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# Motivation and Persistence in Long-Term Educators of Students With Emotional and Behavioral Disorders in the Specialized Program

Nancy Wesselmann  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Nancy Wesselmann

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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the review committee have been made.

Review Committee

Dr. JoAnn McAllister, Committee Chairperson, Psychology Faculty

Dr. Valerie Worthington, Committee Member, Psychology Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost

Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University

2024

Abstract

Motivation and Persistence in Long-Term Educators of Students With Emotional and

Behavioral Disorders in the Specialized Program

by

Nancy Wesselmann

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

General Psychology

Walden University

August 2024

## Abstract

Although few educators choose to work with students with behavioral difficulties, some decide to work with students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). Special education teachers who work with students with EBD have a high turnover rate because those students are one of the most challenging populations to teach. Separate day programs (SDPs) are the most restrictive settings for students with EBD but are also the most restrictive settings for educators. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the motivation of these educators and the factors that lead to their longevity in the field from the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Data collected from semistructured interviews with 10 participants were coded and analyzed for themes. Participants' reasons for staying in the SDP were the satisfaction of seeing students improve, developing personal and professional maturity, and building a family based on similar experiences and interests. Findings may help districts recruit and hire teachers who are more likely to persevere and help students reintegrate to a less restrictive setting and prepare for the challenges beyond school. Findings may also guide officials who develop teacher preparation courses to include content that better prepares new educators to address the challenging behaviors of students with EBD in the SDP. Improving therapeutic programs for students with EBD by developing more effective training and support of teachers has the potential to contribute to positive social change for students, their families, and communities.

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## Dedication

To my children, Jack and Tony. You mean the world to me and inspire me to be the best I can be at everything, not only as an example for you but to be as proud of myself as you are of me. I am grateful for you and the joy you have brought me. I have learned more from you than you learned from me.

Jack, I cherish the time we had when it was just the two of us. I am so grateful we had the time to build the relationship we needed to overcome the tough times. I am proud of the man you are becoming. I love it when you call to share your experiences. Even if it seems minor to you, I promise it is significant to me. Keep calling and keep sharing! It will never get old.

Tony, I cherish the time we have now. I am excited to watch you grow and learn and make your mark on the world. Your spirit shines everywhere you go and in everything you do. I hope your imagination continues to grow and sparkle in all the activities you undertake.

I love you both more than words could express. There is never enough time with you, and I am thankful for every second I have with you. I am blessed to be your mom.

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And for those who taught me about people and life, as unpleasant as it was, and helped me learn who I wanted to be by seeing what I did not want to become, thanks.

*“I’ve come to a frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It’s my personal approach that creates the climate. It’s my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child’s life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, and a child humanized or dehumanized.”*

Haim Ginott



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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) are the most challenging population to teach, and many teachers depart after a year or two of working with them (Taylor et al., 2024). Whether teaching a general population of students or those with special needs, teachers are expected to improve their students' academic and social performance (Sanders et al., 2024). Educators who effectively teach students with behavior challenges are in the highest demand (Taylor et al., 2024). Not every teacher is motivated to work with the students placed in their class or equipped to address the specific needs of some students.

The purpose of the current study was to explore what motivates educators to teach students with EBD in a separate day program (SDP) and what factors contribute to teachers remaining in the field longer than most teachers do. Understanding their motivation and persistence may provide insights to identify the changes that may be needed for the preparation and support of these teachers. With the appropriate changes, incoming teachers may provide students with the rigorous academic and behavioral instruction required to be successful in the less supported general education environment while maintaining teachers' well-being. This chapter describes the need for teachers of EBD, the demands of the separate day setting, and the theoretical framework (Bronfenbrenner's systems theory) that informed this study. I also include the assumptions of the qualitative study, the scope and delimitations, limitations, and the significance of the research.

## **Background**

Students in kindergarten through high school who qualify for special education services and exhibit disruptive behaviors may receive services under the eligibility category of EBD. Students with EBD present the most challenges to teachers out of all eligibility categories because of their disruptive, impulsive, and unpredictable behaviors (Lambert, Katsiyannis, et al., 2022; Masluk et al., 2022) and often their academic deficits (Sanders et al., 2024). The severe behavior exhibited by students with EBD disrupts the learning environment (Poling & Smith, 2023) and can be a danger to peers and staff (Gilmour et al., 2022). Students with EBD require a specialized social skills curriculum that teaches accountability, responsibility, and replacement behaviors suitable to most social settings (Kian et al., 2020). However, therapeutic services in the school can address only part of the problem students with EBD face outside of the school setting by teaching them socially acceptable behaviors and accountability for their actions. Teachers are helpless to address factors beyond the school setting, such as poverty, homelessness, or a generational history that prioritizes impulses and desires over delayed gratification and hard work (Lambert, Katsiyannis, et al., 2022). Some students may have trauma-induced behaviors from abuse or neglect that require additional training from teachers and support staff (Hackney et al., 2024). Many students with EBD remain in general education but may require small group instruction, especially for social and emotional content and support.

Students with EBD who engage in school-wide disruptive behaviors may require a more restrictive setting than the general education environment (Kumm et al., 2020).

Although most students with EBD receive special education services in a general setting (Individuals with Disabilities Act, 2020), approximately 1% require therapeutic support in a separate day setting (Minkos et al., 2023). Some school districts staff therapeutic day programs in a facility that accommodates students with severe behavior while providing criterion-based academic instruction. Students with EBD who require a separate day setting display behaviors such as physical, verbal, and relational aggression or elopement from the class, building, or campus that could lead to self-harm or harm to others (Individuals with Disabilities Act, 2020). The SDP's goal is to change these students' behavior, prepare them for a less supportive environment, and return them to a less restrictive setting. The most important skill in changing behavior is building positive relationships based on honesty and compassion (Kennedy et al., 2022; Masluk et al., 2022).

Teachers who work with students with EBD enter an environment aware that challenging behaviors can endanger their physical and emotional well-being (Denne et al., 2023). Even experienced teachers may feel unprepared to accommodate students with the most severe behavior (Lee et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2020) and increased demands of the SDP. Although individual factors such as resilience and self-efficacy contribute to a teacher's desire to impact students with behavior challenges positively, external factors may play a more important role in teacher motivation and persistence (Kangas-Dick & O'Shaughnessy, 2020). Bettini et al. (2022) explained that teachers can become emotionally exhausted and disenchanted without proper support from administrators, parents, and peers.



Proper parental support could mitigate emotional exhaustion due to student threats, aggression, and noncompliance (Viola et al., 2020). However, no support is better than the hindrance of parents who advocate for their children without understanding the harmful impact of their behavior on themselves and others, even when police presence is required. Parents who have experienced trauma or neglect may overdramatize the school environment's influence and understate their child's negative effect on peers and teachers (Ratkajec Gašević et al., 2023). A parent's interference in their child's behavioral and academic instruction and services burdens the teachers and adds to their anxiety and fatigue (Ratkajec Gašević et al., 2023). Teacher turnover and burnout negatively affect student success because any change to the students' consistency, predictability, and relationship building with others impedes their progress (Hunter et al., 2023).

Working with students with EBD requires patience, compassion, resiliency, and a desire to help students who may not want to improve initially (Zabel et al., 2019). These students require intensive therapeutic support and trustworthy adults who see them as people who sometimes make poor choices, not as "bad kids" (Pierce et al., 2023). EBD teachers use token economy systems for building confidence and motivation, point sheets for data collection and student accountability, and verbal de-escalation and restraint techniques for physically aggressive students.

Teachers receive yearly training in a behavior change model, such as positive behavior intervention supports (PBIS) or the student achievement model (SAM) depending on the program director's model choice (Minkos et al., 2023). Additionally, all SDPs use crisis management techniques, such as life space crisis intervention and

mindset (Dârjan & Tomiță, 2014), to address dangerous behaviors, such as physical aggression and elopement from the building or campus, safely and successfully. Proficiency in these skills can take 3 to 4 years (State et al., 2019). The extensive training (Yu & Sims, 2023), daily conflicts with students (Yassine et al., 2020), and constant awareness of potential triggers (Hackney et al., 2024) result in high teacher turnover and burnout (Taylor et al., 2024).

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers spent noncontract hours away from their families and health to manage their workloads. Special education teachers (SETs) have different responsibilities than general education teachers that can require even more noncontracted time to complete (Dill, 2022). Students with EBD require behavior support plans to address disruptive behaviors. SETs write and implement individual education plans (IEPs) for each student on their caseload, ranging from 10 to 15 students (Bettini et al., 2019). Weekly and sometimes daily data collection is required to track progress on goals and objectives.

The growing teacher shortage, the recent pandemic, and the return of students to the classroom without socialization requires the remaining teachers to take on additional duties they may not have anticipated when entering the teaching profession (Lee et al., 2023). Those who remain in the classroom encounter more demanding responsibilities, such as increased documentation and data collection, as well as students who exhibit more disruptive behaviors and significant academic deficits. According to Bettini et al. (2022), there is a widening gap between seasoned educators with years of experience who choose to remain in the field and new teachers who have no experience with behavior

change techniques. Alkahtani (2022) found that new teachers were often inadequately prepared for the students' evolving demands or for the stakeholders' political agendas (Lanterman et al., 2021). Losing long-term educators will place more responsibilities on new, underprepared teachers and negatively impact student success (Soares et al., 2022). A lack of motivation to enter or remain in the classroom has reached a critical level, and the effects include lower student success rates, dangerous environments for students and teachers, and teacher burnout (Walters, 2023).

Teachers of all fields are in high demand globally, but the greatest need is in special education (Walters, 2023). Teacher shortages have led to increased workloads and unmanageable caseloads for the remaining teachers. New teachers are overwhelmed with expectations from students, parents, and administrators. Teachers make moment-to-moment decisions that impact educators in every field and can lead to legal ramifications or policy change (Krämer & Zimmermann, 2023). Frustrations from a lack of support (Gilmour & Sandilos, 2023), aggressive outbursts (Smith et al., 2020), or burnout (Brunsting et al., 2023) may lead teachers to make decisions that have legal ramifications for themselves and others. For example, a fellow teacher may assign consequences such as writing lines or withholding recess, which may result in parental uproar and administrative intervention (Gilmour & Sandilos, 2023).

The global pandemic that shut down schools for nearly a year created a gap in students' academic, behavioral, and social education (Brunsting et al., 2023). In response, districts demanded a more rigorous curriculum to catch students up to the standards, and that teachers be more compassionate toward the students' deficits from the lack of

socializing, expectations, and restrictions (Garwood, 2023). Despite the demand to address factors beyond their control, teachers who suddenly shifted from in-person to virtual overnight perceived little compassion from administrators, parents, students, and the general public (Cordova et al., 2023).

Teachers who work in specialized schools, such as SDPs, have a higher turnover rate than any other group of teachers (Taylor et al., 2024). In addition to lesson plans, colleague collaboration, and clerical duties such as attendance, SDP teacher responsibilities include daily data collection, specializing instruction, preparing and conducting IEPs, supervising support staff, and implementing individualized behavior interventions (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020). Furthermore, SDP teachers address student behavior that can expose them to trauma-inducing aggressive episodes (Masluk et al., 2022).

Multiple researchers have studied and offered recommendations to promote teacher retention, prevent burnout, and address intent to leave the profession, yet not all teacher preparation courses have evolved to address the increasing demand of the classroom (Kozikoglu & Senemoglu, 2021). Little research has considered the motivation and characteristics of teachers who enter and remain in the therapeutic separate day setting. Exploring how teachers prepare for and persist in the SDP can help districts and administrators select and support incoming teachers for the most challenging setting in public education (Kumm et al., 2020). Long-term educators in a SDP may have insights to improve new teacher experiences, reduce burnout, and provide quality educational experiences to students with EBD.

### **Problem Statement**

Although the recent literature focused on the working conditions that contribute to teacher attrition (Alexander, 2020) or retention (Cumming et al., 2021) when working with students with EBD in inclusive or self-contained settings, little research had considered the qualities or characteristics of long-term educators in the therapeutic separate day setting. The stress of teaching under normal circumstances has led to a global teacher shortage (Balart et al., 2023; Bettini et al., 2020), and working with students with EBD is the most challenging field in education (Stark & Ragunathan, 2022). Most teachers in the SDP transfer to a different school or quit in the first 2 years, some before the end of the first year (Lee et al., 2023).

Students with EBD receiving services in the SDP have the lowest success rate of any student population (Individuals with Disabilities Act, 2020), including other special needs populations (Lambert, Katsiyannis, et al., 2022). Teacher success requires adequate training (Minkos et al., 2023) and support (Masluk et al., 2022). However, some teachers have persevered in the SDP and have continued working with students with EBD (Gersib & Mason, 2023) despite their challenging behavior and the risks to teachers' physical and mental well-being. Learning about their motivation and persistence may inform administrators and district personnel's hiring practices, teacher support, and teacher preparation course writers. Recruiting educators with motivation and persistence levels similar to long-term educators could reduce turnover rates (Garwood, 2023). Improving teacher support could increase job satisfaction and reduce staff changes that affect student

morale (Schwab, 2019). Adjusting teacher preparation courses could help teachers adequately prepare for increased student aggression (Smith et al., 2020).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore what motivates educators to teach students with EBD in a separate day setting and what factors contribute to their remaining in the field longer than most. With the decrease in long-term seasoned educators and increased classroom responsibilities, administrators and districts may need to adapt their recruiting and training practices to seek intrinsically motivated teachers, especially for students with severely disruptive behaviors. Some teachers knowingly and willingly accept the expectations of the SDP, manage their psychological well-being, and remain in the field for more than a decade. Exploring the motivation and persistence of long-term educators who provide academic and behavioral instruction to students with EBD may offer insights to identify what changes may be needed to recruit and support teachers to provide students with EBD the rigorous academic and behavioral instruction required to be successful in the less supported general education environment while maintaining teachers' well-being.

### **Research Questions**

1. What motivates educators to work in a separate day setting with students with EBD?
2. What factors contribute to educators' persistence in the SDP?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory (EST) as it relates to education was the underlying theory for my research. Bronfenbrenner explained that behaviors manifest based on a person's perception of their environment. EST can be applied to teachers by describing the systems used to explain childhood development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). EST was used in the current study to explain the level of systems that affect teachers' expectations and responsibilities, including the factors that contribute to their motivation and persistence working with students whose behavior can be exhausting. For example, internal conflicts, miscommunication, and disabilities strain the mesosystem, which consists of the relationships between teacher and student, parents, colleagues, and school leaders. Exosystemic influences include intense data collection systems, behavior change models and social skills curriculum, and crisis management techniques that require intensive training and practice.

A teacher's development requires self-efficacy, self-confidence, and self-reliance. EST predicts and explains that an educator's motivation is linked to their current pedagogy, personality traits, previous experiences in the classroom, and relationships with stakeholders (Garwood, 2023). Teacher readiness includes addressing unexpected student behaviors, supporting a student's needs, documenting, preparing for crises, and keeping themselves and students safe during crises. Long-term educators collaborate with students, peers, colleagues, administrators, and others to broaden their perspectives, expand their repertoire of effective strategies, and navigate unexpected challenges to persist in the separate day environment. EST was used in the current study to shape the

research design, including interview questions and data analysis, by focusing on teachers' motivation, experiences, and understanding of their environment. Chapter 2 provides a more detailed explanation of Bronfenbrenner's EST and how it relates to long-term educators.

### **Nature of the Study**

A qualitative approach was selected for this study to explore the abstract reasoning of long-term educators who persist in a highly specialized environment. The qualitative approach is used to inquire and interpret individuals' perceptions of their experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative data collection, such as interviews and focus groups, is used to obtain a better understanding of the participants' experiences (Kegler et al., 2019). Qualitative research expands beyond numbers and scores and explores the participants' subjective reasoning and explanations to gain insight into a topic or experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

A generic qualitative design focuses on the outward participant experiences (Percy et al., 2015). Although a typical generic qualitative design is used for mixed methods and requires a larger sample, a smaller population with relevant targeted responses is appropriate for qualitative studies (Percy et al., 2015). The current study concentrated on a single population with unique skills and experiences. Long-term educators in a specialized field provided detailed responses about their motivation to work with students with EBD in the SDP and the factors contributing to their perseverance. There are 24 SDPs in Georgia, and only 35% of the teachers who work in



those programs have remained in the program for 3 or more years (Georgia Department of Education, n.d.). That percentage translates to roughly 30–40 teachers.

Other qualitative designs, such as phenomenology, case study, and narrative, were considered for this study. A phenomenological design would have required removing biases from the experiences, investigating the preconscious reflective experiences, and allowing the teachers to share the essence of their lived experiences (Percy et al., 2015). A case study singles out one person or a small group of participants with the same experience (McLeod, 2023) and would not have been appropriate to explore the experiences of long-term educators at other programs in the state. I considered a quantitative approach to survey teachers' use and comfort level using the behavior change models and specialized lesson planning. However, the data required for statistical analysis (see Burkholder et al., 2019) is not collected at all separate day facilities.

Semistructured interviews, typical in generic qualitative studies, focused on participants' reasoning for teaching in an intense environment for longer than most. The interviews also captured the descriptions of factors that motivated participants to remain in the field. The persistence of some teachers in SDPs suggests they are not only aware of the nature of the environment they are voluntarily entering but they are also seeking the position beyond the paycheck. These teachers know the physical threat some students pose (Poling & Smith, 2023) and feel the stress to remain detached yet compassionate (Cordova et al., 2023), yet they choose to persevere in their quest to show students caring, honesty, trustworthiness, and respect. The generic qualitative design was the most

appropriate because I wanted to explore participants' opinions and subjective perspectives and I had prior knowledge of the topic (see Percy et al., 2015).

For my planned research design, I needed to recruit current educators who had worked in the SDP for 3 or more years for individual semistructured virtual interviews. Interview protocols included permission to record the interview, stating participants' right to review their responses before publication, and preconstructed open-ended questions participants could decline to answer if they became uncomfortable or upset. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour. Any follow-up meetings for response clarification or further questions lasted no more than 10–15 minutes.

I collected and analyzed participants' responses from semistructured interviews using a first-cycle coding process (see Burkholder et al., 2019). Deductive thematic analysis of participants' responses to the interview questions (see Braun & Clarke, 2006) using Bronfenbrenner's EST enabled me to identify participants' previous experiences in teaching, professional development courses, and behavior-specific training. Through thematic data analysis recorded in a code book and spreadsheet, I organized responses into themes, such as experience, support, and training, as noted in previous literature as being related to support teacher persistence (see Scott et al., 2022). Unexpected responses to the open-ended questions were coded and added to subcodes or new categories if needed. Interpretive thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2006) focused on unexpected or expanded responses from participants about any experiences that prepared them or hindered their motivation to work in the separate day program.

## Definitions

*Emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD):* A category of disability that qualifies a student for special education services characterized by difficulties forming and maintaining relationships, an unexplained inability to learn, inappropriate behavior under normal conditions, pervasive unhappiness or depression, and a tendency to develop unexplained pain or fear associated with school (Individuals with Disabilities Act, 2020)

*Long-term educator:* A teacher who has remained in the teaching field with the same population for 3 or more years (Prather-Jones, 2011).

*Teacher persistence:* A teacher's ability to reflect on their practices and continue teaching (Scott et al., 2022) while maintaining their effectiveness in the classroom by balancing their well-being and workload conditions (Bettini et al., 2020).

*Teacher self-efficacy:* A teacher's belief in their confidence about teaching a particular population or skill set to motivate students regardless of capabilities, abilities, and history (Alkahtani, 2022).

*Therapeutic separate day setting:* A facility or classroom for students who engage in frequent, intense, or long-lasting school-wide disruptions such as physical aggression or elopement from the classroom or building to receive intensive supports to replace their behaviors with socially acceptable skills (Georgia Department of Education, n.d.).

## Assumptions

Burkholder et al. (2019) described three critical attributes of an assumption: (a) the assumption must relate to a critical condition of the study, (b) there is a basis for assuming, and (c) the assumption relates to a procedure of the study that is not under the

researcher's control. Qualitative research focuses on the participants' experiences and requires the researcher to interpret subjective responses objectively (Percy et al., 2015). The assumption that the researcher will adequately interpret the language of the data can be addressed with the researcher's previous experience with the topic, which allows recognition and understanding of the respondents' language, semantics, vocabulary, and themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Awareness of the philosophical assumptions common to qualitative studies allows researchers to address the beliefs and theories that inform the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018)

All research traditions guide the researcher in choosing an appropriate design based on the four philosophical assumptions: ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological (Hathaway, 1995). The assumptions shape the paradigms used to determine the design. The quantitative paradigm is typically associated with positivism and is empirical or analytical, beginning with a cause-and-effect hypothesis that relies on objective, factual data (Hathaway, 1995). The interpretive qualitative paradigm (Hathaway, 1995) comprises exploratory and perceptual data from interviews and focus groups.

Ontology relates to people's view of reality and how and why people make specific choices (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Working with the most challenging population in schools requires the agency to develop the courage, motivation, and grit to find what works for each student and continue to apply those strategies despite student opposition. An ontological assumption in the current study was that long-term educators choose to stay rather than request a transfer or leave the profession. Teachers choose to remain in

the SDP and renew their contract because they want to be there or because it is the best option at the time; either way, I assumed that they are aware of the dangers and stress of the program and continue to persist.

Epistemology refers to a person's subjective experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An epistemological assumption in the current study was that I knew what other long-term educators in the separate day program knew, and I participated in the state-required training in behavior change models and de-escalation and restraint techniques that I provided to new teachers. By responding to open-ended questions, long-term educators of students with EBD shared their experiences of learning to address behavior, previous knowledge of EBD, and the level of support provided by administrators and colleagues. I maintained a self-aware, nonbiased perspective when collecting and analyzing their responses and kept their identities confidential (see Burkholder et al., 2019) to reduce the fear that their responses might affect their employment or evaluation.

Axiological assumptions are related to values and ethics based on perspective (Danaher, 2021). The axiological assumption in my research was that long-term educators of students with EBD believed in the SDP and the opportunity it offered to help students become independent citizens who positively contribute to society, although in my experience and those of my previous colleagues, the SDP is as stressful as it is fulfilling. Many long-term educators recognize the students' struggles before the changes by the state demanded the program incorporate outside services to support students and their families beyond school hours. Some long-term educators may not have started with the same values they developed after working with the EBD population; they addressed

students' challenging behavior to improve their lives rather than just managing them day after day. With the teacher shortage and how good many teachers are at addressing students with behavior challenges, these teachers could have gotten a job anywhere, but they chose to stay.

Choosing the methodology for a study is affected by the researcher's perspective and life experiences. The assumptions accompanying the selected methodology are also affected by the researcher's values, pedagogical beliefs, and level of self-awareness (Clark, 2022). Their process for choosing a methodology is based on researcher's understanding of knowledge and social reality. My assumption related to studies regarding EBD teachers was expressed by Zabel et al. (2019), who shared that Dr. Sharon Mahoney, an expert in EBD, believes that teachers who want to work with students with EBD in a separate day setting know what they are getting into and do so willingly to fulfill a need within themselves. Although I had never heard the term EBD before I began working in an SDP, I agree with her because I found fulfillment within the first year of working with the students. Some teachers may view students with EBD as they perceive others to view them: without guidance and structure. Teaching them may provide teachers an opportunity to be the support to the students in the program that they need when they are in school. Some teachers stay because they find fellowship with other teachers that they did not find in different environments. Working with other educators in a volatile climate can give rise to bonding and trust teachers may not have had in any other setting. I found self-worth and value in my position working with teachers and students in the SDP. Using interview questions and reporting the results using qualitative

methodology allowed me to share the motivation and persistence of long-term educators who shared my preference to work with a challenging population.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The delimitations of a study refer to its scope through specific criteria (Burkholder et al., 2019). The criteria that delimited the current study were intrinsically motivated educators who had remained in the SDP for 3 or more years and displayed persistence to continue working with students who displayed aggressive behaviors with high frequency, intensity, or duration (see Gersib & Mason, 2023) that require therapeutic support beyond what school counselors, behavior contracts, and suspension can provide. The goal of my study was to explore what motivates long-term educators to work with students with EBD in the most restrictive setting and what factors contribute to teachers' persistence for over 3 years.

Students with EBD require specific behavioral interventions (Minkos et al., 2023) including relationship building (Yassine et al., 2020), social skills curriculum (Kian et al., 2020), a token economy (Ackerman et al., 2020), and a behavior change model (Chitiyo et al., 2019; Frye et al., 1999) chosen by the program director based on the population of the SDP and the school district's mission and vision. The complexity of a behavioral change model means mastering it requires patience, practice, and consistency (Frye et al., 1999) and can take up to 3 years. The current study did not include teachers who worked in the SDP for fewer than 3 years because they would not have had adequate time to learn the behavior change model, develop an understanding of the nature of students with EBD, or develop effective strategies for coping with the level of stress that accompanies

working with students in the SDP. Teachers outside of the SDP were not included because they are not required to implement specific behavioral interventions or they do not have the support of other staff to handle the level of behavior found in the SDP. Although some students with EBD require more intense placement in a residential setting, those facilities use medical interventions, mandatory family counseling, and support outside of the academic environment to manage behaviors. Eligibilities found in an SDP may include autism, intellectual disabilities, brain injuries, medically diagnosed health impairments, speech and language impairments, and EBD. I focused on teachers who support students who receive services under the category of EBD.

### **Limitations**

Every researcher must overcome design weaknesses to ensure the integrity of the research (Burkholder et al., 2019). Qualitative research relies on the researcher's interpretation of the participants' personal experiences. Sample sizes are generally small and may limit the scope of the experience to a region, facility, or community. The current study focused on SDPs in one state in the South, some of which may not have been funded and operated in the same way as when the study began. The information shared by the teachers may be relevant to any environment where there are students with EBD because even though their placement may differ, the students with EBD will continue to exhibit the same challenging behavior, and administrators and teachers in those environments may find the conclusions helpful. Although staff are trained in a behavioral change model, data collection system, and de-escalation procedures, determining the internal efficacious use of procedures and strategies is impossible (Pierce et al., 2023).



Another limitation was the relatively small number of potential participants who met the inclusion criteria because of the high turnover associated with SDPs (see Taylor et al., 2024). Although facilities are spread across the state to serve every district, students' behavior challenges cause teacher burnout yearly. This limitation may have made it difficult to find an adequate number of participants who met the criteria and may have required expanding the criteria (see Creswell & Poth, 2018) to social workers and counselors or educators who had been teaching in SDPs for 1 or 2 years.

### **Significance**

This study explored teacher motivation and persistence in the therapeutic separate day setting. Teacher shortage and attrition result in poor student performance in and out of school. Changes in teacher preparation programs would result in selective recruitment of efficacious teachers with identifiable qualities and characteristics for positively affecting student success in the separate day setting. Surveys and personality assessments could be added to teacher candidate programs to determine the likelihood of a teacher's success with a specific population (Chow, 2020). Preteaching courses could expose potential teachers to the realities they will face in the separate day setting (Stipp, 2019) to prepare them for challenges and enable them to work through first-year challenges that most teachers face without proper preparation. Students with EBD are 13 times more likely to be arrested for behavioral offenses (Milner et al., 2022). Preparing teachers with tools to address the extreme behaviors could reduce the school-to-prison pipeline by increasing positive student experience and postschool preparation, significantly

impacting society. Better prepared teachers may be empowered to address behavior confidently and competently regardless of the school environment.

### **Summary**

Teacher shortages have schools scrambling for staff, especially special education departments. Educators who teach students with EBD in a SDP are in the highest demand because students' severe behavioral challenges can lead to emotional exhaustion and physical injuries among teachers. Despite the intense workload and staff turnover, however, some educators' motivation contributes to their longevity and persistence in the field. Previous studies explored teachers' experiences with students with EBD, workload conditions, school culture, and self-efficacy. Although previous studies described the separate day setting, students, and teachers, none addressed why teachers choose to work there and the factors that contribute to their persistence beyond the first 3 years. Chapter 2 provides a literature review of previous studies related to the stressors of teachers in special education, students with EBD, and the separate day environment. Additionally, Chapter 2 provides a more detailed description of the theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner's EST that I used to explore a teacher's motivation to become a long-term educator in the separate day setting.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Students with EBD who require therapeutic services frequently fail to reintegrate to a less restrictive environment because of the lack of consistent, trained teachers who are familiar with the specialized supports needed to change socially unacceptable student behavior with appropriate social skills. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore what motivates long-term educators to teach students with EBD in a separate day setting and what factors contribute to teachers' persistence in the field. This chapter describes the methods used to identify relevant studies, the theoretical framework that guided the study, and the literature related to teacher preparation, support, and experiences with students with EBD.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The resources for this study were found in the following databases: ERIC, Academic Search Complete, Directory of Open Access Journals, APA PsycInfo, Education Source, Teacher Reference Center, and CINAHL Plus with full text. The journals referenced in the sources included *Teaching Exceptional Children*, *International Education Studies*, *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, *Exceptional Children*, *Remedial and Special Education*, *Behavioral Disorders*, *Journal of Educational Supervision*, *Journal of Research in Special Education Needs*, *Preventing School Failure*, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *Multicultural Learning and Teaching*, *Educational Assessment Evaluation and Accountability*, *International Journal of School & Educational Psychology*, *European Journal of Educational Management*, *Social*

*Behavior Research & Health, Teacher Education and Special Education, Research in Pedagogy, The Journal of Experimental Education, Intervention in School and Clinic, Beyond Behavior, Journal of Special Education Apprenticeship, Sustainability, Frontiers in Psychology, Education and Treatment of Children, Exceptional Children, Emotional & Behavioral Difficulties, Support for Learning, and Teachers College Record.*

To locate peer-reviewed articles, papers, and literature reviews, I searched databases using the following terms individually or in combination: *teacher motivation, special schools, teachers' perceptions or attitudes or opinions or experiences or perspectives or views, students with emotional disturbance or emotional behavioral disorder or emotional behavioral disorders, special education teachers, consultation, behavior change, student-teacher relationships, teacher characteristics or qualities or attributes, restrictive settings, education or school or learning or teaching or classroom or education system, teachers or educators, therapeutic or separate day or alternative setting or special school, teaching as a second career, teacher training or teacher education or professional development or in-service training or coaching, teacher support, bioecological model, self-contained setting, teacher persistence, teacher recruitment and retention, teacher self-efficacy, separate day setting or therapeutic setting, and teacher effectiveness or efficacy or effective.*

Initially, I searched Walden's library for literature on therapeutic or separate day settings and students with EBD, but the literature was more than 5 years old. I broadened my search to *special schools* and *students with EBD*, but the literature was too extensive, so I narrowed it to the last 5 years and included *teachers* and *teachers' experiences*. After

I limited my topic to teacher experiences and included terms such as *attitudes*, *perceptions*, *characteristics*, and *qualities*, the searches resulted in articles similar to my focus but revealed the gap. Few articles approached the topic using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory; only one article discussed why the teachers chose to work with students who required a SDP (Kennedy et al., 2022), and only one article mentioned motivation for remaining in the self-contained setting (Stark et al., 2023). Scott et al. (2022) focused their research on educator persistence in the special education environment. Dill (2022) addressed EBD teachers in the self-contained setting but focused on attrition prevention and balancing demands with resources. I found no articles when I searched for type of setting, students, teacher qualities, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. This literature review includes empirical data from as early as 1999, but most articles were published from 2019 to 2023 to explore teacher motivation and persistence in a separate day setting.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Bronfenbrenner's (1979, as cited in Buchanan, 2020) ecological systems theory is one of the most accepted explanations regarding the influence of social environments on human development. This theory describes how a person's environment affects other facets of life, especially those most impactful and meaningful. Educators' development and well-being may be affected by their peers, colleagues, supervisors, students, parents, and other stakeholders (Hirsch et al., 2023). Educators in the SDP rely on multiple support staff to provide a safe, supportive environment for students with EBD. For example, at least three staff are required to assist students who become aggressive or

elope from the building. Classrooms require a minimum of two staff to provide academic and behavioral instruction while implementing individualized behavior supports and behavior change model reinforcements to replace unacceptable social interactions.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) used EST to describe human development in stages or systems regarding their impact, including the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Bronfenbrenner illustrated the systems using increasing concentric circles emanating from an individual. Bronfenbrenner argued that an individual is born with characteristics that determine physical, emotional, and mental qualities such as height, eye color, and personality traits. As individuals mature, some characteristics are permanent regardless of outside influence. However, as a person interacts with other people and obstacles, their personality and perception are influenced. Although Bronfenbrenner intended the theory to explain an individual's development from birth to adulthood, EST can describe a teacher's evolution from their introduction to teaching to their success as an education professional. Liu (2018) applied Bronfenbrenner's EST to teacher well-being and described the teacher as the individual who enters the profession with their perspective of how to educate and interact with young people, their pedagogy that has been influenced by their experiences as a student, and their learning style. The closer the circle, the more impactful the effect.

Liu (2018) described the microsystems and mesosystems as teachers' interactions with peers, colleagues, students, and parents. Kangas-Dick and O'Shaughnessy (2020) provided a more detailed application of EST to teacher resilience and self-efficacy. The microsystem circle consists of the students, parents, peers, colleagues, and administrators

who set the expectations of who, how, and what to teach. The mesosystem includes school and district policies, school climate and culture, the interactions between students, student and parent interactions, student and other teacher interactions, colleague interactions, and the academic and behavioral models used to address student deficits. Parents of friends, coworkers, peers, colleagues, local government, and social media are the groups of the exosystem. The macrosystem extends beyond stakeholders and could include the federal government, international policies, economic policies, and social norms depending on the individual's interaction with the world. The chronosystem encompasses how time affects a person's development (McLeod, 2023). For educators, the chronosystem refers to years of experience with the student population, curriculum changes, and policies (Buchanan, 2020). The current study focused on the microsystem, which included a teacher's reasons for entering the field, readiness for the challenges of the most severe student behavior, and the development of practices that lead to persistence in the separate day setting.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Concepts**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the motivations of long-term educators who provide academic and behavioral instruction to students with EBD in a therapeutic SDP and the factors that lead to teachers' retention. The literature review addresses research on students with EBD, students in the SDP, and teacher preparation, motivation, and persistence in a SDP. The chapter concludes with a synthesis of the research findings and the literature on the methodology.

## **Students With Emotional Behavior Disorders**

Students served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act made up 13% of the students in public school systems in 2023 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Students with EBD made up 5.13% of students served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). EBD is characterized by unexplained, socially unacceptable (Mitchell et al., 2019), externalized, disruptive behavior (Poling & Smith, 2023) not associated with mental illness, cognitive disabilities, or any other diagnosable disabilities or disorders (Riden et al., 2022). The Georgia Department of Education (n.d.) defined emotional disturbance eligibility, referred to as EBD in some school districts, using the following criteria:

- relationship problems: an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers or teachers
- inability to learn: a failure to learn that cannot be adequately explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors
- inappropriate behavior: consistent or chronic inappropriate behavior or feelings under normal conditions
- unhappiness or depression: displayed pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression
- physical symptoms or fears: displayed tendency to develop physical symptoms, pains, or unreasonable fears associated with personal or school problems



Students with EBD often exhibit disruptive behaviors that negatively impact their academic performance and learning environment. They may display externalizing or internalizing behaviors that interrupt their learning and the learning of their peers. Externalizers engage in eloping within the class or from the classroom; physical aggression (Masluk et al., 2022) such as hitting, kicking, or throwing objects; or verbal aggression (Poling & Smith, 2023) such as name-calling, profanity, and hurtful remarks toward peers and teachers. Internalizers exhibit noncompliance such as refusal to respond, crying, or emotionally shutting down (Rubow et al., 2019).

The severity of either behavior requires a specialized intervention based on the function of the behavior. School staff, usually a board certified behavior analyst, conducts a functional behavior assessment to determine the nature of the behavior (Riden et al., 2022). The functional behavior assessment data determine whether the behavior meets the needs for attention, escape, access to items, or sensory input. Data are collected on the behavior's frequency, duration, or intensity and the antecedent that elicits the behavioral response. The data inform a behavior intervention plan (BIP) that addresses the target behavior's function and provides a replacement behavior, meeting the same need appropriately. Teachers implement function-based BIP strategies with academic instruction.

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, an IEP team comprising parents, educators, and specialists develops personalized education plans for students requiring special education services, detailing goals, accommodations, and placement. Students with schoolwide behavioral issues may be placed temporarily in therapeutic

SDPs focused on building appropriate skills and eliminating destructive habits (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). The objective is to reintegrate students into their regular schools after disruptive behaviors have been addressed through frequent, high-intensity interventions.

### **Students in a SDP**

According to the continuum of special education services, a separate day class or program is the most restrictive setting in a public school that allows students to attend in person (Individuals with Disabilities Act, 2020). In Georgia, SDPs may be a dedicated class or hallway within a general education school or a stand-alone facility that supports students with severe behaviors from one or more school districts. The SDP provides services to students ages 6–21, separated into elementary, middle, and high school classes (Georgia Department of Education, n.d.).

Students who receive services in the SDP present with a range of levels and abilities that require teachers to prepare academic and behavioral instruction for a multigrade classroom with up to eight students with similar exceptionalities (Riden et al., 2022). Placement in an SDP requires specific behavior criteria based on the behavior's frequency, intensity, and duration, as well as data describing the support provided in a less restrictive environment (Individuals with Disabilities Act, 2020). Students placed in a separate day setting exhibited physical aggression or elopement that created a school-wide disruption (Kumm et al., 2020). The behaviors can harm students, teachers, or peers and require multiple staff member support. In many cases, emergency services have aided the students in their crisis, or police needed to intervene when students eloped from

campus or escalated to extreme violence. Some students need the therapeutic help found only in an SDP (Yu & Sims, 2023), such as group and individual sessions with social workers, instruction in socially acceptable replacement skills (Minkos et al., 2023), and token economy (Ackerman et al., 2020) to promote intrinsic motivation from extrinsic rewards.

However, these programs often lack adequate resources, including instructional materials, parental involvement, and enough trained staff to keep themselves and other students safe, ensure the students receive the necessary support to change their behavior, and provide opportunities to succeed after graduation (Hirsch et al., 2023). Behavioral change depends on various factors including personality (McGuire & Meadan, 2023), cognitive characteristics (Stremel et al., 2022), and external influence (Viola et al., 2020), and parental involvement is the main predictor of change (Ratkajec Gašević et al., 2023). Some parents refuse to intervene on their child's behalf and help them practice social skills, study, or complete their homework. Other parents advocate for their child without understanding the full extent of their child's aggression, disability, or effect on others. The more serious the behavior, the more crucial parental support is in behavioral modification (Ratkajec Gašević et al., 2023). Lack of parental support results in a lack of student motivation and progress (Ansley et al., 2019), increased acting out to gain their parents' attention (Ratkajec Gašević et al., 2023), and teacher burnout (Granger et al., 2023).

Parental interactions can be among the most impactful influences on a teacher's mesosystem (Viola et al., 2020). When parents accept the need for behavioral

modification and necessary support, their children are more receptive to the therapeutic support and exhibit the replacement skills quicker (Ratkajec Gašević et al., 2023).

However, in some cases of an IEP team determining a student needs to be placed in a separate day setting, the parents are uncooperative, unsupportive, and, volatile (Lambert, Duppong Hurley, et al., 2022). The parents blame the teachers or administrators for failing to provide their child with adequate support or leniency. These parental interactions negatively affect the teachers' intrinsic competence (Gilmour et al., 2022), faith that the student will benefit from their efforts (Hirsch et al., 2023), and confidence in parental support (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020).

Students in the SDP are disadvantaged by not having non-disabled peers with whom to practice social interactions as they master new skills to help prepare them for a less supported environment. However, some local schools allow partial access to the home school for students to practice interactions while still receiving therapeutic support from the SDP to develop strategies as new situations arise. Partial access, or "half days" allows the student attends some classes at the local school without the support of the SDP teacher for part of the day, and then returned to the SDP to reflect on their experience and continue practice using self-control and other coping strategies. Some SDPs use practices beyond the token economy (Ackerman et al., 2020) and crisis management (Karasavidou & Alexopoulos, 2019), such as an integrated behavior change model with token economy and cost response (Frye et al., 1999), social skills curriculum (Kian et al., 2020), and intensive crisis intervention tools (Milner et al., 2022).

SDPs are state funded and work with local schools to support students returning to a less restrictive setting. EBD classes are staffed with a certified teacher and at least one paraprofessional trained in the token economy system and de-escalation and restraint techniques. The SDP teachers are hired by the county in which the program is located. Applicants follow a procedure like that of other educators: applying, interviewing with an administrator, and receiving notification from Human Resources (HR) regarding an offer of employment.

Responsibilities of the SDP educator include planning lessons for students in multiple grades on multiple levels, familiarizing themselves and support staff with the IEPs, BIPs, and psychological evaluations of each of the students, implementing IEPs and BIPs, collecting data daily, addressing every behavior infraction, and supervising classroom paraprofessionals (Czyszczonek, 2022). SDP teachers must collaborate with general education teachers, speech language pathologists, occupational therapists, nurses, social workers, and others to ensure students receive necessary services. Students with EBD improve most when they have strong, trusting relationships with teachers and support staff who work closely with them (Riden et al., 2022). Staff in SDPs are most effective when they stay curious about the function of a student's behavior (Eaton, 2020), build rapport to gain trust (Yassine et al., 2020), and provide structure and consistency to encourage student growth (Pierce et al., 2023). Educators who work in the SDP are made aware of the nature of the program before meeting the students. They learn the students' needs, receive training in specific protocols, and acknowledge expectations before they meet their students.

## **Ecological Systems Theory**

Educators who teach students with EBD require a supportive community (Hirsch et al., 2023) to address behaviors and provide adequate social skill instruction to prepare them for the social expectations of life after school. Garwood (2023) initiated a call to action in response to teacher burnout, especially of special education teachers. Lee et al. (2023) answered and further strengthened the call for special educator support from parents, colleagues, administrators, and the community. Teachers do not work in isolation, especially since the pandemic, and now, more than ever, need reliance and support from as many sources as possible (Lee et al., 2023). The EST outlines the type of support teachers have access to, from their instincts and self-efficacy to the global community reliant on them to raise future leaders.

Teachers in the SDP have multiple resources to rely on for supporting behavior, but they must be willing to accept the help, know how to work with others, and know when to ask for help. Long-term educators rely on instincts developed from experience with aggressive or harmful behavior to know when the situation requires assistance and who can best provide the necessary support. Additionally, SDP educators operate according to the program's policies and procedures. Multiple demands and expectations could benefit or hinder a teacher's ability to address behavior while providing academic rigor comparable to students' abilities. For example, collaboration committees help teachers use time tested lessons and strategies to present new information or reiterate skills, but time constraints for meetings stress teachers' mental capacity.

Bronfenbrenner's EST can be used to explain the tiered systems that affect a teacher's efficacy (Hirsch et al., 2023).

### ***Exosystem***

Public policy and societal demands exist in a teacher's exosystem (Kangas-Dick & O'Shaughnessy, 2020). A public school district's responsibility to the community and government requires proof that the children they serve receive an appropriate education based on their needs (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Therefore, exosystemic influences such as intense data collection systems, behavior change models, social skills curricula, and crisis management techniques require intensive training and practice. Professional development sessions allow training and practice of techniques (Chow, 2020) but may detract from lesson planning and peer collaboration. District and state stakeholders significantly affect a teacher's motivation and persistence in the therapeutic setting by placing demands without understanding how they affect daily responsibilities and workload capacity or offering solutions to time management and burnout issues.

### ***Mesosystem***

The mesosystem consists of the community's cultural and societal supports and expectations. Cultural, spiritual, or religious leanings shape resiliency and a strong sense of self (Kangas-Dick & O'Shaughnessy, 2020). Self-efficacy and confidence allow teachers to face classroom pressures and achieve district expectations without as much emotional strain. The mesosystem includes teacher preparation programs (Buchanan, 2020), which facilitate teacher readiness but do not dictate how a teacher perceives their role or expectations (Liu, 2018). Administrators rely on teachers to enter the profession

with intrinsic motivation and personal goals. However, school culture significantly influences how confident and comfortable an educator feels interacting with students, parents, and colleagues (Kangas-Dick & O'Shaughnessy, 2020). The mesosystem is also a combination of multiple microsystems and can provide a more positive or negative level of support from peers and stakeholders.

### ***Microsystem***

Microsystems include friends, peers, mentors, and school leadership. Social support and interpersonal skills are factors on the microsystem level (Kangas-Dick & O'Shaughnessy, 2020). The microsystem includes co-teachers, collaborative cohorts, paraprofessionals, conceptual thinking about students with EBD, counselors, board certified behavior analysts, social workers, and administrators (Bettini et al., 2022). Teachers need to know they have a support system at home and school. Personal and professional networks allow teachers to vent their concerns and frustrations, seek feedback for guidance, and procure suggestions for improvement or validation. Working conditions, administration, colleague support, and collaboration exist in the microsystem. Working conditions include the demands placed upon them, the social support system, paperwork, available resources, and behavioral and academic instructional responsibilities (Cumming et al., 2021; Gilmour & Sandilos, 2023; Hirsch et al., 2023). Behavior specialists or board certified behavior analysts can provide another level of support by training teachers in the proper strategies for students with EBD (Garwood, 2023). Teachers' microsystems have a crucial impact on the stability, motivation, and desire to remain in education, especially when working with the EBD population.



### ***Individual***

Individual factors influence teacher motivation and persistence, including their personality, previous experiences, and self-awareness. Extraverted teachers who are conscientious, agreeable, and adaptable educators with experience are the most resilient, especially in challenging environments (Kangas-Dick & O'Shaughnessy, 2020). Barriers or benefits can influence a teacher's self-efficacy (Amundsen et al., 2021). For example, resources such as pedagogy (Taylor et al., 2024), organizational skills, content knowledge (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020), previous experiences (Goodwin et al., 2019), and self-awareness (Kangas-Dick & O'Shaughnessy, 2020) affect efficacy and motivation. While some aspects of teaching are influenced by external factors such as peers, students, and curriculum, resiliency and motivation may require more internal qualities in long-term educators.

### **Teacher Preparation**

A review of the literature identifies a lack of teacher retention in the separate day environment to an inadequate selection of (Kennedy et al., 2022) and support for teachers (Bettini et al., 2022) to address student behaviors as a factor in low student success transitioning from a highly restrictive setting to their local school (Hirsch et al., 2023). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, colleges and universities have had fewer students registering for education-based careers (Amundsen et al., 2021). Fewer teacher candidates mean fewer qualified recruits for districts to hire, especially for intense environments like separate day programs (Chow, 2020). In addition to decrease in teacher recruitment, more students are presenting with mental health and behavioral challenges

that teachers were not trained to address (Gottfried & Ansari, 2019). Fewer qualified teachers result in a decrease in proper supports for students with special needs, including behavioral challenges.

Current literature focuses on teacher attrition (Bettini et al., 2019; Koenen et al., 2019), burnout (Brunsting et al., 2023; Garwood, 2023), and retention (Bettini et al., 2020). Some studies have explored qualities and characteristics (Bettini et al., 2022; Leggio & Terras, 2019), including self-efficacy (Cumming et al., 2021; Van Mieghem et al., 2022), supportive administration (Gilmour & Sandilos, 2023), and relationship building (Hunter et al., 2023; Valenti et al., 2019). Some articles focused on special education teachers' experiences in self contained or alternative settings (Hirsch et al., 2022; Stark et al., 2023; Stark & Ragnathan, 2022). Scott et al. (2022) discussed special educators' persistence, but I could not find any articles that explored the motivation of long-term educators who find fulfillment and satisfaction in a separate day setting.

### ***Traditional Preparation Versus Alternative Certification***

In general, teacher readiness occurs through teacher preparation courses (Manasia et al., 2020), procedural training (Stipp, 2019), and facility orientation for teachers who are new to teaching or new to a specific building. Traditional post-secondary courses dedicated to teacher education guide candidates (Soares et al., 2022) from the first day of pre-planning to managing students with behavior issues and students who struggle academically, as well as the clerical responsibilities of taking attendance and sending home progress reports (Rivera et al., 2020). The literature related to this research suggests that traditional teacher education courses better prepare teachers to work with students

with challenges than alternative certification courses (Manasia et al., 2020). However, even traditional teacher education courses fail to prepare teachers for the demands of students with EBD who require therapeutic support in a specialized setting (Kennedy et al., 2022).

### ***Teacher Workload***

When teachers' workload is manageable and the administration is supportive, the emotional toll of working with students with EBD is less stressful, and teachers are more inclined to stay (Bettini et al., 2020). Workload manageability includes para supervision, caseload, school culture, support from administrators and peers, and training to address severe student behavior. Teachers with too many paraprofessionals to supervise and an unmanageable workload are statistically likely to leave the profession within the first three years (Barnes et al., 2021). Teachers with self-awareness, previous knowledge of behavioral challenges, and intrinsic motivation to work with students with EBD have a higher retention probability (Goodwin et al., 2019). The characteristics most relevant to teacher readiness involve the school climate created by leadership and interactions with peers and colleagues (Ansley et al., 2019). Unfortunately, I have witnessed educators who have attempted to control the students through punishment—teachers and paraprofessionals with an authoritarian attitude rarely last more than a year. However, teachers who have guidance in building relationships with students with EBD (Yassine et al., 2020), receive support from (Hirsch et al., 2023), and engage in positive interactions with peers, colleagues, and administrators (Snook et al., 2021) are more likely to remain in the profession.

### ***Teaching as a Second Career***

Whether teaching is their first career or fifth, those who become teachers are motivated to help students learn about the world (Bettini et al., 2019). The students in the SDP benefit most from teachers who take the time to develop a trustworthy, predictable relationship with them (Masluk et al., 2022). Although educators transitioning from a non-teaching career are not as prepared for the classroom as teachers from a traditional preparation program (Bar-Tal et al., 2020), second-career teachers bring maturity, self-awareness, and problem-solving skills (Alharbi, 2020). Those with worldly knowledge and experience may bring more patience, compassion, and relationship-building skills to the classroom.

### ***Teaching in the SDP***

Long-term special education teachers are becoming increasingly more challenging to find (Garwood, 2023). Teachers of EBD are even more uncommon (Lanterman et al., 2021), and educators who choose to work in an SDP are an exceptional population (Kennedy et al., 2022). Students with EBD in a self-contained setting are the most challenging population to teach (Taylor et al., 2024). Their severe behavior disrupts the learning of all the students in their class (Poling & Smith, 2023), making it difficult to follow the rigorous curriculum in a general education or inclusive setting (Manasia et al., 2020). Some students with EBD require a more restrictive environment to address their aggression or elopement (Gersib & Mason, 2023; Kumm et al., 2020).

The teachers in these programs receive specific training to address behaviors (Minkos et al., 2023) and crises unique to these populations (Riden et al., 2022). In

addition to helping students meet grade-level standards, they are expected to address disruptive behavior using a social skills curriculum (Kian et al., 2020), a token economy (Ackerman et al., 2020), and de-escalation and restraint techniques (Bettini et al., 2020). Teachers in the SDP collect daily progress monitoring data of IEP goals (Van Loan & Garwood, 2020) and work with support staff to ensure the safety of all students and staff (Karasavidou & Alexopoulos, 2019).

Teachers are attracted to positions where they feel they can impact the students, have positive interpersonal interactions, experience low occupational stress, and operate effectively and efficiently (Ansley et al., 2019). Because of the shortage, most teachers can have their pick of positions, and few teachers want to work with students who present challenges to their pedagogy, especially students with behavioral obstacles (Zabel et al., 2019). Long-term educators in the SDP may have found satisfaction providing meaningful academic and behavioral instructions to students who would not receive it in a larger, generalized setting.

### **Teacher Motivation**

Most teachers enter their profession because of their love of education and a desire to help others learn (Alharbi, 2020). They find fulfillment in sharing their knowledge and witnessing the “lightbulb” moment when students connect to a new concept. Every teacher brings a unique style to the classroom, regardless of grade level, content, and demographics. An individual’s teaching style predicts how they will provide instruction and address behavior (Taylor et al., 2024). In the SDP, teachers must incorporate evidence-based practices that address severe behavior with their style.

Although not every style fits every student, most teachers can adjust their style to fit a specific student if they can build a rapport with the student.

A teacher's previous experiences before transitioning to an SDP could help or hinder their ability to help students succeed. Dr. Sharon Maroney, an expert in the field of EBD, explained that the most successful teachers find solace in a community willing to support them amidst the clerical, academic, administrative, and legal demands on special education teachers (Zabel et al., 2019). The most crucial challenge new teachers face in determining their retention potential is classroom management, amplified in the SDP because of the severity of the behaviors exhibited (Denne et al., 2023). Teacher self-efficacy and attitude are essential qualities of effective teachers of students with emotional and behavioral disorders (Scott et al., 2022).

Teachers who transferred to the separate day facility from another teaching position reported higher self-efficacy than those who transitioned from another field (Brunsting et al., 2023). The SDP can be volatile and stressful for teachers and students. The constant anticipation of crises can put psychological, emotional, and physical strain on teachers and students (Sharifian et al., 2023). The daily intensity of the school environment due to the instability of students' emotional well-being negatively impacts teachers, affecting their health and wellness.

Students with EBD may have experienced trauma early in their lives, such as abandonment, abuse, neglect, medical issues, or divorce, to name a few examples. Teachers who work with students who have experienced trauma may struggle to continue teaching in that environment because they tend to experience secondary trauma and

compassion fatigue (Sharifian et al., 2023). A teacher's emotional resilience is vital to protect against psychological warfare within the microsystem to prevent burnout (Cordova et al., 2023). Preparing for and combating secondary trauma and compassion fatigue can help educators maintain their motivation and persistence.

Students with EBD make the most gains academically and behaviorally when they have a teacher who believes in their own ability to help students succeed and has a positive attitude toward them (Leggio & Terras, 2019). Most EBD teachers in an SDP reported high job satisfaction and retention intention when they had positive relationships with and felt supported by administrators and other school personnel (Gilmour & Sandilos, 2023). A significant trend in teacher motivation relates to communication efficacy with parents and students (Granger et al., 2023). SETs in the SDP may need more development in their communication with parents because they may not understand why their child struggles in school and why therapeutic supports are crucial for their child's progress. A SET's workload may entail learning and implementing multiple IEPs and BIPs, teaching academic content and social skills, managing the classroom, supervising paraprofessionals, collecting data, collaboration meetings, lesson planning, and exploring resources pertinent to the multiple levels of the students in their classroom (Sanders et al., 2024). Despite the numerous responsibilities, teachers will meet the expectations if the work is relevant and purposeful (Lee et al., 2023).

Burnout sets in for teachers when the purpose of their tasks is irrelevant to their focus on improving students' potential future. Teachers with a special education certification entering the SDP are more ready for students with EBD than teachers

without special education training (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020). With fewer than 1% of students served under EBD and 1% of that served in an SDP (State et al., 2019), teachers familiar with the needs of students with EBD are essential for those students to succeed. However, few teachers receive adequate preparation to provide academic and behavioral instruction specific to the learning challenges of students with EBD (Alkahtani, 2022). SETs who work with students with EBD must regulate their emotions before offering support for students and set examples for problem-solving, conflict resolution, and expressing feelings in a socially acceptable manner (Stark & Rangunathan, 2022). Those SETs are motivated to provide their students with a positive example of socially acceptable behavior and attempt to replace the disruptive behaviors the students displayed that led to their restrictive placement.

### **Teacher Persistence**

Teacher persistence begins with early career decisions and preparation (Scott et al., 2022). In their first year, long-term educators in the SDP learned behavior change models, de-escalation, and restraint techniques. If they persist beyond the first year, they develop weekly and daily data collection forms, recyclable differentiated lesson plans, and reward menus specific to their classroom. Through experiences with students, parents, administrators, and colleagues, long-term educators develop strategies to reduce burnout. Most teachers contributed feelings of personal fulfillment as a reason they persevere in their field (Scott et al., 2022). Teachers strive to provide students with quality academic and behavioral skills due to extensive training and multiple required supports.



Years of working with aggressive students inevitably result in injuries, threats, and emotional exhaustion (Poling & Smith, 2023). Nevertheless, despite the potential for physical and emotional trauma, teachers who teach students with EBD continue to work with the students who endanger their well-being daily. Veteran teachers identified several factors that positively impacted their decision to persist in teaching this intense population, including a creative and collaborative culture, leadership support, and making meaningful contributions to education (Mullen et al., 2021).

Training teachers may be secondary to recruiting teachers with the mindset and attitude needed to work with students who require a specialized placement. A unique set of skills is needed to guide students with EBD to get out of their own way and find success (Van Loan & Garwood, 2020). Several studies recommend that teacher preparation programs provide specific training for teachers who work with students with severe behavior issues (Rivera et al., 2020). However, not all the recommendations identify tools and strategies that illuminate how behavior modification will prepare teachers to work with challenging students. Most research regarding supporting students with EBD recognizes building relationships with students as the most successful strategy (Kennedy et al., 2022). Establishing rapport with children treated poorly in their homes, in their local schools, and around their community is no easy task (Milner et al., 2022). Training and professional development can help prepare teachers for some aspects of the classroom, but students may challenge even the most seasoned teacher.

The human element of teaching is unpredictable and unstable. Many teachers I worked with who were calm in almost every situation were brought to tears by an

emotionally dysregulated student with whom they spent months building a relationship. Awareness of emotional triggers and vulnerabilities can help teachers prepare for the trauma and deficits students with EBD face in their homes and communities (Granger et al., 2023). Teacher preparation courses do not encourage teacher candidates to address their own psychological and emotional hang-ups, so many are not prepared to become the target of a student who may view them as trying to agitate their wholly unstable yet carefully crafted reality. In defense of their perceived safety, students will reject even the best intentions from teachers who have not taken the time and deployed the empathy to understand their ordered chaos (Pierce et al., 2023). In short, teachers need to deal with their own demons before interacting with students who need guidance to deal with theirs.

Knowing that EBD students perform academically below-average (Krämer & Zimmermann, 2023) means teachers must prepare lesson plans to engage them (Sanders et al., 2024) appropriately for their ability to comprehend while challenging them to rise to the curriculum's expectations. These students may never catch up, but they can progress with specific skills that can help them improve their lives. Some SDPs use social skills curriculums that can incorporate social skills, such as following directions, accepting feedback, and disagreeing appropriately, into any academic lesson (Kian et al., 2020). Additionally, teachers must address the academic deficits typical of students with EBD (Stark et al., 2023) because of the disruptive nature of their behavior (Stark & Ragnathan, 2022), which results in an interruption of instruction (Sanders et al., 2024).

Whether the behavior causes them to fall behind their peers or an undiagnosed learning disability creates embarrassment and leads to the behavior, most students with

EBD are two to three grade levels behind (Eaton, 2020). The cycle of shame and frustration at how far behind fuels the downward spiral of shutting down or acting out. Long-term educators have witnessed the spiral and adjust their lessons to slow down or approach the content differently. When teachers are free to create lessons they know are attractive to that group of students, they feel empowered and energized to continue seeking supportive strategies.

Teachers in the SDP discover that they are up against many forces outside of their control, and either they are resilient and persevering through collaborative support from their peers, colleagues, and supervisors (Mullen et al., 2021), or they leave the program. Some working conditions are out of their control, such as state testing, staff shortages, restrictive policies, lack of parental involvement, and salary. However, through support groups, empowerment, intrinsic motivation, and self-efficacy (Mullen et al., 2021), many teachers overcome the stress of the working conditions and persist for the sake of the students. Long-term educators who have found their “why” are committed to searching for each student’s motivation to overcome obstacles in school and out in the community.

### **Synthesis of Research Findings**

Students with EBD in a self-contained setting are the most challenging population to teach (Zabel et al., 2019) because their severe behavior disrupts the learning of all the students in their class (Poling & Smith, 2023). Classrooms in the SDP consist of students with EBD and a range of academic levels and abilities that require teachers to prepare academic and behavioral instruction for a multi-grade classroom (Riden et al., 2022). Students with severe behaviors, such as physical aggression and elopement from the

building, require the therapeutic help found only in an SDP (Yu & Sims, 2023). The severity of their behavior requires that teachers and staff receive specialized training in de-escalation, restraint, and behavior change models (Cumming et al., 2021). The amount and intensity of training and preparation required of teachers in the SDP can lead to burnout (Bettini et al., 2020). However, some teachers have found outlets to counterbalance the emotional exhaustion and maintain their motivation and persistence to provide these students with consistency and structure.

Research shows that teachers with self-awareness (Lee et al., 2023), self-efficacy (Schwab, 2019), previous knowledge of behavioral challenges (Leggio & Terras, 2019), and sound pedagogy (Stipp, 2019) have a higher retention probability. Additionally, teachers of students with EBD are more likely to remain in the profession with support from and positive interactions with peers, colleagues, and administrators (Hirsch et al., 2023). Bronfenbrenner's EST is the tiered system that explains a teacher's efficacy (Hirsch et al., 2023), the farther the circle from the individual in the center, the lower the impact the system has on the individual (Cornell & Sayman, 2020). The teachers who have thrived rely on a positive workplace climate (exosystem; Buchanan, 2020), peer support (mesosystem; Liu, 2018)), and practical strategies to counter stress and burnout (microsystem; Sharifian et al., 2023).

Educators who choose the SDP know what they are getting into: behavior challenges, extensive data collection, compliance responsibilities, detailed documentation, and communication with multiple stakeholders over and above that required for teachers of mainstreamed children (Zabel et al., 2019). Despite the

insurmountable responsibilities, they choose to stay and continue working with students who can be violent, disrespectful, and noncompliant. Long-term educators in the SDP know that building relationships is essential for students with EBD to succeed (Van Loan & Garwood, 2020). Preparing for the trauma (Granger et al., 2023) and understanding students' shortfalls in their homes and communities can help teachers maintain their mental and emotional well-being.

### **Literature of Methodology**

This basic qualitative study's research questions focus on identifying the motivation and persistence of educators who teach students with EBD in a separate day setting. The qualitative nature of the study allows interviewed participants to share their personal feelings and perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018) about why they chose to work in such a challenging environment. Similar studies value the qualitative methodology to capture the insight and social constructs of the participants' histories and experiences (Clark, 2022). Semistructured interviews can be used to collect responses to prepared questions while facilitating additional contributions that the participant may find relevant to the inquiry. Qualitative research encourages the theoretical interpretation of real-life experiences that may impact larger populations or decision-making authorities (Burkholder et al., 2019). A report of long-term educators' first-hand accounts may provide administrators insight into the type of recruits to hire to teach students with EBD. Additionally, findings can guide officials who develop teacher preparation courses to include content that better prepares new educators to address the challenging behaviors of students with EBD in the SDP.

## Summary and Conclusions

As supported by research findings, special education teachers often experience higher stress levels than general education teachers (Czyszczon, 2022). This heightened stress can be attributed to several factors inherent in their profession, including more intense workloads with additional responsibilities such as managing antagonistic interactions with students, parents, and administrators (Cordova et al., 2023). They are often expected to perform miracles, such as maintaining control over challenging behavior while ensuring that students who are two or more grade levels behind academically catch up to their same-aged peers (Balart et al., 2023). Furthermore, SETs, typically a minority within the teaching population, often feel isolated from their colleagues due to their unique demands (Dill, 2022). These demands include extensive data collection, providing individualized accommodations, and consistently monitoring student progress. In the SDP, teachers face even more responsibilities and work under the constant threat of emotional, psychological, and physical harm, which can be akin to the experiences of front-line soldiers (Fabelico & Afalla, 2020).

Despite the primary and secondary trauma, SDP teachers choose to work in and remain committed to the therapeutic setting. Their perseverance raises an important question: What motivates these educators to dedicate themselves to a student population with exceptional needs, and what drives their tenacity in the face of physical and emotional stress, increased workloads, and challenging interactions with students and parents? My research will shed light on this topic by delving into the motivations of long-term educators within the SDP. By exploring the factors that contribute to their desire to

work with a unique student population and their resilience in the face of stress, additional workload demands, and aggressive interactions, we can gain valuable insights into the experiences of SDP teachers.

Selecting and training staff to work with students with EBD must include consideration of their self-efficacy (Brunsting et al., 2023), pedagogy (Hirsch et al., 2022), motivation (Fabelico & Afalla, 2020), and self-awareness (Taylor et al., 2024). Educators who teach in a separate day program (SDP) have unique characteristics that make them suited for the environment (Stark et al., 2023) and the type of support that students with EBD need (Minkos et al., 2023). The current literature focuses on teachers who work with students with EBD in inclusive (Czyszczonek, 2022) or self-contained settings (Gersib & Mason, 2023). However, no studies include teachers in a therapeutic separate day setting. Learning what motivates teachers of students with EBD to enter and remain in the most restrictive environment may help programs dedicated to helping students with EBD better prepare their teachers to persevere. Preparing teachers to address the behavior more effectively can help students reintegrate to a less restrictive setting and prepare for the challenges they will face after school.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

A decrease in the number of seasoned educators and an increase in the number and type of classroom responsibilities have pressured administrators and districts to adjust their preparation and support of teachers in a separate day setting. Teachers in this environment struggle to successfully reintegrate students from a highly intensive setting to a less restrictive environment (Yu & Sims, 2023). However, some long-term educators remain in the field and successfully transition students to a local setting and prepare them for the responsibilities beyond school. Exploring the characteristics and qualities of long-term educators who provide academic and behavioral instruction to students with EBD may offer insights into necessary changes to teacher preparation courses and professional development training for teachers working with students with EBD. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore what motivates educators to teach students with EBD and what factors contribute to teachers' perseverance in the SDP. This chapter presents the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, the methodology used in the study, issues of trustworthiness, and ethical procedures.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

The research questions guiding this study were the following: What motivates educators to work in a separate day setting with students with EBD? What factors contribute to educators' persistence in the SDP? Using a qualitative design allowed me to inquire, interpret, and present the participants' experiences (see Creswell & Poth, 2018) in an organized manner. I chose a generic qualitative design to explore long-term educators' motivations for working with students with EBD and the factors contributing



to teachers' persistence in this role. Findings may be shared with administrators, potential teacher candidates, and teacher preparation course developers.

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the qualitative study requires a researcher to report participants' experiences with an adequate description. Surveys and interviews allow participants to respond to the same questions, provide their answers in their own voice, and expand on the topic to clarify their perspectives (Burkholder et al., 2019). In the current study, respondents participated in in-depth interviews to share their reasons for working with students with EBD and for remaining in the SDP despite the physical and emotional stress to their well-being.

Percy et al. (2015) claimed that basic or generic qualitative research is usually reserved for mixed-methods studies because the data can easily be supplemented with quantitative research. However, generic qualitative data can also be used to report the subjective perspective of participants' experience. Although a mixed-methods approach would have provided more data for the current study, such as student point sheets, students' mastery of replacement behavior skills, and class dynamics, the program directors were reluctant to share the data for fear of judgment regarding the effectiveness of the program. Other qualitative approaches, such as phenomenology, case study, or ethnography, did not align with the research questions. Although similar to the basic qualitative design, phenomenology focuses on participants expressing their internal struggles or feelings (Percy et al., 2015). A phenomenological approach could have been used to explore how long-term educators experienced emotional evolution working with students with EBD. That investigation would not have contributed to better preparation or

recruitment of educators to work with students with EBD in the SDP. A case study would have focused on a single incident or educator and would not have accounted for multiple experiences in other districts, grades, and curricular content. The ethnographic design requires long-term immersion in a cultural group. Although some educators in the SDP may consider themselves a unique culture, they do not qualify as cultures with anthropological roots (see Burkholder et al., 2019). Given the various qualitative designs, the generic design was the most appropriate for collecting data and reporting results for my research questions.

Understanding what motivates long-term educators to work with students with EBD in the most restrictive setting in public schools may inform principals and directors about support to provide their teachers and characteristics to look for when hiring. Additionally, colleges and universities that offer teacher preparation courses may adjust their classes to offer concentrations in working with students with EBD and develop the skills necessary for teachers to address behavior and be successful in the classroom. The most appropriate design was the generic qualitative design that explored long-term educators' motivations for working with students with EBD in a specialized setting.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The first phase in any study involves a personal history or connection to the subject (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The topic of long-term educators' motivations for working with students with EBD had significant meaning in my growth as a teacher, leader, mother, and woman. Although I could personally address the students, setting, models, and brave staff who manage intense situations daily, a generic qualitative design

was needed to seek broad reflection of opinions and experiences (see Percy et al., 2015). Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that the role of qualitative research is to apply philosophical and theoretical frameworks to ethical or political issues and collect, analyze, and assimilate data to present subjective experiences for scientific consideration. In the current study, I recruited participants, scheduled interviews, gathered data, and verified findings before presenting the research.

My interest in the motivations of other long-term educators of students with EBD in the SDP arose after someone asked me why and how I had worked with students with behavior challenges for several years. I had worked with and knew other teachers who chose to remain in the stressful yet fulfilling environment of extreme behaviors, and I wanted to know their why and how. I taught students for 4 years before advancing to a leadership position that allowed me to support the teachers who found satisfaction working with the students but struggled with the documentation aspect of teaching. My experience as a lead teacher was more fulfilling as I watched teachers improve their behavioral and academic approaches, increase their proficiency with the behavior model, and develop a better understanding of compliance expectations under my guidance and tutelage. Stepping away from the students and focusing on the teachers allowed me to appreciate the program's purpose more every year, and my motivation to remain and grow in my knowledge expanded.

During my tenure, I trained staff in de-escalation and restraint techniques required of all teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators. I trained staff in the evidence-based behavior change model with an integrated token economy; became the coach for the

PBIS team, a nationally used multitiered preventive system to address and manage behavior in schools ((Minkos et al., 2023); and led staff in adapting multiple classroom-specific reward systems. Serving in numerous roles in the program allowed me to have a wide range of experiences including teaching students of various grade levels and abilities, training staff, providing support, and addressing ethical and political issues typical of any educational environment.

Throughout my years in the SDP, the factor most disruptive to student success in gaining skills and independence was high teacher turnover. Students with EBD thrive best in environments with consistency and positive relationships (Gersib & Mason, 2023). Routines and predictability take time to establish, and relationships with students with EBD can take years to build. When teachers leave, students have to start over and may feel abandoned or rejected (Pierce et al., 2023), leading to social regression or increased aggression (Poling & Smith, 2023). Although the SDP aims to reintegrate students to a less restrictive setting, the students still require therapeutic support from trusted adults to help them learn, implement, and practice replacement social skills safely before they can transition to their local school with different staff, peers, and expectations. My hope for the current study was to contribute to a reduction in the turnover rate of teachers of students with EBD, thereby improving the reintegration success rates of students with EBD from restrictive settings.

By the time I left the program to achieve a more global perspective on education, I had evolved as a leader, teacher, and learner. Just as I had learned to detach from the students' emotions while maintaining compassion and empathy, I approached interviews

using the same parameters of emotional distance (see Collins & Stockton, 2022). Each participant's responses were meaningful and personal to them, and I intended to represent their perspectives with respectful evaluation and interpretation (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). Most participants were from facilities I did not work in or supervise. Although I may have been familiar with their program and daily responsibilities, I did not know or had never met most participants. I offered a \$10 Amazon gift card as compensation for participation reciprocity. I treated those I knew with the same respect, dignity, and tact as any other participant.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection Logic**

The population for this qualitative study was specific to the research on teachers of students with EBD in the separate day setting. Percy et al. (2015) noted that a qualitative sample should provide information-rich responses representing the target population. However, Burkholder et al. (2019) stated that qualitative studies should focus less on representing the population and more on answering the research question. There are 24 SDP in the state of my focus, and the turnover rate for teachers and classroom staff is high. An inquiry to program directors for potential candidates who met the selection criteria resulted in 35 educators. Once approved, I invited all 35 teachers to participate in the study to recruit as many qualified candidates as possible.

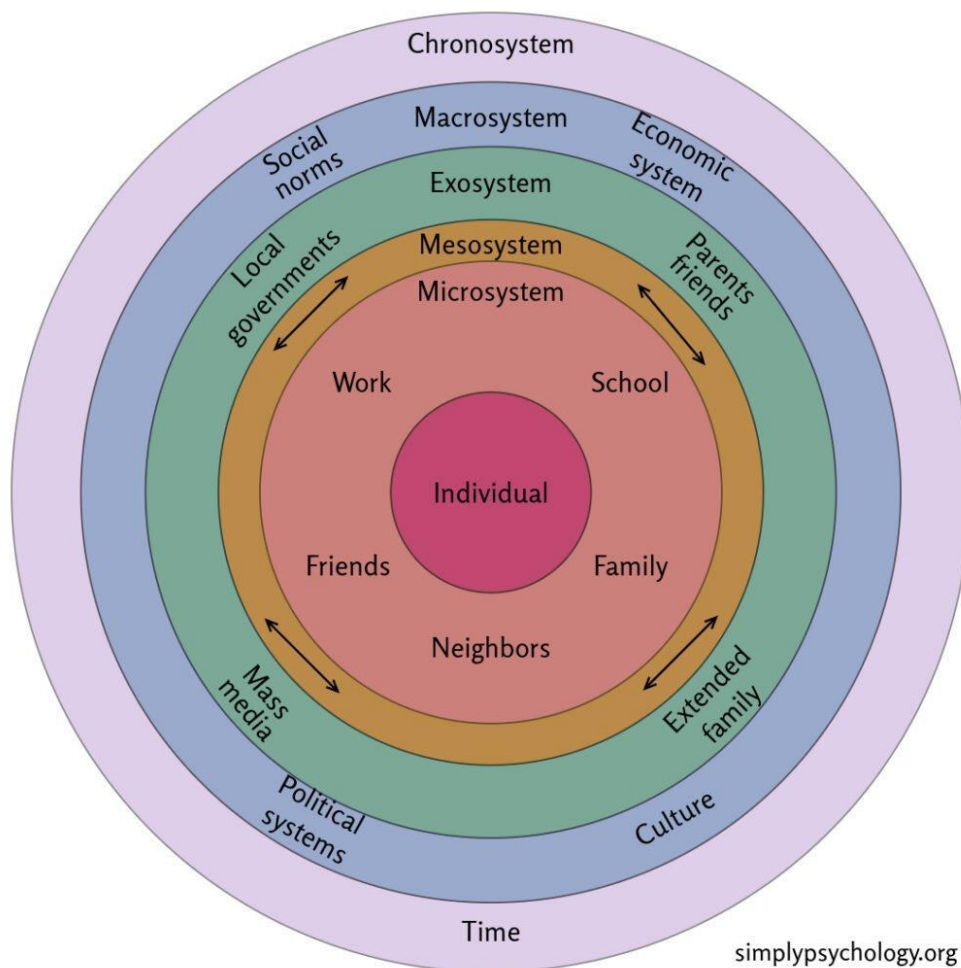
### **Instrumentation**

As the sole researcher, I served as the instrument for data collection. I asked open-ended questions in a semistructured interview format to maintain structure while

encouraging participants to share their experiences (see Burkholder et al., 2019). The questions were developed from previous studies on teachers' motivation to work with a challenging population (Walters, 2023) and their perseverance despite the emotional and physical challenges associated with burnout (Scott et al., 2022). Additionally, the questions focused on the individual, microsystem, and mesosystem (Kangas-Dick & O'Shaughnessy, 2020) that contribute to teachers' persistence and self-efficacy (see Figure 1). After analyzing the transcripts, I followed up with the participants for clarification of their responses.

**Figure 1**

*Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory*



*Note.* Adapted from Guy-Evans, O. (2024, January 17). *Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory*.

<https://www.simplypsychology.org/bronfenbrenner.html>

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

Participants were recruited by emailing the directors of SDPs. The directors guided the next steps and informed me of other persons or agencies for requesting permission to contact county employees. Potential participants were those who knew the most about the field or situation to provide the most accurate information or experience about the topic (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). To meet the criteria for this basic qualitative study, teachers must have worked in the program for at least 3 years and had training in a behavior support system such as PBIS or SAM.

Upon obtaining Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB number 05-14-24-1107210) and specific district approval, I sent email invitations to candidates seeking their participation. Once they accepted, I provided consent forms via email and a brief demographic survey to collect data on their age, number of years they had been teaching, number of years they had been teaching in the SDP, and whether teaching in the SDP was their first job.

The SDPs are located throughout the state. The interview location facilitated accessibility, time, and privacy (see Burkholder et al., 2019). Because of the distance between facilities, I conducted the interviews virtually through Teams, which allowed for recording and provided a convenient time for the participants, such as before or after school, on the weekend, or during planning periods. Removing the presence of students, family, colleagues, or peers reduced participants' anxiety and distractions and encouraged honest and open responses. Additionally, my unmitigated attention ensured the participants that their responses would be worthwhile, and recording the interview



allowed for a neo-positivist philosophical orientation evaluation (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). After participants accepted, I sent a follow-up email informing them that interviews would be recorded for transcription purposes only, provided dates and times for interviews that they could choose from, and included the link to the demographic survey.

Kallio et al. (2016) developed a five phase interview guide, including (a) identifying the appropriateness of qualitative design, (b) assimilating previous knowledge, (c) compiling relevant semi-structured questions, (d) conducting a mock interview demonstration, and (e) presenting findings for analysis. As the sole researcher, I developed the appropriate questions, conducted the interviews, transcribed the interaction, and coded the responses. I concluded each interview by providing participants with coded responses to ensure interpretation fidelity. Interviews took between 15 and 45 minutes to build rapport; ask follow-up questions based on responses; and allow time for participants to relay thoughtful, genuine responses. Before exiting the interview, I debriefed with participants (Kegler et al., 2019) and offered time for them to consider their responses (see Burkholder et al., 2019) and ask questions or comment on their emotions during the interview (see Percy et al., 2015). If they needed to leave during the interview, especially if they were overwhelmed with emotion (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), I was prepared to offer the number for a mental health support hotline and provide options for additional times to meet to complete the interview. If further clarification was needed from the participants, the follow-up meeting would last no longer than 10-15 minutes.

If the initial invitation emails had resulted in few responses, I would have resent the emails to the other directors requesting the appropriate steps to ask permission to contact qualified teachers. Tanasiuk and Islam (2012) suggested that incentives have not been as commonly offered to participants in the last decade because people's altruistic behavior has taken precedence over materialism. However, because of the confidentiality needed when working with such a vulnerable population and the surge of teacher-targeted social media attacks (Hickey, 2024), I offered Amazon gift cards to encourage participation while ensuring potential participants that their identities will remain confidential. Most of the participants were not as interested in the monetary incentive as they were in contributing to change for their students and peers. I also requested that participants who responded encourage their colleagues to participate, which resulted in an adequate number of participants.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

A data analysis plan provides a detailed outline of the intended data collection based on the research question. Piñeiro and Rosenblatt (2016) described a pre-analysis plan as a connection among the findings, evidence, and interpretation of participant responses. Creating a plan commits the researcher to their preplanned intentions for data analysis and not to become distracted by perceived relationships between the data and interpretation (Piñeiro & Rosenblatt, 2016). Thematic analysis is standard to basic qualitative interpretation, especially semistructured interviews, to allow the researcher to investigate the respondents' subjective experiences (see Percy et al., 2015).

Percy et al. (2015) introduce three types of thematic analysis, and for my purposes I will utilize the 13-step theoretical analysis to explore long-term educators of students with EBD motivation and persistence in the SDP. Theoretical analysis is a tool a researcher can use to examine responses according to predetermined categories while allowing emerging themes based on responses. With my previous knowledge of the nature of the program, teacher support systems, and training, I anticipated some of the themes that will arise from participant responses. Theoretical analysis permitted the emergence of themes I unanticipated. I implemented theoretical analysis as follows:

1. First, I immersed myself in the data by reading, reviewing, and familiarizing myself with each participant's responses. After re-reading the interview transcripts, I highlighted meaningful keywords or phrases under the predetermined categories related to Bronfenbrenner's EST and the research questions while remaining open to new patterns or themes related to the research questions.
2. I compared the highlighted data to ensure the participant's responses were related to the research questions and Bronfenbrenner's theory.
3. I stored interesting but unrelated responses in a separate file for potential future research.
4. I assigned an easily identifiable characteristic descriptor or code to each related data item.
5. I clustered connected items that indicate patterns or relations.

6. I placed patterned or related data into the corresponding preexisting themes and direct quotes from the transcription to clarify the patterns.
7. For patterns unrelated to the preexisting themes, I stored them in a separate file for further evaluation to determine if they relate to the questions or theory.
8. After reviewing all individual responses, I scanned patterns for overall emerging themes by combining and clustering the related patterns into preexisting categories.
9. I arranged the themes into corresponding patterns.
10. I revisited the data patterns that did not fit into preexisting categories and considered new patterns or themes related to the research questions and theory.
11. I wrote a detailed analysis describing the scope and substance of each theme.
12. I included a detailed description and supporting quotes for each theme.
13. Finally, I synthesized all themes to form a composite of the research questions.

Thematic analysis requires the researcher to analyze data after every interview rather than collect all the data before evaluating the responses (see Percy et al., 2015). The most crucial aspect of analyzing data as it is collected is allowing the researcher to edit or remove questions before the next participant (see Oplatka, 2021). Reflecting on the outcome of each interview optimizes the experience and responses of the following participants. The interpretive nature of qualitative research lends to possible

discrepancies (Oplatka, 2021). If any discrepancies had arisen, the data would have been revisited and reviewed.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Quality research expands science's understanding of our world and its people. Qualitative research relies on trustworthiness to enhance the credibility of a study (see Kakar et al., 2023). Low standards or poor data collection can lead to misleading or inaccurate data, confusing and confounding researchers (see Burkholder et al., 2019). Conducting trustworthy research requires valid, consistent instrumentation and reliable data interpretation (see Oplatka, 2021). In this basic qualitative investigation of long-term educators and their motivation and persistence, use of self (Shufutinsky, 2020), thematic analysis (Percy et al., 2015), criterion-sampling (Oplatka, 2021), audit trails, and saturation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) was used to increase the trustworthiness of the study.

### **Credibility**

Merriam and Tisdale (2015) defined credibility as the validity of research findings to reality but claim that both validity and credibility are subjective concepts. Because qualitative research relies on the researcher's reflexivity and multiple realities of data, credibility can be determined via the *use-of-self* (see Shufutinsky, 2020). According to Shufutinsky (2020), the use-of-self relies on the researcher's mental, emotional, and psychological factors to employ self-awareness, mindfulness, and self-monitoring when analyzing qualitative data. By maintaining my self-awareness and rational thought, I

analyzed and assimilated the validity of the participant's responses regarding their motivation and persistence in the SDP.

### **Transferability**

Burkholder et al. (2019) explain transferability as how well the findings of one study can be applied to another. Transferability is generally achieved by the original researcher providing a sufficiently detailed description of the study for future researchers to replicate (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), which could include detailed descriptions of the methods and an audit trail of the techniques and procedures. The data analysis plan thoroughly described the steps taken to analyze the results so others can replicate the process (Percy et al., 2015).

### **Dependability**

Similar to transferability, the dependability of a study indicates the ability to replicate the study's findings if repeated (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). Selecting the most appropriate participants was integral to replicating the findings of a qualitative study (Oplatka, 2021). Criterion sampling defines the specific participants targeted to provide accurate, dependable descriptions of the environment and experiences that lead to their motivation to work in the specified setting and their persistence to remain longer than average.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability relates to the neutrality of a researcher's interpretation of participants' responses (see Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Although it is impossible to remove bias entirely from qualitative research, following the data analysis plan, auditing

the codes and themes for neutrality, and ensuring an appropriate saturation population (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) can assist a researcher in maintaining the confirmability of a study. An interpretation based on the research questions and theory provides more accurate data than those based on the researcher's personal bias.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Protecting the participants, researcher, and study requires ethical procedures. From the development of a research question to the delivery of the results, ethical practices must prevail. The study's ethics depends on researcher's training, experience, and intellectual maturity (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The researcher is the constant throughout the design, data collection, analysis, and presentation of the results. However, professors, mentors, peers, and colleagues can help guide a researcher to learn and conduct ethical practices to safeguard them or their participants from mental, emotional, or physical harm. Awareness of triggers and risks, gaining approval from the IRB, and conforming to a code of ethics assures minimal risk to all stakeholders (see Burkholder et al., 2019). Researchers can maintain ethical practices by following IRB guidelines, disclosing expectations, obtaining consent from their participants, and ensuring data remains confidential and secure.

In preparation for the interviews, I contacted the directors of the area's separate day programs to secure their permission to talk to their staff or discover what other steps were needed to secure permission. Obtaining consent from the IRB and local professional agencies responsible for protecting employees ensured ethical treatment of persons by respecting their autonomy and privacy (Burkholder et al., 2019). With approval from IRB

and local institutions, I sent an email invitation to teachers to participate in the study. The email included an introduction of who I am, the purpose of the study, the participation criteria, and an incentive (Tanasiuk & Islam, 2012) to encourage participation. After securing participation, I sent an email including a consent form (Burkholder et al., 2019), interview process details, the voluntary nature of the study, risks and benefits, and the incentive payment method. The consent email also included other ethical concerns, such as recording and transcribing, data storage and security, and participant confidentiality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Before the interview, I sent a demographics survey to collect their age, number of years teaching, and any previous careers before becoming a teacher using Microsoft Forms or Google Forms.

Recordings and transcriptions are stored in a secure file labeled without names or identities that could easily be deciphered. Maintaining confidential records and securing data is a top priority to assure participants their responses cannot be identified by anyone reading the study. Ethical practices determined by the IRB, local institutions, and the Code of Ethics (American Psychological Association, 2020) will be maintained throughout the recruitment, data collection, and data analysis process.

### **Summary**

This chapter addressed the research method, design, role of the researcher, data collection and analysis, and issues of trustworthiness related to exploring long-term educators' motivation and persistence with students with EBD in the separate day program. Semistructured interviews conducted by the researcher collected responses from participants to answer the research questions related to motivation and persistence in the



SDP. Thematic analysis coded and organized responses based on the research questions and address reliability. Issues of trustworthiness were addressed using use-of-self, audit trails, criterion sampling, and appropriate saturation. Chapter 4 will include the setting of the interviews, the demographics of the participants, data collection procedures, and prevalent themes from responses.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore what motivates educators to teach in a SDP and what factors they contribute to remaining in the field. The two research questions in this study were the following: What motivates educators to work in a separate day setting with students with EBD? What factors contribute to educators' persistence in the SDP? These questions addressed the characteristics and qualities of teachers who provide academic and behavioral instruction to students with EBD in the SDP. Participants' responses may offer insights to inform changes that may be needed for hiring and supporting teachers while maintaining their well-being. Additionally, the findings may provide higher education curriculum development staff with suggestions to better prepare teacher candidates to address disruptive behavior. This chapter provides a description of the setting of the study, the demographics of the participants, the data collection method, the process of data analysis, and the results. Furthermore, this chapter addresses the trustworthiness of the study and provides a summary of the findings.

### **Setting**

After obtaining approval from Walden University's IRB, I contacted SDP directors inquiring about teachers who may meet the criteria and what procedures were needed to recruit participants in each district. Some directors provided me with names and email addresses, and others directed me to a contact for requesting permission to interview district personnel. Of the 10 participants, I personally knew three of them through the SDP where I had provided guidance for compliance, training in behavior models, and assistance with crises. I had no supervisory role with any of these

participants. During the interviews, I maintained a professional demeanor and showed respect for each participant.

I sent emails to the addresses provided and responded to replies with an invitation and the IRB-approved consent form. Interviews occurred between May 16, 2024, and May 29, 2024. Those dates corresponded to the end of the school year and the beginning of the summer break when most teachers had a fresh perspective of the challenges of students in the SDP and were ready for a break. The timing provided an accurate accounting of participants' feelings about the students because the participants could have transferred, retired, or changed careers, yet all of the participants were preparing for the next year in the same SDP.

Interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed via the Teams platform. Most of the teachers scheduled interviews at the end of their workday and sat at their desks without any students or colleagues present. Others scheduled interviews at the beginning of the summer break and sat in the comfort of their home without anyone else present. One teacher scheduled his interview in the evening while he was at home, and another scheduled in the morning before her summer school duties began. I conducted the interviews from my home office, a private space.

### **Demographics**

Of the 24 programs in the state, directors from only six locations responded with permission to interview and provided names of potential participants who met the selection criteria. All participants were current educators with 5 or more years of experience in the SDP in Georgia. Demographic information included their age range,

number of years teaching, number of years teaching in a SDP, and whether teaching was their first career (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Teacher Demographics*

Participant ID	Age	Number of years in the SDP	Number of years teaching	Teaching first career?
Teacher 1	40–49	16	16	No
Teacher 2	40–49	9	10	No
Teacher 3	40–49	5	5	No
Teacher 4	50–59	8	9	Yes
Teacher 5	60–69	6	16	No
Teacher 6	40–49	10	16	Yes
Teacher 7	50–59	7	7	No
Teacher 8	60–69	14	14	No
Teacher 9	40–49	12	12	No
Teacher 10	50–59	6	17	No

The participants were between 40 and 69 years old and had between 5 and 17 years of teaching experience. There were only two participants whose first career was in education. The other eight had previous careers in the military, coaching, corporate work, or clerical duties. The participants came from various centers around the state; about half came from in-center settings, and the other half came from school-based settings.

**Data Collection**

Recruitment of participants occurred in May 2024. Of the 35 educators who were emailed, 11 responded and 10 participated in interviews. The 11th teacher rescheduled multiple times and could not commit to a specific date and time. There were no significant changes in the data collection process outlined in Chapter 3. The SDP

directors and school principals assisted me by identifying teachers who met the criteria of teaching in the SDP for 3 or more years and having had training in the locally used behavior-change model. Only one program required district approval before participants were contacted, and the director responded and approved my petition to interview teachers. The other teachers' names were provided by the program directors without additional procedures. With approval from the school district research committee and Walden IRB, I emailed an invitation to candidates who met the selection criteria. After receiving the initial responses to the invitations, I sent an email with the consent form attached and the link to the demographics survey to the interested participants. I also texted three of the teachers I knew personally from the SDP location where I had previously worked. All 10 participants were interviewed via the Microsoft Teams platform and were provided the informed consent agreement to review and confirm prior to the interviews. I obtained demographic information via a Microsoft Forms survey, Google Forms survey, or by incorporating the survey questions in the interview for those who could not access the survey link.

The interviews ranged between 12 and 46 minutes in length, not including rapport building and debriefing, and were completed over a period of 3 weeks. I created margin notes during the interview process and debriefed with each participant immediately after each interview. Member checking allowed participants to ensure that their ideas and descriptions during the interview were represented accurately (Motulsky, 2021). Each participant received the transcript and a summary of the interview. None of the participants contacted me with further questions or concerns.

### **Data Analysis**

The objective of analyzing the interviews was to identify and catalogue patterns in the participants' responses regarding the motivation and persistence working with students with EBD in the SDP. A top-down, deductive theoretical analysis approach was used to examine data using predetermined codes driven by the theoretical framework (see Percy et al., 2015). I read and reread the transcripts and highlighted the keywords relevant to the research questions. I used Microsoft Excel to organize the responses, categorize the keywords, and label quotes associated with each participant. The process of coding all 10 interviews yielded 42 keywords and phrases that overlapped among most of the participants' responses. Using the theoretical codes of individual, microsystem, and mesosystems, I identified three categories. I then compared and consolidated these categories in a few different ways, finally arriving at three major themes based on the research questions: (a) intrinsic motivation, (b) support, and (c) perseverance.

Only one of the 10 interviews were less than 15 minutes long. The participant answered each question and provided detailed responses to the questions but did not elaborate beyond the posed question like the other participants. Despite the brevity, the responses contributed to the research by supporting other responses about the environment being unified as a team and personally rewarding. All 10 interviews yielded responses that explained the motivation and persistence of long-term educators in a specialized setting.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

In this basic qualitative investigation of long-term educators and their motivation and persistence, I employed use of self (Shufutinsky, 2020), thematic analysis (Percy et al., 2015), criterion sampling (Oplatka, 2021), audit trails, and saturation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) to increase the trustworthiness of the study. Revisiting guidelines from Percy et al. (2015) ensured trustworthiness of the data analysis. The four areas of trustworthiness relevant to qualitative research are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

#### **Credibility**

Addressing credibility requires demonstrating that the findings accurately reflect reality as seen by the participants. Qualitative research reflects the perception of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and findings are the interpretation of the researcher based on their analysis of the data (Percy et al., 2015). The methods I used for certifying credibility included prolonged engagement, use of self, and referential adequacy. I worked in the separate day setting for 13 years and was immersed in the culture as a teacher and leader. I understood the scope of the setting and teachers' experiences. Prior to recording each interview, I spent a few minutes establishing rapport with the teachers I was unfamiliar with to build their trust to encourage genuine interactions and responses.

Employing use-of-self fortified self-reflection, mindfulness, and detachment from the phenomenon (see Shufutinsky, 2020), which maintained the integrity of the participants' responses as theirs and not a projection of mine. In addition to prolonged engagement and use of self, I bolstered credibility through referential adequacy by

archiving the raw data for subsequent analysis (see Walden University, n.d.) to verify initial findings and conclusions. The recorded interviews and transcripts were saved in secure, coded file.

### **Transferability, Dependability, Confirmability**

Transferability ensures the conditions of the study are replicable. Assimilating the descriptions of the conditions and procedures in sufficient detail via an audit trail (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) permits other researchers to confirm the findings of the study. Participants in the current study were recruited via email by contacting the SDP directors for appropriate procedures for requesting permission to interview the educators who fit the study criteria. Invitations were emailed to SDP educators who met the criteria, and response emails included the Walden University approved consent form and availability for those who replied to the invitation. I recorded and transcribed interviews using Microsoft Teams, emailed electronic gift cards to participants, and verified the transcript of the interview by listening to, highlighting, and sending the transcript to each participant for their approval. An accurate, thorough explanation of participant selection ensured transferability and dependability (see Oplatka, 2021). The participant selection criteria included teaching students with EBD for 3 or more years in the SDP, and training in a behavior change model such as SAM or PBIS.

Dependability accounts for variables in the context by considering the degree of instability of documentation (Walden University, n.d.). The audit trail in the current study included raw data, the data analysis plan, instrumentation, and my personal journal to address dependability issues. I maintained a journal throughout the interview process to



reflect on my strengths and weaknesses during interviews, emotions I felt during the interviews, and changes to include in the next interview based on the participant's interaction. The journal also served to ensure confirmability, which was needed to authenticate data, findings, interpretations, and recommendations (see Walden University, n.d.).

## **Results**

The purpose of the study was to explore the motivation and persistence of long-term educators of students with EBD in the separate day setting. The first research question addressed the motivation for choosing to work with students with severe behavior in the most restrictive public school setting. The second research question addressed educators' reasons for remaining in the SDP long term. The categories were organized according to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) first three circles of the EST. The results were organized by categories, themes, and subthemes.

### **Theme 1: Intrinsic Motivation**

Interview questions were created based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) EST relating a teacher's development to internal and external influences. The first two interview questions addressed participants' reasons for (a) teaching in general and (b) teaching in the SDP. The response pattern revealed the general theme of intrinsic motivation to help others or better themselves. The responses centered around three subthemes: (a) for the students, (b) personal fulfillment, and (c) community. The subthemes corresponded to the EST categories of (a) microsystem, (b) individual, and (c) mesosystem, respectively (see Table 2).

**Table 2***Research Question 1 Themes and Categories*

RQ1	Theme	Category
	Theme 1: Intrinsic motivation	
What motivates educators to work in a separate day setting with students with EBD?	Subtheme 1.1: For students	Microsystem
	Subtheme 1.2: Personal fulfillment	Individual
	Subtheme 1.3: Unity	Mesosystem

***Subtheme 1.1: For the Students***

Many of the participants had childhood experiences or had children with behavior challenges similar to the students who required the therapeutic supports only accessible in the SDP. Their motivation was to support students the way they wished they had been treated or the way they learned to support their children. Teacher 3 shared that he first started working with students in a detention center and noticed that their backgrounds were similar to his and the environment felt hopeless. He shared “I understand the kids ... understand the background” and wanted to provide them an opportunity to change their behavior rather than leave them to suffer. Teacher 2 had a similar experience in the military:

I became a teacher because in my previous employment I was in the military and I was sent to war on multiple occasions ... I started to notice that the older I got, the younger soldiers were coming into the military ill prepared for the challenges that would be presented to them and I was becoming frustrated with that. So, I wanted to become a part of the solution instead of just complaining about things ... I went

from becoming a trainer and leader of men to becoming an educator and leader of the youth.

Both Teacher 2 and 3 started out in the general education setting but realized they could best serve the youths in an SDP environment.

Teachers 1 and 10 served students in a different capacity prior to the SDP.

Teacher 1 was a counselor before becoming a teacher and discovered the SDP used the SAM he had implemented as a counselor. He recognized he still wanted to help students and “contribute to education,” but the SDP focused on the unique population of students who were commonly forgotten. Knowing the population and the SAM inspired him to pursue a career in the SDP. Teacher 10 worked for the Department of Children Services:

And I realized that there was a whole lot of red tape with the foster care system and trying to get help for those kids. And I just decided that I was gonna go back and get my masters, and I was gonna teach because I felt like I could help kids better that way and not have my hands tied as much.

Teacher 4’s children demonstrated behavior challenges and knew the importance of addressing the behavior and not the child. She was driven to share her knowledge with others because, “if you can affect one child, that’s huge!” Similarly, Teacher 7’s children demonstrated disruptive behavior and knew the students in the SDP:

But to me it was no different than raising my own son because those kids were like, they were like my children to me. So, I understood where they were coming from. I had one - this is how bad it was - I had one student, that, umm, I had to take my husband to the doctor and I told him I would not be there the next day.

They say not to tell the kids that, but I did not feel like he should be just thrown into cause he didn't like change when I told him he had a severe meltdown. 'You gonna leave me like everybody else leaves me?' That just broke my heart.

She shared her father's experience growing up without learning to read. "I saw him struggle and I was like, there has to be something that I can do to help others in his, like, in his situation."

Teacher 5 felt compelled to work with students in the SDP because she knew they needed compassion and kindness and saw that they were being treated with contempt, or at the least, indifference. She was determined that there was "a better way to help these kids." Similarly, Teacher 8 originally started his career working at an alternative setting:

I had some background with a working in a in a high school in Chicago, that was a separate setting for students that have committed two Class Acts felonies in Chicago, and so they were sent to this school to prevent them, to try and help prevent them from doing the third class acts cause then they're gonna be sent away as adults. So, when I explained that to the principal, she decided she was going to place me in the high school setting here, and that's where I've been ever since I've been in the high school setting.

Teaching students in the SDP was a "natural choice," when he changed careers.

### ***Subtheme 1.2: Personal Fulfillment***

Teachers can be the most influential factor in a child's development by setting high expectations and maintaining low tolerance for behavior disruptions (Gottfried & Ansari, 2019). Teachers 3, 5, 6, and 9 discussed their "passion" for teaching, and

reflected that their motivation for working with students with severe behaviors was a “calling” they could not ignore.

The teachers’ intrinsic motivation charted their course into special education and the unique characteristics needed to build a rapport (Poulou, 2020) with the students and make connections needed to help the students find their motivation to learn social and academic skills. Teacher 5 shared that she knew early what she wanted to do:

That’s just always been seems to be what my passion has been. I can remember as a child, my brother and I we even in the summertime, would play school. That was just something we seemed to play a lot and, I because it’s just kind of always been a passion of mine to see that person, whether it was a child or an adult, have that aha moment and you know or at least get him started thinking about something, you know, just to I say, well, you know, what about this, you know? And get them think outside the box.

Teacher 3 reflected on his grade-school teachers and recognized the time and effort they gave to him. He also described teaching as a passion and wanted to “give back to the teachers who helped me.” Teacher 7 proclaimed that all teachers should experience the SDP:

I told my [administrator] that all future teachers need to work a month before they get their teaching degree in [an SDP] to understand that a child that comes in having a bad day, doesn’t necessarily need, mean that they need to be put in [an SDP]. Just because they’re having a bad day every once in a while, doesn’t mean that. If you try to be empathetic with that student and get to know them, I know

it's hard. I understand when you have 30 students in a class, 17 to 30 students in the classroom, it's hard to get on a personal level with that student. But get a knowledge of that student so they know that they can come to you if something is just not right.

Teacher 9 described teaching as something "I always knew I wanted to do," but never considered special education:

I took a sub job over for the [SDP] that was a long-term, and I was there about 3 weeks and the director said. I've got a math position coming available next year. Do you want it? And I said absolutely and been here ever since. So, I just, I mean once I got in and learned it and loved it and it was like it's just it's easy for me. Like I just connect with the kids.

Teacher 6 chose teaching out of a need for a job and "wanted weekends and the summer off" with our kids." When she heard how aggressive some of the students could be she shrugged saying, "I'm a very clumsy person, and I'll hurt myself way more than the kids will hurt me." Ironically, she was in a leg cast during our interview because she had injured herself during Field Day trying to compete against her students in an athletic event. Her injuries did not slow her down and she went back to work the day after she was injured. Teacher 9 had a similar experience, "I had a student jump on me, beat the crap out of me, and I was still willing to get up and come back the next day, so I said I think I'm here for the long haul."

***Subtheme 1.3: Unity***

Teachers 7 and 10 were recruited to the SDP by friends who worked there either as teachers or paraprofessionals. They were dissatisfied with their previous careers and looking for a change. Teacher 10 shared:

I actually had a friend who was working as a parapro and for two years she kept poking and prodding me and saying you'll love it. You know you will.

You know you'll love the kids. You'll love the work. It's never a boring day.

So you know, I finally gave in and was like, well, OK, I'll check it out.

I'll do the interview and then, you know, we'll see. And well, that was it. I was stuck.

Teacher 7's children had similar behavior issues, and she felt a kinship with the staff who knew the challenges of severe behaviors, "I had a friend that was working at the [SDP] and she asked me would I be interested in coming and joining the group, as she put it."

Teacher 8 came from a family of teachers:

I guess a lot of teachers in my family, my mom and my dad were teachers.

My mother was an elementary school teacher, and my father was a high school teacher. And then I have several aunts and uncles and great uncles, all of them with educators at some level from college level down to elementary school. I grew up around teachers.

**Theme 2: Support**

The second research question asked participants to reflect on their reasoning for remaining in the SDP despite the potential for physical danger and emotional burnout.

Educators who teach students with EBD require a community, a mesosystem, that best supports the students in SDP to address their behaviors and provide effective social skill instruction to prepare them for the social expectations of life after school (Hirsch et al., 2023). The mesosystems serve to support teachers before, during, and after crises to reduce emotional exhaustion (Lee et al., 2023). Several of the participants referred to the support from their administration and colleagues as incentive to persevere through the first year and continue learning effective methods to help their students succeed (see Table 3). The third interview question was in two parts and inquired (a) about the level of support they received in learning how to address severe behaviors and (b) the type of support they needed to help reduce burnout.

**Table 3**

*Research Question 2 Themes and Categories*

RQ2	Theme	Category
What factors contribute to educators' persistence in the SDP?	Theme 2: Support	
	Subtheme 2.1: Personal growth	Individual
	Subtheme 2.2: Teamwork	Mesosystem
	Theme 3: Persistence	
	Subtheme 3.1: Student growth	Microsystem
	Subtheme 3.2: Personal qualities	Individual
	Subtheme 3.3: Family unit	Mesosystem

***Subtheme 2.1: Personal Growth***

Many of the teachers persevered in pursuit of personal growth. Teacher 2 contributed his development to the support he received:



I was given an incredible Lead. I was given an incredible parapro. Umm, the gentleman, my first year what I was placed in a separate day facility, he was a person who had no educational background, did not have any knowledge about the intricacies of special education, and we kind of grew together.

His development led him to help other teachers in not only his strengths, but in the areas he was not well acquainted in his first year.

Burnout was “not in my vocabulary” for Teacher 8. He and Teachers 1 and 2 shared that their work ethic and drive to improve themselves prevented burnout as an option. Teacher 1 insisted that “I don’t get burned out...it’s a calling and I love it,” and Teacher 2 maintained that “it takes a lot for me to burnout.” All three gentlemen were adamant about continually improving themselves and their commitment to provide the most effective support for their students.

Teacher 9 learned much about addressing disruptive behavior from her son who demonstrated “impulsivity and attention problems.” During the SAM training, she realized that she was “on the right track” and was excited to learn there was even more she could do for her son and her students. She realized that even after the first couple of years in the SDP, she was still discovering more ways to teach students socially appropriate replacement skills and help them find their internal motivation to improve academically.

Teachers 4 and 5 expressed the lack of support through professional development or training. They developed techniques for addressing behavior through trial and error, and by working with peers:

I came here and I'd never written an IEP. I mean, I'd seen plenty of them, but I'd never written one. We had somebody that did that for us. But anyway, basically I felt like at the time it was just sink or swim. And I mean the mentor that was assigned to me, she'd only been at the school I wanna say for two years, maybe, so she didn't know a whole lot herself. So a lot of it was just, you know, Googling and looking up what PBIS means, what you know, kind of what other school systems were doing and asking some questions because we were having such a high turnover rate at that time there really wasn't anybody who had been here long enough that knew how to train anybody. And there's been some things that, you know, this needs to be happening. So, I think now people that come here for the most part, if they're teachable, then they can be taught. But there are some people that this is just not the setting for them and, so they struggle.

Teacher 4's motivation to continue improving and persisting through the difficult times was her "fiancé and kids saying, 'I'm proud of you'...that keeps the burnout from hitting hard." The lack of training in their first year inspired them to work with new teachers to ensure they feel supported.

### ***Subtheme 2.2: Teamwork***

Stremel et al. (2022) described the characteristics most relevant to teacher readiness involved the school climate created by leadership and interactions with peers and colleagues. Several participants shared that the support they received from their leadership, peers, and colleagues helped them grow personally and professionally.

Teacher 2's support consisted of "an incredible Lead...[and] and incredible parapro." His

teaching team and Lead made time for “venting sessions” when he was anxious or frustrated about a situation.

Teacher 1 noted the teamwork early in his career, saying “I feel I had a lot of support, especially my first year.” He went on to say:

The work we do is challenging, but with our separate day program, you will have the support from the administrators...everybody in that building. Some people, they’ll help you, but if you’re not listening to their advice, people are gonna get tired of helping you. And then you’re gonna be on the island by yourself. So, you know, ask for help, but when you get to help and advice, make sure that you are following through with the advice. Don’t ask for advice and then don’t do nothing with that advice. Don’t take the advice or whatever you ask for advice and somebody give you advice make sure you do that in the classroom to help you with that situation. But you will have a lot of support, so that’s the one that I can guarantee if you work in the separate day program, you have a lot of support and help from the staff and you won’t be alone.

Teacher 3 proclaimed that “everyone had everyone’s back,” and explained that the team played to everyone’s strengths by bolstering one person’s weakness with another’s strength. While some teachers excelled in verbal de-escalation, others had mastered data collection and compliance paperwork. In some cases, teachers would trade off duties to ease the potential for burnout.

Teacher 6 was grateful that “the veterans were really...good about telling me, like, how to do something and giving me feedback.” Her peers, colleagues, and

leadership were available to her to ask advice about students, discuss personal issues, or simply to vent her frustrations. Teacher 7 also had veterans to defer to for suggestions, strategies, or ideas about the curriculum, social skills lessons, and individual student needs. Even more so than the veterans, she credits her paraprofessional as her lifeline because “she really was my support person.”

Although Teacher 5 did not feel her initiation adequately prepared her to address the severe behaviors, she and her team bonded through trauma, became a close-knit family, and enjoyed their work. She did not succumb to burnout because work did not feel like work. She does not have family around her, but her co-workers having become like a family to her:

And like any other family so to speak, yeah, we get our feelings hurt and we, you know, as a staff, will get mad about things and we get frustrated with admin and all that. But then you know when it comes down to it, though, umm, we got each other’s back and I never found that in gen ed. I found more backstabbing than I’ll be around anything else just tell you one thing to your face and go behind your back and then you’d hear about it later. And while that might happen here, I haven’t noticed it nearly as much as I did in Gen Ed.

Although Teacher 10 received nearly two weeks of training prior to facing her students, she reflected the same “family feel” with her teammates as Teacher 5. Teacher 10 shared how her team banded together to help where it was needed, especially after multiple crises. She does not have family nearby, so “being able to call on other people” made her work family feel “like a family.”

### **Theme 3: Perseverance**

The second research question revealed a two-part response related to long-term educators' reasons for staying in the most restrictive setting in public school. The last two interview questions focused on the participants' persistence in the SDP and tips they would share with other teachers interested in the SDP. The categories that emerged centered on student growth, personal qualities, and the family unit (see Table 3). All the participants provided recommendations for potential SDP educators, and they provided stories, examples, or rationale for specific characteristics such as patience, open-mindedness, and empathy.

#### ***Subtheme 3.1: Student Growth***

Like Teacher 2, who stated that the factor he contributed most to his persistence in the SDP was, "the personal growth of the students," many other participants also contributed student growth as their primary reason for their longevity. Teacher 3 appreciated, "seeing the kids grow, you create relationships...you see behaviors change." Teacher 6 is also, "here for the kids" and recognized that she is "a safe space" for so many of her students. The students need space and time to be vulnerable without judgement (Eaton, 2020). Teacher 4's experience included the therapeutic supports:

You can't take it personally, because if you do, you go home crying every day and they're really not directing it at you. You're their safe space. That's all it is. You're their safe space and they know it, and that's what we have to remember. So, it's, I mean it's true though. That's why they do some of the things that they do. Especially those big behaviors because they can't do it at home, they can't

express it in, and they don't know how else to express it. We become their safe space because we are we are therapeutic. We are nurturing. We are forgiving. We're gonna start from the beginning. It's OK. Yesterday was a rough day. Today's the new start and so we become that safe space that some of these kids don't have.

Teacher 5 was passionate about her students getting the most out of school, because "education is the key to opening doors for these students." She also serves as a "safe space" for her students because so many have experienced, or are still experiencing, trauma. Teachers who can separate their personal feelings can provide the space for the students to express their feelings and being to heal their hearts (Bruhn et al., 2020). Teacher 7 reasons that "I love these kids," and giving them the love and attention they seek but never find at home keeps her coming back every year.

Teacher 9 attributes her longevity to "the challenge of the kids" and watching them implement the strategies they learn to manage their emotions and control their impulses. She is inspired by the connections she makes with the kids and watching them overcome their issues. Teacher 10's forged friendships with colleagues revealed that she was not alone in her quest for student success. "We're all here for the kids."

### ***Subtheme 3.2: Personal Qualities***

Each participant provided qualities and characteristics that led to their successful persistence in the SDP. Teacher 1 contributes student success in the SDP to teachers who "have thick skin," can "be patient," and "ask for help when you need it." The students

can be cruel and hurtful because they feel unjustly hurt by people they should be able to trust (Denne et al., 2023)

Teacher 2 summed up his experiences by saying:

So basically, working in a separate day facility is giving me something that I didn't know I needed in life. That where I was moving about in life, I had a very, very high paying job before I got an education, and I did not like life. Did not like it. Cause the computer did the same thing every day and the infrastructure broke down the same way every day, and getting into academia, I took an incredible pay cut. But I'm so fulfilled, like I'm genuinely, like, fulfilled. Like I wake up like happy to get up and go to work and my wife's like, are you ready for those kids to yell at you today? I was like, uh, we don't know. They might, you know, and that's the enjoyment of it. I don't know. They might. They might not. It's, you never know, is genuinely the box of chocolates, so yeah.

Teacher 4 contributed her success to the SAM strategies for addressing the behaviors with compassion, patience, and directness (Frye et al., 1999), and, "it made me realize I was doing the right thing with my kids." Teachers 8 and 10 mentioned "patience" as a necessary quality, Teacher 7 recommends being "mentally strong", and Teacher 10 suggested "keeping an open mind" for the sake of the students. Teacher 6 detailed her suggestion of a growth mindset by describing some of the trauma her students carried:

I really sometimes I think people forget that these kids are kids, and they want to be loved. They wanna be hugged. They wanna have fun. We had a friend that,

he's not one of my friends, he's one of my husbands and my father in law's friends, and he was like ohh you work with the delinquents? And I'm like they're not delinquents, and I turn around and walked off. And so, I think I think people forget that, you know, like they're still kids, they need people to love them and to hug them and to listen to them.

Teacher 9 spoke of a “forgive and forget” mindset and letting go of “the need for justice or recompense.” She recognized that the students’ behaviors were communicating a need, and it was crucial for teachers and support staff to determine the individual student’s need. She suggested starting each day anew, focusing less on the academics until rapport is built and more on the skills they need outside the classroom. Teacher 4’s recommendations included separating yourself from your job, “at the end of the day, when you go home – be home!”

### ***Subtheme 3.3: Family***

Nearly all the teachers spoke about the “family” they built during their career. Teacher 3 referred to her facility as a “family-oriented environment.” Teacher 1 knows he can “ask for help” whenever he needs it. Teacher 2 praised the “really good strong team here,” and recommends the setting for teachers who “want to be a part of something bigger than you – a community – that thrives because you are in it.” Teacher 4 talked about the unity among staff in the SDP:

There's only four of us, but I'm the team lead and my partner is he used to play professional basketball, so he understands what a team is. And then our two paras understand the rules, they understand what our expectations are. And so, I think



having them Just keeps you going. We've all got each other's back and I think that's what's so important. And [the administrator's] doors are always open. It's not hard for us to go in and just sit down in one of [his] chairs. You know, you don't walk in there and they're all buttoned up and they're like, what do you want? You know it's very friendly. It's very open. I mean, because the nature of who we are and what we do, I think our administrators make it so, and we feel supported. Like at the end of the day, if I were upset about something, I can walk in there and be like I don't know why you did that, I'm not really happy with the way that this went or hey, thanks for that or whatever. It's very open door and I think that's huge, and you don't get that a lot.

Teacher 5 remarked that the “family you build makes it hard to leave because you know they are counting on you the way you're counting on them.” Teacher 6 feels the support is unparalleled in any other environment, “it's the admin for me – and my colleagues.” Teacher 9 deemed his “learning how to contribute to a team” that he could lean on during the hard times as his motivation to persist. Teacher 9 stated “we all work as a team,” and Teacher 10 said her peers and colleagues are “like a family.”

### **Summary**

The responses to the first research question revealed that the long-term educators' motivation was to help the students, for personal fulfillment, and the unity among their peers and colleagues. The second research question yielded a two-part response to their persistence in the SDP. For many of them, the support they received helped their personal growth and provided them a sense of teamwork. Several of the participants noted that the

money was not adequate motivation to stay. All the participants referenced the students, their personal growth, or the family unit as their reason for staying in the SDP for so many years. Nearly all participants indicated that they have no intention of leaving the SDP, and they expect to retire from that environment. Despite the dangers and emotional strain, they love what they do and would rather work in that setting than with non-disabled students in the general education setting.

Chapter 5 includes the interpretation of my findings and a comparison to the findings from the literature review in Chapter 2. The findings are also analyzed based on the theoretical framework used in this study. Chapter 5 also includes limitations of the study and implications for social change based on the findings.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore why educators choose a therapeutic setting to teach students with severe behavior challenges and what motivates them to remain longer than most. Semistructured interviews of 10 long-term educators from five SDPs were conducted to answer the research questions. Previous literature focused on attrition (Brunsting et al., 2023), burnout (Garwood, 2023), and lack of support for teachers (Van Mieghem et al., 2022). Little research was found on the motivation and persistence of long-term educators in the specialized setting.

Exploring the experiences of long-term educators in the SDP highlighted the teachers' perspective about the environment, students, and community feeling that motivates them to continue working in that setting. Sharing the results with administrators and district personnel may provide insights on the qualities and characteristics to look for when recruiting and hiring teachers for the SDP. Distributing the results to colleges and universities may help them design courses for teacher candidates to better prepare them to address disruptive behavior in the classroom.

One of the major findings from the study was that teachers choose to remain in the SDP to help students they identify with or students who have no one to advocate for them. Helping students who struggle to express themselves in a socially appropriate manner empowers the educators to continue to improve their approach to behaviors and collaborate with like-minded individuals to form a community of support for students and each other. Chapter 5 includes the interpretation of findings, limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and implications for positive social change.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

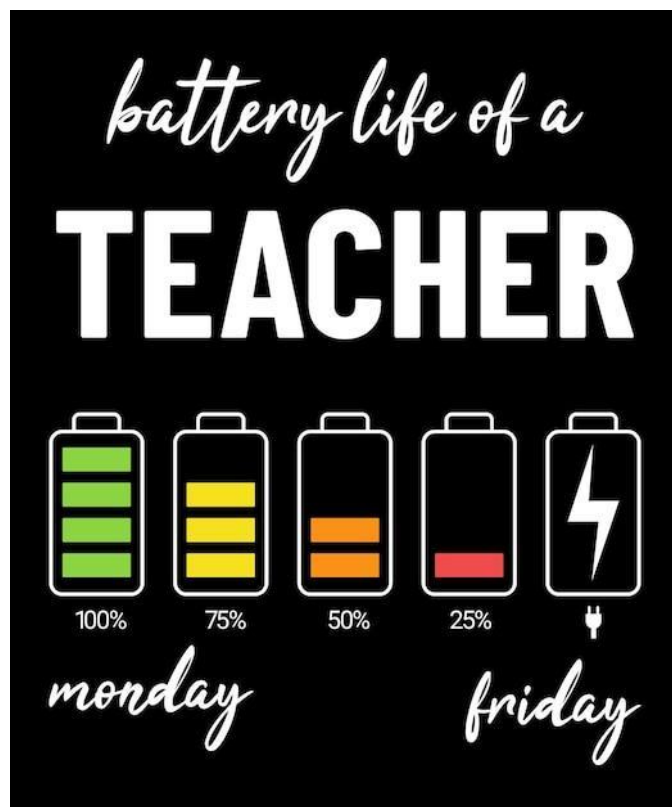
The themes revealed by the interview questions included (a) motivation to help students, (b) personal and professional growth, and (c) find unity with others. Teacher 1's proclamation that "everybody can't do this" and Teacher 5's comment that "you either love it or hate it" suggests that working in the SDP with students with severe behavior issues speaks more about a teacher's personality and motivation than their intelligence to learn a behavior model or knowledge of the curriculum. In this section, I compare the results of the study to findings from previous literature and the theoretical framework that informed the research questions. The first research question addressed what motivated educators to teach students with EBD in a specialized setting. The second research question addressed the factors that contributed to their persistence in that setting.

Shaping the behaviors of students with EBD who require therapeutic support requires an open mind, an abundance of patience, and empathy (Yu & Sims, 2023). In addition to the traditional preparation of lesson planning (Soares et al., 2022), teachers in the SDP receive specialized training in crisis management (Riden et al., 2022) and social skills curriculum (Kian et al., 2020). Teachers are trained in behavior change models (McGuire & Meadan, 2023), integrated token economy systems (Ackerman et al., 2020), and de-escalation strategies (Gersib & Mason, 2023). Because the students who require the SDP must have IEPs to support their eligibility, teachers must also know compliance trends (Manasia et al., 2020) such as writing IEPs, conducting functional behavior assessments, and implementing BIPs (Eaton, 2020). Most importantly, EBD teachers must build rapport (Hunter et al., 2023) with students who have experienced trauma or

learning disabilities (Milner et al., 2022) to help them succeed. Long-term educators are empathetic, patient, and compassionate (Cordova et al., 2023). The literature indicated that the SDP is a challenging environment for any teacher, despite years of experience, because of the demands on teachers' time, energy (Cumming et al., 2021), and emotional output (see Figure 2). Previous literature indicated that educators who felt supported by administrators and colleagues were more likely to remain in their field than those who felt isolated and unsubstantiated (Scott et al., 2022).

## Figure 2

### *Battery Life of a Teacher*



Bronfenbrenner's (1979) EST was applied to teacher development using the concentric circles of systems surrounding a person's self. Buchanan (2020) identified the

individual as having unique personality traits, qualities, and characteristics developed throughout their maturity from their experiences with specific phenomena related to their interest in the specified field. Individual characteristics related to teaching included patience, open-mindedness, and a desire to teach a specific student population. Kangas-Dick and Shaughnessy (2020) defined the microsystem as the relationships teachers have with others related to their responsibilities, such as the student–teacher connection and the camaraderie with peers and colleagues. Liu (2018) defined the mesosystem as the interaction between the teachers’ microsystems, including the student–parent relationship, collaboration among colleagues, and the support provided by administrators to their staff. Current participants’ responses could all be connected to one of these above aspects of the EST.

The current study found that teachers who choose the SDP setting recognize the students’ need for compassion, understanding, and self-efficacy. The participants expressed their desire to promote student growth, personal growth, and a community with other educators who share their vision for the students in the SDP. All participants shared stories of student success, personal and professional progress, and collaboration with colleagues that led to strengthened bonds and a family-feel environment.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore motivation and persistence of long-term educators in the SDP. Limitations are an inevitability that threaten the integrity of the research (Burkholder et al., 2019). The first limitation in the current study was the sample size, which was small and restricted to a specified region or

population. This study focused on SDPs in a southern U.S. state. Other states or institutions may have had more or less stringent guidelines for addressing behavior in the SDP (Kumm et al., 2020). The programs represented in the current study follow district-specific protocols for discipline and require distinct training for teachers. Because only five of the 24 programs were represented, other long-term educators in the state may not experience the same positive culture that the participants described in their responses.

Another limitation due to the small sample size was the number of participants. Only 10 educators contributed to the study. Of the program directors who replied to my inquiry for qualified candidates, two did not have any long-term educators. Three programs deferred to the district for permission, and only one reply was received and granted. The nature of the specialized setting results in high teacher turnover each year (Bar-Tal et al., 2020), which also affected the number of candidates who qualified to participate. However, expanding the selection criteria to ensure saturation (see Creswell & Poth, 2018) was unnecessary. The responses centered around similar themes throughout all 10 interviews.

### **Recommendations**

This study provided insights into long-term educators' motivation and persistence in a specialized setting. The findings filled the gap about the characteristics of long-term educators in the SDP and the support they need to maintain healthy well-being. Further research may include a quantitative survey of all educators in each program to determine whether support is adequately distributed to all SDP in the state. Administrators and district personnel responsible for hiring could be interviewed for their recruiting and

hiring practices to determine what changes can be made while adhering to district guidelines and protocols. Researchers could also conduct a longitudinal study of educators upon entering the SDP until they leave or retire to determine the acceptable time frame for learning the behavior models, compliance responsibilities, and program-specific tasks. Knowing how long an average educator needs practice developing skills and support during training may assist administrators in managing time for staff meetings, professional development, mentorships, and trainings.

### **Implications**

The findings of the study have the potential for impacting positive social change among SDP educators. Teachers of students with behavior challenges have the highest turnover (Stark & Ragunathan, 2022) and quit after or within the first year (Lee et al., 2023). The most successful practice for teachers of students with EBD is building a relationship with their students (Yassine et al., 2020). When teachers leave, students may feel abandoned (Stremel et al., 2022) and digress to aggression or shutting down. Staffing SDPs with educators who are more likely to persevere provides students with the consistency, structure, and emotional support they need to develop appropriate social and academic skills useful beyond school (Pierce et al., 2023).

The current study may also provide insights to higher education course writers who create and arrange teacher preparation courses. Adding more detailed instruction in addressing students with behavioral needs may better prepare teachers in any educational environment. The teaching profession has struggled for decades to attract and retain quality educators (Walters, 2023) due to the increasing demands from parents (Rossetti et



al., 2021), increasing demand for documentation and data collection (Stark et al., 2023), and the COVID-19 pandemic that required prompt changes (Bruhn et al., 2020).

Current participant responses indicated that self-improvement, student success, and fostering community are the factors that contribute to long-term educators' motivation and persistence in the SDP. To address the individual level of the EST, recruiters could narrow the field of potential candidates by creating and distributing a survey focused on qualities and characteristics that indicate whether they are more likely to persevere in the SDP before interviewing. During the interview, administrators should be direct and clear about the nature of the setting and the extent of possible responsibilities to prepare the candidate for the possible experiences. To foster the mesosystem level, administrators may also consider a trial period of 1 week for potential hires to observe long-term educators. Finally, every new teacher should be assigned a mentor for the first year to support and guide them as they receive trainings and class rosters to develop their microsystem.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the motivation of long-term educators of students with EBD in a specialized setting, and what factors contribute to teachers' persistence. The study addressed teachers' perceptions of their teaching environment and their experience with the students. Teachers who work in the SDP often know the nature of the setting and the behaviors of the students in the setting (Zabel et al., 2019). Despite the challenges and high turnover rate, some teachers enter the field and remain for many years.

Ten teachers from five SDPs who work exclusively with students with EBD provided responses to interview questions regarding their motivation, persistence, and suggestions for new potential teachers. The data analysis resulted in three main themes with two to three subthemes associated with each theme. The findings indicated that the teachers were motivated by the desire to find a better way to help students with behavioral difficulties, self-improvement, and the prospect of a like-minded community. The teachers felt support from their family of origin, peers, colleagues, and administrators. Participants shared that their reasons for staying in the SDP were the satisfaction of seeing students improve, developing personal and professional maturity, and building a family based on similar experiences and interests. Professional connections become families, and personal fulfillment emerges from the most intense public school setting for teachers and students.

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## Appendix: Interview Guide

Greetings,

I appreciate your participation and willingness to answer my questions. The purpose of this study is to explore the motivations and persistence of long-term educators of students with EBD in the SDP. Please answer the questions as honestly as possible. At any point, if you feel uncomfortable or are unable to continue for any reason, we can stop the interview.

Thank you for your cooperation.

### *Interview Questions*

1. What motivated you to become a teacher?
2. What motivated you to work in a separate day setting?
3. How did the support you received from peers and colleagues prepare you to work with students with severe behavior?
  - a. How did your peers, colleagues, and supervisors assist you in overcoming or reducing burnout?
4. What factors contributed to you remaining in the program?
5. What tips would you share with a teacher considering teaching in a separate day setting?