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Jennifer Braaten  
*St. Catherine University*

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Linking EBD Student Achievement to Attachment:  
Exploring the Role of Relationship in Encouraging School Success

by

Jennifer Braaten, B.S.W.

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Social Work  
St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas  
St. Paul, Minnesota  
in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Social Work

Committee Members  
David Roseborough, Ph.D., LICSW  
Jean Jordan, Ed.D.  
Mary Larscheid, Ph.D., LICSW

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 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: Less than one half of students educationally labeled Emotionally or Behaviorally Disordered (EBD) graduate. Previous research findings suggest some reasons for this lack of success including: lack of educator training, mental health issues of students, the effect of poverty and how the nature of early childhood attachment impacts learning. Specific attention has been given to early childhood attachment patterns form the neurological pathways upon which a student may base future interactions. This qualitative study focused on the nature of the student-educator relationship and how that relationship can impact the learning of EBD students. There were ten participants interviewed for this study: four educators, one grandparent of a former EBD student and five former EBD students. The findings of this study suggest a need for increased teacher training to broaden understanding of mental health issues, the barriers EBD students face outside of an educational system, and the importance of the educator-student relationship as an essential component needed for EBD students to succeed. Additionally, the findings included the need for increased funding for education to decrease class size and a need for increased mental health supports in schools.

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The reason for the inception of this project has always been the EBD students I have been privileged to work with specifically those who volunteered to be interviewed for this project. There is never a dull moment in working with EBD kids. Each of them has left a mark on my heart, and because of them I have found my true passion in life. I'm deeply indebted to them for taking a risk by allowing me to share in the pain and joy in their lives. These students have inspired, motivated and taught me more about the human condition and how to be a social worker than anything I've ever learned from a textbook. I'm constantly amazed and in awe of their strength as well as their resilience.

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## Introduction

Over the past three decades, there has been a marked increase in the number of school aged children educationally identified as emotionally and behaviorally disordered (EBD). There is much disagreement regarding how to define EBD since it can encompass not only behavioral issues but a wide array of mental health disorders defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual IV-TR. The United States Department of Education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Section 300.8 defines EBD as the following:

Emotional disturbance means 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 child'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.

(Retrieved from: <http://idea.ed.gov/explore/view/p/,root,regs,300,A,300%252E8>)

The National Association of School Psychologists defines EBD as

a condition in which behavioral or emotional responses of an individual in school are so different from his/her generally accepted, age appropriate, ethnic or cultural norms that they adversely affect performance in such areas as self-care, social relationships, personal adjustment, academic progress, classroom behavior, or work adjustment (National Association of School Psychologists, 2004, p. 1).

A variety of negative behaviors encompass an EBD student including poor impulse control, verbal and physical aggression, oppositional, argumentative, depressed,

withdrawn and a tendency to blame others for and have limited insight into their behavior (Abrams, 2005). Additionally, a lack of social skills frequently causes EBD students to struggle to maintain appropriate behavior and relationships with both peers and adults.

One of the hallmarks of an EBD student is the cognitive functioning lies in the normal range but the behavioral and emotional outbursts negatively impact learning. In 2010, the National Center for Education Statistics reported 407,000 EBD students were receiving special education services (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). In order to qualify for special education under the EBD criteria, the student's behavior or emotional health must negatively impact their ability to learn in a classroom setting (IDEA, 2004). The presenting maladaptive classroom behavior challenges coupled with educational demands can create an extremely frustrating and stressful environment for both EBD student as well as teachers.

Author and researcher Bruce Perry has argued success or failure in the world is determined largely by the health and strength of human relationships. He notes, the most critical brain development of emotional and psychological functioning happens, in utero through five years of age (2006, p.21). Important neurological building blocks of brain development hinge upon the quality of caregiving provided to an infant as the brain begins to organize around early life experiences (2006, p.22) The ability to manage stress, motivation, and growth all begin to wire together to form a neurological highway during this extremely critical time in human development (2006, p.22). Regrettably, due to a variety of factors, too many children are not provided the opportunity for healthy brain development, setting them up for life-long negative consequences.

Unfortunately, a substantial number of children are exposed to and live in abusive, traumatic, and neglectful home environments. In 2004, an estimated three million child protection reports were made to government agencies with 872,000 cases confirmed. One in eight children under the age of seventeen report some form of maltreatment by adults within the past year. An estimated ten million children in the United States are believed to be exposed to some form of domestic violence. Each year 800,000 children will spend time in the foster care system due to substantiated abuse or neglect from their family system (Perry, 2006, p.3). The sobering statistics provide some insight into the plight of American children. The societal cost is significant with the educational system being the first of many systems affected by the lack of healthy human relationships.

For healthy human development physical, social, and emotional needs must be met before one can advance to the next developmental stage (Perry, 2001). Simply put, one must crawl before one can run. If not given the opportunity or encouragement to grow in a certain developmental area, one can risk becoming stunted. The behavioral, social, and emotional deficits often stem from an environment of unmet psychological needs. Children coming from chaotic, abusive, neglectful and traumatic home environments often struggle with the demands of an educational system (Abrams, 2005). School systems are unable to single-handedly change the social and cultural problems of a prevailing society; this contributes to the growing number of disadvantaged students. Nevertheless, schools are required to provide an education to all students including those coming from extremely problematic backgrounds.

One contributing factor affecting a child's development is poverty, and the effects of childhood poverty often last a lifetime. Although the United States is considered both an economic and resource rich country, there are structural inequalities which prevent children from realizing their potential. Up to 40 percent of children living in chronic poverty were found to have deficiencies in areas such as language and emotional responsiveness at age three (Jensen, 2005). Children of low income families may not receive the nurturing inherent of middle class family relationships in part due to long hours at low paying jobs or a lack of understanding of how to positively engage their children (Dubin, 2013). This places children at a disadvantage since the lack of nurturing can inhibit a child's ability to develop effective social or communication skills needed for academic success. The prevalence of language deficits in EBD students is 10 times that of the general education population; in one particular study, EBD students were more likely to use physical actions and less verbal communication to solve peer to peer problems (Benner, Beaudoin, Kinder and Mooney, 2005). Compared to the general population of students, those educationally labeled emotionally and behaviorally disordered (EBD) are more likely to live in poverty and in a single parent home with no post-secondary education beyond high school (Gaylord, Quinn, McComas & Lehr 2005). Tragically, 22 percent, or one in every five children, were reported to be poor in 2011. The statistics are even graver for children under five years old with one in four reported to be living in poverty and almost half in extreme chronic poverty (Children's Defense Fund, 2012).

One manner in which school districts address the challenges EBD students bring to the classroom includes offering special education services. Despite such efforts, this

population of students experience drop-out rate of 47%, significantly higher than their mainstream counterparts (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). The hallmark characteristic of an EBD student is having the cognitive abilities to do the academic work, but their emotional and behavioral outbursts interfere with their ability to learn and retain information. However, this population is overrepresented in failure rates of schools. For example, students with EBD fail more courses and are retained in grade more often than students with any other disabilities. In secondary schools, 13.6% receive mostly D's and F's, the highest rate of failure of any category of students with disabilities (Wagner, M., Kutash, K., Duchnowski, A., & Epstein, M., 2005). Failure to graduate from high school has serious and broad based consequences for society that endure throughout a lifetime. For instance, only 47.4% of students with EBD were actively employed three to five years out of school and only 40.2% was living independently (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). Other research found fewer than 25% of former EBD students were considered to be successful three years after exiting high school (Sitlington & Frank, 1995).

In the United States, the educational system was mandated through the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation of 2001 to address academic achievement of all students. With the inception of 'high-stakes' testing, school performance dictated how funding and the structural leadership of a school were determined. As this legislation was put into practice, there has been intense pressure for students to perform well on standardized tests used to evaluate schools. As a result, attention of educational leaders has been often focused on improving test scores through refining of instructional strategies with evidence based practices. However, the emphasis of such efforts creates a

risk of leaving behind the EBD student. Previous educational interventions have focused almost exclusively on the development of classroom management skills. However, emerging research suggests school success is strongly associated with the strength of a student-teacher relationship and is more indicative of academic achievement than previously thought (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Hallinan, 2008; Poulou & Brahm, 2000; Mihalas, Morse, Allsopp, Alvarez McHatton, 2009).

The purpose of this qualitative project is to gain a better understanding of the complexity of intersecting factors resulting in the poor prognosis for EBD students. It is the hope of the following literature review and subsequent findings will serve as an opportunity to explore the relationship between an educational setting and the needs EBD students bring to the classroom. As Perry reminds us of the importance of development, this study will focus particularly on the relational context of EBD education. By using theoretical sampling, various perspectives will be considered regarding what motivates and promotes educational achievement of EBD students as well as barriers to academic success. Additionally, the relational variable in the educator-student relationship was explored as a central factor impacting either positively or negatively the EBD student. The information gleaned from this report serves as a starting point for addressing the challenges of educating EBD students and is intended for school administrators, school social workers, school psychologists, teachers, para-educators, and all staff who interact with EBD students.

## Literature Review

### **Attachment: The crucial foundation**

In order to better understand why children educationally labeled emotionally and behaviorally disordered (EBD) have such significant struggles in virtually every aspect of their life, one must gain a deeper insight into the implication of attachment as one the underpinnings which drives all behavior. The importance of forming a secure attachment to a care giver is a critical and foundational developmental milestone of early childhood. In the 1970's psychologist Mary Ainsworth's research contributed greatly to the advancement and development of attachment theory in the social and emotional development of children. Attachment can be described as an enduring emotional bond which connects one person to another across space and time (Ainsworth, 1979). Children have an innate need to attach to a caregiver (McLeod, 2007). The process of attachment originates in early infancy when a child begins to emotionally attach to an attachment figure (AF) through consistent and continuous meeting of the infant's needs. Such quality or lack thereof in forming a secure attachment to an AF carries life-long consequences.

The interactive process most protective against later violent behavior begins in the first year after birth; the formation of a secure attachment relationship with a primary caregiver. Here in one relationship lies the foundation of three key protective factors that militate against later aggression: the learning of empathy or emotional attachment to others; the opportunity to learn to control and balance feelings, especially those that can be destructive; and the opportunity to develop

capacities for higher levels of cognitive processing (Karr-Morse & Wiley, 1997, p. 184).

Attachment theory describes four basic sets of attachment patterns: secure, insecure resistant, insecure avoidant and insecure disorganized (Ainsworth, 1979). The following will provide a brief description of the four patterns of attachment as a means to depict how the importance of the attachment relationship becomes the backdrop for the future teacher-student relationship in a school setting.

### **Attachment styles**

As the name implies, securely attached children feel a strong emotional and secure bond with their AF. When confronted with a fearful situation, securely attached children are quickly soothed by their AF and will return to exploration of their environment. They tend to be more confident and exhibit more pro-social skills than those children with an insecure attachment (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Although a child will experience stressful events or difficult moments in life, a secure attachment provides a stronger internal base from which to manage or cope with adversity. Attached children are better equipped to manage new situations and challenges which they are confronted with in life.

Bergin and Bergin (2009) describe insecurely resistant attached children as difficult to soothe and do not appear to be easily comforted by their AF. These children can be described as immature, fussy, or angry and resistant towards their AF. When an AF is depressed, mentally ill or generally unavailable to the child, the lack of secure attachment has a profound effect on their ability to help the child learn how to regulate their emotional and physical emotions (Karr-Morse & Wiley, 1997). Resistant children

tend to be more preoccupied with their AF and find themselves expressing excessive worry or concern over their AF. Caregiving the resistant child receives from their AF is categorized as inconsistent or inadequately responsive resulting in a child becoming clingy, anxious, or more depressed.

Insecure avoidant attached children do not display any clear preference for their AF and tend to avoid any interaction or contact with them. Avoidant children often will not seek out comfort from their AF during times of distress or fear (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Ainsworth, 1979). The AF is typified as being insensitive, intrusive, angry and rejecting of the child thus causing the child to physically and emotionally avoid the AF (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Ainsworth 1979). When the AF has not been emotionally available to the child, it results in a child who craves the instinctive drive to emotionally attach but is unable to attain it from their care giver. Consequently, avoidant children are likely to have deep seated anger towards their AF coupled with a cool resistance towards them (Bergin & Bergin, 2009).

Finally, the insecure disorganized attached child is described as oscillating between periods of sudden emotion and unresponsiveness. It is thought disorganized children have been exposed to frightening behaviors exhibited by their AF such as approaching the child aggressively, with complete insensitivity and responsiveness or treating them as an inanimate object (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). The child may be fearful of their AF but also dependent upon them to meet their physical needs and lack other caregivers to provide for them. Many abused and neglected children have a disorganized attachment pattern (Bergin & Bergin, 2009).

### **Internal working model**

Developmental psychologist, John Bowlby, described an *internal working model* from which a child thinks and behaves is rooted in the quality of the attachment to a caregiver (McLeod, 2005). The nature and quality of the attachment sets the emotional platform upon which all future relationships will be based (Bowlby, 1969). Beginning at birth, the attachment, whether secure or insecure, formed between an AF and a child predicts the quality of future relationships with teachers and peers (Jensen, 2009, p.15). The security of the attachment plays a role in the development of social functions such as curiosity, arousal, emotional regulation, independence, and social competence (Sroufe, 2005) which are all needed to attain academic success. For example, if a child develops a secure attachment to a caring and nurturing adult, he or she will come to expect all adults, including teachers, to be caring and nurturing to them. Likewise, if a child is not able to form a secure attachment, he or she may become fearful, mistrusting, and disconnected with the outside world. The memories and expectations formed during early attachment are carried into the new interactions with others and influence whether children approach or avoid others (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Based upon the nature and quality of the attachment, children will bring that template into the new experiences they confront as they interface with the outside world. Advances in neurological research have provided a deeper understanding into the biological foundations of this theory. As a child attaches to an adult AF the brain begins to organize itself and form neurological pathways, or highways, which the child will interpret or view the world (Perry, 2006). The brain begins to structure itself based upon the experiences a child has with the outside world

and subsequent future cognitive, emotional and social functioning will work from this foundational structure.

The internal working model is based upon three elements which determine the social and emotional foundation of a child: (1) a model of others as being trustworthy, (2) a model of the self as valuable, and (3) a model of the self as effective when interacting with others (McLeod, 1997). A child will perceive the world based upon the manner in which past experiences and interactions have taken place and carries this template or bias into all future exchanges with people. Therefore, the early childhood experiences can profoundly impact, both positively or negatively, the ability of a child to succeed or struggle with relationships and systems.

If a secure attachment is not formed, children lack the capacity to find relationships with others as enjoyable or positive (Perry, 2006). Since relationships are the cornerstone upon which humanity is built, lacking secure attachment sets the stage for children to struggle with school, peers, and society. The motivation to put forth effort or to do well comes from relationships which offer encouragement and trust in and from others. An extensive array of prior research has demonstrated the link between the security of attachment to a number of child outcomes including academic success (Aviezer et al, 2002, Bergin & Bergin, 2009, Milhalas et al, 2009).

### **Lack of a secure attachment**

The value of developing a secure attachment to an AF cannot be overstated. If a child does not form a secure attachment to an adult figure, there is not only a substantial deficit in the child's social and emotional functioning, but it can also be predictive of academic failure. The mutual attachment between a child and AF leads to internalized

positive feelings which in turn motivate a child to engage in the social environment (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Long term consequences of an insecure attachment have been linked to delinquency, reduced intelligence, increased aggression, depression, and affectionless psychopathology (McLeod, 2009). If having a secure attachment becomes a key ingredient to opening a path for academic work, it becomes a vital link needed for academic success. Unfortunately, the importance of the student-teacher relationship can be lost in the drive for higher test scores which determines the success or failure of a school. However, such a short sighted perspective simplifies the learning process in that it is both a social psychological process as well as a cognitive process (Hallinan, 2008). For instance, secure attachment to a mother predicted scholastic skill, GPA, and a general school attitude among sixth graders, regardless of IQ (Aviezer et al. 2002). In one longitudinal study on attachment, the parent-child attachment was linked to the following school outcomes: 1) willingness to accept challenges and independence, 2) social competence, 3) emotion regulation, 4) ADHD behaviors and 5) psychopathology and delinquency (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Sroufe 1985). Research indicates children are better able to learn from adults with whom they have a close relationship versus those with whom they have a detached or conflicted relationship (Pianta, 1999). Teachers have the potential to provide a nurturing relationship to students who may lack a secure attachment to an AF. They can become conduits of teaching beyond academic content regarding how to be successful in relationships with others and in life.

When a secure attachment has failed to form, it makes not only parenting but also teaching a child much more difficult. Attachment has been identified as the first core strength critical to the healthy emotional and social development of humans (Perry,

2001). One of the underpinnings to problematic behavior in adolescence is the lack of adequate sustainable relationships with caring adults (Demaray & Malecki, 2002). If children feel emotionally secure, they are better able to effectively communicate their feelings and needs to their teachers and can then devote more of their energy and attention to learning (Pianta,1999). This impacts learning because an insecurely attached student often does not have the necessary self-confidence or emotional capabilities to express when they need help from their teacher. Rather, an EBD student is more likely to engage in negative attention seeking behaviors as a means to avoid academic expectations and to cover for their social and emotional deficits.

### **Effects of Poverty**

Poverty is one of the risk factors associated with an insecure attachment, and there are a number of dynamics which can make it difficult for parents to provide an opportunity for their child to form a secure attachment. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty report in 2011, 21 million or 21% of the children in the United States live below the federal poverty level of \$22,350 per year for a family of four; 14.9 million of these children live in low income families with at least one parent working full-time (National Center for Children in Poverty).

Those working full time and still falling within the federal poverty guidelines are commonly referred to as the ‘working poor’ and often work long shifts at minimum wage jobs. For some, the hours of employment, such as a second or third shift, create family stress due to limited options for quality and affordable evening or overnight child care. In addition to financial strains, parents may struggle with addiction, mental or physical

health issues, lack of affordable health care, and safe and affordable housing options which are common for families in poverty.

When a parent is under an enormous amount of stress, their parenting skills may suffer, and this negatively impacts the child. Poverty increases socio-emotional problems in children since parents are more inclined to discipline children in a punitive and inconsistent manner while ignoring the intrinsic dependency needs of children (Kazdin, 2000, p.256). If a parent is unable to understand the normal developmental trajectory of their child, it limits the quality and importance of the attachment the child will be able to form. There are numerous intersecting economic, social and personal dynamics which cumulatively can greatly diminish the opportunities for poor families to ensure a secure attachment for their children. Consequently, children can become stuck in the cycle of poverty as schools and educators are often not equipped or adequately trained to understand or to address the deficits they bring with them to class. The effect of poverty is often underestimated or greatly diminished by society and the educational system.

People both within and outside of the field of education sometimes attribute low academic achievement to the lack of effort or ability on the part of the individual, without serious consideration of the systemic causes and effects of poverty (Taylor, 2005).

There is compelling evidence suggesting poverty and related experiences influence the children's development through environmental factors that go beyond any genetic attributes (Kazdin, 2000). Forty percent of children living in poverty had deficiencies in areas of functioning such as language and emotional responsiveness at age three (Jensen, 2009, p.3). Children living in poverty are more likely to experience

increased emotional and behavioral problems than non-poor children by externalizing problems such as disobedience, delinquency or fighting (Kazdin, 2000). Since EBD students are frequently characterized as having impulse control issues, it is difficult for them to maintain positive peer relationships and to follow teacher directives. Impulsivity is common among impoverished students, but it is actually an exaggerated stress response which serves as a survival mechanism (Jensen, 2009, p.26).

### **Lack of Mental Health Services**

Not surprisingly children who form an insecure attachment often struggle with an array of mental health issues. The stress and strain on a child for survival can alter neurological pathways which drive emotion and cognition as well as physiological processes.

Children living in abusive, traumatic, neglectful, or violent homes can suffer from a hyper-aroused sympathetic nervous system, suffering from high blood pressure, rapid heart and irregular heart rates, slightly elevated temperature and constant anxiety. Children can have resting heart rates of 100-170 beats per minute; the average for their age is 84 (Karr-Morse & Wiley, 1997).

When considering the trauma some children endure, it is easy to link the lack of a secure attachment to successive mental health problems and school related issues.

Without question, the EBD population of the educational institutions in the United States is struggling to achieve academic success. When a student is struggling with a mental health issue, it makes academic work all the more challenging. However, more often than not students who meet criteria for a mental health challenge are not identified as needing mental health services nor do they receive supportive services. According to

the National Center for Children in Poverty, 75% to 80% of children and youth in need of mental health services do not receive them (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2011). Only one in five gets treatment from a mental health worker with special training to work with children (American Psychological Association). Although students may be involved in multiple systems such as child welfare, juvenile justice, or special education, the needs often go unmet in part because there is not one overseeing agency responsible for ensuring service is provided.

Previous research has identified one of the areas of grave concern affecting EBD students is the challenge to maintain mental health. For example, one in ten youth have serious mental health problems severe enough to impair function at home, in school, or in the community (Kessler, Berglund, Demler, Jin & Walters, 2005). The U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration reports, 4.4 percent of youth aged 12-17 had serious emotional disorders in 2008. In 2007, 3.1 million youth (12.7 percent) received treatment or counseling in a specialty mental health setting for emotional or behavior problems. An additional 11.8 percent of youth received mental health services in an education setting, along with 2.9 percent who received services in a general educational setting. (U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration, Office of Applied Statistics, 2009). Though this indicates some are able to access services, it is clear most children and youth with mental health problems do not receive needed services. Mental health services are needed for all students, but it becomes even more critical for EBD students due to the severity of their issues.

## **Student-Educator Relationships**

If the success rate of EBD students is to improve, there needs to be a more concentrated focus on the importance of the student-educator relationship for all of the reasons discussed above such as lack of secure attachment, mental health issues, and poverty. It becomes less critical for a student with a secure attachment to develop a strong relationship with their teacher because that student has already achieved the relational foundation needed for academic success. The primary attachment relationship of early childhood is re-enacted educationally in a classroom setting with a teacher and peers. Securely attached children feel more self-assured thus allowing them to more freely explore their environment (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Attachment styles also form the basis in which children socialize (Bergin & Bergin, 2009) which is an important component not only in school but also for the rest of the child's life. Since students are required to spend a considerable amount of time engaged in a school setting, teachers become uniquely positioned to form a relationship with this population. This is illustrative of why the role of a teacher becomes paramount in working with troubled youth. Educators have the potential to not only provide the basis for curriculum instruction but also the opportunity to become catalysts for the emotional and developmental needs of their students (Mihalas et al, 2009). Educator-student relationships become a critical link to improving the outcomes of EBD students as well as an integral component in the foundation for a successful transition into adulthood. The importance of a nurturing and caring adult is essential to healthy adolescent growth and development; thus, students who experience more support at school are more successful (Milhalas et al, 2009). Since most students spend 35-40 hours a week at school, teachers

are in an exclusive position to form positive and healthy attachments to students with a history of insecure or avoidant attachment patterns. How a student feels at school tends to influence how much they will learn (Hallinan, 2008). For some students, a beneficial relationship with a teacher is the only opportunity they have to experience what it means to be nurtured and cared for. Teachers can model and teach effective stress management skills and social skills to the benefit of EBD students (Abrams, 2005). If a student was not able to form a secure attachment in childhood, a student-teacher relationship may become the starting point, for many, in learning healthier life patterns to heal themselves from past dysfunction. There are links between early childhood relationships and teacher responses and how children respond to challenges in the learning environment (Billman, Geddes & Hedges, 2005). A cultivating student-educator relationship can become a strong conduit for encouraging and guiding students' social-emotional, behavioral, and academic growth (Mihalas et al., 2009).

Students are more likely to drop-out of high school when they don't feel engaged in the educational system. Two commonly identified reasons students describe for leaving school include poor relationships with teachers or peers and a lack of a sense of belonging (Williams Bost & Roccomini, 2005; Muller 2001). Healthy teacher-student relationships provide motivation in maintaining engagement in school and subsequent academic success (Burchinal, Peisner-Fernberg, Pianta & Howes, 2002; Sutherland & Oswald, 2005). Previous research has also indicated a key to success in motivating students is when teachers demonstrate genuine concern for the student both in their school and private life (Hallinan, 2008). When students feel the teacher cares about them and their success, they are more likely to pay attention in class. "Relationships, care, and

respect were three primary themes identified by students as important” (Mihalas et al., 2009). Teacher relationships have value because teachers are able to support the intellectual, social, and emotional development which may have been lacking in the child’s life (Pianta, 1997). The extent to which teachers support their students both socially and emotionally has a strong influence on a student’s academic and social outcomes (Hallinan, 2008).

### **Teacher Training**

Teaching a student with emotional and behavioral disorders can be an extremely arduous task, and for most EBD students, the demands of an educational system can be overwhelming. As a result, teachers can become very frustrated with an EBD student exhibiting behaviors which are offensive, rude, insulting, or explosive. Teachers often lack the understanding of how to ‘read’ a child’s behavior but are expected to respond in helpful ways (Comer, 2004). Therefore, teachers can be at a disadvantage in working with EBD students as they lack insight into the emotional or psychological deficits this student population may bring into the classroom. When teachers experience stress in teaching EBD students, their feelings may force them to question their own competence which subsequently may negatively impact their teaching performance (Poulou & Brahm, 2000).

The necessary skills needed for academic success include motivation, self-confidence, social skills, and patience; all of these can be lacking in an EBD student. Due to a lack of training, teachers may often interpret the social and emotional deficits of EBD students as a lack of respect or manners (Jensen, 2005, p.18). However, it is more accurate and helpful to look beyond the behavior and to the underpinnings of an

extremely limited range of emotional responses (Jensen, 2005, p.18) which EBD students learned from their environments. An EBD student may not have the capacity to self-express or communicate their needs as to when they require more teacher assistance or guidance because they have never had the opportunity to learn such skills. Students who are less engaged in the classroom experienced more neglect and use of punishments from teachers and were inconsistently treated (Sutherland & Oswald, 2005). Additionally, EBD students can lack the self-confidence to access a teacher due to their insecure attachment style from which they were parented as a child. They assume and perceive the world, and their teachers, as critical and punitive. Unfortunately, the offensive and challenging behavioral outbursts interfere with the ability for teachers to form positive and connecting relationships necessary to achieve academic success. Changing a student's behavior can be within the educator's influence if there are changes in the classroom dynamics and within the school structure (Poulou & Brahm, 2000) which could be more responsive to the needs of EBD students. For example, due to the educational deficits of EBD students and their lack of motivation, the school structure of special education services may not be the best manner to promote academic achievement.

Many of these students need intensive and systemic instruction to address the challenges posed by the severity of their learning needs. When students with EBD receive [special education] services in general education classrooms, where the expectation for academic progress is to keep up with the other students in the class, most do not keep up, and they often perform poorly (Williams Bost & Riccomini, 2006).

An integral component of education involves developing social skills needed to interact with peers and teachers. Teachers may lack the necessary preparation and skills needed to teach EBD students (Mihalas *et al*, 2009). Research on effective teaching has demonstrated teachers are more successful in motivating students when they demonstrate concern for their students both in and outside of the classroom setting (Hallinan, 2008).

Motivating students to perform the necessary academic work is often problematic for EBD teachers. The emotional and behavioral outbursts can become the barrier to any potential learning process. Research findings have established a link between teacher praise and positive outcomes on both the academic and classroom behavior of EBD students; regrettably such practices are used infrequently (Sutherland, Wehby & Yoder, 2002). EBD students have a need to form an attachment to the teacher which can mimic the early attachment between the attachment figure and the child. It is common and normal for teachers to experience high levels of frustration and anger towards the EBD students they teach since the emotional needs of the student are significant. One way for teachers to become more effective with EBD students is to become more self-aware of their feelings and how their own emotional reactions to a challenging EBD student can negatively influence their teaching. This provides insight into the need for ongoing professional development of teachers since additional training can serve to educate and broaden the understanding of the nature of the EBD student and teachers' personal responses to them (Poulou & Brahms, 2000).

### **Role of Social Work**

There are numerous implications related to the practice of social work, specifically to those working with children in an educational setting. To begin with,

social workers employed in the field of early childhood development can provide a significant impact in assisting parents in understanding the crucial importance of forming secure attachment with their children. During early child development, the most significant impact can be made and social workers are often practicing in settings such as early childhood programs, child welfare services, day care centers, trauma nurseries or in the role of a parent educator. Providing a stronger base to support the emotional and social development of infants and toddlers is a preventative key in resolving the complex and pervasive challenges EBD students face in an educational setting as well as in their life beyond school. Social workers similarly often interface with related problems such as families in poverty, child protection, children's mental health, or truancy and can provide a supporting attachment relationship to EBD students needing validation of their plight.

School social workers become paramount advocates for the ongoing mental health needs of EBD students. This may include assisting in accessing resources, collaborating with teaching staff to improve school outcomes, providing continuous professional staff development as to address the mental health or emotional needs of students, and finally to assist teachers in managing their own stress and fatigue from working in the EBD environment. Furthermore, school social workers can be the voice for the challenges EBD students face with teaching staff, school administrators, and the legislative process in determining resources and programs to best meet their needs. School social workers have opportunities to influence positive outcomes for students indirectly through consultation with teachers concerning mental health issues or addressing specific issues or behavioral problems of a particular student (Lynn, McKernan & Atkins, 2003).

Recent studies have begun to examine the keystone barriers which prevent not only academic success but success in life after school. The focal point of this study was to identify and examine what those involved directly or indirectly in educating EBD students as well as parents of EBD students and former EBD students to be the explanatory causes for the failure of EBD students in a high school setting. This qualitative research project was developed to provide insight into the following question: How does the student-educator relationship impact the learning of EBD students? It was focused on and asked how best to support a strong sense of school belonging and retention for students meeting this classification, with a focus on supporting attachment and in aiding a relational component to teaching in school success. I did so by using theoretical sampling by interviewing adults in a variety of leadership positions and roles within the school. Additionally, this research project aimed to hear from a sample of former students as a means to provide a voice to their experiences.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this paper is a contemporary attachment theory, as articulated by Dr. Bruce Perry. In his books, “*-The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog-*” and “*-Born for Love: Why Empathy Matters and Is in Danger-*”, Perry points out how brain development is influenced by the nature of a secure attachment. The early infant brain begins to form neurological pathways based upon experiences and interactions with the outside world. Each connection to the outside world causes a neuron to transmit messages from one cell to the next in what is called a synapse (Perry, 2006). Over time with continuous and repeated experiences, the synapses, out of efficiency, begin to form pathways, communicating messages in the brain. Such pathways are user dependent,

meaning the pathways form around the positive or negative interactions the infant experiences. In essence, the developing brain attempts to organize itself based upon repetitive patterns it encounters. The early childhood years are crucial to brain development since this is the period where the neurological pathways form and eventually become 'hard-wired' as the platform for future cognition, emotion regulation, and behavioral outcomes. Simply put, early brain development sets the backdrop upon which all future relationships will be based (Bowlby, 1969).

The nature of the attachment an infant forms to an attachment figure (AF) determines how the brain becomes wired neurologically. For example, if the AF is continuously responsive and soothing to the physical and emotional needs of a baby, the firing synapse will begin to configure around the expectation that their needs will be met. Eventually, the synapses will repeatedly fire and wire pathways around which the sense of needs met by an AF (Perry, 2001). Subsequently, the infant will begin to trust their AF will meet their needs and positively interact with them. Since this interaction has happened countless times over a period of days, weeks and months, the pattern the brain has detected is simple; the AF meets my needs for survival. Conversely, if a newborn does not have a responsive and nurturing AF, the neurological pathways will potentially organize around a level of mistrust and uncertainty of what to expect from the environment.

Once the neurological pathways become hardwired into the brain, it sets the stage from which one thinks, reacts to environmental stimuli, and subsequently behaves in interactions with others. For many EBD students, their lack of forming a secure attachment has implications which can extend beyond the child-parent relationship. One

such consequence can encompass the educational environment in which EBD students often find it difficult to succeed, partly due to the manner in which they are neurologically wired. For instance, if an EBD student received neglectful parenting and was ridiculed or punished for curiously exploring his or her environment, the same assumption may be made in the classroom with a teacher, although the teacher may be encouraging and nurturing to the student. Such exploration and curiosity require an inherent trust in the ecological environment and can be key elements needed for academic success. Unfortunately, a paradox is set up in which one of the critical foundations needed for classroom achievement has not been laid due to the poor attachment from early childhood. To complicate this, teachers can be unaware of the subtlety of this dynamic and the powerful impact it can have on their students. The understanding of neurological development has only recently been discovered over the past twenty years (Perry, 2006). As a result, there is a disconnect between what EBD students may need to be successful, both in and out of the classroom, and a well-intentioned teaching staff unaware of the critical role early attachment plays in the academic achievement of their students.

Although the early years of childhood become the building blocks of human brain development, the emerging neurological research over the past two decades has indicated some plasticity in the brain's ability to adapt and change to new environmental stimuli. For example, Perry (2006) in his research has demonstrated the brain is continuously rewiring itself based upon the experiences and interactions with the ecological environment. Furthermore, Perry (2006) suggests the brain's amazing ability to change and adjust to its environment is part of the evolutionary history of humans. For instance,

someone who has sustained a stroke and lost speech ability may be able to recover, in part, by building a new neurological pathway by using a variety of therapies. People with vision impairments or blindness can have a heightened sense of hearing which provides another example of the brain's capacity to adapt to the environment for survival. There are promising prospects for those lacking a secure early childhood attachment including the ability, with intentionally repetitive and consistent interactions, to form a secure attachment to other individuals.

Given this evolving neuroscience, there is hope for EBD students and their ability to overcome their disadvantaged past. Educators are uniquely positioned to be the conduits for academic success and perhaps also the link to forming a secure attachment to an emotionally healthy adult. If a teacher can form a positive and caring relationship with an EBD student, it may be the key element in improving the educational success rate of EBD students. The profound value of attachment and nurturing relationships may be minimized or overlooked in our broad society which is also reflective in our educational systems.

Attachment theory was the conceptual framework used in this study as the backdrop in understanding the divide between what an EBD student may need to achieve educationally and the lack of awareness or understanding in the educational system as to how best to address the lack of a secure attachment. By using this framework, a better understanding of the powerful impact of an educator-student relationship may be further explored. This study focused on the significant nature and quality of the early attachment relationship and ensuing obstacles or barriers to academic achievement of EBD students.

## **Methodology**

### **Research design**

As discussed in the literature review, there is a large body of research supporting the importance of secure attachment to subsequent academic achievement (Aviezer et al. 2002, Bergin & Bergin, 2009, Sroufe et al. 1983). However, there is little to no published research examining the differing perspectives of EBD students, their parents, and education professionals. The intent of this project was to highlight the differing perspectives between students and an educational system regarding the importance of student-teacher relationships linked to improved academic success. This research project's design was qualitative, and used a theoretical sampling of administrators, teachers, parents, and former EBD students.

### **Population and sample**

The interviews were carried out in a one to one setting, using a digital recording device and later transcribed by the researcher. Sampling for this study consisted of ten interviews of former EBD students, parents, teachers and school administrators. The sample population was from one medium sized school district located in southern Minnesota. All educational participants were actively engaged in teaching EBD students or had experience in working with EBD students in an administrative role. The parent participants had previously enrolled their EBD child in the identified school district. Former student participants had previously been enrolled in the district. The sample of school personnel was obtained from staff or administrative volunteers after the researcher sent out a global staff email inviting educators to volunteer to be interviewed. Names of former parents and EBD student participants were provided by EBD teachers, administrators, teachers, counselors, or social workers.

**Protection of human participants**

Using a template provided by the University of St. Thomas, consent and assent forms were tailored for this research project including the background information and purpose of the current study. These forms consisted of an explanation of the research project and question, procedures for the interview, confidentiality and voluntary nature of participating in the project. The consent form was compiled with the expedited-level University of St. Thomas IRB and Protection of Human Subjects guidelines ensuring confidentiality of the respondent throughout this research project. Additionally, the consent forms included contact information for Dr. Eleni Roulis, the chair of the University of St. Thomas Internal Review Board, (IRB) in the event any questions or concerns may have arisen with the researcher or the project. The forms were reviewed and approved by the researcher's committee chair, Dr. David Roseborough, prior to the interviews. Each participant, along with the researcher, signed and dated the consent form prior to the interview and subsequent audio recording. The researcher reviewed the voluntary nature of participant's contribution to the study as well as any possible risks which may have been associated with their involvement.

A copy of the consent form was provided to each study participant and the signed consent form was kept by the researcher for a period of six months upon completion of the project. Respondent's names and other identifying information were omitted from all field notes, transcripts, and from the written report. Any other participant identifying information was redacted to ensure confidentiality. Since these interviews were both confidential and voluntary, participants were provided multiple opportunities to decline answering any question(s) throughout the course of the interview. This included monitoring their non-verbal body language for indications of feeling uncomfortable

coupled with verbal check-ins with participants as the interviews proceeded. The digital audio recordings were erased six months post completion of the research project. To ensure confidentiality, field notes, participant names, phone numbers, and any other identifying information as well as signed consent forms were kept in a locked file cabinet at the researcher's office. The door to the office was also locked allowing for an extra measure of protection. All interviews were transcribed by the researcher as a means to provide an additional level of confidentiality.

### **Data collection**

Interviews were conducted at the high school setting where the teachers and administrators are employed and took place after instructional hours. Parent and former student interviews were conducted at a determined location such as at the participant's residence or a local restaurant. All participant interviews were recorded using a digital recording device.

The twelve questions asked of the participants included twelve questions and were of a semi-structured nature to allow room for elaboration of each participant's unique perspective. As an investigative process to glean the most beneficial and rich information possible, the questions sought to be neutral and open-ended. The research questions were guided by both the current research question as well as from the base of literature from previous research findings ((Burchinal, Peisner-Fernberg, Pianta & Howes, 2002; Sutherland & Oswald, 2005; Demaray & Malecki, 2002; Mihalas et al, 2002; Williams Bost & Roccomini, 2005; Muller 2001). There were two sets of research questions used; one for the educational providers such as teachers and administrators and separate series of questions for the receivers of educational services, the parents and former students. Previous research has indicated the lack of teacher training related to

the mental health issues of some EBD students, thus other questions were specifically posed to teachers and administrators to address this issue (Jensen, 2009 p. 18, Poulou & Norwich, 2000, Milhalas, 2009). The educational staff interviewees were asked what they have found to be helpful or not helpful in assisting EBD student achievement in school, what factors promote a stronger learning environment, how the student-teacher relationships influence motivation or effort in the classroom, and what discourages EBD students from continuing to put forth effort towards their education. For parents and students, questions focused on their personal experiences in an education system, factors which have assisted them in meeting educational goals, attitude towards teachers, and general feeling toward special education services. During the natural flow of the interview, more probing questions were used to further explore the intricacies between the student-teacher relationship.

The digital recordings were transcribed and all records were kept confidential. As much identifying information was deleted from the transcript and the findings section as possible, so it will be difficult to identify any individual participant. Examples of information that were redacted include: (names, information which may inadvertently identify a graduate, names or location of the school, administrative or teaching position held by the interviewee). The findings from this research study were only used for academic purposes only. They were presented in summary form, but included reference to individual quotes, at a public presentation and were published in the form of a clinical research paper. Once the interviews were transcribed, all digitally recorded interviews were deleted by June 1, 2013. The non-identifying transcripts were kept by the researcher indefinitely by the researcher for any future educational objectives. Each

interviewee was encouraged to contact the researcher up to one week after the interview if they felt uncomfortable about the statements they provided and that portion or the entirety of the interview would not be used.

### **Data analysis**

This study used both deductive and inductive approaches in analyzing the information presented by the interviewees. Previous reviewed literature provided a starting point as it guided the questions to be asked regarding the paramount importance of student-teacher relationships and the link to academic success. With this in mind, start codes were used in an effort to identify the key themes, already identified in the research, of the potential importance of attachment in an educational setting. Additionally, analysis of the data used open codes as a means to identify other new and emerging themes. The data was read numerous times by the researcher for developing concepts, allowing emerging themes and similarities to come to light. As themes surfaced, notes were written on the side column next to the transcribed interview. Written transcript notes were examined again in order to identify codes from the interview. The data was organized into thematic and sub-thematic categories as well as any other contributing latent themes missed previously by the researcher. Additionally, field notes were used to organize work, map progress, and identify how the direction of the findings evolved into the final product.

The validity of this research was dependent upon the participants who were involved. Diversity of participants was strived for through the intentional theoretical sampling of educational stakeholders and of former EBD students. In order to best assess the underpinnings to the educational failure rate of EBD students (i.e. lack of retention

and graduation) , it was imperative to involve the key players in an effort to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics and intersecting complexities of educating EBD students. For example, there is an inherent danger to blame school administration and educators for the failings of EBD students, without providing a voice to educators as to some of the challenges, barriers, or obstacles facing them.

### **Strengths and limitations**

The strength of qualitative research lies with the richness of personal experiences and perspective the interviewees provide to the researcher. Emotional and social components of this study have the potential to provide a human connection to the struggles found between the educational system and EBD students often resulting in failure. By using a qualitative format, the researcher was able to better highlight the multifaceted difficulties impeding the academic success of EBD students from multiple perspectives. For instance, there are a variety of reasons, poor attachment just being one, as to why EBD students are failing at such a high rate. The one -to-one interviews allowed for a wide array of obstacles to be identified which would be more cumbersome using a quantitative style. Additionally, by using a qualitative research design there was a potential to highlight sources of hope and support for EBD students. All questions were formulated with previous research findings in mind but can also serve to further future research in this area. The researcher's prior work experience and passion for EBD students also assisted in providing a depth of insight into this issue.

As with any study, there are limitations which are important to note. To begin with, a convenience sample was used for this project from a small Minnesota high school. It was dependent upon the willingness and openness of school administrators, parents, and former students to participate. The parents and students interviewed may arguably be

more successful since they had graduated, than other EBD students who have dropped out of school. More than likely, the most severely EBD students were not interviewed due to their inaccessibility, since they may have poor school attendance as well as their natural mistrust for outsiders.

Previous research has identified the verbal and language deficits many EBD students face and such an in-depth interview may have been difficult for some former students to have accurately expressed themselves. Since this study used a theoretical sampling, the questions used were not tested previously which may have left some issues unaddressed. This included how teacher training or lack thereof impacts how teachers build relationships with their students. Finally, the sample was limited to only one high school setting in rural southeast Minnesota. In order for the research findings in this study to be reliable, it would need to be replicated in similar settings as well as within larger cities and school districts.

### **Findings**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the experience of students educationally classified as EBD in this setting and from the perspective of the stakeholders involved in the education of EBD students. Participants were from a secondary educational setting from a small, rural town in Minnesota. As a means to provide the most balanced approach to understanding the unique nature and demands of EBD students, approximately 75 educators, five parents of former EBD students and five former EBD students were invited to participate in this study. Of the 75 educators, four volunteered and were interviewed, including two males and two females. Within the educator participant group, there was one administrator, one school social worker, one general education teacher and one special education teacher interviewed.

The years of experience for the educators ranged from seven years to 25 years. A second set of participants, former EBD students and a parent of a former EBD student, were also invited to participate in this study. This included five former EBD students and one grandparent who served as the guardian of her grandson who had been identified as a former EBD student. Three female and two male former EBD students were interviewed for this study. Of these students, three had graduated from high school, one student had dropped out of high school, and one student had dropped out for a year but had re-enrolled in a neighboring high school.

Themes were defined by at least three participants identifying the same idea, feeling, or thought. Italicized quotations are used to identify the voice and perspective of the participants. Quotations which best illustrate and represent the various themes are used throughout this finding section. The dominant themes include: the importance of the student-teacher relationship, need for more teacher training, mental health needs of students, class size, and the stigma of EBD students.

### **Student-teacher relationship theme**

One major theme identified is the importance of the student-teacher relationship (see Table 1 for respondents' voices). Since there were many questions asked regarding relationships, the following responses did not come from only one interview question. Educators identified the importance of the student-teacher relationship but also acknowledge some teachers struggle to form a relationship with a student. The former EBD students and grandparent of a former EBD student responded more with how the teacher made them feel and how that impacted their sense of self as well as effort needed to successful complete class work.

**Table 1-The importance of the student-teacher relationship**

The Importance of the Student-Teacher Relationship	
Educators' Voices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I think those (students) who don't succeed are the ones who have not made a connection, and that is why they are having the struggles they are having.</li> <li>• Our kids (EBD) just need more nurturing in general.</li> <li>• I think if the students have some perception that the teacher wants them to do well...I think that helps a lot.</li> <li>• If you don't like a teacher, you're definitely not going to work to do well.</li> <li>• Some (teachers) make connections like that (snaps fingers) and some don't.</li> <li>• I think some of them understand they need to form a relationship with the kids. They do need to make that relationship. Others don't.</li> <li>• (Teachers) who are not very personable, they struggle at making those connections, and they are typically the teachers kids complain about the most.</li> <li>• You know...the most important part of education is the connection you can make.</li> <li>• If they (EBD students) don't find that success and that connection with an adult, it is going to be difficult.</li> </ul>
Former EBD Students/Grandparent Voices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A few teachers from the high school ended up impacting me because they connected with me, and I connected with them.</li> <li>• They (teachers) were just there and made it seem like they did care which they did, and they really pushed you.</li> <li>• They believed in me...you know...and that made me want to believe in myself and that I CAN really do something.</li> <li>• He (teacher) did care, and I saw that. Whenever I needed help I felt like he would be there for me.</li> <li>• You don't want to disappoint them, so you feel like you gotta do this.</li> <li>• It felt like they (teachers) were a role model almost...just like you can't let them down.</li> <li>• I got to know her on a whole different level, and she was like a second mom and it was a teacher.</li> </ul>

Additionally, there were two particularly insightful quotes from two former EBD students which seem to speak to the significant role the student-teacher relationship plays in not only education but the future trajectory of EBD students' lives. The following are the quotes:

*What I'd have to say for teachers is don't ever give up on your students, because when a teacher gives up on their student, they (students) give up on themselves.....they (students) give up on themselves.*

*I just got to be able to trust somebody, to trust them (educators) instead of being stepped on over and over again. It's important I think in any relationship to have trust, because if you don't, you end up not trusting anybody and life is 10 times more difficult.*

#### *Subtheme #1: The importance of being understood by teachers*

One subtheme to arise was how EBD students feel misunderstood or judged by their teachers which can often impede school success. Throughout the interviews, participants referenced the difficulty and frustration they felt when teachers did not acknowledge or recognize some of the social and emotional difficulties an EBD student can face. This became most apparent when former EBD students and a grandparent answered the following question:

- What do you wish teachers knew or understood about you and your friends that they do not (if anything)?

The participants responded with the following statements:

*"I wish they knew what was going on outside of school"*

*"There are people not understanding the things or the situations that you are going through personally. It is the judgment. It's the lack of not knowing who you are as an individual. They don't talk about it to you. They don't dig deeper into what is really going on"*

*“It’s just looking at the child that you are dealing with and trying to know more about the person instead of just judging them upon one thing that they’ve heard like in reports”*

*“All they (teachers) focus on is ‘the kid is not in school’ and not looking at the big picture that there is a lot more going on and why.”*

*“There could be family issues that are going on. There could be drug issues that are going on.....a whole lot of things come into play.”*

Moreover, some former EBD students expressed a sense that special education teachers were more understanding of the realities of their lives than mainstream general education teachers. They conveyed a sense of a special education teacher being more interested in their individuality rather than just being another student in a classroom. This may be due to special education teachers having a smaller class size or better training regarding the needs of special education students which is addressed in the following theme.

### **Teacher training theme**

A second theme revealed in this study was the issue of the quality and amount of formal training teachers receive in undergraduate teaching programs. There seemed to be a lack of clarity, among all participants, as to the minimum qualifications needed to become a licensed teacher in Minnesota. All participants expressed a need for improved training in mental health issues for all classroom teachers (see Table 2 for respondent’s voices).

**Table 2—Teacher training for mental health issues**

Teacher Training for Mental Health Issues	
Educators’ Voices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The actual training is very inadequate. I think anyone hired before 1997 doesn’t have any training, because they didn’t have to go through any special education classes to get their teaching license.</li> <li>• The training part of it (teacher education) is probably the biggest lacking aspect (mental health training) for any adult of</li> </ul>

	<p>any experience level, because you see some adults do very well and some don't.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My guess would be it is not enough, and it's not just kids that are labeled EBD. There's a whole raft of young people out there that are struggling with choices and mental health, and they don't have a label. So they are not getting enough and probably need a lot more.</li> <li>• I think there's not really a whole lot of training on how you deal with those difficult students...How do you work with them? How do you not get into a power struggle with them?</li> <li>• I think that the number one fear when you got into your class your first year teaching is classroom management.</li> </ul>
<p>Former EBD Students/Grandparent Voices</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gain some more knowledge about the kids they have in school now with different types of emotional things. So they have that background. I know it is difficult, but still I think they have to know that and how to apply some of that to helping kids.</li> <li>• You gotta make sure to understand what the kid is going through before you make assumptions.</li> <li>• I think they should give more courses of psychology so they (teachers) can understand kids.</li> <li>• No matter what teacher you get, if that teacher doesn't understand and know how to treat or deal with that particular child's behaviors,...it makes all the difference in the world.</li> </ul>

Educators suggested a lack of training on mental health issues or on how to deal with challenging behavioral students. The responses indicate there is more emphasis placed upon classroom management skills rather than on how to assist EBD students in finding school success. Former EBD students and a former grandparent of an EBD student indicate the necessity EBD students have for teachers to understand their difficult situations and the barriers they may face in school.

### Mental health theme

Another theme which emerged through the research process was that of mental health needs many students have which complicate their ability to learn. This theme was identified only by educators because of the interview question which was specific to the role of an educational system in providing mental health support to students. The participants responded to the following question (see Table 3 for educators' voices).

**Table 3—How are the mental health needs of EBD students addressed?**

How are the Mental Health Needs of EBD Students Addressed?	
Educators' Voices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students who are EBD and need mental health support...the lucky ones get to see (social workers). I'm not really sure what happens to the others.</li> <li>• They (EBD students) maybe connected with a social worker but not every social worker is clinical or has a mental health perspective.</li> <li>• I don't know how (EBD student mental needs are met).</li> <li>• There are some students who bring with them serious and persistent mental health issues; whether it is anxiety or schizophrenia, or any of those things. So, they're bringing in a raft of issues...</li> <li>• The school counselors are two to 1,200 kids, so there is not much counseling going on there. It is mostly scheduling, and there may be little of 'come and talk to me.'"</li> <li>• ...it depends on the district you are in. Some have more support and some don't, so you're kinda at the mercy or limit of the dollar.</li> </ul>

The responses suggest there is no clear shared understanding or formalized protocol in how students may receive mental health supports in schools. There may be school social workers or school counselors but the answers provided to this question indicate there is a high ratio of students to trained mental health support services in

schools. Although there may be some supportive services, it varies by district and the comfort level and training of school personnel to the clinical needs of EBD students. The final response suggests one reason for this is due to limited funding.

### **Poverty and family issues impacting EBD students theme**

Another theme to surface through the interviews was the difficulty EBD students face in their lives outside of school. This may include the effects of poverty, abuse, neglect or family issues. Furthermore, the lack of having nurturing and strong parents became apparent as another component to the struggles EBD students can face. Although this was not a direct question to respondents, it did appear as a thread explaining some of the underpinnings as to why school are difficult for EBD students (see Table 4 for respondents' voices).

**Table 4—Poverty and family issues impacting EBD students**

Poverty and Family Issues Impacting EBD Students	
Educators' Voices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They (EBD students) bring with them abuse or neglect or they are the parents; poverty or lack of basic necessities, things like that.</li> <li>• They (EBD students) came from crappy backgrounds, crappy families that beat them or do whatever to them. They (families) don't give them the love they (EBD students) need to make those connections, so it just continues to go on.</li> <li>• By not understanding what their (EBD students) issues are, it just follows through and it just continues to get worse.</li> <li>• Maybe they (EBD students) don't have friends to talk to, or maybe they don't have someone to support them.</li> <li>• They (EBD students) come from backgrounds that are very violent...just degrading to them.</li> <li>• There are just a lot of factors outside our (educators) control, and you have to come in every day and just...."I'm living in the moment...this is what I can do today."</li> <li>• They go home to chaos and craziness and no stability.</li> </ul>

<p style="text-align: center;">Former EBD Students/Grandparent Voices</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I can say he (administrator) pushed my brothers out and they signed their own waiver to leave, but I saw he (administrator) knew what my history was and he knew...he just saw another failure (in me).</li> <li>• You gotta make sure to understand what the kid is going through before you make assumptions.</li> <li>• Living environments...where there is not structure at home...no one is pushing them.</li> </ul>
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The following quote is from one former EBD student. She was speaking of her own experience before being placed in foster care.

*“If your parents are drug addicts, having arguments all the time, or you are taking care of your drunk mother...something is keeping you from your studies. You don’t really have a secure place to do your homework, and it’s not so much that you don’t want to. It’s that you don’t know how to balance the two situations out, so I guess family takes preference over school. I’d say living environment is a huge one (cause for students to drop-out).”*

Another former EBD student reflected on his own behavior in high school as a result of being confronted by others for the actions of his older brother. He states:

*Sometimes people would confront me on things my older brother would be doing. I’d be in jail if I were still at the high school, because you know my fists would talk more than my mouth would. That was the thing about me. That was my defense mechanism....it’s kinda illegal to use that defense mechanism, because if you hurt somebody you are going to be sitting in the cell thinking about....all the negative stuff you ended up doing.*

One veteran educator shared the following perspective on how poverty can impact parenting.

*A lot of people are not ready for the 20 year 24/7 commitment that it takes to raise a healthy child. We (society) haven’t adapted to the needs of our children. There are a lot of parents that put their personal relationships....above the needs of their children. It’s potentially ugly and the kid gets a pretty important message that ‘you are less important in my life than my boyfriend or girlfriend’. It is devastating to our societal fabric because most likely these relationships don’t*

*last. We've got another kid who has been told in another way and in another time he or she is of less value than someone else.*

Educators were quicker to identify poverty, abuse, neglect and family dynamics as underlying factors which negatively impact EBD students. From the educators, there is both recognition of such factors and an inability to impact the harmful dynamics which occur outside of an educational setting. Furthermore, there was a suggestion of the chronicity of the cycle of poverty, abuse, and neglect which can often span several generations. Although not all EBD students come from impoverished or abusive homes, educators did imply the link between the two factors.

#### **The stigma of being labeled EBD theme**

The issue of being labeled 'EBD' was a theme which emerged primarily from former EBD students and the grandparent of a former EBD student. The responses suggest a lack of awareness of some teachers as to how EBD students may be viewed by their peers. Although some educators did acknowledge the stigma, the theme was expressed more strongly by the former EBD students where they provided examples from their own personal experiences in school (see table 5 for the respondents' voices).

**Table 5—Stigma of being labeled EBD**

Stigma of Being Labeled 'EBD'	
Educators' Voices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I think there is still a social stigma about asking for help or seeking help. 'Oh, you're going to a group. You're seeing a counselor?'</li> <li>• Unfortunately, they are viewed by their label. We look at them as a label and not the individual person.</li> </ul>

<p style="text-align: center;">Former EBD Students/Grandparent Voices</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I felt like kids looked down on us as we were stupid or not as smart or different. I felt like I was completely capable to do exactly what they were doing. I just had behavioral issues.</li> <li>• Sometimes he could control some of that (depression) with his medication and also just trying but sometimes it just didn't work. And then he felt like he was kinda singled out or really put down because of it.</li> <li>• He had a hard time with teachers that he felt singled him out. He didn't like having the label 'EBD' because he felt it made him different.</li> </ul>
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Additionally, there were two students who provided the following insight into how they specifically were identified as receiving special education services in front of their peers. They expressed how this affected them. The following are the voices from two former EBD students:

*I even had a teacher point blank say that I was on an IEP, and people look at you differently, like why I was on it. What is wrong with her? What's different about her than us? I don't know so I guess being more aware of what they say and how they say it around other students because it does impact us.*

*They (teachers) would say it (IEP accommodations) out loud, and I don't want my classmates or other people to know I can use my notes or that I need special help, because they look at me like I'm dumb and I can't do what they can do.*

The responses suggest EBD students in this sample do understand they have difficulty and may need some additional supports to be successful in school. However, the above replies suggest some general education teachers are unaware of this or have not considered how their actions towards EBD students may negatively impact them, especially in front of their peers. Furthermore, the responses suggest the feeling of being singled out or the weight of the stigma may negatively impact EBD students' self-perception of being capable to do academic work.

### The difficulty of class size theme

All participant groups identified the difficulty class size presents for the student-teacher relationship to form. Educators expressed the challenge in balancing the needs of an EBD student with the number of other mainstream students. Former EBD students stated they feel overwhelmed with large class sizes and an inability to access the teacher. For this theme, there was uniformity across participant groups as to one barrier in forming a student-teacher connection (see Table 6 for respondents' voices).

**Table 6—Difficulty of large class sizes**

Stigma of Being Labeled 'EBD'	
Educators' Voices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It's difficult when you have a large class size and you have one student who is EBD and trying to deal with them and help them out at the expense of everybody else. It's hard to do it in a larger class setting.</li> <li>• I think part of the anxiety special ed kids have is just the overall energy that comes with walking into a room of 35-40 students. I think that if you could get class sizes down to 20-25....it's easier for a teacher to manage even the misbehaviors or the bad behaviors just because it is smaller.</li> <li>• I think it is so hard when you have 1,000 kids in a school....how do you make those connections?</li> </ul>
Former EBD Students/Grandparent Voices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ....when you have a small classroom, you feel more connected to the teacher.</li> <li>• It seems like when you are in a smaller class compared to a big class, the teacher has more time for you and its....it's just a connection in my opinion.</li> <li>• It had more to do with the size of classes because I think if they get too big, he would get lost and screw up too much.</li> <li>• At the high school when there were 30-35 kids in a class, it is really hard because everyone is going to need help at some point. And a lot of times at the high school when you did need help, so did a lot of other people, so there wasn't really any time for you.</li> </ul>

One educator indicated the likelihood of fewer behavior issues if the class size was reduced to a more manageable level which was also supported by a former grandparent of an EBD student. Former EBD students indicated they felt more connected to a teacher when the class size was smaller and felt more comfortable. The number of students in a classroom, as well as the number of students in a school building, represents the obstacles to forming the essential student-teacher relationships.

### **Conclusion**

The results highlight the imperative nature a student-teacher relationship plays in achieving successful educational outcomes for EBD students. Former EBD students and a grandparent of a former EBD student provided clear examples from their own personal experience on how a caring teacher can positively impact not only their academic achievement but also their lives outside of school. Furthermore, former EBD students indicate an awareness of what makes them different from other students and the heavy stigma which they may feel and carry. All participants agreed on factors outside of school such as poverty, challenging family dynamics, and mental health issues create arduous obstacles for EBD students to achieve in school. In addition, large class sizes, limited mental health supports, and general education teachers who may lack training for the unique mental health needs of EBD students, provide insight regarding some of the structural systems which add to the complexities of successfully educating EBD students.

### **Discussion**

Current research has explored the role of a student-educator relationship as a conduit which impacts the academic achievement of EBD students. The foundation of this research project is deeply rooted in attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1973) which was

further developed by the internal working model (Bowlby, 1969). The underlying premise is the quality of the critical early childhood attachment to a caregiver has a significant impact on all future relationships, including the one between a student and educator. Students who lack a secure attachment in early childhood are more likely to experience difficulty and challenges in an educational setting. Prior research in this area supports the value and importance of the early attachment relationships (McLeod, 2009, Aviezer et al, 2002; Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Sroufe et al. 1985; Pianta, 1999).

This project used the conceptual framework of contemporary attachment theory, as articulated by Dr. Bruce Perry, whose research considers how the nature of the early attachment relationship impacts the neurological wiring of a child's brain. For example, early childhood experiences create neurological synapses which, over time with consistent and repetitive interactions, will form connective neurological pathways in which future thinking and interactions to others will be based upon. This neurological wiring that takes place in early childhood is one indicator of future academic success. Fortunate children form secure attachments to a caregiver, and by doing so learn to trust someone will meet their physical, social, and emotional needs. These children enter an educational system in which they innately assume a trusting relationship with a teacher. Unfortunately, some children do not form a healthy and secure attachment to a caregiver and will not as easily develop trust their needs will be meet consistently or in extreme cases ever. Insecurely attached children will enter into an educational system with more potential barriers to learning because of their unmet needs. Their internal working model may assume a general mistrust of the world, new situations, and new people including teachers or peers.

### **The importance of the student-educator relationship**

Educators validated the importance of a student-teacher relationship by sharing examples of how a student may work harder or show more motivation if they have a bond to a teacher. The importance of student perception of a teacher was identified as central, because if the student felt supported by a teacher, they reported being more likely to complete the work for the teacher and succeed. Prior research supports the findings of this research project. It is the relationship between teachers and students, along with the academics, which profoundly impacts learning (Dubin, 2013). Educators were consistent in ascertaining some teachers are more apt to or more inclined to form a relationship with students while other teachers find that uncomfortable or difficult. There seemed to be an acceptance from educators that whether a teacher forms a relationship with a student or not is strongly dependent upon teacher personality.

Former EBD students and a grandparent of a former EBD student, expressed a strong link between their success and a positive relationship with a teacher. Based upon their personal experiences as students, this group of participants articulated an emotional component they felt from their teacher that was not academically embedded. A strong thread was consistent from the participants in how they felt a teacher believed in them and pushed them to do better. There was a sense of not wanting to disappoint or let a teacher down if they felt the teacher cared or was concerned about them. This finding is supported in previous research, as it identifies the importance of the student-teacher relationship as a strong motivating factor for EBD students.

Although both participant groups did identify student-teacher relationships as important, the former EBD students clearly expressed how key those relationships

became to them. The former EBD students did not speak to the academic learning but rather to how the teacher made them feel. Academic success was strongly correlated to having someone who believes in the student. Some of the responses suggested students lacked a belief in their ability to achieve or do well in school, and they only began to believe in themselves or their ability after the teacher did. This is consistent with previous work of the internal working model of Bowlby in which children coming from insecurely attached homes may see themselves as not being valuable or effective in interacting with others. Former EBD students also identified how a teacher became a role model or even a 'second mom' to them and pushed them to do better not only in school but also in life lessons which are applicable outside of school as well.

Former EBD students also expressed a necessity for teachers to understand some of the complex factors which they may have to contend with outside of school. For example, former EBD students and a grandparent of a former EBD student highlighted experiences in which they felt judged negatively by educators. This lack of understanding of the wide array of stressors outside of school left some former EBD students feeling misunderstood by teachers as to why they were struggling in the classroom or why they were not in school on a specific day. For example, one former EBD student identified family problems such as having an alcoholic parent she had to care for as one reason she struggled to complete her academic work. Although such a lack of understanding from educators may be unintentional, it can result in another barrier to academic achievement for EBD students. One grandparent of a former EBD student categorized an empathetic teacher as making all the difference for her grandson's school success. This has been supported by previous research. Evidence for teacher support has

been identified as a protective factor of middle school and high school students (Rosenfeld, Richman & Bowen, 2000). A sense of teacher support significantly influences student academic performance and investment in education (Rosenfeld, Richman & Bowen, 2000).

This research is suggestive of how the student teacher relationship may be undervalued in an educational setting. Former EBD students strongly emphasized how profound their relationship with their teachers became for them and the subsequent positive impact. This was consistent between former EBD students who had graduated and those who had dropped out of school. For EBD students, the need to form that crucial relationship to a teacher may be more essential than even the academic content taught in a classroom, because they may have been insecurely attached in their early childhood. Teachers value the relationships with students but may see this relationship as secondary to academic learning rather than a critical and central element. On the contrary, former EBD students seemed to characterize the relationship to a teacher as primary or a starting point and the academic learning as secondary. This finding alludes to how teachers may fail to appreciate how significant their role may be influencing academic success of EBD students.

### **Teacher training for mental health issues**

Both groups of participants strongly identified the lack of or very minimal formal mental health training teachers receive in undergraduate programs. One surprise finding was former EBD students and a grandparent of a former EBD student both identified the lack of teacher training for educators. This is evidenced by previous research findings which found when educators are compared to mental health professionals, educators do

not understand what a child's behavior may represent—good or bad (Dubin, 2013). One former EBD student actually stated the need for more psychology classes for teachers, so they could better understand students. Another surprise finding from this research was that before 1997, general teachers were not mandated to have any formal training for mental health needs of students. Teacher training colleges need to improve upon teachers-to-be training as a means to better support EBD students (Stoutjesdijk, Scholte & Swaab, 2012). It should be noted special education teachers do have more of a pedagogical focus on mental health and in the management of classroom behaviors of special education students because of the unique needs this population presents in an educational setting. Nonetheless, this suggests an overwhelming number of teachers working today had no educational base or training into the needs of EBD students. Teacher training programs should focus on both subject matter expertise and child development, since they are both central to academic achievement (Dubin, 2013). One educator suggested the need is not only for those identified as EBD but a growing number of students coming from challenging backgrounds.

Currently, in Minnesota educators renew their teaching license every five years with the requirement of 125 hours of continuing education clock hours. Out of the 125 hours only two hours are specifically dedicated to mental health training. This is quite telling of an educational system which has not placed great value in training teachers on the mental health needs of students. It may also be suggestive of a lack of understanding into the vital importance a student-teacher relationship plays in academic achievement. As mentioned previously in this discussion, some educators more naturally form positive relationships with their students. The ability to form such connective and positive

relationships may not be something which can easily be taught, since it seems to be a strong link to personality characteristics. However, teaching educators more extensively in mental health issues and human development may merit more attention. For example, if educators were more aware of how early attachment influences educational outcomes, it would have the potential to provide educators with an additional lens in which to approach their students. Additionally, providing a basis of how poverty or challenging family systems have the potential to negatively impact students would be an essential element to this educator training since many EBD students come to school with a complexity of intersecting issues, all of which can impact learning.

### **How the mental health needs of EBD students are addressed**

The question of how the mental health needs of EBD students are met was specific to educators. These findings indicate there is no clear system or procedures as to how EBD students access mental health services in educational systems. Based upon the participants responses, how the mental health needs are met is often dependent upon fiscal resources available on a both a state and local school district level. The State of Minnesota has faced billion dollar budget deficits during 2009-2012 which has impacted how public education is funded. As a means for the state to reach a budget agreement in 2010, payments to school districts were delayed resulting in many school districts having to borrow capital to remain solvent. Although each school district will eventually receive payment from the state, interest on borrowed dollars will cost districts more money. In some districts, school social work or counseling services were cut due to budgetary constraints and because school social work is not a mandated service. Additionally, a school social worker's time may be very constrained since they may be shared between

many school buildings. Unfortunately, this has left many students with mental health concerns without a consistent or formal support as historically was more available.

The educators also indicated leadership within the school district influences what services are provided. For example, a strong special education director or administrator may push for student support services in mental health where another district may not have a strong advocate for such services. A similar dynamic was suggested with school social workers. Some social workers are more clinical by nature and are able to provide more mental health supportive services than others who are less clinically inclined. To compound this issue, the profession of school counselors has evolved into one in which the focus is more on post-secondary education planning, academic testing, course scheduling and if time available counseling of students. Furthermore, some school counselors may feel uncomfortable in a clinical role. In Minnesota, the minimum educational qualification for a school social worker is at the bachelor level. Thus, there are school social workers who cannot provide clinical support to students due to their licensure and education level. This may be especially true in rural Minnesota where it may be less common to find master level social workers than in the metro area.

Despite the reality of a patchwork of mental health supports for students, all educators indicated substantial need to provide such services. One veteran educator expressed a marked increase in the number of students needing such supports at school compared to 20 years ago. This educator also indicated it is not just the typical EBD student but students who have not been formally identified under the special education umbrella who come to school with a host of life stressors outside of school. Such examples were of parents working a second shift and not being home when the student

was, increased levels of poverty, addictions or mental health issues. This lack of a comprehensive mental health approach in educational institutions has been identified in previous research findings. In some schools, the mental health services are selective in that they only target EBD students (Lynn, *et al.*, 2003). This research indicates a growing need within the student body for mental health supportive services than was seen previously in schools. It suggests a paradox is created in which there is an increasing need with fewer supports available to students.

### **Class size**

Another finding of this research was the negative impact of class size on education which was expressed by all participants. Educators voiced the difficulty in managing classes of 35-40 students and the inability to reach students due to the sheer number in a classroom. It becomes an obstacle for teachers to keep that many students engaged in learning, and when there is an EBD student in need of more one to one attention; it risks becoming impossible to connect with students. Although it was assumed educators would identify class size as a barrier, it was an unforeseen finding that former EBD students would also cite it as a barrier to their academic success. The lack of individual attention, feeling connected to a teacher, or the ease of 'getting lost in the crowd' were all voiced by former EBD students and the grandparent of an EBD student. One former EBD student expressed difficulty in getting the extra help needed because of the large number of students in a class. It can become an insurmountable barrier for an EBD student to have academic success when they are already struggling scholastically.

Based on the findings, both groups of participants articulated the cumbersome difficulty of learning and achieving educational outcomes within a large class size. It is

important to note the size of classes has increased over the past decade due to fiscal resources allotted to education. Nonetheless, it is warranted to pinpoint another consequence to limited educational funding is class size which impacts both educators and students. The lack of funding places a heavier burden on teachers to meet the needs of more students in general, but this is compounded with a growing number of EBD students or students facing more challenges outside of school. Limited educational allocations of state fiscal resources greatly limit the ability of the student-teacher relationship to form which can diminish the opportunity for academic achievement of all students.

### **Stigma of being labeled 'EBD'**

An additional rich finding gleaned from this research was the topic of the stigma EBD students feel as being labeled as such. Although two educators did report stigma as an issue, the voices of the former EBD students and a grandparent of a former EBD student provided a vivid and powerful insight into their experiences. There was a consistency among this group of participants in terms of how the stigma made them appear to be different or somehow unequal to their peers. It seemed there was a desire to receive special education services but in a covert fashion which would not be shared or seen by their peers. This may fit with the developmental stage of adolescence as acceptance within a peer group becomes paramount. Being perceived as different, incapable, stupid, or in need of extra help can create socially damaging dynamics for EBD students which have the potential to further isolate them from peers.

One participant poignantly expressed how the stigma of diagnosed depression caused her grandson to feel ostracized in the classroom by a teacher. Two former EBD

students provided examples from their own experience in which a teacher announced in front of the entire class their IEP accommodations. The experiences occurred on two different occasions from two different teachers which indicates the manner in which this stigma may inadvertently be reinforced. One respondent was unyielding in her perception of the teacher intentionally stating her IEP accommodations as a means to humiliate and embarrass her in front of her peers. In both cases the teachers in question were general education teachers and not special education teachers. Such cases point to the need for increased teacher training into how such actions can have devastating impacts socially on EBD students. This is an illustrative example of a breach of confidentiality since all IEP information is individualized to a specific student, and a public reference is a violation of student privacy. It also speaks to the power of teachers and other educators can wield over a vulnerable group of students who have little authority to defend themselves in front of peers.

### **Influence of poverty and family issues**

Educators were clear in the link between poverty and difficult family issues negatively impacting EBD students. There was a thread woven between the responses from this group referencing chronic neglect, abuse, violence, chaos, and a lack of stability in the home. The connection to poverty and family issues was consistently voiced by educators as contributing factor as to why EBD student may struggle at school. One educator provided an example of watching some parents choose an adult romantic relationship over their child and the subsequent emotional damage which results from such a choice. This educator spoke to a perception of some parents not taking the needs

of their children in account before deciding on whether to pursue an unstable romantic relationship.

Former EBD students had also provided quite eloquent responses to this issue which echoed what educators had stated. For example, one former EBD student gave powerful testimony from her own life experience, before being placed in foster care, in which she became the parent to her alcoholic mother and older siblings. She related living environments can create significant difficulty for EBD students. When forced to make a choice EBD students may often choose a chaotic family life over school work because it is family, and they are dependent upon that system for survival. Another insightful former EBD student describes a legacy in which his brother, through his aggressive behavior within peer groups, had created social barriers for him. He describes how peers would ask him to answer for the actions of his brother and how, after much repetition, he became enraged and felt compelled to answer the peer group through physical aggression. The following is a vividly descriptive quote which concisely conveys his personal experience: “-my fists would talk more than my mouth would-”. The quote provides a rather symbolic example of how one can fall into a pattern of behavior in which one is exposed to as a child and speaks to poverty which can sometimes see physical aggression or violence as the only respectable means to solve a conflict. Prior research supports the experience of this intuitive former EBD student as he identifies a defense mechanism he adopted which was modeled in the family he was raised in. Poor children tend to exhibit more emotional and behavioral problems than their non-poor counterparts, such as more external problems including fighting or delinquency (McLoyd, 1998). This student does go on to articulate the defense

mechanism he used to survive in the family culture he was raised within. It provides a deeper level of understanding as to how the reality of some EBD students' lives is entrenched in behaviors such as physical or verbal aggression to solve problems. However, such behaviors are unacceptable in a school system as well as in a broad societal context.

Another former EBD student described the difficulty he faced as being the youngest sibling from a family which had a long running negative history with the education system. He reported feeling judged by teachers and administrators who had worked with his family and older siblings, and the assumption was made he would not make it through high school and drop-out as his siblings had. This young man may have been unique in that he used this negative stereotype as a motivator to make it through high school to prove them all wrong, which he did by way of graduating. However, this example does shed light on how EBD students may feel negatively perceived, judged, or unwelcomed by educators due to a family history. It also begs the question how many former EBD students with similar experiences reacted in a less adaptive manner than this example and did drop-out of school.

### **Role of Social Work**

Many EBD students have maladaptive behavior which is generally, at a minimum, considered offensive or problematic and often leads to involvement in the criminal justice system. Frequently, EBD students come from impoverished families struggling with a host of social problems such as addiction, mental illness, abuse, and chronic neglect. As a result, the formation of a secure attachment as a crucial cornerstone

of human development sometimes is not cultivated leaving EBD students ill prepared for the social, emotional, and academic skills needed to achieve academically.

The profession of social work has a significant role to play as a change agent for this special population of students. To begin with, social workers are uniquely positioned to become agents promoting change on the micro, mezzo and macro levels for EBD students. Working directly with EBD students in educational settings is a means to address the micro level mental health needs. Due to factors such as class size, lack of teacher mental health training, poverty and family issues, many EBD students struggle to form a healthy and nurturing relationship with an adult. Social workers can fulfill such a role in schools as they have the luxury to work individually with EBD students. Additionally, there is an opportunity to address the mental health needs EBD students invariably may have. This may be the sole occasion for such support due to limits of available supports within the mental health care system.

By working within an educational system, social work has a notable role to play in advocating within the system. Serving as a connector between student and educators can be an invaluable function to assist EBD students achieve educationally. By cultivating a relationship with an EBD student, social workers can help teach the social and emotional skills to manage their emotions and also how to navigate within the system. For example, if a student is overwhelmed with the length of an assignment, a social worker could work with that student to teach how to negotiate with a teacher to modify an assignment or how to bargain for an extension. In such a situation, the student learns a valuable life skill, completes the work, and is able to achieve. Without having a trusting and supportive connection to a social worker, such a student may give up and

eventually fail. Developing the skills on this mezzo level is an integral part of the profession of social work.

On a macro level, social workers have a role to fulfill in advocacy of education policy and training of educators. Since many EBD students come from a disenfranchised segment of the population, they are not often involved in the process of crafting social policy, although their lives are significantly influenced by it. Founded upon the advocacy of work Jane Addams, social work has a place in influencing how public policy is shaped with the needs of EBD students in an educational system. School social workers can serve in a consulting role to educators on the mental health needs of EBD and mainstream students and can push for change within the school districts in which they are employed. Providing ongoing training which meets state re-licensure requirements as well as addressing what educators can do to enhance learning for EBD students is a powerful role for social work. Finally, lobbying legislatively with elected officials and policy makers is a role to fulfill for social workers. If the voices, experiences, and impact of policy are not with policy makers, there can be no change to benefit EBD students. Mandates for mental health services, educational funding, undergraduate teaching, and re-licensure education requirements are such areas which would benefit from a social work perspective.

### **Strengths and limitations of the study**

There are numerous strengths to this research study. Initially, when the researcher reviewed prior research for this study, no studies were found which explicitly sought input on personal educational experiences of former EBD students or the parents of former EBD students. The greatest strength of this study was it provided a venue for the

authentic voices of former EBD students and a grandparent of a former EBD student. By including them in the discussion, it provided a more balanced perspective on the issue of education for this population which has not been seen in other research. The qualitative data garnered in this research will also contribute to the wealth of knowledge ascertained in previous research. Specifically, this explored how the nature of the student-teacher relationship can be a critical component for EBD students to be academically successful. Some of the barriers to academic success include the lack of mental health services, ongoing training for educators, and an understanding of how poverty is a contributing factor to academic failure or of students dropping-out.

Despite the knowledge gathered from this study there were limitations. Unfortunately, although a grandparent of a former EBD student did volunteer to participate, no former parents did. Therefore, the study was limited because only one voice is represented from this group of participants. This may indicate parents of former EBD students in this setting have had negative experiences with the educational system or with educators. It may also suggest a mistrust for the intention of the study as the parents who were invited to participate did not have as strong a working relationship with the researcher as the former EBD students had. Additionally, all participants were from a rural area of Minnesota and from one school district. Educators, former EBD students and parents of former EBD students from different geographic regions or from urban settings may have different experiences than those in this study.

### **Suggestions for future research**

It is the hope of the researcher the findings from this study will spur future research questions to be asked and researched. To begin with, this study could be

expanded to discover if the findings in this study are consistent in different geographic regions and in rural versus urban settings. If the findings would be consistent, the direction of future research may lead to the development of educational programs which have the needed social-emotional components for EBD students to be more academically successful than current trends indicate.

Another area that merits further research is the training requirements of undergraduate teaching programs as well as continuing education hours for re-licensure of teachers. One of the clear findings from this study includes a lack of understanding and preparedness to meet the mental health challenges of EBD students and a growing number of mainstream students. Prior research supports this as well. A broader focus on child development would assist educators in better meeting the social and emotional needs of EBD students (Dubin, 2013). Another area of focus could be to research more in depth how educators feel prepared to understand, manage or assist students with mental health concerns and what they might need to be better supported. There may be an underlying assumption special education teachers are left with the sole responsibility of addressing mental health needs and general education teachers see themselves as separate from this dimension. This may be due to the formal education prerequisites required for a special education license; further research could provide this. If future research findings yield compelling data, it may be the catalyst to promote curriculum changes within the undergraduate teaching programs as well as with the State Board of Education. At a minimum, this study may inspire some school administrators to use the lens of the student-teacher relationship as a critical conduit to academic achievement as

well as highlight how the barriers of poverty, stigma, and insecure attachments impact EBD students.

The lack of mental health support services within schools was another finding from this study which has implications on how services are provided and to whom. As previously discussed in the findings, there seems to be a patchwork of mental health supports for students which are dependent upon special education directors, funding, and school administrators. The findings provided a well-defined need for more supports in schools for not only EBD students but also for emotionally struggling mainstream students. As a means to ensure more uniformity, mandating school social work in all educational settings may be one way in which to address this concerning issue.

Finally, there are implications for public financing of education at the state and national level. All participants in this study identified the size of classes as a major obstacle to achievement. The findings section of this research categorized difficulty for educators managing behavioral and the workload of large classes, EBD students feeling 'lost in the crowd', difficulty for EBD students accessing teacher assistance, and a general feeling of anxiety for some students. Without increased educational funding, it is highly doubtful class size will be reduced. In an era of restrictive fiscal resources, budget deficits, and intense pressure for schools to achieve, the issue of how schools are funded becomes a cornerstone issue facing society. It becomes imperative for all research in this area to be shared with elected officials who make decisions regarding social policy and funding.

## **Conclusion**

The essence of human development is rooted in the attachment formed from early childhood. Who we become and how we evolve as individuals is dependent upon the relationships we form within our family, peer, and societal relationships. Unfortunately, for far too many, the attachment formed in early childhood is insecure in nature making it difficult for such individuals to perform well in an academic setting. The significance of the student-teacher relationship and the link to EBD student achievement cannot be overstated. There lies an opportunity in an educational system to form healthier and nurturing relationships between a teacher and an EBD student. Conceivably, this relationship has to develop not only academic skill and knowledge but also in teaching EBD students to believe in themselves as well as their potential to do well in life. Regrettably, the powerful capacity of this relationship to bring about change to benefit EBD students is infrequently recognized within society, public institutions, and school administrations as well as with some educators. However, if the powerful impact of this relationship is recognized, encouraged, and supported, the human potential of thousands of EBD students could be unleashed. Just think of the possibilities that lie within those students.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions—Parent of a former EBD student questions

1. Tell me about your child's general experience in school. What was positive, what was negative/what did your child enjoy/not enjoy about it?
2. What were some of the factors which contributed to your child's success in school?
3. What (if any) made school difficult for your son or daughter?
4. When thinking about your child's teachers, can you think of one teacher or another adult educator (social worker, school counselor, para educator) who made an impact on his or her learning? How did that person impact him or her?
5. What do you think schools could do to help students like your child achieve in school (if anything)?
6. What do you wish educators knew or understood about your child that they do not (if anything)?
7. What factors (if any) helped your son or daughter to stay in school as long as they did?
8. What relationships were important to their success?
9. If you were the principal of the school, would there be anything you would change to help students become more successful? If so, what would they be?
10. What factors (if any) do you think contribute to EBD students dropping out?
11. As you think about your child's success (or school experience more broadly), is there any person or people who stand out as having been important or as having had an impact? What was it about this person/people?
12. What else would you be willing to share that you think would be helpful for me to know?

## Appendix B

### Interview Questions--Educational professionals

1. When thinking about the nature of an EBD student, what challenges do they bring to school?
2. What types of academic interventions do you think net the most successful results?
3. What do you think are some crucial elements needed to motivate or encourage an EBD student at school?
4. What factors are needed to help students stay in school and graduate?
5. What kind of training do adult educators receive in order to address the needs and to support the school success of EBD students?
6. What could administrators, teachers and staff do to enhance school climate if anything (that is what do we do well and what might we do better)?
7. Might there be any type of social supports would benefit EBD students either in or out of the school setting?
8. What could be done to encourage higher retention or graduation rates among EBD students?
9. How are the mental health needs of EBD students addressed?
10. How do student-teacher relationships affect student achievement if at all?
11. As you think about the success of former EBD students, is there any student(s) in which you felt you had an impact on their educational experience or their life? In your opinion what made the difference for this student(s)?
12. What else would you be willing to share that you think would be helpful for me to know?

## Appendix C

### Interview Questions—Former EBD student questions

1. Tell me about your general experience in school. What was positive, what was negative/what did you enjoy/not enjoy about it?
2. What were some of the factors which contributed to your success in school?
3. What (if any) made school difficult?
4. When thinking about your teachers, can you think of one teacher or another adult educator (social worker, school counselor, para educator) who made an impact on your learning? How did that person impact you?
5. What do you think schools could do to help students like you stay in school and graduate from school (if anything)?
6. What do you wish teachers knew or understood about you and your friends that they do not (if anything)?
7. What factors (if any) helped you to stay in school as long as you did?
8. Which classes were easiest for you? What made classes more challenging?
9. If you were the principal of the school, would there be anything you would change to help students become more successful? If so, what would they be?
10. What factors (if any) do you think cause some kids like you to drop out?
11. As you think about your success (or school experience more broadly), is there any person or people who stand out as having been important or as having had an impact? What was it about this person/people?
12. What else would you be willing to share that you think would be helpful for me to know?



