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Teachers' Experience Serving Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders in Distance Learning

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This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
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Abstract

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MA, National University, 2006

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

General Psychology

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Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, stay-at-home orders forced millions of students attending schools in the United States to shift to distance learning. As pandemic restrictions lifted and schools reopened, an emerging trend was observed: many parents of children with disabilities chose to continue distance learning. This decision gains significance in the context of students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs) who are at a higher risk of disengagement from school. Educators need to understand how to address social, emotional, and behavioral needs within online learning frameworks. However, increasing engagement for students with EBDs in distance learning has not been well-researched. Drawing upon Knowles' adult learning theory andragogy, this study involved exploring and understanding teachers' experiences with selecting and implementing interventions to increase academic engagement for students with EBDs in terms of distance learning. A generic qualitative design was used to gain insights into teachers' experiences. Participants consisted of nine teachers from a suburban school district in Southern California who were interviewed using semi-structured questions. Thematic analysis with coding was used to identify two main themes: relationship building and fostering engagement and leveraging technology to increase engagement. Findings indicated creating positive classroom environments, individualizing instruction, and building teacher-student relationships are crucial to addressing unique learning needs of students with EBDs. Study findings may contribute to positive social change by advancing the knowledge base regarding student engagement for students with EBDs to improve academic outcomes.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family, whose unwavering support and belief in me have been my anchor throughout this journey. Thank you for being my constant source of strength and motivation.

Acknowledgments

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to my committee chair, Dr. JoAnn McAllister, whose encouragement, commitment, and support were indispensable throughout my dissertation journey. Your support and guidance have made a lasting impact, and I am profoundly grateful. I am also grateful to Dr. Patricia Loun for her insightful feedback and steadfast support. Lastly, a special thanks go to the students I have had the privilege of working with over my educational career. This study would not have been possible without you.

"When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves." – Viktor E. Frankl

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Students with emotional disturbance (ED), hereafter referred to as students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBDs), are the most demanding and challenging students to educate and support (Bettini et al., 2019; Freeman et al., 2019; Garwood et al., 2021; Hott et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2019). Teachers need targeted skills, abilities, and knowledge to instruct students with EBDs effectively (Chen et al., 2021; Cumming et al., 2021; French, 2019; Hirsch et al., 2021; Marlow et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2018). Leggio and Terras (2019) found traditional interventions were insufficient. They suggest that teachers can meet the unique learning needs of these students by creating positive classroom environments, individualizing instruction, and building teacher-student relationships. Although studies have explored academic and behavioral interventions for students with EBDs, there is a lack of information on effective interventions to increase academic engagement for students with EBDs in distance learning. Additionally, it remains unclear whether classroom practices can be effectively adapted to distance learning environments.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore teachers' experiences with selecting and implementing interventions to increase academic engagement for students with EBDs participating in K-12 online special education programs in the state of California. Insights regarding their experiences contributed to the body of research on effective practices for teachers supporting students with EBDs in online learning environments. Findings of this study also contributed to positive social change by adding

to research to support changes in public school policies and instructional practices for students with EBDs.

Chapter 1 includes a description of the phenomenon leading to the research topic and research problem. Next, the problem and purpose of the study are described as well as the theoretical framework. Key concepts are defined, and potential assumptions that may have influenced research as well as scope and limitations are described. Lastly, this study's significance and implications for positive social change are discussed.

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the way teachers teach and interact with students. It forced more than 1.6 billion students worldwide to switch to remote learning and school systems to rapidly provide students with remote learning technologies (Trust & Whalen, 2021; Wyse et al., 2020). As school districts increasingly adopt distance learning, teachers remain responsible for fulfilling students' educational and social-emotional needs. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004, educators are legally and ethically obligated to apply effective instructional practices for students with EBDs to adequately address individualized education programs (Hott et al., 2021; Jameson et al., 2020; Lowenthal et al., 2020; Ortiz et al., 2020; Rice & Dykman, 2018). Several studies on learning needs of students with EBDs advocate for systematic and targeted approaches. Ineffective interventions and teaching practices for engaging and supporting students with EBDs in distance learning have led to poor academic outcomes and lack of school success (Gilmour et al., 2022; O'Brien et al., 2019; Soares et al., 2022; Whitney et al., 2022). To date, there is little evidence or research on educating

students with EBDs in distance learning environments that effectively guide educators in terms of implementing evidence-based interventions. This decreasing trend is concerning, given the inherent challenges of working with students with EBDs and underperformance of this population of students (Garwood et al., 2021).

According to Hirsch et al. (2021), distance learning environments are likely to create significant and pervasive regression in students with EBDs compared to typical students. Students with EBDs need explicit social, behavioral, and academic support to address their learning needs and keep them engaged in distance learning (Bettini et al., 2019; Cosma & Soni, 2019; Gage et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2019; Popham et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2018). Without effective practices, students with EBDs are at risk of continuing a cycle of disengagement and failure, including dropping out of school (Garcia et al., 2018; State et al., 2019). Furthermore, Dorn et al. (2020) indicated students with EBDs may already be facing setbacks due to COVID-19, a challenge that requires educators to be ready to address effectively.

Previous studies highlight the significant influence of teachers in terms of distance learning, particularly for students with EBDs. Distance learning environments limit teachers' use of interpersonal connections, modeling, and physical manipulatives to assist with making specialized academic instruction (SAI) engaging in distance learning (Alvarez-Guerrero et al., 2021; Hirsch et al., 2021; Schuck & Lambert, 2020). Despite these challenges, research indicates teachers should implement a range of evidence-based practices (EBPs) and intensive interventions that are differentiated or modified and adapted from standardized methods to meet varied academic and behavioral needs of

students with EBDs (Chen et al., 2021; Cook et al., 2017; State et al., 2019). However, distance learning requires a level of autonomy and student responsibility that this population of students may not independently possess, increasing their likelihood of disengagement (Billingsley et al., 2018; Chiu, 2021; Crutcher, 2020; Page et al., 2021). McKittrick and Tuchman (2020) emphasized the necessity of modifying teaching approaches to effectively accommodate students with disabilities in distance learning environments. Yet, it remains unclear how these adaptations can be effectively implemented in distance learning environments.

Tanis (2020) stated teachers can possess effective instructional approaches in classrooms, but these skills do not always transfer to effective online teaching. Effective online teaching should include faculty-student communication, student-student communication, and content engagement (Tanis, 2020). Further, evidence-based interventions result in the best possible outcomes for students with EBDs (Didion et al., 2020; Hirsch et al., 2021; State et al., 2019; Zaheer et al., 2019). However, teachers often receive limited professional development involving classroom management practices to keep them engaged in these learning environments (State et al., 2019). Understanding teachers' perspectives regarding selecting interventions may contribute to developing best practices that support engagement of students with EBDs in distance learning environments.

Problem Statement

Specific intervention strategies need to be developed to meet the unique needs of EBDs students in online learning environments. However, there is limited information

regarding effective teaching practices that enhance the learning engagement of students with EBDs in distance education. Teachers often report feeling unprepared to address the social, behavioral, and emotional needs of students with EBDs (Bruhn et al., 2022). Teachers face difficulties in maintaining student engagement, adapting curriculum to remote learning, and a lack of expertise in delivering effective strategies or interventions remotely (Hirsch et al., 2022). Exploring teachers' experiences in selecting and implementing interventions to improve student engagement enriches our understanding of how to engage students with EBDs in distance learning environments. Additionally, it informs best practices to better prepare teachers to use online formats. Understanding their experiences also bridges the gap between effective in-person and distance learning practices for students with EBDs.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore teachers' experiences involving selecting and implementing interventions to increase academic engagement for students with EBDs participating in K-12 online special education programs in California. I explored teachers' experiences and interventions in selecting and implementing interventions to increase academic engagement for students with EBDs in distance learning. This led to information regarding EBPs, perceived preparedness to implement these interventions with fidelity, and effective instructional strategies that support students' social-emotional functioning with EBDs. In addition, this study included teacher reflections on the psychological impact of online learning to guide them in delivering effective interventions to meet students' social and emotional needs.

Learning about their experiences may provide insights for school personnel, including teachers, school psychologists, and administrators, and add to the knowledge base regarding engaging students with EBDs in distance learning environments.

Research Question

The research question for this generic qualitative study is:

What are teachers' experiences with selecting and implementing interventions to increase academic engagement for students with EBDs in distance learning environments?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation for this study was andragogy. Andragogy is based on six assumptions related to adult learning, learning environments, and learning processes: self-concept, experience, readiness to learn, orientation of learning, and motivation to learn (Knowles, 1980). Self-concept and experience are drawn from humanistic psychology which recognizes adults are independent learners with unique personalities. Readiness to learn and orientation of learning rely on psychosocial developmental perspectives which support adult willingness to learn (Bartle, 2021). I sought to understand how and why teachers select specific interventions and what tools or resources they used to engage students. Lastly, motivation is related to self-esteem, quality of life, responsibility, and success (Knowles, 1989).

Knowles' assumptions of andragogy guide this generic qualitative study to understand teacher experiences with selecting interventions to meet unique needs of students with EBDs. In addition, andragogy was used to address educator-learner

relationships, which are essential for students to feel connected and engaged in distance learning. The research design approach, research questions, and data analysis were influenced by Knowles' andragogy. A detailed description of andragogy is provided in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

A qualitative approach was selected in order to understand how individuals interpret their experiences. Quantitative research involves confirming or testing a theory by analyzing relationships between variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These variables are then quantified using statistical measures (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Due to the nature of this study, a quantitative approach was considered but determined not to be appropriate. Qualitative approaches involve understanding a phenomenon or topic through perspectives of those who are involved. These approaches enable researchers to pursue answers to specific questions using a systematic and predefined set of procedures (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, it is an effective means to obtain specific information about values, opinions, and behaviors involving how people experience a given issue and experience the world. Common approaches to qualitative research include grounded theory, ethnography, case study, phenomenological research, and narrative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The specific qualitative approach was a generic approach. This approach was used to understand participants' behaviors and motives, and to address their interpretations. Although other qualitative approaches were considered like case studies and ethnography, a generic qualitative approach was selected. This method includes using

semi-structured interviews, observations, field notes, and digital materials to deeply explore participants' experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A generic qualitative approach was used to identify relevant patterns and themes from participants' experiences, using an interview process. This method provided insight into behaviors, perspectives, and thoughts. Kiger and Varpio (2020) said the generic approach is a flexible and robust analysis method that is used for developing insights into complex phenomena without using theories to inform analysis. Instead, the theory may be modified during the research process to align with findings as the research question becomes more focused or is redefined in response to emerging facts (Walters, 2001).

Participants in this study were special education teachers assigned to K through 12th grade students who were eligible for special education services under the IDEA eligibility criteria for emotional disturbance (ED). Data sources included individual semi-structured interviews of teachers. Data were systematically arranged according to similarities, differences, and themes. Creswell and Poth (2018) recommended interviewing five to 25 participants so that research has enough information. For this study, 10 to 12 teachers were recruited. However, the final number depended on data saturation. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), saturation occurs when continued data collection does not produce added information or insights, and analysis has produced robust findings.

Data analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis process. Braun and Clarke (2006) described thematic analysis as a method that involves searching across datasets to identify recurring patterns that signify underlying meanings within the data. This method

follows a six-stage process where themes are generated from coded data to identify experiences of special education teachers regarding opinions and perspectives that may not be immediately obvious but can positively inform the study. I made sense of the findings by grouping responses by respective themes and interpreting phenomena in terms of meanings according to participants. To ensure objectivity and reliability, I bracketed personal thoughts to reduce bias and decrease threats to internal validity. This qualitative approach enabled me to understand experiences of online educators by addressing their experiences with providing social, emotional, behavioral, and educational support to students with EBDs. Following the guidelines by Braun and Clarke (2006), I employed and inductive an inductive and data-driven approach to directly identify themes from the data, ensuring that the findings emerged from the educators' perspectives without preconceived notions.

Definitions

The following terms and phrases were used in this study and are defined as follows:

Adolescents: The period between the ages of 10 and 19 (CDC, 2020; WHO, 2019).

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs): A traumatic experience which occurs before the age of 18 that an adult person remembers (CDC, 2020). There are nine types of ACEs: physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, mental illness of a household member, problematic drinking or alcoholism of a household member, illegal street or prescription drug use by a household member, divorce or separation of a parent, domestic

violence towards parents, and incarceration of a household member (CDC, 2020). ACE scores are used to provide predictive values for health and social problems in adulthood (CDC, 2020).

Distance Learning: Also referred to as distance education, e-learning, and online learning. Distance learning means instruction in which pupils and instructors are in separate locations, and pupils are under the general supervision of a certified employee of the local educational agency (LEA). Distance learning may include but is not limited to interaction, instructions, and check-ins between teachers and pupils through use of a computer or other communications technology, video or audio instruction in which the primary mode of communication between the pupil and certified employee is online interaction, instructional television, video, telecourses, or other instruction that relies on computer or communications technology, and print, video, and audio materials incorporating assignments that are the subject of written or oral feedback (CDE, 2023).

Educationally Related Mental Health Services (ERMHS): A term that was adopted by California school districts to refer to services that were previously provided by county Department of Mental Health (DMH) agencies (Disability Rights California, 2024).

Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBDs): Students with EBDs have difficulties regulating their emotions or behaviors, which negatively impacts their educational progress. Educational difficulties are the result of "an inability to learn which cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors […] the term does not

apply to children who are socially maladjusted unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance" (CFR 300.8 (4)(i).

Individualized Education Program (IEP): Plan which documents free and appropriate public education (FAPE) is provided with details regarding learning needs and educational and related service information as well as information about how schools measure progress (Hott et al., 2021).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004: A law that made significant changes to the IDEA of 1990. The law changed federal and state monitoring practices and required assessment of early intervention programs to enhance learning of students with disabilities.

Psychological services: These include counseling services, social work services, and parent counseling and training (California Association of School Psychologists, 2014).

Related Services: The IDEA (2004) defined related services as the following:

Transportation and such developmental, corrective, and other supportive services as are required to assist a child with a disability to benefit from special education, and includes speech-language pathology and audiology services, interpreting services, psychological services, physical and occupational therapy, recreation, including therapeutic recreation, early identification, and assessment of disabilities in children, counseling services, including rehabilitation counseling, orientation, and mobility services, and medical services for diagnostic or evaluation purposes. Related services also include school health services and

school nurse services, social work services in school, and parent counseling and

training. (34 *CFR* 300.43(a)

Assumptions

All research is grounded in philosophical assumptions. My assumptions were

rooted in personal and professional experiences and were necessary to state and justify

since they had the potential to influence research. I assumed participants shared their

experiences using professional points of view. Participants' perspectives may differ

regarding where and how they acquired knowledge. I assumed participants had

knowledge and skills that were required to work with students with EBDs. Teachers are

assumed to have training and experience to deliver targeted, intensive, and meaningful

instruction. In addition, I assumed participants had professional backgrounds and training

to view classroom experiences from both student and teacher perspectives. I also

assumed participants answered questions truthfully and according to their professional

credentials and experiences. Participants were assured their identities would be kept

confidential to prompt truthful and accurate responses.

Scope and Delimitations

This study involved capturing distinct experiences and perceptions of teachers'

experiences in selecting and implementing interventions to engage students with EBDs in

distance learning environments. I aimed to understand how teachers meet social-

emotional and behavioral needs of students to increase academic engagement for students

with EBDs. I did not consider or control other factors, such as parental involvement or

technological issues, which may have influenced how students with EBDs responded to

distance learning and teacher interventions. Additional research is needed to determine the impact of parental involvement and technology on student motivation and engagement in distance learning environments.

To facilitate the best possible outcomes, teaching professionals need to be proficient in implementing effective interventions tailored to the unique needs of students with EBDs. As such, the population in this proposed study was delimited to credentialed teachers who were certified in California with a minimum of 2 years of teaching experience working with students with EBDs. More needs to be known about what is currently happening in terms of direct practice to ensure long-term positive outcomes in distance learning environments. The growth of online education was a driving factor for this study. Therefore, I did not include teachers in face-to-face or blended online learning environments.

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), transferability or external validity in a qualitative study represents how results can be generalized outside participant populations. To mitigate the threat of transferability and promote validity and reliability, I created an audit trail to address transparency of procedures throughout the research process. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) defined the audit trail as a comprehensive and detailed narrative that outlines methods, procedures, and decision points during the research process. In addition, generalization becomes weaker when extending results to other groups of students. However, providing detailed descriptions and member checking enhances trustworthiness of findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I address potential

transferability issues via descriptions of the research methodology and design in Chapter 3.

Limitations

Creswell and Poth (2018) defined a limitation as a weakness in research. Specific limitations inherent to this study include the sample size, sampling methods, and limitations of the statistical model. First, the proposed sample size is small but appropriate for a generic qualitative research study. I collected data until it reached saturation to address this limitation. Secondly, participants may not have provided complete accounts of their experiences. This limitation was addressed by developing questions designed to prompt responds to share their successes and positive experiences related to the phenomena. Given that I focused on teacher experiences, I did not provide quantifiable data. A generic qualitative research design with interviews has limitations because they do not permit triangulation or data collection from multiple sources to assure validity. I used information from a small group of selected participants which may not represent larger groups.

A potential limitation is that cases may not accurately represent the phenomenon. Reflexivity and data saturation can be used to confirm validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Lastly, I acknowledge my experiences as a school psychologist may have led to latent biases that may have interfered with interpreting data. To address limitations and biases, I established explicit criteria for participation in the study. I also reflected on potential biases using dated journal entries throughout the data collection and analysis processes.

Significance

Online learning may not be suitable for every learner because of the required autonomy and student responsibility it demands (Chiu, 2021; Molnar, 2019; Vaughan, 2020). McKenna et al. (2019) asserted students with EBDs need effective interventions to increase engagement and student success. This study provides insights into effective instructional strategies and interventions for students with EBDs in distance learning environments. These insights will contribute to additional training opportunities for general and special education teachers and help establish improved practices for engaging students with EBDs. This study will also help build teacher confidence in terms of teaching this population online, enabling students with EBDs to overcome learning challenges. This study also encourages further research, expanding the understanding of current interventions and instructional methods used in practice to engage and meet the needs of students with EBDs in distance learning environments.

Teachers play a crucial role in educating students. However, educators often struggle to meet the needs of students with EBDs because they may perceive maladaptive behaviors or disengagement as a manifestation of their disability. This study offers insights and a deeper understanding of processes by which teachers select, implement, and assess interventions to increase engagement and achievement in distance learning environments. It also positively impacts social change by identifying current practices in special education that promote consistency with social-emotional learning and instructional methods to support student growth. Furthermore, effective interventions for students with EBDs have the potential to produce long-term positive impacts on life

functioning, transitioning into employment, and independent living. In addition, the findings give teachers the confidence to deliver and shape service models for students with EBDs. This study contributes to positive social change by expanding the knowledge base regarding student engagement for students with EBDs participating in distance learning and may also alleviate economic strains on the welfare system, juvenile corrections departments, and mental health facilities.

Summary

The pandemic forced millions of students attending schools in the United States to transition to remote learning. Students with EBDs are more likely to experience significant and pervasive academic regression compared to nondisabled students (Dorn et al., 2020; Hirsch et al., 2022). However, limited research exists regarding distance learning practices to improve academic engagement for students with EBDs. Educational reforms have been used to meet those needs, but students with EBDs present a wide range of needs that require targeted and specialized instruction. It is unclear what practices or approaches are best for distance learning. Without appropriate interventions, students with EBDs are at risk of school disengagement, failure, and are more vulnerable to problems such as dropping out of school.

The purpose of the proposed study was to focus on teachers' experiences with selecting and implementing interventions to increase academic engagement for students with EBDs participating in K-12 online special education programs in the state of California. Andragogy was used to support the focus of this study. A generic qualitative approach was used to address teachers' experiences with this population. Increasing

knowledge about supporting this population of students may promote positive social change by identifying best practices for student growth and academic success. Chapter 2 includes descriptions of literature search strategies to identify relevant previous studies, the theoretical framework, and a review and analysis of relevant research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools closed their doors and transitioned to remote learning. As a result, educators were left to navigate online education with limited resources and experience involving educating students with EBDs remotely. This situation has highlighted a clear need for additional information on the feasibility and effectiveness of distance learning practices for students with EBDs. The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to enhance understanding of student engagement among students with EBDs who were participating in distance learning environments. I focused on exploring teachers' experiences with selecting and implementing interventions to improve student engagement.

This chapter includes literature search strategies used to identify best practices for engaging students with EBD. It then provides a detailed discussion of Knowles' theory of andragogy. Additionally, I provide an overview of this student population, discuss approaches to meet their needs, explore the unique characteristics and instructional requirements of students with ED, and present information on the background and quality of teacher experiences in serving this student population. The chapter concludes with an overview of specific evidence-based practices for addressing this population's unique educational, social-emotional, and behavioral needs. A summary completes the chapter.

Literature Search Strategy

The primary focus of this literature review was to review and critique literature that establishes best practices for students with EBDs. Literature sources that were applicable to this study were reviewed, including peer-reviewed journal articles and

published books. Search terms were used in various combinations to identify an initial list of sources. These sources were subsequently reviewed and narrowed in terms of relevance. Search terms in this study were: *teaching students with emotional disturbance*, *behavioral disorders*, *online learning*, distance *learning*, *interventions*, *best practices teaching EBDs students*, professional development, *teachers*, *special education teachers*, *academic achievement*, and *academic performance*. I used the following search engines: SAGE Journals, ERIC, Google Scholar, EBSCOHost, and ProQuest. In addition, I reviewed CDC and NCES web sites. Over 200 sources were identified to have significant relevance to the topic study. These were narrowed to 130 articles.

The literature review emphasized EBPs for students involving ED, engagement, special education teachers, and online learning. The literature review contains information about practices according to the reauthorized IDEIA, regulations, and curricula that were used to support educational progress and development of necessary skills for students with EBDs to increase positive outcomes. The literature review also included evidence regarding online learning and EBPs for students with EBDs. I determined teachers require additional training to provide effective interventions for students with EBDs, and there is a lack of teacher knowledge to effectively engage students with EBDs in distance learning environments. These factors may be contributing to student disengagement.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was Knowles' andragogy, an adult learning theory. Andragogy was used to provide the language and foundation for

understanding teacher perspectives regarding how they address added information and concepts to apply knowledge to online learning environments. Andragogy is based on five assumptions related to adult learning, the learning environment, and learning process: self-concept, experience, readiness to learn, orientation of learning, and motivation to learn (Knowles, 1980). Andragogy shows learners are encouraged to use past knowledge to form present conclusions. Knowles (1980) suggested teachers benefit from being involved in planning and evaluation of instruction and learning by acquiring knowledge.

Knowles (1989) suggested four principles that apply to distance learning: adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction, experience (including mistakes) provides the basis for learning activities, adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance and impact to their job or personal life, and adult learning is problem-centered rather than content-oriented. Knowles (1989) suggested teachers benefit from involvement in planning and evaluating instructional strategies. The ideal way for educators to learn how to apply these strategies is to acquire necessary knowledge and skills which relate to fulfillment and success (Knowles, 1980). From this perspective, educators can move from simply being facilitators to helping students achieve their full potential (Knowles, 1980). Andragogy and its concepts are relevant to this study in order to understand how and why teachers select specific interventions and what tools or resources are used to engage students with EBDs. Knowing how adult learning principles translate to targeted interventions may enable

stakeholders to better meet needs of students with EBDs in distance learning environments.

<div align="center">**Literature Review Related to Key Concepts**</div>

Research on effective interventions to increase engagement for students with EBDs in distance learning environments is limited; however, teachers are still expected to implement interventions to meet social-emotional, behavioral, and academic needs of students with EBDs. The following literature review includes insights regarding interventions for students participating in distance learning to promote engagement and additional training with effective strategies for teaching students with EBDs. Engagement correlates with academic performance, which results in positive outcomes (Buzzai et al., 2021; Mihalec & Cooley, 2020; Mullins & Panlilio, 2021). Topics that were covered in this review include an overview of students with EBDs in schools, characteristics of students with EBDs, an overview of teachers supporting students with EBDs, multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) and adaptive supports, universal design for learning (UDL), academic challenges, distance learning and school connectedness, and online academic intervention strategies for students with EBDs.

Overview of Students with EBDs in Schools

The California Department of Education (CDE, 2023) reported it provides special education services to 21,593 under ED eligibility criteria. This represents 3% of students identified for special education services during the 2022-2023 school year. Qualifying students who met IDEA eligibility criteria for ED were provided educational services through IEPs. IEPs are designed to help address students' individual social, emotional,

behavioral, and academic needs, requiring additional support with access to related services such as school-based mental health counseling and behavioral supports to benefit from special education services (Lambert et al., 2021).

By nature of the eligibility criteria, students eligible for ED do not acquire the same skills as their non-disabled peers for school success. They are often unable to maintain appropriate social relationships, have academic difficulties in multiple areas, low grades, and have the least favorable outcomes of any group of individuals with disabilities (Chen et al., 2021; Garwood et al., 2021; King et al., 2019; Mitchell et al., 2019; Prince et al., 2018). Although the IEP is designed to provide students with disabilities an appropriate education to help meet their specific social-emotional, behavioral, and academic needs, research reveals they do not always align with positive outcomes. Consequently, relying on the student's IEP may not be enough to give teachers instructional guidance or the best possible outcomes for students with EBDs. Hott et al. (2021), in a descriptive review of 126 IEPs for students with EBDs, identified that IEPs often fail to address student needs comprehensively. As a result, this disconnect may cause students with EBDs to fall further behind their peers, especially in distance learning environments (Basham et al., 2020; Mann et al., 2021; Ortiz et al., 2020).

Subsequently, in a study completed by Tomaino et al. (2021), the researchers determined that students with high behavioral needs who transitioned to distance learning-maintained half of the skills addressed in their IEPs and only made progress on a quarter of their own IEP goals. These findings are concerning since IDEA of 2004 requires educators to ensure that students with disabilities receive an appropriate public

education regardless of the educational setting. Unfortunately, this population of students had the highest dropout rate compared with other disabled children at 33% and nationally at 57% (CDE, 2023).

Data gathered from the National Education Policy Center (NEPC) Annual Report on Virtual Education (2019) for students enrolled in online learning environments indicates the graduation rate of disabled and non-disabled students was recently 54.6%, significantly lower than the national average of 85%. These statistical findings are alarming because students with EBDs have consistently had lower graduation rates (Mills & Sabornie, 2021; Vaughan, 2020). In addition, students with emotional disabilities are three times more likely to be arrested and face unemployment than non-disabled students (Freeman et al., 2019; Nordahl & Wells, 2019). Although the data reveals that students with EBDs make up a small fraction of many school populations across the United States, the data indicates an urgent need to address the social-emotional and educational needs of this targeted population.

Data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study (2018) from 2003 to 2012, report students with EBDs have made steady improvements in the areas of independent living skills, engagement in school activities (e.g., sports, clubs), and school support (e.g., tutoring) (Liu et al., 2018). However, they continue to face significant challenges in other areas critical to adulthood. For instance, they found compared to the previous decade, students with EBDs were more likely to have difficulty understanding others, take prescriptions for their behavioral health, come from economically challenged households, and participate in federally assisted programs (Liu et al., 2018). Furthermore, the study

noted rates of grade retention, suspension, and expulsion among students with EBDs remained constant over the past decade, even when compared with other students with disabilities, despite the implementation of programs like Multi-tiered System of Support (MTSS). Similarly, research in mental and behavioral health reveals that students with EBDs are more likely than other students with disabilities to demonstrate challenges across all domains, which include areas of social-emotional, academic, and behavioral (Kern et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2019; Oldfield et al., 2017).

Characteristics of Students with EBDs

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, Sec. 300.8 (c) (4)), the term emotional disturbance refers to students with significant behavioral and mental health challenges that adversely affect a student's educational performance. They must demonstrate at least one of the following behaviors over a prolonged period and to a noticeable extent: (a) an impairment in educational performance that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors; (b) an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers or teachers; (c) a general mood of unhappiness or depression and (e) a tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems (Oelrich, 2012). In addition, this student population often demonstrates difficulty meeting social and behavioral demands, establishing meaningful peer and teacher relationships, and poor self-regulatory skills (Bierman & Sanders, 2021; Van Loan & Garwood, 2020). These behaviors can hinder students with EBDs and further isolate them from participating in the general education environment. Yet, others may struggle to cooperate or collaborate in the classroom environment or get into

conflicts with peers and teachers simply because they may lack the social skills to engage with others appropriately and require explicit teaching of skills to relate with others (Hutchins et al., 2020; Kumm et al., 2021; Wattanawongwan et al., 2021). Many, however, will experience significant internal and emotional distress, including social anxiety, loneliness, depression, and withdrawal behaviors that may further hinder their ability to connect with peers and teachers (Bierman & Sanders, 2021).

The literature indicates a correlation between the social and emotional makeup of students with EBDs and those who have experienced adverse childhood experiences (Crouch et al., 2019; Mattison et al., 2021; Offerman et al., 2022; Spence et al., 2021). The Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) Study is ongoing collaborative research between the CDC and Kaiser Permanente. This study has sparked discussion and research on the relationship between exposure to trauma during childhood and its negative impact on a student's long-term mental, emotional, and behavioral outcomes (Mattison et al., 2021). Research indicates an estimated 48% of children will experience at least one adverse childhood experience before age 17 (Mattison et al., 2021; Offerman et al., 2022; Spence et al., 2021). While not all trauma exposure results in EBDs or related symptoms, it does increase the risk of such outcomes. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated trauma experiences and intensified anxiety levels thereby putting students with EBDs at increased risk (Dorn et al., 2020; Hirsch et al., 2022).

Specific characteristics of students impacted by trauma may include the following: internalized behaviors (e.g., Generalized Anxiety, Major Depressive Disorder, Bipolar Disorder), externalizing behaviors (e.g., Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity

Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Conduct Disorder), or a combination of both behaviors that may impair their ability to benefit from universal or targeted school supports (Offerman et al., 2022; Spence et al., 2021). Two frequently identified internalizing conditions are anxiety disorder and depression (CDC, 2020). Externalizing behaviors are observable actions directed toward other people or property, such as acting out, disrupting the classroom environment, verbal aggression, or physical aggression. These characteristics, typical in students with EBDs, can make teaching challenging and unpredictable in a classroom setting and present even more significant challenges in distance learning (Hirsch et al., 2021).

School-based interventions are commonly used in combination with the IEP, such as school-based counseling, contingency management, behavior modification, social and emotional learning, and mentoring to address the specific needs of students with EBDs (Carroll et al., 2020; Egan et al., 2019; Hawkins et al., 2020; Kelchner et al., 2019; Kern et al., 2019; Lambie et al., 2019) and to a lesser degree academic interventions (Garwood et al., 2021). Though some of these strategies can be implemented in distance learning, the research is unclear on how effective these interventions may be or if modifications are required to make these interventions effective for students with EBDs (Hirsch et al., 2021; Tomaino et al., 2021).

Overview of Teachers Supporting Students with EBDs

Special education certification identifies teachers with the skills needed to instruct students with disabilities (Gilmour et al., 2022) effectively. They go through rigorous training and a certification process that includes the completion of state requirements for

teaching a subject or grade and the ability to demonstrate content knowledge through a test before becoming certified. Similarly, with a general education certification, teachers are required to show competency that they are highly qualified (HQT) and are prepared to educate students (Green et al., 2021). Unfortunately, certification does not always correlate to quality teaching or positive student outcomes for students with EBDs. Without the proper training, educators often turn to ineffective practices that negatively impact students with EBDs (Hirsch et al., 2022; Zaheer et al., 2019).

The literature supports the view that students with EBDs require explicit, intensive, engaging, and focused teaching strategies (Bruhn et al., 2022; Hirsch et al., 2022). Given that teachers play a critical role in student outcomes, it is important they use effective interventions in distance learning rooted in evidence-based practices. However, teachers report uncertainty in supporting students with EBDs (Hirsch et al., 2021; McGuire & Meadan, 2022). Additionally, education preparation programs often place minimal emphasis on classroom management techniques and school districts provide limited professional development opportunities to support special education teachers serving students with EBDs (Hirsch et al., 2022; French, 2019; Oliver & Reschly, 2017). Students with EBDs need individualized and targeted instruction to support their social-emotional functioning and learning needs (Benner et al., 2022; Hirsch et al., 2022; State et al., 2019). Given their unique needs, teachers must receive the knowledge and skills to implement evidence-based academic and behavioral strategies to improve student outcomes (State et al., 2019). Without the proper training, teachers are susceptible to job

burnout, ineffective teaching practices, and poor student outcomes (Bruhn et al., 2022; Brunsting et al., 2022; Hirsch et al., 2022; Gilmour et al., 2022; O'Brien et al., 2019).

Although knowledge and skills are essential in providing individualized support, Leggio and Terras (2019) indicate that understanding behavioral disorders and effective teaching strategies may not be enough when instructing students with EBDs. Teachers should develop a positive attitude and genuine listing skills and become aware of influences that may hinder their ability to teach students with EBDs effectively. Leggio and Terras (2019) identified three critical characteristics of effective teachers of students with EBDs. First, effective EBDs teachers develop teacher-student relationships that foster a student's ability to succeed despite setbacks. Students with EBDs need well-qualified teachers to teach them the skills they lack. Secondly, effective EBDs teachers establish positive learning environments that are safe, consistent, and nonjudgmental. Finally, effective EBDs teachers individualize instruction that meets individual academic and behavioral needs.

MTSS and Adaptive Supports

Research supports that students with EBDs can be successful in a general education setting when teachers apply inclusive practices that use evidence principles and strategies such as multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) (Lanterman et al., 2021). Research indicates teachers should implement a range of evidence-based practices and intensive interventions that are differentiated or modified and adapted from standardized methods to meet the diverse academic and behavioral needs of students with EBDs (August et al., 2018; Farmer et al., 2021; Jagers et al., 2019). Systematic and

nonacademic interventions are common approaches to support students with EBDs (Gage et al., 2017; Markelz et al., 2019). Research indicates that MTSS, through evidence-based practices (EBP), offers the best opportunity for students with EBDs to learn (Horner & Halle, 2020; Melloy & Murry, 2019; Smith et al., 2018). Although promising, a review of the literature shows that most existing service delivery models are fragmented or non-existent (Mitchell et al., 2019; State et al., 2019). In addition, the research consistently documents teachers are not implementing evidence-based practices with fidelity (Chen et al., 2021; State et al., 2019). This has led to a disconnect between effective and evidence-based practices and standard practices among this population of students. Consequently, this puts our most challenging students at a higher risk of social-emotional difficulties and disengagement in distance learning if educators are not prepared to meet their unique academic, social, and behavioral needs (Hirsch et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2019; State et al., 2019).

The MTSS framework consists of principles from response to intervention (RtI) and Positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS). It integrates a continuum of support that includes evidence-based practices, strategies, and resources to address the academic and behavioral challenges that often create barriers to learning (Chen et al., 2021; Marsh & Mathur, 2020; Melloy & Murry, 2019; Splett et al., 2018). In California, MTSS integrates Common Core State Standards (CCSS), core instruction, differentiated learning, student-centered learning, individualized student needs, and the alignment of systems necessary for students to succeed (e.g., academic, behavioral, and social-emotional) (CDC, 2020). The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP)

supports MTSS as an effective framework that delivers a comprehensive system of differentiated support to improve the outcomes of a range of students, including special education students who struggle with learning. A multi-tiered system of support also connects with the demands of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and IDEA, which supports the concept that every student has access to a high-quality education regardless of their learning needs (Marsh & Mathur, 2020; Melloy & Murry, 2019).

From a systemic perspective, MTSS provides three levels of support: intensive (Tier 3), targeted (Tier 2), and universal (Tier 1). Intensive (Tier 3) programs are individualized based on current student needs. Tier 3 meets the needs of 3-5% of the student population, manifesting high-risk behaviors, learning difficulties, and signs of mental health problems. Interventions are provided in a small group (i.e., 1-3), with weekly progress monitoring. Targeted (Tier 2) programs allow increased time to practice learned skills and instructional materials in a group setting (i.e., 5-8), with monthly progress monitoring. Tier 2 meets the needs of 7-10% of the student population. Universal (Tier 1) programs are designed to meet the needs of 85-90% of the school population. Tier 1 promotes preventative and proactive academic and mental health functioning with universal screenings two to three times a year (Bierman & Sanders, 2021; Marsh & Mathur, 2020).

The tiers are designed to function in a group setting, individual, or a combination of individual and group settings based on student needs and level of intensive instruction for better outcomes for general and special education students. To address students' social and emotional functioning at the Tier 3 level, school-based intervention programs are

facilitated by a licensed clinician, marriage family therapist, or school psychologist and are empirically or evidence-based supported programs (Marsh & Mathur, 2020). Chen et al. (2021) indicates that although MTSS provides a framework to promote student success, evidence-based strategies to address the needs of students with EBDs are limited. Most of the interventions developed center on universal (Tier 1) and targeted (Tier 2) strategies that are designed to prevent instead of treat problems students with EBDs may already be experiencing (Chen et al., 2021). Although Tier 1 and Tier 2 supports are designed to mitigate students requiring Tier 3 support, additional information on how to provide effective intervention programs at the Tier 3 level is required to maximize overall student outcomes (Chen et al., 2021). School-based interventions within a multi-tier system of support (MTSS) framework are common approaches to addressing the needs of students with and without EBDs within the school setting. However, it is unclear how this transfers over to distance learning.

Although students with EBDs may have access to targeted interventions, studies have shown that challenging behaviors that are emotionally and behaviorally driven will likely require interventions that go beyond the Tier 1 and Tier 2 intervention levels of the MTSS framework (Chen et al., 2021; Farmer et al., 2021; Melloy & Murry, 2019; Splett et al., 2018;). Currently, limited information is available for Tier 3 practices for students with EBDs and even less for those participating in distance learning (Farmer et al., 2021). Research indicates that students with EBDs make up a small fraction of school populations across the United States, which accounts for the limited research in this area. Farmer et al. (2021) propose building upon MTSS and treating students with EBDs

within a Tiered System of Adaptive Supports (TSAS). Like MTSS, the TSAS is a

framework of support focusing on Tier 3 interventions to promote the positive

reorganization of a student's social-emotional development by creating adaptive services

for individual needs (Farmer et al., 2021). The framework includes approaches from what

is currently known through the existing literature and advances in prevention

perspectives, MTSS, social-emotional learning initiatives and programs, evidence-based

programs, and systems of care services to support specific student needs (Farmer et al.,

2021). The critical difference between the framework is that the evidence-based practices

are not specific to any tier. The interventions can be utilized across various tiers if data

shows that the strategy meets that specific goal of that tier (Farmer et al., 2021).

Additionally, unlike the MTSS framework, TSAS acknowledges that students do not

uniformly respond to standardized universal strategies and recognizes that development is

heterogeneous (Farmer et al., 2021; Jagers et al., 2019). This approach to creating

adaptive services, responsive to individual student circumstances and needs, is believed

to increase the likelihood of positive outcomes in the educational setting and distance

learning environment (August et al., 2018; Farmer et al., 2021).

Likewise, August et al. (2018) proposes a similar approach to addressing students'

social, emotional, and behavioral needs with EBDs. The approach is referred to as

adaptive treatment strategies (ATS). Similar to MTSS, it tailors each individual's

intervention over time based on continuous assessment of the student's response to the

intervention but extends the model by specifying (a) which intervention options to offer

first, (b) at what point in time to assess and adjust the interventions, and (c) which

intervention options should be offered if there is no response to the first intervention option (August et al., 2018). Using empirically derived decisions, educators can target individual characteristics that guide the selection of intervention programs. This approach moves past the associated problem-solving approach from the MTSS framework and builds upon empirical evidence to inform decisions and promote positive outcomes. Flanagan and Morgan (2021) suggest applying Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to support students with high-incident disabilities in distance learning environments (e.g., learning disabilities, mild intellectual disabilities, emotional-behavioral disorders, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder).

UDL

According to Sailor et al. (2021), MTSS coupled with UDL provides the best possible outcomes for students with disabilities, including students with EBDs. UDL is a research-based, evidence-based practice that guides educational practices based on the premise that instruction needs to be individualized to meet the diverse learning needs of students (Flanagan & Morgan, 2021). UDL principles guide educators on instructional strategies to mitigate potential learning barriers. To support the learning of students in distance learning environments, Flanagan and Morgan (2021) indicate that UDL, like in-person learning, offers multiple means of engagement and motivation to learn by allowing educators to design a flexible curriculum that adjusts to the learner's interest and motivation. In addition, UDL provides options on how students can access information (e.g., video and audio options) and demonstrate their knowledge of learning through multiple means of action and expression to show mastery of the content (Flanagan &

Morgan, 2021). These guidelines, which are the basis of UDL, permit the instruction and intervention to be individualized, which is the hallmark of special education. Specifically for students with EBDs, UDL steps away from traditional instruction delivery methods and encourages engagement, flexible learning environments, and learning spaces that can accommodate learning differences (CAST, n.d.; Cook et al., 2017).

Applying UDL principles to online learning provides an underlying foundation based on a model, practices, and tools that have already been well-established in the literature to help support the growing changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and the needs of students with EBDs (Basham et al., 2020). Basham et al. (2020) further adds, the UDL framework, along with the use of technology, provides a proactive approach to learner diversity to maximize student learning. The UDL guidelines purport to develop expert learners who are purposeful, motivated, resourceful, knowledgeable, strategic, and goal-directed (CAST, n.d). In California, UDL is supported by the California Department of Education (CDE) to provide equity and inclusion for general and special education students to provide a high-quality education for all learners in a distance learning environment (CDE, 2023). It is also defined in the federal education law, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), governing general K-12 education (CAST, n.d). Research has shown that students with EBDs require individualized interventions to meet their unique needs to support their social, emotional, behavioral, and academic needs. The UDL framework can provide guidelines for educators to support the learning needs of students with EBDs.

Academic Challenges and EBDs

Educational challenges in the learning environment are well established and include difficulties in reading, written expression, and math compared to students with and without disabilities (Chitiyo et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2019; Nordness et al., 2019). Adamson and Lewis (2017) reported that the academic performance of elementary students with behavior problems is up to 1.5 to 2-grade levels behind their peers. Research suggests that by the time students with EBDs enter high school, the achievement gap may be 3 ½ grades behind typical developing students (Adamson & Lewis, 2017; Mckenna et al., 2021). Similarly, in a systematic review of five meta-analyses focused on academic, curricular, and instructional interventions examining the academic achievement of K-12 students with EBDs, Campbell et al. (2018) indicated that students with EBDs performed at or below the 25th percentile in general academic functioning. Eventually, these deficits impact academic performance in other subject areas, such as history, science, and language arts, as students with EBDs transition to middle or high school, where the instructional content becomes more complex and difficult to comprehend (McKenna et al., 2021). Despite the poor academic performance of students with EBDs, there is limited research on academic interventions to improve outcomes (Campbell et al., 2018; Nordness et al., 2019). Zaheer et al. (2019) suggest using strategies and practices that have evidence of effectiveness, such as adopting evidence-based practices (EBPs) to address students' academic difficulties. EBPs are defined as practices subject to systematic, empirical inquiry and determined to be effective with the relevant population.

Distance Learning and School Connectedness

Distance learning provides accessibility and individualization for special education students (Hopcan et al., 2021). Students can attend classes whenever and wherever they want without leaving their homes. In addition, the added flexibility of online lessons with offline activities allows students to learn at their own pace. In contrast, the primary limitation of distance learning is the opportunity for face-to-face interactions between peers and teachers. This is a significant disadvantage, especially for students identified with an emotional disturbance who have difficulties with building or maintaining satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers, inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances, or a general mood of unhappiness or depression (IDEA, Section 300.8 (c) (4). Consequently, distance learning may increase the risk of students with EBDs developing a connectedness to school.

Research has shown that by the nature of the disability, EBDs students may have trouble developing high levels of connectedness to school. This may lead to high-risk behaviors, disengagement, and disconnect from the learning environment (Garwood & Moore, 2021; Marsh, 2018; Marsh et al., 2019). Marsh (2018) refers to school connectedness as the extent to which a student feels staff and peers care about them as individuals, their academic success, and their overall well-being. The concept consists of three components: (a) school bonding and attachment, (b) school engagement, and (c) school climate (Marsh, 2018). Without those components, students with EBDs may struggle to engage in distance learning (Marsh, 2018; Hirsch et al., 2022). In addition to possibly hindering school connectedness, distance learning has the potential to exacerbate

social skills development, social life, and the mental and psychological health of students with EBDs without effective interventions (Carrero et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2021; Hirsch et al., 2022; Hopcan et al., 2021; Lloyd et al., 2019; Marsh, 2018; Marsh et al., 2019). According to Ortiz et al. (2020), numerous entities have developed teacher preparation standards that address teaching and supporting students in distance learning. Still, these standards have focused on the general student population, not students with EBDs.

Generally, students with EBDs have a developmental history of problems establishing adult and peer connections or a significant traumatic event resulting in a persistent state of alarm (Marsh et al., 2019; Mitchell et al., 2019). As stated, they may present with high-risk behaviors, including substance use, self-harm, and suicidal behaviors that adversely impact public health, social welfare, and, most importantly, engagement in the learning environment. These challenging behaviors can disrupt school readiness, strain student-teacher relationships, and, without the right interventions, can persist into adulthood (Duppong Hurley et al., 2019; Mitchell et al., 2019; Nemer et al., 2019; Zolkoski, 2019). Although students with EBDs share common characteristics, research indicates the needs of students with EBDs vary, with the right interventions and positive behavior support, they can have positive behavioral and academic outcomes (Chen et al., 2021; Chitiyo et al., 2021; Farmer et al., 2021; Kumm et al., 2021; McKenna et al., 2021; Nordness et al., 2019; Van Loan & Garwood, 2020; Zimmerman et al., 2020)

A key finding in the literature suggests that even well-intentioned interventions may fail without establishing a strong teacher-student relationship. Mihalas et al. (2009), as cited in Garwood and Moore (2021), state a high-quality teacher-student relationship

establishes the foundation for effective class and school-wide positive behavioral support. Hirsch et al. (2021) describe four school-based interventions, grounded in evidence, for students with and at-risk of EBDs: (a) building relationships, (b) establishing expectations, (c) promoting engagement, and (d) making choices within the learning environment. These practices are most effective when delivered together and differentiated (Hirsch et al., 2021). Intrinsically, the teacher-student relationship is essential to fostering learning and connectedness.

According to Valenti et al. (2019), emotionally and socially competent educators are more likely to create high-quality classroom environments that result in more academic success for students. Similarly, Bettini et al. (2019) indicate meeting students' needs with EBDs requires a better understanding of special education educators as service providers. However, as Leggio and Terras (2019) indicated, teachers would benefit from evaluating their skill level to develop unconditional teacher-student relationships, create positive classroom environments, and individualize instruction to provide effective teaching strategies. Research also reveals teachers' educational level, certification status, and years of experience impacts the academic achievement of this population of students (Gage et al., 2017).

Based on a review of the literature spanning seven research articles from 2009 to 2018, negative relationships with staff and protective factors such as personalized curriculum, were found to significantly influence positive student outcomes. The concept of a "pupil's voice" was also viewed as a protective factor for a positive educational experience. Allowing students to express themselves was linked to them feeling heard

and understood (Cosma & Soni, 2019). This research highlights how teachers can influence and foster a positive school experience where students feel connected to the learning environment. The experiences of implementing interventions in distance learning are not clarified through existing research.

Online Academic Intervention Strategies for Students with EBDs

The Adolescent Community of Engagement (ACE) framework stipulates students are more likely to engage in courses when given collaborative learning opportunities that allow them to construct new knowledge with their peers (Borup et al., 2014). Borup et al. (2014) examined this learner-learner engagement in a study that sought to understand the impact of learner-learner interaction in K-12 online learning environments. Borup et al. (2014) found that the ACE framework can positively impact learning through motivating, instructing, and collaborating activities. Teachers described befriending, motivating, instructing, and collaborating as behaviors that positively impacted student engagement. Befriending and motivation were believed to have formed the foundation for students to guide their peers and collaborate effectively. Teachers also identified obstacles and potential drawbacks to meaningful learner-learner interaction. Meaningful collaboration requires more structure and uniform pacing. Furthermore, just as positive social interactions fostered a sense of community and increased motivation, negative interactions created a sense of isolation and unmotivated students. Therefore, this framework provides a positive approach to teaching EBDs students online.

Summary and Conclusions

A review of literature indicates there have been over 40 years of work and evidence of growing needs of students with EBDs. However, little has been done to advance this area of study. This present study fills the gap in literature regarding providing effective interventions to educate and support students with EBDs in distance learning environments. The study will also extend knowledge of providing students with EBDs explicit social, behavioral, and academic support to address their learning needs to keep them engaged in these environments. Since limited research exists regarding distance learning practices for students with EBDs, this study will also contribute to the development of professional development programs for teachers to better meet the needs of these students.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore teachers' experiences in selecting and implementing interventions to increase academic engagement for students with EBDs participating in K-12 online special education programs in the state of California. Research indicates that students with mental health issues are some of the most demanding and challenging to educate and support (Bettini et al., 2019; Hott et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2019). Online learning limits the ability of teachers to use interpersonal connections, modeling, and physical manipulatives that assist with making specially designed instructional or specialized academic instruction (SAI) meaningful, engaging, and individualized, which can impact the learning of students with EBDs (Alvarez-Guerrero et al., 2021; Schuck & Lambert, 2020). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with K-12 special education teachers of students with EBDs to explore teachers' experiences with the phenomena.

This chapter begins with a description of the qualitative research design and the researcher's role. It then explains the sample, recruitment of participants, instrumentation, and procedures used to collect and analyze the data. The trustworthiness of the study will also be detailed. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Research Design and Rationale

This qualitative study explored the experiences of special education teachers in selecting interventions and implementing interventions to increase academic engagement for students with EBDs in distance learning. The research question guiding the study was: What are teachers' experiences with selecting and implementing interventions to increase

academic engagement for students with EBDs in distance learning? There was a need to

provide additional insight into teachers' experiences in engaging students with EBDs in

distance learning to determine how these experiences influenced interventions to improve

student outcomes. A quantitative study would not have yielded an in-depth understanding

of teacher experiences with selecting and implementing interventions as it relies on

numerical, measurable data, quantifying variables, or how often something occurred

(Creswell & Poth, 2018). Instead, a generic or basic qualitative design with interviews

appeared to be the most appropriate design because it allowed for analysis and

understanding of how individuals interpret their experiences with specific experiences or

phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Several approaches to qualitative research were considered. For example, the

phenomenological design was not used because online instruction is not considered an

"intense human experience" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and the lived experiences of

each participant did not need to be examined. Similarly, a case study was not selected as

this study did not seek to develop an in-depth analysis of a case, program, event, activity,

process, or individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Instead, this study sought to understand

a specific targeted population. The aim was to gather information about values, opinions,

and behaviors that create themes to uncover and interpret the meaning of teachers'

experiences to understand better the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Braun and

Clarke's (2006) method of analyzing qualitative data entails searching across a dataset to

identify, analyze, and report repeated patterns (themes) across a data set through a six-

step process. It provided a way for the researcher to identify and understand the collective

or shared meanings and experiences, thereby comprehending how participants perceive and interpret these commonalities.

Role of the Researcher

Currently, I work as a School Psychologist for a school district in California. I provide a supporting role to the school district where the study was conducted. As a School Psychologist for the district, I identify students for special education services, work with teachers and staff to ensure best practices in the classroom setting and provide professional development for special education teachers throughout the district. As an employee of the district, I do not serve in a supervisory position, nor is there a conflict of interest. As a School Psychologist, I have personally observed and heard about the challenges of teaching practices implemented by the district that do not always address the learning needs of special education students, specifically students with EBDs. The understanding that there exists a disparity between the learning needs of students with EBDs gave me empathy, yet the objectivity to find answers that guided me throughout this study.

As the researcher, my role was to gather, organize, and analyze the experiences of online teachers responsible for educating and supporting students with EBDs without bias. I was the only interviewer, and I kept a journal to document my thoughts, judgments, opinions, inferences, and ideas about what was shared during the interview process. Although my experiences and involvement in the educational system have shaped my perception, I avoided bias by paying attention to details, listening to how participants respond, and asking probing or follow-up questions to accurately document

their thoughts and feelings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In addition, I developed competent methods to explain the study without bias, made appropriate field observations, and analyzed and interpreted the data per design (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finally, I ensured that participants felt safe by allowing them to keep their identities confidential (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As the interviewer, I kept the tone formal yet conversational and consistent with each participant by asking the same questions in the same order for the teacher interview.

Methodology

The methodology section includes information about the population, participant selection, the interview protocol, questionnaire instruments to be used, and the process used to validate the instruments. Additionally, I will explain the plan for data collection and analysis.

Participant Selection Logic

The setting of this study was a suburban public school district in Southern California. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2021), the district enrolled 21,065 students from 2019-2020, of whom 3016 had IEPs. The district has 26 schools, including an adult transition program, three alternative education schools, three high schools, three middle schools, two K-8 schools, 13 elementary schools, and one state preschool. According to the district special education director, during the 2020-2021 school year, 35 students qualified under the eligibility criteria of Emotional Disturbance. Online learning occurred for all students from March 2019 through June 2020, and 6 students remained on distance learning after June 2020. The selected district has 133

special education teachers, 22 of whom provide special education services for students who qualify under the eligibility of Emotional Disturbance during the 2019-2020 school year. Therefore, the recruitment pool consisted of 22 potential participants who provide online services to students with EBDs.

Sampling Approach and Criteria for Participant Selection

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative researchers should collect extensive details from a few individuals. Likewise, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) emphasized that the researcher should gather information until the point of saturation or redundancy that the researcher begins hearing the same responses to the interview questions and should not be based on the number of interviews. A purposeful sampling of the target population of 22 special education teachers in the target district served as the main participant sample for this study. The proposed desired sample size was 10-12 participants. The small number of participants allowed me to examine the experiences of special education teachers in an in-depth manner and to focus on the methods used to select interventions for each participant, allowing the development of descriptive data and saturation to be reached (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The following criteria were used to select participants: (a) credentialed special education teachers, (b) a minimum of two years of experience with students identified with Emotional Disturbance (ED), and (c) employed in the target district. A demographic questionnaire was used to confirm that participants met the study criteria. Invitations were sent to 22 educators within the target district. Of those invitations that were returned, nine were screened to obtain the required sample size using inclusion criteria.

Demographic details were requested for data analysis purposes, such as years of teaching special education, years of service, knowledge of or experience with students with emotional disturbance, and degree obtained.

Instrumentation

There is a gap in the research as it pertains to educating students with EBDs in distance learning. To address the gap, the proposed interview questions were generated based on the related studies presented in Chapter 2 and Knowles' (1980) theory of andragogy. The researcher carefully planned the introductory questions, transition questions, key questions, and closing questions that were analyzed to generate themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data collection instruments included an interview protocol that featured open-ended questions and follow-up prompts designed to resolve any ambiguity. Digital copies of the interview were downloaded onto a password-protected personal computer.

Data sources consisted of recorded interviews via Zoom to gather insight into the interventions, strategies, and processes used to get a glimpse into the teacher's knowledge base. The interview questions encompassed teacher experiences and engagement interventions. The director of special education and the district program specialist vetted the questions, providing feedback to enhance sentence fluency, sentence order, clarity, specificity, text organization, and details about using a specific curriculum. Subsequently, this researcher revised the interview questions to ensure they provided sufficient information to yield reliable data.

Developing the interview protocol included going through Chapter 2, identifying topics related to teacher experiences, and selecting interventions to increase engagement. During data analysis, I color-coded the questions based on the topic to help develop statements summarizing each category's main ideas. The interview questions were related to classroom interactions, the instructional model, personal beliefs, motivation, and implementation of interventions. In the open-ended questions, teachers were asked about their learning environment, the classroom, and what supports student engagement. Other questions will focus on the teacher's perception of the class.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

With Walden IRB approval, I emailed the district special education director to seek permission to send the Letter of Invitation to the special education teachers to conduct this study. I then arranged a meeting with the district special education director to answer any questions they might have regarding the study. Upon collecting the names and email addresses of the special education teachers, the Letter of Invitation was emailed to them. This letter included a link to the notice of consent followed by the demographic questionnaire. Participants' identities were kept confidential.

To ensure participants understood how the interviews would be conducted, the process was explained in the notice of consent that was sent electronically to the sample participants. This notice outlined the nature and the purpose of the study, the length of the interview, and the time required to complete the demographic questionnaire. The notice of consent also included information on informed consent and the participants' right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. If a response is not returned

within one week, the second Letter of Invitation was emailed, per the IRB committee's approval process. Interested individuals indicated their participation by responding with "I consent."

Interviews were conducted using Zoom. Interviews were recorded within the Zoom platform, and a backup recording device was used. I began each interview with an introduction about the purpose of the study and explained that the interview was recorded for coding purposes. Participants were given the option of turning off their webcam for confidentiality. Participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the interview at any time. Once the participant answered all the questions, I concluded the interview and thanked them for their participation. A follow-up email was sent within three days, thanking them for their involvement in the study and letting them know a follow-up interview may occur should there be any additional questions to address.

Data Analysis Plan

Once the recorded data was transcribed, the researcher coded the interview questions using in vivo coding software, followed by a manual thematic analysis. I followed the thematic analysis model as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). I integrated the 15-point checklist that Braun and Clarke (2006) discussed to ensure a thorough data analysis. The thematic analysis phase consisted of the following phases: familiarizing myself with the data, generating preliminary codes, identifying themes, refining these themes, defining and naming themes, and finally, compiling the findings into a report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The in vivo coding software assisted the research with sorting, coding, and analyzing the data by themes. Dalkin et al. (2021) describe in

vivo coding as an attempt to increase transparency and support theme analysis using multiple sources within the software. Since the interviews were organized and structured so that the same questions were asked to ensure consistency, it was possible to make generalized statements and inferences about the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

<div align="center">**Issues of Trustworthiness**</div>

Qualitative research by design can introduce a myriad of concerns if one does not identify biases, values, and personal backgrounds that may shape the interpretations under study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Since I work within the district where the study was conducted, I may bring some biases to this study since I echo some of the frustration of my colleagues. However, I aim to ensure that participants reflect on their learning and instructional experiences truthfully and honestly without bias (Kawulich, 2005). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), trustworthiness is used to describe the validity and reliability of the study presented. For the study to be considered trustworthy, it must address credibility, authenticity, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the accurate representation of the participant's viewpoint. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2018), the criterion of credibility addresses the researcher's ability to accurately convey patterns, themes, and issues that might not be easily understood. To maintain credibility and remove any biases that may influence my analysis, I will provide participants with a copy of their interview in transcript form, which allows them to read and comment on the analysis (Creswell & Miller, 2000). I will then conduct a second interview to verify that the analysis accurately represents their

experiences. This member-checking process is a way to ensure the information gathered is accurate and will reduce researcher bias.

In addition, I will use the method of reflexivity as I gather and analyze data to create the space for intentional reflection (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). The journal entries will provide a way to make a deeper connection between current and past ideas and assist with developing perspectives, viewpoints, and questions through the study. As an employee of the district in this study, reflexivity provides the means to set aside my opinions, draw upon the information, and objectively interpret the research findings to ensure credibility.

Transferability

Transferability describes the extent to which the study could relate to other settings. To establish transferability, I used thick descriptions and variations in participant selection. Transferability through thick, rich descriptions allows the reader to be transported into the situation under study and describes the contextual elements that ground and shape the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). I also established a criterion for participants and addressed the issue by acknowledging the study's limitations based on these factors to convey contextual relevance.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the stability and consistency of data over time (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). To establish dependability, I will use audit trails and peer review. Audit trails include detailed explanations of how the data was collected and analyzed and a clear record of field notes and transcripts. The peer-review process will assist with

checking the consistency of the data and reduce the potential bias of a single researcher collecting and analyzing data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018).

Confirmability

Confirmability describes objectivity in the researcher's findings and interpretations of the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Bloomberg and Volpe (2018) indicate it is the implication that the findings are evidence of the research and not the outcome of the biases and subjectivity of the researcher. To establish confirmability, I will use reflexivity and triangulation strategies. Using reflective and triangulation strategies throughout the data collection and analysis process will allow me to critically reflect, evaluate, and discuss with participants to assess the trustworthiness of the findings and interpret and explain them accurately.

Ethical Procedures

Qualitative data requires the researcher to minimize the potential harm to the study's participants. In this study, I ensured the rights and protection of all participants by establishing safeguards such as informed consent, confidentiality, and privacy. I requested permission from the district and school board following IRB approval. I also followed all the required procedures to select and engage with the participants as agreed by the school district in the study. I transcribed the data and checked for accuracy. In addition, data was protected and secured in a locked file cabinet and encrypted computer files. Identifiable data will not be shared with the committee. After five years, as IRB requires, paper documents will be shredded, and digital data will be physically destroyed by erasing all data from the researcher's computer-based files.

Summary

In this qualitative study, I explored the experiences of nine special education teachers in selecting interventions to increase learning engagement for EBDs students in distance learning. A generic or basic qualitative design with interviews was selected because it allowed the researcher to analyze people's complex experiences with the phenomena (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The setting of this study was a suburban public school district in Southern California. A purposeful sampling of the target population of 22 special education teachers in the target district served as the main participant sample for this study. To address the gap in the research on educating students with EBDs in distance learning environments, proposed interview questions were generated based on the related studies presented in Chapter 2 and Knowles' (1980) theory of andragogy. A thematic analysis of the recorded interviews, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006), was conducted. For the study to be considered trustworthy, the criteria for credibility, authenticity, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were followed. Finally, the rights and protection of all participants were ensured by establishing safeguards such as informed consent, confidentiality, and privacy throughout this research study. Chapter 4 will describe the research, data collection, and findings.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand teachers' experiences with selecting and implementing interventions to increase academic engagement for students with EBDs in distance learning environments. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews that were conducted over Zoom with nine participants. This chapter includes the study's setting, participant demographics, and methodology to collect and analyze data. Additionally, I detail measures to ensure the study's trustworthiness, results, and a summary of findings.

Setting

My goal was for special education teachers to share their experiences involving instructing students with EBDs in a distance learning environment. The study received approval in late April 2023, which coincides with the end of the district's academic year at the end of May. Typically, teachers are burdened with various tasks and responsibilities at the end of the school year and do not want to take on additional tasks during this period. Consequently, they were potentially hesitant to take on extra commitments as they looked forward to summer break or were already engaged in summer training programs for the next school year. These factors may have contributed to the limited number of participants who volunteered.

Demographics

Participants were credentialed special education teachers with a minimum of 2 years of experience working with students with EBDs. Another requirement was participants had to be employed within the targeted district. Those without online

teaching experience or who had worked with me were excluded from the study. The study included nine participants: three women and six men. Each participant was a special education teacher with at least 2 years of teaching experience and held a master's degree; two had earned a Ph.D. Among the participants, four had between 5 and 10 years of experience working with students with EBDs, while five had over 10 years of experience. In terms of expertise with students with EBDs, three participants rated their skill level as intermediate, five as advanced, and one as an expert.

Data Collection

To begin the data collection process, I contacted the school district's Director of Special Education to seek permission to send letters of invitation. I shared the purpose of the study and participant criteria. Once approval for the study was obtained, the Director of Special Education provided me with email addresses of special education teachers with experience teaching students with EBDs. I sent letter of invitations containing embedded links to consent forms. If they elected to participate, they clicked on the link with the words "I consent" and received a notice explaining the nature and purpose of the study, lengths of interviews, and time it would take to complete the demographic questionnaire. This also included information regarding informed consent and their ability to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. After receiving consent and demographic information, I responded by email, introducing myself as the researcher and providing a brief overview of the study.

Once they consented, participants and I coordinated meeting times for Zoom interviews. Times were offered after the contracted school year ended. Each participant is

referred to as a number, such as P1 and P2. Most participants chose to have their videos on during interviews, except for one. Participants took part in interviews from their homes or home offices. I conducted all interviews from my home office to ensure privacy for participants. All interviews were conducted using Zoom's recording feature and Cockatoo. The recruitment and data collection process took 12 weeks to complete.

Before beginning each interview and initiating recordings, I reiterated the study's purpose and once more sought participants' verbal consent to be recorded. Once I received approval from participants to begin recording, data collection began. I conducted a total of nine semi-structured interviews. Duration of each interview varied from 19 to 67 minutes. Initially, the plan was to conduct interviews with 10 to 12 participants. However, by the ninth interview, data saturation had been met. Data saturation was achieved, as indicated by themes which emerged during interviews. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested data saturation is reached when new data no longer brings additional insights, marked by redundancy within the data.

After interviews were completed, audio recordings were transcribed using Cockatoo, an online platform that is designed for recording and transcribing interviews. I then checked transcribed interviews in Microsoft Word and made edits as needed to correct words that were not accurately transcribed. Video recordings from Zoom and transcription of interviews were saved in a digital password-protected file on my computer.

Data Analysis

Once transcriptions were completed, I imported them into MAXQDA to begin the initial coding process. During this phase, I used MAXQDA while also following Braun and Clarke's six phases of thematic analysis to identify and analyze patterns within data systematically. The first step involved immersing myself in the data to understand the content. By reading and rereading transcribed interviews, I was able to identify patterns, ideas, and potential themes that emerged from the data. Using MAXQDA, I highlighted and systematically coded the data. This involved assigning labels to specific data that relate to the same ideas, concepts, or themes. MAXQDA's coding feature was used to organize and categorize data into segments, which helped me identify patterns across datasets. I reviewed each coded extract, generating a thematic map for analysis. At this stage, themes became more visible as I was able to make connections between codes to form patterns that related to the research question. Data connected to the research question regarding teachers' experiences in terms of selecting and implementing interventions to increase academic engagement for students with EBDs in distance learning environments.

The next step involved reviewing themes, defining them, and renaming them to refine my themes and capture overall analysis. During this step, I used my own words and direct quotes to help describe patterns that emerged based on data that helped answer the research question. Patterns were determined by identifying 25 different codes that were common throughout data. These codes included academic advancement, assessment, and feedback, beginning of class activities, innovative teaching strategies,

advantages of online learning, challenges of online learning, use of educational platforms, breakaway rooms for individual attention, building rapport with students, one-on-one engagement, personal sharing and connections, addressing student behavior, calling out student behavior, managing classroom dynamics, engaging parents in the learning process, navigating home learning environments, adapting to new technology, challenges with technology, providing emotional support, social skills development, encouraging students to participate, adapting curriculum for online delivery, self-paced and direct instruction models, using humor and engagement strategies, and recognition and rewarding effort.

Next, I used Excel to highlight and group codes into categories based on the research question. I was able to determine two distinct categories based on the coded data. These categories include (a) relationship building and fostering engagement and (b) leveraging technology to increase engagement. I then moved from patterns and categories to overarching themes. The themes identified based on the response to the research question are discussed in the results section of this chapter. In the last step, I continued to use Excel to arrange themes and the relevant quotes into tables and integrate the data from all the participants to identify consistent patterns and themes. This approach helped develop a comprehensive thematic analysis of the data. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidance, I refined and then defined each theme, ensuring its relevance to the research questions. This process enabled me to craft a detailed analysis that addressed the research question and connected it back to the existing body of literature. Consequently, I was able to provide answers to the research question that guided my study.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

As previously mentioned in earlier chapters, the integrity of the research was established by addressing creditability, authenticity, transferability, dependability, and confirmability throughout the study to determine trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Credibility

Credibility refers to the accurate representation of the participant's viewpoint. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2018), the criterion of credibility addresses the researcher's ability to accurately convey patterns, themes, and issues that might not be easily understood. Within this study, credibility was established using strategies that included checks from members who were not involved with the study. I used member checks, recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018), by asking three members to review their transcripts. This form of checking throughout the study allowed for clarification and determined any areas of confusion that needed to be eliminated.

Transferability, Dependability, and Confirmability

Transferability describes the extent to which the study could relate to other settings. To establish transferability, I used thick descriptions of the participants, detailed settings of the study, and any resources used. Transferability through thick, rich descriptions allows the reader to be transported into the situation under study and describes the contextual elements that ground and shape the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). I also established a criterion for participants and addressed the issue by

acknowledging the study's limitations based on these factors to convey the contextual relevance clearly.

During the study, I kept an audit trail for each step with details of the study's transparency and reliability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This ensured the study's dependability, and that data could be applied to the participant's experiences to increase academic engagement for students with EBDs in distance learning. To ensure confirmability, I used reflexivity throughout the study. This strategy allowed me to critically reflect, evaluate, and discuss with participants to assess the trustworthiness of the findings and interpret and explain them accurately. This strategy also helped reduce any personal bias that would have affected the study's outcome (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Results

In this study, I conducted interviews with nine participants. I asked questions that focused on answering the research question and connected them to aspects of the theoretical framework. The results are structured thematically to support the overall research question. Results are explained with the themes related to the research question. Table 1 presents the themes and subthemes for the research question that guided this study. In this section, I review each theme and subtheme in detail.

Table 1

Research Questions and Data Themes

Research Question	Data Themes
	Theme 1: Relationship building and fostering engagement.

	Subtheme 1:1: Collaborative and supportive learning environment.
What are teachers' experiences with selecting and implementing interventions to increase academic engagement for students with EBDs in distance learning?	Subtheme 1:2: Behavioral and emotional supportive practices.
	Theme 2: Leveraging Technology to increase engagement.
	Subtheme 2: Instructional adaptation and enrichment.

Research Question

The research question for this study was:

What are teachers' experiences with selecting and implementing interventions to increase academic engagement for students with EBDs in distance learning environments? This question aimed to provide a platform for teachers to explain their experiences in selecting and implementing interventions to increase academic engagement for students with EBDs in distance learning. To address this question, two major themes, two subthemes for one of them and one subtheme for theme two, were found for a total of three subthemes. In this section, I discuss each theme and subtheme, including quotes from the data collected.

Table 2

Theme 1, Subtheme 1:1 and 1:2

Theme	Subtheme
Relationship Building and Fostering Engagement	Collaborative and Supportive Learning Environment
	Behavioral and Emotional Supportive Practices

Theme 1: Relationship Building and Fostering Engagement

This theme focuses on strategies to cultivate a more personalized and engaging learning experience. It includes the creation of learning spaces, efforts to build rapport, personalized attention, and the use of humor and relatability to maintain student engagement. In eight cases ($n = 8$), participants emphasized the importance of understanding students' needs and circumstances to tailor their teaching approaches effectively. They also discussed the importance of establishing trust and rapport and went beyond standard teaching practices to maintain these connections, especially with the challenges of distance learning. P1 was an example of how casual check-ins and relating to students personally can make a difference. Instead of immediately starting the day with academic content, they would engage students with casual conversations about their weekend, discuss movies, and other personal interests. This approach allowed the educator to gauge the emotional state of the students, ensuring they were ready to learn. P1 recalled:

> There'd be days where a kid logs in thinking we're about to jump into some curriculum and I'm doing my verbal check in, "Hey, man, what's going on? Anybody seen the new movie that came out? What'd you guys do this weekend? Anybody barbecuing this weekend?" Like, you know, just general talking. And you will kind of get a feel for things. And if I felt like things weren't right, I wouldn't necessarily jump in academic stuff…the biggest thing for me is always like you have your person. Who's your person? Every kid has to feel comfortable talking to someone. Every kid needs to have an outlet.

P3 had a similar experience and indicated the importance of understanding the students before meeting them and forming a strategy based on this understanding. By reviewing information about the students, the educator can tailor their interactions and teaching strategies to be more effective and responsive to engagement. P3 expressed, "the process is to begin with really getting to know the students. It starts with before you're even introduced to the student, you have to begin the process by actually reading information about the student." P5 highlighted that the reason why many students with emotional disturbance require alternative strategies is that they struggle with relationship building, so they try to model what it's like to be in a positive teacher/student relationship, "I've operated as being in a partnership with them."

Other participants acknowledged the difficulties of connecting with students in a virtual setting. Some participants ($n = 3$) used humor as a tool, empathy, and individual attention to engage students. These methods are particularly significant in a virtual learning environment where physical cues are absent, and the risk of disengagement is high. For example, P6 explained, "then I try to use humor as much as I can to kind of keep them engaged." P8 stressed, "the most effective thing that I've learned is knowing exactly what led to having that diagnosis of emotional disturbance." P9 explained the importance of individual attention in connecting with students: "It's usually for attention, so arranging a one-on-one meeting time is more engaging and more of a buy-in because they know that they're important to me." These quotes illustrate how prioritizing relational connections and trust-building with students helped foster an engaging and supportive learning environment.

Subtheme 1: Collaborative and Supportive Learning Environments

In this subtheme, participants ($n = 5$) described the collaborative efforts between home and school, highlighting the crucial role of parents in supporting the learning process during distance learning. They emphasized how actively involving parents enhanced student participation and served to recognize and reward students' efforts, thereby motivating them to remain engaged and invested in their learning. For example, P8 shared experiences of fostering strong relationships with parents to support student engagement. This partnership was crucial in making distance learning a collaborative effort between home and school. P8 recalled:

> I had a few that would always be on there and I actually had a lot of them on there. And that was kind of like because I had built a relationship with the parents and they supported me, so it was easier to ask parents to make sure they're on it and they would be on.

P5 had a similar experience, detailing that collaborating with parents helped to ensure student engagement, "And if they were disengaged, I had to really text their parents saying, hey, is there something wrong with the Zoom? I can't see so and so." These insights illustrate how teachers actively engaged parents to overcome the challenges, ensuring students remain engaged and motivated. P4 captured perfectly how direct communication with parents is a key strategy to keep students connected, "I immediately set up the Google voice, every parent's number in so that I could make contact at home. That's the first thing that I did."

Other participants (n = 2) discussed how empowering their students in terms of increasing responsibility and personal worth helped establish a supportive learning environment. P1 reflects on giving the students the experience of college-level work as a source of pride and empowering students by acknowledging their academic achievement and increasing their responsibilities, "so for them to be able to say, hey, I took a college course, and I got an A or a B, that was like a big chip on their shoulder, and I think it was empowering." P6 also speaks to student empowerment through increased responsibility. This empowerment boosts their self-worth and engagement. P6 notes, "And they actually like the increase in responsibility because I think it creates their own personal worth and personal value." Overall, while the primary goal remained the teaching of academic content, most of the participants focused on fostering an environment that promoted parental involvement and empowered students to feel in control, valued, and capable. This approach is crucial in supporting students with EBDs.

Subtheme 2: Behavioral and Emotional Supportive Practices

All participants ($n = 9$) stated that behavioral and emotional supportive practices are the cornerstone of supporting students with EBDs to increase engagement. P2 provided the most detailed explanation about the significance of creating a supportive, understanding, and responsive environment for students with EBDs. P2 highlighted the importance of creating a classroom environment where students feel like they belong and are proud to be part of because "we all have a voice, we all matter, I mean, because again, you're with each other all day, every day, you better find a way to get along." They emphasized the importance of acknowledging each student's voice, fostering a sense of

belonging, and the value of finding innovative ways to engage students "like, I'm going to make this your own. This is gonna be something that you feel safe in, that you want to be part of, and we're gonna get better." This approach is vital for students with EBDs, as it helps reduce stigma and fosters a sense of community. P2 recalled:

> The first semester, they were awful. We went back to day one of Boys Town, like accepting no for an answer, like I'm teaching this in high school, you know, like continually drilling it. They're getting better now…having leaders, having stakeholders, having a voice, having opinion, like knowing this classroom, taking away the stigma.

P2 then went on to explain how, in their experience, it's important to have patience and understanding, "I try to show more grace and understanding with the population and what they've been through." This strategy helps create a comfortable environment to engage students, and they want "to be in here." P4 reiterated this sentiment and reflected on the rewarding feeling of seeing students become more comfortable as time passed, "the rewarding parts were after they are settled in, and the kids are a little more comfortable." Similarly, as P8 noted, recognizing even small efforts builds confidence and motivates students to continue engaging and improving. P8 recalls:

> So, when they come to me and say, I'm done. Ok, listen, I appreciate that you sat there for five minutes doing this, man. That means a lot because yesterday, remember yesterday? You were up all day, dude. But I appreciate you sitting there for five minutes, and you wrote something. You wrote a word. I really

appreciate that. You're awesome. How about now? How about we add a few
more words to this word?

P6 emphasized setting clear boundaries and expectations for behavior as another
key factor in creating a mutually respectful and engaging environment. P6 recalled:

And the other big rule I have is we have to have classroom norms…And I think

the reason why it worked was because even through everyone was contributing to

a dysfunctional environment, there were elements of that environment that they

didn't like. So, if we all agree to stop, the piece that they don't like stops. But that

means that they also have to stop contributing to the piece that the other person

doesn't like.

However, others struggled and were challenged to engage students. P1 stated that
students would turn off their cameras and wouldn't participate in the learning
environment. P3 recalled:

When you have a child who has emotional disturbance, psychological problems,

unfortunately, impersonal disconnected methods that are employed with online

learning usually exacerbate their feelings of isolation and their feelings of being

disconnected.

Similarly, P4 expressed teaching students with EBDs was "daunting" at times and
took "a lot of time and effort" to meet their needs in distance learning and described their
experience as "almost exhausting." P9 stated, "unless there is some form of
accountability…and when I say accountability, meaning an adult there to monitor and

make sure they're doing what they're supposed to do," indicating that meeting the social-emotional needs of students with EBDs was challenging. P3 recalled:

> Even as attentive as I am and as skilled as I am in knowing students and having the relationship with them, it made it more difficult to really get the kind of results and the potential out of the students that I would normally have expected.

Collectively and despite the struggles, all the participants focused on fostering student engagement and addressing the social-emotional needs of students with EBDs. This involves close communication, community creation, and consistent support and acknowledgment of student struggles and achievements. The participants also demonstrated their commitment to maintaining an educational space where students are heard, and their individual needs are met with empathy and creativity. They stressed the need for accountability to maintain student engagement. This holistic approach highlights the importance of creating positive classroom environments and relationship building as integral to educational interventions for students with EBDs.

Table 3

Theme 2 and Subtheme 2:1

Theme	Subtheme
Leveraging Technology to Increase Engagement	Instructional Adaptation and Enrichment

Theme 2: Leveraging Technology to Increase Engagement

Although teachers emphasized the importance of relationship building, tailoring strategies to individual student needs, and leveraging humor and empathy as a value to

increase engagement for students with EBDs, teachers also stressed the value of

leveraging technology to increase engagement. This theme captures teachers' educational

strategies and assessment approaches to foster academic growth. It includes class

activities designed to engage, ongoing feedback to inform instruction, and modifications

to the curriculum that accommodate distance learning. In most cases, participants ($n = 7$)

described a multifaceted approach when using technology. P1 explains how they

creatively use technology in distance learning: "The positive side of some of the software

is it allowed you to create quizzes and tests that were auto generated, and you could

create a bank of questions." This allowed the teacher to develop individualized

assignments to meet the needs of the class. Similarly, P2 elaborates on adding structure to

the day while incorporating technology in varied ways to maintain focus and

engagement, "We did like a writing prompt right out of the gate, and then we'd do like

some form of Edpuzzle, and then we'd do another writing component, and then we'd

have a lecture, and then a discussion…" This multifaceted approach allowed students

with EBDs to actively participate in the distance learning environment. P7 noted that

delivering academic content online was more straightforward than in-person teaching due

to fewer distractions. They observed that the absence of physical classroom distractions

supported the direct teacher-student interaction online and, as a result, enhanced the

effectiveness and focus of content delivery. P7 states:

> I felt that there some real advantages to teaching online…because so much of
>
> their issues revolved around their interactions with other students and sometimes
>
> with other adults even in the classroom that I didn't have as much control

over…but when we were online it was just me and just the student and I felt it was a lot, in many ways a lot easier to deliver the academic portions.

In addition, P6 explained that ongoing feedback provided students with a review of the lesson and helped inform instruction for the day. This allowed the educator the opportunity to reinforce learning and address any confusion to help create a positive learning environment: "So I used Canvas, and we would typically do a recap of the previous day's assignment, and then I would ask for any additional questions." Likewise, P5 introduced additional methods to keep students engaged, such as using a whiteboard on Zoom and typing out key points in the chat during lessons. This multi-modal approach helped accommodate different learning styles and kept students attentive and involved. P5 stated, "What I had to do is when I spoke, I would type in the chat, or I had a whiteboard on Zoom where I would type in questions for engagement." Teachers also used breakout rooms to teach small groups, while the digital platform allowed continued monitoring of the other students. This approach ensured personalized attention where needed without losing oversight of the entire class. P1 explains, "if we broke out and did small groups on Zoom, I could still monitor the other kids."

Even with leveraging technology to increase engagement, P6 expressed concerns about the limitations of distance learning, especially for explaining complex concepts that might be easier in a physical setting. P6 stated:

And then, even if they didn't have any questions, I would still raise questions I think kids would probably have. And the reason why I did that was because, you know, explaining something over Zoom is different than being in the classroom.

P3 also expressed concerns about the effectiveness of online learning for students experiencing emotional disturbance, "I don't tend to be in favor of online learning for children who have or are having an emotional imbalance." Despite their concerns, they also recognize the necessity to adapt and incorporate various technological tools to better engage and support these students. P3 stated that teaching online "challenged me to utilize more technological pieces in the online media" to help engage students with EBDs. Overall, the finding indicates the need for innovative ways to use technology to adapt teaching methods and assessments for distance learning. These experiences also reveal a shared understanding of the potential of technology to foster an effective learning environment despite the challenges of distance learning.

Subtheme 2.1: Instructional Adaptation and Enrichment

This theme covers teachers' strategies and methods to engage students and adapt instruction to the online format, ensuring academic progression and active participation. Most participants ($n = 6$) described how they included innovative class activities designed to engage students and made curriculum adjustments that cater to distance learning. P1 explains how they intertwine reading and writing assignments to reinforce learning, using technology to provide students with tools like sentence starters. This adaptation helped students develop stronger writing skills by reflecting on the reading materials. P1 shares:

> So, reading and writing, I typically bounce them off of each other. I try to keep writing assignments reflective of anything reading, more so than providing independent assignments. I felt like they has some material they could reflect on or look at, they would usually write stronger assignments because they could go

look for words, they could use some of the terminology and things of that nature…What I also did was I also created a snapshot of sentence starters that would be broken down into different areas with starting a sentence, transitions, starting your second paragraph, third paragraph, and different transitions.

P1 explained that these adaptations allowed for a deeper understanding of the content and helped students remain engaged in the learning environment. Additionally, P1 explained that in their experience, "how subject matter was implemented, it really came down to the teacher." They explain:

I could have two students with the same primary and secondary disabilities. It doesn't mean they're going to react to the intervention the same. And I think that's kind of a case-by-case thing as to where and when we implement things and see the outcomes, at some point, you got to make a judgement call. Is this working for this kid or not?

Similarly, P2 and P8 emphasize the necessity of creating engaging lessons that capture students' interests and cater to their needs. They use scaffolding and targeted lessons to break down information to make it more relevant and relatable to maintain engagement. They incorporated other online resources such as Khan Academy, Ed puzzle, and online videos to support those struggling academically in addition to the online curriculum. Additionally, P2 tried to follow an instructional format like in-person teaching. They would start their session like they would do in person and allow the students to "get their funnies out" before introducing the lesson. For those students who were a bit more boisterous and difficult to engage, the teacher introduced a digital

randomizer. This tool allowed students to choose and randomly select preferred assignments which they themselves had suggested. It was a creative and innovative way to adapt the lesson and engage students. Whereas P8 focused on individualizing learning. This method ensured that all students received the support needed to succeed regardless of their academic level. P8 recalled:

> So, I brought the kids into breakout rooms according to their abilities or reading levels and…so one group did you know lower level another group did a higher and I did one different group so when the kids that needed extra reading I would put them in that group.

> P9 also expressed the need to individualize the academic content and stated, "I don't get a curriculum and follow their scope and sequence to a T. I do more standards-based" instruction. Yet other teachers preferred a more structured approach when adapting their instruction to foster engagement. P3 recalled:

> You have to be able to know your students, understand their interests, figure out where their needs are and then you have the material that you're required to teach. Then you try to create a lesson that always, this is step two, has a good hook to it to initially get their attention and then based on that hook, you're able to progressively deliver the lesson…you got to have what is the hook to kind of get their attention. So, it's something that they understand, and they connect with, so that's the hook that gets them interested, so they actually want to pay attention.

P3 reiterated again later in the interview that they had to adjust their teaching approach "so that you're able to make those connections with your students and make sure that

learning is occurring." Adapting the instruction was, therefore, seen as a necessity and a way to address varied needs. P3 also described using scaffolding, targeted lessons, chunking assignments, data, and one-on-one small group instruction to support the different learning needs of students. Similarly, P6 used recall strategies to keep students engaged and adapted the curriculum accordingly to the student's needs. P6 states, "I realize the importance of spending arguably more time on recall than time memorizing. So, we do a lot of recalls." Overall, each participant, through their unique approach, shares a common goal of addressing the specific needs of their students and adapting to an educational environment that distance learning necessitated.

Summary

Chapter 4 included results of this study, including themes that answered the research question. I began by describing the setting and explaining that the study was approved at the end of the school year. This may have influenced the number of participants as teachers planned for their summer break. Next, demographics were presented, including characteristics of nine participants that were relevant to the study and collection of data. This was followed by an explanation of data collection procedures. The number of participants was discussed, as well as location and duration of interviews. Once data analysis was discussed, an explanation of trustworthiness of the study followed, which included evidence of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Chapter 4 concluded with results from data during interviews, which revealed two major themes with direct and indirect quotes from participants to answer the research question.

The two major themes were relationship building and fostering engagement as well as leveraging technology to increase engagement. Subthemes that emerged were collaborative and supportive learning environments, behavioral and emotional supportive practices, and instructional adaptation and enrichment. Themes and subthemes illustrate that implementing interventions to increase academic engagement for students with EBDs in distance learning environments goes beyond traditional academic delivery. It requires a comprehensive approach that includes emotional support, relationship building, and collaboration with parents. Educators' dedication to understanding, engaging, and empowering their students fosters nurturing environments where individual needs are addressed. The narrative also highlights how technology, despite its challenges, provides valuable opportunities to enhance engagement. Educators use technology in innovative ways to adapt their teaching strategies to meet the unique needs of students with EBDs. This approach helped establish thriving online learning environments within the limitations of distance learning. This evolution of teaching strategies demonstrates the importance of integrating both social-emotional support and adapting technology to support students with EBDs.

Chapter 5 includes my interpretations of the findings. This includes comparing findings with peer-reviewed literature in Chapter 2. These findings are also analyzed based on the theoretical framework. Furthermore, I address the study's limitations, propose recommendations, and consider implications for social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore teachers' experiences with selecting and implementing interventions to increase academic engagement for students with EBDs in distance learning environments. Data addressing the research question were collected through semi-structured interviews with nine teachers who instruct students with EBDs in K-12 public schools within a suburban district in California. Teachers can meet the unique learning needs of students with EBDs by creating positive classroom environments, individualizing instruction, and fostering teacher-student relationships. However, it is unclear if these classroom practices can be effectively transferred to distance learning. There is limited research concerning effective interventions to increase academic engagement for students with EBDs participating in distance learning environments.

This study was conducted to explore teachers' experiences regarding selecting and implementing interventions to best support students with EBDs in distance learning environments. Findings include positive and negative experiences based on participants' perceptions. One of the study's main findings was relationship building and fostering engagement in distance learning environments. Participants addressed strategies to craft individualized learning experiences marked by strong rapport building, direct personal engagement, and tailored instruction. This illustrates the significant impact of understanding and addressing students' individual and emotional needs to support engagement in online learning environments. I also addressed the importance of leveraging technology to increase student engagement. This suggested using technology

innovatively and creatively to increase student engagement. Teachers who made adaptations to accommodate distance learning and modifications to their teaching approaches for online learning formats saw the most improvement and positive engagement among students with EBDs. Negative experience of participants related to technological challenges faced by teachers and consistently addressing specific needs of students with EBDs in distance learning environments. These findings are discussed and interpreted in this chapter.

In this chapter, I explain interpretations of findings based on themes. I describe study limitations and recommendations that were derived from my analysis of data collected from interviews. Implications for positive social change are also addressed.

Interpretation of the Findings

In this section, I interpret findings and compare them to findings from literature as discussed in Chapter 2. Themes were relationship building and fostering engagement and leveraging technology to increase engagement. In this section, connections between findings and literature are organized. The research question was as follows:

What are teachers' experiences with selecting and implementing interventions to increase academic engagement for students with EBDs in distance learning environments?

Creating positive classroom environments, individualizing instruction, and building teacher-student relationships are essential to address unique learning needs of students with EBDs (Garwood & Moore, 2021; Leggio & Terras, 2019). Teachers also need targeted skills, abilities, and knowledge to teach students with EBDs effectively

(Chen et al., 2021; Cumming et al., 2021; French, 2019; Hirsch et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2018). According to the data, participants who established teacher-student relationships went beyond standard teaching practices to maintain these connections. They observed improved outcomes, notably increased engagement in distance learning and higher attendance rates, ensuring students were present and ready to learn.

While students with EBDs share common traits, individual differences exist. However, with appropriate interventions and positive behavior supports, students with EBDs can have positive behavioral and academic outcomes (Chen et al., 2021; Chitiyo et al., 2021; Farmer et al., 2021; Kumm et al., 2021; McKenna et al., 2021; Nordness et al., 2019; Van Loan & Garwood, 2020; Zimmerman et al., 2020). Duppong Hurley et al. (2019) found parental involvement improved academic outcomes among students at risk of EBDs compared to students without disabilities. Collaboration between home and school played a crucial role in supporting the learning processes of students with EBDs during distance learning. Students with EBDs tend to face more challenges than their peers with other disabilities, including social-emotional, academic, and behavioral disabilities (Kern et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2019; Oldfield et al., 2017). These findings underscore the critical importance of behavioral and emotional support practices for effectively supporting students with EBDs.

Students with EBDs require individualized interventions to meet social, emotional, behavioral, and academic needs. The UDL framework can provide guidelines for educators to support the learning needs of students with EBDs. UDL in distance learning environments is supported by the CDE to provide equity and inclusion for

special education students. It is also defined by the ESSA governing general K-12 education. Many participants used multifaceted approaches when using technology, including class activities that were designed to engage, ongoing feedback to inform instruction, and modifications to the curriculum that accommodate distance learning, which is in line with UDL learning guidelines. Flanagan and Morgan (2021) indicated UDL, like in-person learning, offers multiple means of engagement and motivation to learn by designing a flexible curriculum that adjusts to learners' interests and motivations. Students with EBDs need individualized and targeted instruction to support their social-emotional functioning and learning needs (Benner et al., 2022; Hirsch et al., 2022; State et al., 2019). Participants explained they used a variety of strategies and methods to engage students and adapt instruction to online formats, ensuring academic progression and active participation. They made instructional adaptations with the common goal of addressing specific needs of students with EBDs in distance learning environments.

Although participants shared a common goal of addressing the specific needs of their students and adapting to an educational environment that distance learning necessitated, they expressed feeling challenged teaching students with EBDs in distance learning. These challenges included students not turning on their cameras, lack of parental involvement, and not being able to engage students despite using innovative and engaging strategies. These findings are consistent with the current literature, which indicates that students with EBDs may have a higher risk of behaviors, disengagement,

and feeling disconnected from the learning environment (Garwood & Moore, 202;

Marsh, 2018; Marsh et al., 2019).

The participants who expressed frustration with distance learning felt that by the

time they could control behaviors and teach, the teaching was no longer meaningful or an

engaging experience for the students or the teachers. They expressed a desire for

additional support with practices and training. Given the unique needs of students with

EBDs, the literature indicates that it is essential for teachers to receive the knowledge and

skills to implement evidence-based academic and behavioral strategies to improve

student outcomes (State et al., 2019). Without the proper training, teachers are susceptible

to job burnout, ineffective teaching practices, and poor student outcomes (Bruhn et al.,

2022; Brunsting et al., 2022; Hirsch et al., 2022; Gilmour et al., 2022; O'Brien et al.,

2019).

The data gathered in this study aligned with the existing literature and theoretical

framework of this study. Knowles' (1980) theory of andragogy includes five assumptions

that suggest that teachers benefit from being involved in the planning and evaluating of

instructional strategies and learning through acquiring knowledge. From this perspective,

educators can move from facilitators to helping students achieve their full potential

(Knowles, 1980). More specifically, applying andragogy to this study can be paralleled in

the themes identified in the research study, which emphasizes the importance of self-

direction, leveraging learners' experiences, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and

motivation.

In andragogy, the learner's experience is a critical component of the learning process. Participants built relationships and fostered engagement with their students and parents as part of the learning environment. This approach makes selecting and implementing interventions to increase academic engagement more relevant and encouraging to the adult learner. Andragogy emphasizes establishing a collaborative learning environment where learners can contribute to the learning process. The theme of creating supportive and collaborative learning environments aligns with the principle of using the diverse experience of the learner to establish a positive learning environment for the students. Acknowledging and supporting students' emotional and psychological needs support an environment conducive to learning as an adult learner. Leveraging digital tools and platforms to accommodate diverse learning styles and needs of adults to help students in need aligns with the andragogical principle of readiness to learn and orientation to learning. Lastly, andragogy advocates for the adaptation of instruction. The study's instructional adaptation and enrichment theme demonstrates how the adult learner can tailor learning activities and enrichment to align with the adult learners' experiences, professional experiences, and personal goals to create an effective learning experience.

Limitations of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore teachers' experiences in selecting and implementing interventions to increase academic engagement for students with EBDs in distance learning. There were limitations to the study. As stated in Chapter 1, a limitation is defined as a weakness in a research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The first limitation is the sample size, which relates to dependability because the study was

limited to nine participants. However, the nine participants were able to show saturation, as evidenced by the recurring themes as the interviews continued. As stated by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the researcher should gather information until saturation or redundancy and not base it on the number of interviews. Another limitation relates to credibility.

The data collected is based on the participants' experiences. These experiences may not be shared experiences. However, the purpose of this study was not to provide a generalized experience but to learn about teachers' experiences with selecting and implementing interventions to increase academic engagement with a specific population of students in distance learning. Another limitation was transferability. The study has been explained in detail, including an audit trail, the data collected, and the research question used in this study. I was explicit about the population and the context being studied, including the sample criteria. This transparency allows readers to make their own determination. The final limitation is trustworthiness. It was shared that the researcher works within the study location and may not have captured the full range of teachers' positive and negative experiences. However, throughout the study, an audit trail of notes and reflections was used to limit any biases during the study. I also provided member checking to help validate my findings. All these limitations were considered throughout the study.

Recommendations

This study provided insight into teachers' experiences in selecting and implementing interventions to increase academic engagement for students with EBDs in

distance learning. The data collected fills a gap in the literature about teacher's experiences in selecting and implementing interventions to increase academic engagement for students with EBDs in distance learning. However, future research should continue to fill the gap by exploring the experiences of teachers who instruct students with EBDs in distance learning. Future research could involve a more extensive and diverse group of teachers from various geographic locations and school settings to enhance the repressiveness of the findings. Further studies could explore specific technological tools and platforms that improve engagement for students with EBDs in distance learning, examining their efficacy in various teaching contexts. Given the noted importance of parental engagement, future research could focus on strategies to increase parental involvement in distance learning and examine its impact on student outcomes. This type of inquiry might provide a more comprehensive perspective on the social-emotional and academic needs of students with EBDs and provide additional insight to support this population of students and teachers better.

Implications

The findings of this study can lead to positive social change by adding to the research to support changes in public school policy and instructional practices for students with EBDs. The findings can potentially influence school districts to improve how they support and educate students with EBDs and promote professional development for teachers. The findings highlight the need for specific training programs that equip teachers with the skills to engage students with EBDs in distance learning settings effectively. Knowles' theory of andragogy highlights the relevance of adult learning

principles in professional development, especially in the context of distance learning. As stated in the literature, teachers can possess effective instructional approaches in a classroom, but these skills do not always transfer to effective online teaching (Tanis, 2020). Insights from the study may lead to adapting existing intervention strategies or developing new ones specifically designed for online learning environments. Such adaptations could help educators effectively address the unique needs of students with EBDs. Finally, the study highlights the potential need for schools to enhance support services, including counseling and technical support, to assist teachers and students in navigating the challenges of distance learning.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore teachers' experiences in selecting and implementing interventions to increase academic engagement for students with EBDs in distance learning. This study was developed to fill the gap in the current literature on providing effective interventions to educate and support students with EBDs in distance learning and promote teacher professional development. The study also extended the knowledge base of providing students with EBDs explicit social, behavioral, and academic support to address their learning needs to keep them engaged in distance learning environments (Bettini et al., 2019; Cosma & Soni, 2019; Gage et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2019; Popham et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2018). Nine special education teachers at a suburban school district in Southern California were interviewed for insight into their perceptions and experiences with selecting and implementing interventions to increase academic engagement for students with EBDs in distance learning. Once the

data from the interviews were collected, the data analysis indicated the emergence of two main themes and three subthemes that answered the research question posed in this study.

The results of the study emphasized the value of personalizing the learning experience through relationship building, understanding individual students' needs, curriculum modifications, and using a variety of strategies to engage students, including technology, to enhance engagement. The study also identified that a collaborative and supportive learning environment, facilitated by parental involvement and recognizing student efforts, was crucial for increasing academic engagement. Additionally, behavioral, and emotional supportive practices were identified as essential in fostering a positive learning environment where students' social and emotional needs can be addressed. These findings have the potential to provide positive social change by adding to the research to support changes in public school policy and instructional practices for students with EBDs. Additionally, these findings have the potential to influence school districts to enhance how they support and educate students with EBDs, especially at times when teachers may need to engage in distance learning due to unforeseen circumstances or as a regular part of their professional journey.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Research Question: What are teachers' experiences in selecting and implementing interventions to increase academic engagement for students with EBDs in distance learning?

1: In your experience, what is the process of teaching EBDs students online like?

2: Would you please walk me through, step by step, the beginning, middle and end of distance class session with you teaching a reading, math, and writing lesson?

   a: What does curriculum, communication, and content look like and sound like?

3: How do students respond if they do not understand or if they need help?

   a: How do you keep EBDs students engaged in distance learning environments?

   b: In your experience, what interventions are the most effective for EBDs students?

4: What can you share about the feedback you provide for the students?

   a. How do you feel about EBDs students in a K-12 online setting?

5: What are some rewarding and challenging moments that you can recall from your experiences?

   a: Is there any particular online teaching experience that has had a major impact on your life that you would like to share?

6: Has your experiences in the online setting changed the way you teach?

   a: What teaching methods have you changed, modified, or added? Why?

   b: How has your delivery of interventions and strategies changed over time?