Teacher with Learner Model: Educating Youth Labeled with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders

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Abstract

Literature suggests there is as a significant research-to-practice gap in education that contributes to challenges faced by students labeled with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD). In Minnesota, students labeled with EBD have a 58% dropout rate and are in need of a different approach to their education. This theoretical research project explored the research-to-practice gap through extensive data analysis and conceptualizing of current discoveries in neuroscience and the physiological affects of emotional and social interactions. This project allowed for in-depth exploration of three texts, Emotional Intelligence and Social Intelligence, both by Daniel Goleman, Ph.D and Lost at School, by Ross Greene, Ph.D. Using a Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology, this research highlighted key concepts that contribute to challenging classroom behavior and offers a shift of perspective in how we approach special education. The findings of this project resulted in the creation of the Teacher with Learner education model which offers that the best learning occurs via a meaningful relationship and in emotionally secure, attuned, empathic and responsive classrooms.
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I’d like to thank my incredible wife, Katie, for her unconditional support during my MSW program and this research process. She is the very reason I was able to dive into my education with as much enthusiasm and intensity as I did. She managed our life, so that I could sit and think, write, and create, for hours and hours. I want to thank her for her unending patience, her frequently called on listening ear and for reminding me to take care of myself. I am eternally grateful for a wife who inspires me to be better and who encourages me to follow my dreams of influencing positive change in this world.

Secondly, I’d like to thank my chair, Mari Ann Graham, who illustrates the power of the Teacher with Learner model by educating students via a meaningful relationship. Mari Ann challenged me, supported me when my emotional self needed more love than my cognitive self and gave me the freedom to drive my own learning. I have learned invaluable lessons about my personal and professional self through my educational relationship with Mari Ann that I integrate into my being, as well as, my practice. Thank you for showing me what an empowered, relational and inspired classroom can look like.

Lastly, I’d like to thank all of the students I have had the privilege of working with over the years. Each one of you added laughter and insight into my life and fueled my passion for serving you better. I promise to work tirelessly to better understand your needs and to advocate for an education system that allows you to thrive in all the ways you deserve access to.
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Introduction

Minnesota educates 824,333 students a year, 74% of whom are White and 10% of whom are Black (MinnCan Research Report, 2013). Thousands of schools across Minnesota are attempting to educate students who come with a complexity of challenges that are highly individualized. There is no one size fits all for education. The increase in standardized testing has been an attempt to monitor education, by determining a level of expected proficiency on exams, particularly in academic areas of Reading and Math. Although Minnesota student demographics are 74% white and 10% black, black students score an average of 34% lower than their white peers in both Reading and Math. More alarmingly, roughly 10% of black students meet college readiness benchmarks in all subjects compared to approximately 40% of their white counterparts (MinnCan Research Report, 2013). The statistics on student achievement do not improve over time. Additionally, National Report Cards show significant discrepancies between students of color and their white peers with, 20% of black students compared to 60% of white students, registering with proficient scores. One strategy to address educational needs and variances is with special education, where students and administration undergo a multi-step process to determine interventions for individual students. Less than 20 years ago, legislation began to offer another category of special education meant to protect a broad range of student need. In 1997, Emotional Behavioral Disorder was included in an amendment to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), with the intent to provide schools more jurisdiction to support students falling into a grayer area of special education (National Association of Special Education Teachers, 2007).
Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD) are complicated to define because, ultimately, it is a purely subjective, non-medical label imposed to provide more student supports and more frequently, to contain the disruptive behavior. Criteria for EBD cover three categories of behaviors (Minnesota Administrative Rules, 2007):

1. Withdrawn or anxious behaviors (e.g. depression, severe mood problems, isolation from peers, school refusal, lacking emotional expression, excessive worry or stress).

2. Disordered thought processes manifested by unusual behavior patterns, atypical communication styles and distorted interpersonal relationships (e.g. inappropriate laughter, crying, sounds or language)

3. Aggressive, hyperactive or impulsive behaviors that are developmentally inappropriate (e.g. physically or verbally abusive behaviors; impulsive or violent, destructive, or intimidating behaviors).

The EBD label has grown into the fourth largest disability category considered under IDEA. Decisions on who is labeled with EBD go through a process of data collection and case consultation between teachers and special education review groups, as well as, hopefully, connecting with parents to see that behaviors occur across settings. However, heavy weight is placed on the perceptions of the teachers who are struggling with said students; these decisions hinge on students’ ability to conform and behave based on personal preferences of classroom etiquette. These expectations change from teacher to teacher, school to school and, at times, day to day. Powerful and lasting educational services are reliant on one of our most subjective qualities-human perception.
Neuroscience and behavioral research continues to highlight the inaccuracies and possible misinterpretations in human perception, particularly when teachers are in states of elevated stress or experiencing deep emotion. Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence* (1995) argues that people suffer from “emotional hijackings” (p.26) that create action instead of pause. These actions are based on raw emotional responses fired from the amygdala (located just above the most primitive part of the brain near the brainstem) before the prefrontal cortex (the thinking part of the brain) can evaluate the information. These hijackings are easy to spot in the dis-regulated student who is displaying disruptive behavior but rarely considered are hijackings by the teachers in response to the aggressive student behaviors. Might sound a little like which came first, the chicken or the egg, but considering the outcomes for students put on the EBD track, it seems worthy of some contemplation.

Students labeled with EBD experience many disadvantages when it comes to their education compared to their peers resulting in dire consequences for learning. These challenges include a 1.4 average GPA, a 58% dropout rate and youth that are three times as likely to be arrested before leaving school (Benner, Kutash, Nelson & Fisher, 2013). The most alarming local statistic is that, in Minnesota, 90% of students labeled with EBD are African American. Considering that only 10% of students educated in Minnesota are African American, the fact that 4% of a student demographic makes up 90% of the population of students labeled with EBD in the state, raises some questions. Especially when these statistics are three times higher than the national average, making Minnesota the number one state for such disproportionate discrepancies (Meitrodt, 2013). Minnesotan African American youth labeled with EBD are mostly males, confined in self-contained classrooms for at least 60% of their school day, and
categorized as “intervention in progress.” EBD labels and services produce poorer outcomes twice more than any other disability category (Meitrodt, 2013). When pairing this demographic of students labeled with EBD with the overrepresentation of white female teachers, it is only fair to explore the possibility that cultural differences, deeply rooted intentional/unintentional racism and emotionally charged judgements may set up a volatile dynamic.

Current education initiatives focus on strengthening academic deficits to raise scores on high-stakes testing to accrue more funding. However, there is a noticeable absence of initiatives that are designed to strengthen deficits in emotional and social literacy, ultimately, these are equally as important. Dr. Ross W. Greene, Ph.D., posits that students exhibiting challenging behaviors are lacking skills in emotional, social and behavioral development, similar to those students who struggle with reading or math. However, schools have long adopted the discipline philosophy that students would behave if they wanted to; rather than the paradoxically different, students would do better if they could (Greene, 2008). How educators approach students labeled with EBD, has as much to do with the outcome of our interactions with these students as the challenges they bring. Goleman’s (1995) theory of emotional hijacking suggests that regardless of professional status and relational power dynamics, humans are subject to react and act based on perceptions of threat that could unknowingly influence decisions based on potential misappraisals of a situation. However, after labeling students with EBD, emphasis is then placed on observing students’ inability to conform without considering the potential bias of the person creating and implementing the subjective structure students are compared to. In many areas of life we accept the view that relationships are a two-way street but frequently schools pay little attention to addressing the dynamic of the relationship with all parties.
Further challenges facing educating students labeled with EBD stem from how to translate research into inter-disciplinary practice. Research has much to say in regards to what constitutes best-practice interventions, makes attempts to explain the massive research-to-practice gap, and agrees that the United States Education System needs to address the growing number of students in special education who are failing out of its public schools. As of 2008, yearly discipline records of U.S. public elementary and secondary schools showed the fate of 110,000 expelled students, 3 million suspensions and multiple tens of millions of detention slips given to students who just wouldn’t behave (Greene, 2008). In any other area of special education, learning disabilities are met with compassion, patience and an understanding that it is the school’s responsibility to fill in the cognitive disconnects; preparing students for success in meeting the demands of school. However, when it comes to how we educate and view students labeled with EBD, the framework often lacks the same attention to skill enhancement and is replaced by trying to motivate students to comply instead of teaching them how to do well.

Therefore, the purpose of this research is to explore how a social work lens can enhance the ways we attend to students labeled with EBD. Generalist social work perspectives focus on individuals and their environments which influence their daily experiences. Clinical social work emphasizes the importance of the therapeutic relationship as a vehicle of change, learning and development. Goals of therapeutic work often involve empowering clients to discover their own inner resources and to harness and enhance their own abilities and agency. Therapy is rooted in collaboration and empathy with great respect for client potential; social workers facilitate a client-driven process. This project will examine parallels between teaching and the therapeutic
relationship in hopes of finding some insights on how educators can more effectively serve students labeled with EBD.
Literature Review

The following literature review will examine the research that is targeted in scope but inclusive of several themes. While the reference list is far from exhaustive, this review focuses on what constitutes “best-practice,” perceived barriers to research-to-practice integration, and empirically supported educational models showing significant improvement in the development of emotional and social literacy. This exploration of current literature hopes to illuminate how Minnesota might begin bridging the gaps and improve educational success for students labeled with EBD. The hope is that this review will offer some insight on alternative approaches and areas to emphasize to improve student academic, social and emotional success.

This chapter will first explore the role of semantics in policy and how nuances impact practice. Next, the potential disadvantages of labeling, what constitutes “best practice” and challenges with effective implementation will be discussed. Using a professional clinical social work lens this review of the literature will report the research on relationship building and attempt to substantiate the need for a different educational approach.

Policy Semantics Impact Practice

In order to understand this extensive issue, the following sections attempt to funnel elements from macro, mezzo and micro levels of affectedness; beginning with the nuances of policy and following the path that leads to challenges in learning environments.

Minnesota policy uses the term disorder instead of disabilities or difficulties. Each of these words carry different connotations and inform different educational approaches. The term disorder implies permanency in the perceptions of non-clinical professionals. Policy and research suggest early identification (labeling) and interventions are key, but do not explain the
concerns or potential disadvantages with receiving a *disordered* label in pre-school. According to a study that examined teachers’ perceptions of emotional and behavioral disturbances in nursery school aged children, teachers reported perceiving that 56% of students fell into this dysregulated category (Poulou, 2015). A significant number of children in preschool potentially have poor self-regulation skills, and at no point do any students receive intentional and intensive interventions addressing social and emotional deficits in order to increase ability. There is no consistent and intentional attempt to level the emotional playing field *before* deciding that more than half are labeled while others are not.

Current policy does not address the need for inclusion of social and emotional skills into the curriculum, it offers criteria for identifying and providing a recommended standard of treatment. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) specifies that schools use a Behavioral Intervention Plan (BIP) to address challenging behaviors, but does not provide specifics as to what should be included in such a plan. This can lead to confusion, inconsistencies and even controversy among educators (Maag & Katsiyannis, 2006). Additionally, IDEA intervention requirements are that teachers *should* be clear about learning objectives, be engaging/lively and prompt for answers to academic questions (O. J., 2012). Not all children begin school with the skills they need to be successful. Yet, children receive no specific social and emotional education to learn how to successfully meet expectations. These students are often then targeted for not fitting into the classroom norm, labeled and removed from class, sometimes permanently. Minneapolis Public Schools district reports that 29.1% of students in Special Education Federal Instructional Settings, ages 3-5 are educated in a separate class, school or residential facility (Minnesota Department of Education, 2013). Students who display significant
problem behaviors in pre-school, have a 50% chance of experiencing future difficulties that continue to develop (Hester, Baltodano, Hendrickson, Tonelson, Conroy & Gale, 2004). Research confirms that early intervention is key for the benefit of student success, however, Minnesota, like most states, does not typically remove these labels once they are attached to a student’s record. There is little room for growth and development and students are seen as having a disorder they will always carry, necessitating intensive services (seclusion), potentially, for their entire school career.

**Labeling: theory and reality.** Minnesota Administrative Rules (2007) defines criteria for labeling a student with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders based on a pattern of one or more of a series of emotional and behavioral responses (e.g. A. Withdrawal or anxiety; B. Disordered thought processes coupled with unusual behavior; C. Aggression, hyperactivity or impulsivity). Furthermore, students are observed, data is collected on test scores and cumulative student files, and interviews are supposed to be done with teachers. This process takes time and students are likely to exhibit behavior that is deemed disruptive to the regular classroom; impeding teachers’ ability to manage the classroom while educating. Students are labeled with EBD, removed from the mainstream and contained in secluded classrooms claiming more supports for one student and quieter learning environments for the others. Labeling, in theory, is an opportunity to receive more targeted and individualized education. The concept of federal level three classrooms, which classifies that students spend at least 60% of their school day in secluded rooms, intends to provide more support and more intensive services for students. However, there are several layers complicating program integrity, resulting in missing the mark on how the education system truly serves these children.
Federal initiatives addressing special education needs of students all have requirements rooted in “best practices” and a tiered approach to effective primary preventions. In order to benefit from tier I and tier II interventions, a student needs access to mainstream classroom teachers and staff. The tiers are defined as, Tier I: Core Instructional Interventions, Tier II: Group Interventions; Tier III: Intensive interventions. Students labeled with EBD and who are placed in Federal level 3 settings are educated in seclusion for at least 60% of their day (Benner et al., 2013). According to researchers Lewis, Hudson, Richter & Johnson (2004), the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act reauthorized in 2001 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004 IDEA; e.g., accommodations during testing) do not provide clear expectations of how these two acts would interact. Implications for policy and practice under NCLB emphasize resources focused on proven educational approaches, high quality teachers, scientific research and results. Within the field, the grey area lies in what is actual best practice and how much research is needed to support it; causing confusion and inconsistencies. Outside the field, decisions of funding and endorsements are made with disregard to the grey areas of implementation and are solely based on perceived best practices. Lewis et al., (2004) reports that “research on special education needs enhanced rigor...[and] the current system does not always embrace or implement evidence-based practices once established.” Having laws about expectations regarding special education are limited if we are then not monitoring the effectiveness of the implementation of federal initiatives.
Policy, Research and the Practice Gap

Assessing need is different than knowing how to address needs or being able to address them effectively. Often, students labeled with EBD are facing mental health and environmental challenges, which are not necessarily considered or incorporated in how we educate students labeled with EBD. The following sections of this lit review will explore the various challenges that educators face after the identification process. Attention is paid to the challenges of putting policy into practice. Discussion will include issues around program fidelity, complex issues that are involved with students labeled with EBD and challenges involved with following “best practices.”

Program fidelity. An additional complication is that educators are often unaware of individual circumstances or ill-equipped to educate students with complex issues. Students labeled with EBD can be students with extreme amounts of external/environmental stress, i.e. experience extreme poverty, family/community violence, family substance use/abuse issues and extensive trauma. Students can also be youth who are struggling with a mental health diagnosis like Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder or Conduct Disorder. Researcher Poulou (2015), asserts that Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) is the most commonly reported disorder for preschool children accounting for 16.8% of the 20% of children struggling with emotional and behavioral disorders (Poulou, 2015). Whether a child is struggling with emotional and behavioral regulation due to environmental factors or mental health issues, approaches should be sensitive to working with kids with such high levels of need. Placing all these students in one single classroom or separate building, success hinges on educators perceptions children has the ability to learn new and different behavior. Teachers do not use the same methods to teach reading to a
student who didn’t learn the proper phonics and syntax before coming to school the same as students who have dyslexia. So why is it that self-contained classrooms often attempt to educate a student with intensive trauma history and a student with ODD in the same way? More importantly, are the approaches emerging from a lens of teaching children social and emotional skills so they can do better or from a lens of motivating children to behave? Greene (2008) would argue that there is an important difference in these two child philosophies and both impact the perception of what educators believe students have the ability to learn.

Seasoned teachers have developed their bag of classroom management tools and discovered all kinds of learners along the way. However, when staffing EBD classrooms, seasoned is not what students get. Researchers McCurdy, Ewing and Polis (2009) found that teachers who educate students labeled with EBD are frequently less experienced, have fewer credentials and are less skilled in general instruction compared to other educators in special education. Teachers are often swiftly assigned to a new classroom, given a room full of students who are incredibly dysregulated with no specific plan, support or training. Teachers are doing the best they can under the circumstances but this dynamic lends itself more to control and management than to educating. Better training is necessary for teachers to feel equipped to not only manage problem behaviors, but to help navigate the messiness with skill, so that students can have the proper support and guidance to genuinely learn how to pursue functional behavior that leads to success not punishment.

**Trauma and EBD.** Teacher training is perhaps the easiest to address moving forward and largely accounts for the discrepancies and fidelity of programming. Students labeled with EBD often experience Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) seeing that 55% of Minnesotan adults
report having at least one adverse experience during childhood (Minnesota Department of Health, 2013). These experiences cause actual brain chemistry to change and physiological reactions that are in a constant state of arousal; e.g. average resting heart rate equals 70 beats per minute compared to an average resting heart rate for a traumatized youth is between 130-135 beats per minute (Minnesota Department of Health, 2013). And yet, teachers are not given this information nor do they receive in-depth training on how to de-escalate and navigate the complex triggers that accompany traumatized youth. This is a disservice to students and educators alike. Schools operate on a continuous spinning wheel. Each year is different and hopefully improved but once the year starts there’s no way to slow down. Students keep coming, programs keep running and often the priorities are the things that have to get done which often does not include checking to see if interventions are working.

**Challenges in implementing and sustaining effective practices.** Policy requires use of best practices, however, there are no requirements as to what constitutes best practice. Popular and professionally recommended practices are often based on little to no research but are passed on as best practices (Fitzpatrick & Knowlton, 2009). This allows for districts and schools to self-define best practice often suiting the financial or broader building needs instead of focusing on the students. Fitzpatrick & Knowlton (2009) also reported that teachers are often confused about which practices are supported empirically and which are not. Explicit instruction is needed for the success of student achievement yet explicit instruction as to how to instruct students isn’t provided. Feeling overwhelmed by the confusing process led to a “lack of fidelity when implementing the strategy or abandonment of the practice altogether” (Fitzpatrick & Knowlton, 2009).
Another challenge due to the extensive and individualized behavioral needs of students labeled with EBD, behavior becomes the primary focus, thereby eclipsing their academic needs:

*One of the largest impediments to improving academic instruction provided to youth is the fact that adults tend to focus more attention on interventions and techniques designed to ameliorate youth behavior in an effort to create an environment that is conducive to instruction* (Benner et al., 2013, p.18).

Frey & Nichols (2003) discuss some challenges in teaching social skills when students labeled with EBD are non-responsive to traditional social skills training. They argue that simply delivering social skills training is ineffective if not associated with a specific, evaluated behavior plan or considerate of the function of the challenging behavior. They also maintain that students need opportunities to practice skills before they are judged (and disciplined) based on acquisition (Frey & Nichols, 2003).

Benner et al. (2013) reports that in observing students with EBD in self-contained classrooms, that teachers provide little or no instruction. According to them, supports that are imposed in an attempt to better educate students labeled with EBD are failing to educate students academically at all. When assessing regular education classrooms, their research shows that 58% of time devoted to instruction is lost due to focusing on managing disruptive behavior and only one hour (or 17%) of a six hour school day is spent with youth successfully engaged in academic learning. If out of six hours of attempted academic instruction is met with only one hour of engagement, how do students with EBD in federal level three settings fair since they found teachers spent less than two out of six hours on academic instruction (Benner et al., 2013)? Considering that students who enter federal level three settings rarely climb back down the ladder of intensive support, the trajectory of students labeled with EBD looks bleak in regards to an academic education.
Effectiveness of social skills training. As mentioned above, very little time is spent teaching academics in federal level three classrooms (Benner et al., 2013). One could argue that teaching social skills might benefit the students in order to help them regulate themselves, leaving more time for academic learning. However, when reviewing studies focused on social skills training specified for students labeled with EBD, researchers found a common thread among a variety of different approaches. Regardless of how sound the model, keeping the integrity of implementation was a challenge for each, as was teaching the skills to be generalizable (Maag, 2006). Part of the problem could be attributed to the fact that, typically, key social skills training happens organically and through interactions and modeling of a connected adult to the children who are learning. So much of social skills training occurs spontaneously while being social. When these lessons are moved inside a classroom and are modeled in a prescribed way by a detached adult, students are less likely to integrate the learning (Maag, 2006).

Empirically Supported Best Practices

Benner et al. (2013) highlights the need for “embedded instructional management procedures and motivators to help youth regulate their attention and behavior as well as actively engage during instruction” (p.18-19) They suggest that youth engagement negatively correlates with inappropriate behaviors and PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports) used to identify and meet student needs in schools, is key to creating effective learning environments benefiting all students. According to Jeffrey et al. (2009), there are three main elements to consider for successful uses of PBIS: (1) use evidence-based practices, (2) train teachers to increase fidelity of implementation and (3) develop a performance feedback component to
evaluate program effectiveness and to continue training support for staff. Due to time constraints imposed on schools, training is highly varied and typically happens only once, in the beginning of the year. They suggest that treatment integrity increases after a few rounds of professional performance feedback and is fairly stagnant and ineffective after one initial training without the follow up.

Benner et al. (2013) posit that clear expectations and consequences are also necessary for classrooms educating students labeled with EBD. It isn’t enough to simply define the expectations but this must be paired with explicit and direct teaching of behavioral expectations, as well, for example, “SLANT: Sit up, Listen, Ask and Answer Questions, Nod your head, Track the speaker” (Benner et. al., 2013, p. 19). Once behavioral expectations have been established then the instructor should explain step by step how the students will be held accountable for those expectations. The ultimate goal with this approach is to eliminate coercive interactions between students and staff. Tiered behavioral interventions, that become routine, will allow teachers to maintain focus on student learning; resulting in higher rates of engaged students exhibiting fewer problem behaviors (Benner et a., 2013).

**Explicit instruction and self-management.** Explicit instruction is direct and lacks ambiguity. The emphasis is “on providing students a clear statement about what is to be learned, proceeding in small steps with concrete and varied examples, checking for student understanding, and achieving and successful participation of students” (Benner et al., 2013, p. 16). Fitzpatrick & Knowlton (2009) agrees with the importance of explicit instruction especially when it comes so teaching positive and expected “target” behaviors. Students labeled with EBD are typically on high alert and in anticipation of surprises. If teachers can take away the element
of surprise by being explicit and direct with their instruction, students can settle and engage with the issues at hand instead of focusing on anticipating unknowns (Fitzpatrick & Knowlton, 2009).

**Benefits of using creative arts to facilitate emotional health.** Scott and Ross (2006) discuss the use of creative arts in therapy with clients who experienced trauma or struggle with addiction. They argue that creative arts and therapy are inherently linked to the therapeutic process through their shared goal of awakening an individual’s internal creative energy. Art creates space for emotional exploration in a safe form of internally driven expression (Scott & Ross, 2006). Research examining Position Emission Tomography (PET) scans shows that trauma doesn’t discriminate and affects both sides (hemispheres) of the brain. Broca’s area is the region of the brain located in the left inferior frontal cortex and is responsible for our ability to articulate internal experiences. The PET scans of clients with PTSD showed physiological responses to trauma related triggers that inhibit the ability to articulate their associated feelings, frequently leaving expressions of emotion presenting as bodily dysfunction. (Scott & Ross, 2006).

According to Scott & Ross (2006), students with extensive trauma histories carry the weight of an experience that language cannot fully express as such pain is often layered with shame. They go on to explain that the lack of training teachers can lead to a limited image of how trauma is expressed, e.g. as solely withdrawal or frequent crying, and is a prominent reference for assessing student need for support rather than discipline. However, they maintain dysfunction of the body can look just as easily as the student who can’t sit still or who is provocative or impulsive. This tendency to express emotional states physically lends itself to arts incorporating physical movement or driven by images instead of words and can be a useful tool for working with clients lacking words to describe their experiences (Scott & Ross, 2006). While
teachers of students labeled with EBD will not be expected or encouraged to dive into the details of trauma histories, understanding creative arts as a vehicle for self discovery and growth, can enhance instruction and reflection on the professional self.

**Paradigm Shift Needed For Student Success**

Anne Garity, Ph.D, LICSW created a training manual for clinicians working with young children who have complex trauma histories for the Washburn Center for Children. Garity’s work entitled, “Developmental Repair,” expresses the need for a paradigm shift in working with extremely at-risk children. While her approach is targeted for children ages three to third grade, Ross W. Greene, (2008) extends the need for shifting our philosophy of the child through high school. Both Garity and Greene agree that in order to serve students with trauma and challenging behaviors educators and clinicians need to believe that children will do better if they have the tools to do so (Garity, 2009; Greene 2008). According to Garity, children “need repair of core developmental capacities that permit more positive adaptation” (p.7) and interventions must be rooted in relational approaches since “developmental learning always relies on interpersonal experiences with caregiving adults” (Garity, 2009, p.7).

**Teacher/student relationships are paramount.** Klem and Connell (2004) posit that in order for students to successfully rise to meet high expectations, they need to be supported by those he/she interacts with in the school environment. This concept extends beyond the walls of the classroom, however, teachers play a key role in building a safe environment for learning. Their research shows that “students with caring and supportive interpersonal relationships in school report more positive academic attitudes and values, and more satisfaction with school” (p. 262). Yet, according to the MN Student Survey distributed by the MN Department of Health,
students of all races feel liked either “very much” or “quite a bit” by only 40 percent of teachers and adults in their school (Department of Health, 2011). Furthermore, reports show that as students progress through their educational career, disengagement rises to an alarming 40-60 percent by the time they reach high school; with percentages not including students who have already dropped out (Klem & Connell, 2004). These statistics indicate that while we know positive teacher/student relationships are necessary for meeting the demands of education, these relationships are not developing.

**A whole school approach.** According to researchers Frey & Nichols (2003), successful implementations of best practices hinge in an inter-disciplinary team approach involving educators, mental health professionals, administration and parents of students labeled with EBD. Frey & Nichols (2003) go on to say that effective school social work is rooted in system change through collaboration, advocating, consulting, developing holistic strategies to address problem behaviors and sharing expertise on person-in-environment perspectives. School Social Workers can facilitate the teaching of social skills but are not the primary educator in the classroom nor are they always involved in federal level three settings. There are several challenges that inhibit utilizing School Social Workers (SSW) in addressing the needs of students labeled with EBD. Most frequently there is only one SSW assigned to a school and often that one person serves the district, as well. This one position attends to the entire school population, is in charge of outreach, resource networking and simultaneously supporting student problems that occur nonstop in a school setting. Fortunately for SSW’s, this issue is not a one woman show, in order to see progress, all the players have to be on board.
Collaborative problem solving. Greene recommends a Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) approach to addressing challenging behaviors and research supports his claim. CPS is a model that views student behavior as ultimately influenced by acquired skills or deficits in learning areas of flexibility/adaptability. When teachers can shift their perspective from ‘this student is acting out because they are lazy or disrespectful’ to ‘she/he needs my help in learning and strengthening key emotional/social skills; the relationship can blossom. When teachers hold a belief that if a student has made it this far they should know what is expected, schools set thousands of students up for failure from the moment the first bell rings. A study that implemented CPS in a school setting suggests that CPS can reduce teacher stress thus improving their ability to interact positively with students (Schaubman, Stetson & Plog, 2011). Connell offers the First Things First school-reform framework which outlines three goals to strive for: “1) improve relationships between students and adults; 2) improve teaching and learning; and 3) reallocate resources to achieve goals one and two” (Klem & Connell, 2004).

Summary and Research Purpose

As indicated by this review of literature, attention has been paid to defining best practices and recognizing discrepancies in implementing programs and services for children labeled with EBD. While research recommends strategies for engaging students in their education, it disregards the very necessity to have relationships with students that allow for direct and explicit instruction. Policy language emphasizes structure and positive approaches, but in reality models are only as good as its implementor. The topic of training professionals on issues involved with EBD is disturbingly quiet. Research provides the “how” and states that high-quality educators are important without laying out what makes someone highly qualified. Leaving the keystone to
student success grossly open to interpretation is largely responsible for the disheartening achievement gap of students labeled with EBD. We understand how to sound good and take good verbiage as indicative of quality work. However, the 58% dropout rate for students labeled with EBD tells a different story. The social work profession emphasizes the invaluable importance of building relationships with clients to support change and improve client outcomes. A consistent fear in schools is about crossing the lines of professional boundaries, and knowledge about how to navigate new roles and responsibilities in relation to student mental health is limited. Most often the responsibility of supporting social and emotional health is appointed to the SSW, who’s counselor-to-student ratio typically far exceeds what is reasonable. Schools are machines that keep running even when parts are missing or malfunctioning, with little time to investigate or address the issues.

This research proposes to address these challenges by synthesizing relevant data using a Constructivist Grounded Theory method for creating a framework to help schools and educators better meet the needs of students labeled with EBD.
Method

This chapter outlines the method used for this theoretical research project. It begins by presenting the rationale for using theoretical research, followed by an overview of theoretical research. Also included are sampling procedures, data analysis procedures and strengths and limitations of this research method.

Rationale for Theoretical Research Method

The rationale for this research project results from a combination of the researcher’s professional experience educating students in special education and the importance of addressing a current educational approach that is not currently serving this student population well. Current teaching practices are based on a very traditional model of teaching, presenting teachers as *delivers* of information and skills, and students as *recipients*, vessels who absorb content. This model is rooted in the ideas that students should exercise control over their behavior so they can be compliant with expectations of the teacher/authority figures. According to Gregory and Ripski (2008), however, there has been a great shift over the past 25 years in how students view and accept notions of authority and automatic compliance. Students may intentionally resist compliance, and their relationships with authority figures play a large role in determining student behavior:

*Schools attempt to convince students, though not always successfully, that the rules and controls to which they are subjected and the often tedious or onerous assignments that they are given represent the legitimate exercise of their authority rather than the arbitrary use of power* (Gregory & Ripski, 2008, p. 338).

The literature suggests that one of the largest deficits in schools’ ability to effectively educate students labeled with EBD, is the gap between research and practice. Educators receive limited training on the challenges that accompany students labeled with EBD and spend most of
their time simply trying to make it through the day. Time appears to be the biggest enemy currently; there never seems to be enough of it. This is the reason I decided to explore alternatives to current practices from a place of curiosity and openness in order to discover threads of a larger theoretical picture.

Since the literature review suggests a need to bridge the research-to-practice gap and there is little literature outlining how to embark on such a process, I decided to use a conceptual research method to create a new model that bridges the gap by integrating existing theories. This methodology uses data from existing sources to create a new practice model. This method used theoretical “data” from professionals in the field of psychology, social work and education to create a new model for addressing the needs of students labeled with EBD in classroom settings. Schools serving students labeled with EBD that also have a School Social Worker (SSW), frequently rely on the SSW to be a primary source of support in the classroom. This model clarifies how the learning experience for both teachers and students can be enhanced by applying the social work concept of the therapeutic alliance to teaching-learning relationships.

Overview of Theoretical Research

“A theory states relationships between abstract concepts and may aim for either explanation or understanding” (Charmaz, 2014, p.228). Theoretical research methodology is used to help develop basic theories that can then be tested using further research, observations, and other data. Theories do not have to be entirely new ideas; they can be the synthesis of existing information that helps support and build on existing ideas (Sephton, 2015). Theoretical research is the framework for creating hypotheses about social interactions that are rooted in accepted scientific truths and established facts/opinions. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) describe a
critical research concept, *bricolage* (from the French word *bricoleur*, a “handy” individual who utilizes available tools to accomplish a task). This orientation to research enables the researcher to explore complex topics in order to create practical responses to data. While there are various types of theoretical research, Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology was chosen for this specific project.

**Constructivist grounded theory research methodology.** This research methodology explores the *whats* and *hows* of social interaction but also attempts to answer the *whys* (Charmaz, 2014, p. 228). Foundational assumptions of this method include the following: “assumes multiple realities, mutual construction of data through interaction, researcher constructs categories, views representation of data as problematic, relativist, situational, and partial and that the observers values, priorities, positions, and actions affect views” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 236). Additionally, Charmaz (2014) identifies a number of objectives for this kind of research. First, the researcher, “views generalizations as partial, conditional, and situated in time, space, positions, action and interactions. The researcher also tries to gain an “interpretive understanding of historically situated data. According to Charmaz, the theoretical researcher seeks to “create theory that has credibility, originality, resonance and usefulness” (p. 236). Data analysis requires that he/she “acknowledges subjectivities throughout the data analysis, views co-constructed data as beginning the analytic direction, and engages in reflexivity throughout the research process” (p. 236).

The logic behind this method focuses on “learning how, when, and to what extent the studied experience is embedded in larger and, often, hidden structures, networks, situations, and relationships” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 240). This method explores the “differences and distinctions
between people and maintained hierarchies of power and communication” (p. 240). This method of research calls for a “reflexive” approach to the research process and findings with the researcher assuming “that both data and the analysis process are social constructions that reflect the conditions of their production” (p. 240). This theoretical method takes into account that researchers’ personal values are inherently coded into what they see and do not see, which requires them to be in continuous reflection of their own biases and values as they influence the research process. This particular project attempts to explore the relationship between variables (e.g. students and teachers) and to construct a better conceptual understanding of the social phenomena that challenge special education classrooms.

**Sampling Procedures**

The researcher used the following published works as primary sources of data for analysis:


This sample is purposive. I purchased Goleman’s *Emotional Intelligence* and *Social Intelligence* 10 years ago while searching for supportive references for my own work in education. Now, a decade later, these books seemed to be exactly what I needed to explore the initial ideas I had about challenging classroom behavior. Additionally, *Emotional Intelligence* was referenced in a psychoanalytic text for clinical methods during this MSW program, which solidified for me that these texts were the data I had been looking for. *Lost in School* came to my attention when staff members were asked by the principal to read this book to enhance their own practices. It was
important to have publications that focused specifically on emotional and social aspects of learning, as these were areas I observed in my career as needing more attention.

The literature review discusses a research-to-practice gap and offers that this gap is partially due to the disconnect between what constitutes “best practice” and the ability to deliver content through this lens. However, these publications were used to explore an additional element that moves beyond how educators deliver information to how they facilitate a learning process. Examining social and emotional phenomena affects on learning offers insight on teacher-student relationship dynamics and how breakdowns in these relationships contribute to this gap.

**Preparing and Analyzing Data**

I used a multi-step process to select data from each text for more detailed analyzing. Each book was first coded using the following procedures: (1) key portions from text were highlighted while reading, (2) all highlighted sections were transcribed using verbatim, and finally (3) transcriptions for each text were created and edited for accuracy. This resulted in creation of three separate documents, approximately 107 pages in total (reduced from 892 pages of original texts), containing the official data for analysis. This process took roughly 120 hours to complete.

The first step of data analysis involved reading each of the three transcripts carefully and individually, without marking or coding. The purpose of this step was to get a sense of each transcript as a whole and maintain the integrity of the concepts specific to each text. Next, I noted elements in each text that spoke to the following: the current education structure in the United States; developmental stages, biological influences and environmental factors affecting
learning; and empirically-based research of the interplay of emotional, social and academic variables.

The next step in this process was to carefully review all three transcripts as a whole unit in one sitting. The goal here was to “enter” the data into the researcher as the “instrument” in order to experience this data as a whole in order to gain insight on how concepts in data overlap, reinforce, challenge and/or elaborate each other. After reading the transcripts as a whole I then reviewed each of the three transcriptions (totaling 107 pages) again, in order to further narrow the focus. Quotes from each text were color coded in order to keep track of which text the quotes originated from when analyzing for themes. As I reviewed each document electronically, I copy and pasted quotes that contained data on emotional and social aspects of learning, as well as, quotes that specifically referenced the neurobiological effects of these dimensions of cognition. This process resulted in a single document totaling 53 pages which took the researcher approximately 25 additional hours to complete. From here, I reviewed this single document (compilation of data) that was then further analyzed to develop four main themes that were used to create the Teacher with Learner model presented in the Findings Chapter.

**Strengths and Limitations**

A strength of this theoretical research methodology is that it is *discovery* oriented. This kind of research is needed along with research that is verification oriented. In fact, too much verification without discovery leads to stagnations or apathy. In this case, the literature suggested a need for something new and closing the gap between research and practice, rather than creating more data about what we already know. This methodology allowed for creative ways of looking at an existing problem. Conventional methodologies focus on procedures or outcomes using
current structures. But this theoretical approach allowed the researcher to step back from existing structures and create something new. The new model created by this research process can then become the focus of more verification-oriented research.

The strength of using Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology, in particular, is that it is rooted in the exploration of social interactions and considers underlying factors that exist in power differentiated relationships, e.g. teacher-student relationships. This methodology allows for the integration of the researcher into the data analysis process allowing for discoveries that aim for usefulness.

By definition this kind of research is not generalizable. Different researchers may very well come up with different results using the same data. Subjectivity is considered a limitation in most forms of qualitative research and this is why specifying the researcher’s lenses and particular skills as an “instrument” of data collection and analysis is critical (see Lenses Chapter). This research is a starting point only, and depends on further research to implement and assess this model’s utility.
Lenses

Choosing a method provides structure and improves impartiality and fidelity of the research. Parallel to method is a process that identifies the partiality that the researcher brings to the analysis of data, as well. This chapter identifies the theoretical, professional and personal lenses that influence the focused and design of this study.

Theoretical Lenses

Reflection on which theories inspired the direction of this research, as well as, which align with my view on learning, behavior and education, identified several theoretical lenses that shape my paradigm. The development and design of this theoretical research was based on the Strengths Perspective, Psychosocial Development theory, Systems theory and Critical Race Theory. My social development lens stems from a social constructionist perspective, meaning that individuals learn about the world and their place in it, through social interaction, e.g. I think I am, in part, who I think you think I am (Hutchison, 2011). My psychological development lens is rooted in cognitive theory, which asserts that human action is based on thinking and that thinking is different for all people, at all times, e.g. “I think, therefore, I am”- Descartes (Hutchison, 2011). The strengths perspective offers that all communities, families and individuals have strengths and resources to drawn on, viewing experiences as challenges and opportunities (Hutchison, 2011). Additionally, systems theory acknowledges that individuals are intricately connected to the various environments, groups and organizations that impact, influence, impede and encourage the lives of those enmeshed in each system (Hutchison, 2011). Lastly, Critical Race Theory (CRT) which is based on the following assumptions: race is a social
construction, race permeates all aspects of social life, and race-based ideology is threaded throughout society (Ortiz & Jani, 2010, p. 176) influenced this research. CRT adds a critical element to this research considering the racial discrepancies involved with the labeling of EBD. CRT highlights the inevitability of racial influence on the classroom dynamic between white teachers and black students and is a part of how the data was analyzed.

The interplay of these theories influenced how I analyzed the data, attempted to better understand how children learn and how they are affected by their school and home environments; two places where children spend the most time. This theoretical model offers a shift in perspective that focuses on discovering students’ inner strengths, viewing behavior as serving particular functions that can highlight deficits in need of more teaching opportunities, and the effects of trauma on physiology impacting behavior and academics. Students bring their whole life circumstances into the classroom and are rapidly developing, discovering, observing and learning, simultaneously. For some, this juggle is manageable and for others, finding solid footing is a daily struggle.

**Professional Lenses**

I have worked as a paraprofessional, teacher and student advocate in public and therapeutic schools for over 10 years. As a professional, I have interviewed, hired and trained staff working with students with special needs, as well as, collaboratively created curriculum for students who struggle academically and were at-risk of dropping out of school. I have worked with the Massachusetts Department of Education creating and implementing dropout prevention programs. I have collaborated with teachers, school and district administration and state level educators to create intervention plans and tracking databases that identify students in need of
extra support. These various vocational experiences in education systems illuminated the need for further understanding about the unique needs of students and how building solid relationships with students can open opportunities for teaching that would otherwise be absent.

Pairing my knowledge and understanding of education with my newfound and growing grasp of my professional clinical social worker lens, drives me to be curious about how to incorporate clinical frameworks into translatable versions to enhance teaching. Social Work emphasizes the importance of building relationships and a strong therapeutic alliance with clients. Only when this critical element is present, can real change and improvement of an individual’s quality of life occur. When teaching students, who come to class with all the rawness that clients bring into therapy, one might consider that building a stronger and more intentional relationship with students might enhance learning, as well.

**Personal Lenses**

As a clinician, it is important to reflect and consider how one’s personal biases affect and/or influence one’s practice. It then seems equally as important to acknowledge the personal lenses I bring to this research project, in hopes of addressing any need for additional techniques that will increase reliability. Developmental theories and Social Constructivism theory influence how I view learning, as well as how I approach teaching children and adolescents. I believe that learning is not a linear process and that students should be active participants in their education. Growth and development are fostered by space to inquire and explore their environment which, ideally, is driven by the child, not the adults in their lives. The beauty of childhood is that opportunities to play and discover tend to be more integrated in every day routines, until they reach elementary school.
As students progress through the American Education System, elements that truly foster learning are phased out and replaced by “teaching to the test” and rigid expectations for achievement with varying levels of support to reach the demands. From a Social Constructionist perspective, learning environments can serve as equally as important to the content taught. If children and adolescents understand themselves based on their perceptions of how others see them, every aspect of our interactions provide potentially vital information. This theoretical model offers a different approach to education, rooted in the bio-psycho-social perspective that informs social work practice and the invaluable, sometimes magical tool of: a trusting and meaningful relationship.
Findings

This section reports the key elements that emerged during data analysis and contribute to the conceptual model that was developed and presented here. Included is a brief description of the authors whose texts were used for data analysis and whose quotations are noted with italics. Next, I present some visuals to illustrate important concepts related to the model. The Teacher with Learner model is then presented, first as a visual outline and then is described in detail. The narrative expands on four themes that emerged from the data which led to the development of five different dimensions within the model. These four themes are (1) helping relationships, (2) attuned, empathic and responsive classrooms, (3) neurobiological affects on learning (4) community building and group processes.

These themes were then used to create the following five dimensions of the Teacher with Learner model: (1) Teaching and Learning, (2) Roles of the Teacher, (3) Emphasis, (4) Discipline and (5) Structure. In order to explain the model, the narrative includes comparative information about current traditional teaching practices to highlight how this new model differs. This is followed by the final visual, which further compares the Teacher with Learner model to the conventional Teacher verses Learner model used in public education.

Description of Authors (Participants)

Dr. Daniel Goleman, Ph. D., author of Emotional Intelligence and Social Intelligence, is an internationally known psychologist who, as a science journalist, wrote for The New York Times reporting on brain and behavioral sciences. Dr. Ross W. Greene, Ph. D., author of Lost at School, is an associate clinical professor in the Department of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School who
regularly consults with special education schools and conducts research funded by the U.S. Department of Education.

**Visual Tools**

The following visuals were created to elaborate on some key concepts that influenced the development of this model. All the information in these are Dr. Goleman’s two texts. Analysis of the data revealed several neurological phenomena that impact learning and how students function in the classroom. Therefore, in the interest of a bit of background on these phenomena, I created two visuals that illustrate important concepts. The first visual describes the social and emotional brain, including concepts of social aptitude, neurological circuits: Low road and High road and emotional contagion made possible by mirror neurons which drive initial development. The next visual includes the affects of moods like anger, anxiety and hope affect thinking and learning.
The Social and Emotional Brain

The Amygdala:
Reads social messages in 17-33 milliseconds and then
Attaches emotional meaning (judgement)- before we can intellectualize what we see.

Low Road: Neural circuit: Rapid, quick to judge, bypasses prefrontal cortex, engaging in Feeling-Action, assesses with less accuracy (impulsive and reactive behavioral responses).

High Road: Neural circuit: Slow, thoughtful, engages prefrontal cortex, engaging in Feeling-Thinking-Action, assesses with more accuracy (informed, intentional behavioral responses).

Emotional Contagion
We transmit and catch moods from others like a social virus.
Sends messages along the Low Road: Quick to Judge and Quick to Act.
Power to transfer emotion from more powerful person to subordinate: Teacher to Student.

Mirror Neurons
Responsible for “copy cat” effect.
Enables mimicry: how babies learn and why we whisper back when whispered to.
Allows us to grasp the minds of others-by feeling, not thinking.
A leader’s power can drive emotional states into better or worse states.

Social Aptitude: acting wisely in human relationships.
We are wired to connect and have an automatic biological influence and responses to others.
Teachers can be active ingredients in brain growth...that drives neural development.
Mood Affects on Thinking and Learning

The **Amygdala** has no wiring to speech centers: Our **emotional hub** is literally “speechless.”

**Hope**

*Deciding factor of academic achievement when comparing students with equivalent intellectual aptitude.*

**Hopelessness**

Breeds **no motivation** and instills the belief that **failures** are **unchangeable personal deficits**.

**Anger**

*Builds on the backs of smaller slights, each increasing anger’s intensity until intentionally interrupted or an explosive release.*

*Increases likelihood of perceiving slights where there are none.*

*Best way to douse anger flames is to offer a shift in perspective.*

**Anxiety**

*Undermines the intellect & sabotages academic performance.*

*The biology of anxiety casts us out of the zone for excellence.*

When we are **emotionally upset** we can’t remember, attend, learn, or make decisions.
Teacher with Learner Model

This model is based on four themes that emerged from the transcript data: (1) helping relationships, (2) attuned, empathic and responsive classrooms, (3) neurobiological affects on learning (4) community building and group processes. In order to present this model along with supporting data, I will present it’s five dimensions (1) Nature of Teaching and Learning, (2) Roles of the Teacher, (3) Emphasis, and (4) Discipline. Each of these dimensions will be elaborated and contrasted with conventional approaches used in public school settings as described in the data and corroborated by researcher observations. The following table (Table 1.) provides a skeletal comparison of the new model and current conventional practices. This is then followed by a narrative explaining the model in depth to enhance understanding of its conception. The narrative concludes with Table 2, which provides a a skeleton of the Teacher with Learner model alone, without the comparison to the Teacher verses Learner model.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Teacher versus Learner</th>
<th>Teacher with Learner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teaching &amp; Learning</strong></td>
<td><strong>Power differentiated</strong>&lt;br&gt;Deliverer/Recipient: Teacher has expertise and is sharing with student who is the primary learner.&lt;br&gt;Kids do well if they want to.</td>
<td><strong>Relationship-based</strong>&lt;br&gt;Effectiveness depends on regulating biological systems &amp; improving access to the zone for excellence.&lt;br&gt;Collaborative: Shared responsibility for learning. Shared expertise in the room.&lt;br&gt;Kids do well if they can.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Roles of Teacher</strong></td>
<td><strong>Expert</strong>&lt;br&gt;Authority Figure/Disciplinarian&lt;br&gt;Rigid Commander</td>
<td>Empathic Facilitator: of a group process engaging all members in growth and development.&lt;br&gt;Flexible Responder: Increase social harmony, increasing productivity. Attuned to individualized student needs, responding empathically and with unconditional positive regard.&lt;br&gt;Attuned Improvisor: skillfully navigating the changing needs of individual students and the class as a whole. Prepared to navigate spontaneous teachable moments, viewing learning as an interactive process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emphasis of Education</strong></td>
<td><strong>Academic Content</strong></td>
<td><strong>Social Aptitude</strong>&lt;br&gt;Emotional Intelligence&lt;br&gt;Academic Content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discipline</strong></td>
<td><strong>Standardized</strong>&lt;br&gt;Adult-driven&lt;br&gt;Coercive&lt;br&gt;Punitive&lt;br&gt;Reactive</td>
<td><strong>Culturally responsive</strong>&lt;br&gt;Differentiated: different students need different expectations&lt;br&gt;Collaborative: explicit and includes both teacher and students concerns with systems to solve problems collaboratively.&lt;br&gt;Attuned, empathic and responsive: Proactive</td>
</tr>
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</table>
The nature of teaching and learning. Transcript data suggests that teaching and learning are grounded in reciprocal mutual relationships between teachers and learners. Goleman states that the most reliable factor leading people to change—by far—is the relationship they have with the person helping them change (Greene, 2008, p. 54). The relationship that is vital for helping individuals grow, discover, uncover and flourish is perhaps valued as a part of a therapeutic experience but it is often left out of the education conversation. However, teachers who connect meaningfully with students typically educate students more effectively. Feeling connected...refers not to some vague niceness but to concrete emotional links between students and the people in their schools: other kids, teachers, and staff (Goleman, 2006, p. 282). These helping relationships can help students learn to better manage given problems, to transfer learned skills to other issues that arise and potentially eventually learn how to prevent problems from starting in the first place. Helping provides kids with tools to become more effective self-helpers and more responsible "agents of change" in their own lives (Greene, 2008, p. 54).

Data also suggests that learning is dependent on regulating biological systems and accessing the zone for excellence. Goleman states that from the vantage point of the brain, doing well in school...involves...the brain’s sweet spot for performance and that the biology of anxiety casts us out of that zone for excellence (2006, p. 267). He goes on to assert that when emotionally upset, people cannot remember, attend, learn or make decisions clearly (Goleman, 1995, p. 149). However, good moods can expand one’s access to the brain’s capabilities. Good moods...enhance the ability to think clearly and with more complexity...even mild mood changes can sway thinking (Goleman, 1995, p. 85). This data suggests that there is more occurring in the classroom than...
simple transference of knowledge and incorporates the social and emotional factors that inhibit or enhance learning. This contrasts the conventional notion that teaching is primarily about transferring (delivering) knowledge and learning is primarily about acquiring knowledge and/or skills. This view ignores the reciprocal relationship between a teacher in a student. The data offers that the effects of mood on learning conclude that when students are neither attentive nor happy in class, they observe only a fraction of the information being presented (Goleman, 2006, p. 272). Emotional contagion indicates that the teachers can play a significant role in setting the emotional tone of the classroom. Emotional displays have immediate consequences in the impact they make on the person who receives them (Goleman, 1995, p. 114). Teachers and learners operate on a continual feedback loop that can have a surprising power. When my mind is full of anger, other people catch it like the flu (Goleman, 2006, p. 275). In classrooms, there is an inherent power differential that can be used to positively benefit the learning environment. When two people interact, the direction of mood transfer is from the one who is more forceful and expressing feelings to the one who is more passive (Goleman, 1995, p. 115). Additionally, the passing of moods from leader to follower...such as teacher-student...have a benign potential: to promote the growth, education or healing of the less powerful person (Goleman, 2006, p. 276).

Finally, Greene speaks about a fundamental difference between the current educational philosophy of kids do well if they want to and offers that kids do well if they can. The model incorporates this latter philosophy and is influenced by the belief that there are social and emotional skills that are necessary for academic success.

Roles of the teacher. Transcript data suggests that rather than focusing solely on delivery of information, teachers are primarily facilitators and improvisors. They facilitate not only
acquisition of information, but also relationships between themselves and students and between students and their peers. Since relationship is central to this model, this expanded facilitator role is critical. This role requires that teachers co-labor with learners in terms of establishing expectations, pacing, activities and responding to learner needs. This is not unlike the role that parents play in families with lots of children, step-children or foster children. Goleman asserts that our parents form our basic template for a secure base in childhood...In school, our teachers fill that position (Goleman, 2006, p. 277). According to data, this secure base allows a student’s brain to settle, giving them access to neuropathways that provide clear routes to their zone for excellence. When students and teachers do not feel safe, classrooms do not function effectively, and adds the potential for continual damage to relationships, creating great consequences for learning. Safety, in this sense, does not involve more “security”, but instead depends on creating a safe space through consistency, attuned and empathic responsiveness and building a trusting relationship.

Goleman posits that socially intelligent leadership starts with being fully present and getting in sync (Goleman, 2006, p. 280). Research on how teaching styles’ effect how at-risk students learn, showed that students who had teachers who followed pedagogic guidelines for good instruction but who were cold or controlling, floundered academically. However, if they had a warm, responsive teacher, they flourished, learning as well as the other kids (Goleman, 2006, p. 283). This stresses the need for teachers to engage in a multi-dimensional attuned method of teaching that moves beyond beginning class with a positive outlook. This requires attending to the emotions in the room, approaching learners with empathy and a having genuine desire to better understand the needs of the learner; even when facing instinctual personal
responses to behavior. Goleman states that *the single most important factor in maximizing the excellence of the groups product was the degree to which the members were able to create a state of internal harmony* (Goleman, 1995, p. 161). This suggests that when teachers are attuned and able to increase social harmony between students, then classrooms are functioning at maximum capacity.

Additionally, this model suggests that teachers are not the only expert in the room. They make space for perspectives other than their own and students become active agents in their learning. A teacher as a facilitator can engage 25 individuals in a group process, building on the strengths of the group to help navigate the challenges. When a teacher tries to control 25 individuals as separate from the whole, students are bound to feel threatened, which increases anxiety and or frustration/anger, and rejection of the order is likely to follow. When a teacher then responds to students whose behaviors are escalating in an even more forceful tone or response, the student loses even more access to their thinking brain, inhibiting them to respond appropriately. Data suggests that *the type of stress that most activates stress hormones...lurks in the classroom...social threats like fears of the teacher’s judgement or of seeming “stupid” in the eyes of other students...powerfully impair the brain’s mechanisms for learning* (Goleman, 2006, p. 273). When requesting students to shift their behavior teachers can also role model the desired behavior. Mirror neurons enable mimicry, which both students and teachers are susceptible to. It is the responsibility of the teacher to attempt to shift mimicry in a positive and constructive direction rather than be left mimicking the emotional responses of the child.

A teacher’s comfort with improvising can enhance an educator’s ability to recognize spontaneous opportunities to teach skills *before* they are desperately needed. *You don’t have to*
wait until the kid disrupts the class before you try to solve the problem that causes the
disruption; you can do it in advance because the problem and the disruption are predictable
(Greene, 2008, p. 28). Student’s can better internalize skills when they can practice in real time,
as they need them. If a classroom environment is emotionally safe and provides a secure base for
a group of learners, then emotional reactivity can calm, clearing neural pathways for the zone for
excellence. Building meaningful relationships with students allows teachers to be attuned,
empathic and responsive to the various needs of students in the classroom. Supporting students
in this way shows vast improvements in academic achievement and school engagement.
Whenever teachers create an empathic and responsive environment, students not only improve in
their grades and test scores—they become eager learners (Goleman, 2006, p. 284).

**Emphasis of education.** The data suggests additional emphasis of schools that moves
beyond the traditional focus of solely academic content. Learning doesn’t take place in isolation
from kids’ feelings. Being emotionally literate is as important for learning as instruction in math
and reading (Goleman, 1995, p. 262).

Data from this study offers unique explanations for biologically influenced social
behaviors. These social and emotional biological factors contribute to emphasizing a
relationship-based approach in this Teacher with Learner. Mood and emotional contagion impact
the interactional dynamics between peers, as well as, between student and teacher. Students who
are most consumed by emotional upset, be it anger, frustration or anxiety, cannot think, attend,
remember or effectively engage in their education. Teachers who have the ability to empathically
respond and attend to student needs, while balancing their own needs for a safe instructional
environment, have students who are engaged in learning. Students who feel safe, cared for,
empowered and supported learn best, however, if teachers are not aware of their own emotional reactions, emotional contagion can hijack a classroom.

The focus of this model is on assessing and understanding students social and emotional skill deficits, in addition to, academic needs. This involves more than assessing whether a student can “follow the rules” but which lagging social or emotional skill inhibits this student’s ability to behave in the desired way. The skills required for adaptive social, emotional, and behavioral functioning don’t come naturally to all kids. We adults tend to think the kids are created equal in these capacities, but this simply isn’t true (Greene, 2008, p. 25). Because of this, students need intentional constructive instruction to help build necessary skills, not continued punishment for not having them. Students who repeatedly receive the message that they are lacking, develop a sense of hopelessness that can destroy their concept of personal capacity. Babies who repeatedly fail at a task become sullen and stop trying. This reaction continues to thrive in students who begin to believe that they aren’t smart enough to succeed and they too stop trying. Many challenging behaviors stem from the belief that there is no point in putting forth effort, as students internalize the idea that they are personally defected and nothing they do matters. In terms of motivation, when people believe that their failures are due to unchangeable deficits in themselves, they lose hope and stop trying (Goleman, 1995, p. 153).

Teachers who can see beyond difficult behavior and can focus on what is trying to be communicated will be more successful in helping students better understand themselves. According to the data, expecting students who are emotionally charged to effectively communicate what their difficulties may not be particularly helpful. Many kids don’t know what their concerns are. Because kids are accustomed to having their concerns dismissed, it’s possible
they haven’t given the matter much thought (Greene, 2008, p. 117). Highly distressed students have little to no access to their speech centers and neuropathways bypass the high road’s thinking abilities, which would allow them to reflect on what they are feeling:

The reminder “use your words” won’t help at all if a kid doesn’t have the words...disrespect is just a sign that a kid is lacking important skills, if the kid could communicate in a more respectful way he would (Greene, 2008, p. 19).

Students who do not feel emotionally safe, lash out and create difficult environments to maintain empathy for teachers and vice versa. When educators can learn the language of the behavior itself they can begin to understand what provokes it. Paying attention allows us to build an emotional connection. Lacking attention, empathy hasn’t a chance (Goleman, 2006, p. 51).

Discipline. Conventional discipline practice involves coercive measures and adult imposed punishment to send a message. Many adults are incredibly vigilant in ensuring that kids suffer immediate, adult-imposed consequences for maladaptive behavior (Greene, 2008, p. ).

Data from this study, however, suggests that behavior that needs disciplinary action may have been avoided or at least tempered. Just as, educators differentiate instruction to accommodate learning styles, it is possible to differentiate disciplinary needs. In differentiated classrooms, teachers accept and build upon the premise that learners differ in important ways (both academically and behaviorally (Greene, 2008, p. 161). Conventional discipline tends to be standardized and rigid; this is considered “fair.” Data suggest that vague requests to “be respectful,” and “be appropriate” without defining what those particular words mean for that particular teacher can be confusing. We often place expectations on kids that we know they can’t meet, and then punish them when they handle our expectations poorly as we suspected they
would (Greene, 2008, p. 56). Inevitably, classrooms will look different and those differences can be enhanced by being explicit, informative and consistently reinforcing through teaching (not punishment), how to meet agreed upon (not arbitrary) expectations.

However, understanding that problem behavior often stems from difficulties with social and emotional skills that haven’t been learned, can help educators be more sensitive and nuanced in their responses, less rigid, and more effective. Many kids with behavioral challenges have difficulty understanding another’s perspective and appreciating how their behavior is affecting others (Greene, 2008, p. 24). Current disciplinary practice reinforce these lagging skills by punishing kids to motivate them to consider others, without giving them an opportunity to understand the deeper social implications of impulse behavior. Punishment may not be a terribly effective way to teach kids how to take another's perspective or to appreciate how their behavior is affecting others (Greene, 2008, p. 24).

Data from transcripts suggest that discipline be approached as a collaborative opportunity to create a more conducive learning environment. And, data suggest that it is vital that educators be aware of their own privilege and core beliefs so they can understand how their personal cultural experience may be different from their students. When discipline is primarily dependent on educators’ personal/cultural ideas of right and wrong ways to behave, their reactions may be less culturally responsive. The emotions of prejudice are formed in childhood, while the beliefs that are use to justify it come later (Goleman, 1995, p. 156). Furthermore, people remember more readily instances that support the stereotype while tending to discount instances that challenge it (Goleman, 1995, p. 157). Data suggest that people disavow racist attitudes while still acting with covert bias. When asked, people say they feel no bigotry, but in ambiguous situations still act in a
biased way—though they give a rationale other than prejudice (Goleman, 1995, p. 157). Data indicates that educators and school personnel be attentive to inherent biases that affect classroom function and impede learning, otherwise, turning a blind eye to acts of bias—allows discrimination to thrive (Goleman, 1995, p. 158).

Current public education emphasizes order and control, which isn’t working for students and teachers alike. Greene states that school discipline programs aren't working for the kids who aren't doing well and isn't needed to by the kids who are (2008, p. 8) and expresses a need for dramatic changes in a system that isn't working for teachers, parents, or challenging kids (Greene, 2008, p. xii). This model is based on the view that challenging behavior is a form of valuable information that if attuned to, approached with empathy, evaluated through a lens of curiosity rather than judgement, then children can engage in learning. Greene continues to suggest that we need to create mechanisms for helping these kids that are predominantly proactive instead of reactive; and...creating processes so people can work on problems collaboratively (Greene, 2008, p. xii).

The data from this study suggest that discipline be more socially grounded and implemented. Helping kids appreciate how their behavior is affecting others is a much more reliable mechanism for ensuring that kids do the right thing without adult assistance (Greene, 2008, p. 25). Finally, data suggest that teachers and school personnel respond to students exhibiting difficult behavior from a place of unconditional positive regard for the worth and dignity of each child while building a sense of accountability to the classroom community.

Rethinking schools: teaching by being communities that care. As family life no longer offers growing numbers of children a sure footing in life, schools are left as the one place
communities can turn to for correctives to children's deficiencies in emotional and social competence (Greene, 2008, p. 279).

The following table (Table 2.) illustrates the Teacher with Learner alone, without the comparison to current practices.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Teacher with Learner Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching &amp; Learning</td>
<td>Relationship-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Effectiveness depends on regulating biological systems &amp; improving access to the zone for excellence. Non-pathologizing and necessary regardless of diagnosis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collaborative: Shared responsibility for learning. Shared expertise in the room.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kids do well if they can.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roles of Teacher</td>
<td>Empathic Facilitator: of a group process engaging all members in growth and development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flexible Responder: Increase social harmony, increasing productivity. Attuned to individualized student needs, responding empathically and with unconditional positive regard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attuned Improvisor: skillfully navigating the changing needs of individual students and the class as a whole. Prepared to navigate spontaneous teachable moments, viewing learning as an interactive process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis of Education</td>
<td>Social Aptitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional Intelligence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic Content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline</td>
<td>Culturally responsive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Differentiated: different students need different expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collaborative: Explicit and includes both teacher and students concerns with systems to solve problems collaboratively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attuned, empathic and responsive: Proactive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

Frequently, requests to better our education system call for more money and more resources, which never seem to get beyond the House of Representatives committee stage. While both of these things are indeed necessary to truly shift the dire circumstances of our public education facilities and curricular resources, there are also some things that can be done that are relatively inexpensive. Shifting our approach doesn’t necessarily require expensive curricula nor is it dependent on having materials. As the Teacher with Learner model suggests, teaching from a place of attunement, empathy, unconditional positive regard and emotional intelligence can transform the way students labeled with EBD learn. Now, when thinking of education from this perspective one might think, all students would benefit from this kind of treatment, which is also true. However, since students labeled with EBD are at greater risk of not being treated in this way, these learners need this approach the most.

The concepts in the Teacher with Learner model are not new to alternative schools, private schools and some special education programming. Educators and helping professionals in schools currently advocate for supplemental opportunities for personal growth and development, and regularly obtain grants to help reach higher achievement goals. But, both the literature review and the findings presented, argue the necessity of a different goal: teaching children how to be learners and engaged members of classroom communities inside public school systems. Not after school or if you can afford a more thoughtful learning environment. Focusing on the learners themselves and helping youth by modeling and building meaningful relationships offers great promise. People do not function at their best when they are anxious, fearful, feel rejected and are ignored or punished. Yet learners labeled with EBD experience these emotions regularly,
hijacking their capacities to learn effectively. We spend copious amounts of energy trying to figure out how to motivate kids to comply instead of teaching them how to successfully manage their emotions and connect with others in order to learn. It is as though we have an expectation that learning just occurs and you are either willing to absorb it or you aren’t. Ironically, our education system is as concrete in its thinking as students labeled with EBD are! Public schools operate with a mentality: students are either successful or they are not; they choose to follow the rules or they suffer the consequences. But, human beings are complex. They need to connect with others, and sometimes interactions are chaotic attempts to find synchrony, containing emotional disarray that inhibits vulnerable connectedness. The literature suggests that at the heart of the dysregulated individual is an emotional upset related to feeling unheard, undervalued or disregarded. Since schools are typically primarily adult-run facilities when students exhibit challenging behaviors they are rarely engaged in a manner that invites conversation. Usually they are given various commands that tend to exacerbate the issue. If school personnel are not focused on building relationships with students, there is little likelihood that students will learn to build better relationships with themselves or others.

The following sections of this Discussion chapter connect the findings from this research with the literature and includes implications for practice and future research.

Findings Supported by the Literature

Research continues to support that building meaningful relationships with students, creating a safe space (secure base), and integrating social and emotional learning into the very fiber of the school and classroom is what allows students to learn best (Gearity, 2009, Klem & Connell, 2004, Maag, 2006). Explicit instruction and providing clear expectations will help
eliminate the need for coercive tactics that stem from a need to control behavior that is seemingly out of control or ambiguous (Benner et al., 2013 and Fitzpatrick & Knowlton, 2009). When students are emotionally upset, expecting them to appropriately access verbal processes, is simply inappropriate given what we know about the amygdala’s lack of direct circuits to our language centers and is affected by emotionally charged situations and impacted by trauma (Scott & Ross, 2006). Students labeled with EBD experience adverse childhood experiences, systemic poverty, and various degrees of trauma which impact their ability to access optimal biological regulation. A healthy active heart rate increased by exercise ranges from 102-173 beats per minute for an average 16 year old. Consider that a resting heart rate for a traumatized youth often reaches 135 beats while sitting in a classroom (Minnesota Department of Health, 2013). Imagine what his/her internal physiological experience might be. We understand the need to wait out the excitement that follows a competitive basketball game, yet young learners’ internal experience can mimic this heightened nervous system response unbeknownst to us.

Ultimately, these findings speak to a greater need to reform our current education system. Researchers agree that there is a need for more inter-disciplinary team responses and “whole school” approaches that foster positive and meaningful relationships with students (Frey & Nichols, 2003). Collaborative problem solving approaches can not only improve student learning experiences but can also offer teachers a new way of expressing their needs that may lead to actual shifts in dynamics (Schaubman, Stetson & Plog, 2011). The Teacher with Learner model offers the potential to reduce teacher stress and create learning environments where both teachers and learners can flourish (Klem & Connell, 2004). As with social work practice in general, change is facilitated via meaningful relationships; so too, in teaching and learning.
Implications for Practice

The Teacher with Learner model offers additional opportunities for clinical social workers in school settings. Teaching practice could be enhanced by having clinical social workers run mutual aid groups for teachers. These groups could model group facilitation skills, provide clinical insights related to behaviors, and encourage teacher self-reflection process. In many ways social workers are constant educators, advocating for the needs of others and enlightening skeptics to a more accurate understanding of our profession. Social workers who engage with students, families, educators and administrators can reinforce the message that meaningful relationships characterized by empathy, attunement and responsiveness can help all professionals enhance their practice. Social connectedness is not limited to the classroom or contained within a school building, it is what most people strive for daily, in most of what we do.

These findings suggest integral roles for social workers within the education system. (1) Social workers can serve as educators to school personnel about mental health and the chemistry of the brain that inhibits learning, (2) social workers can serve as a member of educational teams as the advocate that continually offers this different perspective on behavior and learning, (3) help educators better understand diagnostic labels, undiagnosed students and the physiological reactions to trauma, anxiety and depression, and finally, (4) be advocates for shifting a disciplinary structure that does not serve students well, modeling attuned and empathic responsiveness. This may seem like a lot to ask of social workers who are serving far more students than is recommended for a counselor to student ratio, however, it can be considered our social justice duty to attend to an educational system that further disenfranchises students of color and students living in poverty.
Implications for Future Research

Further research related to implementing this model evaluating its effectiveness is recommended. For example, as Action Research project could implement this model and extend its development through field testing. Using this model to train school personnel and collecting evaluative data from parts is another option. Additionally, future research can investigate how to train educators to effectively explore and utilize their own emotional and social intelligence in a way that they can integrate the information to transfer concepts to moments of high contention.

Implications for the General Public

All people would benefit from enhancing and honing their social aptitude and emotional intelligence in order to be more effective communicators and engaged citizens. When we attune to others, are aware of how our emotional states affect others and how others affect us, we can participate in life more fully. When environmental factors are frequently chaotic and unpredictable, gaining mastery over our internal experiences can better equip us to manage the unknown. Just as for the students who need explicit instruction on how to develop these emotional and social skills, we so too, need opportunities to be reflective, gain insight on our personal and individualized emotional make-up and to learn more about our internal processes. Only then can we truly be present and connect with others in ways that support social synchrony and maximize productivity and personal growth.

Conclusion

This Teacher with Learner model that was developed from this theoretical research is focused on relationship-based education. The emphasis is on the importance of building relationships with students to facilitate change in behavior and empower academic achievement.
However, the concepts inherent in it are applicable to school environments, as a whole. Just as learners need to have access to their zone for excellence; so too do teachers, administrators and social workers. This model offers a shift from pressure and coercion to flexibility, creativity and responsiveness to emotional and social needs of all persons involved.

Students who need help the most, are often the ones who are spoken with the least. Students exhibiting challenging behaviors are frequently spoken about, given directives and make up agenda items for behavioral support teams, but are rarely included in a shared conversation about how their behavior is affecting other learners and the teacher. When school personnel believe students have value and are communicating a need, then a collaborative conversation can be productive, allowing equal space to share concerns and generating mutually agreed upon solutions to try.

Many adults still do not fully understand the complexity of stimuli that impact young people’s nervous systems. The ability to tune in and listen to the unique wavelengths of one’s inner world is compromised by far too much information to discern natural wavelengths from outside digital interruption. When teachers intervene in a child’s neurological loop they have to learn to quiet not only the doubts and fears of his psychological pathways but influence the constant stream of overstimulation in a positive direction. The educator that understands their own emotional reactions and is secure in their “care taking” role, can effectively attune to the needs of students and invite their mirror neurons to mimic the secure base provided by the teacher. Students need to learn how to borrow others’ calm so they can learn to integrate that inner peace and access it when needed.
On a personal note, I understand that this model may feel like one more thing that teachers are being asked to do. However, this model requests that all members in our education system shift how they view students labeled with EBD and how they attend to the learning environment, as a whole. Best teaching and learning practices cannot exist in environments that are policed, interrogated, authoritatively controlled and based on punishment. This breeds resentment, anger, fear, threat and anxiety, which all paralyze individuals, locking them in their most primitive part of their brain; one rooted in impulse reaction and protection from potential harm. There is only one destination for this kind of environment, and we’ve already arrived; 58% of students labeled with EBD confirm our failed adventure when they give up on education entirely. Those who have no hope, stop trying. It is our job in education to instill hope, inspire aspirations and foster learning environments where all students can be successful, not simply the ones who already come with the skills they need. We need to stop assuming or expecting that students are anywhere other than where they are. In a perfect world, all children would get everything they need for healthy development from the time they enter the world until they take their first steps through school doors. But the world isn’t perfect, and students do not arrive with all they need, nor are they intentionally taught skills consistently throughout their schooling. And yet, somewhere along the line, we decide that students should know how to behave or how to read, write and do arithmetic and we stop teaching and begin reinforcing a consistent message that particular children just don’t have what it takes to succeed. One caring, empathic and attuned adult can make a substantial difference in a child’s life. Let’s try to magnify that number to include the majority of adults present in a school, instead of hoping that somebody else will be that someone.
References


