Factors Contributing to the Success of Students

With Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities

by

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ABSTRACT

Youth with Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities (EBD) have presented public education with one of its greatest challenges. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act commits schools to extend their role into social and emotional realms in addressing the needs of youth with EBD so academic progress can occur. This study uses interviews to compare the risk and protective factors found in research with the perceptions of a sample of high school students placed in an EBD program. Both the literature and the students emphasized the benefits of practical and emotional support provided by staff and parents. This study concludes that schools are influential in moderating the interactions between students and their environment by bolstering the student's own coping resources, and by building perseverance and future optimism through supportive relationships.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Youth with Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities (EBD) face tremendous struggles in school, perhaps experiencing less success than any other group of students (Wagner, Kutash, Duchnowski, Epstein, & Sumi, 2005). This paper seeks to illuminate the factors that contribute to or alleviate these struggles. Understanding the plight of youth with EBD involves understanding who they are and how they interact with their environment.

School-age youth who have been identified with Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities have a unique set of challenges to overcome. These youth are characterized as having "severe, chronic and frequent behavior that is not the result of situational anxiety, stress or conflict" (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2001). Their learning is hindered by their social, emotional, or behavioral dysfunction which may result in poor social relationships, inattention, inappropriate or disruptive behavior, depression, or anxiety.

One characteristic of youth with EBD is that they are predominantly male. An estimated 75% of all students receiving special education services under the category of Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities are male (Wagner & Cameto, 2004). One hypothesis for the under-representation of females in the disability category is that females are more likely to internalize their problems into depressive or anxiety-type symptoms that are not disruptive in classrooms (U.S. Department of Education, 1998).

Other characteristics are that Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities are twice as prevalent in teenagers as compared to younger school age children and is slightly more

common among African American students (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Low household income and its associated characteristics of single parent families, and low parental education, has been noted to be interrelated with all disability categories, especially EBD (Wagner, 2004; Wagner & Cameto, 2004).

In school, youth with EBD experience greater school mobility, 38% have been held back a grade, and three fourths have been expelled or suspended at least once (Wagner, 2004; Wagner & Cameto, 2004). This group of students also is more likely to receive poor grades, have high course failure rates, and have high absenteeism (Wagner & Cameto, 2004).

The difficulty faced by youth with EBD in school culminates in an unusually high dropout rate for this group. The population of youth in United States school systems who are receiving special education under this disability category is over 470,000, and the drop out rate of this group of students is over 50% (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). This dropout rate is almost twice as high as the next leading disability group: learning disabilities.

To what degree this high dropout rate is caused by school, environmental, or individual factors is debatable. This high dropout rate may indicate friction between schools and youth with EBD to the point that half see dropping out as their only option. Unfortunately, as teenagers with EBD, the school system may be the best resource for learning to deal with their disability. Prematurely terminating this connection leaves these youth with diminished support.

Along with a pattern of academic failure, poor social adjustment, and disengagement from school, youth with Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities often show a pattern of criminal behavior (National Longitudinal Transitional Study, 1993; Wagner & Cameto, 2004; Zionts, Zionts, & Simpson, 2002). For youth with serious emotional disturbances, 37% were reported to have legal/criminal problems within two years of leaving high school (National Longitudinal Transitional Study, 1993). After having been out of school three to five years the rate for this group jumps to 58% having been arrested. And among students with serious emotional disturbances who also dropped out, 73% were found to have been arrested 3 to 5 years after secondary school. Rushton (1995) sites education as a key factor in determining whether youth will avoid the pitfalls of poverty, juvenile crime and unemployment.

The potentially high social cost of this group has resulted in policy changes and increased national attention (Wagner & Cameto, 2004). Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1997) and A National Agenda for Achieving Better Results for Children and Youth with Serious Emotional Disturbance are examples of this concern (U.S. Department of Education, 1994; U.S. Department of Education, 1998). The potentially high social cost of youth with EBD who do not have effective self-management or coping tools warrants preventative policies.

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this study is to identify how to prevent or alleviate the poor scholastic and social outcomes listed above. Unfortunately, in a medical sense, prevention of Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities are not currently well understood.

The causal origins of Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities are debatable. Like many other psychological disorders, there is ambiguity over how much of the disorder is the result of outside influences on the person, or how much is inherent to the person's own brain chemistry and biological makeup (Farrell, 1995). Even the environmental hazards of lead and mercury have been shown to have an association with EBD-type behavior in children (Marlowe, Errera, Stellern, Beck, 1983). Many theories also emphasize the impact of prenatal conditions or exposure to chemicals in contributing to emotional disorders (Zionts, Zionts & Simpson, 2002). The contributions of variables like a person's environment, or their genetic make up and brain chemistry is open to great speculation and debate. Given the debate about current preventative capabilities, a more purposeful study of EBD is to engage in an investigation that brings about direct improvement in the lives of youth with EBD.

This study takes the pragmatic stance that school systems are a powerful tool in improving the lives of youth with Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities. Schools provide an immediate way of influencing the behavior and social adjustment, as well as improving the insight that youth with EBD have about themselves. School is a stable environment with trained specialists and educators who can help children and teenagers learn to cope with their disability. It is at a young age that people have the best ability to learn, change, and adapt in preparation for the inflexibility of the adult world. For example, if youth with EBD are not successful in adapting to the parameters of the school environment, how successful will they be in adapting to the parameters of the legal environment?

The task is then to discover what aspects of the school environment can be most influential in promoting school success or, at minimum, school retention. Staying in school until graduation may not be the ultimate measure of success, but it enables educators to maintain influence over youth who benefit from guidance. Society now places an emphasis on youth's emotional and social well being, and expects schools to be a major deliverer of these services.

One way to help youth with EBD succeed in school is to institute academic interventions. Unfortunately, studies that identify the effectiveness of academic interventions with emotionally or behaviorally disabled youth are scarce. Mooney, Epstein, Reid & Nelson (2003) identified only 55 studies on students with EBD from the last quarter century that had an academic intervention focus. Only a total of 358 students contributed to research-verified knowledge of which academic intervention strategies work. Research on students with EBD is insufficient (Wagner, Kutash, Duchnowski, Epstein, & Sumi, 2005). There is an urgent need to know what strategies or aspects of school are most beneficial to youth with EBD.

Purpose of the Study

Given the high propensity for difficulty in school and the tendency for large numbers of these students to end their schooling early, there is ample evidence to suggest improvements could be made in the education of youth with EBD (Kortering & Blackorby, 1992). With more information about the challenges that affect youth with EBD, changes can be made to accommodate the needs of this group. Accommodating the

needs of these students will allow schools to have a positive influence on their academic and social trajectory.

The goal of this study is to uncover the personal and school factors associated with the success of students with EBD. This knowledge must also be framed in an understanding of the environmental, family, academic, and social factors that most affect the lives of youth with EBD. Together, this information creates a picture of the most relevant issues and allows schools to address these concerns. By providing schools with an understanding of what forces have the greatest influence on students with EBD, changes can be put in place that counteract these forces and not only keep more students with EBD in school, but also enhance the benefit they receive from this education. The goal is not only reduction of the dropout rate but also improvement in the service that schools provide to youth with EBD.

Assumptions of the Study

This study assumes schools are the best place to serve youth with EBD. Certainly, for more extreme behaviors, clinical treatment centers are and should be utilized. This study places emphasis on special education departments' trained faculty and systems of identification and intervention to adjust to the needs of youth with EBD.

Another assumption is that schools can affect students with EBD in a positive manner. This premise assumes that the high dropout rate can be decreased and improvements can be made in the scholastic functioning of this group of students. It also assumes that the psycho-educational category of Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities is a condition that students can learn to cope with and adapt to in more productive ways.

For instance, it is presumed that a student's lack of impulse control can be buffered by a conscious attempt to avoid situations that encourage impulsive acts like aggressive games at recess. If the condition were one in which coping strategies or adaptation where futile, then schools would have no way of influencing the productivity and success of students with EBD.

Definition of Terms

In this analysis of the literature, the terms Emotional Disturbance and Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities are used synonymously because all students in the US public school system are subject to the same federal procedures of identification for eligibility of special education services (Kauffman, 2001). Variations on terminology can differ by state or researcher, but for the purposes of this literature review, all contribute to provide an overall picture of youth with these concerns.

The term Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities (EBD) is used in the plural sense because it is used to include a variety of challenges faced by a very diverse group of young people. Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities can include behaviors characterized by social withdrawal, impaired social interaction, attention and concentration deficits, eating disorders, substance abuse, aggressive or disruptive behaviors, or significant mental health problems. Under these categories, the label of EBD is determined in accordance with stipulations of the intensity or duration of a child's problems.

A helpful definition for understanding Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities is given in the state defined category of educational disability for Wisconsin (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2001). The category of Emotional and Behavioral

Disabilities is defined under section PI 11.36 (7)(a) as "social, emotional or behavioral functioning that so departs from generally accepted, age appropriate ethnic or cultural norms that it adversely affects a child's academic progress, social relationships, personal adjustment, classroom adjustment, self-care or vocational skills." A simplified definition is provided by Zionts et al. (2002): "students who have significant social, behavioral, or emotional differences when compared to their normally developing peers" (p. 9).

By focusing on students who are receiving special education under the broad category of Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities, this study utilizes a predefined population. The highly regulated identification and special education assignment process assures that students placed in the Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities category have concerns that are well validated by school staff.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation of this study is that the realities of this population are widely varied and somewhat resistant to quantification. No single study can properly represent the diversity contained in the individual situations of students who are identified as needing special education services under the category of Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities. Research has a long way to go in developing a comprehensive body of scientific knowledge on this population and this study only provides a narrow look into part of the whole picture.

Another limitation is that the scope of this study is limited to improving the school environment. The realm of influence in the lives of youth with Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities from genetics to the community is not easily studied nor easily

changed. What is within the realm of our knowledge and within our control as educators is what happens in schools. As mentioned previously, the magnitude of change affected by schools alone is limited. An ideal situation would include policy change that benefited the whole environment around youth with EBD.

Chapter II: Literature Review

This literature review surveys the current academic research to identify the factors that both contribute to and alleviate the struggles that youth with Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities face in school, at home, and in society. This analysis of the literature determines what is most critical to youth with EBD and also determines those factors that can be influenced or directly changed by school personnel.

An identification of the most relevant risk or protective factors that affect the scholastic success of youth with EBD serves to illustrate the struggles and supports these youth have. The influence of risk and protective factors even in the presence of severe mental health disorder has been verified by Vance, Bowen, Fernandez and Thompson (2002). They found that certain risk and protective factors outweighed the importance of psychiatric symptom severity in predicting future behavioral functioning in students with Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities. This means that outside influence and support can have a degree of impact, regardless of the severity of the emotional and behavioral disability.

Of the risk and protective factors, attention was paid to how they relate to scholastic success. Of particular importance were studies that focused on the risk and protective factors that may have a relation to a student's decision to drop out. Scholarly work that addresses the conditions surrounding a student's decision to drop out of school can illustrate the factors involved in a student's disassociation from school. Though dropping out of school is not intended to be the ultimate measure of school or student failure, the conditions surrounding such an event do serve to illuminate the conflict

between students and other sources. Knowing the sources of conflict provides schools with information about which aspects of school or the environment are most troubling to these youth. School staff with this understanding can help youth with EBD or other at-risk youth. Schools can adopt policies that are responsive to the struggles of students with EBD that can evolve as knowledge of EBD evolves.

Personal Factors as They Relate to Scholastic Success or Strife

Personal factors that contribute to or hinder the scholastic success of students with and without EBD have been identified. Factors that specifically contribute to dropout among students include a record of absenteeism, course failure, repeating a grade, poor academic performance, attitudes, individual behavior, pregnancy, and school adjustment factors. Personal skills and characteristics like low educational aspiration, sociability, low self-esteem, and external locus of control have been linked with students who drop out (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986).

A deficit in social skills is often attributed as a variable that exacerbates the misbehavior of students. Students with EBD can have difficulty creating and maintaining friendships and their social behavior may anger or disappoint those around them (Kauffman, 2001). Navigating and responding appropriately to unpredictability of the social environment may be particularly difficult for students who struggle to regulate their emotions. Also language competence and the practical, social usage of language has been verified to be lacking in the skills of a large percentage of student with EBD (Kauffman, 2001). Therefore, it is appropriate that school staff continue to make attempts

at improving students' abilities to use language and communication to solve problems and obtain their needs.

Personal characteristics have been associated with positive outcomes among youth with EBD. Vance et al. (2002) found contact with prosocial peers and well developed interpersonal skills, reading ability and social problem-solving ability were most predictive of success one year later. School faculty can seek to bolster these individual skills to provide a sense of accomplishment and motivation to cope and adapt to challenges in positive ways.

The term resilience refers to those personal characteristics which can counter-act negative experiences or risk factors. Studies on the impact of resilience to risk can provide some insight into the personal traits that aid students both with and without EBD. The main personal traits cited in the literature on resilience are self-esteem, adaptability, ability to problem solve, determination, internal locus of control, empathy, and other social skills (Luthar, 1991; Rutter, 1987; Smokowski, Reynolds, & Bezruczko, 1999; Weinreb, 1997; Wyman et al., 1992). Though the prevalence of research on the notion of resiliency peaked in the 1980s and 1990s the goal of empowering the personal resources of students is still valid.

One channel to a more resilient outcome by utilizing personal attitude and coping efforts is offered by Rutter (1987). This method utilizes alteration of the meaning or impact of stress though "controlled exposure to stress in circumstances favorable to successful coping or adaptation" (Rutter, 1987, p. 326). He suggests that youth can learn to successfully navigate potentially harmful situations and come away with a stronger

sense of self-efficacy by facing challenges with some level of support. Rutter emphasizes the importance of self-efficacy through accomplishments and the importance of learning to cope with and control events.

When considering the personal characteristics of students with EBD that contribute to or negate success in school, many of these characteristics would seem to be within the students' control. In Werner and Smith's (2001) now 40 year longitudinal study of resiliency: "the overwhelming majority of the resilient individuals considered their personal competence and determination to be their most effective resource in dealing with stressful life events" (p. 69). Attitude, personal outlook, and determination all relate to how a student chooses to react to their environment and even how they react to themselves. There are limitations imposed on people with disabilities, yet how an individual chooses to respond to those limitations makes perhaps a greater difference than the magnitude of those limitations. School staff then can shape attitude, personal outlook, and determination by how a student is encouraged. As will be elaborated on later, the school environment can help foster a student's personal resources through support and guidance as well as successful task accomplishment (Smokowski, Reynolds, & Bezruczko, 1999; Rutter, 1987; Weinreb, 1997).

Family Factors as They Relate to Scholastic Success or Strife

Those aspects of an EBD student's family background identified as risk factors include poor family function, low maternal education, being raised by a single parent, household stress, and mobility. Data from two recent longitudinal studies found that more that a third of youth with EBD live in a single parent home, and almost a quarter live in

homes where the head of the household is unemployed (Wagner, Kutash, Duchnowski, Epstein, & Sumi, 2005). This study also found the prevalence of household heads who had not graduated from high school was more than double the general population in homes of students with EBD. Furthermore, almost half of these youth live with a family member who also has a disability.

Research has consistently indicated that a child's school performance is strongly influenced by the family environment (Christenson, 1990; Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter, & Dornbusch, 1990). Identifying these risk factors and others does not to assign causation, but characterizes some of the struggles that can exacerbate the problems of students with Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities. It is also important to note that family factors can be an asset in overcoming adversity. Parents of youth with EBD can be viewed as uninvolved or uncaring by educators, when in reality they may be trying to overcome numerous challenges (Wagner, Kutash, Duchnowski, Epstein, & Sumi, 2005). Of the over two thousand families who participated in the two longitudinal studies mentioned above, parents of youth with EBD were more likely to help with homework and attend parent-teacher conferences. School faculty, therefore, should not make assumptions about parents but instead foster collaboration.

Family involvement in school and family expectations for the future can improve outcomes for all youth with disabilities (Christenson, 1990; Wagner, 2004). Specifically, parental support translates to a greater likelihood of post-secondary education, more positive classroom engagement behavior, and less chance of receiving disciplinary action (Wagner, 2004). Also, having supportive and caring caregivers who utilize firm,

reasoned, and predictable discipline has been shown to contribute to better child outcomes in the face of major life stress (Smokowski, Reynolds, & Bezruczko, 1999; Wyman et al., 1992). Rumberger et al., (1990) noted several characteristics of families that contribute to higher academic achievement: higher involvement in their children's education, imparting values that increase motivation to succeed, spending time in activities that aid in cognitive development, and having an open communication style between children and parents.

Some family responsibilities can take priority over education and force students to drop out. The number of students who leave school because of pregnancy is significant according to Wehlage and Rutter (1986). Fine (1986) indicates that for girls who struggle with school, becoming a teen mother can offer an alternative that generates a sense of purpose and competence. Further, school staff can offer sex education, contraceptives, and job training as a way of reducing dropout and teen pregnancy. Alexander and Entwisle (2001) conclude that students who drop out can be placed (either before or after dropping out) in positions of adulthood before they are ready for the responsibility.

Economic Factors as They Relate to Scholastic Success or Strife

Students who live in poverty are more likely to face significant struggles. They are more likely to drop out of school or have Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities (Fine, 1986; Kutash & Duchnowski, 2004; Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter, & Dornbusch, 1990; Wagner, Kutash, Duchnowski, Epstein, & Sumi, 2005). Similarly, rates of dropout and of emotional disturbance are higher in inner-city schools and are higher for African American males (Kutash & Duchnowski, 2004; Wehlage & Rutter

1986). Economic disadvantage is thought to be the factor with the largest influence on the lives of students who drop out (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Economic disadvantage is associated with poor outcomes on many fronts: educational, social, and in terms of physical and mental health. These variables are also interrelated, and it is difficult to determine much more about the problem other than the seriousness of the economic stress on these families (Wagner, Kutash, Duchnowski, Epstein, & Sumi, 2005).

It is important to note that characteristics like low socio-economic status and family background are variables that are relatively static. Though these aspects can not be readily accessed and influenced by school personnel, educators can seek to support students who are disadvantaged by economic inequality. It is useful for educators to be aware of the challenges that students face outside of school because they may need help dealing with these challenges while they are in school.

Almost every piece of research that focuses on either students who drop out or students with EBD makes an attempt at characterizing the socio-economic, family, and personal characteristics of these students. The major categories of risk factors identified in the literature tend to be a list of influences that are indicative of struggle such as economic disadvantage, belonging to a minority group, family factors, and stress (Mason, Chapman, & Scott, 1999). However, these lists of identifiable characteristics do not indicate causation, they merely provide insight into the factors that shape a student's response. Searching for the cause of a student's choices to drop out or act a certain way is embedded in the conditions that surround the interaction of the student and their

environment, which includes the school (Kortering & Blackorby, 1992). It is not enough to just say that these students are economically disadvantaged and come from single parent homes, an understanding of these students must go a step further in looking at how students with this background interact with the school system.

Disadvantage may make life harder, but it does not govern how a person acts or the choices they make. Disadvantage, however, may set up a dynamic between individuals and others who improperly understand the depth of personal struggle that shapes a person's outlook. When a disadvantaged student arrives at school unprepared and angry, the interaction that follows is decided both by the school faculty and the student. This interaction will determine what benefit or detriment the student receives from school. Does the student end up sitting sullen in detention, or is the student calmly learning ways to gain control over themselves with a faculty member they respect? The next section of research focuses on school factors that can be manipulated to benefit youth with EBD and all youth at risk of dropping out.

School Factors as They Relate to Scholastic Success or Strife

There are abundant school factors that create both risk and protective factors that apply to youth with and without EBD. Taking occupationally-oriented courses or being in a work experience program was found to be related to completing school (National Longitudinal Transitional Study, 1993). Also, being involved in school or community groups and attending a smaller high school was linked to a decreased chance of dropout. And among other teacher actions, even effective instruction itself can be a deterrent to disruptive behavior (Kauffman, 2001).

Among all students with disabilities, age seems to be an important factor in dropout. The National Longitudinal Transition Study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education notes that most dropouts stayed in school until their same-aged peers graduated (National Longitudinal Transitional Study, 1993). Fewer than one-fourth dropped out before age 17, another one-third left at age 18, and the rest left school at 19+ years of age. Considering that the average number of credits held by this group was only 10, one might guess that peer pressure influenced students' decision to stay in school. The exact implication for students in the EBD disability category is not noted in the research, but the influence of age can be inferred. This suggests that students with disabilities may reach the age of graduation along with their peers without having the number of credits necessary to graduate. Seeing their non-disabled peers exit school has an understandable draw for disabled students to also exit school.

The composition of school staff and availability of school funding may also influence dropout rates. Overcrowding and a lack of additional resources like tutoring, counseling services, or the means to follow up on long-term absentees and dropouts have been cited by Fine (1986) as important contributors to higher dropout rates. Also having a racial distribution of staff that doesn't match the diversity of the students can hinder connections to students. Fine (1986) asserts that staff who have large class sizes, limited support staff, and unavailable administrators can develop disparaging attitudes that are carried over to their students.

Students with EBD struggle behaviorally and are susceptible to disciplinary processes in school, and hence, may want to leave. Studies have shown that students who

struggle academically and students with disabilities receive more disciplinary consequences (Leone, Mayer, Malmgren, & Meisel, 2000; Mendez, Knoff, & Ferron, 2002). Not only are students with disabilities almost twice as likely to be suspended from school, students with Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities and Learning Disabilities are an over-represented disability category in overall suspensions.

The impact of severe disciplinary action must be considered because suspension has been found to correlate significantly with dropout (Mendez, Knoff, & Ferron, 2002). Similarly, students with academic and discipline problems can frequently change schools and/or classrooms. This mobility, along with its deleterious effects on academic performance and social connections, can contribute to the high dropout rate of students with EBD (Osher, Morrison, & Bailey, 2003; Kortering & Blackorby, 1992; Wagner, 2004).

Osher, Morrison, and Bailey (2003) cite emotionally disturbed youth's tendency to face both negative interactions with peers and teachers and academic frustration. This, along with the resulting poor grades, may contribute to a disengagement from the learning process (Wagner, 2004). Academic struggle can simply be daunting and unattractive when compared to life outside school, particularly if there are grade retentions or detentions involved.

A student's perception of his or her academic ability is an example of how a student's beliefs can work for or against them. Many students with EBD report lacking confidence in their academic ability and their ability to have control over their lives (Scanlon & Mellard, 2002). This is where teachers taking note of the cycle can intervene

with additional tutoring and other support to enable student success. Helping students feel accomplishment in overcoming a struggle through a well-supported challenge can boost self-efficacy (Rutter, 1987). Self-efficacy in academics as well as in students' social and extra-curricular life is a major determinant of engagement in school and it is what students at risk of dropping out can be lacking.

Dropout among students has been well researched. In most cases, dropout is the culmination of a long period of disengagement from school. Alexander and Entwisle (2001) describe patterns of how students disengage from academics then fade out through truancy. They indicate that most young children enter their school career with enthusiasm for learning. It is over a long period of failure or discouraging experiences that erosion of a child's investment in school can occur. Wehlage and Rutter (1986) show evidence that the disengagement process is most evident at the high school level. Even as late as their sophomore year, few dropouts in their study anticipated their impending dropout. These findings suggest something happens internally or externally to dissuade high school students from reaching their expectations.

Student perceptions of the support they receive from their school and their teachers can have a significant influence on their attitudes and behavior (Kauffman, 2001). Variables of teacher interest in (or sensitivity to) students, effectiveness of discipline, and fairness or appropriateness of discipline can be reflective of student alienation and rejection of school (Kauffman, 2001; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). A lack of academic success and demoralizing disciplinary experiences combined with a perception that teachers do not care can lead to feelings that the institution of school has rejected the

student. Kauffman (2001) has said that underachievement and disruptive behavior may be reciprocally reinforcing. Therefore, if the student's motivation is declining, it is possible that disengagement may escalate in intensity until the student leaves school.

The importance of teacher support in students was further emphasized by Croninger and Lee (2001) in their conclusion that social relationships of at-risk students and their teachers are critical in determining whether the student graduates. Dropouts often cite a lack of social and emotional support as a reason for leaving school before graduation. Because dropouts are less likely to have positive relationships at school, with either peers or school faculty, they are the group that benefits most from teacher support. Teacher support comes in the form of encouragement, guidance in making decisions and foreseeing consequences, emotional support, and information and assistance with personal and school related issues (Croninger and Lee, 2001; Smokowski, Reynolds, & Bezruczko, 1999). Teachers (along with other community members) can be key in providing emotional support, rewarding competence, and promoting self-esteem in at-risk students (Weinreb, 1997). The key is that teachers must both build trust and give actual assistance or guidance to students (Croninger & Lee, 2001).

In general, the support that youth with EBD need is more than emotional support, it is effective teaching, counseling that provides sound guidance, along with behavioral expectations that are clear and attainable. Schools in which students with EBD are most successful have high behavioral and academic expectations and also have the resources to support these students (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). According to the U.S. Department of Education, supportive programs can include prevention and early

intervention as well as individualized services, positive behavioral supports, and collaboration between staff and families.

This review of the literature gives a theoretical justification for the use of supportive strategies with students who have Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities, but much more information will need to be provided to school staff in order to achieve better results and decrease the dropout rate. Specifically, Smokowski, Reynolds, and Bezruczko call for more qualitative studies that foster resilience (1999). The theoretical stance of this literature review is helpful in identifying current hypotheses about the factors most influential to students with EBD. However, the following investigation uses a more personal approach to illustrate actual experiences and evaluate the factors generated by the literature review.

Chapter III: Methodology

The methods and procedures used in this study of students with Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities are explained in this chapter under the headings of (1) research design, (2) sample selection, (3) instrumentation, (4) procedures followed, and (5) method of analysis.

Research Design

The approach of this study was qualitative, with a primary goal of generating insight into the experiences of youth with Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities (EBD). Although the verbal accounts that students gave of their own experiences was quite subjective, they can be regarded as useful. As Smokowski, Reynolds, and Bezruczko (1999) point out, the factors that a student believes to have the most impact on them are what will carry the most importance in how that individual chooses to act. In this sense, the subjectivity of a student's viewpoint is valuable for the effect it has on a student's decisions, attitudes, and behavior.

This investigation used interviews to provide information about students' perceptions and sought to illuminate the factors that are most influential in determining success in school. Interviews mirror the richness and complexity of the individual students' situations by providing anecdotal accounts of experiences. The interviews sought information about what schools can do to have an impact on those with Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities.

The design of the interview protocol is based on the factors that have been identified in the literature as having importance for this group of students. Major factors

identified in the literature include: personal factors of self-efficacy, social skills, academic frustration, and resilience, family factors of the level of parental support, household stress, parental education and unemployment, economic factors of poverty and inequality, and school factors of counseling and tutoring services, perceived disciplinary fairness, teacher support and guidance to students, and faculty who foster personal development and academic skill in students. According to research, these factors are related to the outcomes students with EBD reach in education. As mentioned earlier, this information does not assign causation, but provides school staff with insight about how to shape a student's educational experience to meet their needs. Of all the personal, family, economic, and school factors, the interview protocol focused only on those factors the school can readily influence, namely, personal and school factors. The interviews were conducted according to a protocol of questions that touches on these key factors to gain a sense of student perceptions of these factors.

Sample Selection

This study sought to represent students identified as EBD who were experiencing high levels of risk for academic failure and dropout. The influence of economic disadvantage, and racial inequality, as well as academic and social struggle was sought to be represented in the sample of students. For this reason, interviews were conducted in an inner-city public school building devoted solely to serving students receiving special education under the category of Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities. This EBD program housed students with the highest level of need in the district. Because of the diagnostic rigor that goes into identifying and serving students through special education

under the EBD category, it was assumed that those students who had advanced to the highest level of special education services also had the highest level of symptomatology.

Volunteers were solicited from a small self-contained school of 57 students, grades 9 through 12. Students are referred to the school primarily from the surrounding district of Minneapolis Public Schools. The district served students who are 41% African American and 28% Caucasian, with 67% of the families meeting income requirements for free or reduced price lunch (Minneapolis Public Schools, 2007). The staff of the school fit roughly the same cultural profile as the students and seemed adept at relating to the students in terms of their family and neighborhood contexts.

The eight students who participated in an interview were 15-17 years old in grades 9-11 who were receiving special education services under the category of Emotional Behavioral Disabilities in the spring of 2006. The gender and ethnic background of the eight students reflects the composition of the student body for that school: 5 were African American boys, 2 were African American girls, and 1 was a Caucasian boy. However, bias in the student composition may exist in that the students who were motivated to make the extra effort to bring a consent form home and back may have a higher level of social gregariousness and motivation compared to others receiving special education services under the EBD label. Though a larger sample size would reduce certain biases, eight students has been considered a sufficient number to begin lending insight for this exploration study.

Instrumentation

A semi-structured interview format was used with the eight volunteer students. The interview protocol used both specific and open-ended questions to compare student perceptions with what is stated in the liturature and to gain additional insight into what students believe is valuable in contributing to their success. The interview questions started out by asking for short concrete answers that reflect the factors supported by the literature. The questions then asked for more elaborate and personal answers, leaving room for experiential narratives (See Appendix A for the list of protocol questions).

Procedures Followed

Subjects were selected for an interview through a nonrandom selection of volunteers. Volunteers were obtained by making a request in classrooms and to individual students. Students were approached either in class or between class and given a brief description of the study and told what their participation would involve. They were told that participation was voluntary, and that permission had to be obtained from a parent or legal guardian prior to an interview. Students were also provided with incentives. They were told if they met with the interviewer, they would receive a bottle of "Gatorade" sports drink or a pack of AA batteries. These incentives were suggested by school staff at the onset of the study. Students were then given a consent form to take home and return with the necessary signatures.

Once a consent form was signed by a parent, permission was asked of the classroom teacher for the student to meet with the interviewer. The student was then asked to meet with the interviewer out of the classroom in a side room where the

discussion would confidential. Individual interviews lasting 10 – 20 minutes were conducted with volunteer students during the school day and during nonacademic periods when possible. The interviews were recorded on an audio recording device and then transcribed and analyzed. As mentioned previously, these transcriptions remained confidential to protect the participants' anonymity. The participating students' names were not included on any documents associated with verbal answers, and no information was shared with any school faculty at the students' school regarding an identifiable student.

Obtaining student volunteers was difficult because the students seemed to need to reach a level of trust before agreeing to share their thoughts. Students who volunteered also had to be willing to give their time and energy while receiving little in return. The students were often encouraged by making the appeal that this was their chance to voice their opinions and share their insight to help make schools better. The study was successful, in part, because of the cooperation from the staff who, over the course of a few months of visits, became familiar with the researcher. Once a level of trust and familiarity with the staff was reached, they introduced the interviewer to students and provided a time and a space for the interviewer to meet with students. Perhaps once the students saw that the staff trusted the researcher they, in turn, became more comfortable with the researcher.

Method of Analysis

The analysis of student responses was both categorical, in that they were grouped into the type of school service cited, and anecdotal, in that the content of the student responses were included to illustrate important common elements, themes, and attitudes.

The categorical analysis was a simple tabulation of the type of school service or personal resource most highly endorsed by each student. To minimize subjectivity and to balance the possible interpretations needed in categorizing responses, three independent reviewers, not including the interviewer/researcher, were used. The three reviewers were not associated with the students' school district and did not receive the names of the students or school. The reviewers were trained in academic research, had attained their master's degree in education, and were familiar with the school environment and the services/benefits students might receive. The reviewers independently considered the content of each student's interview as a whole and then categorized each student's interview statements according to the factor that was most highly endorsed.

Each reviewer developed a primary and secondary category that described what the student described as most impactful. For example, consider student "A" who mentioned the benefits of teacher support and guidance as well as the benefits of a particular teacher's instruction, but admited the only thing that keeps him coming to school everyday is the free breakfast and lunch. If student "A's" final response to the question of "what has helped you the most in making it through school?" does indeed reflect the immediate need for him to find physical nourishment, then the category that highlights the service of teachers is not of highest importance to this student compared to

the food service of the school. Agreement between raters was not necessary and all of the raters' primary or secondary categories are included in Appendix B.

Anecdotal analysis of student interviews was included to illustrate important elements, themes, and attitudes students share by comparing student responses for each question in the interview. Direct quotations as well as descriptions of responses were included to provide a synthesized analysis of commonalities or specific comments that provide insight into what students value. The term "helped" was used in the initial directions of the interview and in many of the questions to serve as the framework in guiding the type of information the students should supply. This encouraged students to weigh their comments according to how much positive benefit they perceived for each item. Topical questions posed in the interview allowed for a comparison of specific school factors, services, and benefits found to be of importance in the school retention and success of students with EBD in literature. Direct comparisons were then made between the critical analysis of the current research and the students' responses.

Chapter IV: Results and Discussion

The data gathered by interviewing students who received special education services under the category of Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities was analyzed categorically and anecdotally. The categorical results indicated a strong endorsement for teachers' ability to have influence over the students' success. The role that teachers played in contributing to their success divided between, supportive, academic, and unspecified roles. After teachers, the students cited their personal resources and family almost equally in terms of frequency. Looking closer, anecdotally, into what the students expressed in their statements, diverse strategies and resources the students found in navigating their way through life and school were identified. A prominent feature to their responses were stories of people/individuals who played roles of support or guidance in their lives.

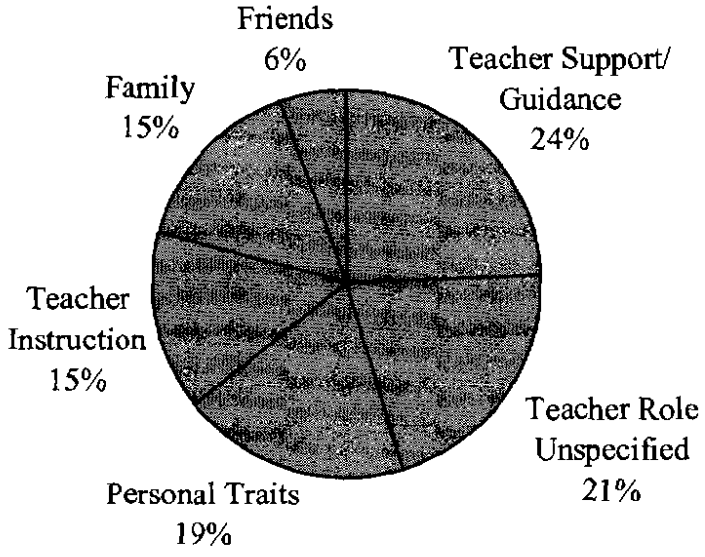
Categorical Analysis

The main factor each student cited in his or her interview was summarized into both primary and secondary categories by three independent raters. The categories were formed according to the factor that was judged to be endorsed most highly for each student. The categories contained references to both who was most influential to the students and what was done that was most influential (see Figure 4.1 for a summary of the categories).

In terms of who was most influential, teachers were reportedly the highest contributor to a student's school success. Of the primary and secondary categories generated by the raters, teachers and other school staff are mentioned in 60% of the

categories. Teacher support, generally on an emotional and social level, was identified in 24% of the categories. Academic support or instruction was identified in 15% of the categories. Students reportedly drew from their personal resources or traits in 19% of the categories. Families were estimated to be a contributor to a student's school success in 15% of the categories. Students' mothers were primarily cited in the family categories. A student's peers were only estimated to be the contributor to a student's success in 6% of the categories.

Figure 4.1. Chart of Student Categories



Anecdotal Analysis

An overview of the students' responses by each question serves to illustrate any differences and commonalities across the students. The first four interview questions asked the students to think about their personal traits of self-efficacy, social skills, frustration levels, and resilience. Questions five through eight of the interview

investigated the school factors of counseling services, tutoring services, perceived disciplinary fairness, and teacher support and guidance to students. Questions nine through fourteen of the interview were open ended questions that asked to students to identify aspects that did and did not help them in school and their connections to others at school. The final question, number fifteen, asked the students to describe what has helped them most in making it through school. An analysis of how the eight students answered these fifteen interview questions follows.

Personal factors. The personal factors listed in research about students with Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities places a high importance on a student's ability to perceive themselves as competent, to demonstrate determination, to have good interpersonal skills and social problem solving ability, and to demonstrate resilience in response to adversity. Academic frustration was listed in research as being a risk factor that hinders a student's success.

The first question in the interview asked, "Do you believe you can be successful in school?" Students were unanimously affirmative that each student knew they were capable of success. Five of the eight students included stipulations that they could be successful as long as they did things like kept themselves busy, did their work, stayed enrolled in school, or understood their schoolwork. Another student based her belief of her own success off the success of others that she sees around her, and one talked about her own success as an illustration that she can be successful in school.

The second question asked the students how well they communicate with others in attempt to gauge their social skills. Four of the eight students gave one word answers

consisting of "alright," "fine," "pretty good" or "very well" with no elaboration. Others said they did not communicate well because of their poor vocabulary or that they had better written skills than verbal skills. One student replied that she is a "people person" who is funny and well liked, and the last student rated himself as a four on a scale of one to ten, saying that he only talked to his teacher at school.

Question three tried to gauge the students' level of academic frustration by asking: "Are you frustrated about your school work?" Six students said they were not frustrated about their school work. They made comments indicating their school work is "no problem," "too easy," or that they liked it. One student said he was only frustrated when he is bored. Another said that he was frustrated when he "does not get it" and teachers move on.

The fourth question in the interview asked the eight students about their resilience. It asked, "How well do you bounce back after a setback?" Seven of the eight students needed a further explanation that included the directions that they were to think about how well they overcome challenges that they face. Once the question was clarified, five had a positive view of their ability to rise to a challenge with one reporting: "I'm really good at that, I've dealt with a lot of things in my life... I used to have bad grades and I was in jail for awhile." Another reported that, "It's all about learning. If you mess up something, you got to do it again. Then you won't make that mistake once you completed it." Two students admitted they were not sure how to answer the question saying: "I don't know how to answer that" and "I don't even know." The final student offered, "I ask a teacher for help on a question if I don't know it."

These four interview questions regarding personal factors showed consistency with academic research in that all the students believed they could be successful in school. This finding indicated a high level of optimism. This is consistent with research in the sense that these eight students have made it through the majority of their school careers in spite of numerous risk factors and endorsed their ability to believe they will succeed. On the second question, perhaps the most telling element of their responses was their relative lack of elaboration when asked how well they communicate with others. These one word answers when combined with the students who had a less favorable opinion of their communication abilities reflects research indicating social skills may be a common deficiency for students with EBD. On the third question, the fact that none of the students admitted any significant academic frustration is a departure from the research that indicates that academic frustration can be a significant hurtle. The fourth question regarding resiliency reflected how the majority of the eight students knew they could overcome their difficulties. This, coupled with their belief in their ability to be successful in school, mirrors the importance of attitude, personal outlook, and determination as supported by Werner and Smith's (2001) research on resiliency.

School factors. The school factors listed in research about students with Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities emphasize teacher support and guidance to students, resources like tutoring or counseling services, the availability of staff, and the perceived fairness of discipline. Questions five through eight of the interview seek to gage the perceived effect of these factors on the sample of students.

The fifth interview question asks: "How much have school counselors helped you?" Six of the eight students had little or no contact with school counselors. This question was broadened to include school social workers for students who had not utilized school counselors. One student shared that school counselors and school social workers helped by "talking to me and giving me positive things to look for." Another student shared that one social worker helped him "deal with problems. If, like, problems happen in school we'd go down there and talk to her and she'd find out a way for us to leave those problems behind." Two other students shared that counselors and social workers assisted them by talking to them. One student said that school social workers helped by contacting parents to get permission for a student to leave school and go to a job. Another student shared that school counselors have "done a lot of stuff for me here because my living situation was really messed up." She went on to share that a counselor found transportation for her to get to school. This aid with transportation was echoed by another student who received rides from his social worker when he missed the bus. This student also reported his social worker "gives me help with finding things to do over the summer." One reported not having contact with either school counselors or school social workers.

Question six asked about tutoring and individual instruction by asking: "How much has one-on-one teaching helped you?" Five students said they benefited from one-on-one teaching. Their remarks included, "I learn a lot from when people try to be patient and teach me by themselves" and, "[We are] learning a lot because we're not moving as fast as the class, going at my own pace, and I understand better." Another student

admitted that one-on-one teaching helped "a lot, but I don't like it... I don't want to be sitting in a class by myself." Two students said they did not need one-on-one teaching because they did not struggle with the work.

The seventh question asked, "How fairly have you been treated when you've gotten in trouble at school?" Six students said they thought the discipline was fair or kind of fair. One of these responses included the comment: "It's my fault for my actions and whatever responsibility comes to me I gotta do it." Another of these students shared that "I know when I do stuff I'm supposed to have my discipline. So that's what happens. I fight. I get suspended. That is what happens." Of the two students who disagreed with the fairness of discipline they received said: "Teachers try to break my arms. I've been called names by the teachers and stuff. I've been assaulted, criticized, so its not very professional." The other student who described being treated unfairly said, "If they suspend me I won't come back the next day or I won't talk to the staff or students."

The eighth question attempted to elicit responses about the support and guidance teachers provide by asking: "Have any teachers helped you get through school?" Two students responded by saying: "No, I can be successful on my own to tell you the truth" and, "Nope, I help myself." Two students reported they benefited from teacher help in the form of instruction they understood. Another said they benefited from teachers who would "talk to me... trying to motivate me to get more work done in class." Another said, "The ones that care, they will sit down and tell you your grades. And they'll try to help you with your work and tell you what work to bring home so you can get your grades up. That is as much help as they can give you." One student said all of his teachers helped

him by keeping his behavior in line or by rewarding him for completing his work. The last student said he got into a lot of fights and that he benefited more by having teachers there to talk to rather than to have them teach.

The answers to the four interview questions regarding school factors were consistent with results indicated by academic research. Students in this sample underscored the importance of individual teachers and staff in their school experience. This purpose, as described in research and by the students in this study, can be described as a relationship between staff and student that fosters support and guidance. The help that the students described can be organized into four types: social, emotional, academic, and practical. In the interviews, each of the eight students described a teacher or staff member who went out of their way to help them. The fact that most of the students did not perceive a problem with the fairness of the discipline they received is a little incongruent with research that emphasizes this as a potential risk-factor. However, a larger sample size might be more representative. This group of staff may have been particularly good at developing connections with these students.

Student identified factors. Open ended questions were posed to the students as a way of verifying the students' views of topics already approached by the previous questions. Open ended questions also gave the students more freedom to generate their own topics. Without the parameters of the more specific questions, the students' answers broadened into some new areas, but also contained most of the same sentiments as the former set of questions. Answers to these last seven questions contained the same strong

belief in the value of individual staff's ability to connect with them and to offer support and guidance.

The ninth question began a series of open-ended questions about students' thoughts about school. It asked, "What are your strengths that help you in school?" Two students cited academic areas like math or writing and physical activities like football and gym. One student said his strength was his ability to "stay away from all the drama... like when my classmates act up, I don't act up. I just go to my desk like this and do my work." Similarly, another said it was his ability to stay focused amidst noise. Another cited her ability to listen to her teachers and one cited his ability to challenge his mind. One replied that cussing or smoking cigarettes helps calm her, and another seemed to struggle to provide a clear answer.

Question number ten asked: "What holds you back the most?" Four students said that other students' bad behavior distracts them and sometimes draws them into behaving badly. Another cited gossip among students and staff angers her to the point of fighting: "I be ready to be fighting... even though fighting don't solve anything, it just makes me feel better." One student said it was teachers misunderstanding him that angers him. Another student said that math held him back because of his inconsistent education in this area: "They just taught me some things and thought I was ready and skipped that part that I needed to learn that I hadn't learned yet." One simply cited reading without elaborating further.

The eleventh question in the interview asked, "Who at school has helped you the most?" Of the eight students, six cited nonacademic or personal help from staff as being

most the beneficial factor. Two students mentioned staff and a principal who "just talk with me." One student reported one of the support staff helped her by keeping her "on track" and telling her "what to do and what not to do." Another student listed teachers who helped her when she was having personal problems. Her comments include:

> I usually come to school about 12 or 1 o'clock each day... but [the teacher] knows what my living situation is and she lets that slide... I can trust [another teacher] because I've known her for so long, like if I was down or anything and I needed to tell her something or something was running through my mind or something was wrong I could sit there and be comfortable to tell her. Ms. [a third teacher], she stands by my side most of the time when I cry out, when I ask for help.

One student said a social worker helped a lot particularly in helping to arrange transportation. Another student, now a 10th grader, cited his seventh grade teacher who was fun and who he still visits occasionally. Another cited a teacher's instructional ability: "We could understand her the way she was doing it. And she would take the time. If she thinks that somebody don't understand, she would be repeating it for us again." Another student mentioned it is usually the principal and some of the teachers who helped him. He described the difference in teacher's motivation to help the students: "Some of [the teachers] see the potential in me... and they feel motivated to help... there are other kids who don't really want to be helped."

Question number twelve poses the question: "Who at school has not helped you?" Seven of the students said that all or most staff have helped in some way. One student echoed her previous comment that staff who gossip are not helpful.

Question thirteen asks: "Do you feel connected to others at school?" Four students needed clarification of the term "connected." Explanations given included: "feeling close to them or like you can trust them," "like if you feel bonded or friendly," or "feeling like you belong." Three students agreed they felt connected. Two said they sometimes felt connected. One said they did not know. Another student said he did not feel connected and that "usually I stay home and play games." One student said he felt connected to staff, but not to students.

Question fourteen asks: "Who do you feel most connected to at school?" Three students said both staff and peers. One student who said both students and staff elaborated by saying: "I'd say the kids because I'm still a kid myself but then I feel connected to teachers too because I see what they go through with these kids. Like it is kinda 50-50." Another indicated both friends and teachers citing the family connections he had to them. Another three students mentioned teachers exclusively, with one describing a teacher who "tries to help find me harder work and she tries to help me with my career that I want, to help me get ready for college and everything." One student indicated friends only, and another stated that he did not feel connected to anyone at school.

Question fifteen was the last question in the interview. The question was designed to serve as a summary of the topics presented in the previous questions by asking the

student to sum up "what has helped you the most in making it through school?" Four students included their mothers and family in their answers, three mentioned teachers as having helped them, and one cited his principal exclusively. Another said staying out of trouble and having teachers around to "keep me on the right track" is what helped him the most. One student said being isolated from others helped him be "on-task." Another cited his attitude: "You got to have a good attitude to be in school." And one generally said it is having family and friends be "there for me, if I needed them." One student's explanation was that it was his mother's ability to be "here everyday to help me" as well as his own ability to have survived. Similarly, another student says it was his "mom getting me up every day... telling me I got to go to school every day" as well as his teachers who help him. Another gave an answer that included "teachers being patient" and his mother being involved with the school. The student went on to talk about the need to reduce the dropout rate by reducing the amount of fighting in schools and by providing childcare programs for young parents to remain in school. Finally as one student puts it:

> I know that I put these teachers through some hectic s*** though. Just like they put me through some hectic stuff too... I'd say that Ms. [principal] is the reason why I'm still in school, because she's the one that just sat there and told me what is going to be best for me."

Both categorically and anecdotally, the students' reflections on the different aspects of school contain many stories about how they individually drew from strength they found both around and within them. The students' perceptions of the impact the

school staff had on their success in terms of supporting them can be seen as a valuable vote of confidence for educators' ability to have an impact on a student's success. The last question in the interview validates the sentiments described by the students throughout the interview in regards to the importance of educators' involvement in their lives. It is also the most open-ended question posed to the students, giving them an opportunity to think of any type of factor that has helped them in making it through school. The candid remarks the students provided in response to the last question reflect an emphasis on one factor that was not highlighted by the topic questions earlier in the interview. Half of the students identified their family, and, particularly their mothers, as having had the greatest influence on their success. The importance of family support was identified in academic research on students with EBD as a major protective and risk factor that potentially shapes the outcomes reached by these students. Given the results of this study, parent and educator support should be considered together as the type of aid these students most endorsed.

Chapter V: Summary and Conclusion

A review of the purpose, design, and findings of this study along with conclusions and recommendations are explained in this chapter under the headings of (1) Summary, (2) Conclusions, and (3) Recommendations.

Summary

Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities are hindered in their learning by their social, emotional, or behavioral dysfunction which may result in poor social relationships, inattention, inappropriate or disruptive behavior, depression, or anxiety. Students in this disability group are likely to have poor grades, fail courses, and have high absenteeism. It is estimated that 75% of EBD youth have been expelled or suspended at least once. As a group, they are 50% likely to drop out of school and among those with serious emotional disturbances over 50% will have been arrested within five years of leaving school. Because students who have Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities tend to show poor scholastic and social outcomes, the intent of this study was to investigate the factors that have the potential to contribute to success among this population or group.

The risk and protective factors found in academic research on students with EBD and students who drop out can be categorized by personal, family, economic, and school factors. Among personal factors, negative attributes include an external locus of control, low self-esteem, low sociability, low educational aspiration, school adjustment factors, pregnancy, absenteeism, and course failure. Positive attributes can include reading ability, empathy, adaptability, interpersonal skills, ability to problem solve, and having

pro-social peers. Studies on resilience in response to stressful events point to personal competence, determination, personal outlook, and the importance of building self-efficacy through facing challenges with some level of support.

Family factors identified in literature of students with EBD and students who drop out include positive attributes that include the use of firm, reasoned, and predictable discipline. Strong parental support is said to increase a student's chances of attaining post-secondary education and can contribute to more positive classroom behavior. Family factors that can exacerbate the struggles that students face include household stress, mobility, unemployment, low parental education, and single parenting.

Some family factors are interrelated with economic disadvantage. Poverty is thought to be the factor with the largest influence on the lives of students who drop out and is associated with poor outcomes on many fronts: educational, social, and in terms of physical and mental health. As educators, it is not appropriate to assign causation to this correlation, but instead, use a knowledge of these struggles to provide insight into a student's response to stress.

School factors that negatively impact students with EBD or students who drop out include overcrowding, a lack of resources and services such as tutoring and counseling services, negative interactions with peers and staff, suspensions and disciplinary action, and school mobility. A school's positive influence can include teacher support through encouragement, guidance in making decisions and foreseeing consequences, emotional support, and information and assistance with personal and school related issues. Beyond emotional support, schools should utilize effective teaching, counseling that provides

sound guidance, behavioral expectations that are clear and attainable, and collaboration between staff and families.

Because personal and school factors are more readily influenced by educators than economic and family factors, those two factors were further investigated qualitatively. A sample of high school students who were placed in a federal setting level four EBD program were interviewed to determine if their perceptions reflected the personal and school factors found in the literature and what influences they attributed to be strongest in their school success.

The students' reflections on their school experience supported what has been found in literature in that there was strong evidence for the importance of interpersonal relationships both at home and at school. Both the literature and the student interviews emphasized the benefits of practical and emotional support given to students by staff and parents. In all, the highest student endorsements were split evenly between teacher and parental support. The support described by the students could commonly be characterized as having an adult 'be there for them.' They described being helped by adults through academic and personal guidance. This personal guidance was described as including things like: how to stay "out of trouble" or stay "on the right track," listening to them, encouraging them, arranging transportation, and accommodating a student's work schedule. In all, the guidance received from adults gave the respondents practical answers to meet their immediate needs and leave them with a feeling they were supported in their endeavor to succeed.

Conclusions

The eight student interviews coupled with current research provided some evidence for the benefit of supportive relationships in contributing to the scholastic success of youth with EBD. The sample of students in this study focused heavily on the interpersonal aspects of school and their lives, emphasizing the benefits of practical and emotional support provided by staff and parents. How the students were treated, supported, and regarded, was what they highlighted as most important.

Recommendations

The emphasis on interpersonal factors may be attributed to the staff at the site of the study in their ability to connect and relate to the students on a personal level, or it may be evidence of a common underlying need of EBD students in general. For EBD students, it may be challenging for school staff to focus on meeting the students' needs instead of distancing themselves from the students with severe behavior. Future investigation may uncover how universal the need for interpersonal support is for EBD youth.

The student interviews also seemed to present an emphasis on environmental factors rather than on personal/internal factors. As mentioned earlier, theories on the causes of EBD are split between internal and environmental sources. This study presented eight students who did not focus on inherent limitations in their ability even though the interview questions addressed personal and internal factors. More research is needed to determine whether the causes of EBD are internal or external. However, if environmental factors are considered to shape the students' development, then perhaps

they can also shape their success. More research is needed to measure the progress being made with EBD students in schools to determine the impact of environmental factors.

This study concludes that there is some evidence that schools can be influential in moderating the interactions between students and their environment by bolstering the student's own coping resources, by building perseverance, and by fostering future optimism through supportive relationships. School staff can serve youth with EBD through emotional support, effective teaching, counseling that provides sound guidance, and behavioral expectations that are clear and attainable. Supportive programs can include prevention and early intervention as well as individualized services, positive behavioral supports, and collaboration between staff and families.

The key is to empower students with EBD through support that enables them to experience success over the challenges they face. For schools, a policy of support should foster a realization of a student's own abilities to overcome adversity. A student's personal development may ideally involve gaining self-direction and motivation along with an ability to make rational decisions and gain control of oneself and one's future. Coupling personal development with the acquisition of academic knowledge and skill is a broad design for a school's role. This policy of personal development as well as academic development is well suited to the needs of struggling students whose personal challenges need attention before academics can be pursued.

As Kutash and Duchnowski (2004) indicate, there is a growing focus on schools as providers of mental health services. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is an example of public education's commitment to addressing the broader, and sometimes

mental health, needs of students who would otherwise be excluded from public education. Kortering and Blackorby (1992) state students with behavioral disorders have presented public education with one of its greatest challenges: to address their intense and often nonacademic needs.

The magnitude of change capable of being produced by schools alone is limited. An ideal situation would include policy changes that benefit the whole environment around youth with EBD. Schools seeking to take a more holistic approach to student development could benefit by collaborating with community organizations, local agencies, and private professionals oriented towards achieving positive outcomes for adolescents. The needs of youth with Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities are diverse and changing. Schools will need to exert tremendous flexibility and ingenuity in addressing the broad array of needs presented by these students to be effective.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Greeting and Introduction: "I just want to talk to you for a few minutes to help me understand what things in school have helped you so far. I am going to record our conversation on this tape recorder so that I can include your answers in a study that I'm doing. My study is an attempt to figure out how to help students in EBD programs to succeed. I appreciate your thoughts about what has helped you get through school and hope you will share your insight with me. Everything you say will be confidential, your name will not be included with your answers. Your participation is voluntary and you may decline any question or stop answering questions at any time. Do you have any questions?"

Demographics

a. Race

b. Gender

c. Age "How old are you?"

d. Grade "What grade are you in?"

Personal Factors

1. Self-Efficacy: "Do you believe you can be successful in school?"
2. Social Skills: "How well do you communicate with others?"
3. Academic Frustration: "Are you frustrated about your school work?"
4. Resilience: "How well do you bounce back after a setback?"

School Factors

5. Counseling Services: "How much have school counselors helped you?"
6. Tutoring Services: "How much has one-on-one teaching helped you?"
7. Perceived Disciplinary Fairness: "How fairly have you been treated when you've gotten in trouble at school?"
8. Teacher Support & Guidance To Students: "Have any teachers helped you get through school?" "Tell me what some teachers have done to help you."

Open-Ended Questions About School

9. "What are your strengths that help you in school?"
10. "What holds you back the most?"
11. "Who at school has help you the most?"
12. "Who at school has not helped you?"
13. "Do you feel connected to others at school?"
14. "Who do you feel most connected to?"

Final Question

15. "Before answering this final question I am going to give you two minutes to think of your answer. Also I would like to say that if you are upset by any questions or want to follow up this discussion please see your principal or school psychologist. Here is the final question: What has helped you the most in making it through school?"

Note: A follow up question such as "can you tell me more about that?" may be posed after a one word answer to elicit a longer response.