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# School engagement and academic success of students with an EBD educational label: Perspectives among helping professionals in schools

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School engagement and academic success of students with an EBD educational  
label: Perspectives among helping professionals in schools

by

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MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the  
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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with 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

With less than half of students educationally labeled as having an Emotional or Behavioral Disorder (EBD) graduating from high school, this student demographic faces both lower graduation rates and higher dropout rates when compared to their peers. Previous research findings provide several theories for these students' lack of academic success, including: their likely exposure to risk factors such as mental health concerns and living in poverty, challenges in building and maintaining positive social relationships with peers and school staff resulting in a higher likelihood for school disengagement and lack of belonging, and the tendency for these students to be taught in a more restrictive and sometimes punitive special education classroom, isolated and alienated from their peers. Conversely, previous research also offers evidence-based suggestions for promoting school engagement and fostering academic success in EBD students, including: highlighting the importance of positive relationships with school staff, the importance of providing a nurturing and supportive classroom environment, and the importance of providing adequate mental health services in schools. The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine how a sample of school social workers view and foster success with EBD students in the classroom, defined both in terms of school engagement and academic success, leading to high school graduation. Eight school social workers were interviewed on the topics of school engagement, academic success, classroom environment, and characteristics of an ideal EBD program. The findings of this study attribute school engagement, positive relationships with school staff, positive social contexts, adequate mental health services, a supportive and nurturing classroom environment, and school staff unity to the social and academic successes of EBD students. Additionally, the findings support the need for increased funding and resources for urban school districts, as they were found to have the greatest need and least amount of resources to foster social and academic success for EBD students.

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An Emotional or Behavioral Disorder (EBD) is defined by the Minnesota Department of Education as an educational disability that requires special services for emotional or behavioral supports to address a wide range of challenging and complex emotional or behavioral conditions in school settings (Minnesota Department of Education, 2014). Students with an EBD educational label can be further defined as having an inability to learn in classroom environments not explained by cognitive or intellectual functioning, an inability to foster positive social relationships, and an inability to express emotions and behaviors in a healthy or productive way (Braaten, 2013). These individuals make up a student population with an overrepresentation of students of color, students coming from low income or impoverished families, and students living in households that fail to meet basic psychological needs. Additionally, many of these students come from households with a history of neglect, abuse, or traumatic experiences, further affecting their social, emotional, or psychological health. Children coming from homes such as these are often times not psychologically ready to keep up with the academic and social demands of the educational system (Abrams, 2005). Consequently, these students often come into schools presenting with a wide array of problems including high levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms, family deficits, heightened levels of aggression, and academic deficits (Hadjstylianos, 2014).

Due to the significant predisposing factors and environments experienced, these students enter the educational system largely disadvantaged as compared to their peers. This, in turn, places a burden on the educational system, questioning how to best meet these students' needs in order to foster universal student success. Recent legislation, such as the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act and the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), have increased the amount of pressure placed onto schools in terms of universal student success rates, and

narrowing what are sometimes referred to as achievement gaps. These and other related legislation have placed pressure onto administration, teachers, and students, holding each individual school accountable for the success of their students. This added pressure and accountability placed onto schools to facilitate universal student success has increased the importance of research in this area, and in particular, expanded the amount of research in the area of facilitating the success of the particularly challenging demographic, students with an EBD educational label.

Due to the complex problems and challenging behaviors presented, preparing teachers to teach EBD students has been named one of the greatest challenges that the field of education faces today (Owens & Dieker, 2003). EBD student programs place the largest burdens onto schools in terms of finances, time, and staffing, as compared to any other special education classification (Hadjstylianos, 2014). In 2009, students with an EBD educational label accounted for the use of 252.8 million dollars in school budgets in the state of Minnesota (Minnesota Office of the Legislative Auditor, 2013). With 16,511 students in that demographic in 2009, financial expenses total \$15,312 per student. Yet, despite these efforts, schools continue to lack the ability to help these students reach success, with less than 50% of EBD students graduating from high school (Braaten, 2013). Students with an EBD educational label also lead all other special education labels in terms of course failure, with 13.6% of these students receiving failing grades in almost all of their courses, and in terms of post-schooling employment, with less than half of this student demographic successfully obtaining and maintaining employment within 5 years of being in school (Braaten, 2013).

Current special education systems for students with an EBD educational label are not always effective in leading these students to school success. School success can be defined

simply by academic success, high school graduation, and social success, exhibiting a level of school engagement and a sense of belonging. Research on why these current systems are often failing to meet these students' needs blames the key philosophy of EBD systems in schools, separating and alienating students from their peers (Hadjstylianos, 2014; Achilles, McLaughlin & Croninger, 2007). Current EBD systems in schools tend to separate these students from their peers early on in their education. Students with challenging behaviors are often taken out of the mainstream classroom and placed into an EBD classroom with like students. This method has been shown to further isolate these students, both socially and academically. Additionally, Achilles, McLaughlin and Croninger (2007) discuss the high rate of suspension used with EBD students and found the suspensions led to no improvement in these students' emotional or behavioral problems. Though much research exists on proposing effective strategies for dealing with the complex emotional needs and challenging behaviors of EBD students in the classroom, research is lacking on how to address the holistic needs of these students (Owen & Dieker, 2003). Thus, school administrators continue to struggle to answer the question: How can we establish a universal and effective special education system for EBD students?

Although current special education systems in schools continue to fail in leading the majority of EBD students to high school graduation, many students report feeling supported the most by helping professionals in schools. Helping professionals in schools can include school social workers, psychologists, counselors, teaching assistants, or anyone else listed as a service provider on these students' Individualized Education Plans (IEP). Wagner & Davis (2006) deem the creation of positive relationships in schools as especially important for students with an EBD educational label. In a study rating the effectiveness of EBD programs in schools, the schools rated as most effective had the highest percentage of students feeling that they had at least one



supportive and positive relationship with a staff member in the school (Wagner & Davis, 2006). The creation of positive relationships in schools has been shown to increase school engagement, as well as create a foundation for social and academic success in school (Wagner & Davis, 2006). Therefore, the importance of positive relationships in schools is presumably especially important for students with an EBD label, who face a significantly higher rate of high school dropout, partly due to lack of school engagement. Efforts to increase the likelihood of forming positive relationships in schools have been shown to boost the potential of social and academic success in students with an EBD educational label (Wagner & Davis, 2006).

Helping professionals in schools tend to provide direct services to these students on a daily basis, and tend to have a large amount of training and understanding on how to best deal with these difficult and complex emotions and behaviors (Hadjstylianos, 2014). However, with many helping professionals who continue to work inside of what can be an ineffective system, research is lacking on how to best use the expertise of these helping professionals in order to make the systematic changes to help these students succeed. The purpose of this research is to better determine how school-based staff, in particular helping professionals in schools, foster success in the classroom, particularly for EBD students, defined by both high school graduation and a sense of school engagement and belonging. Sub-questions of this research take into consideration the topics of academic success, school engagement and belonging, classroom environment, other successes and challenges, and what a more ideal system would look like.

## **Literature Review**

### **EBD Educational Label**

The United States Department of Education provides a current definition of an Emotional or Behavioral Disorder (EBD) in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA),

Section 300.8. This explanation of EBD defines the disorder as an inability to learn that cannot be explained by cognitive or intellectual functioning, and an inability to build and maintain positive social relationships (as cited in Braaten, 2013). This definition also acknowledges the common presence of a persistent negative or depressed mood, inappropriate behaviors and expressions of emotions, anxiety and somatic symptoms stemming from the fear and stress present in school (Braaten, 2013). As seen in the definition, the EBD educational label encompasses a broad range of academic, social, and mental health issues. With the large variety of symptoms, emotions, and behaviors displayed in EBD students, the historical context surrounding of the definition, criteria, and stigma of this label helps to shape how special education systems in schools structure EBD programs in order to attempt to facilitate student success.

As far back as 400 BC, there are records of advocates speaking out on the behalf of individuals who display erratic emotions and maladaptive behaviors. Since then, there have been a number of terms attempting to define such individuals, including mental illness, mentally handicapped, psychopathology, demonic possession, emotionally disturbed, and behaviorally disordered (Bullock & Gable, 2006). In 1988, the National Mental Health and Special Education Coalition adopted the term Emotional and Behavioral Disorders to provide a uniform and standard classification for individuals with inappropriate emotional expression and behaviors. The history of the field of emotional and behavioral disorders records various theories and attempts to create a special education system that most effectively intervenes to treat emotional and behavioral deficits in children and adolescents in order to facilitate overall success as they emerge into adulthood upon high school graduation (Bullock & Gable, 2006).

Hallmark examples of theories and attempts to create an effective special education system for EBD students include the establishment of professional groups, the dissemination of written reports offering strategies to use in the classroom, and federal legislation. In 1944, the New York City Board of Education established 600 schools for disturbed and socially maladjusted youth. A principal in one of these schools, Esther P. Rothman, wrote many articles and books offering theories and interventions to use in the classroom with what were then referred to as emotionally disturbed children (Bullock & Gable, 2006). These theories and interventions offered by Rothman and other professionals in the field led to increased pressure placed on the federal government to enact legislation to ensure that the special needs of these students were taken into consideration and acted upon in the school special education system. Important federal legislation affecting EBD students in the field of special education include the 1963 Mental Retardation Facilities Construction Act, the 1975 Education for all Handicapped Children Act, and the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Bullock & Gable, 2006).

Though efforts to create an effective special education system for students with an EBD label have been identified and recorded throughout the last two centuries, EBD students continue to fall behind from their peers in terms of social and academic success. Students labeled with an emotional or behavioral disorder have been shown to have the worst academic, behavioral, and social outcomes as compared to any other student demographic (Sacks & Kern, 2007). This is demonstrated by academics in the form of graduation rates, with less than 50% of EBD students graduating from high school, and in terms of overall academic performance, with EBD students achieving lower grades, failing more courses, scoring lower on standardized tests, and exhibiting a higher rate of grade retention as compared to their peers (Sacks & Kern, 2007; Braaten, 2013). Socially, these students struggle to build and maintain healthy social relationships, which can

lead to school disengagement, lack of school belonging, and school dropout. More than 50% of students with an EBD educational label drop out of high school, and continue to exhibit poor social and economic outcomes in terms of high unemployment rates, a low socioeconomic status, and high rates of criminal activity (Kern, Hilt-Panahon & Sokol, 2009). Of all students with an EBD educational label, 50% are arrested five years after leaving school, with 70% of EBD student dropouts arrested five years after leaving school (Sacks & Kern, 2007). Furthermore, with over half of all students with an EBD label failing to succeed academically and socially, there is a need to continue to improve the special education system for this student demographic in schools.

### **Risk Factors**

Children and adolescents with an EBD educational label make up a student population with an overrepresentation of individuals living in low income or impoverished households, individuals living with one or more mental illnesses, and individuals with lower levels of parental or familial support. Due to the high rate of comorbidity between EBD labels, poverty, mental illness, and a low level of parent and familial support, it is not surprising that these students have a hard time succeeding academically and socially, and that schools have a hard time facilitating success in these student, as they come into schools with an array of predisposing factors hindering success.

In 2012, there were a total of 658,249 families with 1,252,151 children in Minnesota. Of those children, 46% were reported as living in a household with an annual income that is less than the federal poverty threshold, with 32% of those living in a household with an annual income that is 200% below the federal poverty level (National Center for Children in Poverty). Living in poverty has been shown to increase financial strain and family stress, increase the

likelihood of substance abuse, and increase the likelihood of living in an abusive or neglectful environment (Braaten, 2013). Subsequently, children and adolescents living in poverty are more likely to be at risk for emotional and behavioral disorders, or other learning disorders (Braaten, 2013; Kutash & Duchnowski, 2004).

Another predisposing risk factor of developing and being labeled as EBD is the presence of one or more mental illnesses. In the United States, it is estimated that one in five children has a mental illness, and that 3-5% of children in the United States have a mental illness that seriously impacts at least one main area of functioning (Kutash & Duchnowski, 2004). The presence of mental illness is oftentimes comorbid with living in poverty, as each factor conversely affects the other. Living in an impoverished, stressful, abusive, traumatic, or neglectful household can affect the brain's ability to manage stress, which can lead to mental illness (Braaten, 2013). Children and adolescents exhibiting externalizing mental health symptoms, such as aggression, conduct disorders, and delinquency, or internalizing mental health symptoms, such as withdrawal and depression, are more likely to be educationally labeled as EBD (Talbot & Fleming, 2003).

Poverty, mental illness, and EBD students are more common in urban areas as compared to suburban or rural areas. Schools located in urban areas have large volumes of students living in poverty and living with severe and complex mental illnesses, but tend to have access to a smaller number of resources to assist students and their families (Talbot & Fleming, 2003). A theme found in research on improving success rates of EBD students identifies lack of resources and lack of adequate school-based therapy for mental illness as primary factors preventing school success for these students (Braaten, 2013; Kutash & Duchnowski, 2004; Goodman, 2010).

It is important to note the high levels of comorbidity in the research between the identified risk factors of poverty and mental illness, and emotional or behavioral disorders.

### **The Role of Helping Professionals in Schools**

Helping professionals in schools can include school social workers, psychologists, counselors, teaching assistants, or any service provider listed on a student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP). These helping professionals often possess a high case load and a daunting list of daily tasks, and are responsible to fill many roles in order to help facilitate success in their students. These roles can include individual and group counseling and therapy, scheduling, testing, assessing and addressing, referral, and academic planning (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010; Hadjstylianos, 2013). Additionally, helping professionals in urban schools are often faced with the largest case loads, but are provided with the smallest amount of resources, including parent and administrator support, when working with special education students, including EBD students (Talbot & Fleming, 2003). Thus, because of the large task lists, high case loads, and high expectations that helping professionals in schools face, there is reported role confusion and a lack of task completion, ultimately leading to limiting the potential of both the helping professionals and the students that they help and support in schools.

Despite the high case loads and the reported lack of task completion, helping professionals in schools are often highly valued and referred to as social change agents within the school (Hadjstylianos, 2013). Many agree that these helping professionals possess a large and valuable knowledge base on this student demographic, through both rigorous training and schooling, and experience providing direct services with these students on a daily basis (Hadjstylianos, 2013). Because of this, school administrators, parents, and students often

confront them while looking for additional support or answers to questions concerning this complex group of students.

Current research suggests the importance of fostering student success using multiple social contexts (Talbot & Fleming, 2003; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010; Hadjstylianos, 2013). The existing research hypothesizes if helping professionals in schools dedicate more time to community involvement, establishing effective partnerships in the community in order to further support students and parents, then the number of students with serious academic and behavioral problems would decrease (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010). After reviewing research in this area, Epstein and Van Voorhis (2010) propose that helping professionals in schools should redirect 20% of their time towards establishing effective and equitable community partnerships to provide multiple contexts of support for students and their parents/guardians in order to work together with the same goal of fostering success in their students. In a qualitative study interviewing nine helping professionals on the topic of effective strategies for students classified with emotional or behavioral disorders, Hadjstylianos (2014) found a theme supporting an increase in community involvement efforts in order to increase parent/guardian and student participation in school. Talbot and Fleming (2003) echo this theme in the literature by inferring the importance of multiple social contexts in promoting positive mental health outcomes for urban youth. However, there is not complete agreement on the perceived importance of helping professionals redirecting their time to provide additional community involvement and networking for students and their parents/guardians. In a qualitative study interviewing helping professionals in schools on perceived role importance, Agresta (2004) found that all helping professionals interviewed (school social workers, school psychologists, and school counselors) expressed that they did not want to make community involvement a priority, and preferred to use

individual and group counseling within the school as a primary mean of fostering student success.

Regardless of the debate on increasing helping professionals' time spent on community involvement, research collectively agrees on the presence of high caseloads and task lists that these helping professionals in schools face. In addition, research also collectively agrees that helping professionals in schools possess a large and valuable knowledge base in working with special education students, including EBD students. Thus, it is implied that helping professionals in school have a heightened level of knowledge on the current successes and failures of the special education system for EBD students, and may be able to contribute to the potential future success of currently unsuccessful systems.

### **Current Special Education Structure**

When a student is displaying a symptom or characteristic of a disability that is affecting their learning, that student will be referred to the school's special education staff, typically by a parent or guardian, a teacher, or other school faculty. Once the referral is made, special education staff work with school administrators, teachers, and the student's parent or guardian to identify whether the criteria for an educational disability is present, assess the student's needs, and write up an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for the student. The special education process is set up to accommodate the individualized needs of students with disabilities. However, for some students, particularly students with an EBD educational label, this is not always the case. In the 1975 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), it is stated that students with disabilities must be educated in the least restrictive environment. However for mild disabilities, there is a widespread disagreement on what this looks like in schools in terms of interpretation and implementation (Anderson, Kutash & Duchnowski, 2001). School administrators, teachers,



and helping professionals are continually asking the question of whether to mainstream EBD students into general education settings or to place them in more restrictive special education classrooms in order to better accommodate to individual specialized needs (Anderson, Kutash & Duchnowski, 2001).

In a study describing the psychosocial characteristics of 158 urban youth with an EBD label, Kutash and Duchnowski (2004) found that on average, the students were placed into the special education system at age eight, third grade, and spent a total of 67% of their educational careers in special education. Additionally, it was found that, on average, these urban EBD students spent 72% of every school day in special education classrooms (Kutash & Duchnowski, 2004). One implication of these findings is that even though most parents or guardians of these students first noticed EBD characteristics affecting their child's learning at age 5, they were not placed into the special education system until age 8, where at that point they had fallen significantly behind academically compared to their peers (Kutash & Duchnowski, 2004). Another implication that can be taken away from these findings is that these students spent over two-thirds of every school day in restrictive special education classrooms, separated from their peers and placed into a classroom with other children displaying the same maladaptive behaviors as them. This leads back to the complex discussion on whether an inclusive, general education classroom, or a restrictive, special education classroom best fits the needs of EBD students.

Research has reported that the current special education system for EBD students facilitates school disengagement by the use of high levels of exclusion, and the tendency for special education classrooms to possess a punitive, rather than nurturing, classroom environment (Achilles, McLaughlin & Croninger, 2007; Sacks & Kern, 2007). Using preexisting data from 1,824 students ages seven to fourteen, Achilles, McLaughlin and Croninger (2007) identified

factors or predictors associated with the use of higher levels of exclusion. The use of higher levels of exclusion includes using punishments such as suspension or expulsion as consequences for problem behaviors. The use of these types of punishments has been associated with higher stress levels, poor developmental outcomes, and gradual social disengagement (Achilles, McLaughlin & Croninger, 2007). The findings showed that possessing an EBD educational label, urban schooling, low socioeconomic status, being an African American male, and having parents with low school satisfaction were associated with the use of high levels of exclusion (Achilles, McLaughlin & Croninger, 2007).

Additionally, EBD students are often taught in the most restrictive environments, as compared to general education students and students with other special education labels (Sacks & Kern, 2007). These restrictive, punitive environments that enforce a zero tolerance policy in order to help limit behaviors that are common in the EBD label, have been shown to result in a gradual process of social disengagement, which has been shown to lower attendance and increase the probability of academic failure, problem behavior, and high school dropout (Achilles, McLaughlin & Croninger, 2007).

Regardless of conflicting opinions on whether to place students with an EBD educational label in general education setting or special education setting, there is significant evidence that EBD students continue to receive a disproportionate amount of high levels of exclusion, as measured by suspension and expulsion rates, and continue to be placed into classrooms with a punitive, zero tolerance policy for many externalizing behaviors that are common in the EBD label (Achilles, McLaughlin & Croninger, 2007; Sacks & Kern, 2007). There is also evidence that the use of these types of consequences for problem behaviors have negative effects on school engagement, academic performance, and overall student success. Whether it is

determined that a general education classroom or special education classroom is most accommodating for individualized student needs, the literature suggests that changes must be made in both of these classroom environments in order to better facilitate student success.

### **Theories of Effective Strategies Fostering Student Success with EBD Students**

In contrast to research identifying components of the current special education system that are hindering school engagement and overall success, there is a body of research that provides evidence-based suggestions that increase the likelihood of student engagement and success for students with an EBD label. Current themes found in the research include providing adequate mental health services in schools, providing an inclusive, supportive, and positive learning environment for special education students, and highlighting the importance of the student-teacher relationship for academic success as well as the need for an increased amount of training for teachers (Owens & Dieker, 2003; Braaten, 2013; Goodman, 2010; Talbott & Fleming, 2003; Farmer, Hamm, Petrin, Robertson, Murray, Meece & Brooks, 2010).

One theme found in the literature offering effective strategies to improve student outcomes is the call for an increase in mental health services offered in schools. Braaten (2013) reports that 11.8% of youth are currently receiving mental health services in an educational setting. However, many youth that are in need are failing to receive mental health services. The lack of mental health services being offered in school is especially relevant for the EBD student population, as the presence of one or more mental illnesses has been identified as a risk factor for obtaining an EBD educational label. Additionally, Hadjstylianos (2014) found a similar theme emerge from her research on effective strategies for students with an EBD label. The helping professionals interviewed in this study identified a lack of mental health services as a barrier for EBD student success (Hadjstylianos, 2014). Kutash & Duchnowski (2004) offer the idea of

restructuring school systems so that they address these psychosocial barriers that students are facing in order to improve student success rates.

Research also provides theories for creating an inclusive, positive and supporting environment in order to facilitate student success. Owens & Dieker (2003) propose a classroom model that addresses the holistic needs of EBD students. This model includes a gradual inclusion method while transitioning from middle to high school; gradually weaning students in self contained EBD classrooms into inclusive general education classrooms. This model focuses on teaching self-advocacy skills in middle school in order to help students to acquire confidence and independence before entering high school, where helping professionals generally have higher caseloads and less individual time to devote to each student (Owens & Dieker, 2003). Other suggestions available in the research for creating a classroom environment that facilitates and supports school success include: positive instruction and proactive classroom management, strengths based instruction, providing real world issues in curriculum, and providing a balance between challenging and accommodating curriculum (Talbot & Fleming, 2003; Farmer et al, 2010; Owens & Dieker, 2003).

A final theme provided in literature on fostering EBD student success in the classroom emphasizes the importance of the student-teacher relationship. As educators collectively spend a large amount of time with their students, the student-teacher relationship becomes important in improving student outcomes. While interviewing educators of EBD students and former EBD students themselves, Braaten (2013) found that it is important for teachers not only to be the provider of curriculum, but a supporter of the emotional and behavioral needs of their students. Because of the heightened emotional and behavioral needs present in students with an EBD label, this relationship becomes especially important for this student demographic. While

identifying characteristics of effective teachers for EBD students, Owens and Dieker (2003) found that weaving student-centered connections into the curriculum increased levels of perceived support and helped to improve overall student success. While asking helping professionals about effective strategies while working with the EBD student population, Hadjstylianos (2013) reported finding a theme relating to barriers of student success that included the lack of understanding and support that teachers have while working with the EBD population. Similarly, research suggests that increasing the amount of teacher training on the topic of working with students with an EBD label would be beneficial for overall student success (Goodman, 2010; Braaten, 2013; Hadjstylianos, 2013).

With less than half of EBD students graduating from high school, there are undoubtedly changes that could be made in the special education system in the United States to increase school success rates of this student population. However, with these students entering schools with a number of predisposing risk factors, such as mental illness and poverty, a large burden often becomes placed on the educational system, that can make the best practices to use with these students unclear. However, many use the helping professionals in schools as a primary knowledge base for this student population, as they spend much of their time attending trainings and providing direct services to these students. Although research has come a long way in providing evidence on practices that hinder or foster EBD student success, the special education system as a whole continues to fail these students. Therefore, this research will attempt to determine how helping professionals in schools facilitate school success in the classroom for students with an EBD label, in terms of both leading students to high school graduation and helping students achieve a sense of school engagement and belonging. This research took into

account the topics of academic success, classroom environment, school belonging, other successes and challenges, and what a more ideal or effective system might look like.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study used Martin and Furr's (2010) model for promoting school and classroom engagement as the conceptual framework, as described in their article entitled, "Promoting Classroom Engagement." This conceptual framework was used as a lens while analyzing the data of this research project. Mary Martin and Maureen Furr collaborated to create an experience-based framework that offers assessment tools and strategies to implement to improve student engagement in a classroom, as they both have a professional background in the education system. This framework was designed for use in general education classrooms, but is applicable to special education environments, as it offers both an assessment tool and strategies that can be implemented in any type of classroom environment.

School engagement is vital for a student's academic success. If a student becomes disengaged in the classroom, it will make academic success much harder to attain. Furthermore, school and classroom engagement are key to the attainment and retention of all knowledge presented in the classroom. Because of the high level of importance placed on school and classroom engagement, Martin and Furr (2010) constructed a model from which to base classroom instruction on, focusing solely on the level of student engagement in each classroom. This model places the responsibility of monitoring each classroom's student engagement level on the principal and related professionals in each school. Martin and Furr's (2010) model of promoting classroom engagement includes a definition of the term classroom engagement, speaks to the importance of classroom engagement and offers strategies to ensure a higher level of student engagement in any classroom.

A healthy environment for optimal classroom engagement includes a supportive, positive classroom culture in which students are not fearful of failing, and have the ability to take academic risks while feeling safe as learners, without the threat of academic consequences. This type of classroom culture is able to occur when teachers take on a facilitative role, rather than a purely directive and instructive role (Martin & Furr, 2010). Producing a healthy environment for optimal classroom engagement includes tailoring the curriculum to reflect real world examples, in order to facilitate student attention on the material. Martin and Furr (2010) suggest that it is not the student's fault they become disengaged, rather it is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that each student stays engaged by presenting the curriculum in a way that fits different student needs. Curriculum rigor should be kept at a level where each student feels challenged but not frustrated, in order to stay within the zone of proximal development for students at different ability levels. Finally, curriculum should reflect the development of independence in all students, in order to best prepare them with the level of independence and number of life skills needed to succeed later in life (Martin & Furr, 2010). In addition to providing strategies promoting classroom engagement, this model includes a five-step action plan for principals and related school staff to monitor each classroom's engagement levels. This action plan aims: 1) to help teachers arrive at a common understanding of what student engagement looks like, 2) monitor classrooms and provide teachers with specific feedback, 3) provide teachers and school staff with specific examples of classroom engagement or disengagement and the reasoning behind it, 4) suggest strategies and 5) implement effective and purposeful instructional planning (Martin & Furr, 2010).

Martin and Furr's (2010) model of promoting classroom engagement provides school staff insight into the importance of school engagement on a student's academic success and

future life projections, as well as specific strategies to implement to ensure a higher level of student engagement. As previously stated in the literature review, school disengagement is especially common in students with an EBD educational label. These students are at a higher risk of school disengagement as compared to their peers, based on their higher scores on the school disengagement warning index, indicated by number of school absences, course failure, low GPA, and high suspension rates (Henry, Knight & Thornberry, 2011). Therefore, it is especially important that individuals teaching EBD students follow these evidence-based guidelines in order to increase their students' school engagement levels. While analyzing the data in this study, a comparison was made between individual student success stories, as relayed by staff interviewed, and perceptions of overall student success rates, with the classroom environment, class engagement levels, and instructional techniques used to facilitate school engagement in these students. Inversely, contrasts were also made between individual student dropout stories and overall student school dropout rates, with the classroom environment, class engagement levels, and instructional techniques used with these students

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

The research design for this project is qualitative. Though much research exists providing theories for effective special education systems for students with an EBD educational label, the current system remains inadequate in terms of facilitating school engagement and academic success in this student demographic, as evidenced by the disproportionate high school dropout and graduation rates. Conversely, there is a body of research suggesting the importance of helping professionals in schools, as they are highly trained and tend to provide the largest amount of direct services with this student demographic. Thus, the intent of this research is to



utilize the expertise of helping professionals to supplement the knowledge base of existing effective strategies in the literature, with a specific regard to facilitating school engagement and academic success in students with an EBD classification. To do this, helping professionals had an opportunity to voice their professional, experience-based opinions while drawing from their real life experiences.

### **Population and Sample**

The sample of this study entirely consisted of school social workers. One criterion of the sample was the requirement of having at least one year of experience working with the EBD student population in schools. This requirement was established based on the assumption that a baseline of one year of experience is needed to provide the study with quality data. Sampling methods included purposive snowball sampling in urban and suburban areas in Minnesota.

One-on-one interviews were conducted with each school social worker. The interviews were audio recorded using a digital recording device, and later transcribed by the researcher. The interviews were semi-structured, including demographic information and ten predetermined questions, leaving room for elaboration on each question. The questions were on the topics of school engagement, academic success, effective strategies, successes and challenges, and what a more ideal special education system for EBD students might look like. All questions asked the school social workers to draw on personal experiences in educational settings as well as professional training and education.

### **Protection of Human Participants**

Using a template provided by the University of St. Thomas, a consent form was created to fit the needs of this individual research project (see Appendix A). This form included an explanation of the research project, the research question, procedures for the one-on-one

interviews, confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of the research project. It also included the contact information of the researcher, in case any questions regarding the researcher or the research project came up. Additionally, the research chair of this project, Dr. David Roseborough, reviewed the consent forms before the research begins. Prior to each interview, both the researcher and the interviewee reviewed, signed and dated the consent form. Prior to the audio recording, the interviewees were reminded of the voluntary nature of the study, as well as any possible risks associated with their involvement.

A copy of the consent form was provided to each interviewee, and the researcher will keep the signed consent forms for a period of six months after the completion of the research project. Upon the completion of each interview, the researcher transcribed the interview, and the audio recordings will be destroyed within six months after the completion of the research project. All transcripts, audio recordings and field notes were kept with the signed consent forms in a locked desk drawer located in the researcher's home office. Any particularly identifying information was omitted from transcripts, field notes, and the written report in order to further ensure confidentiality. As this research project is both confidential and voluntary, there were many opportunities to decline answering any of the interview questions during each interview. These opportunities included both verbal reminders and giving attention to the interviewee's body language and level of comfort during the interview.

All interviewees had choice of location for the interviews to be held. The interviews were either be held in the school building, or in a more neutral environment, such as a private room at a coffee shop. For either choice, the researcher ensured privacy by monitoring the surroundings prior to the start of the interview.

### **Data Collection**

All interviews were one-on-one, audio taped, and later transcribed by the researcher. Each interview consisted of the collection of demographic information, and ten semi-structured, predetermined questions. Each of the questions was designed to be neutral and open-ended and allow room for elaboration, in order to best draw out the different perspectives and experiences of each interviewee. Personal demographic information included each interviewee's age, race and gender in order to give insight into themes in data that may emerge based on these differences. Professional demographic information gathered included the number of years of experience working with EBD students, the ages of these students, the types of direct services, if any, they have provided to these students, and information on the school environments that they have worked in. The remaining questions asked about how the approximate rates of high school graduation, school dropout, attendance, and use of exclusionary measures compare between the students that they work with who have an EBD educational label and those students' peers. The researcher also asked about attributions to academic success or failure and characteristics of the current EBD system in their schools. In addition, the interviewee's opinions on levels of school engagement, the facilitation of school engagement, the use of multiple social contexts, the importance of mental health services provided in schools and the importance of the student/teacher relationship were recorded. Lastly, the interviews sought to capture perspectives on how to best place students in the least restrictive environment, and how to alter classroom environments in order to best facilitate both academic success and school engagement in this student demographic.

### **Data Analysis**

This research project used both deductive and inductive approaches while analyzing the data provided in the interviews. Findings in the literature show that there is a current problem

with the special education system in regard to students with an EBD educational label, as evident in low high school graduation rates and high dropout rates, as compared to their peers (Braaten, 2013; Kern, Hilt-Panahon & Sokol, 2009; Sacks & Kern, 2007). The literature also presents the pattern of how high levels of school disengagement experienced by this student demographic can lead to behavior concerns and truancy, which can lead to high rates of suspension and expulsion, which can ultimately lead to failing to graduate from high school (Henry, Knight & Thornberry, 2012; Achilles, McLaughlin & Croninger, 2007; Sacks & Kern, 2007). Based on these findings, start codes primarily concerning school engagement, and academic success were determined prior to conducting interviews. Upon completion of the interviews, the researcher first analyzed the data using these start codes: high school graduation, attributes and barriers to graduation, classroom environment, and characteristics of an optimal EBD program. Additionally, open coding was used to catch emerging themes not found in reviewing the literature. Therefore, the researcher analyzed the data a second time using open coding. Once coded, the data were organized into thematic and sub-thematic categories. In addition, field notes were used to further analyze and organize the data.

The validity of this research depends on the participants involved. While sampling, the researcher sought to find diverse interviewees, both in terms of the individual's demographics and in terms of experience. Diversity in interviewee demographics is valued, as it will help to bring multiple perspectives into the research. Subsequently, diversity in the interviewees' experiences is also valued, as interviewees with differing amount of years of experience, differing student demographics and differing school environments will add to the validity of the research findings.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

As they are present in all research, this study has several strengths and limitations. An initial strength of this qualitative research project is found in the first-hand professional experiences and perspectives that the interviewees will be able to provide to the researcher. The semi-structured nature of the interview gives all interviewees the opportunity to provide their perspectives on the subject matter without imposing a large amount of structure (Monette, Sullivan & DeJong, 2010). This allowed the interview to take an unexpected direction if it was deemed beneficial to the research. Because of this, themes that are not present in the literature reviewed could emerge from the data and provide the researcher with additional perspective and insight on the subject matter. Qualitative interviewing methods also allow the researcher to observe both verbal and nonverbal behavior, which may also add to the quality and richness of the data.

Additional strengths present in this research project lie in the experience found in the researcher, as well as the research chair and committee. Both the researcher and the research committee have experience working with this student demographic. The research committee consists of two LICSW school social workers that have provided direct services to students with an EBD label for a combined total of over 36 years. This level of expertise in this research topic adds to the overall quality of the research project.

Primary limitations of this study lie in the small sample size and the untested interview questions. As present in many research projects using qualitative interviewing, this study is limited to a small sample size, due to restricted time and resources. The sample consisted of eight participants, who were sampled using purposive snowball sampling. Because of the nonrandom nature of sampling used, the study will not be generalizable to larger audiences and may be

difficult to replicate. Additionally, the interview questions that were used in this study had not been previously tested. This study served to pilot these questions.

### **Findings**

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the impact of school engagement on academic success and high school graduation for EBD students. This research also took into account the subthemes of attributes to academic success, barriers to high school graduation, the classroom environment experienced by EBD students, characteristics of an optimal EBD program, and ways to foster both student engagement and academic success for this student demographic. Eight school social workers were interviewed as participants in this research. These eight individuals were chosen due to their involvement in working with EBD students, their families, and school staff in order to foster and facilitate school engagement and academic success, ultimately leading to the goal of high school graduation. All eight of the participants currently hold an MSW degree, with over half possessing an LICSW licensure status. Of the eight participants, five identified as female, with three identifying as male. All eight identified as Caucasian, and their age varied from 25-55 years old. Their years of experience in working with EBD students in a school setting varied from one to thirty. All of the participants were currently working in a middle or high school setting, with the majority working with EBD students who spend more than 60% of their school day in special education classrooms. Their identified roles in working with EBD students ranged from providing individual and group therapy, supporting teachers and staff, providing interventions and crisis control, linking students and staff to outside community resources, writing behavior plans, and providing social work and mental health interventions. Of the eight participants, six were currently located in an urban school district, with two in suburban school districts.

While analyzing the data, start codes were used first to organize the data into themes supported by the literature. Next, open coding was used to catch any other themes that may emerge that were not present in the previously reviewed research. All of the themes that emerged can be divided into three categories: attributes and barriers to academic success and high school graduation, the classroom environment experienced by EBD students, and characteristics of an optimal EBD program.

### **Attributes and Barriers to Academic Success and High School Graduation**

The first category that themes in the data fit into is attributes and barriers to academic success and high school graduation. The majority of participants agreed that EBD students had lower graduation rates as compared to their peers. Many of the participants did comment that there are a lot of EBD students who do graduate, but many of them take an extra year or two to do so. Many of the participants also commented on the likelihood of dropping out around ninth or tenth grade, due to many challenges or barriers faced by this student demographic. Major themes that emerged as important attributes or barriers to academic success and high school graduation include school engagement, the level of family or parental/caregiver involvement, the level of appropriate treatment for mental health concerns, external community influences and level of community involvement, the importance of student-teacher relationships, and the presence of an internal drive.

**School engagement.** As one of the primary purposes of this research study was to better understand the effect of school engagement on academic success and high school graduation for EBD students, each participant was asked, “How important would you rate school engagement for EBD students’ academic success?” All eight participants rated school engagement as very

important, if not vital to EBD students' academic success. When asked, one participant responded:

*Obviously it's hugely important, and we know the statistics, that students stop attending or just drop out or are not engaged when they are there, and then they are not successful in learning and earning their credits when they are there, so I think we have a very, we have a building wide approach and appreciation in terms of promoting school engagement.*

Another participant responded in a way that attributed school engagement to academic success or leading to high school graduation:

*We did a pretty good job engaging kids, and that is a huge part of keeping them in school, engaging with staff and that connection with the school, that was big for them. So if we could get that to happen, we were much more likely to get them to graduation.*

A third participant linked lack of school engagement to dropping out of high school, ultimately not leading to academic success or high school graduation:

*We are probably seeing a lot of dropping out in 9-10<sup>th</sup> grade, early high school where they are just no longer engaged.*

Lastly, another participant linked school engagement with the importance of EBD students forming and possessing strong relationships with school staff:

*I definitely think that school engagement for EBD students is vital. If they have that connection with school staff, someone that they know cares about them and that they feel safe with that is going to watch to see if they get there every day. I think just building those relationships definitely helps with school engagement and would then in turn lead to better attendance, and then better grades, and then you know better success at graduation hopefully eventually.*

**Family involvement.** When asked about attributes and barriers to academic success and high school graduation, family involvement was noted as either an immense attribute or significant barrier, depending on the presence or amount of family involvement or level of support available to the student. One participant explained:



*I think that parent or caregiver involvement is huge. Caregiver involvement is vital. Lack of caregiver involvement is a barrier; you know kids that just have unstable home environments really don't do well.*

Similarly, participants described the potential barrier, lack of parent involvement, due to parental mental health issues or other related issues involving traumatic or chaotic home life situations:

*And then, their family support was not always what it probably needed to be. Our families struggle, their parents struggle to keep themselves together so it's hard to give to their children because they are really themselves trying to keep their lives on track.*

*Just yesterday there was a mom of a student, I was talking to her and she has schizophrenia and is struggling with immense problems with her mental health, so we're just trying to get her connected with a case manager, she really is struggling. So I need to help her, because she can't help her son unless she gets her needs met.*

**Mental health.** Similarly to family involvement, the presence or lack of appropriate mental health treatment was seen as either an attribute or a barrier for a student's academic success and potential to graduate high school. One participant commented on how when she was in a high school setting, she viewed the low attendance rates of some EBD students as a huge barrier to their academic success and potential to graduate:

*I think there are untreated mental health needs that were playing a part in [low attendance]. And I think because of that age, they weren't wanting to seek help and wanted to be independent and not need anyone else's help to do anything. I think part of it is their age, being a teenager, and all that goes into being a teenager, and then you put in all of the mental health kinds of issues on top of that.*

Another participant explained:

*I would say mental health, getting the appropriate treatment for mental health issues is extremely important. Getting the correct treatment for the correct mental health diagnoses. And a barrier would be the opposite, lack of appropriate mental health treatment. And you know, parental mental health issues are big.*

**Community influences.** Another theme identified by many of the participants as a barrier for EBD students' academic success and high school graduation was either the

involvement in negative activities that led to police involvement or incarceration, or a lack of involvement in positive activities in the community. One participant commented on this:

*A lot of the barriers that I see with EBD students are just the stuff that they are getting into outside of school. So if they are tending to get into some trouble or if they are more truant or break the law or something like that, it can definitely be a challenge, and EBD students may tend to be at a higher risk for that, police involvement. So it tends to affect their ability to graduate.*

In addition to getting involved in negative activities in the community, another participant commented on how EBD students are usually not involved in many positive community activities.

*“It’s quite rare that I get an EBD student that is really doing much out in the community. It’s really very sad, because they’re not on sports teams, they’re not in activities, some of them do have church activities, but they just don’t have the typical experiences that other more typical kids experience in their teenage years.”*

#### **Importance of relationships with school staff.**

A subtheme that was found within the theme of the importance of school engagement for EBD students’ academic success is the importance of building and possessing strong relationships between EBD students and school staff. In addition to being asked about the importance of school engagement, participants were also asked, “How, if at all, do student-teacher relationships affect student success, in terms of academic achievement and school engagement?” Similarly to the question on school engagement, all eight participants responded that student-teacher relationships greatly affect an EBD student’s academic success and school engagement. However, before being asked this question, the majority of the participants had already expressed the importance of strong, positive relationships between EBD students and school staff when being asked about the importance of school engagement for EBD students. The following quotes are responses from both the question on school engagement and the question concerning student-teacher relationships.

*Student-teacher relationships, yep it's vital. I just don't think you could have a successful EBD program if you don't have that real engaged student-teacher relationship.*

*I think [student-teacher relationships] are huge. Because if the kids are connected with the teacher, they are going to buy in more to the classroom engagement or the academic part of it.*

*I think especially with the smaller programs the connection and relationship piece is so big. And to be in the smaller setting like that is huge for them. I would say the smaller close-knit relationship piece is where the success comes in.*

Another participant theorized that the reason that some EBD students don't do well in a mainstream general education classroom and need a more restrictive environment in order to be successful is due to the relationships that are able to be formed in a smaller classroom.

*I think that these kids, that's part of the problem why they didn't do well in a mainstream school is they didn't have a connection. So we have small classes here, we're really very lucky we usually don't go over 7 or 8 students in a class. And a big emphasis in our program is relationships. So we really work on getting those relationships with kids so that they feel connected to our school.*

**Internal drive.** Each participant was asked, "What do you attribute to the academic successes of the EBD students who do graduate?" Three of the eight respondents included personal resilience or an internal drive or motivation as a major attribute to successfully graduating high school.

*Academic successes, the moderate ones that I've seen either have had a horrific middle school experience and kind of the light bulb moment, and they realize that they have to do something different to be successful. And either something at home isn't working, they see the community, whatever, and then they are like, no not for me, we have to change this. So it becomes this internal drive.*

*I think that some of it is the internal drive. This is not the life I want. I want to be in school. I want to graduate.*

### **Classroom Environment Experienced by EBD Students**

The second category of themes that the data fit into concerns the classroom environment that EBD students are placed into, how they are experiencing that environment, and how the classroom environment affects their levels of school engagement and academic success.

**Views on Least Restrictive Environment.** Each participant was asked to share their opinion on how they think the IDEA notion of least restrictive environment should be interpreted, implemented and regulated in schools. There was a large amount of disagreement and varying opinions on this question. About half of the participants agreed with the idea of keeping a student in the least restrictive environment, a few of the participants did not agree with this notion, and many of the participants either could not decide which side of the argument they agreed with, or had mixed opinions that included both the pros and cons of each side of the argument. The following quotes come from participants who were unsure of how LRE should be implemented and regulated in schools.

*I think it's really, that's always a difficult thing. I think when you put together all of the kids who are struggling, it's really difficult. Now the other side of that coin however, is that there are kids who come to school and create significant safety issues and significant disruption, and I think it's about trying to balance that.*

*Well I very much agree that kids should be in the least restrictive environment. On the other hand, we see kids thrive in a restrictive environment such as ours, because it's where they're at and it's what they need at the moment.*

*I've seen it go both ways, it worries me and least restrictive is so broad that I don't know that you could ever get two people to be totally on the same page.*

Another participant was very confident in always implementing and placing a student in the least restrictive environment possible, with hopes that little to no students would end up with a federal setting four EBD label.

*I agree completely. I think that what the students miss out on when they get to a level 4 is positive peer interaction, which is absolutely vital in a middle school level. They have to see kids do things that are functional behaviors, and we see, if you look at any mental*

*health treatment to aggravate kids with the biggest behavioral problems is worst treatment, it's not best practice, and it's worst treatment, because you're just exposing them to more and more negative behaviors. So we end up at times managing that, and that's ineffective. I think once they get to a level 4, something like this, it is very difficult to treat them effectively.*

Finally, a third participant voiced his opinion of favoring the more restrictive environment when a student is on the border between two different federal level setting EBD labels.

*Well the way it is implemented and regulated I kind of don't like. Because what you say is you always go to least restrictive first, so you try them in a lower least restrictive setting, or less special education time. And then if they don't do well, you make the case that they need more supports and services. So it's kind of like, instead of starting more restrictive and letting them earn their way out, you start and then watch them fail and need more. And I don't know that either one is the right model.*

**The classroom experience of EBD students.** Each participant was asked, “How would you describe the classroom environment experienced by EBD students in the school that you work in? What could school faculty do to enhance the classroom environment for EBD students?” The responses for this question varied. Some participants touched on physical components of the classroom, while others touched on qualities of teachers and faculty that enhance school engagement and academic achievement in EBD students. Two subthemes emerged in the responses to this question: the importance of a nurturing, flexible environment, and the importance of having all school faculty on the same page and working as a team in order to best serve these students. The following quotes are responses to this question that highlighted the importance of a non-authoritative classroom environment.

*I think just hearing them out, when they have problems just being there to listen, and letting them be able to air what they have an issue with and feeling like the adult is there in their corner with them. And I think that our program does a nice job of that, we really try to instead of being authoritative with the kids we try to do a more collaborative approach with them so that they feel that they have that rapport with us which is very important.*

*I think that teachers who are flexible and our assistant director and mental health practitioner get it. Suspension isn't always the answer, so being flexible is huge and*

*understanding that there is something else driving the behavior that the students are having as it relates to academic engagement and school engagement.*

The next set of quotes are responses to this question that highlight the importance of having the school faculty operating as a team in order to create a school-wide or classroom culture that fosters success in EBD students.

*If there's a culture around the school that these are all of our kids and we have to figure out how to do right by them, that it's everybody's job. Sometimes teachers just want to be inside of their classroom and shut the door and manage their own stuff, but the more that you can create that community where everybody is feeling safe and is open to giving and receiving feedback then I think that definitely helps the kids.*

*We have a very supportive environment and a very flexible environment, so that helps the students. The struggle is how to provide that and provide academic rigor for the students. But I think that the kids feel supported and that is by the teachers, all of the helping professionals. I think that we team here pretty well and that the kids feel that.*

*There is a big staff development piece. We as adults need to step back and try to understand what a kid might be feeling, why they might be acting out. It makes us more patient, understanding, compassionate. It doesn't mean that I won't come down on your behavior with a hammer, but I can at least pat it in velvet or something.*

*I think the teamwork is vital, you've got to have a collaborative team. You've got to have people who are committed and like working with EBD students, and you have to have administration that support and understand EBD students and will support the team and the staff. That makes for an optimal EBD environment.*

### **Characteristics of an Ideal EBD Program**

The third category of themes that the data fit into is characteristics of an ideal EBD program. Each participant was asked, "If you could create an optimal program for EBD students, what would it look like?" The most common themes present in the responses to this question include: small program size, flexible, structured, and including coping skills and mental health services.

**Small program size.** Of the eight participants, three included small program size in their optimal or ideal program for EBD students, but all eight included the importance of having a small program size within other questions in the interview.

**Flexible.** Of the eight participants, four included the importance of having a flexible classroom environment when asked about their ideal or optimal EBD program, but all eight included the importance of being flexible when working with EBD students or the importance of having a flexible classroom environment within other questions in the interview. When describing an ideal EBD program, this participant explained,

*And also just flexibility, just really moving away from that regimented that they all need to march in a line and sit straight up in their desks. There needs to be more flexibility and helping them to regulate and understand the effects of, you know most of the kids have experienced really traumatic events, and to understand how that has affected their development and using strategies to help with that.*

**Structured.** Of the eight participants, three included the importance of having a structured EBD program when asked about their ideal or optimal program, but five participants included the importance of having structure and consistency within an EBD program within other questions in the interview. In the following quote, one participant explained the importance.

*My students need structure and boundaries. This is the line, here are the consequences if you cross the line. That is the ideal classroom environment when the expectations are laid out, clear and consistent, and follow through.*

**Including coping skills and mental health services.** Lastly, almost all of the participants included the importance of an ideal or optimal EBD program containing coping skills, life skills, and mental health services in addition to academics. One participant stated:

*Teachers and the mental health staff being mindful of the mental health driving the behavior. My ideal program would have great teachers that take the mental health needs seriously and incorporate them into their day. Because if you're constantly anxious, you're not going to get any of your work done. So I think just having staff that are mindful of that.*

## Discussion

This study focused on the relationship between school engagement levels and the academic success of students with an EBD educational label. Students with an EBD educational label face the highest rates of school disengagement and high school drop out when compared to their peers, with less than 50% of these students graduating from high school in the United States (Braaten, 2013). Because of this, there is a large body of current research facing the topic of how to best foster school engagement and academic success in this student demographic. Current research blames a key philosophy of many EBD programs, separating and potentially alienating EBD students from their peers, for these low rates in school engagement and academic success (Hadjstylianos, 2014; Achilles, McLaughlin & Croninger, 2007). Conversely, research on this topic also offers evidence-based suggestions for increasing the likelihood of higher levels of school engagement and high school graduation in this student demographic. Many of these evidence-based suggestions revolve around the importance of positive relationships with school staff, adequate school-based mental health services, and providing a positive classroom environment and experience for EBD students (Owens & Dieker, 2003; Braaten, 2013; Goodman, 2010; Talbott & Fleming, 2003; Farmer et al, 2010).

The conceptual framework used for this study was Martin and Furr's (2010) model for promoting school and classroom engagement. This model operates from the belief that school engagement is vital for academic success. Martin and Furr (2010) state that a healthy classroom environment for fostering an optimal level of school and classroom engagement is supportive, positive and flexible, and offers an ideal balance between curriculum rigor and academic forgiveness.

### **Attributes and Barriers to High School Graduation in EBD Students**



School social workers participating in this study echoed the broader, existing research in terms of high school graduation rates of their EBD students compared to the rest of the students in the schools that they worked in, stating that they saw lower graduation rates in this student demographic and higher rates of high school dropout, or commenting that it took these students longer to reach graduation when compared to their peers. When speaking on the topic of student success stories or attributes to high school graduation, many of the participants spoke to the topics of personal resilience, family involvement, adequate mental health services, positive relationships with school staff, and high levels of school engagement. The participants validated the importance of school engagement and its effect on academic success. One school social worker in this study attributed the success of their school's EBD program to its emphasis on promoting school engagement. Similarly, many other school social workers spoke on the importance of school staff building positive relationships with EBD students in order to promote school engagement and achieve higher academic success rates in these students. The importance of EBD students possessing positive relationships with school staff was highlighted as a primary evidence-based strategy to promote school engagement and academic success in these students in previous research. In a study rating the effectiveness of EBD programs in schools, Wagner and Davis (2006) found that the schools that were rated as most effective in terms of academic success had the highest percentage of students who felt that they had at least one positive relationship with a school staff member. Positive relationships with school staff are especially important for EBD students, as they tend to struggle socially, and often lack the social skills to build and maintain healthy relationships.

Research on the EBD student demographic shows a high comorbidity rate between an EBD educational label and mental health concerns. Students with externalizing mental health

symptoms, such as aggression and conduct disorders, or internalizing mental health symptoms, such as depression and withdrawal, are more likely to be educationally labeled as EBD (Talbot & Fleming, 2003). Because of this, it is imperative that EBD students in schools are receiving adequate mental health services in order to succeed both socially and academically. Many of the school social workers interviewed agreed with the literature on the topic of the importance of mental health services for these students. One of the participants stated that it is unrealistic to expect a student suffering from mental health symptoms, such as anxiety or depression, to be able to focus on academics if their mental health is struggling. Therefore, in order for these students to succeed in school, adequate mental health services are vital. Another participant echoed this concern, adding that she has a caseload of over seventy students, and it is overwhelming and unrealistic for her to be able to provide adequate mental health services for all of these students. Similarly, while interviewing helping professionals, Hadjstylianos (2014) identified a lack of mental health services as a barrier for EBD student success.

In addition to the presence of mental health symptoms in EBD students, both previous research and school social workers in this study touch on the effect of family mental health needs and family involvement on these students' school success. Many of the participants in this study touched on the importance of family support on a student's school success. A few of the participants spoke about the difficulty of engaging families in school involvement due to mental health concerns. Parental mental health concerns and lack of family involvement were established as barriers to a student's school success. However, only the participants from urban school districts discussed family mental health concerns, as compared to the participants from suburban school districts who did not express this as a major barrier to their students' success. This theme was also echoed in previous research, as Talbot and Fleming (2003) discussed the

tendency for urban school districts to be faced with more severe and complex mental health needs and the tendency for these districts to have access to a smaller amount of resources to assist their students and families.

A final theme found in attributes and barriers to academic success is the importance of positive social contexts for EBD students, in the forms of family, peers, community and school. Previous research on this topic area has highlighted the importance of using multiple positive social contexts in order to promote both school engagement and academic success in these students (Talbot & Fleming, 2003; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010; Hadjstylianos, 2014). This existing body of research hypothesizes that if you surround these emotionally and behaviorally vulnerable students with positive peer, community, family and school influences, these students will have a higher likelihood of succeeding both socially and academically. This theme was mirrored in the findings of this study, as every school social worker interviewed expressed the importance of all of these forms of positive social contexts. Additionally, many of the participants attributed their students' successes to the use of positive peer influences, by placing EBD students in study groups with peers who could serve as role models, positive family influences, by attempting to engage these students' families in their schoolwork, and positive school influences, with school-based philosophies surrounding school engagement and belonging. One area of positive social contexts that was lacking for many of the urban school districts is community. Many of the school social workers interviewed expressed their concerns around the community influences present for many EBD students. One participant explained that she simply cannot control her students' "street lives," and that is where she found most of her students running into trouble that jeopardized their academic success. Another participant expressed her concerns on the need for more positive community activities and resources for her

students. She explained that none of her students are involved in any extracurricular activities, and that she felt that they would benefit both socially and academically if they were involved in such activities.

### **The Classroom Environment Experienced by EBD Students**

Martin and Furr's (2010) model of promoting classroom engagement focuses primarily on creating and monitoring the classroom environment so that it is in the optimal position to fit the individualized needs of the students. This healthy environment for optimal engagement should be supportive and have a positive culture that makes students feel safe and confident enough to take academic risks (Martin & Furr, 2010). The opinions of the school social workers in this study mirrored this philosophy of creating a classroom environment optimal for school engagement. Having a positive and supportive classroom environment was identified as being especially important for EBD students, as many of the participants attributed having a negative classroom experience to school disengagement or academic struggle or failure. One school social worker interviewed stated that she believed the reason that students end up in a restrictive, federal four setting classroom environment is because general education classrooms did not provide the classroom culture that is needed for many EBD students. As students educationally labeled as EBD tend to lack coping strategies to deal with emotions resulting in maladaptive behaviors, it is especially important to create a safe, positive and supportive classroom environment in order to promote school engagement for these students.

Another theme in the findings around the topic of classroom environment was the importance of having all of the staff in a school on the same page and working together as a team while promoting both school engagement and academic success of their EBD students. One school social worker interviewed attributed the successes of her school's EBD program to the

staff unity, and to the universal support that she experienced with the principal, teachers, and administrative staff. Conversely, another school social worker interviewed discussed the difficulties that she experienced with her students when the staff were not working together. She stated that when she did not feel supported by other school staff, that the students could sense it and would therefore either act out behaviorally or struggle academically when there was a break in staff unity.

Previous research spoke to the widespread disagreement present on the topic of whether it is best for EBD students to be mainstreamed into a general education classroom, or to be placed in a more restrictive special education classroom that may be able to better accommodate their individualized needs (Anderson, Kutash & Duchnowski, 2001). As an EBD educational label can be considered as a mild to moderate disability, it is difficult to interpret the national legislative term, Least Restrictive Environment, as it is hard to know what level of restriction is optimal for each student's academic success. As there was disagreement on how to interpret and implement this in the research, this disagreement was also present in this study's findings. Amongst the eight school social workers interviewed, their views on where to place students varied significantly. One school social worker interviewed expressed her support for favoring a more restrictive environment for certain students, as she believes it is what will best foster their academic success. Another school social worker interviewed expressed his support for favoring a lesser restrictive environment, as he believes surrounding these students with positive peer role models is especially important.

### **Characteristics of an Optimal EBD Program**

The last category discussed in the findings of this study is on the topic of characteristics of an optimal EBD program. When the school social workers were asked about this topic, their

responses were strongly consistent with the literature on this topic. According to both previous research and this study an optimal EBD program is flexible, structured, has a small classroom size, and includes coping skills and mental health services in the daily curriculum. The optimal EBD classroom is flexible but structured. Many of the participants in this research stated that their EBD students needed structure, they needed to have a consistent schedule and be informed as soon as possible of any anticipated changes in order to remain emotionally regulated. However, these same participants discussed the importance of being flexible to the individual needs of the students, and to be flexible and understanding when they are not emotionally regulated in order to allow them to better regulate themselves in order to be able to focus on academics. Research on this topic and Martin and Furr's (2010) model for promoting classroom engagement also speaks on the importance of being supportive and caring, rather than punitive and authoritarian (Achilles, McLaughlin & Croninger, 2007; Sacks & Kern, 2007; Talbott & Fleming, 2003; Owens & Dieker, 2003). The optimal EBD classroom also includes coping strategies and mental health services in the daily curriculum. Both the school social workers interviewed in this study and previous research on the topic expresses the important role that mental health services play in the academic success of EBD students. The participants in this study explained that since mental health is such a huge barrier to school engagement and academic success in these students, it is imperative that they are receiving mental health services in the classroom in order to maintain their focus on academics during the school day.

### **Implications for Social Work**

This research explored school social worker perspectives on how to foster school engagement and academic success in EBD students. The findings of this study can be used on a micro level when working directly with these students. These findings can also be used on a

mezzo or macro level when working systems that affect and impact these students' school engagement and academic outcomes.

School social workers have been named as social change agents for EBD students, due to their extensive education, knowledge and training, and to the amount of time and experience that they have working directly with this student population. School social workers fulfill many daily roles in working with these students ranging from a micro level, working with these students on a one-on-one basis, to a mezzo level, engaging their families, peers and community resources to better prepare these students for social and academic success, to a macro level, advocating for this vulnerable population in the forms of future research and policy. Therefore, these findings can be used to better inform both school social workers and school based staff in better serving these students when working with them directly. These findings can also be used to inform and advocate for this vulnerable student population on a larger level. As less than half of the students currently educationally labeled as EBD are graduating from high school, it is imperative that the public be informed and educated on ways to facilitate and foster academic success with this challenging and vulnerable student population.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

A strength of this study comes from the diverse population of school social workers who provided data for this research. The school social workers interviewed in this research study were a diverse population in terms of age, gender, number of years of experience working with EBD students, and school environment. The participants were almost equally balanced between male and female, with the age of participants ranging between twenty five and fifty five. The amount of experience with this student population ranged from just over one year to over thirty years. The school environments of the participant included urban school districts, suburban

school districts, a residential treatment center that provided schooling, and schools that provided education to solely federal level four EBD students.

A limitation of this study is the limited amount of generalizability of the findings. The findings were provided by a limited number of participants (n=8). With this small number of individuals speaking on this topic area, it cannot be assumed that their opinions are generalizable to a larger population. Similarly, all of the participants were school social workers, making the findings limited to just one profession, and not including other forms of school staff such as teachers or administrative staff. Finally, all of the participants are from the greater Twin Cities area, including only St. Paul, Minneapolis and some suburbs of those cities. Thus, the findings of this study are not necessarily generalizable to a greater population educational programs in the United States.

### **Suggestions for future research**

The intent of this research was to continue to explore the links between the current structure and philosophies of EBD programs, school engagement levels of EBD students, and high school graduation rates of this student demographic. Future research on this topic area is needed to further expand and explore the relationship between these variables in order to better serve this student population. As this study focused solely on the metropolitan areas of St. Paul, Minneapolis and their suburbs, future research could focus on the generalizability of the findings of this and other study's findings to other geographic regions in the United States.

Another area to which the findings of this study can be explored and expanded concerns the reported struggles of urban school districts to meet the increased needs of their students with a smaller number of resources available to them to do so. The participants in this study from



urban school districts expressed the need for additional funding to address the challenging emotional, behavioral and mental health needs of their EBD student population.

### **Conclusion**

With less than half of students educationally labeled as EBD graduating from high school in the United States, there is an imperative need to explore potential causes and solutions to this immense gap in achievement between student demographics. Previous research has indicated the tendency for many EBD students to be taught in a restrictive, punitive classroom environment, and the association between this type of classroom environment to school disengagement, lower attendance rates, lower academic achievement, and higher rates of school drop out. Thus, it is important to educate school staff and the greater community on evidence-based strategies needed to foster both school engagement and academic success in these students. The findings of this study attributed school engagement, positive relationships with school staff, positive social contexts, adequate mental health services, a supportive and nurturing classroom environment, and school staff unity to the social and academic successes of EBD students, ultimately leading to high school graduation. The researcher of this study encourages readers to explore, expand and educate others on the current gaps in levels of school engagement and academic success between EBD students and their peers, and to encourage the use of these initial findings, supported by a larger literature, when directly working with these students and while advocating for the EBD student demographic.

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**Appendix A****CONSENT FORM  
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS****School engagement and academic success of students with an EBD educational label: Perspectives among school social workers**

I am conducting a study on how helping professionals in schools can facilitate school success in the classroom for students with an EBD classification. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because of your professional training and experience as a helping professional in a school working with students with an EBD classification. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Kristin Wecker, a graduate student at the School of Social Work, St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas, and is supervised by Dr. David Roseborough, Ph. D., LICSW.

**Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to explore the perspectives of helping professionals in schools on the topic of how to best facilitate school success for students with an EBD classification, both in terms of leading to high school graduation and providing a sense of school engagement and belonging. This research will also take into account classroom environment, student successes and challenges, and opinions on what a more ideal or effective EBD system might look like.

**Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Complete a 45-60 minute interview about your training and experience working with students with an EBD classification, in terms of their school success.
2. The interview will be audio taped and will be transcribed and coded by the sole researcher.
3. The findings of this project will be published in my clinical research paper and will be disseminated during an oral presentation in May 2015. Your name and organization will not be shared in the paper or presentation.
4. The findings of this project will be published in my clinical research paper. Quotes may be used but will not be linked to you, and your name will not be used.
5. The findings of this project may be used in the future for further academic writing or presentations. Your name and organization will not be shared in any future works.

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

This study has no known risks. This study has no direct benefits.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you in any way. The types of records I will create include audiotapes, transcripts, field notes, and this signed consent form. All records will be kept in a locked file at my home and destroyed within six months after the completion of this research project. I am asking for you to give your individual impressions on this subject matter, not to speak on behalf of the district or school that you are employed by. I will be the only person with access to these confidential records, with the exception of my research chair, Dr. David Roseborough, Ph. D., LICSW, to be shared only in the case of academic consultation.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of St. Thomas, St. Catherine University, or the School of Social Work. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. Should you decide to withdraw data collected about you will not be used. You are also free to skip any questions I may ask, at any time in the interview.

**Contacts and Questions**

My name is Kristin Wecker. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at week2961@stthomas.edu. You may also contact my research chair and instructor, David Roseborough, Ph. D., LICSW at (651) 962-5804. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-5341 with any questions or concerns.

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

**Statement of Consent:**

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

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

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix B**

## Interview Questions

## Personal Demographics:

What gender do you identify with?

What race do you identify with?

Please select an age group: below 25, 25-35, 35-45, over 45

Educational level:

## Professional demographics:

How many years have you worked with EBD students?

What sort of services (if any) do you provide to these students, and how often?

What are the ages of the students you have worked with?

What have the school environments that you have worked in looked like in terms of location (rural, suburban, urban) and types of students served (student demographics)?

1. In your experience, how have you seen high school graduation rates of EBD students compare to their peers? What would you attribute to the academic successes of those who graduate?
2. What challenges do EBD students face as barriers to high school graduation?
3. How are mental health needs of students, generally, and then EBD students, more specifically addressed in schools?
4. How important is school engagement for these students' academic success? How have you seen school engagement be promoted by school faculty (teachers, administration, helping professionals)?

5. How would you describe the classroom environment experience of the EBD students that you work with? What could school faculty (teachers, administrators, helping professionals) do to enhance the classroom environment [for EBD students]?
6. How important are positive social contexts for EBD students ? Which social contexts do you deem most beneficial for EBD students? (school, community, family, peers)
7. How, if at all, do student-teacher relationships affect student success, in terms of academic achievement and school engagement?
8. How does the current EBD system operate in the school that you are currently located, and has it changed since you have been there? (assessment, placement in special education classes).
9. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) states that students with disabilities should be educated in the least restrictive environment. What do you see as the most optimal level of restriction for EBD students? Does it vary? How should this be implemented and regulated in schools?
10. On average, how early are students educationally classified as EBD in their academic career? How do you view the impacts of an early trajectory on these students? Is there an alternative early intervention that you view as being beneficial?
11. Is there anything that I haven't thought of that you would like to add?