more. This is a difficult challenge to undertake, but a necessary one for us to see any change in the future of our students.

*“I think the connection isn’t there... [There is] a huge negative association with school and so I think schools aren’t necessarily the environment that they have positive experiences with. Which is what I do my best to create, is relationships with those students.”*

*“Just believing in their kids, having faith in them and even if they have straight Fs let them know that they can still do it, there are people that will help them. I think that the community needs to care more. I feel like our politicians need to care more. I feel like everybody needs to care more, because really they are the future and they are worth it. We need to help them and they need more help than other people and we just need to be able to provide the help.”*

**Lack of adequate programming.** In addition to lack of resources, respondents noted there is a lack of adequate and appropriate programming for this group of students. During the school day time is limited for school social workers to meet individually or in groups with all the students that have any needs, let alone transition needs. Therefore, the students are not learning as many of the transition skills as they could be. Additionally, with the other scholastic requirements students must meet there is little time to fit in a transition class that can meet the transition needs of students more appropriately. Instead, students are learning transition skills in their core classes. Many respondents agreed upon the fact that there need to be more transition programs for students 18-21 or more flexibility to allow students with an EBD to attend this type of program.

*“They often get the least amount of attention, even though they may be, and the more needy kids... some of the kids who are cognitively delayed, there is more*



*programming outside of school, more opportunities to be out in the community, to be supported in that way and those are not necessarily things that we have that I think our students would benefit tremendously with more like real life experiences, supported jobs, things like that.”*

*“Like I’m typically meeting with students a half hour once a week, that’s not a lot of time to cover 5 transition areas and a lot of our case managers are stretched pretty thin, so we don’t have like a transition skill class, so they are having to kind of incorporate some of those skills within English or math or other content areas.”*

### **Discussion**

Research in this study focused on the preparation for life post-graduation of students with an EBD from the perspective of school social workers. According to Bradley et al. (2008), the students who have the poorest outcomes for life post-graduation are the students who have been diagnosed with an EBD. Findings showed preparation for life post-graduation during high school was not doing enough to prepare students with and EBD for the transition to adult roles and responsibilities. The transition to adult roles and responsibilities would be difficult for any student, but the challenges that this group of students face with their behavioral and/or emotional difficulties would make this transition even more difficult.

### **Lack of Preparation**

The research performed in this study was in agreement with the literature found on the topic. All participants interviewed for this research study believed that students were insufficiently prepared for life post-graduation. Findings also noted that students did not have realistic goals and expectations, lacked desire or ability to go on for further education and lacked overall skills, all factors that hinder preparation for life post-

graduation. Throughout the literature, findings also noted that students with an EBD have a much more difficult time transitioning to adult life than students without this educational diagnosis due to higher drop out rates (Carter, Trainor, Sun, & Owens, 2009; Cheney, 2012; Karpur, Clark, Caproni, & Sterner, 2005; Lemarie, Mallik, & Stoll, 2002; Mueller, Bassett, & Brewer, 2012; Scanlon & Mellard, 2002; Wagner & Blackorby, 1996; Westerlund, Granucci, Gamache, & Clark, 2006), difficulty with relationships (Bradley, Doolittle, & Bartolotta, 2008; Bullis & Cheney, 1999; Cheney, 2012; Curtin & Garcia, 2011; Lane & Carter, 2006; Westerlund et al., 2006;), and lack of integration and use of service within the community (Bullis & Cheney, 1999; Lane & Carter, 2006; Wagner & Blackorby, 1996; Westerlund et al., 2006). Major needs that must be addressed for equipping students to be better prepared for life post-graduation include: ability and desire pursue further education, improved transition skills, improved connection and support, and more programming for this group.

### **Further Education**

Lack of preparation for further education and lack of interest in further education was noted by participants interviewed for this research study. Many participants believed this to be the students' biggest area of weakness. Participants indicated students did not value further education; it was not a part of their ideal future. They noted that many students did not think they could be successful, that they could afford it, or that they needed it. This is unfortunate because higher education of any sort can lead to more success in adult life.

Studies within the literature did not focus directly on the value of further education and the lack of students who go on to more school, but on improvement of assessment methods and IEPs. Research participants were not asked directly about

improving the assessment process and process of the creation of an IEP, but if the assessment and IEP process could be improved to more directly target weaknesses and build upon strengths, this may help students to be better prepared for the rigor and demands of further education throughout their school years. Specific ways of improving this process were highlighted by Bullis and Cheney (1999), Carter et al. (2009) and Cheney (2012). They suggested incorporating a functional assessment, which includes more of a focus on fears, challenges, supports and resources (Bullis & Cheney, 1999). Previous research also suggested beneficial services for helping students find the value in further education. This value would come from inspiration and support from community services, school services and the family (Bullis and Cheney, 1999).

### **Transition Skills**

According to the findings of this research, all social workers assisted students, in some way, with transition skill building. School social workers noted that overall the students' skills for adult life were lacking. Skills that school social workers help to develop were traditional social skills, such as coping, problem solving, and decision-making and emotional and behavioral management. Other skills that social workers assisted with were transitional skills, such as matching interests to potential jobs and other types living skills.

Within the literature four major skill areas important for transition preparation were identified. The skill areas included social skills training, vocational skills training, academic skills training, and self-determination skills training (Carter & Lunsford, 2005). Carter and Lunsford identified two additional skills that participants in this research study did not directly identify, academic skills and self-determination skills. However, participants did note the students' lack of ability to perform at a higher level but do not

directly assist with this skill group. All four skills are important to create well-rounded, successful students who are adequately prepared for adult roles.

### **Lack of Connection and Support**

For students to be more prepared for life post-graduation many provisions are made within the school system. For example, students receive special education services and have an IEP, which “outline[s] the services and supports the school will provide in order for the child to benefit from the educational program” (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2013, para. 5). However, research findings from this study discovered that school social workers felt their schools were doing the best they could with what they were given. With this in mind, many participants still identified that more resources, support and programs are needed both in school and outside of school students to be more successful.

Findings from this research study highlighted the overall lack of parent involvement and the difficulty that school staff have had with engaging the parents who have a student with an EBD. Many participants noted that this could be due to the negative association that the families have with the school and their child’s behavior. Another reason noted was the more important challenges that families are facing, such as providing for their basic needs, were more important than transition preparation of their child. Social workers also noted that the students and families were disconnected from community members and community resources as well. Connection and communication continue to be a crucial for support and success of students. Disconnection not only has an impact on the future of students but their families and their communities.

Previous literature on connection and support of students with an EBD was congruent with what school social workers were stating in this research study. Literature

found the lack of, yet major importance of, family support (Carter & Lunsford, 2005; Lane & Carter, 2006; Kohler & Field, 2003), natural supports within the community (Carter & Lunsford, 2005; Cheney, 2012; Westerlund et al., 2006), and workplace support systems (Carter & Lunsford, 2005) when helping students with an EBD be prepared for successful lives post-graduation.

### **Lack of Programming**

Findings from this research study indicate an overwhelming lack of adequate and appropriate programming for this group of students and their transition needs. Many students have not learned all the transition skills needed for adult life. Due to the amount of education the school staff must fit into one school day transition skills have not gotten adequate coverage. This is why school social workers identified more transition programs for students 18-21 or more flexibility to allow students with an EBD to attend this type of program to be a major need.

Previous literature on the topic agreed with findings from this study. Many studies (Kohler & Field, 2003; Lane & Carter, 2006; Bullis & Cheney, 1999) believed that for more student success in high school and post-graduation more importance should be placed on adding career-building programs into school programs as part of the transition to adult life. Additionally, the previous research studies had the belief that access to more training and vocational programs were necessary for successful transition to adult life.

### **Surprising Performance in the Work Setting**

Findings from this study showed, despite the overall lack of preparation for life post-graduation some students performed surprisingly well on the job site. This supports findings within the literature that also showed on the job training programs were

motivating for students. Within the literature reviewed four types of job training programs were identified: peer mentorship programs, Job Designs, programs that used the service-learning model, and programs based on the paid-internship model. All four programs identified were found to be successful by the participants. Factors of success included interest, nonthreatening environment (Westerlund et al., 2006), improved placement in competitive jobs (Bullis and Cheney, 1999), and increased work performance (Curtin and Garcia, 2011). The motivation that students feel on the job is an area of great hope. If we can determine what worked for these students, maybe we can use it for other students as well.

### **Summary**

Previous research on preparation of students with an EBD for life post-graduation and findings from this study agreed that more must be done to help students be more adequately prepared for adult roles. For the need of further education, participants from this study felt that students and families did not value education and felt as though it was out of reach for them. Previous research on this focused more on the assessment and drafting of IEPs to help students gain skills than actually helping them enroll in further education. Carter and Lunsford (2005) agreed that transition skills were lacking and students would benefit from a greater focus on academic skills, vocational skills, social skills and self-determination skills. Previous literature and findings from this study agreed that more connection between students and school, school and families, student and community, families and community would be beneficial for successful student outcomes post-graduation. Findings from this study and previous literature also agreed on the importance of transition programs for students age 18-21. It was believed that with more programming students have more opportunities to gain skills, knowledge and

more realistic ideas for life post-graduation when they are on their own to fulfill adult roles.

### **Implications for Social Work**

This research explored school social work perspectives on the preparation of students with an EBD for life after high school. The findings of this study can be used when working directly with the students and the systems that impact the students to better prepare, improve and build upon strengths that students already have.

The role of the school social worker could be defined more universally, or expanded to include transition preparation more fully. Many of the school social workers interviewed had varying roles in the transition process. Some had little impact on the transition process and others were teaching skill-building curriculum. If this role could be broader to include skill building taught and encouraged by the social worker, who would know the needs and disability of each student, there is potential for students to have more transition preparation when they graduate. Additionally, a more universal role for all high schools social workers would be beneficial. Therefore, if a student transfers to a new school there is someone available to assist them with their skill building and transition process similar to their previous school.

More work can be done to help students understand the connection between materials taught in school and its connection to adult life. To achieve this teachers, support staff and parents need to use real-world examples and help the students navigate real-world situations using skills learned in the classroom. For example, a class party where students must use the skill of budgeting to buy food for all class members. Additionally, for those students where some things are beginning to make a connection, use that connection and capitalize on it, generalizing knowledge and skills to other areas

of adult life. For example, teaching a student to know how to advocate for his or her needs with a teacher could be generalized to adult life where he or she could advocate appropriately for needs within further education or employment.

School staff can work to build connections and have conversations with students and families to aid them in the transition process. With parents, they know their child well, so their involvement in the transition process and setting of realistic goals and expectations about adult life would be helpful.

### **Social Work Policy**

We must fill the resource gap where students with an EBD are falling through. They do not have a severe enough disability to qualify for resources and programs that would benefit them tremendously. If there could be adequate funding for resources and programs for students 18-21 with an EBD students would be able to gain more skills for adult life. Social workers could advocate for their students to attend transition programs such as the programs for individuals who have a developmental disability. Transition programs for students with an EBD may include the following life skills: community areas of living, daily independent living, social functioning, employment, education, supports, and personal skills (Bullis & Cheney, 1999; Carran et al., 2005; Carter et al., 2009; Karpur et al., 2005; Kohler & Field, 2003; Mueller et al., 2012; Trainor, 2010; Wagner & Blackorby, 1996). If transition programs for EBD students age 18-21 were able to focus on the seven skill areas listed above students will be better able to succeed in their adult roles.

### **Social Work Research**

There are many areas of research that can be explored to better aid students with an EBD for the transition post-graduation. One such area could be to perform a very



similar study to this, but interview other stakeholders in the transition process.

Interviews may be conducted with teachers, parents, support staff, and, most importantly, the students to explore the areas where they feel most and least prepared for adult life.

Research can be done to explore the building of a connection between materials that are taught in class to its use in adult life. Research can be done with parents, students and school staff to understand how we can help students have more realistic goals and awareness of themselves that carries over into their transition to life post-graduation.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

A strength of this research study was the richness of the data collected from those who work directly with students who have an EBD. The previous research on actual perceptions of student preparation is limited in both the school social worker perspective and the student perspective.

A limitation of this research study was limited generalizability due to multiple factors. The number of participants interviewed for this study was limited (n=6). Therefore, it cannot be assumed that the perspectives of those interviewed are representative of the greater population of social workers working with this population. Furthermore, with only one type of profession interviewed, this study is limited to only one perspective, which does not include teachers, students and other support staff. This study was limited to one Midwestern metropolitan area, and cannot be generalizable to the greater United States for that reason as well.

Due to the potential partial nature of this qualitative study, since one researcher coded this research, there is concern for bias. One possible bias would be this researcher's concern with the lack of information on the social aspect of the transition to life post-graduation over inclusion of this area could be likely. Additionally, bias could

appear in the coding due to this researcher's belief that students do have difficulties with the transition from a structured high school environment to an independent environment. However, research colleagues with the intentions of eliminating such biases, crosschecked the data.

### **Conclusion**

Previous research identified the skill areas that are important when students with an EBD are transitioning to life post-graduation. Additionally, previous research has identified various programs that have been studied for use with students who have an EBD and are transitioning to adult life as well as unmet needs. However, specific areas of preparation and lack of preparation had not been explored. This research sought to explore school social workers' perception of student preparedness for life post-graduation.

Themes that emerged from the interviews performed included: overall lack of preparation, the skill of survival skills, the lack of preparation for further education, lack of realistic goals and expectations, skills learned, lack of parent involvement and unmet needs in the areas of resources, programming and overall communication and connection. Previous literature identified major areas where students should be prepared for life post-graduation, but research throughout this study has identified overall lack of preparation and many unmet needs for this group of students and their supporting systems, more should be done to work to remedy this challenge for our youth and within the school system.

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**Appendix A****Sample Letter Sent to Potential Participants**

Date: [Insert Date]

[Recipient]

[Title]

[Company]

[Address 1]

[Address 2]

[Address 3]

Dear [Recipient]:

Hello, my name is Stephanie Adix; I am a MSW student at the School of Social Work at the University of St. Thomas and St. Catherine University. For my final research project I am conducting a qualitative study about student preparation of student preparedness for life post-graduation from the school social worker perspective.

I would like you to help by participating in my research study. I am selecting participants based on their work in a setting with high school students who have an emotional behavior disorder. There will be a one-time interview lasting 30-45 minutes that will be audio recorded. The questions I will be asking are broad questions about perceptions of preparation for life after high school and not about any specific students. The records of this study will be kept confidential and participation in this study is voluntary.

I will be making follow-up phone calls within a few days. At that time you will be able to ask any additional questions you may have and hopefully we can set up a time at your convenience in January for you to be interviewed for my study.

Your consideration is truly appreciated! If you have questions, please contact me at 507-402-5419 or [adix3662@stthaoms.edu](mailto:adix3662@stthaoms.edu).

Sincerely,

Stephanie Adix

## **Appendix B**

### **Sample Phone Call Script**

Hello. My name is Stephanie Adix. I am a MSW student at the University of St. Thomas and St. Catherine University conducting my clinical research project interviewing licensed school social workers. Do you qualify?

A few weeks ago you should have received a letter in the mail from me outlining my study. I would like to tell you about my study again and give you the opportunity to participate. My study is an exploratory study looking at the preparation of students who have an emotional behavioral disorder for life after high school. This study will ask you about your perception of the areas in which students with an EBD feel most and least prepared for life after high school, areas in which you feel they are most and least prepared, the transition process at your school and what more can be done to meet the needs of this group of students. I am wondering if you would be willing to partake in a 30-45 minute interview in regards to these four areas. Your participation will be confidential, and your name and the name of your program will not be mentioned. If you would be willing to set aside this time for an in-person interview, I can schedule that with you now. Your decision to participate in this study is appreciated. There will be no risk of harm or any benefit to you as a participant.

**Appendix C****CONSENT FORM  
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS  
PREPARATION OF STUDENTS WITH EBD FOR LIFE POST-  
GRADUATION: SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKER PERSPECTIVE  
IRB #: 534383-1**

Dear Participant,

I am conducting a study about student preparation for life post-graduation from the school social worker perspective. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because you work in a setting with high school youth who have an emotional behavior disorder (EBD). Your contact information was found on your district website via the Internet. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Stephanie Adix in the Master of Social Work program at the School of Social Work at the University of St. Thomas and St. Catherine University. My faculty research advisor, Dr. Kendra Garrett, is supervising it.

**Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the preparation of students with an EBD for life post-graduation and what more can be done to help this group of students to be prepared for life post-graduation.

**Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following: agree to a one-time interview at a private location of your convenience, which would last about 30-45 minutes and will be audio recorded.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

The study has no known risks.

There are no known direct benefits you will receive for participating.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you, or your place of employment in any way. The types of records I will create include an audio recording, which will be transcribed. The audio recording will be destroyed after transcription and the transcribed document will be stored on my computer and password protected until completion of the study, and then deleted.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of St. Thomas and St. Catherine University. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time. Should you decide to withdraw, you may do so within one week of the interview, and data collected about you will not be used. You are also free to skip any questions I may ask.

### **Contacts and Questions**

My name is Stephanie Adix. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at 507-402-5419. My advisor is Dr. Kendra Garrett; please use her email to reach her, [kjgarrett@stthoams.edu](mailto:kjgarrett@stthoams.edu). You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-5341 with any questions or concerns.

If you would like to obtain a summary of the results of this study when they are available, I will provide you with them. You may call me using the information above.

Thank you so much for your time and participation.

Sincerely,  
Stephanie Adix

**You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.**

### **Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age. I consent to be audio recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Study Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Print Name of Study Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Researcher**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

## Appendix D

### Interview Guide

**Primary Question:** What is the school social worker perception of student preparedness for life post-graduation?

#### Demographic Questions

1. What is your current position?
2. How long have you worked in that position?
3. What is your role in the transition process of students who have an EBD?
4. On average, how many minutes of service do you provide to this group of students?

#### Preparation for Life post-graduation

5. In general, how prepared do you believe the students with an EBD are for life post-graduation?
6. How prepared do you believe the students believe they are?
7. In general, what skill areas do you believe the students are most prepared?
8. What skill areas do you believe the students feel most prepared?
9. In general, what skill areas do you believe the students are least prepared?
10. What skill areas do you believe the students feel least prepared?

#### Transition

11. What skills do you help your students who have an EBD develop for life post-graduation?
12. How involved are the students and parents in transition preparation?
13. Do you assess their transition preparation with an assessment tool?
14. In general, do the results align of the assessments align with your knowledge of preparedness among your students? How/Why?

#### Need

15. What more can be done to help this group of students?

#### Examples:

Finding, keeping employment

Finding, succeeding in further education

Navigating the community

Finding, maintain social supports

Recreation and leisure activities

Finding, keeping, housing

Daily living skills-personal hygiene, paying bills, cooking, time management