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Kathleen Darby Geddes Jay

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Walden University
2022

Abstract

Perceived College Retention Factors Affecting Postsecondary Students With Emotional Behavioral Disorders With Internalizing Behaviors

by

Kathleen Darby Geddes Jay

MS, Walden University, 2009

BA, Western Washington University, 1995

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

February 2022

Abstract

College persistence rates for students with emotional behavioral disorders (EBD) are lower than same age peers. College students with EBD manifesting internalizing behaviors who graduated from one independent northeastern therapeutic high school (INTHS) had low first-year college retention rates despite high college admission rates. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceived factors that may affect first-year college retention rates for the students from one INTHS who have EBD with internalizing behaviors. The theories that grounded this study were Tinto's model of institutional departure, with Braxton et al.'s later modifications, and Forber-Pratt and Zape's disability identity development model. Data were collected from semistructured interviews with 12 graduates of the INTHS. Data analysis included a priori, open, and axial coding for thematic analysis. Findings included factors that may increase first-year college retention of INTHS students: explicit lessons devoted to disability identity development in high school, normalizing gap years, and encouraging the use of disabilities and support services in college. Implications for social change include better preparation for young adults with EBD transitioning from high school to college. Findings may contribute to stronger first-year college retention outcomes for these individuals, which may impact their families and communities positively and help other schools with similar populations make more informed transition preparation choices as well.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables v

List of Figures vi

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study 1

Background 2

Problem Statement 4

Purpose of the Study 5

Research Question 6

Conceptual Framework 7

Nature of the Study 9

Definitions 10

Assumptions 11

Scope and Delimitations 12

Limitations 13

Significance 13

Summary 14

Chapter 2: Literature Review 16

Literature Search Strategy 17

Conceptual Frameworks and Theoretical Foundation 18

Tinto’s Early Model of Institutional Departure 19

Critiques of Tinto’s Model 22

Braxton and Colleagues Revisions of Tinto 25

Disability Identity Development Model 28

Literature Review..30

Federal Legislation Related to Youths With Disabilities 31

Defining Emotional Disturbance and Emotional and Behavioral Disorders 36

EBD Prevalence and Correlates in Youths 42

Public High School IEP Transition Planning and Support 45

Alternative/Therapeutic School Transition Planning and Support 48

Grant-Funded Transition Planning and Support for EBD Students...................... 49

EBD Prevalence and Correlates in College Students 51

College Retention Supports 52

Summary 56

Chapter 3: Research Method...59

Research Design and Rationale 59

Role of the Researcher...62

Methodology 65

Participant Selection 66

Sampling 67

Instrumentation 68

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection 70

Data Analysis Plan 73

Trustworthiness 75

Credibility 75

Transferability 76
Dependability and Confirmability 76
Reflexivity 77
Ethical Procedures 78
Summary 80
Chapter 4: Results 81
Setting 81
Demographics 82
Data Collection 82
Data Analysis 85
Coding Preparation 85
First Cycle Codes: Attribute, a Priori, and Open 86
Axial and Thematic Coding 91
Results 93
Theme 1: High School Preparation Successful 94
Theme 2: High School Preparation Unfulfilled Needs 99
Theme 3: College Supports Working 104
Theme 4: College Supports Not Utilized or Lacking 110
Discrepant Cases 113
Evidence of Trustworthiness 115
Credibility 116
Transferability 117

Dependability and Confirmability 117

Reflexivity 118

Summary 118

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations 120

Interpretation of the Findings 121

Theme 1: High School Preparation Successful 121

Theme 2: High School Preparation Unfulfilled Needs 127

Theme 3: College Supports Working 132

Theme 4: College Supports Not Utilized or Lacking 137

Limitations of the Study 140

Recommendations for Further Research 141

Implications 142

Positive Social Change 142

Theoretical Implications 144

Recommendations for Practice 145

Conclusion 148

References 150

Appendix A: Interview Protocol of INTHS Graduates 182

Appendix B: Letter of Cooperation Confidential Version 184

Appendix C: Research Flyer Confidential Version 185

List of Tables

Table 1. Domains of Disability Identity Development 30

Table 2. Examples of First Cycle a Priori Codes 88

Table 3. Examples of First Cycle Open Codes 91

Table 4. Four Major Themes With Subthemes 93

List of Figures

Figure 1. Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure 21

Figure 2. Theory for Student Persistence in Residential Colleges and Universities 27

Figure 3. Example of Attribute Coding Block Included in Each Interview Worksheet ... 86

Figure 4. Proposed Disability Modification of the Theory for Student Persistence in Residential Colleges and Universities 145

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Although students classified as emotionally disturbed (ED) accounted for only 1% of the special education population in the 2016–2017 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part B Child Count data (U.S. Department of Education, 2017), the percentage of students estimated to struggle with emotional or behavioral problems at some point in their career is 14%–20% (Mitchell et al., 2019). Historically, many special education students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) have not experienced successful postsecondary outcomes. Students with EBD diagnoses are graduating high school at lower levels than their nondisabled peers and peers with learning disabilities (LD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Freeman et al., 2019; Harrison et al., 2017).

Students with EBD are also beginning college at lower rates (10.8%; Harrison et al., 2017) than nondisabled peers (66%; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). College persistence rates for students with EBD are lower than same age peers (Davis & Cumming, 2019) and peers with LD and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Davis & Cumming, 2019). Postsecondary employment rates for students with EBD and job satisfaction levels for these young adults are also below peers and other students with identified disabilities (Harrison et al., 2017). Although some educational programs focused on this group in the past few decades, this population still needs a great deal of attention to find success during their schooling years and beyond. One independent therapeutic school whose students all have EBD diagnoses has been watching its students struggle with poor postsecondary outcomes, specifically poor college retention as

students graduate out of the therapeutic setting. The school administrators wanted a better understanding of the gap in practice occurring for their students and wanted to support their transition with more evidence-based best practices to encourage stronger postsecondary outcomes (head of school, personal communication, January 21, 2021).

This chapter includes background information about this independent school educating students with EBD and the significant struggles they face when moving to a postsecondary setting. Also included are a description of the problem, the purpose, and the significance of this study. The study's limitations and assumptions are discussed, along with definitions of keywords used throughout the study. Research questions, the conceptual framework, and methodology are briefly described in this chapter and expanded upon in Chapters 2 and 3.

Background

One independent northeastern therapeutic high school (INTHS) has seen its students struggle with poor postsecondary outcomes despite intensive intervention and therapeutic supports given at the high school. The school staffs four full-time psychologists and a full-time school psychology doctoral intern to support the social-emotional needs of students at any moment in the day. With fewer than 100 students, the teaching staff of 20 faculty members, a learning specialist, and a college counselor shows a remarkable level of personalized educational opportunities for the student population.

Self-dubbed "the private school for public good," the school is composed of students from a variety of backgrounds because almost all student tuitions are financed through the home school district the student is from when it was determined that the

district placement could not meet the needs of the student. Some are Carter funded, in which families have to pay the tuition up front and the district reimburses the family. Others are Connors funded in which the district pays the school directly. Approximately 70% of the student population is currently Carter funded, and 30% is Connors funded, which helps increase the school's socio-economic diversity and allows the school to admit students on a need blind basis (chief financial and operating officer, personal communication, January 13, 2022).

Despite the support in place for these students with EBD, the school struggles with the successful transition of their graduates from the small therapeutic environment to a variety of solid college placements. Although the percentage of students with EBD entering college from this school at over 90% is well above national rates of students with EBD entering college (10.8%; Harrison et al., 2017) and nondisabled peers entering college (66%; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021), first-year college retention for their students is around 50% (college counselor, personal communication, June 11, 2020) and well below nondisabled peers (Harrison et al., 2017). The school had a gap in knowledge for best practices to meet the needs of their unique students and wanted to find out what types of skills, transition supports, and college environments would help their students find more retention success once they begin college (head of school, personal communication, February 25, 2021). The school also wanted its graduates to have every chance of success in their postsecondary schooling endeavors to promote their well-being and life satisfaction.

What this INTHS was seeing in first-year college retention was also being experienced more broadly among students in all disability categories. Lower college retention and lower college graduation rates are experienced by students with disabilities compared to their nondisabled peers (Kutscher & Tuckwiller, 2019). In addition, student mental health has been strongly correlated to student retention (Eisenberg et al., 2016; Schwitzer et al., 2018), which was relevant to the INTHS population addressed in the current study.

Problem Statement

The problem addressed in this study was that college students with EBD manifesting internalizing behaviors who graduated from one INTHS had low first-year college retention rates. The high school counselor at the INTHS for college bound students with EBD noted that first-year college retention rates for their high school graduates averaged around 50% (personal communication, June 11, 2020). National statistics indicated first-year college retention rates for all students is 74% (Shapiro et al., 2019). Postsecondary students with EBD have poor transition-to-college persistence outcomes (Lyman et al., 2016). At the INTHS, the issue of understanding and improving the college transition experience for their graduates is so urgent that it has been part of the school's strategic plan for the last 3 years (head of school, personal communication, February 25, 2021). In addition, the head of school informed all faculty that a full academic program review was being started in fall of 2021 to investigate how to better prepare graduates for the transition to postsecondary education (personal communication, February 25, 2021).

A better understanding of what perceived factors affected the college persistence of graduates at this INTHS was needed to better prepare students for the first year of college. Although students with EBD are seldom provided tools within the secondary system to successfully transition (Harrison et al., 2017; Morningstar, Lombardi, et al., 2017), some research into best practices for making this transition has indicated better outcomes for students with EBD (Yeager, 2018). A small amount of research has demonstrated successful evidence-based transition models for students with EBD (Davis & Cumming, 2019). Most research in this area has included qualitative methodology addressing the social supports that students with EBD rely on for transition (Yaeger et al., 2020). The INTHS leaders did not know what transition tools were helping or missing from their transition model and were open to learning what they could do to increase their graduates' postsecondary persistence (head of school, personal communication, January 21, 2020). Because students who graduate with a postsecondary degree have greater and more varied job opportunities (Kutscher & Tuckwiller, 2019), understanding what factors would increase the first-year retention of INTHS graduates with EBD toward postsecondary degree attainment was important to the students, the school leaders, the teachers, and the community (head of school, personal communication, January 21, 2020).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceived factors that may affect first-year college retention rates for students from the INTHS who have EBD with internalizing behaviors. Investigating first-year college persistence of a group

of students with EBD diagnoses highlighted issues affecting postsecondary retention based on best practices in the research literature (Davis & Cumming, 2019; Yeager, 2018; Yaeger et al., 2020) and Tinto's retention model (1975, 1993) with later modifications (Braxton et al., 2013). The added perspective of the disability identity model (Forber-Pratt & Zape, 2017; Forber-Pratt et al., 2020) in analyzing results was used because it was relevant to the specific study population. A deeper understanding of what was successful and unsuccessful for this student population in college persistence may fill the gap in practice for transition planning with this population for the INTHS (see Lloyd et al., 2019). The INTHS leadership made clear that they were interested in integrating the results of this research into their continuing efforts to review transition planning for their students to prepare them more effectively for the shift to college after graduation (head of school, personal communication, February 24, 2021). The teachers and leaders in the INTHS feel a sense of responsibility for students after the shift to college and often maintain close ties in communication once students have graduated from high school (college counselor, personal communication, June 11, 2020). Given these close ties, school faculty had a commitment to use feedback from this research to create more successful futures for their students. Better results in first-year college retention for students with EBD would create positive social change in impacting the life outcomes of this group of students with EBD and their families and communities.

Research Question

The study was intended to understand better the experiences of graduates from this independent therapeutic school as they moved from a small therapeutic environment

into a variety of colleges and universities. An exploration of their experiences during the first year of college that impacted first-year retention may help the therapeutic school better understand what skills, supports, and services would encourage future students' retention as they move to college. The following research question guided the study: What perceived factors affect first-year college retention of graduates of one INTHS with internalizing EBD behaviors?

Conceptual Framework

The theories that grounded this study were Tinto's (1975, 1982, 1987, 1993) model of institutional departure, which focuses on student integration and motivation, self-determination, resilience, and retention, with the modifications to the model that Braxton and colleagues later contributed (Braxton et al., 2000; Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Braxton et al., 2011; Braxton et al., 2013) in student culture and financial impacts. To tighten the theoretical scope to the studied population, I used the disability identity development model (Forber-Pratt & Zape, 2017; Forber-Pratt et al., 2020) to explore how the ED of the students and their identity within the disability community may influence their first-year college persistence.

Tinto's student retention model had been applied in recent studies on the persistence of students to college (Baker et al., 2021; Xu & Webber, 2018) and often with groups that may be disadvantaged in beginning the college process, such as first-generation college students (Tucker & McKnight, 2019). Tinto (1975, 1982, 1987, 1993) focused on the factors that students enter college with and what happens to students after they arrive on a campus that influence how capable they may be in persisting in the

college environment. Tinto (1987) also noted that students who depart college the first year have struggled with a combination of academic and social adjustments. Tinto (1993) found that 75% of first-year college departures were connected to nonacademic reasons, and focused on three nonacademic areas that affect retention: financial, psychological, and institutional.

Braxton et al. (2004) added to Tinto's 1993 model and noted that it was the most used and most empirically sound model in education research on college retention. In their adaptation of the model of student departure, Braxton et al. created two variations from Tinto's original: a revised model for residential colleges and universities and a revised model for commuter colleges and universities (2013). These modifications included newer research on how culture, identity, and financial resources impact student retention. Although these modifications included important cultural and identity factors, I added the disability identity development model (see Forber-Pratt & Zape, 2017; Forber-Pratt et al., 2020) to further strengthen the theoretical foundation of the current study.

Tinto's model (1993) with Braxton et al.'s (2013) modifications aligned with the study addressing the perceived factors influencing first-year retention of students with ED beginning college because they focused on factors that should be in place before starting college to succeed and types of college settings that are most beneficial for students to persist. Because Tinto and Braxton delineated areas needed for the success of undergraduate students to persist given the challenge of the college environment, the revised model guided research development and the process of data collection. In addition, the disability identity development model (see Forber-Pratt & Zape, 2017;

Forber-Pratt et al., 2020) was used to understand better the disability identity development stage that could also be a factor in the college persistence of EBD students. This model had been used in recent studies of college students with disabilities (Abes & Wallace, 2018; Kreider et al., 2020). The disability identity development model also aligned with the current study because it focused on an area of the EBD college students' experience and identity that was not highlighted in Tinto and Braxton's broader focus on college retention and persistence (Braxton et al., 2000; Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Braxton et al., 2011; Braxton et al., 2013; Tinto, 1975, 1982, 1987, 1993) and further guided research development and the process of data collection.

Nature of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore what factors were affecting first-year postsecondary persistence of college students with EBD with internalizing behaviors who graduated from the INTHS. The research design included a semistructured interview protocol to gather data. The study participants were graduates of the INTHS and were students with EBD who enrolled in various colleges to earn a bachelor's degree directly after graduation. Although some students deferred enrollment for a semester or a year for either personal reasons or because of the effects of the COVID-19 lockdowns, all were offered admission to college the fall after spring graduation. The desired number of student participants was 12, and interviewees were recruited from recent years of graduating classes from the school. Given the continuing ties these graduates had to their school, the INTHS's outreach efforts to alumni and their families, and the INTHS's willingness to help connect and recruit students for this

research, this number seemed feasible during the planning stages. It proved to be reachable when recruiting participants.

Using constant comparative analysis of interview scripts, I conducted interpretive descriptions of the perceived retention factors of college students with EBD with internalizing behaviors. A combination of attribute coding, a priori coding based on the framework and the literature review, and open codes based on data gained from interview scripts was used so that both deductive and inductive analysis could be undertaken in the examination of the data (see Adu, 2019; Saldaña, 2013). Second cycle axial codes were then created that spanned the a priori and open codes to identify subthemes and themes across all first cycle codes (see Bingham & Witkowsky, 2021).

Definitions

College retention: The percentage of students who return to the same college or university the second (sophomore) year (Lane, 2020).

Emotional behavioral disorder (EBD): The preferred term for students classified as ED by the IDEA (Kauffman et al., 2018; Yeager et al., 2021).

Emotional disturbance (ED): The name given in the IDEA (2004) legislation to indicate students identified with emotional/behavioral disabilities who have qualified for special education services (Mitchell et al., 2019). Although many in the field have advocated changing both the name and the definition in the legislation, it remains in place to this date.

Evidence-based practices: Educational methods that have been carefully researched and shown to bring value to a learning situation (Kozleski, 2017).

Internalizing behaviors: Under the umbrella of emotional-behavioral disorders, students are often separated into two broad categories of externalizing versus internalizing behaviors. Externalizing behaviors are easily seen: disruption, aggression, and other antisocial behaviors. Internalizing behaviors are often not easily seen: depression, anxiety, and withdrawal (Rose et al., 2018).

Therapeutic high school: Private therapeutic schools, whether day programs or residential programs, to help youths with academic, behavioral, and social-emotional problems (Pfaffendorf, 2017) in a safe, supportive environment.

Assumptions

Several assumptions were made regarding perceived factors affecting first-year college retention of students with EBD with internalizing behaviors. First, within special education, the idea of using interventions or best practices to help a learner to develop educationally or academically to grow to the greatest extent possible is one of the paradigmatic assumptions of educational practitioners. These best practices should meet the student’s individual needs and support them in their journey toward the least restrictive environment and a general education setting, where appropriate. Identifying and using best practices that better facilitate the transition from secondary to postsecondary educational settings is legally required (IDEA, 2004) and morally necessary to increase access for students who have difficulty navigating the transition.

Next, I assumed the young adults who agreed to participate in this basic qualitative study would provide their honest opinions of their perceptions. Each of these former students of the INTHS reflected on their unique experiences during high school

and the first year of college to give a truthful accounting of the types of support and preparation that helped or hindered their first year of college. Finally, the study's findings were analyzed from these study participants' voices based on my deductive and inductive reasoning (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The interviews were nonevaluative, relational, and person-centered so that I could identify the themes in the patterns of the data (see Bazeley, 2013).

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study included 12 adults who had graduated from INTHS and immediately enrolled in a 4-year college or university. Several students deferred enrollment for a semester or a year due to personal choice or COVID-19 lockdowns. Some of these young adults continued with college and graduated from the institution they began. Some of these young adults left college or university for various reasons. Each of these young adults was diagnosed with an EBD as a high school student and may or may not have been continuing treatment for their diagnosis.

During recruitment, no former students who were not emotionally stable enough to handle the interview requirement were included in the study. This determination was based on my experience working with EBD students for over 25 years. All participants were encouraged to stop interviews if they became uncomfortable at any point in the interview process; however, no participants stopped the interview other than to take a drink. Participants were informed that they could opt out at any point in the study, but none chose to do so. These protective steps stemmed from an ethical reluctance to engage

a vulnerable individual and a desire to ensure that no participants were harmed during the interviews.

Limitations

Limitations in a study are those restrictions “out of the researcher’s control” (Theofanidis & Foutouki, 2018, p. 156). In the current study, the most significant factor beyond my control as a researcher was the COVID-19 pandemic that affected all college students.10 of the 12 participants had their college careers impacted by the shutdowns. Second, at the time of the interviews (fall of 2021), many students were experiencing screen time fatigue, and it took slightly longer than expected to find 12 willing participants, though this obstacle was overcome.

In addition, access to participants was a challenge because the INTHS did not keep current contact information on all graduates within the time frame of this study. Although the INTHS staff reached out to parents of these graduates to gather contact information, the pool of college students to recruit from was much smaller than initially anticipated. This slowed data collection but was ultimately overcome.

Significance

This study was significant to the INTHS, the school leadership, the future students of the INTHS, those students’ families and communities, and the field of special education research. Students with EBD with internalizing behaviors have lower first-year retention rates than their nonlabeled counterparts (Francis et al., 2019). Understanding what factors increase or decrease postsecondary persistence of students with EBD with internalizing behaviors may help the INTHS leadership team plan more effectively for

transition supports for this population, which may address the gap in college retention rates for this group (see Lloyd et al., 2019). If better preparation can be put in place for young adults with EBD transitioning from high school to college, stronger first-year college retention outcomes for these individuals may be achieved. In addition, with greater postsecondary success rates, families and communities may benefit from higher levels of independence for these students financially and emotionally, a significant positive social change. Finally, given the smaller amount of research on students with EBD with internalizing behaviors, as opposed to those with externalizing behaviors, the current study added to the body of knowledge for students with internalizing behaviors to further the understanding of supports that are helpful to this population (see Lloyd et al., 2019).

Summary

Current legislation makes clear that students with EBD should have transition plans put in place to help them make the successful transition to postsecondary education (IDEA, 2004). However, many students with EBD are still struggling with this transition, and poor college retention is seen in students with EBD who are moving to college and university settings. One independent therapeutic school has seen poor first-year college retention for their graduates and was interested in finding out from graduates what perceived factors influenced their decisions to stay in college beyond the first year or abandon postsecondary educational pursuits. The purpose of this study was to explore those factors that influenced retention so that the INTHS could implement stronger transition preparations and college placements.

In Chapter 2, I provide a more detailed discussion of Tinto's model of institutional departure with the later modifications and evolution of the framework added to the model by Braxton and colleagues. In addition, the disability identity development model is discussed with its four levels of disability identity constructs. Chapter 2 also addresses the changing laws that affect students with EBD as they move from a secondary to postsecondary setting, including the history and evolution of the terms emotionally disturbed and emotional behavioral disorders as applied to the legislation and research of students served by special education for social-emotional needs. Finally, a full literature review of current research on how best to prepare students with EBD for the transition to college and the best retention supports for students with EBD once they have begun to attend college is provided.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Students from one INTHS have poor first-year college retention, and this school wanted to understand what factors may be affecting their graduates' college retention. In preparation for the current study to explore the perceived factors that affect the college retention of graduates of the INTHS, I performed a search of the literature on related topics. The literature reviewed included seminal works and current peer-reviewed articles focused on the best research-based preparation for students with EBD transitioning to college, and the best evidence-based transition supports that colleges can have in place for students with EBD.

This literature review was intended to describe the factors that affect the college retention of students with EBD. With a thorough review, I used the conceptual framework and this literature review to analyze the gap in practice that is causing poor college retention rates for the graduates of the INTHS. Beginning with the framework of Tinto's model of institutional departure and the later refinements of the model to first discover what helps most students with college persistence, and then adding the disability identity development model to focus on particular issues relevant to the studied population, I explored clear patterns of factors that influence retention. Characteristics of students with EBD and the history of the definition of emotional disturbance in research and legislation were examined. A thorough study of factors that prepare students with EBD for college settings and help in their retention once they have matriculated was detailed.

Literature Search Strategy

Literature for this study was acquired using the Walden University Library's databases including Academic Search Complete, Education Source, Sage Premier 2020, PsycArticles, PsycINFO, Education Database), Arts & Humanities Database, SocINDEX, Eric, Academic Search, Sage Online, Public Health Database, Science Database, CINAHL, MEDLINE, along with Google Scholar. Hundreds of peer-reviewed journal articles were reviewed, using keywords including *transitions*, *transition planning*, *public schools*, *therapeutic schools*, *alternative education placements*, *postsecondary education*, *college*, *universities*, *emotional disturbance*, *emotional behavioral disorders*, *college retention*, *college persistence*, *mental health*, *educational outcomes*, *work outcomes*, *health outcomes*, *transition supports*, and *disability supports*. Terms were searched individually and in various combinations. The primary criteria for my literature search were that each peer-reviewed article was published within the last 5 years or substantiated as the most recent. Focus was placed on literature related to the types of evidence-based transition supports that prepare students with EBD for the transition to college and evidence-based retention supports that assist students with EBD with retention once they have begun college.

I used Zotero Connector to group articles by topics and subtopics to collect and organize the peer-reviewed articles and books. My course texts from Walden were also used to provide information for this review, and the Walden Library document delivery service was used for articles and book chapters. In addition, I purchased multiple books to provide seminal framework references that were important to the development and

evolution of the framework models and to broaden the qualitative voices that were informing my methodology, including authors such as Adu, Saldaña, and Bhattacharya.

Conceptual Frameworks and Theoretical Foundation

The conceptual frameworks guiding this study were Tinto's (1975, 1982, 1987, 1993) model of institutional departure, with the modifications to the model that Braxton and colleagues later contributed (Braxton et al., 2000; Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Braxton et al., 2011; Braxton et al., 2013). In addition, the disability identity development model was also used (Forber-Pratt & Zape, 2017; Forber-Pratt et al., 2020) to further ground the study in a focused manner to discover how the emotional disabilities of the students and their identity within the disability community may influence their first-year college persistence.

Starting with the model of institutional departure, I explored how this model evolved over 30 years with critiques and further research that led Tinto and Braxton and colleagues to reevaluate and revise the theory to better fit current understandings of college retention and perseverance. The evolution of the model throughout the late 20th century and into the 21st century is essential to understand when attempting to use the model for current research in first-year college retention of students with emotional disturbance. The model was further strengthened when combined with the disability identity development model to understand students with EBD who are currently transitioning to 4-year institutions.

Tinto's Early Model of Institutional Departure

Tinto (1975) developed the model of institutional departure to create a theory to help educators better understand the factors that affect the dropout rates of college students. Tinto began with Durkheim's (1951) theory of suicide. However, Durkheim (1951, as cited in Tinto, 1975) argued that psychological dispositions were key to a better theory, moving readers toward the belief that people's individual attributes are most important to consider when looking at motivation toward a goal. When developing a conceptual schema for the model, Tinto had individual attributes, family background, and beliefs going into goal commitment level to earn a degree. This was envisioned as a longitudinal process in which the student gave meaning to all their interactions within the college, including educational and social (Tinto, 1975). Most college dropout decisions reflect student motivation affecting their decisions with a minor nod to institutional commitment.

Seven years later, Tinto (1982) revisited the theory with a cautionary piece about all of the factors that still need to be studied before adding them to the existing college dropout models. Tinto also argued that the goal in creating the model was not to explain all reasons for lack of persistence but to understand the difference between students who leave college because of poor academic standing compared to those who leave voluntarily. Tinto argued that "current theory cannot do or explain everything" (p. 688) and expressed frustration with other scholars not understanding obvious theoretical limits. However, even while expressing this limitation, Tinto noted that it is crucial to continue to improve existing models and consider new ideas such as integrating finances

into the theory; exploring differences among different groups of college students such as gender, race, age, and family income; and looking toward a model that also focuses on 2-year or commuter colleges.

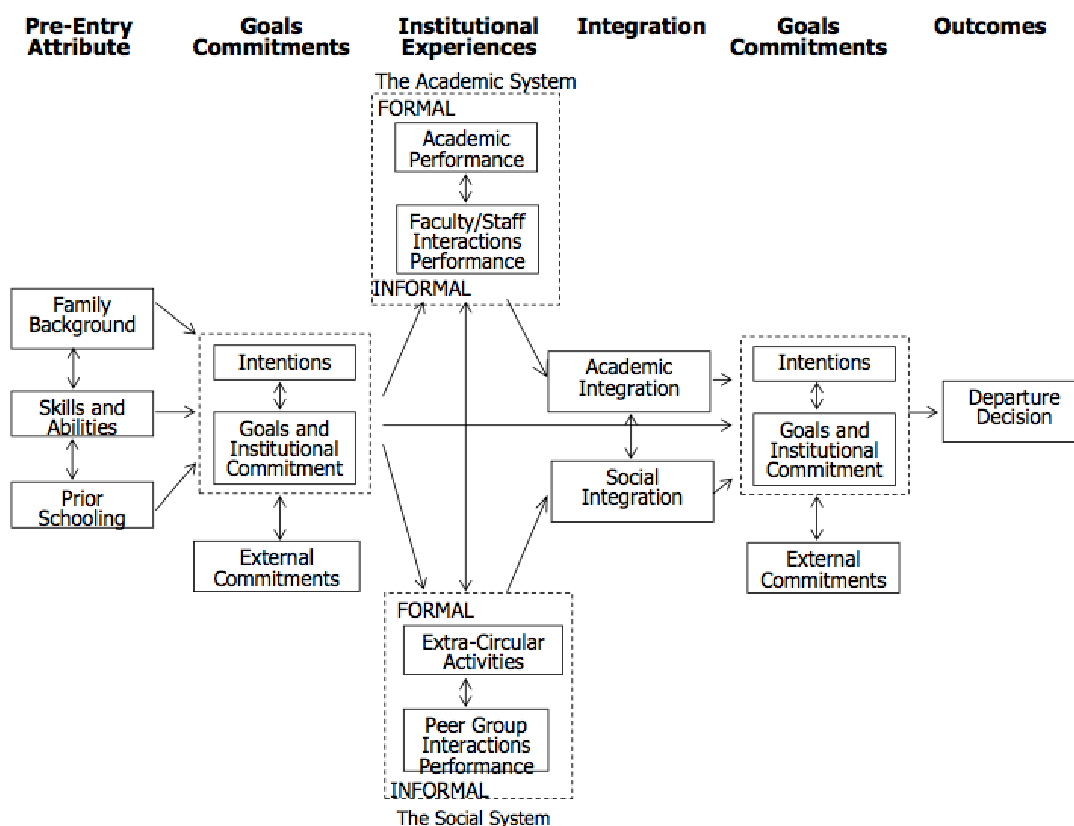
Five years later, Tinto (1987) again revisited the theory. The goal was to synthesize the current research and destigmatize the language of dropout. Tinto added financial resources of the student entering college as an attribute of retention and the influence of family and community in student leaving decisions. For the first time, the role of the institutions in the retention and persistence of students came to the forefront, and specific steps were proposed that all institutions could deploy to increase retention. In 2006, Tinto reflected that the 1987 model "was the concept of integration and the patterns of interaction between the student and other members of the institution especially during the critical first year of college and the stages of transition that marked that year" (p. 3). First-year retention and the transitions that occur during this critical first year of college were central to Tinto's thinking of college completion.

Tinto, somewhat spurred on by critiques of the model, worked to synthesize all of the newest research on retention and college persistence (Tinto, 1993), which included the experience of nontraditional students, racial minority students, and graduate students (see Figure 1). Tinto became more specific in the use of the term dropout, which Tinto felt should only be applied in very limited situations when the failure of a student can be attributed to both the individual and the institution. Tinto noted "in the final analysis, the key to successful student retention lies with the institution, in its faculty and staff, not in any one formula or recipe" (p. 4). Tinto argued that successful retention lies with

institutions caring about their students' social and intellectual development so profoundly that there is a process of constant reflection and engagement by the institution.

Figure 1

Model of Institutional Departure



Note. Adapted from Tinto (1993).

In 2006, Tinto wrote a reflective piece about the future of student retention research and practice, noting that the early studies, along with quite a few other early college retention researchers, "lacked complexity and detail" (p. 3). Tinto noted that the research was based on 4-year residential colleges and lacked racial minority student backgrounds. Tinto called these early years the infancy of the work in college retention

theory. Tinto praised the complexity of more current research, looking into different types of institutions, a more diverse complexity of students, and more diverse models to explain student leaving. Despite all of the different models, Tinto posited that what was once true in the model still was: that the level of involvement matters with students, most pivotally in the first year of college. Tinto argued that future research must clarify how to make involvement occur in different types of institutions and with different types of students.

Critiques of Tinto's Model

To understand the evolution of the model of student integration over the last decades, it is essential to understand the criticisms of the model and how they helped shape the modified model, which was used for the framework of the current study. Through the years, critiques of Tinto's model have been focused on factors that were not included, such as exterior financial issues and pressures on students. For example, Andrieu and St. John (1993) argued that they had no model that included financial pressures on graduate students for their study on tuition prices and persistence. Cabrera (1992) noted that Tinto's 1987 model of student integration was "silent about the role of finances once students enroll" (p. 4). These researchers argued that other researchers of student persistence are more advanced because the role of finances is considered within the overall social, emotional, and integration factors affecting persistence. St. John et al. went further in 1996 and argued that Tinto's 1987 model sees "finances as an excuse for dropping out, rather than a cause" (p. 184). Although these researchers viewed Tinto as

having more casual links and consistencies than other researchers in college persistence, they still noted that the model was insufficient to explore other pressures to leave.

Other critiques of Tinto's model included insufficient discussion of students' educational and background differences, including cultural diversity. Tierney (1992) argued that Tinto's model did not hold up to empirical testing of the social integration aspect because Tinto assumed that successful social integration involves integrating into the dominant culture of the institution. Tierney argued that different cultural groups have different rights of passage, and Tinto created a model that did not include underrepresented groups. Tinto had not held universities accountable to make a welcoming environment for students of all cultures.

Kuh and Love (2000) took this cultural lens a step further than Tierney (1992) and argued that Tinto's model should be completely thrown out because student departure from college is not the individual, psychological decision that Tinto framed, but is instead a cultural experience shaped by cultural forces. In this alternative model, student retention was always viewed through a cultural lens. This lens affects the student in many ways, from impacting the importance their culture applies to college to the amount of persistence a student has being inversely related to their distance from the dominant college culture. The lens also affects how persistence is connected to finding an enclave community within the college institution (Kuh & Love, 2000).

Braxton et al. (1997) pointed out that Tinto's theory needed to be assessed with different student backgrounds because most of the research Tinto drew from in the development of the model was focused on the White student population, which had

higher retention rates than non-White students. Braxton et al. affirmed five of Tinto's 13 propositions in residential universities, but only two from commuter colleges and universities. Braxton et al.'s focus was not to throw out Tinto's theory but to make modifications to it. Tinto, by 2006, understood that the early model was created before much of the research into cultural diversity on college campuses had taken place, and Tinto agreed with newer modifications of the theory based on new research.

Several researchers critiqued Tinto's model based on the development of the theory being flawed. Attinasi (1989), in studying Mexican American college students' retention, rejected Tinto's model as based on another social framework: Durkheim's (1951) model of suicide completion. Attinasi noted that Tinto assumed "at the outset that dropping out of college is like committing suicide" (p. 250) and denied the theory based on this linkage. Also, Attinasi argued that the models were based on quantitative data from institutions and questionnaires, a method of data collection that could not possibly get at the underlying context and student perceptions that are part of the decisions affecting persistence in college. Along a similar vein, Tierney (1992), in a study of Native American students' college persistence, used comparative case studies based on interviews, which Tierney thought were a better way to create a framework of retention rather than traditional research like Tinto's. Both Attinasi and Tierney linked Tinto's methodology in creating the model of institutional departure to their perceived failure of the theory. To handle these criticisms and create a model of institutional departure that could move into modern understandings of factors influencing all college students, Braxton et al. (2000) focused on all these issues with the model and created a more

inclusive theory of college retention that would include perspectives of different cultures, backgrounds, and student populations.

Braxton and Colleagues Revisions of Tinto

Braxton et al. (2000) acknowledged that Tinto's interactionalist theory of college student departure was the most used theory in research of college retention and persistence in the field of education. Given the model's near paradigmatic status, Braxton et al. proposed that rather than throw out the theory to create something new, they would comb through the theory and revise it based on current research. In this manner, the model's base could still be used by researchers with newer adaptations to reflect changing research and understandings. In their study in 2000, Braxton et al. affirmed seven of Tinto's 13 propositions, which included student interaction with faculty, engagement with campus life, and support services for students throughout college.

Braxton and colleagues continued to investigate how to modify Tinto's model to account for students leaving commuter colleges (Braxton et al., 2004) and proposed a revision to Tinto's theory that helped it better fit both residential and commuter colleges. Important in the revision is including social integration as a pivotal retention factor. Mirroring Kuh and Love's (2000) assertion that culture is significant, Braxton remarked, "For minority students whose culture does not resemble the dominant culture of the social communities of their college or university, a cultural enclave or affinity group of students who share the same culture must be found" (Braxton et al., 2004, p. 33)

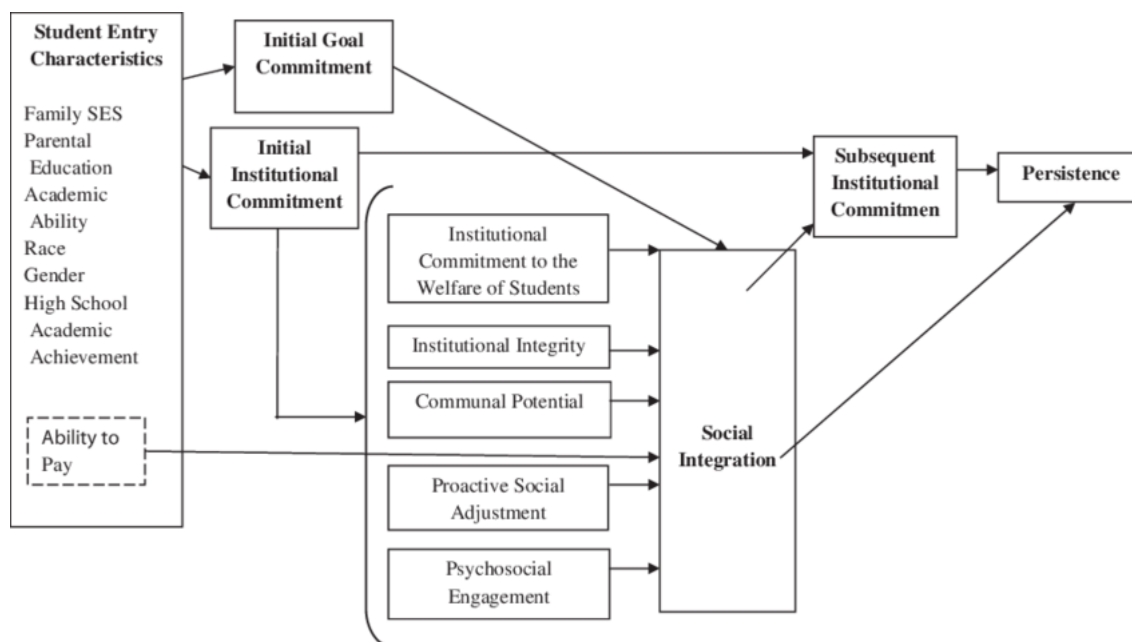
Braxton and Hirschy (2005) further refined Tinto's theory with an expanded list of student entry characteristics, clear external environmental pressures on students that

included finances, work, and family, and clear internal campus environmental factors that affect retention, including active learning, cost, and commitment of the institution to the student. Their goal, once more, was not to throw out Tinto's model but refine it given newer understandings and research in student retention.

In 2013, Braxton et al. further refined the theory for student persistence in residential colleges and universities, expanding the student entry characteristics to include more diversity in background and adding communal potential, proactive social adjustment, and psychosocial engagement to the factors that move into social integration (Braxton et al., 2013, p. 93). These adaptations clean up the propositions in Tinto's original model that did not hold up to research but keep the longitudinal quality of the model and the critical concept of retention being linked to the interplay between what the individual student brings and what the institution does to connect and support the student as the most decisive factors in student persistence (see Figure 2). In addition, Braxton et al. also proposed a theory of student persistence in commuter colleges and universities that adds new student entry characteristics such as parental education and affiliation needs but does not lean as heavily on social integration aspects of the institution since students do not reside on campus (Braxton et al., 2013, p. 111).

Figure 2

Theory for Student Persistence in Residential Colleges and Universities



Note. Adapted from Braxton et al. (2013).

Braxton and colleagues' adaptation of Tinto's model of institutional departure benefited this study by creating a solid framework to analyze factors that may affect students with EBD with internalizing behaviors decisions about persevering in college or leaving. This focus on first-year retention, using Braxton and colleagues' framework, has been utilized in many peer-reviewed studies recently when looking at nonnormative groups such as racial minorities (Baker et al., 2021; Xu & Webber, 2018), LGBTQ+ students (Denton, 2020), and those with disabilities (Knight et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2020). The nonnormative students attending college with EBD with internalizing behaviors would also benefit from this framework. However, adding a framework that focuses solely on disability identity strengthened the study analysis, so a look into a

model that focuses on the development of disability identity was needed to complete the picture.

Disability Identity Development Model

Marking a monumental shift in law, 2020 was the 45th anniversary of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) and was an essential piece of legislation to help bring better opportunities and less discrimination to those individuals with disabilities. The evolution since that time of the concept of disability and how both those with and without disability understand disability is complex (Albrecht & Devlieger, 1999). From studying the ethics of disability treatment in healthcare (VanPuymbrouck et al., 2020), to considering how disability and civil rights and law are related (Conway, 2018), to studying how different disabilities affect different college students (Abes & Wallace, 2018), to viewing disability as its own culture (Hopson, 2019) the study of disability has been both broad and deep in the literature.

Forber-Pratt and Zape (2017) noted that despite all the focus on disability in the last half century, the amount of focus on disability identity compared to sexual identity or racial identity in the literature is much sparser. Gill's stage model of disability identity development (1997) is considered the seminal work in the area, but theoretical. Thus, Forber-Pratt and Zape used qualitative research to create a model of disability identity development based on studying college aged students with disabilities, which focused on the individual students describing their disability identity in their own words. In the model created, "disability identity is considered a unique phenomenon that shapes the

way individuals look at themselves, their bodies, and how they interact with the world" (Forber-Pratt et al., 2020, p. 3).

The disability identity development model that was developed has four domains: Acceptance Status, Relationship Status, Adoption Status, and Engagement Status (Forber-Pratt & Zape, 2017). These four domains demonstrate the areas in which an individual may be identifying in relation to their disability. For example, someone in the acceptance domain may accept their disability and be frustrated with the disability. Someone else may be in the engagement domain and have decided to give back to the disability community through volunteer work or a job helping others with disabilities. Forber-Pratt et al. (2020) make clear that there is no actualized domain that everyone should be trying to work towards and no finish line for disability identity. Instead, disability identity is fluid, constantly evolving, and worthy of the time and space to reflect on and develop (see Table 1).

Utilizing the disability identity development model as developed by Forber-Pratt and colleagues (Forber-Pratt & Zape, 2017; Forber-Pratt et al., 2020) benefited this study by creating a framework in which the development of student's disability identity could be included as a possible factor of college persistence which could affect students with EBD with internalizing behaviors. While relatively new to the literature, this identity model has been utilized with recent studies of college students with disabilities (Abes & Wallace, 2018; Kreider et al., 2020).

Table 1

Domains of Disability Identity Development

Disability identity domain	Interpretation
Acceptance status	Becomes disabled and/or born with disability Person accepts own disability Close friends and family are accepting of the disability Includes aspects of frustration
Relationship status	Person meets others like herself/himself Engages in conversation with these individuals Learns about the ways of the group
Adoption status	Adopts the shared values of the group Feels a strong connection to the disability community
Engagement status	Becomes a role model for others Helps those who may be in other statuses Gives back to the disability community

Note. Adapted from Forber-Pratt et al. (2020).

Literature Review

This review focused on laws and definitions that impact students with EBD with internalizing behaviors, EBD prevalence and correlates in secondary students, and EBD prevalence and correlates in college students. The literature review also focused on best practices in transition planning for students with EBD in public school settings, therapeutic settings, and grant-funded settings. Finally, best practices for increasing first-year college retention of students with disabilities in general and those with EBD specifically were investigated.

Federal Legislation Related to Youth With Disabilities

Key legislation that impacts students with EBD with internalizing behaviors as they transition from secondary to postsecondary education is vital to understand as essential pieces of legislation impact services and supports students receive at each setting. Identifying students with disabilities and the documentation of disabilities changes as students move into college because the laws overseeing students with disabilities in educational settings change as students move to postsecondary education. As will be shown, under identification of students with EBD with internalizing behaviors can occur in the secondary setting due to the definitions in the legislation impacting this age group. Under identification of students with EBD with internalizing behaviors can also occur at the postsecondary setting due to the process of self-identification that occurs in college settings under the laws that affect postsecondary education.

IDEA

In 1975, Public Law 94-142 passed, and The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) became an integrated part of education. This legislation worked to ensure that every student with a disability who needs public education services would have access to a free education appropriate for their individual needs, regardless of the level of disability (Yell & Bateman, 2019).

An Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is one of the most powerful pieces of the IDEA. Every child attending a public school in the United States who has been identified with disabilities must have an IEP which determines specific supports and services that are needed for that student to access the least restrictive general education environment

with specifics on how the student will make progress toward individualized goals (MacLeod et al., 2017). While it is well known that a child in special education must have an IEP or the district faces legal and monetary repercussions, it is now also understood that IEP quality impacts student outcomes and levels of success (Hott et al., 2021).

The second pillar of the IDEA is the formation of the Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE). For a state to receive funding, each state must have a plan to ensure that all eligible students with disabilities receive a free and appropriate education. No public education entity anywhere in the United States can be denied an education despite the severity of a disability (Rozalski et al., 2021). Congress did not attempt to define FAPE; instead, the definition of FAPE is left to the writing of the IEP. While what is appropriate may change from one child to the next, no child may be denied their FAPE (Yell, 2019).

The Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) is also one of the primary principles of the IDEA. This part of the legislation ensures that students with disabilities are to be educated with nondisabled peers as much as possible, "to the maximum extent appropriate" (Underwood, 2018, p. 66). The default assumption in any IEP is that the student will spend the entire day in the regular classroom. Anytime there is a deviation from this, it must be documented explicitly in the IEP, and an explanation for the removal from the classroom spelled out in every instance. Recent circuit court decisions uphold that the LRE should consider a preference for the regular classroom, the cost of the placement for the district, the amount of educational disruption to other children, and the

educational benefit for a child (Underwood, 2018). All of these complex factors must be considered when writing the IEP for any disabled student.

In order to receive special education services, an evaluation must be given to each child. School districts may conduct their own evaluations, or parents may choose to have an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE) completed by an outside agency as this was added to the IDEA 1997. Defining an appropriate evaluation has been fraught with controversy, and every district has utilized different methods for identifying students for special education services. With the reauthorization of IDEA (2004), a shift occurred within districts toward multitiered levels of support and response to intervention teams who work to identify struggling learners early so that they can receive extra help and support before the lengthy special education identification process has begun (Frey, 2019).

The fifth pillar of the IDEA legislation is that parents will be involved with the teachers in creating the IEP for their child. Researchers have documented that when parental involvement in the development of the IEP increases, individual students' achievement also increases (MacLeod et al., 2017). Research has also shown that parents still struggle in participating in these individual meetings on an equal footing to teachers (Cavendish & Connor, 2018), despite the law being deliberate in making sure parents are part of the entire process (Kurth et al., 2020). This deliberate positioning of parent strength in the IEP process was built in specifically to boost the parents in the authority difference between them and the educators making key decisions about their child's education.

The sixth pillar of IDEA legislation is that there are procedural safeguards built into the law to protect the rights of the students and the parents. These safeguards include guarantees to see educational records and assessments, the right of parents to impartial hearings when disagreements over IEPs occur, the right to mediate disagreements with an attorney, and the right to take a disagreement to the state level when a resolution cannot be mediated at the district level. Concerns about parents having complete understanding and access to these safeguards have been raised, as has been the readability of the legislation for parents in advocating for their child (Dinnesen & Kroeger, 2018). Given that the IDEA is "a rather complicated and periodically revised statute that is subject to continuing evaluation based on expansive legislation" (Zirkel, 2017), local districts must continue to work on helping parents understand the process and safeguards that are part of the legislation.

Section 504

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was passed into law two years before the IDEA legislation was created. Section 504 was intended to protect students from discrimination based on ability level. It was viewed as a piece of civil rights legislation that covered anyone with disabilities in a location that received public funding. Under Section 504, both FAPE and LRE are protected, and rather than an IEP, accommodations are documented on a 504 plan that is collaboratively written between the school and family (Goodman-Scott & Boulden, 2019). In the last data collected, 1.8% of public school students currently have a 504 plan (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2018), which amounts to almost 900,000 students nationwide.

Mandated written notice to evaluate a child is not included under Section 504 protections, and discrimination claims under Section 504 have a distinctly separate process compared to the IDEA.

In the past, Section 504 was often considered the "light" version of the IDEA; however, recent court decisions show that the student protections are serious. Zirkel (2020) reminded educators that "this field is inevitably individualized" (p. 264), so it is essential to keep current on how the legislation is being interpreted by the courts currently. In the last decades, court decisions that look at compliance to 504 plans, impartial hearings, and costly court decisions have all been part of the lower court process.

ADA and the ADAAA

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) legislation affected education and was signed into law in 1990. Section 504 provides a broader definition of disability than the IDEA and is also a piece of civil rights legislation. The ADA extends the protections of Section 504 to further protect people with disabilities from discrimination not only in the public sector but also in the private sector. In terms of student education, ADA law is vital in that the protections of Section 504 are extended into private schools, postsecondary institutions, and employment settings.

Newest to the legislative scene, the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act of 2008 (ADAAA) revised the definition of disability, making a much broader definition of disability and includes in the definition impairments in reading, concentrating, thinking, and communicating (Keenan et al., 2019). While the law was

effective in 2009, the agency regulations were not in effect until 2016, so legal decisions based on this newer law are still scant. There is less mandatory documentation of disability for college under the ADAAA, and it placed more emphasis on evidence from high school, so high schools are now being encouraged to make sure that students graduate with their most complete and current copy of their IEP or Section 504, history of accommodations, and any recent psychoeducational reports.

Defining Emotional Disturbance and Emotional and Behavioral Disorders

History

The history of defining emotional disturbance (ED) and emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) has involved the fields of psychology, education, and law. Kirk and Bateman (1962) suggested that behavioral deviations were those that had detrimental effects on the child's adjustment and/or interfered in the lives of the people in the child's world. Haring (1963) viewed an emotionally disturbed child as not learning at a rate commensurate with his/her ability level, displaying an inability to maintain social relationships, does not respond appropriately to ordinary life situations, and displays behaviors out of the normal range. Pate (1963) identified emotionally disturbed children as those students whose attendance is so disruptive that it interferes with the learning for the rest of the class, makes it difficult for the teacher to teach, or is further disturbed by school attendance. Graubard (1973) offered perhaps the least objective of the emotional disturbance definitions when he put forth that children with emotional disturbance have a variety of deviant behaviors which are not appropriate to a perceiver's expectations, and the perceiver would like the behavior to stop. However, none of these definitions gave

clear-cut defining characteristics that would stand up to scrutiny given all types of emotional disturbances.

Interestingly, one of the earliest definitions proposed has had the strongest staying power, that of Bower in 1957 when he developed defining characteristics of ED on a study of 6,000 children, 207 of which had been designated as ED. In his study, Bower put forth five characteristics. If a student had any of these five characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree, he would classify them as ED. The five characteristics are a) an inability to learn which cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors; b) an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers or teachers; c) inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances; d) a general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; or e) a tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems (Bower, 1960).

This exact language of the five characteristics of ED was adopted into the original IDEA (1975) law which provided free and appropriate education to children with disabilities. However, when the final writing of the definition was completed, an exclusionary clause was added. “The term includes children who are schizophrenic or autistic. The term does not include socially maladjusted children, unless it is determined that they are seriously emotionally disturbed” (IDEA, Federal Register, Section 121a.5, 1977). Bower, in 1982, voiced his disagreement with the addition of the exclusionary clause stating that the “modifications do serious damage to the integrity of the research and conceptual base from which the definition is drawn” (p. 55). Bower felt that the

clause was added by lawmakers afraid that too many children would be identified as ED, which would be a significant financial drain from the law's definition.

In 1978 Algozzine et al. worked to create the most objective definition of emotionally disturbed youth:

> The emotionally disturbed child is the student who, after receiving supportive educational assistance and counseling services available to all students, still exhibits persistent and consistent severe to very severe behavioral disabilities which interfere with productive learning processes. This student's inability to achieve adequate academic progress and/or satisfactory interpersonal relationships cannot be attributed primarily to physical, sensory, or intellectual deficits (p. 49).

While this definition was much more school centered than Bower's earlier definition, it was not picked up in the newer updates to the IDEA. In fact, only the first part of the exclusionary clause has been changed as autism is now a separate category of disability in the IDEA (CFR §300.7 (a) 9).

Over- and Underidentification of Students With ED

Because of how ED is defined and how students with ED are identified, studies have shown that some groups of students are underidentified and others over identified. Given the exclusionary clause in the IDEA, students with ED, particularly those with internalizing behaviors, have historically been underidentified (Gresham, 2005, 2007; Merrell & Walker, 2004). Walker et al. (2013) believed that the disparity between the number of students who experience a mental, emotional, or behavioral challenge and the

number of students being served under the ED umbrella is due to the definition of ED having parameters that are too narrow and a lack of clarity in the IDEA definition. Mitchell et al. (2019) noted that the exclusionary clause for maladjustment in the IDEA is inconsistent with the eligibility criteria of the student's inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships. Because of this factor, Mitchell et al. argued for the use of the term Emotional or Behavioral Disorders (EBD) rather than ED, an expanded definition of what EBD would include, and regular universal screenings for all public school students for emotional and behavioral problems.

Given the definition that Bower created, schools generally base their identification of emotionally disturbed students on rating scales that reflect levels of seriousness from the norm (Erford et al., 2015; Miller et al., 2014). However, Algozzine et al. (2017) continued to be concerned that "there is great risk in using ratings of behavior from individuals who believe the child being rated is a problem" (p. 138). Algozzine et al. believed that this risk has led to the overidentification of minorities in the ED classification, and this has recently been a focal point of research in the field of special education (Anastasiou et al., 2017; Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Morgan et al., 2020; Sullivan, 2017). Kauffman (2015) also discussed how difficult it is to define emotional and behavioral difficulties in students and noted that when differences are exposed, there are immediate problems of both privilege and stigma that come from identifying the differences. Also, as Algozzine et al. (2017) pointed out, cultural differences can be problematic in identifying students with ED. Kauffman noted that even defining emotional disturbance "is to a very significant degree cultural" (2015, p. 173).

Emotional and Behavioral Disorders

Because of the controversy over the definition of ED, in 1992, a new definition for the IDEA legislation was proposed by the National Mental Health and Special Education Coalition (Forness & Knitzer, 1992). In this proposed definition, emotional disturbance (ED) would be replaced by emotional or behavioral disorder (EBD) with criteria for inclusion.

1. The term emotional or behavioral disorder means a disability characterized by behavioral or emotional responses in school so different from appropriate age, cultural, or ethnic norms that they adversely affect educational performance. Educational performance includes academic, social, vocational, and personal skills. Such a disability

    - is more than a temporary, expected response to stressful events in the environment.
    - is consistently exhibited in two different settings, at least one of which is school-related; and
    - is unresponsive to direct intervention in general education, or the child's condition is such that general education interventions would be insufficient.

2. Emotional and behavioral disorders can co-exist with other disabilities.

3. This category may include children or youth with schizophrenic disorders, affective disorders, anxiety disorders, or other sustained disorders of conduct or

> adjustment when they adversely affect educational performance in accordance with section (i) (Forness & Knitzer, 1992, para 6).

This definition was heavily lobbied to replace the Bower-based definition in the 1990s with the reauthorization of IDEA. While it did not make it into IDEA legislation, the new definition was adopted into the Head Start federal legislation. Merrell and Walker (2004) agreed with adopting the newer definition into the IDEA and noted, "The term *Emotional or Behavioral Disorder* itself has the face validity of being more descriptive and less stigmatizing than ED" (p. 907). While IDEA has not adopted EBD terminology, most voices within the educational community now use EBD as the preferred term for students classified as ED by the IDEA (Kauffman et al., 2018; Yeager et al., 2021).

Defining and Identifying Students With Internalizing Behaviors

Merrell and Walker (2004), in their discussion of the definition of ED versus EBD, also posited that another possible alternative to the redefinition of ED federally would be to define further the externalizing versus internalizing "dichotomy of behavioral and emotional disorders" (p. 907). Kauffman (1997) also advocated for this viewpoint as the best classification scheme for ED within a school based setting. Kauffman went on to give examples of internalizing behaviors such as "depression, social isolation and neglect, phobias, anxiety and immaturity" (p. 163). This reclassification along dichotomy would have two positive effects: less stigma to students than emotionally disturbed and increased emphasis on students with internalizing behaviors who are historically underserved (Merrell and Walker, 2004). Identifying

students with internalizing behaviors has continued to be challenging for schools, even after more focus has been put on the issue (Ohrt et al., 2020).

Weist et al. (2018) noted that not only are students with internalizing behaviors less likely to be identified, they are also less likely to receive interventions within multitiered systems of support (MTSS). Students with internalizing EBD behaviors “are most visible by what they are not” (p. 173). These students often leave large events, leave the classroom in favor of the nurse’s office and/or refuse school. Because these students cause no disruption, they are easy to overlook or ignore. Internalizing disorders can also be characterized by students overperforming. These students deal with their anxiety by getting the highest grades, which means school personnel does not see these students needing extra assistance. The system many schools use of counting office discipline referrals and suspensions to identify students with ED ultimately leaves out most students with internalizing behavioral disabilities (Splett et al., 2018). The focus on universal screening to get around this type of identification is now being seen as more necessary (Mitchell et al., 2019).

EBD Prevalence and Correlates in Youths

Prevalence

The difference between the number of students with mental health problems and the number of students being served under the ED classification of the IDEA is stark. Approximately 20% of adolescents have a diagnosable mental health problem, with 10% of students having a disorder so severe that it is impacting their daily functioning (Carlson et al., 2020). However, under this classification, less than 1% of students are

being served by special education (Lloyd et al., 2019). Given the high comorbidity factors of EBD with other diagnoses (Schieltz et al., 2020), it is possible that more students are being served than less than 1% of the student population, though in these cases, emphasis on IEP goals would be focused on the comorbid condition rather than the EBD.

Correlates in Educational Outcomes

Students with EBD have a variety of adverse educational outcomes whose statistics often surpass any other disability category. Even before tests are examined, these students experience “high risk of peer rejection, negative teacher interactions, and isolation from their community” (Salle et al., 2018, p. 383). Investigating academic skills, EBD students often have significant academic deficits, demonstrating below grade level performance in reading, writing, and mathematics. (Sanders et al., 2018). These students also often demonstrate language deficits, lower on task behavior than peers, and higher work avoidance behaviors (Garwood, 2018).

Higher dropout rates are also seen with students with EBD (Zirkus & Morgan, 2020). In fact, students with EBD have dropout rates twice as high as students in any other disability category at 35% (U.S. Department of Education, 2017; Wilkinson et al., 2020). For students with emotional diagnoses, there are also longer delays to entering college, and these students are less likely to earn a diploma within eight years after high school (Davis & Cumming, 2019).

Correlates in Employment Outcomes

Similar to educational outcomes, the employment outcomes for students with EBD are equally poor. People with EBD have higher housing insecurity as adults, with only 22% living independently four years after high school (Davis & Cumming, 2019). There is an increased risk of poverty and lower employment rates for adults with EBD, with only 42% working full-time four years after high school completion (Davis & Cumming, 2019). This group also has higher incarceration rates than any other disability category (Wilkinson et al., 2020), and approximately sixty percent of youth in juvenile detention facilities have one or more EBD diagnoses (Houchins et al., 2018).

Correlates in Health Outcomes

Even general health functions are impacted for students with EBD as there are lifelong effects for students with this diagnosis in their physical well-being. Vish and Stolfi (2020) found that students with EBD have more missed school days and visits to the nurse than other students. In addition, more somatic complaints such as headaches, stomachaches, and fatigue were all noted with students with anxiety and depression. Even controlling for comorbid symptoms like asthma, the students with EBD and asthma utilized the emergency room and hospital more often than students without an EBD diagnosis with asthma.

Peer victimization is also high among students with EBD as more than half of these students experience peer victimization compared to 32% of their peers without disabilities, and students with EBD with internalizing behaviors are often particularly targeted (Salle et al., 2018). Studies have also shown that suicide is most closely linked in

adolescents to those with EBD, and emotional disorders "contribute between 47 and 74% of suicide risk" (Bilsen, 2018, para. 7). As mood disorders and suicide rates have been rising in tandem since 2010 (Plemmons et al., 2018), the call for more attention to be paid to students with EBD with internalizing behaviors has become more assertive (Duffy et al., 2019; Twenge et al., 2019).

Public High School IEP Transition Planning and Support

The IDEA legislation requires that all students in special education have an IEP, that schools must create transition plans within the IEP for students to move to college or career, that parents are involved in the process, and students should be the center of this transition planning (Cavendish & Connor, 2018). However, there is little guidance from the federal government in how this transition planning should be facilitated (Raines & Talapatra, 2019). Empirical evidence points to the connection between solid transition planning and better postsecondary outcomes for students with high incidence disabilities (Trainor et al., 2016; Trainor et al., 2020). In public schools, recent research pinpointed ED students' struggles with the transition out of high school to college or career (Kutscher & Tuckwiller, 2019) and made evidence-based recommendations to increase the likelihood of success in this transition. Both Davis and Cumming (2019) and Morningstar, Zagona, et al. (2017) noted that taking a step back and looking at the skills high schools should focus on for transition and using evidence-based practices in delivering these skills should be the first step in increasing outcomes for students with ED. In discussing the implications, Morningstar et al. (2017) declared that "school systems must identify and use instructional strategies to teach critical thinking skills to all

students" (p. 89). This emphasis was specifically given because students with disabilities have often had less rigorous curriculums that do not have as many opportunities for critical thinking (Monahan et al., 2020; van Laar et al., 2017), a key component of postsecondary success. Other researchers have zeroed in on other skills essential to transition. Zirkus and Morgan (2020) argued that improving the self-determination skills of students classified as ED through models such as person-centered planning helps provide instruction to students as these students develop goals.

The creation of postsecondary transition plans has also been scrutinized in research recently. Cavendish and Connor (2018) emphasized that all special education students must have authentic transition plans that are individualized and not simply phrases chosen from a template. Harrison et al. (2017) noted that creating transition goals for youth with EBD that are student-driven is key to positive progress in outcomes, and encouraging both student and parent input throughout the process from goal gathering through monitoring the progress of transition goal attainment must occur. Interestingly, in a recent study of student involvement in IEP meetings, the researchers found that only a third of study participants attended their IEP meeting, and most students did not actively participate (Sanderson & Goldman, 2021). There may be a disconnect between best practices for transition goal planning and creation and what is occurring in most school settings.

Yeager and various colleagues (Yeager, 2018, 2021; Yeager et al., 2020, Yeager et al., 2021) have taken a deep look into better ways to approach ED students when working on transition planning. The conclusions include using a social capital model

(Yeager, 2018), creating person-centered transition interviews, and building a connection with the student (Yeager, 2021). In addition, understanding that students will see teachers, friends, and parents as more important than identified transition team members (Yeager et al., 2020) and utilizing a student strengths-based approach for creating transition goals (Yeager et al., 2021) have all been proposed as best practices in helping ED students create more successful transition plans.

In a college study of skills that helped students with disabilities find more success in postsecondary settings, Madaus et al. (2021) noted that since only a third of students in college are self-disclosing their disability, learning self-advocacy skills to access academic accommodations is key to higher college graduation rates for students with disabilities. They noted, “self-advocacy and understanding of one’s disability, including one’s strengths and needs, should be a critical part of secondary transition planning” (Madaus et al., 2021, p. 9). Similarly, Shogren and Shaw’s (2017) research led them to conclude that self-determination is an important skill to learn for positive postsecondary outcomes of young adults.

In their meta-analysis research to propose future research avenues in transitions for students categorized as ED, Trainor et al. (2020) noted that “the field needs a much deeper understanding of how the combination of services and supports students receive during secondary school, postsecondary school, and young adult life lead to the various outcomes…” (p. 12). This overarching look into what combination of supports and services can help students with ED was also called for in Mitchell et al.’s (2019) list of recommendations for supporting students with ED. In the discussion of federal policy on

improving outcomes for students with ED, Freeman et al. (2019) proposed using Part D of the IDEA legislation for funding to focus further research on best practices for students under the ED umbrella as outcomes for this group are lagging behind other areas of special education in making gains.

Alternative/Therapeutic School Transition Planning and Support

Alternative education programs (AEP) came about in the 1960s to create alternative education pathways for low-income, racial minority, and underserved suburban students (Meyers, 2001) but in the last decades have become a more frequent educational setting for at risk youth who have academic, behavioral, and social-emotional problems (Pronk et al., 2020). Private therapeutic schools, whether day programs or residential programs, also reside in this niche of schools attempting to help youth with academic, behavioral, and social-emotional problems (Pfaffendorf, 2017) though students are more often from higher socio-economic backgrounds. These educational settings are designed to provide a more structured and nurturing environment to diminish the struggles with academic and/or social-emotional functioning they were faced with in mainstream settings (Deeds & DePaoli, 2017).

Transition studies for both AEPs and therapeutic schools are scarce, but one earlier study of note interviewed graduates of AEPs with ED classification to discover those most helpful factors in providing resilience and increased their current life status after graduation (Zolkoski et al., 2016). Their qualitative findings revealed that caring teachers, positive discipline procedures, and small student-to-teacher ratios in the AEPs

were most impactful during high school and that positive impact carried forward to postsecondary settings.

Grant-Funded Transition Planning and Support for EBD Students

In the last thirty years, as data from the NTLS began to show that students with ED had some of the most challenging transitions to adulthood, there has been a movement to create grant-funded transition planning for students with EBD. These programs are usually based in the community rather than in the school setting and often involve social workers who connected youth to a wider variety of resources and supports in the hopes of making a more successful transition to adulthood. The ARIES project (Achieving Rehabilitation, Individualized Education, and Employment Success) was one such grant-funded project that ran from 1995 through 1999 (Bullis et al., 2002). This project was deemed successful through quantitative and qualitative data measures and utilized Transition Specialists (TS) as the coordinator for each participant. The TS used person-centered planning, functional skills assessments, individualized educational supports, job placement, and outside service coordination with other agencies (Bullis et al., 2002). While the grant was not renewed, the model was being replicated by Oregon’s juvenile correction system to help juvenile offenders transition back to the community.

The RENEW (Rehabilitation for Empowerment, Natural supports, Education and Work) model was also a grant-funded project that worked with students from April 2003 through December 2005 (Malloy et al., 2010). Each student in the project was behind in high school graduation credits, exhibited behavioral struggles, or reentered school from alternative placements, such as residential treatment or juvenile detention. Like ARIES

TS adults, RENEW utilized adult facilitators who created the caring bond to deliver services to students. Also similar to ARIES, RENEW focused on person-centered planning, individual resource development, individualized and flexible education programming, and connection to outside resources. The project placed most efforts toward personal futures planning with the help and support of the adult facilitator. Youth in the program had "significant improvement in their functioning in school" (Malloy et al., 2010, p. 24) and a strong positive influence on the students' self-views and self-perception, which are "benefits that will improve the youth's ability to successfully transition to adult life" (Malloy et al., 2010, p. 24). While programs such as RENEW are costly and intensive, the authors noted that they are less expensive than the cost of residential therapeutic programs, alternative day school programs, or incarceration.

The Healthy Transitions Initiative (HTI) was funded by the Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration to create programs in seven states that help support individuals with EBD transition from school to adulthood (Frankford et al., 2016). Maryland's HTI utilized the Transition to Independence model to focus on people 14-22 years of age with EBD to see if they could positively impact outcomes for these adolescents (Stein et al., 2016). Like the ARIES and RENEW projects, the HTI's backbone was a strong bond between the youth and the transition facilitators, who coordinated all the services for each participant. Utilizing a qualitative study interviewing participants, their caregivers, and the staff, the program evaluation team identified items that made the model successful, which included "comprehensive case management, community-based, individualized services, and flexibility of the transition facilitators"

(Stein et al., 2016, p. 589). The strengths of the HTI echo the same type of person-centered planning and connection to outside services that were strengths in both the ARIES and RENEW programs.

EBD Prevalence and Correlates in College Students

Prevalence

Exact statistics are difficult to find on the number of college students with EBD because, unlike under IDEA legislation where the onus is on the school to identify students needing extra support, in college, with Section 504, the ADA, and the ADAAA legislation impacting student accommodations, students must self-identify. The onus is on the student to find the campus Office of Disabilities, present evidence or paperwork that shows the types of accommodations needed, and self-advocate for the accommodations they wish to receive in college (Fleming et al., 2017). Many students never register with the office of disabilities or wait until their disability impacts their education to begin the process (Holzberg et al., 2019). College itself is a difficult time for young adults as they are transitioning from the home environment and dealing with a new culture and new expectations, while for some psychological disorders worsen or begin to appear during this young adulthood window (Lipson et al., 2016; Michikyan, 2020; Shanahan et al., 2020). Mental health conditions in all categories are rising among college students (Oswalt et al., 2020). Depression rates among college students have been estimated over 30% (Coiro et al., 2017), and more than 10% of college students are utilizing college counseling centers for mental health support (Schwitzer et al., 2018).

Correlates in Educational Outcomes

Students with mental health struggles report a negative impact on their academic functioning, and depression has a negative impact on grade point averages (Bruffaerts et al., 2018). In their 2018 study, Bruffaerts et al. pointed out that the finding that stood out most clearly to them was that “freshmen with internalizing and externalizing mental health problems have significant lower academic functioning than other students” (p. 101). Students with disabilities have lower college retention rates and lower graduation rates than their peers without disabilities (Kutscher & Tuckwiller, 2019), and college student mental health has been shown to be a crucial contributing factor in student retention (Eisenberg et al., 2016; Schwitzer et al., 2016).

College Retention Supports

There are many levels of college retention supports that are important to investigate when a complete understanding of what is in place for college students with emotional disabilities is looked into: general evidence-based retention supports that are in place for all college students, retention supports put in place specifically for students with disabilities, and retention supports that are specifically designed for those students struggling with mental health issues.

General Evidence-Based Retention Supports at College

The general supports that colleges have for all students are based on models such as Tinto’s (1993) and Braxton et al.’s (2014), in which the college identifies areas on the model that influence student’s decisions to stay or withdraw and work to create interventions and programs that support student retention and success. Tight (2020) noted

that college retention responsibility discussions have significantly shifted from the student to the college shouldering the burden. In Barbera and colleagues' (2020) meta-analysis of college retention in the last 10 years, student services and quality of faculty both rise to the top of factors influencing student retention. Colleges across the nation have been focusing on adding more counseling, tutoring, and support services for this generation of college students with higher psychological struggles than previous students. In addition, most institutions have also tried to pay more attention to faculty reviews. However, the trend to hire more part-time untenured faculty to save money for the college who may have less commitment to the particular institution and less connection to the students may undermine retention efforts. Tinto (2012) noted that this newer pattern of hiring more untenured professors might hinder students' support in college settings.

Boyd et al. (2020) moved, in their research on college retention, from the concept of belonging to one of community. Their study noted that community experience models showed higher retention of students who have stronger peer relationships built and more meaningful interactions with faculty. Orientation programs, student clubs, and learning communities also had similar effects on student satisfaction and belonging to the community. Like the federally-funded TRIO program, wraparound support services had a strong positive effect on retention, as did summer bridge programs and intensive advising in college settings (Hoyt, 2021).

Retention Supports at College for Students with Disabilities

Interventions that support college students with disabilities retention was a small percentage of overall retention research at the college level (Kutscher & Tuckwiller, 2019). However, some common themes were heard repeatedly in the research literature. Disability support services that colleges already currently have in place for compliance with disability laws show high effectiveness in retention for the students who utilized their departments (Newman et al., 2020). Utilization of these support services, as noted earlier, depends on the self-advocacy of the college student, which often does not occur (Aquino & Bittinger, 2019). Those students with disabilities who do self-advocate also have a higher sense of belonging to the institution. These two traits combined, belonging and self-advocacy, have correlated to higher retention of students with disabilities in college settings (Fleming et al., 2017). Ensuring that students are aware of disabilities services on campus has increased the number of students served through disability support services (Herridge, 2017; Kutscher & Tuckwiller, 2019) and helps with the retention of these students.

Faculty perceptions of disabilities can also substantially impact student retention of this group (Zerquera et al., 2018). Physical disabilities that faculty members can see often receive accommodations in classrooms more positively than learning or emotional disabilities that are less obvious (Sniatecki et al., 2015). Many students with disabilities have experienced a professor who did not honor the accommodations approved by the office of disabilities on their campus (Toutain, 2019). In faculties where more training has occurred with faculty about “hidden” disabilities and their impacts on students,

retention is higher for these categories of students with disabilities (Zerquera et al., 2018). Specific accommodations have been linked to higher retention rates in students with disabilities at college, including distraction reduced testing, due date flexibility, and learning strategies instruction (Kutscher & Tuckwiller, 2019). If faculty members were more willing to support these evidence-based strategies, higher retention of college students could occur.

Teaching style and methodology can also increase the retention of students with disabilities. While only a third of students are self-identifying, instructors whose methodology is more inclusive can help accommodate students with silent disabilities, or more than half of all students who receive their diagnosis after they begin postsecondary education (Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017). Strategies such as universal design for learning in which content is presented through multiple mediums, multiple engagement types are utilized, and multiple expression types to demonstrate understanding are used, can be added to increase engagement of all learners (Grier-Reed & Williams-Wengerd, 2018; Love et al., 2019).

Most studies of college retention for students with disabilities have either focused on making the environment physically accessible or providing academic accommodations. Nevertheless, given all the research on students needing connectedness and community (Boyd et al., 2020; Hoyt, 2021; Kuh & Love, 2020), recognizing that students with disabilities also feel this same need for connection has become (Fleming et al., 2017). Students with disabilities not only often feel isolated from peers and faculty but from their advisors as well, as most college advisors have little training for supporting

students with disabilities, and most students with disabilities feel little connection to their academic advisors (Zilvinskis et al., 2020).

Retention Supports at College for EBD Students

The research on retention supports for students with emotional behavioral disorders or mental health struggles was an even smaller base than general disability retention. Most studies focused on counseling centers and the mental health of college students needing support and expansion (Schwitzer et al., 2016). Since most college students are not receiving needed mental health services, studies of these undertreated students poor sleep, increased alcohol consumption, and suicide ideation and rates (Sladek et al., 2016) are more common than those related to their college retention, but attending to the mental health of college students is crucial in increasing student retention (Eisenberg et al., 2016). While the belief among college faculty members that supporting student mental health is part of their job was almost unanimous in one study (Albright & Schwartz, 2017), faculty still have very little training or development in making accommodations for students or understanding the disabilities (Zerquera et al., 2018).

Summary

Despite several decades of research that has shown that postsecondary outcomes for students identified as EBD are poor in educational attainment (Sanders et al., 2018; Sheaffer et al., 2021), poor in employment status (Davis & Cumming, 2019), and poor in general health and well-being (Stolfi, 2020), few educational shifts have happened and this population of students continues to struggle. Simply defining this population of students has been controversial and continues to be a subject within educational research

and legislation (Bower, 1960, Gresham, 2005, 2007; Merrell & Walker, 2004; Mitchell et al., 2019).

Studies focused on public high school preparation for transition have identified factors that can help students at they graduate, which include specific academic skills that they should be taught (Davis & Cumming, 2019; Morningstar, Zagona, et al., 2017), mindset skills that need to be explicitly taught (Madaus et al., 2021; Zirkus and Morgan, 2020), and ways to increase participation in goal setting and IEPs for students with EBD (Cavendish & Connor, 2018; Yeager, 2021). Alternative education settings have identified small school settings, caring teachers, and positive behavioral interventions leading to better transitions (Zolkoski et al., 2016, 2016). Grant-funded transition programs (Bullis et al., 2002; Malloy et al., 2010; Stein et al., 2016) identified person-centered planning, individual resource development, individualized and flexible education programming, and connection to outside resources as helpful characteristics of programs increasing postsecondary success.

Studies focused on college retention of students in general and those with disabilities point in several helpful directions. Strong student services (Barbera et al., 2020), involved and caring faculty; (Hoyt, 2021), and a feeling of community or belonging (Boyd et al., 2020) can all help student retention. Making sure students connect to the office of disabilities (Kutscher & Tuckwiller, 2019), educating professors about hidden disabilities and accommodations (Zerquera et al., 2018), creating lessons that engage all learners (Grier-Reed & Williams-Wengerd, 2018; Love et al., 2019), and creating a special community for students with disabilities (Fleming et al., 2017) also

helped increase retention of those students with EBD. Finally, ensuring that the mental health needs of students are attended to during college can also encourage college persistence (Eisenberg et al., 2016).

In Chapter 3, an in-depth overview of the research method used to conduct the study is provided. Methodology topics will include the research design and rationale, role of the researcher, methodology, participant selection, instrumentation, and data analysis plan. The trustworthiness of the methodology is explored, and in describing the recruitment of participants, the ethical procedures to protect their confidentiality and verify the findings is also addressed.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceived factors that may affect first-year college retention rates for the students from one INTHS who have EBD with internalizing behaviors. Exploring these graduates' retention at college allowed me to identify, through comparison with the framework and literature and inductive reasoning, best practices for this unique group of students so that future students in the INTHS may be better prepared and supported during this transition. In this chapter, I describe the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, the methodology, the trustworthiness, and the ethical procedures I followed to conduct the study.

Research Design and Rationale

The research question that guided this study was as follows: What perceived factors affect first-year college retention of graduates of one INTHS with internalizing EBD behaviors? Qualitative research is "an iterative process in which improved understanding to the scientific community is achieved by making new significant distinctions resulting from getting closer to the phenomenon studied" (Aspers & Corte, 2019, p. 155). This type of research is used to explore meanings and insights in each situation (Levitt et al., 2017). Qualitative research generates findings that can inform practice or descriptions of a problem in practice (Lester et al., 2020). The problem that I sought to understand was why the students with EBD from one INTHS were having such poor first-year retention to college outcomes. Findings may inform the practice of the INTHS to guide their graduates with this challenging transition.

Qualitative approaches are used to collect nonnumerical data to interpret meaning from the data to deeply understand targeted populations or places (Mohajan, 2018). I interviewed graduates and collected nonnumerical data to understand this population and their experiences in their first year of college. Theorizing based on qualitative data is appropriate for understudied contexts with little prior work (Bansal et al., 2018). Few studies had been undertaken to understand students with EBD with internalizing behaviors moving to college, so this population was considered understudied.

Kozleski (2017) argued that qualitative designs could encourage more communication with educators to connect the research to the craft. In my study, the head of school and clinical director verbalized their commitment to using the results of the study to inform best practices for their students in preparation for the college transition (personal communication, January 21, 2021), demonstrating a desire to communicate and work together. Qualitative research should facilitate a dialogue between the researcher and the community (Silverman, 2021), which was precisely what was occurring with leadership in the INTHS. Moreover, leadership in many schools who have formerly been pushed to use quantitative data for data-driven decision making are now moving toward qualitative data as “meaningful guidance for school leaders” (Lochmiller & Lester, 2019, p. 10). The dialogue between me and the community also occurred with the interviews with the former students of the INTHS, a disability community that is often not heard. Ensuring that I listened to these voices through dialogue and humanized their journey was necessary to be a worthy witness to their journeys (see Paris & Winn, 2013) and accurately share their experiences.

As I considered my approach to the study, various research designs were weighed before choosing the basic qualitative design. The basic qualitative design is used to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon through the eyes of the study participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Yin (2016) argued that there are as many generalized qualitative studies as there are specialized qualitative studies and noted that not being forced into a specialized subtype of research can allow the researcher room to simply explore a phenomenon. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) defined a basic qualitative study as one in which researchers are focused on "(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 24). In the current study, I focused on the first-year college retention of students with EBD with internalizing behaviors. I was interested in how these young adults interpreted their experiences of the first year of college, what factors played into that experience, and the meaning they created of their first-year college experience. Through this investigation of the phenomenon of these students moving from the highly supportive INTHS to a generalized college setting, themes of meaning became more evident.

Before beginning my study, I investigated several other research designs and decided on a basic qualitative design. Hermeneutic phenomenology was a design that was considered. However, upon further investigation, it became clear that this design is both a theoretical and methodological framework (Bhattacharya, 2017). I was invested in having the theories of college retention and disability identity development integrated into the study. Therefore, this methodology was not chosen. Ethnography is a design in which understanding a culture in a deep immersion is practiced (González, 2000; Ravitch &

Carl, 2021). The idea of humanizing the experience of these students as their disability identity evolved (see Diaz-Strong et al., 2013) was a strong pull; however, my goal was not to understand the culture of the students with EBD with internalizing behaviors. Instead, I sought to understand their experiences more deeply after finishing high school and transitioning to college settings.

Role of the Researcher

I was aware that as a qualitative researcher, my role influenced the research process (see McCarthy & Fishman, 1996). It was important for me to understand my positionality as a researcher (see Bourke, 2014; England, 1994) and participate in my reflexivity or self-scrutiny during interviews and data analysis (see Pillow, 2003). I had spent most of my career in education helping students who had barriers in the way of their education. Whether these students had emotional disabilities, as all of the students in the present study do, or whether they had learning disabilities, were from low-income households, or were from racial minority populations, as my current TRiO college students are, I had always felt the pull to work with students who had less of a voice than the majority. It was important in my reflexivity to understand where this desire to help came from, and I realized that much of my desire to help others who face barriers was from growing up in a background impacted by family members with mental health struggles and our subsequent poverty. I feel a kinship with children who come to school each day with extra burdens on their shoulders, affecting how I view the world and my research.

As the sole researcher for this study, my decisions and choices influenced every aspect of the study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted that in basic qualitative studies, the researcher is not a participant-observer. In this study, I conducted semistructured interviews about first-year college retention but was not a participant in the students' experience. The interviews were each conducted separately and virtually through the Zoom application. The young adults who participated may or may not have known me through the peripheral role I had held in their high school during part of the time they were there.

I had ties to the INTHS because I worked as a teacher and served as an administrator over the course of 14 years. When I moved positions to a university setting 5 years ago, I could see the struggle that many students with social and emotional disabilities were having as they moved to college. The experiences of working in both a therapeutic high school for students with EBD and a university setting prompted my interest in understanding more deeply why some students with EBD could handle this transition to postsecondary education, while others were leaving college during their first year. In reconnecting with the INTHS about the issue of first-year college retention, I found that they were also concerned with the transition experiences of their graduates. I had a willing partner in understanding the perceived factors that influenced their graduates' decisions to leave or persevere in college.

Five years have passed since I left the school, and the recent graduates are students whom I did not teach or have a position of power over. While in the last 2 years I had begun talking with the school leadership about transitions to college, I held no

leadership position in the school, and instead worked in an advisory position about the college transition. I had to acknowledge a possible bias due to my experience working with students, administrators, and parents in a school focused on helping high school students with EBD diagnoses. I disclosed this bias because it required consideration when reviewing the study results. Disclosing biases related to the study enables those reviewing the results to decide whether the biases affect the study's outcomes (Tuohy et al., 2013).

I believe that the school's mission is vital in helping students with social and emotional struggles to get through high school in a stabilizing and healthy manner. As someone who worked with this population of students for 14 years, I had great empathy for the students balancing their social-emotional struggles while working hard to be successful students and learning to be young adults. Korstjens and Moser (2017) noted "your role as a qualitative researcher requires empathy as well as distance" (p. 278). Empathy was not an issue. The distance Korstjens and Moser discussed was being aware of my values and emotions so that my data collection remained "non-judgmental and non-directive" (Korstjens & Moser, 2017, p. 278). This distance needed to be part of my reflexivity as I proceeded with the study. Kezar (2002) noted that overlapping identities influence positionality, and each of these identities helps the researcher make meaning. It was important in my interviews and analysis of the data that I was aware of my childhood experiences that led me to a helping profession, my experiences with family members who struggle with emotional disabilities, my professional identity, and my female identity.

I avoided wording bias by transcribing verbatim from interview transcripts with all of these factors in mind. I made a conscious effort to understand the perspectives of the young adults I interviewed without directing the research in any prejudged manner (see Diaz-Strong et al., 2013). All participants were asked to review the transcripts of the interviews for accuracy and to clarify any statements they made during the interview to reduce any personal bias during data analysis (see Candela, 2019). In addition, participation was voluntary, and informed consent was collected before interviews. Because informed consent is a social construct that has been evolving (Miller & Boulton, 2007), I made sure that participants received a written copy of the consent form and discussed consent at the beginning of each recorded interview, allowing time for questions or concerns to be shared. There was no apparent conflict of interest in the study.

Methodology

The Education Sciences Reform Act (2002) put evidence-based practices at the forefront of special education minds. Educational problems and policies are increasingly complex, and quantitative research has dominated these policies (Kerrigan & Johnson, 2019). The data-driven decision making, which has been pushed for several decades, has led many educators to favor quantitative designs over qualitative (Lochmiller & Lester, 2019). However, qualitative research has a special place to provide a more descriptive look into processes and problems than quantitative studies (Aspers & Corte, 2019).

Qualitative research also provides an essential response to inclusive education. Students with EBD have often been excluded from postsecondary educational

opportunities because of systematic exclusion. Through careful observation of understanding how to support marginalized students, educational institutions can develop strategies to include previously excluded students (Kozleski, 2017). Kerrigan and Johnson (2019) argued that qualitative research could empower those who have been affected by public policy, particularly those who have little power compared to the positivist regime currently in power. With this understanding of responsibility, I sought to understand how graduates of one therapeutic school were experiencing their transition to college through a deep analysis of these students' words and perceptions.

Participant Selection

Participants selected for the study were former students of one INTHS who graduated between 2016 and 2020. The final selection of participants who accepted the invitation was based on sampling criteria and potential harm to the participant. Some of these high school graduates were still attending college. Some had already graduated from college. Some had chosen to leave college and not persevere. The participants in the study were diagnosed with an EBD before or during high school and may or may not have been receiving treatment for that diagnosis during my interviews with them. The plan was that participants deemed psychologically unstable would not be included in the interview pool based on my extensive experience with the population. However, because all of the students who responded to the invitation were stable, I did not need to deny anyone who answered the invitation to participate in the study.

The number of participants needed for a qualitative study will vary from one study to another. When a researcher reaches the point of data saturation in which no new

information emerges from further participant interviews, enough participants have been included (Kerr, 2010). Patton (2014) noted that this number and the type of participants should be large and varied enough to answer the research question. In their model for sample sizes needed in qualitative interview studies, Malterud et al. (2016) noted that aim, specificity, theory, dialogue, and analysis play a part in deciding the number of participants. Malterud et al. found that five to 10 participants are usually sufficient to reach data saturation or information power. Given that this was my first qualitative study, I chose 12 participants to make sure that I reached saturation. I also ensured that I had a narrow aim, had participants with specific knowledge of the phenomenon I was investigating, grounded my study in established theory, and had robust interview dialogue. These factors improved my chances of attaining information power (see Matlerud et al., 2016).

Participants were gathered through the tight-knit world of the INTHS. Graduates of the school often keep in contact with former teachers, advisors, college counselors, and school psychologists. Former parents of the school continue to have active roles in school fundraising and school decision making. The school's leadership committed to helping me connect with and recruit students for this research (see Appendix B). 12 students responded to study invitation, and the desired participant number was achieved.

Sampling

Sampling is the process of choosing part of a population to represent the whole; purposeful sampling ensures diversity in the population of participants so that the part may better represent the whole (Tracy, 2019). In my choices of graduates to interview

from the INTHS, part of my purposeful sampling was to obtain a mixture of students who continued with college and those who chose to leave, a mixture of students from different economic backgrounds, a mixture of students from different cultural backgrounds, and a mixture of students with different EBD diagnoses typical of the student population. Once the study invitations were sent, this mixture of perseverance, economics, culture, and diagnoses was achieved, though I did not have as high of a percentage of students who did not persevere in college as would represent the norm. This maximum variation sampling was used for heterogeneity (see Cohen & Crabtree, 2008). Snowball sampling, in which current participants help to recruit more participants (Naderifar et al., 2017; Tracy, 2019), was used in a limited fashion to recruit one last participant for the study.

Instrumentation

Because in most qualitative studies, the researcher is seen to be part of the research instrument (Houghton et al., 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), making sure that I was self-aware throughout the research process was highly important. My positionality as someone with a family background of relatives with mental health struggles, as someone who has spent her life helping disadvantaged students, and as someone who did work with the school formerly were all essential to be aware of as I proceeded with interviews and data analysis. Awareness of nonverbal communication and the spoken words being shared in the interviews is one of the advantages I had being the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. The very nature of the social interaction between researcher and participant creates data and analysis through the researcher for the study. For me,

utilizing a reflective diary/analytic memos throughout the gathering and analyzing of the data was important to the credibility of the research process.

The data collection instrument that I chose was a semistructured interview protocol which can be reviewed in Appendix A. This interview protocol was designed to answer the overarching research question and was created using both the theoretical frameworks and the literature review in best practices of high school students with EBD transitioning and impacting retention success in college. The semistructured interview protocol allowed me to ask all participants the same base questions and then follow up their answers with further probing questions to expand on earlier answers.

The young adult graduates of the INTHS were interviewed via the Zoom application in a semistructured interview format. These participants were asked to reflect on the preparation for transition that they experienced with the INTHS and the perceived factors that influenced first-year retention decisions once they began college. The Zoom application created an audio recording of the interview, which I transcribed to Word documents utilizing the Microsoft Word 365 transcribe feature, creating higher accuracy (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Because these interviews took place via a technological device, they were synchronous mediated interviews (see Tracy, 2019). Zoom was the best interview option for this population as the participants were distributed over a wide geographic area. Also, participants may have been more open in answering questions in a Zoom format than face-to-face if we had not met before (see Joinson & Paine, 2007). Finally, given the COVID-19 pandemic continuing while I was in the interview process,

conducting the interviews via Zoom rather than face-to-face was necessary to reduce travel and contact.

Once each interview transcript was thoroughly checked for accuracy with three rounds of researcher cleanup and one round of checking from the interview participant, each set of interviews was saved as a rich text file and then imported into an Excel datasheet. Interviewer questions and comments were colored red, and the participant's words remained black. A section for attribute codes was added above each interview, and columns for a priori codes, open codes, axial codes, and final themes were added to the datasheet. This process was repeated for each of the 12 interviews in one workbook before coding and data analysis began. In addition, a codebook in a separate Excel workbook was created, which included all attribute and a priori codes. Each code was listed by its shorthand name, the longer name, a description of the code, and an example. This codebook was added to with open codes once the coding process began.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Recruitment

To gain access to participants of this study, I reached out to students from a list of about 40% of the graduates within the five-year time frame of graduation, which the school supplied. I also reached out to other students on the recommendations of other INTHS staff members. As the INTHS is a small, close-knit community, adults who worked at the school were keyed into helpful study participants. In all, about 50% of the graduates who were eligible from the five-year time frame received invitations (see Appendix C) to the study. One student interview participant was also gained through the

snowball sampling of an early interview participant (see Naderifar et al., 2017). As the study sample was 12 former students, the recruitment of this number of participants was not overly difficult and was completed within a two-month timeframe from the first initial outreaches to the completion of the last interview.

Participation

Upon receiving approval from the Walden University institutional review board (Walden IRB approval no. 10-15-21-0122672) I reached out to possible participants through emails and text messages. If a former student of the INTHS was interested in participating in the study, I would send them a letter of invitation and a consent form to read to understand the study thoroughly before agreeing to participate. Students willing to be interviewed had to reply with their consent before an interview. Students who had questions about the study or their consent met with me via Zoom to clarify these questions. They would then send me the consent via email during the Zoom before the interview began. Each participant received a $20 Amazon gift card after the interview was completed as an incentive for participating in the study.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through participant interviews for this study. Interviews are the most common form of data gathering in qualitative research (Saldaña et al., 2011); they can vary significantly in format from highly structured to semistructured to unstructured. I chose the semistructured interview format because it allowed me to ensure that I had data focused on the a priori coding themes from the framework and the literature review and allowed enough flexibility that open and axial

coding themes could be used as well with new information from the interviews. With semistructured interviews, a guide of questions and issues is utilized (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), but the interviewer has the freedom to explore the data with further questions or requests for clarification.

In developing the interview protocol, I created prepared questions aligned with the research question, the framework, and the literature review. The full interview protocol is presented in Appendix A. The interview questions were framed broadly, allowing the conversation to flow naturally in a conversational style that was productive for gathering qualitative data (see Yin, 2016). The questions focused on the content and the participants' individual experiences and avoided leading questions or questions with assumptions or judgment in the phrasing (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To improve validity, I asked two former students of the INTHS who graduated over a decade ago to review the questions for clarity. Revisions and additions took place based on their input and further consideration of the questions.

Each interview was recorded via Zoom with a backup audio recording as well. Given the geographic spread of students being interviewed, the advantage of interviewing these young adults over a sizeable geographical area was very helpful in gaining access to more participants (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In addition, with the COVID-19 pandemic still moving through the country, making sure that participants were not anxious about in person interactions was also an important consideration.

Participants had time during the interview to ask questions and discuss the process. Once the interview was transcribed, all participants were given the opportunity

to review the transcripts and make any corrections they felt were needed for accuracy. 9 of the participants did take the time to review the transcript and email me back with their feedback about the accuracy. The accurately transcribed interviews were then coded and analyzed.

Data Analysis Plan

Data was collected through semistructured interviews with graduates of one INTHS who were offered admission to college the fall after high school graduation. The goal of the data collection was to understand the perceived factors that influenced these students' first-year college retention. Data was analyzed to understand the gap in practice occurring in the transition planning and student preparation process of the INTHS through analysis of the study framework and literature review with the added experiences of each participant student.

Coding qualitative data is a "method of discovery" (Saldaña et al., 2011, p. 96) in which small pieces of data come together in patterns of meaning. For this study, several methods of coding were utilized. First, attribute coding of basic information took place for each transcript. There were nine attribute codes in total, including college attendance status, the year the student began college, and how many years they attended the INTHS. Each of these deductive attribute codes were pieces of information that were contained in every interview and helped to give structure and organization to the analysis process (see Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

The second step in deductive coding was the a priori coding conducted. The 30 a priori codes were grounded in the framework and literature review to enable a clear

analysis of the factors that impacted first-year retention of students based on prior understandings from the literature (see Saldaña, 2013). A priori codes used from the college retention framework included Ability to pay, Initial goal commitment, and Connectedness. A priori codes from the disability identity model included Acceptance, Adoption, Relationship, and Engagement. A priori codes used from the literature review included Awareness of disability support services, Self-advocacy, and Use of college accommodations.

The last round of initial coding was focused on inductive open coding. During this process, "precise and narrow" codes were created to capture "the complexity and diversity of the data" (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019, p. 12). During open coding, time was spent creating codes with distinct concepts of what the students communicated to me about their experiences in high school and college. These concepts were captured in open codes or phrases, holding "units of meaning" (Khalil, 2014, p. 48) for more significant concepts. In total, 49 open codes were created during this phase.

Through several further steps of organizing and reorganizing the data, axial coding was begun. Axial coding is intended to find themes that capture the recurring patterns of data that cross participant interviews (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), and with the development of 14 axial codes I found an organizational method to show the themes in the data (see Williams & Moser, 2019). The four themes that came out of the data were clear from these axial codes.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, the concept of trustworthiness of the research rests within a set of established criteria that have been constructed and agreed upon by the research community. Lincoln & Guba (1985) defined trustworthiness in qualitative research as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The definition of trustworthiness proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) has been accepted as the standard within the qualitative research community. However, in a later statement, they advised, "No matter how real, natural, or objective they may seem, criteria are social products created by human beings in the course of evolving a set of practices to which they (and we) subsequently agree to conform" (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 269). Reflexivity has been added now to many definitions of trustworthiness (see Korstjens & Moser, 2018). These indicators of trustworthiness are highly useful in forming common language around trustworthiness and are well understood and accepted within the qualitative research community (Nowell et al., 2017).

Credibility

Lincoln and Guba (1985) define credibility as whether the research sounds true; "For research to have merit it must be believable and be truthful" (Stahl & King, 2020, p. 28). Credibility can be undertaken through various methods such as prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, and member check (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). One type of triangulation is environmental triangulation using more than one situation to study the intended focus (Stahl & King, 2020). I used environmental triangulation by interviewing students who all left one school but are in multiple

environments for their college settings. Multivocality is also a type of triangulation in which participants who have a variety of views on a particular topic can provide richer credibility (Tracy, 2019). One aspect of choosing my participant pool was ensuring that maximum variation sampling occurred to ensure this type of multivocality.

In addition, credibility can also be increased through member checking in which participants look over transcripts for accuracy and clarification. Member checking is "seen as a productive research practice" (Stahl & King, 2020, p. 27). I conducted member checks with all participants to check for accuracy, and as a space for additional insights they may wish to share. This openness to communication with participants can further enrich credibility (see Tracy, 2019).

Transferability

Transferability is defined by the generalizability of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher does not have to know what sites may wish to use the data. However, the site's descriptions must be rich with detail so that other sites understand how applicable the research will be (Nowell et al., 2017). This thick description gives a "complex and expansionistic depiction" (Tracy, 2019, p. 235). As qualitative researchers' descriptions evolve, they get bigger, not smaller, the more deeply they are understood (González, 2000). This type of thick description was the goal throughout recording and analyzing the data.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability is defined as ensuring that the research process is logical and that all of the steps in the process are documented (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al.,

2017). By having rich documentation and descriptions of the process, dependability is strengthened. I created a rich and detailed audit trail in my coding methods and my analytic memos in which I transparently described each of my research steps to increase the dependability of the study.

Confirmability is the objectivity of the research and is concerned with what emerges from the study is neutral and has not been changed by researcher bias (Amankwaa, 2016). By identifying possible research bias and being open to any influences of the researcher with the research audience, confirmability is made more robust. My own research bias was explored in my analytic memos and my discussions of positionality and reflexivity, along with any assumptions I was making, to increase the level of neutrality of the study.

Reflexivity

Throughout qualitative research, the researcher's views shape the study, and the study is simultaneously shaping the researcher through the interaction of identity, positionality, and interpretation (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Reflexivity calls for the researcher to be self-aware and maintain constant introspection and reflection on how their thoughts, ideas, and views may impact and shape their interpretation of the research (Palaganas et al., 2017). Reflexivity was a constant process of honest and open awareness about my own identity as a researcher and as a person and the attitudes I hold about those participating in my research process. In my notes in this project, I kept a reflective diary of analytic memos to make sure that I was aware of my assumptions and values and how they may impact the lens through which I engaged the data. This type of reflective diary

and introspection can strengthen the reflexivity and the credibility of qualitative research (see Houghton et al., 2013, Pillow 2003).

Ethical Procedures

Ethical issues within data collection can arise anytime there are equity or power issues between researcher and participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Paying attention to the relational aspects of research, how one responds to participants both verbally and nonverbally, how vulnerable you allow yourself to become as a researcher (Diaz-Strong et al., 2013), how the researcher is open and learns from the entirely different world view of every participant who is ever part of any study, is crucial to qualitative studies (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Qualitative researchers should be held to "a demanding standard of ethical self-consciousness" (Bochner, 2000, p. 271).

Procedural ethics are those prescribed by the institutional review board, including doing no harm, avoiding deception, getting informed consent, and ensuring privacy and confidentiality (Tracy, 2019). Privacy is a huge concern with the nature of qualitative interviews in which participants often disclose personal information about themselves, their jobs, their worldviews, and their families. Making sure that these transcripts, not only the published data, go through a de-identification process is routine among qualitative researchers (Myers et al., 2020). In the current study, each participant was given a participant number to protect their identities.

Situational ethics (Ellis, 2007) involves a constant reflection about what questions should be asked, what truths should be shared for the sake of the research, and which should be held private to the researcher and participants. Minimizing harm is part of

ethical reflexivity on the part of the researcher. Asking questions about the necessity of the research, the worthiness of the information being collected, the possible risks to the participants, and the accountability on the part of the researcher are all important aspects of this reflexivity (Roth & von Unger, 2018). The more honest a researcher is in this process of ethical reflexivity, the more care will be taken to ensure the safety of each participant in a study.

In my own process of reflecting on the situational ethics of discussing the experiences of students in their first year of college who have EBD, I had concerns about interviewing a student that was not stable emotionally. In discussions with the institutional review board, it was agreed that I clearly stated to all participants their ability to stop the interview at any point in the process and stop any interview in which the participant seemed uncomfortable. No interview participants were deemed unstable, and none asked to stop the interview during the process. However, being aware of this process of equality and sharing the power of the interview was essential to building trust.

Relational ethics focuses on the relationship between the researcher and the participant, the care, respect, and trust that develops between the two people (see Ellis, 2007). Being aware of the participant as a human being, complete and whole, rather than just as a research subject is key to holding to relational ethics. Given my long history and deep empathy in working with students with EBD, viewing each of my participants as whole human beings with complex and complete lives was my default stance.

Summary

The purpose of this basic qualitative study using interviews was to explore the perceived factors that may affect first-year college retention rates for the students from one INTHS who have EBD with internalizing behaviors. This chapter contained a full exploration of the research design and rationale and an investigation into the role of the researcher. The study's methodology was explained, which included the participation, sampling, instrumentation, procedures for recruitment, data collection, and the data analysis plan. Finally, the measures of trustworthiness of the study and the ethical procedures were detailed, with particular emphasis placed on making sure that participants in this vulnerable population were treated with the highest ethical respect.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceived factors that may affect first-year college retention rates for students from one INTHS who have EBD with internalizing behaviors. This study was grounded in a theory of college retention and a disability identity development theory, which provided an opportunity for new understandings of retention in this community of study participants to be discovered. I collected data using semistructured interview questions to answer the following research question: What perceived factors affect first-year college retention of graduates of one INTHS with internalizing EBD behaviors? This chapter contains a description of the data collection setting, the demographics and characteristics of study participants, the data collection process, and a synopsis of the data analysis with the resultant main themes of the analysis. The chapter concludes with the steps taken in the study to provide evidence of trustworthiness.

Setting

The setting for the study involved students who had graduated from one INTHS. This small day school provides therapeutic support for students who attend. All students enrolled in the school have at least one emotional disability diagnosis, the most common being anxiety and/or depression. High frequency comorbid diagnoses in the school include attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, learning disorders, processing speed disorder, and autism spectrum disorder. Students in this school also function with generally average or above average IQ and have various academic and artistic interests. Almost 100% of seniors in the high school receive multiple college acceptances, and the

college counselor and college coordinator work with students and families to find the most appropriate postsecondary school plan for each student. At the time of the interviews, all participants had graduated from the INTHS and had attended college for some amount of time. Because each graduate attended a different college, interviews were conducted via Zoom at various geographic locations in the United States.

Demographics

The study participants consisted of 12 students of the INTHS who had graduated between 2016 and 2020 and had been accepted for college the fall after spring graduation. I interviewed four males, seven females, and one nongendered participant. Of the 12 students, nine had first-year college retention, while three did not complete their first year. Of the nine who were retained after the first year, one had subsequently stopped attending college. Of the three who did not complete their first year, one had a college admission and restart date. The average amount of time spent at the INTHS was 2 and a half years, with the shortest being 1 year and the longest being 5 years. A mixture of ethnicities was represented similar to the INTHS population as a whole, with eight of the 12 respondents being White and the other four being African-American/Black, Asian/Asian American, and Hispanic/Latino. For purposes of confidentiality, the participants were not listed individually, and gendered pronouns were not used in reporting data from interviews.

Data Collection

The data collection process began as soon as I had received approval from Walden IRB. I reached out to the INTHS for the contact information of graduates from

the 2016 through 2020 graduating classes. The school's leadership had committed to help me connect with and recruit students for this research (see Appendix B). In the process of participant recruitment, it was revealed that the INTHS had current records on only 10% of recent graduates. With further efforts from the school to reach out to alumni parents and obtain more contact information, I collected the contact information of about 40% of eligible participants. However, with further staff connections in this tight-knit community and snowball sampling as well, eventually about 50% of eligible graduating students were sent emails with the study flyer (see Appendix C) containing information about participating in the study. After agreeing to participate in the study, each participant received the informed consent document to review and an opportunity to ask questions about the study or the consent via email before proceeding.

Once participants had responded with their consent, an interview time and date were scheduled based on their availability. I also used snowball sampling to procure another interview from one of the earlier interviews, so the desired 12 participants were recruited. Each interview was semistructured and took place over Zoom due to the geographical location of participants from across the United States and continuing COVID-19 concerns throughout different areas of the country.

The interviews took place over 4 weeks using the interview protocol of INTHS graduates (see Appendix A). The protocol was developed with a focus on the framework and literature review. Miles et al. (2020) noted that in creating interview protocol questions, "better research happens when you make your framework explicit" (p. 22). Each interview was audio-recorded using the Zoom audio recording feature, and I also

used an app on my phone (Voice Recorder) to create a backup audio recording of each interview. The semistructured interview format allowed me to ask 16 open-ended questions in the protocol and probe for further detail with answers that felt like more information could be provided (see Brown & Danaher, 2019).

I used the translate function in the Word application within Office 365 to create an initial transcript. This version captured about 80%–85% of the interview text correctly but also broke up sentences incorrectly. A process of three cleanups with each transcript took place, with each pass through the transcript resulting in the transcript becoming cleaner and clearer. By going through each transcript multiple times, I began to see patterns in the participants' responses (see Adu, 2019; Vanover, 2021). Once I was satisfied that each transcript had been faithfully transcribed, all participants were emailed a copy with the review pane open and a note on making marginal comments. Participants were asked to check for transcript accuracy and make any changes or add to any answers without the pressure of the live interview. This check allowed me to reduce any personal bias I might have introduced while conducting the transcription process (see Candela, 2019). Nine of the participants took part in the review process and responded to the transcript review email.

After each interview was emailed to the participant for review, I wrote an analytic memo to reflect on themes and ideas that came up in that particular interview. Mihas (2021) noted that the process of memo writing is one in which the researcher begins their dialogue with the data; for me, this process was essential. Researchers are often unclear about what the data signify, and through analytic memos, "we write through our doubt"

(Mihas, 2021, p. 244). That uncertainty was what many of my early memos felt like, writing through my doubt until I found a place where ideas began to form. This process of analytic memo writing in which I was not just recording but generating ideas through the writing (see Keane, 2021) was instrumental in finding my way through the data.

Data Analysis

Coding Preparation

Once each participant responded to the transcript check email or 2 weeks had passed, each transcript was saved in a rich text format and uploaded into a Microsoft Excel worksheet. The 12 interviews were kept on separate worksheet tabs in one workbook in Excel. At that point, all of my words were colored red, and the participants' words remained in black, creating a clear visual distinction between speakers. A top section for attribute codes was created in each interview spreadsheet, and columns for a priori codes, open codes, axial codes, and themes were added to each interview worksheet. Next to each coding column was a column for a specific quote from the interview connected to the code. In this way, all codes were linked back to the original text, including axial codes and final themes, and a systematic plan for data management was created (see Turner, 2021). Planning for the coding layout occurred within the analytic memo process.

At the same time that participant interviews were uploaded, a codebook in a separate Excel workbook was created that had columns for a shorthand code name, full code name, definition of the code, example of the code, type of code, and cycle of coding. Design and development of the codebook also took place within my analytic

memos. This Excel codebook had all of the attribute and a priori codes put in before any coding took place to increase the rigor in the study's methodology (see Roberts et al., 2019). The nine attribute codes were developed to keep track of overall data from each interview, such as persistence status, the year the student started college, and the number of years the student attended the INTHS. The 30 a priori codes were developed from the frameworks and the literature review. Everything except for the example of the code column was filled in prior to any coding.

First Cycle Codes: Attribute, a Priori, and Open

First cycle coding began with filling in all attribute codes for each of the 12 interviews. Characteristics of each participant, such as whether they persisted past the first year of college, whether a gap semester or year was part of their college experience, and how many years they had attended the INTHS, were recorded (see Figure 3). The deductive attribute codes allowed me to see common factors among all participants and helped me structure and organize the analysis process (see Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). My thoughts on the attribute coding were then written in another analytic memo as I considered common characteristics.

Figure 3

Example of Attribute Coding Block Included in Each Interview Worksheet

College Status: Persisted
Location: Campus
Gap: Yes - 1 Semester
Gender: M
Year Started: Fall 20XX
Years in HS: X

I began a priori coding after attribute. Each interview was coded with a priori codes with the supporting quote next to it. This stage took several days as I looked for places in the interviews in which these 30 codes, based on the framework and literature review (see Saldaña, 2013), appeared (see Table 2).

Table 2

Examples of First Cycle a Priori Codes

Raw data	a priori code
"they send out emails about events. They have like workshops and like umm, job…resume building workshops, and hiring events with companies that are looking to increase diversity in the workplace among disabled populations. And and then also they have things like movie nights"	DIS: Community forming
"And I had [the math teacher] one-on-one for my whole first year at [the INTHS] and she fixed my math. Like she fixed it like she made it up to grade level…"	HS: Individualized ed supports
"[The college counselor] is an amazing person. The, uhm, the support that that woman gives, the patience that she has is incredible. Uhm, like I knew for her, uhm, getting me to apply was probably a lot of fun because I got like I think I sent out maybe 11 applications and got into 10. So, she was all excited for me like it was the cutest thing. I'm pretty sure she was more excited than I was at times, which I thought was hilarious. (Laughter)"	HS: Person-centered planning
"So, I think I just felt like people were, had my best interests in mind and cared about my future and that's what made me, I think, that's that care that feeling of care through like people listening and and offering their stories and insights. And just sitting with me and talking about and having a prior relationship, that probably is what helped most, I would say, yeah."	HS: Caring teachers
"Yeah, definitely like there's one teacher I have that's like uh, he is a journalist and like he's been in like crazy situations. Like he is like a Pulitzer Prize winner and everything and like he's, he was like a war photographer for a while and like like crazy things like that. So like he is my, one of my favorite teachers…"	C: Faculty: strong connection

Note. Samples of first cycle a priori codes from analysis of participant's raw data.

After coding a priori codes for a period of time, I paused and wrote an analytic memo, noting patterns and questions that were occurring to me and creating connections. At the end of one analytic memo, I pondered more about my process of data analysis.

> I feel like after I open code, I will need to compare what those who persevered said compared to those who did not continue. And academically, did they start at different places? Do students who do not have a disability identity have more struggle in college?

The memoing was a significant part of my analytical process because what I pondered in my head became more solidified the more I wrote about my questions and thoughts in the memos. The themes and ideas in the data became more evident the more times I cycled through the data in different ways and looked at them through different lenses.

The third round of first cycle coding was the open coding cycle. Rather than focusing on deductive analysis based on the framework and literature review, I created inductive codes based strictly on the transcripts. This round focused on "meaning-making, developing findings, and evidence generation" (see Bingham & Witkowsky, 2021, p. 141). While codes in this cycle were being created, I added them to the codebook to keep track of the newly created open codes.

As more open codes were created, the recursive process of qualitative coding (see Moser & Korstjens, 2018) became apparent. For example, as I created a new code in Transcript 4, I went back and checked Transcripts 1–3 to see if the new code applied to any section of the earlier transcripts I had coded. In this process of reading and rereading the data, new understandings and concepts emerged. As I walked away from coding for

the day, new ideas would come to me that sent me back in the morning with a clearer focus on codes (see Richards, 2021).

An example of one of these moments of clarity was when I realized that the feelings that these students were communicating about their experience as a first-year college student such as "left out," "included," "feeling different" or "finding others like me" might be important. Because of that insight, six feeling codes were added to the open codes section of the codebook. Later in the analysis, further insights emerged from comparing student feelings in their first year of college with their disability identity development and first-year persistence. If I had not taken the time to read and reflect on the feelings these students were communicating, I would have missed that opportunity to look at all of the connections. In total, 49 open codes were created to capture the ideas from the interviews that were not caught in the a priori codes from the framework and literature review (see Table 3).

Table 3

Examples of First Cycle Open Codes

Raw data	Open code
"I got my mental health under control. I got my mental health together by the middle of my junior year."	HS: Stabilized emotions
"My mom was like insane about it. She was like if you are dying then you don't go to school. That is… so I was taught like school's very, I don't know… It's very important"	HS: Strong parent support
"I guess it was me not only, just feeling weird about giving a college of mine my entire like neuropsych report."	F: I'm different
"I have always been very academically excellent, but very anxious about that fact. Historically, before [the INTHS], my anxiety and my mental health would get in the way of my grades a lot. Uhm, at [the INTHS] that was a bit better, but I I would say I was trying very hard. And very nervous to fail."	HS: Mental health struggles
"And, and also I, I really want to like have a very strong desire to like, you know, be a better person and improve myself and contribute to the world."	DID: Giving back to community

Note. Samples of first cycle open codes created from analysis of participants' raw data.

Axial and Thematic Coding

Combining the deductive a priori and inductive open codes allowed me to create a more thorough analysis of the collected data (see Blackstone, 2018). As I reflected on all of the a priori and open codes that I had gathered in all 12 interviews, I decided that I wanted to create another spreadsheet in which I counted every time a code was used and discovered how many interviews a code showed up among participants (no matter if I had coded it once or 15 times in one interview). Looking over this data led to several lengthy analytic memos as I tried to process, organize and analyze the 79 total a priori and open

codes. This combination of deductive and inductive coding fulfilled Ravitch & Carl's (2021) advisement to "approach data analysis in a way that is structured, yet also fluid and flexible" (p. 235).

The next step in organizing the data was to take all of the first cycle codes to identify second cycle axial codes. I knew the process was one in which I should be looking for categories of commonality (see Adu, 2019; Saldaña, 2016), but I did not quickly jump into this next coding stage. After several days of just staring at the data trying to figure out what type of categories in which to organize the first cycle codes, I put my research question in front of me - What perceived factors affect first-year college retention of graduates of one INTHS with internalizing EBD behaviors? I asked myself how the data and first cycle codes answered that question.

Creating the axial codes was suddenly clear from this hyper-focus on the research question. I needed to find out what was working at the high school level and what was not. I also needed to find out what was working at the college level and what was not. It was the same organization process I had utilized in writing the literature review, and it fell into place quickly. My themes and axial codes, which became my subthemes, were suddenly completely organized (see Table 4). I went back through each interview and coded each of the first cycle codes with axial codes (subthemes) and thematic codes. I also took the time to create four spreadsheets that had every quote organized by themes, subthemes, and first cycle codes.

Table 4

Four Major Themes With Subthemes

Theme	Axial code/subtheme
Theme 1: High school preparation - strengths	College planning High school instruction High school setting Family high school
Theme 2: High school preparation unfulfilled needs	Disability identity development Transition skills Normalize gaps
Theme 3: College supports working	Connection and community Faculty and advisor Internal student motivation Family college
Theme 4: College supports not utilized or lacking	Office of disabilities Support services Post high school support

Note: Four broader themes generated from data analysis and axial codes.

Results

Findings in this study and the analysis of themes were informed by a combination of deductive and inductive coding to strengthen the final analysis (see Blackstone, 2018). Using the Interview Protocol of INTHS Graduates (see Appendix A), I conducted semistructured interviews to collect data from graduates of the INTHS to answer the research question. The research question investigated in this study was: What perceived factors affect first-year college retention of graduates of one INTHS with internalizing EBD behaviors? An in-depth analysis of the interview data was conducted through the lens of the framework and literature review of deductive a priori codes and also utilizing

inductive open codes. As summarized below, the analysis resulted in fourteen axial subtheme codes and four broad thematic codes.

Theme 1: High School Preparation Successful

The first prominent theme that developed from the data analysis in this study was high school preparation successful. Data analysis showed that participants in this study recognized successful high school preparation with the INTHS in four main subthemes: college planning, high school instruction, high school setting, and family support during high school. Every participant in the study shared a great deal of information about these four subthemes, strengthening the data analysis.

College Planning

College planning, which included Person-centered planning and Self-empowered choice codes, was a subtheme mentioned in all 12 interviews. A variety of supports were mentioned in the college planning process. P4 discussed the junior group in which college applications were discussed, and P7 remembered how a senior seminar class had guest speakers discussing their college experience. P8 recalled creating a list in the senior seminar class of supports in college, and P6 and P7 both discussed the INTHS advisor as someone they trusted who discussed college with them. Mentioned in more than half of the interviews were the people at the INTHS who work closely with students throughout the application process: the college counselor and college coordinator. P2 shared,

> like I had something happen like college wise on Sunday night at 6:00 o'clock. We called [the college counselor]. Who always calls you back in 5 minutes at that

> time. Like [the college counselor] was amazing when she worked with me and everything and she got me settled.

Similarly, P 12 remembered interacting with the college counselor.

> This woman made sure that I was ready. She knew I was ready before I knew I was ready. Uhm, I don't know how she does it. I absolutely do not. Uhm, but she definitely made sure that I was on top of all of my stuff. I was getting everything done even though I was working at [a job] at the time and I was still in class. We still made sure we had our meetings once a week… make sure that we got through everything. She'd make sure I was on time for things if I had meetings with people. She'd make sure I was on time. Uhm, she even proofread my essay for me. Absolutely incredible what she does. I don't know how she does it and how much patience she actually has like, I don't get it, but it works for her. It worked for me; it was great.

All student participants' comments about the college counseling and preparation process were positive.

High School Instruction

High school instruction, which included codes like Caring teachers, Engaging instruction, and Individualized education supports, was also a subtheme touched on in all 12 interviews. Every graduate of the INTHS shared a memory about a teacher or a specific class they felt was meaningful to them. Even in classes the student did not like, the instruction was praised. For example, P12 noted,

> History was never my strong suit ever. And he broke it down in a way that I actually understood it, and I enjoyed it. And that's saying a lot. I don't like history. It doesn't help me. I don't, I don't like it. I don't find it interesting. But he made it into a way that I found interesting, and I could actually participate and feel good about my answers.

And positive comments about instruction were not only based on specific class curriculums as P5 discussed the senior seminar class.

> That was also pretty, pretty helpful and, and I remember like I remember one thing that I remember, at the end was that they wanted you to have a support… Like, they felt like you wanted that they wanted you to assemble like a list of people that you would call if you need help with kind of… like a support system.

In addition, much of the discussion of instruction at the high school focused on how the individualized education supports helped students. For example, fixing missing gaps, especially in math from P2 and P3, or allowing a level of flexibility and creativity as noted with P6 that the classroom instruction had "resources and freedom." Again, all student interview participants' comments about instruction and the faculty at the INTHS were positive.

High School Setting

11 of the 12 study participants brought up elements of the high school setting in their interviews. With a priori and open codes included, such as Positive behavioral interventions, Safe place to socialize, and Therapeutic atmosphere, the elements of the setting that the school has created as a therapeutic day school are evident.

Nine of the 12 participants communicated the idea that the INTHS was a safe place for them to socialize, reflected clearly in the interview from P8 about their strong memory of the first day walking into the school.

> When I first started like I just remember that first day of like meeting everyone and just immediately feeling comfortable, uhm. Yeah, it was just a whole different environment that I was just so excited to experience, uhm. So yeah, I think, I think that first day when like I finally started talking to some people and it was like the first time I actually felt comfortable making friends at school. So I think that really, that really sticks with me.

Another significant code generated under high school setting with P4, P5, P6, and P7 all adding multiple comments in this area was Therapeutic atmosphere. Some focused on the mindfulness aspect of the school. P5 noted, "I think I really liked the deep breathing…and mindfulness and mindfulness activities." Others, like P7, brought up how many one-on-one conversations were held with teachers and advisors. "There's kind of something that comes to mind in terms of strength. I remember, generally speaking, having a lot of one-on-one conversations with teachers and sometimes it would be during lunch…or during the kind of the Wednesday sheet readings." P4 added to this idea of therapeutic conversations by remembering time with their advisor.

> And then [my advisor] again was really helpful both academically and also in like taking time to talk with me and sit with me and like check in with me about…and like draw attention to how much progress I had made. He was my advisor the first summer I was there, and then he was also my mentor for senior seminar for my

> project. And so we were able to have some really good conversations, and he would, you know, bring up that I really was in a different place than I was when I came to [the INTHS]. And that was really important, and I felt like he was on my side.

Also brought up in half of the interviews was the idea of positive behavioral interventions. The way the school is choosing to deal with behavior and discipline is with support and a focus on relationship building between staff and students, rather than a punitive manner. This was reflected in the playful banter P1 reported from a teacher in asking for an assignment, "I'm going to turn around. I'm going to pretend it's done and then when I get to my office it will be there," and the patience another teacher showed with an emotional moment P4 related.

> I was just having a really hard time like keeping my emotions together, and I was allowed to go up and like pet the snake and hold the snake for a little while and come back and sit down and like walk around the classroom a bit, and then I was able to do the homework so like just being able to move a bit really helped me.

Students' comfort in the school setting showed in many comments, like when P10 noted "it felt like really relaxed."

Family Support High School

The INTHS is a setting in which most parents have had to retain educational advocates (often an attorney) to pressure their home school district into funding for their child to attend this specialized school. Some cases end up in arbitration, some are settled with districts quickly, and some are argued for years (chief financial and operating

officer, personal communication, January 13, 2022). In each case, the argument for the educational setting change is that the home district has not met the needs of educating their child in the original educational setting. Given how long that process is, it makes sense that this particular set of parents and guardians demonstrate focus and support of their children.

Eight of the 12 study participants brought up their parents' strong support during high school. Ranging in comments from P2, who noted, "My parents fought for everything in my IEP," to P5, who remembered, "My parents were like very, very, very helpful in that regard," the comments of these students were very grounded in clear support from their families. When asked about parent involvement in college selection, students remembered, "Obviously my parents were involved in it" (P3), and "I'm very grateful to have had a mom who was…she definitely has been really helpful with that type of thing" (P5), and "my mom, also was really involved" (P10).

Theme 2: High School Preparation Unfulfilled Needs

While I coded 245 comments from the students about their former high school that showed how the high school was preparing them well, there were also 188 coded comments about areas where the school could have better prepared them for the transition to college. Data analysis showed three areas where more focus by the school may result in better transition outcomes for more students, and these subthemes are disability identity development, transition skills development, and normalizing gaps.

Disability Identity Development

Disability identity development, as discussed in the framework, is about how an individual understands their disability, their connection to their disability, and their place within the disability community (Forber-Pratt et al., 2020). Coding for this area relied on domains from the model: Acceptance, Relationship, Adoption, and Engagement (see Forber-Pratt & Zape, 2017). In addition, open codes like Giving back to community, and the feeling codes of I'm different, and Others like me were added to this area.

Of the disability identity development model domains, four students of the 12 could not be placed in a domain based on the interviews. They did not, in the interview, demonstrate any level of acceptance (the first domain in the model) or identifying with their mental health disability. Several of these students did not connect their mental health diagnoses with the term "disability." One student, P10, was firmly in the acceptance domain, as they had applied for accommodations in college but did not like the way the accommodations were given and did not advocate for any further changes in the accommodations.

One student was also in the relationship domain. P9 discussed a group they joined in college that was helpful: "And it was all people who were like me, basically like sort of had like various levels of anxiety, depression, sort of other mental issues. So it so. Uh, I did. I did do that." The relationship domain is described as one in which an individual meets others like themselves, engages in conversation, and learns the ways of the group (Forber-Pratt & Zape, 2017), so this student fits into this domain.

Six students were in the engagement domain described as helping others with disabilities, becoming a role model, or giving back to the disability community (see Forber-Pratt & Zape, 2017). P5 noted, “I definitely want to go into the mental health field.” P2 shared, “I don’t know…my whole life it just kind of came to me as a calling. I wanted to do psychology.” And P1 quietly admitted,

> I mean like I have like a volunteer thing that I do. Men’s mental health is kind of totally disregarded—pretty much in general. Statistically, men kill themselves more than others. Most of the time they’re much more fatal there… and a lot of it’s just because you know, whatever, men don’t have an outlet... So, I volunteer with a group. It’s a creative outlet for men to talk about issues, even if it’s just shit that’s going on in normal life.

From participating in peer chaplaincy programs in college (P7) to wanting to work toward the goal of becoming an art therapist (P8) to wanting to focus on issues about stigma and bias in the workplace (P4), half of all the students interviewed were firmly in the engagement domain.

Also, within this subtheme were the feelings codes I developed because they provided more information when connected with the disability identity development codes. Five students noted feelings of being different, five also noted feelings of being in the right place, and two felt they had found others like them. Two voiced sometimes feeling included while four reflected sometimes feeling left out. Two expressed feeling like they needed more preparation for the reality of the world. Those students coded with the most expressions of feeling different and left out were also those coded with less

disability identity development unless they also had counter feelings of being in the right place or finding others like them.

Transition Skills

Transition skills is a subtheme that included the codes Adulting skills needed, Executive functioning skills needed, Transition skills needed, and More academic challenge wanted. Eight of the 12 students interviewed focused on different ideas about the skills that would have helped them transition more successfully to college.

The transition for any high school graduate from living with family to living in a dorm or away from home can be overwhelming. As P7 noted, just the task of moving out on your own can be daunting:

> And also, I think independence, generally speaking, like being being on your own and not at home and if you, if you don't, you know, if you go to college outside the city or wherever you live. Uh, my, I think that's that's tricky for some students, yeah?

Among the adulting skills mentioned were ideas like learning about how to make basic meals (P5, P10), understanding personal finance and how to budget and shop for food and home supplies (P6, P9), and learning to live with others outside of your own family (P9).

However, many of the transition skills desired were more specific to the INTHS environment than traditional adulting skills. Students reflected that transitioning from having enormous therapeutic supports at the INTHS to relatively few supports in college was a challenge that needed more preparation.

> And I mean the first thing was that I think you need to maybe prepare students for an environment which they will probably receive significantly less mental health support. You know, like the transition from [the INTHS] to a college is so different and I think a lot of kids will probably take you for granted having like the office as a resource or having teachers that are versed in in mental health and or in mental health like knowledge and know how to deal with kids who are having … are in crisis. (P5)

Half of the students in the study focused their transition feedback on exactly this shift between a therapeutic high school and a general college setting. Some students even felt the INTHS needed to be less therapeutic the year or two before college, as reflected in comments like, "But it's the fact that it was a, it was more helpful than it should have been" (P12) and "'cause if it's too supportive, then you're just getting coddled… you're not going to be prepared as much as you want to be" (P8). The shift between the two environments was rough for P1, who noted, "once you get to college, professors do not give a shit. You need to learn that work ethic because no one is going to give you a break"

Normalize Gaps

A subtheme that came out in open coding and had no a priori codes attached to it was the positivity for some of the students of a gap semester or gap year. In the study, three of the students took a gap year before beginning college, and one took a gap semester at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic to reset and take a break from online learning. A third of the interview participants reported taking a gap and feeling they

benefitted from it. P10 thought the gap helped by giving time for initial changes from moving out of the family home:

> Yeah, it's like 'cause I needed to like form a different kind of like mindset of like in high school and then like becoming more of like a young adult I guess. And like figuring out I don't know like feeling more self-sufficient for myself. Like … I guess like spreading apart from my family more before leaving.

For P9, completing high school had been a serious challenge to overcome, and the gap year felt like a needed break before jumping into college. After the gap was taken, the student has moved straight through college, will be graduating the year of interview, and is planning on taking another gap year before jumping into a Master's program.

Theme 3: College Supports Working

The third theme that developed from the data analysis in this study was college supports that are working for the students who graduated from the INTHS. Data analysis showed that participants in this study had data focused on four subthemes of factors helping with college retention: connection and community, faculty and advisor, internal student motivation, and family support.

Connection and Community

Connection and community was a code that became elevated to being one of its own subthemes because there was so much focus and emphasis on this theme from study participants. Students reported a large variety of ways in which they connected to the various colleges, from hall government (P5) to game nights (P4, P5) to study abroad (P8) to hanging out with friends (P1, P5, P6, P7, P9, P12).

Students with no or low codes in connection and community also had lower first-year retention. In addition, the connection did not have to be formal or organized by the college to help the student feel connected. As P7 noted,

> I connected to students like some of the really out- outdoorsy students who like to go on hikes and go camping. And we would have a lot of kind of fires. There's a forest nearby the college, so we would have, you know, campfires, kind of and like hang out at in the woods at night and, and sometimes we would have like jam sessions, and play music together, dance and it was really fun.

At one college, a club initially started by the college took on a life of its own during the COVID-19 lockdown and helped continue the connection created when students were back in person last fall as reflected by P5:

> And then also I was in Anime Club. And I think that's actually been one of the greatest parts of this of this school so far… is the relationships that I've met through them, through through that club. I've met my girlfriend, my girlfriend through them, and actually like we would, we'd actually meet every week on online. The club. Even through the whole shutdown. That was one of the most like, like tethering experience like experiences that I had during that…during the lockdown, it was just so like and everyone kind of knew it. You know, like everyone was so excited…at least everyone who was really into like the the the club and stuff. We were all very excited to meet with each other and stuff 'cause we were all so lonely all the time. And then we made like bonds that are very, very strong now. Even now on campus. And so when we went on campus and

> when we all got back, we were all just like so so excited to see that no, yeah it was. It was wonderful.

With one exception, every student who had high connection codes persevered in the first year of college. The one student who was the exception has now been accepted for readmittance.

Faculty and Advisor

Faculty and Advisor is a subtheme that includes the codes Advisor, Faculty curriculum, Faculty strong connection, and Faculty connection to opportunities. Every student interviewed had some sort of connection with their college advisor, and many students reported on the impact of their relationships with faculty members.

At most of the colleges, students reported that they had to meet with their advisor at least once a semester in person (or Zoom) to register for next semester's classes (P1, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12). Several students talked with their advisor about more than registration, like a supportive person when they struggled with classes or mental health (P2, P3, P4, P7, P9). In one college, the advisor was integrated into the complete program throughout the year:

> We would have regular check-ins and meetings about what was going on. They would talk to us... we would talk about what courses we were interested in taking, and were trying to get into. They would offer some feedback or some, or encouragement on work on specific work. We did these, we did kind of like a portfolio reviews at the end of each year where we kind of like for like gave them a folder of some work. And like wrote a kind of retrospective essay. (P7)

Faculty engagement was overall positive with students at the college level, with every student except one sharing a positive faculty interaction. The one student who did not connect with faculty persevered the first year but has since stopped attending college. Faculty connections sometimes focused on creating an engaging curriculum as P6 reflected,

> I do like what I'm doing here on campus. I like what I'm doing here. I feel like fulfilled and like like I'm engaging myself, and I'm doing things that I don't have the opportunity to do in my everyday life. And that makes it like makes me want to work hard and stay here.

Connections with faculty were also created when a faculty member listened to student concerns about a problematic classroom discussion topic and helped make accommodations as P4 shared:

> So I emailed her, and you know, brought it up and said, "Hey, is there any way I could sit out of class for this assignment and and come to office hours and we can talk about it?" and she said, "Yeah, absolutely, that's no problem." So, I did. And you know it all worked out and we had a really good conversation during office hours. That required like a level of vulnerability from me and from her, and so it really kind of was helpful, and also having that request honored was really special for me and important because I hadn't like asked for any really special consideration prior to that.

While these students attended 12 different universities, faculty at each school created connections with their students.

Internal Student Motivation

Internal student motivation is a subtheme that includes the a priori code of Goal commitment from the study framework and the open code of Strong self-motivation. Seven of the 12 study participants were coded as either voicing a strong goal commitment towards college or showing evidence of strong self-motivation.

Sometimes in high school, students feel a great deal of external pressure from teachers and parents to succeed that lessens once they hit the university. For some students, they need to then shift to internal pressure and motivation to stay on track. P4 discussed this exact feeling: “And and so then I realized I really wanted to do this and to succeed in this and and I was like I don’t think I would forgive myself if I gave up. So I did not let myself up.”

For some students, internal motivation comes with a real struggle that sometimes can be painful. When asked what is helping them persevere in college, P1 responded,

> Myself. I had my own force of will that I had to in the back of my mind knew I had to achieve X. Sometimes it was a spite thing, sometimes it was a uh fueled by rage or hatred thing ‘cause I just I hate myself for making myself do this type thing you know, whatever in the lowest of low moments. But it was a goal that I set for myself and I whatever I do that in my daily life. I do that every day. Hey listen, this is what I have to get done today XY and Z. Once I’m done with that, I can do whatever the hell I want, but these come first.

For some, the motivation comes from the end goal, like P10, who pointed out “I feel like most like better paying jobs you need a college degree.” For another student, the

motivation is about their place in the world; P5 shared, "I really want to like have a very strong desire to like, you know, be a better person and improve myself and contribute to the world." The internal drive for each student was very individual.

Family Support College

Just as family support was key to high school success, it was a key factor for the student participants in college success. Two codes went into this subtheme, Family impact and Parent impact, but based on the words of the participants, it felt like a better axial code to capture this subtheme was Family Support. Half of the 12 respondents indicated that family support was a significant factor in their ability to manage college.

More family members were mentioned during college as supportive than during high school from siblings (P4) to godbrothers (P9) to grandparents (P5) as well as parents (P1, P3, P4, P5, P9, P10). Sometimes the support came in simply normalizing how challenging the college process can be, as P4 shared,

> My sister, who was in her senior year of college at that point, was very helpful in that I would send her a text saying I was really overwhelmed and she would be like, "Yeah, that's kind of how freshman year goes." Kind of affirmed that it wasn't necessarily, like, me.

Sometimes just having parents to talk to during college was impactful like P5 shared, "And also like my parents, like reporting to them and talking saying how I was doing. That was very helpful for me." When I asked what helped P6 persevere, the short answer was "Family support, I guess. One of the things just sort of family… family support."

Theme 4: College Supports Not Utilized or Lacking

The fourth theme evident in the data analysis of student interviews was college supports that were either not utilized or lacking. This theme can be broken down into three major areas: the Office of Disabilities, college support services, and postsecondary school support. All 12 interviews touched on some aspect of this theme, and the more that students struggled with college, the lower their code counts on college supports that were utilized.

Office of Disabilities

The subtheme of Office of Disabilities came up as an area of college supports that many of the study participants were not utilizing or not utilizing fully. In looking into how many students had utilized the supports of the office of disabilities on their campus, there were several a priori code areas that had been developed as important concepts in the literature review: Awareness, Self-disclosure, Self-advocacy, Use of accommodations, and Community forming. Open coding added more themes such as Accommodations needed and Unhappiness with DIS.

In first looking at how many students were aware they could receive accommodations in college, 11 of the 12 participants affirmed their knowledge of this, though where they got their information varied from parents (P4, P5, P10), to college classes (P7), to the INTHS college counselor (P1, P2). Of the 12, nine of the students did self-disclose their disability with the office of disabilities, though the extent to which they utilized accommodations and services varied greatly. Of the nine who registered, four of them did not then utilize their accommodations, and five students spoke of situations in

which utilizing more support would have helped them academically. All three students that did not have first-year retention gave examples of times they could have utilized accommodations but did not. The student who had first-year retention but later stopped attending college also gave examples of times they could have utilized more accommodations to improve academics.

Sometimes using accommodations or not came down to how the people in the office of disabilities at their particular college responded to them. In one situation, P11 tried to reach out for help:

> Well, like I was at a class, there was like a photography class. I was like I was like so lost and doing it wrong so then I went to the Disability Office, but they said it was too late so I just ended up like not getting a passing grade. Like towards, when I was suffering I went but then they said it was too late, so.

When asked in follow-up if they ever tried to reach out to the office of disabilities again, they indicated that they did not.

Support Services

The subtheme Support Services also came up as an area of college support that many of the study participants were not utilizing or not utilizing fully. From a priori codes from the literature review that included Counseling services, Tutoring services, and Wrap-around programs, it became clear that many of these services, which almost all colleges offer, were not being utilized by many of the graduates. In fact, only three students mentioned college counseling services as a positive support, only one mentioned

tutoring services, and only one mentioned considering a wraparound program but had not enrolled in the program.

Some students tried the college counseling services and were disappointed. P8 noted,

> I eventually went to the the counseling center there, and they just, it was very basic, just like I had to reiterate like my whole story to them basically, and then they're like, oh, we're outta time, sorry about that. It's like, it wasn't… they, I didn't feel like anyone there really wanted to help. They were just more worried about like why I'm not there in class.

Others did find the college counseling services worthwhile: "There was a counselor, I believe that I would talk to on a kind of like a biweekly basis, and that was very helpful" (P5).

Post High School Support

The third subtheme that came up as a support that is often underutilized when students move to college is the INTHS itself. Open codes that created this category included College: Continued INTHS support, College: No current plan to return, and College: Plan to return. Of the four students who are currently not attending college or graduated, three have no current plan to return. One student has a reenrollment and a start date at their prior university setting.

Two students in the group discussed utilizing adults from the INTHS for support after they left for college. P2 reached out to several former teachers with specific questions and help in specific subjects. P10 shared, "I would still do like tutoring with her

sometimes. Like she would like, help me out with the, some assignments." These isolated cases were simply because the staff cared and wanted to help the students.

Of the three students with no current plans, when asked about their next steps, their responses were similar: "I'm not sure where, or even if I want to do it at this point" (P3), "I don't really know what I'm doing with life" (P11), and "I don't know if I plan on going back to school quite yet" (P12). However, in interviews when I followed up with students who had no current plan to return to college, asking if they understood that the INTHS college counselor could still work with them and help them come up with the next steps, all three students did not realize they could still utilize this support. I gave all three students the INTHS college counselor's email and let them know they could call the school at any time to schedule a conversation with them.

Discrepant Cases

Discrepant cases are the exceptions to any finding, and often the instinct of researchers is to ignore or "smooth them over" in order to make everything work and line up (Miles et al., 2020, p. 296), but discrepant cases can also provide new insights or strengthen findings as well (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, looking at the first-year retention of college students, one student did have first-year retention but then did not go on to earn the degree. There is also one student who did not have first-year retention but codes as though they should have. These two cases make for an interesting look at outliers.

In the first case of the student who did persevere in the first year but later did not complete the degree, there are code indications that make sense that the student would

struggle with college. First, there was no way to clearly put the student into a disability identity development domain. I remember being completely baffled by this when I wrote my analytic memo the day of a priori coding this interview:

> So, in the interview, the student expresses frustration with [the INTHS] for focusing on only their social/emotional disabilities, but it was their academic skills that they believe were their main stumbling blocks for college. However, the student only reached out to the Office of Disabilities one time when they struggled in a class. Because the office of disabilities answered that they needed to register with them rather than wait until they were in crisis to reach out, they never again asked for help from them. So, does this student accept their social/emotional or learning disabilities? Are they even at that first point on the scale? Because if they accepted their social/emotional disabilities, would they have been able to reach out to all the resources the college was offering? Would they have been able to self-advocate with the professors? I'm going to have to put more thought into this one.

This same student did not utilize college accommodations, counseling services, tutoring services, or wraparound support, found college more academically challenging, experienced mental health and social struggles in college, and expressed feelings of being different and left out. While the student did complete the first year of college and move into the second year, with the amount of social-emotional and academic struggles they were experiencing coupled with the lack of support services being accessed, it is not surprising that eventually they stopped attending college.

The second outlier case is one in which the student did not have first-year retention but coded for factors that would indicate strong studentship and supports were in place. In this case, the student indicated a solid connection to the community, very strong connection to faculty, clear institutional commitment, accessed outside resources and support in college, and had high disability identity development in the engagement domain. Everything here indicated that this student should have had successful first-year retention and persisted into the next year of college.

In this outlier case, a mental health crisis occurred. The student did not complete the first year, was hospitalized for an extended amount of time, and then was moved into an intensive day program focused on their specific mental health needs. Despite this crisis, the student has not given up the dream of college and has been reenrolled into classes while the mental health supports will be reduced but not halted. Based on this student's commitment to college, understanding of their disability, and level of support being accessed, the time off may end up being a "gap" rather than a stoppage of college, but this is a best guess prediction from the data analysis.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Before I began my research, I utilized the trustworthiness standards of Lincoln and Guba (1985, 2005) of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability with the added criteria of reflexivity by Korstjens and Moser (2018). While these are well accepted indicators of trustworthiness within the qualitative community, my deeper understanding of the concept of trustworthiness within the qualitative educational community has continued to develop. I believe, as Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020)

pointed out, that “These are not rules to be stiffly applied but guidelines to consider when you reflect on the question, ‘How good is my/this research report?’” (p. 305). With these considerations in mind, the evidence of trustworthiness in this study is explored.

Credibility

Credibility measures how believable a study sounds (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stahl & King, 2020). Prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, and member checking can all add to the credibility of a study (see Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Stahl & King, 2020; Tracy, 2019). Environmental triangulation was utilized by interviewing students from multiple college destinations who came from the same high school. Multivocality triangulation was employed by choosing participants with various views on the same topic of transitioning into college from a particular therapeutic high school. Member checking was also employed, with nine of the participants responding to the opportunity to check their transcript for accuracy and share any additional insights or add to any answers they wished.

In my data analysis process, the data is well linked to the prior theory (see Miles et al., 2020), the depiction of my process was highly descriptive, and my findings from this analysis were laid out clearly and systematically (see Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Discrepant or outlier cases were meticulously examined to understand the phenomenon on a deeper level (see Miles et al., 2020). All of these factors increase the credibility of this study’s findings.

Transferability

Transferability is a tricky concept of trustworthiness in a qualitative study, especially in a site specific context (see Clarke et al., 2018), as was the case in this particular study. Nowell et al. (2017) recommend that the site description is rich with detail so that readers of the study understand if it can be applied to other contexts. In this case, other high schools with large populations of students with EBD with internalizing behaviors may benefit from some of the recommendations. This thick description of both the site and the analysis was the goal throughout the study.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability is the idea that the research process is described explicitly and makes sense logically (Linoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017; Miles et al., 2020). In this case, I created a detailed audit trail that an outsider could view and understand with each step of data collection, data processing, and data coding documented in my Excel worksheets and analytic memos. By keeping each stage of coding linked to the original words of the participants, every code, whether first cycle a priori or open, second cycle axial codes/subthemes, or final themes were consistently strengthened in analysis by being connected to the original data.

Confirmability focuses on ensuring that the researcher maintains neutrality throughout the data collection and analysis process (Amankwaa, 2016). I spent time considering my own positionality and reflexivity, identifying my own possible research bias, and staying aware of that throughout the process in my analytic memo writing. In

addition, the member checking of the participants was also another check to make sure that the transcript creation remained more neutral and freer of bias (see Candela, 2019).

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is the process of understanding how the research impacts the researcher and how the researcher is impacting the research (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Critical to this process is taking the time to think through this issue of how my own thoughts, ideas, and views can influence or shape the research (see Pillow, 2003). My introspection into my positionality both in the proposal and in my analytic memos was essential to understanding the lens with which I saw the study and helped strengthen the reflexivity and trustworthiness of the study (see Houghton et al., 2013).

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to explain in detail the data collection process, data analysis process, and major thematic data results of the study. To start, I reviewed the purpose of this study which was to explore the perceived factors in first-year college retention of graduates from the INTHS. I also reviewed the study setting and discussed the demographics of the participants as a group. For purposes of confidentiality in a small setting, participants were not listed individually in the demographics. I described data collection steps in finding participants, conducting semistructured interviews, and transcribing the interviews into clean transcripts. The organization of the data analysis was described, and then the steps taken during multiple rounds of coding were also detailed. I presented the data analysis findings with a detailed description of the thematic

findings. The study's five trustworthiness characteristics were discussed: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity.

The four main themes of the study, generated from the analysis of the collected data, focused on the factors that may influence first-year college retention and perseverance of the graduates of the INTHS. Findings were categorized in a way that would be meaningful for the INTHS into four main themes: areas in which the INTHS has strength in preparing graduates for college, areas in which the INTHS graduates had unfulfilled college preparation needs, areas in which the college supports of the INTHS graduates were working, and areas in which college supports were not being utilized or lacking. Each thematic area had three or four subthemes of specific factors influencing college retention and perseverance that were detailed and supported by interviews with the students. In Chapter 5, a detailed discussion of the findings will be provided relative to the framework and literature review, along with new inductive findings from the analysis that were not in the prior literature. The chapter will also include limitations of the study, recommendations for future studies, and a discussion of the implications for positive social change, implications for model framework development, and recommendations for practice for the INTHS based on data analysis.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceived factors that affect first-year college retention rates for the students from one INTHS who have EBD with internalizing behaviors. This study was conducted to understand why college students who graduated from this INTHS were having low first-year college retention rates. Given the nature of this population, the study was grounded in a college retention theory (Braxton et al., 2013; Tinto 1987, 1996) and a disability identity development model (Forber-Pratt & Zape, 2017; Forber-Pratt et al., 2020). Using semistructured Zoom interviews, I collected data from 12 graduates of the INTHS who began college between 2016 and 2020. The study was relevant and necessary because few researchers had investigated the factors influencing the first-year college retention of students with EBD with internalizing behaviors (see Harrison et al., 2017; Morningstar, Lombardi et al., 2017; Trainor et al., 2020; Yaeger et al., 2020).

The 12 participants were able to describe factors in their interviews in four thematic areas: factors that were helpful in the high school setting in preparing them for college, the preparation that they wish they had in high school for the college transition, factors that helped them persevere once they began college, and supports that many of the students did not use that were in place at their various colleges and would have helped with perseverance. These subthemes, their connections to the framework and literature review, and areas of new inductive knowledge are explored in this chapter. In addition, the limitations of the study are discussed along with implications for positive social change, theoretical implications, and recommendations for practice for the INTHS.

Interpretation of the Findings

Findings from the data analysis of interviews of INTHS graduates showed that the perceived factors that influenced first-year college retention could be broken down into four main thematic areas: areas of high school preparation that were successful, areas of high school preparation that had unfulfilled needs, areas of college support that were working, and areas of college supports that were being underutilized.

Theme 1: High School Preparation Successful

With every participant giving many data points toward this theme, understanding what areas of high school preparation were successful for INTHS graduates had the largest area of responses. The student participants in this study recognized successful high school preparation with the INTHS in four main subthemes: college planning, high school instruction, high school setting, and family support during high school.

College Planning

Person-centered planning was an a priori code that was developed from the literature. Multiple studies from both public high school settings (Harrison et al., 2017; Yeager, 2018; Yeager, 2021; Yeager et al., 2020; Zirkus & Morgan, 2020) and grant-funded transition projects (Bullis et al., 2002; Malloy et al., 2010; Stein et al., 2016) for students with EBD showed that a critical element in postsecondary success is making sure that the student is significantly involved in planning the next stage in their life and feels empowered. This focus on self-empowered choices and person-centered planning was evident in the college planning process at the INTHS. In thinking of the college coordinator, P5 shared

> he was just very willing to help work with me and try to figure out what I really wanted from my college experience. It's like, like and so I was able to like, uh, whittle down like what is the best option? What are the best? What's kind of like some of the things like, what are the best ways for me to take advantage of the situations and like financial stuff just kind of like being able to help me breakdown the application process in a way that was manageable for me.

P5's words show that the emphasis was on what the student wanted from college, not on outside expectations from the school or other external factors. P8 also highlighted how focused the process was on the individual student figuring out their own needs and desires in a college:

> [The college counselor] was such an important role in that, uhm, and I don't think it would have happened without her to be honest, 'cause I had no, I had no clue how to do any of it. But yeah, it was, it was really helpful to be able to go through the process of like, trying to figure out where I want to go like location-wise. Uhm, I knew I wanted to do art so I was pretty like pinpointed to that.

This type of focus on the student's input and buy-in for the planning process was the process supported by prior research (Harrison et al., 2017; Yeager, 2021).

High School Instruction

Quality high school instruction is a crucial factor in the college persistence model (Braxton et al., 2013; Tinto 1987, 1993) as well as the literature (Bullis et al., 2002; Malloy et al., 2010; Stein et al., 2016; Zolkoski et al., 2016). Within all iterations of the college persistence model, the student entry characteristics of academic ability and

academic achievement appear (Braxton et al., 2013). Without quality instruction, students are less likely to have the academic skills and achievements that are college ready. Other important high school factors whose positive impact carried forward from high school into postsecondary settings with students with social-emotional struggles were caring teacher bonds (Zolkoski et al., 2016) as well as individualized and flexible education programming (Bullis et al., 2002; Malloy et al., 2010; Stein et al., 2016).

Engaging lessons, a focus on academic skills, and individualized education supports were found throughout the current data from the student interviews. In remembering the INTHS supports, P7 remarked

> I just felt like people were, had my best interests in mind, and cared about my future, and that's what made me, I think, that's that care that feeling of care through like people listening and and offering their stories and insights. And just sitting with me and talking about and having a prior relationship, that's probably is what helped most

Even students who noted that they complained about difficult lessons or projects when they were at the INTHS reflected that those assignments of creating resumes (P9), completing the senior presentation (P7, P9), being asked to write long papers and stick with the syllabus (P4), or being told to check those sources (P5) helped prepare them for the college setting.

From strong memories of a neurobiology presentation (P1) to a teacher helping a student create an "emotional attachment to science" (P3), students shared an abundance of memories of teachers engaging them in the curriculum. Beyond that, there was an

entire category of codes called Learner identity in which student data revealed that students were learning information and developing their own learner identity in the process of instruction. This aspect of quality instruction (helping students develop their individual learner identity) was not highlighted in the literature. In remembering a science class at the INTHS, P4 shared,

> [His] classes were hard, and college is hard and it kind of helped me get used to getting an 80 something and being happy with that because I tried my best and did pretty well. It'll… he also got me used to not necessarily understanding things the first time they were explained. Which for me, that used to bring up a lot of anxiety. I'd be like, oh I don't understand things, I must be stupid. I'm not and and kind of dealing in subjects that I didn't necessarily take to as easily like physics was really helpful because like I'm in the sciences now. I have to take organic chemistry. That was hard, but I kind of knew that, OK, I just had to find a different way to understand.

This type of rigorous curriculum with an emphasis on critical thinking is often missing for many students with disabilities in their curriculums (Monahan et al., 2020; van Laar et al., 2017).

In addition, learning how to learn, learning how to be a student, and developing positive mindset skills came up in over half of the interviews with students from the INTHS and were emphasized in the literature as needing to be explicitly taught (see Madaus et al., 2021; Zirkus & Morgan, 2020). P8 discussed how the senior seminar class did not only talk about doing papers and classwork, but also "it hit all aspects of like

thinking about socializing, thinking about your mental health." Along similar lines of mindset, P5 remembered,

> [The PE teacher's] classes were very helpful as well in the way that he very… he teaches you how to, at least for me, how to push yourself. Because, like the lessons that I learned from his classes, not just and it didn't just apply to like physical activity. But also applies to like in all, kind of like all aspects of life. Just like push yourself to learn your limits and you get like stronger. And yeah, so I think I think I, I've really learned a lot more. I just, I I learned a lot in that class with [the PE teacher].

The care and quality of instruction in which emphasis was placed on critical thinking, mindset skills, and individualized education supports received by students in the INTHS had more data than any other subtheme in the study.

High School Setting

The high school setting subtheme was highly discussed in interviews, with 11 of the 12 interviews touching on this area. Positive behavioral interventions, a safe place to socialize, a small setting, and a therapeutic atmosphere all added different dimensions to this subtheme. Identified by Zolkoski et al. (2016) as factors that lead to better transitions for students with EBD, small setting and positive behavioral interventions were both noted in the current interviews. P3 and P4 shared that they had small classes with individualized attention. P2 explained that a friendship with a teacher was possible in the small setting. P5 shared the influence of mindfulness practices at the school in how students and staff interacted and dealt with weighty emotions: "and mindfulness and

mindfulness activities. I I always really like those, and those have been very helpful for me in times of stress."

Nine students described the school as a safe place to socialize, an important component of setting that did not come up in the literature. P2 shared, "once I got to [the INTHS] and everything, I was good like I was happy safety transfer. I was great. But being like in a, I guess, a good healthy school environment was something I really looked for." The fluidity of social groups was also discussed in several interviews, such as when P3 described developing relationships at the INTHS: "I was able to build more individual friendships instead … if you were talking to me, you'd be only talking to me." P7 also shared this fluidity in the social groupings:

> Ah, I remember being pretty friendly and feeling very confident in my ability to talk to any random variety of students, and I remember being, I remember that I was, I would have kind of friendly conversations with students from a lot of different walks of life, I felt. And I, I wouldn't necessarily be super close to them, but I would be a, I just remember being able to talk to people pretty easily at that time. And because of that, I remember having a lot of friends. And having a lot of laughs and people.

Another critical element of the setting that was not in the literature was the idea of the school being a place where student emotions had the time and space to stabilize. The sense of this was best captured by what P1 shared: "I got my mental health under control. I got my mental health together by the middle of my junior year."

Family Support High School

Although family socioeconomic status is a factor influencing retention in the college persistence model (Braxton et al., 2013), family emotional support is not mentioned as a factor. Family support was only peripherally mentioned in the literature review as an important transition factor in the family needing to be involved in the postsecondary planning process (see Harrison et al., 2017; Yeager et al., 2020). Eight of the 12 participants (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P7, P9, P10) brought up their parents' strong support during high school and transition. In describing their parents' influence in writing the IEP, P2 laughingly shared, "I get a lot of crazy shit. And it's like I need that. 'Cause you know I do, but they had to fight for that." P4 and P5 noted that both their mom and their siblings were helpful in the college selection process. In remembering the college selection process, P7 said,

> I think my mom looked into some stuff on her own, so she was very motivated and I think I'm very grateful to have had a mom who was, I mean, yeah, she definitely has been really helpful with that type of thing.

The strength of family support was more prominent in this study than was displayed in the literature. The parents of students in this sample of the INTHS graduates appear to be making positive contributions to the transition process of their children.

Theme 2: High School Preparation Unfulfilled Needs

The students interviewed in this study showed slightly higher retention than the general population of students from the INTHS probably because of the voluntary nature of the participant recruitment. However, three of the students did not have first-year

retention, and a fourth stopped attending later in college, so there were plenty of data from students about areas in which they struggled. In addition, interview participants who had successfully graduated from college were able to reflect on moments of struggle during their college years that might have been alleviated with different high school preparation for the transition to college. Data analysis from the interviews showed three areas where more focus by the INTHS may result in better transition outcomes for more students: disability identity development, transition skills development, and normalizing gaps.

Disability Identity Development

Although I did not find evidence in the literature regarding how disability identity development impacted the transition of EBD students from high school to college, the goal in including a disability identity development model within the framework was to understand better whether any individual's disability identity development was a factor in their college retention. The developers of the disability identity development model chosen stated "a coherent disability identity is believed to help individuals adapt to disability, including navigating related social stressors and daily hassles" (Forber-Pratt et al., 2020, p. 2). Transitioning into a new college environment would be a social stressor for many students with EBD.

The model did seem to hold up upon data analysis given that eight of the nine students who had first-year college retention had developed or had begun to develop a coherent disability identity. The one student who was the outlier discontinued college later and did not graduate. Given this apparent connection between the establishment of

disability identity and persistence in college, more emphasis on disability identity development lessons and culture may be needed to increase the retention of INTHS graduates.

One student who found success in college pondered their interests in looking into the ideas of stigma and bias in different groups, and this reflection showed the progress in their disability identity development: “I like to say that like my kind of axes that I like to think about inequality on are I’m really interested in race and LGBT issues and disability. Those are my things that I really like” (P4). Although this student had six data points coded for the feeling “I’m different,” they also had eight points of data coded for the feeling “others like me.” This student had found many community members through their connection with others with emotional disabilities.

The two students who did not have first-year persistence and currently have no plans for returning to college had no placement in a disability identity development domain. In addition, the first had two points of data coded for the feeling, “I’m different,” and two points of data coded for the feeling, “left out.” The second student had five data points coded for the feeling, “I’m different,” and five data points for the feeling, “left out.” Neither of these nonpersistent students had any data for the feelings of “included” or “others like me.”

Transition Skills

The most directly verbalized request from the INTHS graduates for the school to consider adding to the high school curriculum to help transition to college was the subtheme of transition skills. While their definitions and ideas of the types of skills

varied, eight of the 12 students voiced a desire to be more prepared for the "reality" of the college environment.

Five of the students (P5, P6, P7, P9, P10) requested what I dubbed "adulting" skills: a desire to understand more about making food, creating budgets, understanding time management, and planning projects, doing your laundry, and living with people other than family. Learning "adulting" skills was not indicated in the literature research as helpful for college persistence, but almost half of the students brought it up.

Seven of the students (P1, P5, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12) specifically requested decreasing the amount of help from the INTHS and increasing the amount of challenge and accountability from the INTHS, usually in the last two years before college. P8 noted, "I needed more experience handling my anxiety" before transitioning to college. P1 wanted the INTHS to push them more academically so that the less flexible professors "in the real world" were not such a shock when transitioning. P12 stated it clearly and impassioned:

> Stop cushioning me. Stop cushioning me. And that's coming from me. Like I, I loved [the INTHS]. I did. Uhm, I liked the people that were there. I loved the environment that I was in. But it's not real world. At all. It's so far from it. And we're so sheltered. Which is saying a lot like you guys did such a good job. And it it was just such a turn 'cause I was not expecting it.

This factor of college preparation was not seen in the framework or literature review as helping students with EBD transition from high school, probably because the high level

of therapeutic support that the INTHS has created for students is highly unusual. P1 reflected,

> I only really had three teachers who genuinely like imparted lessons of, “This is how shit works. I’m gonna let this slide right now ‘cause I have to, but when you leave this place. I’m not here. There’s no safety net for you.”

Perhaps, for some students, being completely therapeutically supported at all times and not having to prepare for an environment with “significantly less mental health support” (P5) is not preparing them for the less supportive realities of many colleges.

Normalize Gaps

Four of the 12 student participants took some type of gap year or gap semester before or during college. Of these four, each of them resumed college successfully after the gap, and all four had positive feelings about taking that gap before or during college. P6 advised the INTHS on how to discuss the idea of gaps with students:

> And I think also just encouraging students to like take a gap year and just like take that time to like be able to sow your wild oats before going back into the academic, the rigor, the strictness of academic work and like enjoy their time being a teenager.

P10 discussed how the gap helped them break up the transition between high school and college. First, they learned how to handle themselves autonomously away from home, figured out how to handle decisions about alcohol and partying, and understood what it was like to shop and clean for themselves. Then they dealt with the second half of the

transition the next year learning how to deal with college academics and college expectations:

> Honestly, I feel like taking a year between was really beneficial to me because I noticed like a lot of people like in college, uhm, like they like act out a lot ‘cause they like, didn’t get to experience like certain things in high school maybe, so I feel like it’s like way better to like get all of that out. So that you don’t have to deal with that like while you’re dealing with like homework and stuff like obviously it like works fine for a lot of people, but I just noticed personally, like, uhm, like it was important for me to like have time after high school before college. (P10)

For some students, breaking the transition into separate pieces seemed to benefit them when they did begin college.

Because the idea of the gap was not in the framework or literature, it was not a question in all interviews, but another student who did not persist the first year of college took what they consider a gap year for more mental health support and has a clear timeline for returning to college with reenrollment already offered. If this student returns successfully, that would be five of the 12 students interviewed where a gap appears beneficial for eventual college success.

Theme 3: College Supports Working

Similar to the first theme of strengths from the INTHS helping with college transition and perseverance, student interview participants had much to say about the third theme: college supports working for the students who graduated the INTHS. Data

analysis of participant interviews focused on four main subthemes of factors helping students with retention once they are in college: connection and community, faculty and advisor, internal student motivation, and family support.

Connection and Community

Connection and community were significant themes in college retention both in the framework and literature. Braxton et al. (2013) dubbed this major area "social integration," while several recent studies in the research literature have highlighted community as a significant factor in the retention of all students (Boyd et al., 2020; Hoyt, 2021; Kuh & Love, 2020) and particularly those with disabilities (Fleming et al., 2017).

Unsurprisingly, connection and community was such an often utilized code in the data of this study that the code was elevated to its own subtheme. Every student in the study had data points in this theme, and generally, higher points of data for connection and community also went with students with first-year retention. The one exception is the student who is now reenrolling.

Even students who got separated during COVID-19 lockdowns utilized resources to stay connected as P2 shared about their religious club, "Like Hillel was just Zoom and like the best thing we had was Hillel doing Instagram Live. 'Cause of like making halla and all of us hanging around on Zoom." This club connected the student with others who shared their faith background. P9 also found a connection in a spiritual group: "I like going to the Buddhist student group things 'cause it's honestly just a very chill place to be." At other times the feeling of connection was to a particular department rather than a

group of students; as P8 shared, "I felt more connected within the arts. So, I would definitely say like the art department at [my college] is where I belong."

Clubs were often the place where connections were started in the first year, as P10 shared:

> Uh, yeah, like the first, my first like freshman and sophomore years I was in a lot of clubs. Like I was in like an anthropology club, and then I was in a movie club, and I was also in like a paranormal club…

Sometimes membership in the clubs gave students a never before felt sense of belonging as P5 shared, "I've never been on that side of like the social, I don't know, like the social group system. Like usually I'm on the outside."

Faculty and Advisor

Faculty and advisor influence on retention is also firmly rooted in the literature. How faculty members interact with students' disabilities and handle accommodations is connected to retention (Toutain, 2019; Zerquera et al., 2018), as is teaching style and methodology (Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017; Grier-Reed & Williams-Wengerd, 2018; Love et al., 2019). In addition, the advisor can be a crucial figure for disabled students' connection to the campus and decisions about perseverance (Zilvinskis et al., 2020).

In this subtheme of faculty and advisor, every student interviewed had some sort of connection with their college advisor, and many students reported on the impact of their relationships with faculty members. These pivotal figures at a college or university can significantly impact how students felt about their progress and ability to handle college. P4 shared a memory of one advisor meeting:

> So, I met with her and she was really helpful and supportive and very open to meeting and and having conversations and she was really encouraging. And kind of told me to take care of myself. Like if I managed last semester, I could probably work through this. And if I couldn't, we would cross that bridge when we got to it. And then I did start to do better in that class. Being able to meet with her one on one was really good for me because she kind of reaffirmed that I was in this program for a reason and that she didn't necessarily have some sort of huge bias against me.

Simply knowing a person well from the university was enough to break down barriers for help as P2 shared about one faculty member: "But she was phenomenal. She, like any questions I had, I went to her 'cause I was like. I know you and you're really nice." And faculty members who were tuned into the students as people made huge impacts. P12 shared,

> [My] art teacher, surprisingly was the only one that actually like saw when I was getting really bad, because I guess my art took a different turn. And he paid attention to it. Which is saying a lot because he was like, "You paint with bright colors and you're not, you're painting with like dull paint."

Being seen, being noticed, feeling like faculty and/or advisor was on their side all helped the graduates of the INTHS with retention and perseverance.

Internal Student Motivation

Prior research did not focus on internal student motivation as a significant factor in student retention. The student persistence framework has initial goal commitment as a

factor in retention (Braxton et al., 2013), but not continuing individual motivation. When looking at the data across codes, half of the participants had codes for strong self-motivation, and all of these students had first-year persistence. Students with initial goal commitment or strong self-motivation were also more likely to self-disclose their disability and self-advocate for accommodations.

The self-motivation and goal commitment of these students was there in a variety of ways, from not wanting to let down their family (P2, P5) to "grounding" themselves as a college student from their own car and activities until they raised their grades the second semester (P1), to simply finding deep worth in the type of work they have discovered on the campus:

> I do like what I'm doing here on campus. I like what I'm doing here. I feel like fulfilled and like like I'm engaging myself and I'm doing things that I don't have the opportunity to do in my everyday life. And that makes it like makes me want to work hard and stay here. (P6)

These students' goal commitment and internal motivation clearly connect with their inner strength. As P5 said, sometimes you have to "like white-knuckle, you know? Like grip like the wheel and like hold really hard, you know?"

Family Support College

Family support during college was also not a significant factor in college persistence from the framework or the literature review, but six of the 12 interviews mentioned family support as a major factor in helping the student persevere in college as it was in high school.

The management of emotional disabilities can take a lot of energy for many students. P9 noted that having their college location not too far from home was crucial for dealing with times of struggle:

> [That] was actually one of the perks of being up here is the fact that it's close enough to the city is that if you ever need to sort of like, get away for a weekend or something like that, or just if it was getting too stressful up here like you're literally, you're literally, you're literally only three hours away by bus…

P4 also shared that parent support was helpful at critical moments of stress:

> my mom was really helpful in terms of like just being there, especially when I would have really bad exams that would not go the way I wanted them to. Having someone who was like totally on my side that's good.

Even a study participant who struggled and did not continue with college felt that their parents were supportive throughout the decision-making process of whether to continue or stop attending college.

Theme 4: College Supports Not Utilized or Lacking

Just as the student interviews showed clear areas in high school preparation that could be enhanced, they also revealed clear areas of college support that many students in the study were not utilizing. Data analysis from all interviews showed three areas where students may have stronger retention and persistence in college if these supports were utilized more: the Office of Disabilities, college support services, and postsecondary school support by the INTHS.

Office of Disabilities

Prior research is very clear that students with disabilities who are aware of disability support services, utilize their departments, and self-advocate for accommodations have higher retention in college than those who do not (Aquino & Bittinger, 2019; Kutscher & Tuckwiller, 2019; Newman et al., 2020). This type of self-advocacy also leads to a higher sense of community and connection for students with disabilities (Fleming et al., 2017), encouraging retention.

While 11 of 12 student participants in this study had a strong awareness of disability support services, and nine self-disclosed to the office of disabilities on their campus, the amount they self-advocated for accommodations significantly varied. Only five students used accommodations in college, and those who did not successfully complete their first year affirmed they could have utilized accommodations more. Comments like "Yeah, I don't I, I feel like I could have had more accommodations. I think that may have been more on my my part of like not being as advocating for myself" (P8) and "I just didn't know why I need accommodations, which is so stupid to think of it now that like, oh, I'm embarrassed to give a university something that like they probably get all the time" (P3) were not uncommon in the interviews.

When asked if they registered for accommodations in college, P7 did not realize they could have qualified for accommodations even: "I never did because I didn't really… I don't think I qualified for any. I don't have any disabilities. I, as far as I know, but, uhm yeah, I never needed those services, but I had friends who did." These comments in a few interviews let me understand that not all students understood that a

psychological diagnosis was considered a disability by the university and allowed them accommodations in college classes. Later, this same student clearly states that they struggled with depression at times in college, but again, does not connect that to the term "disability."

Support Services

Support services come up in the prior literature as helpful in college retention. College counseling services are vital in helping students with EBD persevere in college (Eisenberg et al., 2016; Schwitzer et al., 2016). Tutoring services and learning strategies instruction can also be helpful in retention (Kutscher & Tuckwiller, 2019) as are wrap-around support services such as TRiO Student Support Services (Hoyt, 2021).

Interestingly, these areas of support were highly underutilized by the participants in the study. Three students mentioned college counseling services positively, as reflected in P6, who shared, "I know they have like a …free guidance counseling like with actual therapists and all that. So, I've been taking advantage of that lately. That's been better." One participant mentioned trying tutoring who did not have first-year retention and noted, "they weren't very helpful for me" (P12). No students utilized wraparound services, though P2 discussed the possibility of enrolling in one.

Also included in this subtheme were open codes such as college: academically more challenging, college: mental health struggles, and college: social struggles. Only one student coded with college: mental health struggles or college: social struggles also was coded to using the college counseling services. The five students coded with college: academically more challenging did not code with tutoring as a helpful service. These

open codes allowed me to look at the experiences and feelings of the students in college in combination with known helpful supports and services in the a priori codes. Students could utilize these supports more to find help and connection on their local campuses.

Post High School Support

Post high school support is not a subtheme captured in either the framework or the prior research literature. Open codes that created this category included College: Continued INTHS support, College: No current plan to return, and College: Plan to return. Of the four students who are currently not attending college or graduated, three have no current plan to return. One student has an enrollment and a start date for restarting college.

While two students from the study participants talked about reaching out to former teachers from the INTHS for help and support during college, most students did not even consider the INTHS as one of their resources after high school graduation. The three students who did not complete college and do not currently have a plan for their next step were all asked if they were aware that they could work with the INTHS college counselor again, one year, three years,10 years after graduation to help create new ideas or rethink what the right college setting might be. Their answer was simply no; they had not realized that resource was still available.

Limitations of the Study

In this study, the most significant factor beyond my control as a researcher was the COVID-19 issues that came up for college students. First,10 students had their college careers impacted by the shutdowns out of the 12 interviews. Second, at the time

of the interviews, fall of 2021, many students were experiencing significant screen time fatigue, and it took slightly longer to find 12 willing participants than expected, though ultimately, this obstacle was overcome.

In addition, access to participants was somewhat of a challenge as the INTHS did not keep current contact information on all graduates within the time frame of this study. While the INTHS staff did reach out to parents of these graduates to gather more contact information, the pool of college students to gather interviews from was much smaller than initially anticipated. This smaller pool impacted any choice I had of the sample of 12 interviews and also slowed data collection, but was an obstacle ultimately overcome.

Finally, the sampling was not quite as diverse in perseverance outcomes as I had hoped, with nine of the 12 participants who volunteered for the study having first-year college retention while a sample closer to what was happening with the school would have been split about half between those who persevered after the first year and those who did not. My guess is that those students who felt more positively about their college experience were more inclined to volunteer to participate in the study. However, I found that I reached saturation of data with the 12 participants, not adding any new open codes to the interviews past the tenth interview (see Kerr, 2010). Therefore, I felt that I had substantial information about what was going well for students and what areas needed improvement.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study collected data that represented the experiences of students with EBD with internalizing behaviors from one INTHS transitioning to college. Some of the results

may apply to students with EBD with internalizing emotions from a variety of high school settings who are entering college. One recommendation for future research would be to expand the variety of high school backgrounds of the next group of participants while still only working with the core identifying factor of students with EBD with internalizing behaviors. In this way, the larger population of students from public school backgrounds could begin to be incorporated into the data, allowing for much more generalizable results.

In addition, the disability identity development (Forber-Pratt & Zape, 2017; Forber-Pratt et al., 2020) connection within this student population to college persistence was striking in this study. Further investigations into the types of curriculums, lessons, workshops, or interventions that can be developed to help students with emotional disabilities to develop a more complete disability identity is indicated as necessary for increasing the number of students who will have more success in dealing with postsecondary life, whether that is in college, at a job, or in a relationship. Again, this data could help a large population of students entering postsecondary life with EBD with internalizing behaviors.

Implications

Positive Social Change

Although students from this particular INTHS have above average college admission and start rates compared to all students, their first-year college retention rates are still below nondisabled peers (Francis et al., 2019). With the new knowledge of what factors increase or decrease postsecondary persistence of their graduates with EBD with

internalizing behaviors, the INTHS leadership team will be able to plan more effectively for transition supports for this population, addressing the gap in college retention rates for this group (Lloyd et al., 2019). If better preparation can be put into place for the graduates of this INTHS with EBD transitioning from high school to college, stronger first-year college retention outcomes for future graduates may be achieved.

The results of this study highlighted the preparations that the INTHS already has put into place for students that are helping their graduates persevere in college: strong person-centered planning for postgraduation plans, quality instruction by a caring staff, a therapeutic setting that supports students emotionally, and strong family support. The school can capitalize on these strengths by focusing on areas of need and preparation identified in the study. If the focus on the needs and preparation of future graduates can increase postsecondary success rates for these students, the families and communities within the sphere of the INTHS may benefit from higher levels of independence for these students financially and emotionally, a significant positive social change.

Finally, given the smaller amount of research positioned toward students with EBD with internalizing behaviors, as opposed to those with externalizing behaviors, research that adds to the body of knowledge for students with internalizing behaviors is needed to further the understanding of supports that are helpful to this specific population (Lloyd et al., 2019). Key findings of this study of students with EBD with internalizing behaviors include developing their disability identity further, developing more transition skills, and shifting the school's mindset to normalize gap years or semesters before moving to college. In addition, the findings that students who understand how and why to

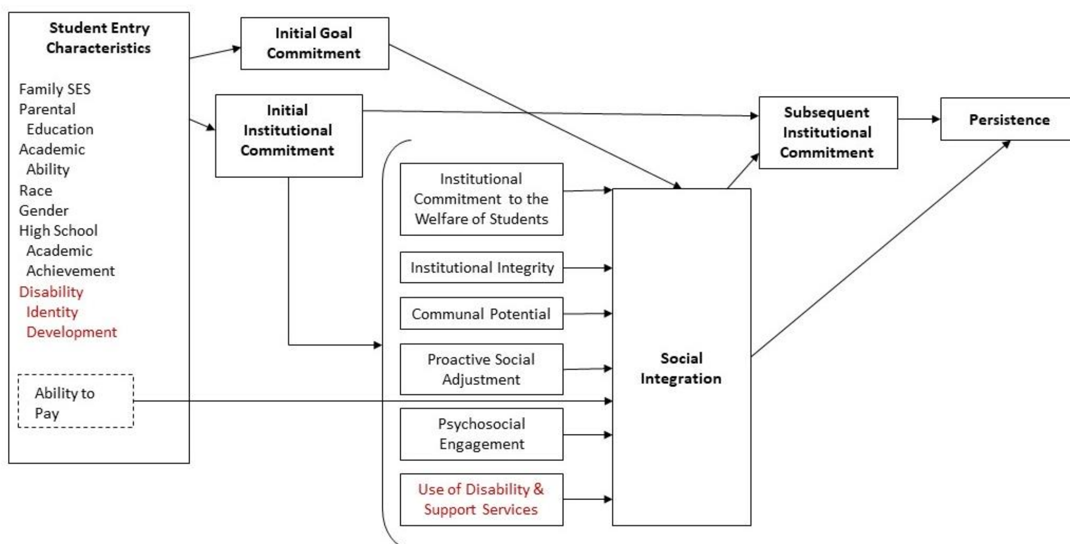
utilize the disabilities services and other college support services found more success are also lessons that may be easily transportable to other sites for students with similar disabilities. As indicated in my recommendations for further research, there is the potential for these areas to be studied next with a broader public school base of students.

Theoretical Implications

While Tinto's model of institutional departure with Braxton and colleagues' later modifications (Braxton et al., 2013; Tinto 1987; Tinto 1993) was a helpful starting place for understanding college student retention, it was adding the disability identity development model (Forber-Pratt & Zape, 2017; Forber-Pratt et al., 2020) and the understandings of what factors influenced students with emotional disabilities to persevere from the literature review, that helped strengthen the understanding and analysis of college retention with this student population with EBD with internalizing behaviors. I would recommend that in future studies of college students with disabilities, the development of disability identity is used as an addition to student entry characteristics, and use of disability support services and other college support services be added to factors that influence the social integration of this community (see Figure 4). The data gathered in this study support these modifications. As indicated in my recommendations for further research, further research into how the disability identity development of students with EBD with internalizing behaviors connects to college retention is the next step that should be taken.

Figure 4

Proposed Disability Modification of the Theory for Student Persistence in Residential Colleges and Universities



Recommendations for Practice

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceived factors that may be affecting the first-year college retention of students graduating from one INTHS with EBD with internalizing behaviors. For the INTHS, this study should help affirm all they are doing well and highlight areas in which they can develop more instruction and preparation for students before graduation to find higher levels of college success.

There were many strengths in college preparation that the INTHS should continue. First, most interviews reflected the robust person-centered college planning

process with both the college counselor and the college coordinator. Students felt both self-empowered and supported in making their postsecondary plans and felt their parents were included as well. Second, the caring instruction that is engaging and helps students develop their own learner identities, mindset skills, and critical thinking skills was touched on in some manner by all student interviews. In addition, another strength of the school is the small therapeutic setting that supports students emotionally and allows space for positive behavioral supports and mindful practices. Finally, strong family support and engagement in the transition process were seen in the data analysis. These strengths should be highlighted with staff and continued as the school looks toward future plans.

There are several areas the INTHS may consider strengthening while in high school to help students with the transition to college. First, because the students' disability identity was so closely connected to their college perseverance, considering what types of curriculum, workshops, speakers, or activities may help students develop their own disability identity may strengthen college retention. Second, thinking about specific ways that students in their last year or two might begin to experience more academic challenges while pulling back on constant therapeutic support may benefit students with less shock in the transition into their first year in college. This would, of course, need to be considered on an individual basis, but several students who suggested this were at the INTHS for many years and were very stable in the junior and senior years when this would be experienced. Third, beginning to think of gap semesters and years as a typical route for many students may be helpful for both parents and students. Those students in the study who utilized gap time before college found that it allowed them to

first transition to more independence in the adulting skills of shopping for food, doing laundry, and making appointments before taking on the added transition of college curriculum demands. Thus, these students broke a problematic transition into two separate parts.

Student interview participants also highlighted college supports that were working for them. The first, connection and community at the college, was highlighted by one interviewed participant as essential to share with seniors at the INTHS. This student believed that it is imperative in the first year of college to create connections to clubs, classes, and other students. In addition, those students who created connections to faculty and advisors had a stronger connection to their colleges, a message that could be reinforced in transition skills at the INTHS. Internal student motivation was a key persistence factor and one that the INTHS could reinforce by continued focus on mindset skills. Finally, many students felt their parents were an incredibly supportive and impactful part of their college retention.

College supports were being underutilized by the graduates of the INTHS in college. Utilizing disability services at their campus and the accommodations provided could be increased by working to develop the disability identities of students further. Also, increasing education in their senior year of high school on the types of accommodations they can request and normalizing how many students utilize these services in college would encourage the use of supports. Other college supports such as counseling, tutoring, and wraparound services were highly underutilized by INTHS graduates. Further discussions and normalizing of these services during the senior year of

high school may also help INTHS graduates find more college success. The last area of support the INTHS graduates are not utilizing is the INTHS itself. While adults within the school know that they are always ready and willing to assist any former graduate in regrouping and reapplying for college after high school graduation, this is not being effectively communicated to graduates who struggled and did not realize they could circle back to the INTHS for further support. Ensuring that all graduates understand that INTHS supports continue to be available for them long after graduation would help those graduates who stumble in their first attempt at college.

Conclusion

Despite excellent college acceptance and admission rates of one INTHS of their students with EBD with internalizing behaviors, their first-year college retention rates are low. Poor first-year college persistence of these graduates hurts the long-term outcomes in jobs and income for those students with EBD who are struggling and not completing college (see Eisenman et al., 2020; Harrison et al., 2017). The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceived factors that may affect first-year college retention rates for the students from one INTHS who have EBD with internalizing behaviors. A semistructured interview protocol was used to collect data from 12 graduates of the INTHS to answer the research question.

The findings from this study revealed four themes related to college retention of graduates from the INTHS: high school preparation that is working which included college planning, instruction, setting, and family; unmet high school preparation needs, which included disability identity development, transition skills needed, and normalizing

gaps; college supports that were working which included connection and community, faculty and advisor, internal student motivation, and family support; and finally, college supports that are underutilized which included utilizing disability supports, college support services, and postgraduation support of the INTHS.

There were several findings of note in the study. First, more explicit lessons and curricula devoted to disability identity development at the high school level may increase first-year college retention. In addition, more time devoted to normalizing gap years and utilizing disabilities and support services in college could encourage more students to consider these supports during the transition. Finally, in considering models of college retention being applied to students with disabilities, the importance of including disability identity development and utilization of disability and support services is a significant future theoretical consideration.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol of INTHS Graduates

I. Greeting

II. Review of Consent Form

III. Participant Questions

IV. Opening Questions (to build rapport and get basic factual information)

a. How many years did you attend the INTHS? What is one of your strongest memories of the school?

b. How would you describe yourself as a high school student academically and socially? (framework)

c. When did you start college? Are you still attending?

d. Was financing college a major factor in your decision to attend or not attend? (framework)

V. Main Interview Questions

a. Can you tell me what you remember about the planning process for what you would do after graduation? What did that look like? (lit review)

b. What types of high school classes or lessons helped you when you got to college? (lit review)

c. Who was the most helpful person or people in getting you ready for the jump to college? How? (lit review)

d. What was your understanding of receiving accommodations in college? (lit review)

e. Who was the most helpful person or people once you got to college? How? (lit review)

f. Can you describe your involvement with the Office of Disabilities at your college? (lit review)

g. How did the behaviors of your professors influence you as a college student? (lit review)

h. What types of interactions did you have with your college advisor? (lit review)

i. What types of activities/groups/people did you connect with at your college but outside of your classes? (lit review and framework)

j. How strongly connected do/did you feel to your college? What went into that feeling? (lit review and framework)

k. (For Students who persevered) From your perspective, what helped you keep going in college even when you struggled?

l. (For students who left college) From your perspective, what were the main reasons you left college?

VI. Close of Interview

a. Choice of identifying name for study

b. Thank You

c. Participant Questions

Appendix B: Letter of Cooperation Confidential Version

9/13/21

Dear Kathleen Geddes Jay,

Based on my review of your research proposal, I give permission for you to conduct the study entitled Exploring Perceived College Retention Factors Affecting Post-Secondary Students with Emotional Behavioral Disorders with Internalizing Behaviors with the cooperation of
As part of this study, I authorize you to recruit graduates of
interview the graduates about their first-year college experiences, have these graduates membercheck their transcripts for accuracy, and provide the students interviewed with summaries of the results of the study. Individuals' participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion.

We understand that our organization's responsibilities include: helping the researcher connect to students who have graduated from the school within the last five years and have begun college, providing guidance from the Clinical Director on the appropriateness of graduate participation in the study, and providing for as-needed consultation for the graduates with the Clinical Director if the interviewee feels a need after the interview. We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

I understand that the student will not be naming our organization in the doctoral project report that is published in Proquest.

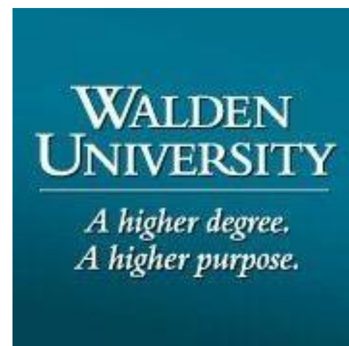
I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting and that this plan complies with the organization's policies.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the student's supervising faculty/staff without permission from

Sincerely,

Appendix C: Research Flyer Confidential Version

INTHS GRADUATES NEEDED



I am conducting a research study that will look at how INTHS graduates are transitioning to their first year of college. This research is designed to better understand what supports work best for students moving on to college.

WHO IS ELIGIBLE?

Students who graduated from the INTHS in 2016 – 2020 and started college the following fall. Whether or not you continued with college or not – I'd love to talk to you!

DESCRIPTION OF STUDY

This study will involve you completing the following steps:

1. Take part in a confidential, Zoom audio recorded interview from any location (1 hour)
2. Review a typed transcript of your interview to make corrections if needed (email option available) (10 minutes)
3. Speak with the researcher one more time after the interview to hear the researcher's interpretations and share your feedback (20 minutes)

INTERESTED?

This is a confidential study. Names will not be shared or used. But your input is important.
Please contact KaDee Jay at XXX-XXX-XXXX or email her at XXXXXXX@waldenu.edu.

Participants who complete the interview will receive a $20 Amazon gift card via email.