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Special Education Teachers' Perceptions of Teaching Effectiveness When Working With Students With Emotional and Behavioral Disorders

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Abstract

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MA, McNeese State University, 2003

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined how special education teachers perceived their teaching effectiveness in supporting students identified with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). The study addressed a gap in the literature by examining the factors that influence special educators' sense of self-efficacy when working with this population. Bandura's theory of self-efficacy served as the conceptual framework. A generic qualitative research design was employed, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eight participants from two central Texas school districts. Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis guided the coding and interpretation process, supported by MAXQDA software. Analysis of the data revealed seven key themes. Participants reported higher self-efficacy when they experienced supportive relationships with students, access to relevant professional development, collaboration with colleagues, and autonomy in implementing individualized behavioral strategies. In contrast, persistent student behavioral challenges, limited support, and role-related stress contributed to emotional exhaustion and diminished teaching confidence. The findings suggest the importance of targeted training, systemic behavioral supports, and ongoing professional development in fostering teacher efficacy and improving student outcomes. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by offering practical insights from teachers who work directly with students with EBD. The potential for positive social change includes informing educational leaders, teacher preparation programs, and policymakers about the systemic support necessary to promote teacher retention, reduce burnout, and enhance equitable educational opportunities for students with EBD.

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Dedication

This dissertation is lovingly dedicated to my wife and two daughters. Their unwavering encouragement, patience, and love have carried me through each step of this journey. Their belief in me and this endeavor served as a constant source of strength during both the challenging and rewarding moments.

To the dedicated special education teachers who work tirelessly to support students with emotional and behavioral disorders, this study is in honor of your dedication, empathy, and perseverance. Your efforts may not always receive the recognition they deserve, but the influence you have on your students' lives is immeasurable. It is my hope that this research elevates your voices and affirms your essential role in education.

To the students identified with EBD, your resilience and courage have inspired every chapter of this work. I hope these findings contribute to the creation of learning environments where your abilities are acknowledged and your growth is nurtured.

Finally, I express my deepest appreciation to my dissertation committee, Dr. Murray, and Dr. Widick. Your guidance, constructive feedback, and steady support were instrumental throughout this process. I am sincerely grateful for your mentorship and your shared commitment to the importance of this research.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Educators play a critical role in promoting academic achievement for all learners, especially those diagnosed with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). Students classified under EBD often exhibit behaviors such as defiance, aggression, and difficulty regulating emotions, which can interfere with classroom learning and instructional flow (Sheaffer et al., 2021).

Supporting this population effectively requires the use of tailored interventions, structured behavior management techniques, and instructional methods that go beyond what is commonly available in general education environments. Special education professionals are commonly responsible for developing and implementing individualized education programs (IEPs) and utilizing research-based strategies to enhance both academic and behavioral outcomes for students with EBD (Odum et al., 2021).

How special education teachers perceive their own effectiveness plays a pivotal role in shaping instructional practices. Studies have shown that a teacher's belief in their ability to influence student outcomes, referred to as self-efficacy, affects multiple areas, including the quality of instruction, behavior management, student achievement, and even job satisfaction and retention (Brunsting et al., 2014; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). Educators with strong self-efficacy tend to take initiative in using preventive strategies, nurturing strong student-teacher relationships, and maintaining classroom structures that promote both academic learning and positive behavior (Leggio & Terras, 2019).

Learners identified with EBD are especially susceptible to the consequences of teacher burnout and frequent staff turnover. Studies indicate that elevated stress and burnout among educators can diminish the quality of instruction and negatively influence student behavior, compounding the difficulties already faced by students with EBD (Gilmour et al., 2022). Educators working with this population frequently report feeling insufficiently equipped to address the complex behavioral and emotional demands presented in the classroom. A shortage of preparation, access to resources, and institutional support are often cited as key reasons behind their sense of diminished professional effectiveness (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). These challenges underscore the importance of examining how special education teachers perceive their instructional effectiveness when working with students classified under EBD, as such perceptions are closely tied to both educator retention and student academic and behavioral progress.

While a substantial body of research has examined teacher self-efficacy (TSE) and burnout, limited attention has been given to the specific context of special education teachers working with students classified with EBD. Much of the existing literature addresses broader issues within general or special education, without focusing on the distinct challenges of educators in self-contained EBD classrooms. As Hirsch et al. (2022) noted, this gap leaves limited understanding of how these teachers navigate the instructional and behavioral demands unique to their roles. This study seeks to address that gap by exploring special education teachers' perceptions of their instructional effectiveness when working with students with EBD.

Background

Learners identified with EBD often face distinct difficulties within school environments. Addressing their academic and behavioral needs typically involves targeted interventions that go beyond the standard support provided to other students with disabilities. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA, 2004), EBD refers to a condition in which emotional or behavioral responses significantly deviate from typical developmental patterns and negatively impact a student's academic performance. Disorders such as conduct disorder (CD) and oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), which fall under the broader category of disruptive behavior disorders (DBDs), are commonly associated with behaviors like aggression, defiance, and rule-breaking in various settings, including school. These behaviors can disrupt the learning environment, contributing to issues like truancy, hostility toward teachers and peers, and avoidance of academic tasks (Levine et al., 2022). As Levine and colleagues (2022) argued, these behavioral challenges not only disrupt student learning but also compromise educators' ability to manage classrooms effectively.

Teachers in special education settings are instrumental in meeting the academic and behavioral needs of students with EBD. Despite their vital role, many teachers report feeling underprepared for the complex demands of the job. Factors such as limited access to training, insufficient institutional support, and scarce resources often lead to a diminished sense of professional competence and increased dissatisfaction (Chu et al., 2020). These conditions have serious implications for teacher retention, as educators' job

satisfaction and decisions to remain in special education are closely tied to the support they receive and the demands they face (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

Studies have consistently shown that teachers' self-efficacy, their confidence in managing classroom environments and fostering student achievement, is strongly associated with instructional effectiveness and student performance (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). Although TSE plays a crucial role in the education of learners with EBD, there remains a lack of focused research on how special education teachers perceive their efficacy when working specifically with this group.

Understanding the role of self-efficacy among special education teachers is increasingly important given the rising number of students diagnosed with EBD in American schools. As of 2020, approximately 28.6 million elementary-aged children were enrolled in public and private education, with 1% (roughly 286,000) identified as having EBD (Statista, 2020). Students with EBD often struggle academically, especially in foundational areas like reading and mathematics, and tend to make limited gains over time. Their outwardly disruptive behaviors, including avoidance of tasks and frequent classroom interruptions, have been linked to reduced participation in learning activities (Sheaffer et al., 2021). Educators' perceptions of these students are shaped by such behaviors, which in turn affect the quality of teacher-student interactions throughout the school year. According to Yoder and Williford (2019), these interactions are essential to fostering students' growth across social, emotional, and academic domains.

Problem Statement

Within the current educational environment, the number of students identified with EBD continues to rise. Based on three decades of professional experience collaborating with special education professionals, this upward trend has become increasingly evident. As the population of students with EBD expands, there is a growing need to reexamine both teaching methods and available supports to more effectively address their varied academic and behavioral needs.

Statista (2020) reported that, as of 2020, EBD affected approximately 1% of elementary students in both public and private schools, representing an estimated 286,000 individuals. Gilmour et al. (2022) noted that special education professionals often struggle with implementing effective strategies due to limited experience with evidence-based approaches across academic and behavioral domains. Similarly, Bettini et al. (2019) highlighted the persistent gap between expectations placed on teachers and the daily realities of instruction, which include addressing significant behavioral challenges.

As the number of students classified with EBD continues to grow, the demands placed on special education teachers have intensified. Meeting these challenges requires an integrated approach that combines instructional and behavioral strategies; however, many educators lack sufficient training in evidence-based practices, which can limit their capacity to effectively support students with EBD. This mismatch between systemic expectations and the practical realities of classroom instruction further complicates efforts to provide effective services. Recognizing these factors—rising prevalence, inadequate preparation, and systemic barriers, is essential to designing responsive

interventions and supports aimed at improving outcomes for students with significant emotional and behavioral challenges.

Although this study contributes valuable insight into these issues, certain limitations affect the scope of its findings. The research was conducted with eight special education teachers from two Central Texas districts, which restricts the generalizability of the results. Instead, the findings provide transferability to similar contexts with comparable demographics, structures, and resources. Because the data relied on teacher self-reports, the results reflect perceptions that may include personal biases or selective recall. In addition, as a qualitative researcher, my own positionality may have shaped interpretation despite efforts to enhance trustworthiness through reflexive journaling and member checking. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the study's contribution to the problem.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how special education teachers perceived their effectiveness when supporting students identified with EBD. The study examined educators' reflections on instructional challenges, strategies, and sources of support within self-contained classroom environments. By centering teachers lived experiences, the research sought to generate rich, descriptive insights into how teachers navigate the academic and behavioral complexities of students with EBD.

This study was not intended to produce generalizable conclusions but rather to provide transferable findings that may inform similar educational contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By gathering firsthand accounts from experienced practitioners, the

research highlighted the ways in which TSE influences instructional decision-making, student engagement, and classroom climate.

The findings contribute to professional practice by offering actionable perspectives that may guide improvements in teacher preparation, targeted professional development, and the design of systemic supports. In addition, the results may assist educational leaders and policymakers in aligning resources and expectations with the realities of teaching students with EBD.

Consistent with Walden University's mission of positive social change, the study's purpose extended beyond academic contribution to the potential for improving educational outcomes. By amplifying the voices of special education teachers, this research provides a foundation for strengthening support structures that enhance both teacher effectiveness and student success.

Research Question

The research question that guided this study is: *How do special education teachers perceive their teaching effectiveness with students classified with EBD?*

Theoretical and/or Conceptual Framework for the Study

Bandura's self-efficacy theory served as the foundation for this study. Widely recognized in educational research, this theory centers on how teachers perceive their ability to succeed in specific instructional tasks (Alibakhshi et al. 2020). As Alibakhshi et al. (2020) explained, self-efficacy involves an individual's belief in their own competence to meet challenges and fulfill responsibilities. Bandura (1998) identified four key contributors to self-efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal

persuasion, and physiological/emotional states (Alibakhshi et al., 2020). These components are especially relevant when exploring how special education teachers evaluate their effectiveness when supporting students with EBD. Previous research has shown a clear association between self-efficacy and teaching outcomes, which justifies this theory's application in the present study.

This study applied self-efficacy theory to better understand how special education teachers view their capacity to manage classroom challenges and provide effective instruction to students with EBD. The framework helped clarify the psychological and contextual factors, such as confidence, training, and perceptions, that shape how these educators respond to their roles. As noted by Binammar et al. (2023), such beliefs are tied to broader patterns of teacher behavior and emotional engagement. Using this theoretical framework ensured the study remained grounded in the lived experiences of teachers who support students with EBD.

Nature of the Study

This qualitative investigation adopted a descriptive model within a generic qualitative framework to explore the research topic. The study was conducted with eight special education teachers employed across two public school districts in the North Central region of Texas. Participants were selected using criterion-based purposeful sampling, as outlined by Griffith et al. (2016), with snowball sampling used as needed to recruit additional participants. The final sample included eight special education teachers who provided instruction to students identified with EBD.

When addressing sample size, Malterud et al. (2016) noted that qualitative studies with a well-defined focus, participants selected purposefully to align with research objectives and guided by a strong theoretical framework can often be conducted with a smaller sample. In-depth interviews that yield detailed dialogue and rich narratives typically require fewer participants, as the depth of information enhances analytic rigor. Participant recruitment involved distributing informational flyers and standardized email invitations, which adhered to IRB requirements.

The data collection process centered on capturing participants' subjective opinions, reflections, beliefs, and attitudes related to their professional experiences with students identified with EBD (Percy et al., 2015). This approach sought to gather thick, descriptive data by eliciting participants' knowledge of specific situations and their personal narratives (Creswell, 2018). Positioned within a generic qualitative approach with a descriptive orientation, the design supported an in-depth exploration of how teachers perceive their effectiveness. Semi-structured interviews, guided by an open-ended interview protocol (Kallio et al., 2016; Weller et al., 2018), allowed for flexibility while ensuring consistency across participants.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2013) six-phase thematic analysis process. After repeated reading of the transcripts for familiarization, initial codes were generated and grouped into broader categories. These categories were refined into themes that accurately reflected the data, and each theme was clearly defined and named. The reporting of findings emphasized how themes illuminated the research questions and provided meaningful insight into TSE when working with students with EBD.

As with all qualitative research, the intent of this study was not to generalize findings to all populations but rather to provide insights that may be transferable to similar contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability was supported through detailed descriptions of participants, settings, and analytic procedures, allowing readers to determine applicability to their own settings. A limitation of this design is that the findings were based solely on teacher self-reports, which introduces the potential for bias related to selective recall, subjectivity, or social desirability. Reflexive journaling, member checking, and adherence to established qualitative procedures were used to enhance trustworthiness and mitigate, though not eliminate, these limitations.

Definitions

To promote clarity and maintain consistency, the terms below are defined as pertaining specifically to this research.

Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD)

EBD is a classification describing students who face significant challenges in regulating emotions and behaviors, which can negatively impact their academic success. These students may have difficulty building and maintaining relationships, managing emotional responses, and adhering to classroom norms. To thrive both academically and socially, they often need tailored interventions and structured support (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 2004).

Teaching Effectiveness

Teaching effectiveness refers to how teachers perceive their capacity to deliver instruction, manage classroom dynamics, and address both academic and behavioral

needs of students. It encompasses the ability to create a supportive and engaging learning environment that encourages active student participation and fosters a sense of belonging. Effective teachers also draw on evidence-based instructional practices to promote learning while adapting strategies to meet diverse student needs. Ultimately, these efforts contribute not only to improved academic outcomes but also to the development of students' confidence and motivation (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001; Odum et al., 2021).

Self-Efficacy

Teachers' self-efficacy reflects their belief in their ability to positively influence student performance, including both academic achievement and behavioral success. It represents the confidence teachers hold in their capacity to design meaningful instruction, implement effective strategies, and respond to challenges in ways that foster student growth. In the context of this study, self-efficacy specifically referred to the confidence special education teachers have in managing difficult student behaviors while also providing high-quality instruction to learners identified EBD. This construct is grounded in Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory, which emphasizes the central role of self-beliefs in shaping human motivation, perseverance, and performance.

Special Education

Special education comprises instructional practices intentionally designed to support individuals with a range of disabilities and diverse learning profiles. These services may occur in various settings, such as classrooms, homes, or hospitals (Francisco et al., 2020). In accordance with IDEA, these services must be offered at no

financial cost to families. Special education stands apart in its mission to serve not only students with classifiable disabilities but also those considered academically or socially at risk. It involves tailored instructional strategies delivered by qualified special education professionals, approaches rarely found in traditional general education environments (Francisco et al., 2020).

Special Education Teacher

A special education teacher is an educator who assists students with disabilities in accessing the general education curriculum by collaborating with a team to develop IEPs, providing personalized instruction to implement these plans, and tracking student progress (George Fox University, 2024). Special education teachers are trained to work with students classified as having mild/moderate or moderate/severe disabilities. They are also responsible for ensuring legal compliance with the IEPs, making sure students receive the services outlined in the plan and that all documentation is completed within the legally required timelines.

Classroom Management

Classroom management refers to the strategies teachers use to establish, maintain, and sustain a productive and orderly learning environment (Wolff et al., 2021). In the context of this study, classroom management involves the specific approaches special education teachers employ to address the disruptive behaviors frequently associated with students identified with EBD. These approaches include maintaining active instruction and supervision, creating structured opportunities for student participation, and providing immediate and constructive feedback to reinforce positive behaviors (Gage et al., 2018).

Effective classroom management not only reduces behavioral disruptions but also fosters an environment where academic engagement and social-emotional growth can occur.

Individualized Education Program (IEP)

An IEP is a legally mandated plan developed for students who qualify for special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The IEP specifies each student's individualized academic goals, the services to be provided, and the support necessary to promote progress toward those goals. In this study, the IEP was considered a key factor shaping how teachers plan and deliver instruction, as well as how they perceive their own teaching effectiveness when working with students identified with EBD (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

Professional Development

Ongoing professional development involves providing educators with consistent opportunities to grow their knowledge base, adapt instructional methods, and implement more effective teaching strategies to support student learning and emotional well-being (McChesney & Aldridge, 2021). In the context of this study, professional development referred to specific training and guidance focused on strategies proven to be effective when working with students identified with EBD. According to State et al. (2019), several research-supported approaches help educators meet the needs of this population, including techniques for promoting self-regulation, teaching social-emotional competencies, delivering engaging instruction with frequent response opportunities, and using targeted behavioral supports, positive reinforcement, and schoolwide behavioral support systems.

Assumptions

To help establish the credibility of the study and accurately interpret its results, several foundational assumptions were considered.

A key assumption of the study was that participating special education teachers provided responses that were honest and accurate. Due to the introspective nature of evaluating one's own teaching practices, particularly in relation to students identified with EBD, it was vital that participants answer interview questions with honesty. The research design depended on participants' self-reported accounts of their perceptions, experiences, and instructional challenges, which made honest responses critical to maintaining the integrity of the study.

Another key assumption was that each participant possessed adequate professional experience teaching students identified EBD. The study presumed that the selected teachers had sustained teaching experience with this population and were familiar with the unique educational and behavioral challenges these students present. Additionally, it was assumed that participants possessed a sound understanding of effective methods, strategies, and approaches for educating their students, which allowed them to provide informed and meaningful responses.

The usefulness of semi-structured interviews in this study relied on the premise that they offer a dependable and accurate method for capturing teachers' views on their instructional effectiveness. The interview questions were intentionally crafted to reflect the essential components of effective teaching, most notably, classroom management, the use of instructional methods, and interactions with students. This method enabled the

researcher to gain a well-rounded and detailed insight into the key issues under investigation.

It is also assumed that external contextual factors, such as the participants' employment status, school climate, and level of administrative support, did not overly influence their responses. While these factors may shape teachers' perceptions of their effectiveness, the assumption is that they did not distort responses to the extent that the study's core focus, teachers' perceptions of their own teaching practices with EBD students, became compromised. Furthermore, differences between schools and districts did not introduce significant variability that would detract from the study's overall findings.

The study assumed that, despite differences in teaching approaches, professional backgrounds, and classroom environments, common themes and patterns related to teaching effectiveness would emerge across participants. Recognizing these shared experiences was viewed as essential for drawing meaningful conclusions that extended beyond individual cases. This assumption further supported the idea that the findings could be relevant to a broader population of special education teachers working with students identified with EBD. By establishing this broader applicability, the study aimed to contribute insights that could inform future research, guide educational policy, and enhance professional practices in the field of special education.

Finally, it was assumed that all participants possessed a clear understanding of the key terminology used throughout the study, particularly terms such as *teaching effectiveness*, *self-efficacy*, and *emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD)*. Establishing

this shared understanding was considered essential to ensure consistency in how participants interpreted both interview and survey questions. Without a common frame of reference, there would have been a risk of misinterpretation that could compromise the accuracy and validity of the data collected. By assuming that participants were familiar with these core concepts, the study aimed to strengthen the reliability of the findings and ensure that the responses accurately reflected the constructs under investigation.

These assumptions played a vital role in safeguarding the credibility of the study. By ensuring that participants responded honestly, understood the key terminology, and reflected shared themes despite differences in background and teaching context, the study maintained a foundation of trustworthiness. These underlying assumptions also reinforced the reliability of the findings by supporting consistent interpretation of the data. Furthermore, they strengthened the potential for the results to have broader applicability, contributing insights that may extend to other special education teachers working with students identified with EBD.

Scope and Delimitations

Scope

This research explored how special education teachers perceived their effectiveness when instructing students classified with EBD. It aimed to gain insight into how these professionals viewed their instructional methods, behavior management techniques, and their capacity to address both the academic and behavioral needs of learners with EBD. Additionally, the study examined various influences on TSE,

including professional training, support from school leadership and colleagues, and access to necessary resources.

This study was limited to elementary-level special education teachers who work directly with students. Participants were employed in public schools located in a designated geographic area (e.g., within a particular district or state). Only those teachers who had primary instructional responsibilities for students with EBD were included. To gather in-depth qualitative insights, data collection involved semi-structured interviews focused on teachers' self-described perceptions and professional experiences.

Delimitations

To maintain clarity and manageability, specific boundaries were set for this study. Primarily, participation was limited to special education teachers currently working in elementary public schools. Educators from private or charter institutions were not included, given potential differences in access to resources and support systems may differ in those environments. This delimitation was set to maintain consistency in the types of support systems and resources that participants had access to, given that public school environments tend to have standardized structures and processes.

Second, the study deliberately focused on teachers who worked directly with students classified with EBD. Teachers whose primary experience was with students identified under other disability categories, such as learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, or intellectual disabilities, were excluded from participation. This decision was made to narrow the scope of the research and maintain a clear focus on the population most relevant to the study's purpose. By concentrating specifically on the unique

challenges and instructional strategies associated with teaching students with EBD, the study avoided being diluted by broader issues in special education and ensured that the findings directly addressed the research questions.

Third, while the study gathered a diverse range of perspectives, it was geographically limited to a specific region or district. This geographic delimitation ensured manageability and feasibility in data collection, particularly for the qualitative interviews. As a result, the findings may not be generalized to special education teachers in other regions, where policies, resources, and student populations may differ.

Finally, this study focused on teachers' perceptions of their teaching effectiveness rather than objective measures of student outcomes. The emphasis was placed on self-reported data from the teachers themselves, acknowledging that these perceptions may not always correlate directly with student academic or behavioral progress. However, teachers' perceptions were considered valuable, as they influence their instructional decisions and self-efficacy.

Limitations

Several limitations emerged during the execution of this study. First, the sample size was limited to eight special education teachers from two districts in Central Texas. While this size was appropriate for a qualitative study focused on depth of insight, it restricts transferability beyond similar contexts. The district-specific structures, including the availability of resources, administrative support, and professional development opportunities related to EBD, further limit how the findings may reflect conditions in other geographic or institutional settings.

Second, as the researcher, my positionality carried potential influence on the study despite intentional reflexive practices. My long-standing professional experience in special education, combined with my role as an employee within the same regional context, necessitated careful efforts to distinguish my identity as a researcher from my professional responsibilities. To minimize this risk, I disclosed my role during the consent process, maintained transparency with participants, and reinforced confidentiality.

In addition, I acknowledged and managed my own preconceptions, including assumptions that special education teachers often experience frustration or consider leaving the profession. Recognizing this bias enabled me to actively engage in reflexivity, ensuring interpretations were grounded in participants' perspectives rather than influenced by my own expectations.

Finally, while these limitations do not diminish the value of the study, they should be considered when interpreting the findings. By openly addressing sample size constraints, contextual specificity, and researcher positionality, the study reinforces its credibility and dependability. These reflective practices underscore the importance of transparency in qualitative research and highlight the boundaries within which the findings should be understood.

Significance

This research addressed a gap in the literature by examining how special education teachers perceive their own teaching effectiveness when supporting students identified with EBD. TSE is central to effective instruction, as educators' beliefs in their

instructional capabilities influence classroom practices, student performance, and overall learning environments (Bandura, 1997). Because students with EBD often face complex academic and behavioral challenges requiring individualized interventions (Kauffman & Landrum, 2018), understanding how teachers assess their own effectiveness is essential. Few studies have focused on teachers' self-perceptions in this context, leaving limited guidance for designing professional development and support systems.

The significance of the study is threefold. First, it provides insight into the factors that shape how special education teachers view their effectiveness, including classroom management strategies, instructional practices, and collaboration with colleagues and administrators. These findings can inform the design of training and professional learning initiatives that strengthen teacher confidence and competence when working with students with EBD.

Second, the results have implications for policy and practice at the school and district levels. By clarifying the challenges teachers face, this study highlights the need for administrative frameworks and support structures that align with classroom realities. Strengthening access to resources and fostering collaborative environments may improve both teacher experience and student outcomes.

Third, this study contributes to the broader body of knowledge on special education by centering teachers lived experiences. The findings provide transferable insights for comparable educational contexts, rather than generalizable conclusions, consistent with qualitative research standards (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By elevating teachers' perspectives, the research underscores the importance of aligning professional

supports with the realities of EBD instruction, thereby extending current understanding of TSE.

Ultimately, the study's significance rests in its potential for positive social change. By amplifying teacher voices, the findings may guide more responsive policies, professional development, and support systems that enable educators to better serve students with EBD. In doing so, the study not only enriches theoretical discussions of TSE but also offers practical direction for improving educational experiences and outcomes for students with significant behavioral and emotional needs.

Summary

The growing population of students identified with EBD presents notable demands for special education professionals, who play a pivotal role in fostering students' academic progress and behavioral development. These educators frequently encounter challenging behaviors, such as aggression or defiance, necessitating support and interventions that often exceed what is standard in typical classroom environments.

Research indicates that a teacher's belief in their own effectiveness significantly influences classroom outcomes, including instructional consistency, student engagement, and overall behavior management. Educators who feel confident in their teaching are more inclined to adopt proactive classroom techniques and cultivate constructive, supportive relationships with their students. These actions contribute to a classroom environment that promotes both learning and behavioral success. In contrast, teachers who lack this sense of efficacy may be more prone to professional fatigue or burnout,

which can interfere with their ability to support student achievement and may increase the likelihood of leaving the profession.

This study investigated how special education teachers perceive their instructional effectiveness when working with students identified as having EBD. Guided by Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory, the research explored how educators' confidence in their classroom management and teaching abilities influenced their practices and behavior strategies. Employing a generic qualitative design with semi-structured interviews, the study gathered detailed accounts of teachers' experiences, emphasizing how they addressed the academic and behavioral challenges of students with EBD.

The study is relevant for shaping educator training, policy considerations, and future inquiry. By examining how teachers view their competence, the research can help inform the creation of tailored support systems and professional learning opportunities that address the unique demands associated with instructing students with EBD. The findings may also offer valuable insights for school and district leaders by emphasizing the importance of enhanced access to resources and consistent support for teachers in these specialized roles, ultimately contributing to improved outcomes for both educators and students. Furthermore, this research expands existing scholarship on special education by filling a notable gap in understanding teacher efficacy within this context.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter offers an overview of scholarly work related to how special education teachers view their own teaching effectiveness when working with students identified as having EBD. Gilmour et al. (2022) noted that one of the major obstacles these educators face is a lack of comprehensive knowledge regarding evidence-based academic and behavioral strategies tailored to students with EBD.

The literature review explores several important dimensions, such as the contributions of special education teachers in supporting students with emotional and behavioral needs, influences on teacher efficacy, previous studies on instructional approaches perceived as effective, professional development related to EBD, and the influence of classroom environments on teacher performance. Through this examination, the chapter aims to present meaningful insights into the challenges educators encounter and outline strategies for improving their effectiveness in addressing the diverse needs of students with EBD.

Literature Search Strategy

To support the need for the study and to provide research problem support, an exhaustive literature review was undertaken. The databases used were Education Source, Sage Journals, ERIC, Psychology Databases Combined, APA PsycINFO (EBSCO Host), and Google Scholar search engine was also used. The search parameters were peer-reviewed journals (2018-2024). The search terms included *EBD student in classroom*, *teacher perceptions of EBD student*, *special education teacher perceptions of EBD*

students, *teacher burnout and* EBD *students*, *special education teachers and perceptions and EBD*, *teachers and EBD students*, regular *education teacher and EBD*, *special education teacher and EBD*, and *EBD student and teacher perception*, *teacher efficacy,* and *emotional behavioral disorders,*

Conceptual Framework

The teaching field is experiencing a notable increase in students identified with EBD. Statista (2020) reported that in 2020 alone, nearly 286,000 students were identified as having EBD across both public and private elementary settings, accounting for approximately one percent of the overall student population. This growing number intensifies the expectations placed on special education teachers, who must simultaneously manage the delivery of both academic content and behavioral support.

These responsibilities are compounded by educators' limited exposure to evidence-based methods that are specifically suited to the varied needs of students with EBD (Gilmour et al., 2022). As noted by Bettini et al. (2019), there is often a disconnect between the idealized vision of teaching and the day-to-day instructional and behavioral demands, adding complexity to their role. With the rising prevalence of EBD, it becomes increasingly vital to explore the ongoing challenges educators face and to design interventions and support systems that strengthen their capacity to meet the distinct and diverse needs of this population.

Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, which stems from social-cognitive theory, provides a conceptual lens for examining how special education teachers view their own

teaching capabilities (Brunsting et al., 2023). This theoretical foundation is particularly relevant for educators who support students classified with EBD.

Social-cognitive theory emphasizes that beliefs about one's self-efficacy are central to how individuals interpret and respond to environmental demands (Bandura, 1986, 1997, 2006, as cited in Yin et al., 2023). These beliefs influence not only how people approach challenges but also the amount of effort and persistence they apply when faced with difficulties. Self-efficacy plays a critical role in shaping personal motivation, guiding cognitive functioning, and regulating emotional responses. Ultimately, these beliefs can determine whether individuals engage in adaptive behaviors that lead to success or withdraw in ways that hinder performance and growth.

Based on this perspective, TSE specifically reflects the extent to which teachers believe in their ability to successfully navigate professional responsibilities and overcome instructional challenges (Yin et al., 2023). Early foundational studies, including those by Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998), helped launch the academic exploration of self-efficacy among educators. Evidence indicates that TSE significantly contributes to academic performance, classroom management, motivation, and emotional well-being. It also enhances overall teaching quality and educator satisfaction (Yin et al., 2023).

Teachers with a keen sense of self-efficacy tend to demonstrate effective classroom management skills (Yin et al., 2022; Poulou et al., 2019). Educators with higher self-efficacy are more likely to implement strategies that promote instructional quality, engage students in differentiated and constructivist learning, and foster student independence through intentional instructional and behavioral practices. These teachers

often maintain student focus and task completion (Poulou et al., 2019). In contrast, educators with diminished confidence in their classroom management abilities are more prone to exhibit emotional exhaustion due to challenging classroom disturbances.

When examining TSE, one must delve into Bandura's social cognitive framework, which proposes that behavior is shaped through a model of triadic reciprocal causation (Bandura, 1986, 1997, as cited in Yin et al., 2023). This model suggests that human behavior is influenced by the dynamic interplay among personal factors (such as biological, emotional, and cognitive processes), environmental contexts, and individual actions. According to the theory, the interaction of any two of these three influences, personal, behavioral, or environmental, can produce reciprocal effects on behavior.

According to Bandura (2012), an individual's system of self-beliefs does not operate uniformly across all contexts; instead, confidence in one's abilities may vary depending on a particular task, situation, or domain. This variability underscores the dynamic nature of self-efficacy and highlights the importance of considering context when examining personal competence. Within Bandura's reciprocal causation model, self-efficacy is shaped by four primary mechanisms: enactive mastery, vicarious experience and modeling, verbal persuasion, and physiological or emotional states (Alibakhshi et al., 2020; Bandura, 1998; Gale et al., 2021; Yin et al., 2022; Yin et al., 2023). Each mechanism contributes differently to the development of efficacy beliefs, collectively influencing how individuals interpret their capabilities, persist through challenges, and regulate their performance in varied settings.

Enactive Mastery Experience

Enactive mastery experience (goal attainment through action that is direct) is a primary source influencing the development of efficacy as it references the individual's attained experience as they successfully mastered a previous task (Hussain & Khan, 2022). An individual's belief in their own self-efficacy is strengthened through successful accomplishments, as the positive reinforcement gained from completing tasks further reinforces that belief. In contrast, Hussain and Khan (2022) noted that repeated failure or difficult challenges can lead to demoralization and a decline in self-efficacy.

Enactive mastery experience is most potent relative to self-efficacy primarily when task accomplishment develops in response to what the individual perceives as a demanding task (Gale et al., 2021). For teachers, they tend to believe in their instructional capabilities when they have the perception of their teaching being successful. In contrast, when teachers have the perception of being unsuccessful, they tend to doubt their ability to teach.

Vicarious Experience or Modeling

Vicarious experience, often referred to as modeling, contributes to the development of self-efficacy by allowing individuals to observe others successfully performing tasks (Hussain & Khan, 2022). Through this process of observational learning, individuals gain insight into the strategies and techniques that are necessary to achieve desired outcomes. While this source of self-efficacy is generally considered less powerful than enactive mastery, it remains significant because it provides learners with concrete examples of effective practice. Observing others can also reduce uncertainty,

increase confidence, and offer alternative approaches that individuals may adopt when faced with similar challenges (Wise & Trunnell, 2002, as cited in Hussain & Khan, 2022). In tasks that are novel and where the observer perceives the model as like themselves, vicarious experiences (observing task performance via a model) serve to boost self-efficacy (Gale et al. 2021). Therefore, self-efficacy in teaching beliefs is most likely impacted during the initial stages of a teacher's career when many of the teaching tasks are still unfamiliar.

Verbal Persuasions

Verbal persuasions refer to the appraisals and feedback that individuals receive from others, contributing to self-efficacy (Gale et al., 2021; Waddington, 2023). This can be akin to verbal wordplay in relation to the development of an individual's self-efficacy (Hussain & Khan, 2022). The impact of feedback is influenced, at least in part, by the perceived credibility and sincerity of the person providing it (Gale et al., 2021).

Self-efficacy in teaching is often unaffected by "empty praise" when it is received from sources that are not trusted or respected (Gale et al., 2021). Bandura (1997) suggested that self-efficacy beliefs are more easily affected and altered by negative feedback than by positive feedback. Positive persuasions encourage individuals' self-efficacy beliefs, whereas negative verbal persuasions can undermine them.

Physiological/Emotional States

Physiological/emotional states within individuals such as anxiety, stress, worry, arousal, and fear of failure affect self-efficacy beliefs in individuals (Hussain & Khan, 2022). Self-efficacy in individuals who are experiencing stress or fear can be negatively

impacted. Yin et al. (2022) referred to the physiological/emotional states as an overarching concept of affective states. They contend that the affective states are comprised of the individual's emotional experiences encountered that are complex during long-term events. Efficacy beliefs are reinforced with reduction in anxiety and depression, the improvement in physical strength and stamina, through correcting misinterpretations of both physical and emotional states (Bandura, 1998).

Bandura's theory serves as a foundational lens for examining how special education teachers view their capacity to meet the needs of students classified with EBD. TSE plays a critical role in shaping students' social development and emotional regulation, as well as contributing to their overall well-being (Alkahtani, 2024). Studies have consistently demonstrated a positive relationship between teachers' efficacy beliefs and their instructional effectiveness, underscoring the relevance of this theory within special education contexts (Alibakhshi et al., 2020). By grounding the study in Bandura's self-efficacy theory, researchers can explore how teachers' self-perceptions influence both their instructional strategies and their effectiveness in supporting students classified with EBD. This theoretical perspective also supports the creation of targeted interventions aimed at strengthening teacher efficacy and enhancing outcomes for students receiving special education services.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts.

Historical Perspective of Emotional Behavioral Disorders

According to Willis-Jackson (2019) and IDEIA (2004), EBD is defined by a consistent inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, cultural, or

health-related factors. Individuals with EBD also tend to struggle with forming and sustaining relationships with peers and educators. Common features include frequent inappropriate behaviors or emotional responses, persistent feelings of sadness or depression, and signs of anxiety or physical distress linked to academic or personal situations. Traits often associated with EBD include aggression, hyperactivity, difficulty managing emotions, delayed social behaviors, and social withdrawal (Willis-Jackson, 2019). While the exact cause of EBD remains unclear, it has been the focus of research for over 2 centuries.

EBD 1700-1900s

Early conceptualizations of emotional and behavior disorders began with Benjamin Rush (1745–1813), a prominent physician who focused on mental illness and was also a United States founding father and signer of the Declaration of Independence (Willis-Jackson, 2019). He is regarded as the father of modern psychiatry and proposed that the mind was susceptible to physical influences that caused it to become diseased. Rush (1812, as cited in Willis-Jackson, 2019) contended that this made the person "the involuntary vehicle of vicious actions, through the instrumentality of passions," which he called "moral derangement." In the years that followed, Rush was the first to categorize the behavior clinically (Gelb, 1989, as cited in Willis-Jackson, 2019).

Samuel Gridley Howe (1801–1876) was a physician who, in 1832, became the director of the *Perkins School for the Blind* (first known as *The New England Institution for the Education of the Blind*) (Athens Medical Society, 2021). Later, as a mental deficiency educator, he also served as director of the *Massachusetts School for Idiotic*

and Feeble-Minded Youth (Willis-Jackson, 2019). In the mid-1800s, institutions for the deaf, the blind, and the feeble-minded spread throughout the United States. Best (1930, as cited in Willis-Jackson, 2019) related that the principle establishing beliefs of the schools for the feeble-minded was the instruction of functional methods and strategies at a practical level for integrating into the community. Those students found to be "uncorrectable" were placed in segregated classes known as "ungraded classes" (Winzer, 1993, as cited in Willis-Jackson, 2019).

EBD 1900 to 1950s

Willis-Jackson (2019) characterized the years 1900 to 1915 as the *alarmist period*, during which research was heavily focused on eugenics and the use of intelligence tests for assessment. Scientific-based accounts using *The Measurement of Intelligence* (1916) and *The Intelligence of School Children* (1919) provide the impetus for student grouping of children with mental disorders being placed in separate classes. According to Willis-Jackson (2019) it was Horn in 1910 that labeled students that were described as "incorrigible and truants" with *Emotional Disturbance* (ED). It was during this period that separate disabilities of learning disability, mental retardation, and emotional disturbance were documented.

In this period, schools faced compulsory attendance laws and were responsible for educating students with "mild" disabilities, such as the feebleminded, recalcitrant, and incorrigible, whereas students with severe disabilities were sent to residential or institutional settings (Willis-Jackson, 2019). The '600' schools were established in 1946 in New York to include non-institutionalized students with emotional disturbance. These

schools were developed to educate those with emotional disturbance and social maladjustment.

EBD 1950 to 1975

Early training to instruct students who were emotionally disturbed was drawn from Freudian psychoanalysis, which concluded that internal mechanisms were responsible for the child's behaviors (Brill, 1939, as cited in Willis-Jackson, 2019). Psychoanalytic theory drove instruction for the emotionally disturbed for over thirty years until the works of B. F. Skinner emerged. Skinner (1953, as cited in Willis-Jackson, 2019) introduced learning theories based on behaviorism, more specifically the role of operant conditioning in shaping behavior through environmental control via consequences. Skinner's theory soon became prevalent as a classroom management technique for students with EBD.

The political influence of President J. F. Kennedy in the 1960s brought changes in education that more focused-on students with emotional disturbance (Willis-Jackson, 2019). The president emphasized mental health and care implementation based on a "comprehensive community care" model. Under President Kennedy, Public Law 88-164 saw the addition of "seriously emotionally disturbed" as a category of eligibility.

EBD – 1975 to Present Day

The passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975) marked a pivotal shift in holding schools accountable for delivering educational services to students with disabilities (Willis-Jackson, 2019). Bower (1982) noted that, before this legislation, schools could exclude or expel students if they were perceived as

unmanageable or unlikely to benefit from conventional classroom instruction. The act addressed this exclusionary practice and introduced a legal definition for serious emotional disturbance. It also mandated access to Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) and education in the Least Restrictive Environment (Willis-Jackson, 2019). However, the act did not provide a definition for social maladjustment, which led the Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders to challenge its adequacy. This omission intensified debates about distinguishing serious emotional disturbance from social maladjustment, especially after the enactment of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) in 2004 and related reforms.

Further changes occurred with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, both of which extended protections to children with social maladjustment and obligated schools to offer reasonable accommodations. According to Willis-Jackson (2019), the Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders advocated for language that would reduce stigma and supported the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA, which eliminated the word “serious” and replaced it with the classification of EBD. This redefinition also introduced proactive frameworks such as functional behavior analysis, behavior intervention plans, and the requirement for manifestation determination reviews. These developments emphasized individualized behavioral support through school-based strategies involving functional assessments, IEP team collaboration, and teacher-focused professional development.

Emotional Behavior Disorder of Childhood

The global prevalence rate of children and adolescents diagnosed with a mental disorder before age 18 is estimated at 13.4% (Dalsgaard et al., 2019) with similar rates observed across various racial and ethnic groups when factors such as income, resident status, education, and neighborhood support are controlled for (Ogundele, 2018). However, risk factors of poverty and low socio-economic status are contributing factors to increased rates of mental health disorders across populations (Ogundele, 2018). Anxiety disorders have a diagnostic rate of 4.4% in girls and 5.0% in boys (Dalsgaard et al., 2019). Depressive disorder rates are 3.7% in girls and 4.1% in boys.

The most commonly occurring mental health issues in childhood often include obsessive-compulsive disorders (OCD), oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), intermittent explosive disorder (IED), conduct disorder (CD), anxiety, depression, attention - deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD) (American Psychological Association, 2022; Ogundele, 2018). According to Ogundele (2018), emotional and behavioral difficulties, also referred to as emotional and behavioral problems (EBP), are commonly categorized into two broad types. These include internalizing behaviors, which encompass inward-focused issues such as depression and anxiety, and externalizing behaviors, which refer to more outwardly disruptive actions such as those associated with ADHD, Intermittent Explosive Disorder (IED), and Conduct Disorder (CD).

In early childhood, it is common to witness low-intensity behaviors such as mild misbehavior, defiance, or impulsivity occurring infrequently (Ogundele, 2018). Behaviors like loss of temper, property destruction, and stealing or deceitfulness are often

seen as “normal.” However, when these behaviors become extremely challenging, unmanageable, and outside of the child’s age norms and developmental levels—such as prolonged or unpredictable tantrums or severe temper outbursts that may include destructive episodes, they are recognized as behavior disorders. Ogundele (2018) argued that emotional problems are often episodes in late childhood. These problems typically relate to anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). While diagnostic symptoms may be present in early childhood, they are often difficult to diagnose because young children lack the vocabulary to express their concerns, have limited emotional intelligence, or because it is challenging for clinicians to distinguish between developmentally normal emotions and the severe, prolonged emotional distress associated with disorders.

Problematic (Challenging) Behaviors

Challenging behaviors are defined as any atypical patterns of behavior that exceed the expected norms for an individual's age and developmental level (Ogundele, 2018). They are characterized as culturally abnormal behaviors that occur with such intensity, frequency, or duration that they pose a serious risk to the physical safety of the individual or others. These behaviors may also significantly restrict or prevent the individual from accessing and using typical community facilities.

Challenging behaviors can manifest in a variety of ways, such as verbal or physical aggression, self-injurious actions, noncompliance, disruptive behaviors, inappropriate vocalizations, and repetitive or stereotyped patterns. These behaviors may significantly impact functioning, even if they occur sporadically or across different

diagnoses (Frazier, 2022). Consequences may include difficulties in forming social relationships, hindered participation in goal-directed activities (Davico et al., 2022), and impaired learning (Davico et al., 2022; Ogundele, 2018). Additional challenges may involve restricted access to supportive environments (Glenn et al., 2021, as cited in Frazier, 2022), increased burden on caregivers (Bradshaw et al., 2021, as cited in Frazier, 2022), and a decline in overall quality of life (Markowitz et al., 2016, as cited in Frazier, 2022).

IDEA Definition of Emotional Disturbance

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 et seq.:

> (i) Emotional disturbance means a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over an extended period and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance:
>
> (A) An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.
>
> (B) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.
>
> (C) Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.
>
> (D) A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.
>
> (E) A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.

> (ii) Emotional disturbance includes schizophrenia. The term does not apply to children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance under paragraph (c)(4)(i) of this section. (IDEA, 2004, §300.8(c)(4))

The federal definition of what constitutes the criteria for identification of emotional disturbance at first glance appears clear and straightforward; however, for the teacher and school psychologist, the criteria is often confusing and filled with uncertainty (Hanchon & Allen, 2018). Many practitioners have attributed the challenge of diagnosing ED to criteria that are often seen as unclear, inadequately defined, and lacking professional justification. Therefore, it is important that the teacher and school psychologist work closely throughout the process of evaluation and that the school psychologist at minimum include tools in the assessment process such as measures of academics (norm and criterion referenced), behavior rating scales, interviews (structured and unstructured) that involve the child and others that have frequent contact with the child, direct observations of behavior, parent-self-and teacher report measures and a thorough record review (Brigham et al., 2021). This will ensure a comprehensive evaluation that limits subjectivity and bias and ensures the reduction in false positives or negatives.

The Student With EBD and Teacher Perceptions and Attitudes

In 2020, approximately 28.6 million students were enrolled in elementary schools across both public and private institutions in the United States, with about 1% (286,000 students) identified as having Emotional Behavioral Disorder (EBD) (Statista, 2020).

Students classified with EBD often demonstrate lower performance in core academic areas such as math and reading, with overall progress remaining limited. Their outwardly directed behaviors are associated with decreased levels of on-task engagement and increased tendencies toward avoiding academic tasks (Sheaffer et al., 2021). Furthermore, educators' early impressions of student behavior, particularly those demonstrating externalizing tendencies, can influence how they interact with the student throughout the school year (Yoder & Williford, 2019). According to Yoder and Williford (2019), the nature of teacher-child relationships is deeply connected to children's academic, emotional, and social growth, and these early impressions can significantly impact a student's overall educational experience and development.

Educators' assessments also play a significant role in influencing students' decisions regarding their educational and career paths (Kramer & Zimmerman, 2023). Grades given by teachers frequently serve as the critical factor in determining whether students enter higher or lower secondary education tracks, ultimately leading to different qualifications that allow for enrollment in vocational training or university programs. According to Krammer and Zimmerman (2023), the instructional choices made in daily school activities, such as determining the complexity of future assignments, rely on teachers' evaluations of their students' performance. The significance of teacher evaluations in both immediate and long-term educational decisions underscores the necessity for accurate and high-quality assessments by teachers that accurately mirror students' true performance levels.

Studies indicate that certain factors can bias teachers' evaluations, including student traits such as student behavior, teacher attitudes (Scanlon et al., 2020) or special educational requirements (Hurwitz et al., 2007 as cited in Kramer & Zimmerman, 2023; Kramer & Zimmerman, 2020; Kramer & Zimmerman 2023). It is plausible that conditions like EBD, which involve disruptive behavior in educational settings (Kramer & Zimmerman, 2023), academic difficulty, and social skills deficits (Sheaffer et al., 2021) may influence how teachers assess students.

In fact, there is a general agreement that teachers' expectations of students impact their classroom behavior, whether consciously or unconsciously (Scanlon et al., 2020). Various theories explain this process, including one which suggests that students interpret different teacher behaviors as signs of high or low achievement. This perception, in turn, affects student self-efficacy compared to their peers. Scanlon et al. (2020) suggest that it is crucial to understand that achievement described here encompasses not only academic performance but also socialization and personality development. Regarding students with special educational needs, teacher expectations are reflective of that described but may also be inclusive of the perception that these students are more difficult to educate than their non-exceptional peers. For students with EBD, teachers often perceive them as the most difficult to educate, particularly when challenging behaviors arise. These perceptions are reflected in lower academic performance and an increased number of discipline referrals (Scanlon et al., 2020).

Inclusive practices for students with EBD involve teachers recognizing that inclusion in mainstream classes is ideal (Scanlon et al., 2020). However, many teachers

are hesitant to include these students in their own classrooms, particularly if the student has been excluded from another class. Teachers are also not willing to adapt teaching practices to enhance the inclusion of the student with EBD.

Special Education Teacher Certification and Professional Development

Licensing requirements for special education teachers differ across states and typically fall into four main categories. These include passing certification assessments specific to special education, holding either a bachelor's or master's degree in special education, completing coursework that qualifies for an endorsement in the field, and earning a dual degree in both general and special education (Vanderbilt University, 2024).

The breakdown is as follows:

- **Special education teacher testing for certification:** Rhode Island, Oregon, North Dakota, Minnesota, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Texas, Oklahoma, and Nebraska.
- **Requirement of a bachelor's or master's degree in special education:** Montana, Idaho, Nevada, Arizona, Alaska, Hawaii, Florida, Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, Illinois, Iowa, and Colorado.
- **Requirement of an endorsement with coursework in special education:** California, Washington, Utah, Wyoming, South Dakota, Kansas, Arkansas, Mississippi, Ohio, New Jersey, Washington, D.C., and Maryland.

- **Dual bachelor's degree in general and special education:** Delaware, Maine, New York, Indiana, Wisconsin, Missouri, Louisiana, New Mexico, and Connecticut.

Although numerous training and certification pathways exist nationwide, the field of special education continues to face a shortage of fully credentialed educators. Consequently, this has hindered the consistent delivery of Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to students with disabilities (SWDs; Mason-Williams et al., 2020). One prominent issue encountered by certified special education teachers is the high incidence of stress and burnout, particularly when supporting students with intensive needs such as those classified with EBD (Bettini et al., 2020). Bettini and colleagues emphasized that these professionals frequently experience emotional fatigue due to the rigorous nature of their roles and the limited institutional support available. This ongoing pressure contributes to elevated attrition rates, compounding the existing shortage of trained special educators. There is a growing recognition of the need for specialized professional development that equips educators to meet the diverse and multifaceted needs of students with EBD, as current traditional preparation programs often lack specific content related to EBD (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020). This leads to special education teachers being inadequately prepared that allows for struggles with implementing effective behavioral intervention and support strategies.

Instructional effectiveness within special education differs notably from general education approaches (Gilmour, 2020). Effective teaching for SWDs often results in enhanced academic outcomes and is distinguished by structured, engaging, and

responsive teaching practices centered on specific instructional techniques. Gilmour (2020) noted that this method typically incorporates direct instruction, consistent progress monitoring, and data-informed adaptations. These practices frequently emphasize validated instructional programs and behaviorally oriented strategies for managing classroom conduct. Conversely, general education tends to define effective teaching as the facilitation of student learning through conceptual connections and idea integration.

Further, the knowledge base of special educators often differs from that of general educators. Training for special education teachers before certification generally prioritizes instructional methodology, educational strategies, and a strong understanding of their specialized roles within school environments, rather than emphasizing broad content expertise (Brownwell et al., 2010, as cited in Gilmour, 2020). While special educators are recognized for their instructional expertise in addressing the needs of SWDs, general education teachers are more often expected to possess proficiency in subject-specific curriculum and standards-based instruction.

Teacher Self-Efficacy (TSE)

TSE stems from Bandura's concept of reciprocal determinism, which posits that educators' behaviors are shaped by, and simultaneously shape, their personal beliefs and the broader environment (Sawyer et al., 2023). According to Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001), TSE refers to educators' beliefs in their capacity to bring about desired results in student engagement and learning.

This belief system reflects how teachers evaluate their effectiveness, including when working with students who may present behavioral or motivational challenges.

Research indicates that students instructed by teachers with elevated levels of TSE tend to perform better academically and exhibit enhanced motivation, engagement, and overall competence (Johnson, 2023). These educators are also more likely to report higher job satisfaction, demonstrate resilience, apply innovative teaching strategies, and face a lower risk of professional burnout (Sawyer et al., 2022).

Self-efficacy plays a critical role in shaping how students learn (Mathews et al., 2023). In the learning process, experiences operate within a feedback loop where opportunities to learn either enhance or diminish self-efficacy. Mathews et al. (2023) contends that this, in turn, shapes an individual's perspective by affecting the effort, persistence, and resilience they bring to a task, as well as the level of emotional distress (such as anxiety) they are willing to tolerate in future tasks. Individuals with higher levels of self-efficacy tend to approach tasks with a more adaptive mindset compared to those with lower efficacy beliefs. This distinction influences not only how learning occurs but also how it is interpreted through the framework of one’s perceived capabilities (Bandura, 1997, as cited in Mathews et al., 2023). Importantly, self-efficacy is context-dependent and shaped by the specific setting in which it is applied. Within the realm of special education, the construct becomes more complex due to the heightened intensity and diversity of student needs (Dawson & Scott, 2013, as cited in Mathews et al., 2023).

One of the critical factors influencing TSE is the nature of student characteristics and how educators interpret their ability to address these dynamics (Sawyer et al., 2022). Recent studies have increasingly focused on domain-specific evaluations of TSE that align with student-centered contexts. For example, Zee et al. (2016, 2017, as cited in

Mathews et al., 2023) discovered that educators reported reduced self-efficacy when instructing students who presented more challenging behavioral profiles. Conversely, educators working with students who demonstrated prosocial behaviors were more likely to express stronger confidence in their teaching abilities, highlighting a link between student behavior patterns and teacher efficacy beliefs.

Extensive evidence supports the assertion that teachers play a crucial role in shaping student success, which underscores the value of cultivating a well-prepared and competent teaching workforce (Bettini et al., 2019). Although students with EBD constitute a relatively small segment of the school population, they encounter considerable academic and socio-emotional challenges. These students are at heightened risk for adverse outcomes, including school dropout and potential involvement with the justice system. According to Bettini et al. (2019), effectively addressing these complex needs requires that special education teachers possess specialized expertise in both academic and behavioral strategies. Educators working with this population must employ targeted instructional and behavior management techniques to support students in overcoming multifaceted difficulties related to learning and social-emotional development (Kauffman & Landrum, 2018, as cited in Cumming et al., 2021).

Students identified with EBD who receive services under the emotional disturbance classification are often taught by less experienced special education teachers (SETs) than their peers with other disabilities (Brunsting et al., 2024). This gap in instructional experience stems from the ongoing national shortage of qualified special education personnel. The situation is further complicated by the high attrition rate in the

field, particularly among those working directly with students with EBD. Research highlights that two major factors influencing educators' decisions to exit the profession are elevated levels of burnout and diminished perceptions of their own teaching efficacy (Brunsting et al., 2024).

TSE is frequently understood as comprising three dimensions related to various aspects of the role: efficacy for instruction, efficacy for managing behavior, and efficacy for fostering student engagement (Brunsting et al. 2024). Hopman et al. (2018) found that special education teachers who emotionally distance themselves from students' misbehaviors can provide themselves with short-term stress relief, but it may also have repercussions for the students involved. Teachers who report lower levels of self-efficacy are less likely to address discipline issues and to refer students for appropriate support, compared to those with higher self-efficacy. While emotional detachment might shield teachers from becoming emotionally overwhelmed, it could also hinder their ability to manage students' challenging behaviors effectively (Hopman et al., 2018). Conversely, Hopman et al. (2018) related that previous research has highlighted that close student-teacher interactions and high TSE are crucial for students with EBD achievements. An engaged attitude is thus considered essential for teachers to effectively support student development. The authors research findings suggest that teachers facing significant classroom disruptions should find a balance between empathetically connecting with their students and safeguarding themselves from frustration and emotional exhaustion, aiming to maintain a healthy equilibrium between job demands and available resources.

Summary

This chapter reviewed existing research focused on how special education teachers perceive their own teaching competence when working with students identified as having EBD. A primary concern noted in the literature is the limited access to and application of evidence-informed practices, both formal and informal, by special education professionals, which impedes their ability to effectively meet the instructional and behavioral needs of students with EBD (Gilmour et al., 2022). The review examines factors that influence teacher effectiveness, including professional development related to EBD and environmental conditions within classrooms. Additionally, Bandura's self-efficacy theory (Alkahtani, 2024) is explored for its relevance in explaining how educators' confidence in their capabilities affects both their instructional methods and success in addressing the needs of students with EBD. The chapter concludes with a description of the comprehensive literature review process, which involved a detailed analysis of peer-reviewed sources published between 2018 and 2024, using multiple scholarly databases.

Conclusion

The existing body of literature highlights the multifaceted challenges encountered by special education teachers when supporting students classified EBD. It underscores the pivotal influence of TSE, noting that educators with higher self-efficacy tend to demonstrate more effective behavior management, stronger instructional delivery, and increased resilience when managing complex classroom situations. Nonetheless, many special educators are insufficiently prepared due to limited access to specialized training

and institutional resources, which hampers their ability to build and sustain elevated levels of self-efficacy. This lack of support contributes to elevated levels of emotional fatigue and teacher turnover. To mitigate these issues, it is essential to implement focused strategies, such as professional development opportunities and institutional support systems, which empower teachers and enhance their ability to address the unique academic and behavioral needs of students classified with EBD.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

This chapter presents the research design that employed to investigate how special education teachers perceive their own teaching effectiveness when working with students identified as having EBD. The primary aim of this qualitative study was to explore, in depth, the experiences, obstacles, and instructional strategies that educators attribute to their sense of teaching efficacy. Specifically, it examined how these teachers understand and interpret their effectiveness in supporting the academic and behavioral needs of students classified with EBD. To accomplish this, the study utilized semi-structured interviews to collect rich, descriptive narratives, which were then analyzed to identify recurring themes and insights reflective of the participants' individual perspectives.

Research Design and Rationale

This study employed generic qualitative research design. This approach is particularly suited for research that seeks to describe and interpret participants' perspectives and experiences without adhering strictly to a single established qualitative methodology (Percy et al., 2015). This design allowed for flexibility in exploring the nuanced and complex nature of teachers' self-perceptions while ensuring a rigorous approach to data collection and analysis.

Research Design

This study employed a generic qualitative research design to examine how participants understood and interpreted their lived experiences (Kahlke, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach was particularly well-suited for capturing the perceptions

of special education teachers, as it emphasized their personal insights without imposing rigid theoretical structures. Through this design, the study developed a holistic view of the elements influencing teachers' perceptions of their instructional effectiveness when working with students identified EBD. Data were gathered primarily through semi-structured interviews; a method aligned with the flexible and open-ended nature of qualitative inquiry. This format enabled participants to describe their thoughts, strategies, and experiences in their own words, promoting the emergence of themes naturally throughout the research process (Adams, 2020).

Rationale

This approach was chosen for its adaptability in capturing participants' personal perspectives without being limited by the rigid frameworks of traditional qualitative methodologies such as grounded theory or phenomenology (Caelli et al., 2003). This method proved especially appropriate for the current study, as it enabled a rich, descriptive exploration of how educators understood and interpreted their teaching effectiveness. The design emphasized practical insights and real-world experiences over theoretical model development.

Educators in special education who support students identified with EBD encounter distinct challenges and multifaceted situations that demand a nuanced and in-depth understanding. The generic qualitative design enabled me to gather rich, descriptive data that reflected the teachers lived realities and diverse perspectives, which may not have been adequately captured through other research approaches (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Importance of the Design

The use of a generic qualitative research design ensured that participant perspectives remained central to the study. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the contextual elements that shaped teachers' perceptions of their instructional effectiveness. By focusing directly on the lived experiences of special education teachers, the design provided space for participants to describe the strategies they employed, the obstacles they encountered, and the supports that influenced their practice. The findings generated from this process offered meaningful insights into the realities of teaching students identified with EBD. These insights not only contributed to a deeper understanding of effective instructional practices but also highlighted professional development priorities that could better support educators in this specialized field.

Role of the Researcher

Prior to beginning coursework at Walden University, I did not have formal research experience. However, through my studies in the social psychology curriculum, I developed the ability to read, analyze, and synthesize research for academic writing and report preparation. These skills provided a foundation for engaging in qualitative research and understanding its methodological principles.

My professional background includes over 30 years of experience as a social worker and school psychologist in educational settings. This extensive experience equipped me with advanced interviewing skills and the ability to build rapport, respect, and trust with families, students, faculty, and staff. In social work, interviews are

primarily utilized to assist individuals in implementing a problem-solving process (Kadushin & Kadushin, 2013). However, qualitative interviewing differs in that it is designed to explore participants' thought processes, refine preconceived ideas, and analyze issues through an in-depth, iterative approach (Jamshed, 2014).

This combination of academic preparation and professional experience positioned me to conduct meaningful qualitative research that was both empathetic and methodologically sound. My background provided a foundation for understanding the complexities of special education while also equipping me with the skills necessary to approach the research process with sensitivity and care. These qualities supported the development of strong rapport with participants, which in turn encouraged open and authentic sharing of their experiences. As a result, the data collected reflected both depth and richness, strengthening the credibility of the findings. Taken together, these factors contributed to the overall rigor and trustworthiness of the study.

Preconceived Bias and Bracketing

As a researcher with professional experience working with students identified as having EBD, I anticipated the importance of acknowledging potential biases that might influence the research process. While I had extensive experience supporting and interacting with students with EBD, I had not previously studied or explored teachers' perceptions of their teaching effectiveness when working with this population. This lack of direct experience with teacher perspectives presented an opportunity for new insights but also necessitated careful reflection to ensure that my familiarity with EBD students did not inadvertently shape my interpretation of teacher responses.

In qualitative inquiry, the researcher holds a central position throughout both the investigative process and the development of outcomes. The distinction between the researcher and the research itself is inherently blurred and often considered neither feasible nor appropriate (Galdas, 2017). To address this, I maintained transparency and reflexivity by critically reflecting on my preconceptions, relationships, and analytical focus (Polit & Beck, 2014, as cited in Galdas, 2017). In alignment with this approach, I engaged in reflective journaling and memoing as bracketing techniques to enhance transparency and minimize the influence of potential biases throughout the research process.

Reflective journaling was employed during the literature review, data collection, and data analysis phases. Reflexivity, a cornerstone of qualitative research, enabled me to examine my assumptions, thoughts, and biases continuously. By documenting my reflections, feelings, and impressions in a journal, I critically engaged with the research process and evaluated how my professional background might have affected the interpretation of teacher experiences (Chan et al., 2013). This ongoing practice ensured that I remained self-aware and intentional in my approach, fostering transparency and accountability throughout the study.

In addition to reflective journaling, memoing served as another bracketing technique. Tufford and Newman (2012) described memoing as an iterative process in which researchers documented their engagement with the data throughout collection and analysis. Through memoing, I recorded and critically analyzed emerging thoughts,

feelings, and preconceptions, allowing me to trace the evolution of my interpretations and address potential biases during data analysis.

Through these reflective practices, I actively sought to minimize the influence of personal assumptions on the research process. Engaging in reflexivity allowed me to critically examine my own perspectives and remain attentive to how they might shape data interpretation. By consistently revisiting memos and journal entries, I was able to ensure that my analytical decisions were grounded in the authentic voices and experiences of participants rather than in preconceived notions. These strategies not only enhanced transparency in the research process but also reinforced the study's overall credibility. Collectively, they contributed to the trustworthiness of the findings by demonstrating a clear commitment to maintaining alignment with participants' perspectives.

Methodology

Setting and Participants

This research was conducted in two independent school districts located in Central Texas. These districts were purposefully chosen because they provided a setting that reflected both demographic diversity and varied instructional contexts. Each district served a student population with a wide range of cultural, socioeconomic, and linguistic backgrounds, offering a rich environment in which to explore teacher perspectives. In addition, both districts maintained specialized educational services designed to support students identified with EBD, ensuring that the study focused on settings directly aligned with the research purpose. The combination of diverse demographics and specialized

programming made these districts well-suited for examining the complexities of teaching effectiveness in EBD contexts.

Participant Selection Logic

Participants for this qualitative research were chosen using a targeted sampling method, complemented by snowball recruitment. The sampling strategy was aimed at selecting special education teachers who possessed the ability to offer comprehensive perspectives on their teaching experiences with students classified EBD. The intentional nature of the sampling ensured that individuals aligned with the study's purpose were included, while the snowball approach expanded participation through referrals from those already involved (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Inclusion Criteria

To align participants with the focus of the study, specific inclusion criteria were established. Eligible participants were currently serving as special education teachers and had a minimum of 1 year of direct instructional experience working with students classified with EBD. These educators were employed in public elementary schools serving students in kindergarten through fifth grade. Additionally, participants needed to be open to participating in semi-structured interviews and engage in member-checking activities to support the accuracy of the findings.

Exclusion Criteria

Educators who did not satisfy the study's inclusion criteria were not considered for participation. Individuals who were not actively instructing students identified with EBD or who had less than 1 year of experience working with this student population,

were excluded from the study. This careful selection process ensured the study's focus remained aligned with its research objectives.

Recruitment Process

Initial participants were recruited through outreach efforts directed at school districts in Central Texas. Recruitment materials consisted of both flyers and email invitations, which were carefully developed in accordance with Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines. These materials outlined the purpose of the study, the criteria for participation, and the voluntary nature of involvement, ensuring that potential participants were fully informed before deciding. By following established ethical procedures, the recruitment process safeguarded participant rights while also supporting transparency and credibility in the study.

To complement these efforts, snowball sampling was employed to expand the participant pool. This strategy involved asking initial participants to refer colleagues who met the inclusion criteria and might have been interested in participating (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Snowball sampling is particularly effective in qualitative research when targeting specialized populations. By leveraging the professional networks of initial participants, this approach helped identify qualified individuals who might not have been reached through the initial recruitment efforts.

Email invitations were distributed using targeted methods to reach eligible participants. District-level administrators, such as directors of special education, assisted in disseminating invitations to their contact lists of special education teachers. School principals and campus leaders also played a crucial role by forwarding email invitations

directly to their special education staff. To expand participation, initial participants were encouraged to refer eligible colleagues, who then received email invitations to join the study.

Interviews using a semi-structured format were held either in person or via virtual platforms to facilitate direct engagement and build rapport with participants. Each session spanned approximately 45 to 60 minutes, allowing adequate time to delve into participants' personal views on their instructional effectiveness. As a token of appreciation for their participation and time, individuals received a $15 gift card upon completion of the interview.

A comprehensive recruitment strategy was implemented to engage a diverse and appropriate group of special education teachers. This strategy included flyer distribution, targeted email outreach, and the use of snowball sampling, which allowed current participants to recommend colleagues who might also meet the study's inclusion criteria. By combining multiple methods, the recruitment process increased the likelihood of reaching teachers with relevant experience and ensuring a pool of participants who were both qualified and motivated to contribute.

Sampling Size and Rationale

The study involved eight participants, which is consistent qualitative research methodologies that emphasize depth of insight over large sample sizes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The number of participants was guided by the concept of data saturation, which occurs when additional data no longer yields new themes or perspectives (Naeem et al.,

2024). This method ensured that the information gathered was both extensive and meaningful, contributing to a well-rounded understanding of the central research issue.

Rationale for Sampling Strategy

This study utilized purposeful sampling to select participants who possessed relevant experience and insight into the research focus (Patton, 2015). This approach focused on engaging individuals best positioned to offer detailed perspectives on the self-efficacy beliefs of special education teachers. To further support participant recruitment, snowball sampling was implemented. This strategy enhanced access to a specialized population by allowing current participants to refer others who met the study's eligibility requirements (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Together, the combination of purposeful and snowball sampling ensured that the participant pool was both diverse and relevant to the study's aims. This dual approach supported the collection of authentic and varied experiences, enhancing the study's capacity to explore the nuanced perspectives of special education teachers.

Researcher as Instrument

As the primary data collection instrument, I engaged directly in gathering, interpreting, and analyzing the study's information, in alignment with qualitative research traditions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This method emphasized adaptability and allowed for a deeper exploration of participants lived experiences. Semi-structured interviews served as the main approach to data collection, offering a reliable framework for eliciting detailed and meaningful responses. The use of a structured interview guide facilitated

comprehensive inquiry into participant perspectives while allowing space for new insights to emerge throughout the research process.

Recognizing the significant role of the researcher as an instrument in qualitative studies, measures were taken to address potential biases and ensure rigor. Reflexive practices were employed throughout the research process. These practices, as outlined in the reflexivity section, helped me to critically evaluate my assumptions, biases, and potential influences on the study. Furthermore, this process required transparency in acknowledging challenges and unforeseen developments encountered during the study, as well as documenting how the research focus evolved over time (Cena et al., 2024).

By combining a structured yet flexible interview protocol with ongoing reflexive practices, this study ensured that the instrumentation effectively captured the complex perspectives of special education teachers. The interview guide provided consistency across participants while still allowing for adaptability, enabling teachers to elaborate on their unique experiences and insights. Reflexive practices supported me in remaining attentive to potential biases and maintaining alignment with participants' authentic voices. Together, these strategies enhanced the credibility of the findings by demonstrating methodological rigor and transparency. As a result, the study produced a comprehensive understanding of participants' self-perceptions regarding their teaching effectiveness when working with students identified with EBD.

Interview Protocol

The interview guide (Appendix) was constructed in alignment with the study's research questions and informed by a comprehensive review of literature on teaching

effectiveness and students classified with EBD. The guide consisted of twelve open-ended questions aimed at generating thoughtful, in-depth responses. This structure provided flexibility for me to pursue emerging patterns and relevant topics as they surfaced during the interviews. Examples of guiding questions include:

1. Perceptions of Effectiveness: “How would you describe your teaching effectiveness when working with students identified as having EBD?”
2. Strategies and Challenges: “What strategies do you find most effective in supporting students with EBD, and what challenges do you encounter?”
3. Professional Development: “How has professional development influenced your perceptions of your teaching effectiveness with students with EBD?”
4. Support Systems: “What types of support or resources have impacted your ability to work effectively with students with EBD?”

The interview protocol included follow-up prompts and probes to encourage participants to elaborate on their responses and provide specific examples.

Audio Recording and Transcription

Interviews were recorded using two separate audio devices to ensure reliability and accuracy, with one device serving as a backup. Verbatim transcriptions of the interviews were completed and verified by me for accuracy. Additionally, observational notes were documented before, during, and after the interviews to capture non-verbal behavior, contextual elements, and my personal reflections.

Data Analysis Plan

Braun and Clarke's (2013) thematic analysis framework was applied to analyze the qualitative data. This method was chosen for its effectiveness in identifying, examining, and interpreting recurring themes and patterns. The approach offered a structured yet flexible strategy for making sense of special education teachers' perspectives. The six phases outlined by Braun and Clarke guided the thematic analysis process:

1. **Familiarization with Data**

   The first step involved becoming deeply familiar with the data. This included reading and re-reading the interview transcripts, reviewing field notes, and listening to audio recordings. During this phase, initial observations and reflections were documented to capture any emerging insights or patterns.

2. **Generating Initial Codes**

   The second phase focused on coding the data. Codes were systematically applied to identify significant features of the data related to the research questions. These codes served as the building blocks for identifying broader patterns and themes. Coding was performed using qualitative data analysis software to enhance accuracy and organization.

3. **Combining Codes into Themes**

   During the third phase, related codes were grouped together to form initial themes. These themes represented broader categories that captured key

aspects of the participants' perceptions and experiences. The process involved refining the connections between codes and identifying meaningful patterns.

4. **Reviewing Themes**

   In the fourth phase, the initial themes were reviewed and refined. This involved checking the coherence of each theme and ensuring that they accurately represented the data. Any overlapping or redundant themes were combined, while themes that did not align with the research questions were discarded or redefined.

5. **Defining and Naming Themes**

   The fifth phase involved determining the final themes and defining their scope and significance. Each theme was clearly articulated to capture the essence of the participants' experiences and perceptions.

6. **Reporting Findings**

   The final phase focused on presenting the findings. This involved writing a detailed account of each theme, supported by participant quotes to illustrate key points. The findings were interpreted in the context of existing literature, highlighting both confirmatory and novel insights related to special education teachers' self-perceptions of teaching effectiveness.

By following these six steps, thematic analysis provided a structured yet flexible approach to analyzing the data, ensuring that the findings authentically reflected the voices of the participants. This method allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the

challenges, strategies, and experiences that shaped special education teachers' perceptions of their effectiveness.

By implementing the six phases of thematic analysis, a structured and adaptable method was used to examine the qualitative data. This ensured that the insights gathered were representative of participants' authentic experiences. This approach enabled a detailed examination of the strategies, challenges, and experiences that influenced special education teachers' perceptions of their instructional effectiveness.

Furthermore, MAXQDA software was used to support the analysis by systematically organizing and coding the qualitative data. The program enhanced rigor by facilitating consistent identification of patterns and themes while allowing the researcher to document ongoing reflections through memoing. This process ensured that the findings remained firmly grounded in the data and authentically reflected participants' experiences.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Establishing trustworthiness is fundamental in qualitative research to uphold the study's integrity and the dependability of its outcomes, particularly given the method's inherent subjectivity (Ahmed, 2024). Key indicators of trustworthiness include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria are comparable to the principles of validity and reliability commonly emphasized in quantitative methodologies and are crucial for ensuring methodological rigor in qualitative inquiry.

Credibility

In examining special education teachers' perceptions of their instructional effectiveness, establishing credibility was essential to ensure that participants' voices were accurately captured (Ahmed, 2024; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Credibility was demonstrated by employing methods such as prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation. These approaches fostered trust and enabled a nuanced understanding of the research context. Triangulation included collecting data from diverse sources, including interviews, observational notes, and reflective journaling, to enhance the validity of the findings (Ahmed, 2024).

To further support the trustworthiness of the study, member checking was utilized. Participants were invited to review and comment on the preliminary findings to verify the accuracy of the interpretations. This process contributed to the study's credibility by confirming that the reported themes genuinely reflected the lived experiences and perceptions of special education teachers.

Transferability

In this study, ensuring transferability was a central goal. Transferability describes how well a study's results can be extended to other settings or populations (Ahmed, 2024). In contrast to quantitative approaches that aim for broad generalizations, this qualitative inquiry emphasized deep exploration of the distinctive experiences of special education teachers.

To support transferability, the study provided detailed descriptions of the research setting, participant characteristics, and procedures. These rich accounts gave readers,

practitioners, and fellow researchers the context needed to judge whether the insights might be applicable to their own situations (Hammarberg et al., 2015). A purposive sampling approach was used to recruit individuals with meaningful experience teaching students identified with EBD. Snowball sampling was also employed to include participants with additional relevant insights, helping to ensure a range of perspectives. By providing detailed, contextualized findings and selecting participants capable of contributing meaningful insights, the study aimed to improve the potential for transferability, allowing others to relate the findings to their own educational settings and professional experiences.

Dependability

Dependability was a key consideration in this study. It involves the stability and consistency of research findings over time (Ahmed, 2024; Houghton et al., 2013). Like the concept of reliability in quantitative studies, dependability in qualitative research highlights the importance of transparency and the ability to replicate processes within the research design (Coleman & Dip, 2021).

To uphold dependability, the study maintained thorough documentation of its design, data collection procedures, and analytic processes. An audit trail captured a detailed account of all methodological decisions and actions taken, including participant recruitment, coding strategies, and justifications for selected approaches.

By preserving this audit trail, other researchers can follow the study's progression and replicate it within comparable settings. This level of documentation helped ensure that the findings were consistent and credible. Ultimately, the procedures supported the

generation of insights that genuinely reflected the lived experiences and perspectives of special education teachers working with students classified with EBD, while also maintaining methodological rigor.

Confirmability

In this study, confirmability was prioritized to ensure that the research outcomes accurately represented participant perspectives, independent of any researcher bias or subjectivity (Ahmed, 2024; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To support confirmability, strategies such as member checking and reflexive journaling were implemented. Through member checking, participants were given the opportunity to evaluate the findings and provide clarification or feedback, helping to verify that their views were represented accurately. Reflexive journaling, maintained throughout the research process, allowed the researcher to identify and document personal assumptions, reflections, and decision-making processes, thereby promoting transparency and reducing the influence of personal bias.

These practices aimed to strengthen the overall credibility of the findings by ensuring they genuinely reflected the self-perceptions of special education teachers working with students identified as having EBD. The inclusion of these confirmability strategies contributed to the trustworthiness and rigor of the study's qualitative findings.

Ethical Procedures

Ethical principles were rigorously upheld to protect participants, maintain research integrity, and ensure trustworthiness of the findings. The study adhered to the *Belmont Report's* (1979) principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, as

well as complying fully with Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) standards.

Respect for people was ensured through the informed consent process, providing participants with clear information about the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks. Beneficence guided efforts to minimize risks while maximizing potential benefits to participants and the broader field of special education. Justice was reflected in the equitable selection of participants, ensuring fair representation and avoiding undue burden on any group.

By adhering to these ethical principles, participants' rights and well-being were safeguarded while generating meaningful contributions to the understanding of special education teachers' self-perceptions of their effectiveness with students with EBD.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

To uphold participant confidentiality, all efforts were made to ensure privacy and maintain anonymity throughout the study. Personal identifying information was removed during the processes of data collection, analysis, and reporting. Instead, participants were given numeric labels (e.g., P1, P2, P3) to safeguard their identities. Private interview settings were used to prevent others from overhearing the discussions. Participants were informed that their involvement would not affect their professional standing or employment.

The collected data is stored securely on a USB drive protected by a password, with access limited solely to the researcher. In accordance with established ethical standards (Workers, 2008), the data will be securely retained for five years. Following

this retention period, all physical records will be destroyed by shredding, and digital files will be permanently deleted to ensure data security.

The study strictly adhered to the confidentiality protocols detailed in the informed consent form. A de-identified data set, free from any identifying information, was used throughout the research process to further protect participant privacy. These measures upheld the highest ethical standards in managing participant data, ensuring the integrity of the study, and safeguarding the rights and privacy of all participants.

Voluntary Participation and Informed Consent

Participation in this research was completely voluntary. Participants were provided with thorough explanations regarding the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, and anticipated benefits, as described in the informed consent form. The form outlined participant rights, including the option to withdraw from the study at any point without facing any consequences. Additionally, it specified the study timeline, how the data would be used, data storage protocols, and measures to ensure anonymity and confidentiality (American Psychological Association, 2017).

To allow sufficient time for review, the informed consent form was emailed to each participant at least 24 hours before their scheduled interview. Prior to beginning each session, the researcher confirmed receipt of the form and reviewed its content verbally, ensuring participants understood its terms and had the opportunity to raise any questions before proceeding. These procedures ensured that all participants were fully informed and provided voluntary consent. By adhering to these ethical research

standards, participant rights were safeguarded, trust in the research process was fostered, and the highest standards of ethical conduct were upheld.

Minimization of Harm

Due to the sensitive nature of exploring perceptions of teaching effectiveness, especially in relation to students identified with EBD, efforts were made to foster a safe and supportive environment throughout the research process. Participants were encouraged to share openly and were given multiple opportunities to voice any concerns or ask questions before, during, and after their interviews. They were assured that their involvement was entirely voluntary, their identities would remain confidential, and that participation would not negatively impact their professional standing or employment. Participants were assured that participation was voluntary, confidential, and carried no risk to their professional reputation or employment. The study adhered to strict ethical protocols, ensuring privacy and confidentiality while prioritizing the well-being of participants. These measures mitigated potential risks and promoted a safe, respectful, and supportive research experience.

Reflexivity and Researcher Bias

Given my prior professional background with students classified as having EBD, intentional strategies were implemented to reduce the potential for bias. To support objectivity, bracketing methods, such as reflective journaling and memo writing, were used throughout the study. These practices ensured that the analysis reflected the authentic experiences of participants, rather than being shaped by the researcher's assumptions or prior knowledge.

Member Checking

At the end of the research process, participants were given the opportunity to examine a summary of the study's results as part of the member-checking procedure. This step enabled them to verify that their viewpoints were accurately conveyed and to offer any corrections or additional input. Incorporating member checking supported the trustworthiness of the findings by helping to ensure that the data genuinely reflected participants lived experiences and insights.

IRB Approval

Before any data were collected, the researcher received formal authorization (approval number 03-19-25-1051242) from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB). This authorization confirmed that all ethical protocols were followed and that participant rights, confidentiality, and well-being were safeguarded throughout the study. The IRB's evaluation affirmed that the study's methodology and procedures adhered to ethical standards and demonstrated a commitment to participant safety and autonomy.

Summary

This chapter detailed the methodology used to investigate how special education teachers perceive their teaching effectiveness when working with students classified with EBD. A qualitative approach was adopted, utilizing a descriptive design to gather rich, detailed data through semi-structured interviews. This method allowed for a deep exploration of teachers' experiences, challenges, and strategies. Participants were

selected using both purposive and snowball sampling techniques from two public school districts in Central Texas, ensuring diversity and relevance within the sample.

The researcher functioned as the primary data collection instrument, integrating reflective practices such as journaling and memoing to mitigate bias. Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke, guided the data analysis process, with support from MAXQDA software to code and identify emergent themes and patterns. Rigor was maintained through established qualitative criteria, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Ethical standards were strictly followed, including voluntary consent, confidentiality, and minimizing potential harm. Participants were provided with full study details and received a $15 gift card as a token of appreciation. The use of member checking and post-interview debriefing further contributed to the study's ethical integrity and strengthened the trustworthiness of the findings.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was secured from Walden University prior to initiating data collection. The methodological framework employed in this study was designed to uphold rigorous ethical standards while facilitating the generation of in-depth and meaningful insights into how special education teachers perceive and experience their work with students identified as having EBD.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

This chapter presents the primary findings derived from semi-structured interviews conducted with special education teachers working in two public school districts located in Central Texas. Participants were selected based on their direct involvement with students identified as having EBD. To supplement recruitment, snowball sampling was utilized. Eligible individuals had a minimum of one year of firsthand experience teaching students with EBD in public elementary schools (grades K–5). Each participant completed a comprehensive, in-person interview that lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. The research was guided by a single research question: *How do special education teachers perceive their teaching effectiveness with students classified with EBD?*

The study employed Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis method, which was supported by MAXQDA software for coding and memoing. Data analysis included initial coding, initial themes, final theme development, and iterative review to ensure accurate representation of participants' perspectives. Measures to ensure trustworthiness were embedded throughout the study, including member checking and reflective journaling to enhance credibility and confirmability. The chapter is organized by seven key themes that emerged from the data: (1) Building Effective Relationships and Student Engagement, (2) Individualized and Flexible Behavioral Supports, (3) Professional Growth and Support Systems, (4) Systemic Challenges and Needs, (5) Emotional and Occupational Well-being of Teachers, (6) Structured Classroom Practices

and Accountability, and (7) Motivation and Success Metrics. Each theme is introduced with a summary and supported by direct quotations from the participants, ensuring that the voices of the teachers remain central to the analysis.

Setting

This study was conducted across two independent public-school districts located in Central Texas. These districts serve a wide range of students and include programs that support children with EBD in elementary settings. The decision to focus on Central Texas was grounded in my proximity to possible participants, the availability of varied educational programs and the presence of established behavioral intervention programs within public K–5 schools. This environment provided a rich backdrop for exploring how special education teachers perceive their effectiveness when working with students classified with EBD, particularly within inclusive and resource-supported instructional models.

Within each district, the schools included in the study reflected both suburban and semi-rural community dynamics, with student populations comprising a mix of socioeconomic, racial, and linguistic backgrounds. This diversity ensured that participants' perspectives were positioned within classrooms serving a broad spectrum of needs. School settings varied in access to behavior specialists, administrative structures, and levels of general education inclusion, highlighting how context shapes teaching approaches and perceived effectiveness. These conditions offered a framework for understanding special educators' experiences with students whose behavioral and

emotional challenges often demand tailored interventions and greater teacher responsiveness.

Demographics

This study included eight certified special education teachers from public elementary schools in two Central Texas districts. They brought diverse professional backgrounds and years of experience, with some transitioning from general education and others holding specialized training in behavioral support. Their roles spanned resource, inclusion, and self-contained settings, with several managing behavior support classrooms or working in collaborative teams. This diversity in training, classroom context, and service enriched the data and supported the emergence of nuanced themes related to teacher effectiveness, behavioral intervention, and student engagement.

Data Collection

Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted using a semi-structured protocol developed to gather rich, detailed narratives about participants' perceptions of their teaching effectiveness. The protocol included open-ended questions (Appendix) that were directly tied to the study's research questions, offering the flexibility to explore responses in greater depth. To ensure accuracy, interviews were audio-recorded with two digital devices for backup, and supplementary field notes were used to capture nonverbal cues and contextual details. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and then reviewed by the researcher to ensure accuracy. Participants were later invited to validate their responses to uphold the credibility and trustworthiness of the data. To ensure data integrity and credibility, participants were invited to review

summaries of their transcripts as part of a member-checking process, allowing them to confirm or clarify their responses. Each of the eight participants was provided with a copy of their interview transcript via email and invited to review and verify the content for accuracy. Five participants confirmed the accuracy of their transcripts, and one participant provided additional clarification. Two participants did not respond to the member checking request. While the lack of response from these two individuals may slightly limit the completeness of verification, their original transcripts were retained in full and analyzed consistently with the verified data. The lack of verification from these participants did not appear to compromise the overall integrity of the thematic analysis.

Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data, offering a structured and robust method for identifying, exploring, and interpreting patterns within qualitative research. The initial phase of the analysis involved deep engagement with the data, which included multiple readings of the interview transcripts, examination of field notes, and careful listening to the audio recordings to enhance familiarity and contextual understanding. Initial observations and reflective memos were documented to capture emerging impressions and real-life teaching environments.

Next, I generated initial codes using MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software that facilitated the systematic organization and labeling of meaningful data segments.

These codes captured noteworthy features of the data related to the research question: The generated codes represented key aspects of the data aligned with the research question: “How do special education teachers perceive their teaching effectiveness with students classified with EBD?” These codes were systematically reviewed and organized into broader conceptual categories, which facilitated the development of preliminary themes and subthemes. Through an iterative process, these emerging themes were refined to maintain clarity and consistency. During the final stage of analysis, themes were finalized and labeled to best represent participants’ experiences. This thorough approach to thematic analysis supported the generation of evidence-informed themes that captured the complex perspectives of special education teachers working with students with EBD.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

To uphold the rigor and trustworthiness of this qualitative inquiry, several techniques were applied to address four essential criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was addressed by maintaining prolonged engagement with participants during semi-structured interviews. In addition, member checking was utilized, allowing participants the chance to review and affirm the accuracy of summaries of their interview transcripts. This process helped ensure that participants' perspectives were genuinely captured.

Transferability was supported by providing thick, rich descriptions of the research context, participant demographics, and educational settings, allowing readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar environments. Dependability was

addressed using an audit trail, including detailed documentation of the data collection procedures, coding decisions, and analytical processes in MAXQDA. This level of transparency enables the study to be replicated or critically reviewed. Finally, confirmability was strengthened through reflexive practices, which helped the researcher identify and mitigate personal biases throughout the study. Collectively, these measures ensured that the findings were grounded in the data, methodologically sound, and reflective of the experiences of special education teachers working with students with EBD.

Results

Theme Development Process

Seven central themes were identified through Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, reflecting participants lived experiences, instructional beliefs, systemic barriers, and professional insights. These themes arose inductively from the qualitative data and were firmly rooted in detailed, descriptive codes, each substantiated by direct quotations from participants. The thematic analysis process adhered to Braun and Clarke's structured six-step methodology:

Phase 1: Familiarization With the Data

I initiated the analysis by transcribing each interview and engaging in repeated readings to gain a comprehensive grasp of the material. Throughout this stage, I created initial notes to document emotional cues, key discussion points, and emerging patterns associated with the participants' experiences instructing students identified with EBD.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

I coded the data manually using line-by-line analysis which included the use of the MAXQDA program. Segments of the interviews were labeled to capture meaningful aspects of the participants' experiences. Examples of initial codes included: "lack of formal EBD training," "relationship-building as foundation," "systemic staffing gaps," "burnout and emotional toll," and "success as small wins."

Phase 3: Searching for Themes

I grouped the initial codes into potential themes based on conceptual similarities and their relevance to the research question. For example, codes related to trust, emotional connection, and rapport were grouped under an emerging theme on relationship-building. Similarly, codes such as adaptability, meeting students' basic needs as foundational practice, and trauma-informed supports contributed to a theme on flexible behavioral supports.

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

I revised the themes through iterative review to ensure coherence and alignment with the coded data. Some themes were consolidated (e.g., combining proactive supports and flexibility under *Individualized and Flexible Behavioral Supports*), while others were restructured or removed based on limited supporting data.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

I clearly defined the themes and their meanings to ensure clear and consistent meaning. The theme naming process aimed to capture both the analytical meaning and the participants' language. For example, the theme *Motivation and Success Measures* was

developed to reflect how educators redefined success beyond conventional academic standards. I carefully explained each theme and made sure their meanings were clear and easy to understand by reviewing and adjusting how they were defined.

Phase 6: Producing the Report

The final seven themes are presented below with descriptive summaries and participant quotes. These themes reflect a multidimensional understanding of teaching effectiveness with students identified with EBD, encompassing instructional strategies, emotional resilience, systemic obstacles, and personal philosophies.

Theme 1: Building Effective Relationships and Student Engagement

All participants emphasized the importance of authentic, trust-based relationships in supporting students identified with EBD. Relationship-building was described not as a supplementary tool, but as the foundation for emotional regulation, classroom participation, and behavioral growth. Participant 2 said, “If you don't have rapport with those kids, you're not going to get anywhere.” Participant 1 emphasized: “Having to build relationships – work on communication.” In a similar vein, Participant 7 noted that “Those students are the ones that stick with you the longest… that satisfaction is everything” (Participant 7). “Build in time to talk with my parents every day” advised Participant 4, while Participant 3 stated, “It’s connection – I’m a safe person for them.”

Theme 2: Individualized and Flexible Behavioral Supports

Participants reported that behavior support strategies must be tailored to students’ individual needs, histories, and emotional profiles. Flexibility and responsiveness, rather than rigid implementation of plans, were viewed as critical to effectiveness. As

Participant 8 explained, “What works for one kid will not work for the next,” further noting the value of “frequent check-ins in the mornings just to kind of catch the tone of the day.” Participant 5 highlighted the importance of sensitivity in interactions, reflecting, “You learn what not to say… what not to do with my voice.” Similarly, Participant 1 described the practice of “setting goals at the beginning of each session” as a means of fostering structure and focus. Participant 4 emphasized the foundational role of attending to students’ immediate needs, stating, “Ensuring what their basic needs are before you ever try to move on.”

Theme 3: Professional Growth and Support Systems

Professional learning was primarily described as experiential, reflective, and mentorship driven. Participants expressed frustration with the lack of formal preparation for working with students with EBD and emphasized the importance of collaborative and administrative support. “Participant 1 reflected, “All the way through my doctorate, I never took a class on EBD,” while Participant 3 emphasized the importance of on-the-job support, stating, “I'm needing a behavior coach to come in, I'm needing you to help me assess the student.” For others, professional growth was tied to years of practice, as Participant 2 observed, “After you have taught for multiple years – you start to get a lot more tools under your belt.” Beyond skill acquisition, Participant 7 highlighted the personal satisfaction derived from relationship-building, noting, “You hear from their parents that they feel connected to you… it’s incredibly satisfying.” “Administration are extremely supportive…admin presence has been really encouraging.” (Participant 6)

Theme 4: Systemic Challenges and Needs

Teachers voiced concern over systemic inadequacies such as staffing shortages, inconsistent district policies, and insufficient mental health resources. These structural limitations were described as ongoing barriers to effective teaching. Participant 6 explained, “I’m expected to be like a mental health counselor with no mental health resources – no mental health training,” while Participant 5 emphasized the persistent challenge of “not having the amount of people you need to support.” Inconsistencies across districts were also highlighted, as Participant 2 noted, “Every district that I've been to is so drastically different.” The importance of adequate paraprofessional support was underscored by Participant 8, who stated, “Staffed to meet the needs… like a massive amount of paraprofessionals because they are the backbone of this whole thing.” Participant 7 further pointed to the consequences of systemic disconnects, observing that “students often receive mixed signals.”

Theme 5: Emotional and Occupational Well-Being of Teachers

Participants described the emotional toll of their work, including stress, exhaustion, and burnout. Despite the challenges, many maintained a keen sense of purpose and resilience, often supported by collegial relationships and a shared mission. “As Participant 5 shared, “It impacts my well-being for sure… hard to go home and continue to process emotions and be a healthy mom.” The physical and emotional strain of working with students identified with EBD was also underscored, with Participant 6 noting, “A lot of days that there’s real injuries… very emotional, it’s very stressful.” Despite these challenges, many teachers highlighted resilience and a sense of purpose,

often grounded in collegial support. Participant 4 observed, “When you have a team… it’s a lot easier to come back to work the next day, even if you have a black eye,” while also noting the unique burdens of behavior-focused teaching: “It’s worrying about a kid… control their temper tonight or are they gonna go to jail.” Participant 7 emphasized the need for thoughtful de-escalation strategies, cautioning that “offering alternative options for quick de-escalation that deviate significantly from established classroom expectations can be counterproductive.” Still, moments of progress sustained many teachers, as Participant 5 expressed: “Tiny successes… even just like a small smile… that reminds me that like what I’m doing is important.”

Theme 6: Structured Classroom Practices and Accountability

Maintaining predictable routines, consistent expectations, and emotionally neutral responses were seen as critical components of effective classroom management for students identified with EBD. These structures created a sense of safety and stability for both students and teachers. Participant 6 described the importance of “structure, stability, flexibility… they know exactly what to expect when they come to school.” Similarly, Participant 4 discussed striving for fidelity within their program through “training staff” and “reviewing yourself at the end of the day through reflection.” Participant 7 highlighted the value of establishing clear expectations, noting that they “must be integrated within a consistent framework to avoid inadvertently escalating behavior.” Others emphasized growth and dignity as critical outcomes of structured support; Participant 8 reflected on “having [students] realize the growth within themselves,” while

Participant 5 explained the practice of "calmly reminding them of things that we'd agreed upon… you can do this in private, keeping their dignity."

Theme 7: Motivation and Success Metrics

Participants reported redefining success to include emotional growth, improved regulation, and meaningful student connections. Small victories, such as de-escalation, peer interaction, or a reduction in aggression, were celebrated as evidence of progress. Participant 4 illustrated this perspective by noting, "You cussed me out, but you didn't hit me," while Participant 5 reflected on the long-term gains of one student who, after two years of work to identify triggers, was "playing basketball on the playground with his peers." Participant 1 emphasized how progress could take the form of shifting strategies, stating, "This year, actually getting to a root and using a different approach is now a new level of success." Others highlighted the joy in witnessing students achieve personal milestones: Participant 6 shared, "To see the look on their face when they meet some of those goals," and Participant 2 described the pride in seeing a student choose restraint, recalling, "He walked away… good feeling that he trusted me giving him advice and actually took it – in the past he had never done something like that, especially when a kid was provoking him.")

Summary

The analysis revealed seven central themes that collectively offer a nuanced understanding of how special education teachers interpret and implement effective instructional practices for students identified with EBD. The findings illustrated a profession grounded in empathy, flexibility, and ongoing challenges within educational

systems. These insights emphasize the emotionally intensive nature of teaching students with EBD and demonstrate that teacher effectiveness is intricately connected to relationship-building, adaptive methods, and contextual support mechanisms.

Teachers described success not solely in academic terms but also through small behavioral improvements, emotional growth, and the development of meaningful student connections. Despite persistent challenges such as staffing shortages, limited mental health infrastructure, and personal burnout, participants demonstrated resilience and a belief in the transformative potential of relationships and empathy.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

This study was guided by Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, which served as the foundation for its conceptual framework. The research aimed to explore the internal beliefs and external factors influencing how special education teachers perceive, engage with, and evaluate their instructional practices when working with students classified as having EBD. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with eight special education teachers, providing in-depth insights into how these professionals construct their understanding of teaching effectiveness.

The findings provide insight into the reciprocal relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and the real-world context of teaching students identified with EBD. Consistent with Bandura's (1986, 1997) triadic reciprocal determinism, participants reported that their perceived success was influenced not only by personal competence but also by environmental factors such as administrative support, professional development, and the behavioral complexities of students. The study highlighted a range of teaching experiences, strategies, and emotional responses that collectively shaped teachers' beliefs about their own effectiveness.

This chapter presents an analysis of the primary findings, explores identified challenges, and offers targeted suggestions for both practical application and future scholarly inquiry. It also highlights key considerations for education policy and the development of teacher training programs. The discussion is anchored in the study's

theoretical foundation and related literature, emphasizing the unique contributions this research makes toward understanding TSE in relation to special education and EBD.

Interpretation of the Findings

Using Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory as a conceptual framework, the analysis revealed that TSE, comprising beliefs about their ability to manage behaviors, engage students, and deliver instruction effectively, was central to their perceptions of effectiveness. The thematic findings suggest that teaching students identified with EBD is not only a pedagogical endeavor but also an experience marked by emotional intensity and ambiguity, shaped by individual student needs, and strongly influenced by environmental factors.

One of the most prominent themes, Building Effective Relationships and Student Engagement, affirmed that special education teachers believe positive, trusting relationships with students are essential for instructional success. Participants consistently emphasized that student progress often hinges on the teacher's ability to create a safe and emotionally supportive environment. This supports earlier findings that teacher-student rapport is particularly vital when working with students exhibiting behavioral or emotional dysregulation (Hopman et al., 2018; Yoder & Williford, 2019). According to Bandura (1997), such interpersonal dynamics contribute to enactive mastery experiences, where repeated successful interactions reinforce self-efficacy. When students respond positively, academically, or behaviorally, teachers experience validation and develop confidence in their instructional strategies.

The theme of Individualized and Flexible Behavioral Supports emphasized how participants adapted interventions based on students' needs, using pre-teaching and proximity control strategies, sensory tools, restorative approaches, and trauma-informed care. Participants highlighted that rigid, one-size-fits-all approaches were ineffective for students identified with EBD. These findings algin with the significance of teacher adaptability, a core component of self-efficacy related to problem-solving and instructional autonomy (Poulou et al., 2019). Teachers with higher levels of self-efficacy are more likely to implement differentiated strategies and maintain behavioral expectations even in challenging circumstances (Yin et al., 2023).

Another core theme, Professional Growth and Support Systems, highlighted that efficacy was also linked to collaborative learning environments and perceived professional validation. Participants reported that mentorship, administrative backing, and peer collaboration reinforced their confidence. This aligns with Bandura's (1997) concept of vicarious experiences and verbal persuasion as sources of efficacy development, observing others succeed and receiving credible encouragement can increase one's sense of competence. However, inconsistent professional development and a lack of training specific to EBD were recurrent concerns. This supports research by Gilmour et al. (2022), who noted that many special educators feel underprepared due to gaps in preservice preparation and ongoing support.

The theme of Systemic Challenges and Needs revealed that structural barriers, such as insufficient staffing, unclear behavioral frameworks, and general education settings unprepared for inclusion, often undermined teacher efficacy. Participants

described feeling overwhelmed by demands that exceeded their capacity, which contributed to emotional fatigue and doubts about their impact. These stressors mirror Bandura's (1986) assertion that adverse environmental influences can erode self-efficacy, particularly when personal or institutional resources are limited. Research by Bettini et al. (2020) and Brunsting et al. (2024) further supports this, indicating that systemic issues like caseload overload and lack of planning time are strong predictors of special educator burnout and attrition.

Lastly, the themes Emotional and Occupational Well-being and Structured Classroom Practices illustrate the dual reality of teaching students identified with EBD: teachers experience emotional strain but also derive professional satisfaction from small victories and meaningful relationships. Participants emphasized routines, restorative discipline, and student accountability as essential for fostering growth-oriented environments. These findings reaffirm that teachers who perceive themselves as effective are often those who manage to manage emotional involvement with proactive classroom planning, a key feature of TSE (Sawyer et al., 2023).

In conclusion, the findings underscore that TSE is a dynamic construct shaped by a confluence of emotional, instructional, and contextual influences. In line with Bandura's (1986) triadic reciprocal causation, teachers' confidence in their teaching effectiveness emerged from the mutual influence between personal resilience, demonstrated student progress, supportive institutional frameworks, and the behavioral intricacies of students identified with EBD. When these factors are aligned, teachers reported a keen sense of efficacy and professional fulfillment. Conversely, when

discrepancies arose, such as limited support, persistent student challenges, or inadequate resources, teachers' self-efficacy was diminished, often resulting in emotional strain and uncertainty about their effectiveness.

Limitations of the Study

As is common in qualitative research, this investigation is subject to certain limitations that may affect how its findings are interpreted and applied in other contexts. The study drew upon a small, localized sample consisting of eight special education teachers from two districts in Central Texas. Although purposeful and snowball sampling techniques supported the selection of participants with rich, relevant experiences, the limited sample size and geographic scope may constrain the extent to which the findings can be generalized to wider populations of special education professionals in varied settings.

Second, the reliance on self-reported data from semi-structured interviews introduces the potential for response bias. Participants may have presented themselves in a favorable light or may have been influenced by social approval bias, particularly when discussing their teaching effectiveness or perceptions of professional support. Although member checking was employed to enhance credibility, the possibility remains that some insights were shaped by reflective interpretation or selective memory.

Third, the researcher's role as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, while consistent with qualitative traditions, may also introduce subjective interpretation. Despite the use of reflexive journaling and memoing to bracket personal biases, the findings are inevitably filtered through the researcher’s lens. This subjectivity

underscores the importance of transparency in coding and theme development processes, which were guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method and supported by MAXQDA software.

Finally, this study focused exclusively on special education teachers' perceptions and did not incorporate triangulation with other data sources such as classroom observations, student outcome data, or administrative perspectives. As a result, the findings reflect teachers' beliefs and experiences but cannot confirm the actual efficacy or impact of the teaching strategies described.

These limitations are acknowledged to provide context, not to undermine the study's contributions, but to provide context for understanding its scope and to guide future research efforts that might expand or validate these findings in broader or more diverse settings.

Recommendations

Drawing from both the results and identified limitations of this study, a series of recommendations is provided for special education and general education teachers, school leaders, and future researchers. These suggestions aim to support improved instructional practices and promote the overall well-being of special educators working with students who exhibit EBD.

- *Enhance Targeted Professional Development*: School districts should prioritize ongoing, evidence-based training specifically tailored to managing the behavioral and emotional needs of students identified with EBD. Workshops should include practical techniques for de-escalation, experiential

learning, trauma-informed care, and differentiated instruction. Peer modeling and coaching can serve as valuable tools for improving TSE.

- *Strengthening Administrative and Peer Support*: Building a collaborative and supportive school culture is essential. Administrators should ensure that special education teachers have access to consistent mentorship, mental health resources, and opportunities for collaborative planning. Teachers indicated that feeling heard and supported by leadership enhanced their emotional resilience and instructional confidence.
- *Integrate Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Practices*: Teachers should be provided with SEL resources and training that not only benefit students identified with EBD but also support teacher well-being. Embedding SEL into daily instruction can reduce student behavioral incidents and increase engagement.
- *Address Staffing Shortages and Workload Demands*: Policymakers and district leaders must address the systemic challenges of insufficient staffing and high caseloads in special education. Providing adequate paraeducator support and manageable teacher-to-student ratios will mitigate burnout and improve classroom outcomes.
- *Include Teacher Voice in Program Development*: Teachers should be involved in shaping school- and district-wide behavioral intervention frameworks. Their lived experiences offer valuable insights into what works and what does not work in the classroom context.

- *Expand Research with Mixed Methods Approaches*: Future research should consider mixed-methods studies that incorporate observational data, student performance indicators, and broader geographic representation. This would help validate and extend the findings of this study and provide a more comprehensive understanding of teaching effectiveness.

These recommendations were designed to enhance TSE, improve the educational experiences of students identified with EBD, and reduce the professional attrition that currently plagues special education settings.

Implications

The results of this study yield valuable insights into educational policy, instructional practice, teacher training, and future investigations. Gaining an understanding of how special education teachers interpret their instructional effectiveness when working with students identified with EBD offers essential knowledge regarding the types of support and systemic adjustments required to enhance outcomes for both educators and learners. These findings are interpreted through the lens of Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, which posits that individuals' beliefs in their abilities shape their thought patterns, emotions, and behaviors.

Implications for Practice

The study's findings suggest that increasing TSE requires more than general training; it necessitates intentional, context-specific, and ongoing professional development that is closely aligned with the realities of teaching students identified with EBD. Teachers repeatedly expressed that their confidence grew when they received

relevant training or experienced success managing difficult behaviors, consistent with Bandura's (1997) principle of enactive mastery. Training should focus on the utility of functional behavior assessments, trauma-informed practices, restorative approaches, and emotional regulation strategies for both students and teachers (Poulou et al., 2019; Gale et al., 2021). School leaders should prioritize creating supportive environments that reinforce teachers' professional growth and sense of competence (Yin et al., 2023).

Implications for Policy

The results point to the importance of addressing systemic challenges such as understaffing, high caseloads, and a lack of emotional and instructional support, which have been shown to undermine teacher efficacy and contribute to burnout (Bettini et al., 2020). Educational policy must recognize the demanding nature of working with students identified with EBD and implement systemic changes to ensure sufficient resources, mental health support, and time for teacher collaboration. As Bandura (1986) emphasized, an individual's behavior is not shaped in isolation but through a reciprocal interaction with the environment and personal factors underscoring the importance of institutional support.

Implications for Teacher Preparation Programs

Institutions responsible for preparing special education teachers should integrate more hands-on, immersive experiences with students who exhibit emotional and behavioral challenges. These real-world contexts are essential for helping preservice teachers build self-efficacy through direct experiences, observational learning, and supportive feedback which are key mechanisms described by Bandura (1997) and

supported by recent research on teacher development (Alibakhshi et al., 2020; Sawyer et al., 2023). University-based teacher preparation programs should provide reflective practices that encourage preservice teachers to continually assess their growth and align their instructional style with confidence in handling challenging student behaviors.

Implications for Research

This study contributes to a growing body of qualitative work examining special education teachers' self-perceptions, but future research should expand on this foundation. Longitudinal studies exploring changes in self-efficacy over time, mixed-methods studies incorporating student outcome data, and studies comparing novice versus veteran special education teachers may offer additional insights (Mathews et al., 2023; Brunsting et al., 2024). Furthermore, research should explore contextually appropriate strategies to understand how teachers' beliefs and efficacy present across diverse populations and educational contexts.

Conclusion

This qualitative study explored how special education teachers perceive their teaching effectiveness when working with students classified with EBD. Using Bandura's self-efficacy theory as a conceptual lens, the study uncovered how personal beliefs, contextual factors, and behavioral strategies intersect to influence teachers' sense of competence and instructional success. The research question: *How do special education teachers perceive their teaching effectiveness with students classified with EBD?* was addressed through rich narratives collected from eight special education teachers. The

analysis revealed seven major themes that reflect a combination of inner determination, system-level barriers, and increasing professional confidence.

Key findings illustrated that self-efficacy is supported by factors such as mastery experiences in behavioral management, peer and administrative collaboration, and recognition of incremental student progress, concepts closely aligned with Bandura's (1997) sources of efficacy development. Teachers described both the emotional toll and intrinsic rewards of working with students identified with EBD, highlighting the importance of individualized support, structured routines, and trauma-informed approaches. These insights support prior research indicating that self-efficacy predicts instructional quality, teacher persistence, and student outcomes (Sawyer et al., 2023; Yin et al., 2023).

However, the findings also revealed ongoing structural challenges. Recurring obstacles included insufficient staffing, limited opportunities for specialized training, and a lack of alignment between general education environments and the unique needs of students identified with EBD. These conditions not only threaten continuity in teaching methods but can also diminish teachers' confidence and increase emotional exhaustion (Bettini et al., 2020; Brunsting et al., 2024). The implications for teacher training programs, district policies, and school-level practices are significant: educators must be provided with tailored resources, mentoring opportunities, and emotionally safe work environments to sustain their sense of efficacy and prevent burnout.

Ultimately, this study affirms that special education teachers are deeply reflective practitioners who demonstrate adaptability and commitment in the face of adversity.

Their voices provide a crucial roadmap for designing professional development, support systems, and policy reforms that address both the practical and emotional dimensions of teaching students identified with EBD. Moving forward, strengthening TSE through sustained systemic support may not only enhance educator well-being but also improve outcomes for one of the most vulnerable student populations in today's classrooms.

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Appendix: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Special Education Teachers' Perceptions of Their Teaching Effectiveness with Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD)

Introduction:

Thank you for participating in this study. This interview will explore your experiences, challenges, and perceptions of effectiveness in teaching students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD). Your insights will contribute to understanding how special education teachers can be better supported.

This interview is semi-structured, meaning I have guiding questions, but you are encouraged to share additional thoughts and experiences. This session will last approximately one hour, and your responses will remain confidential. You may choose not to answer any question and are free to stop the interview at any time.

Background and Teaching Experience

1. Can you describe your journey into special education and what led you to work with students with EBD?
2. What does a successful day in your classroom with students with EBD look like?

Perceptions of Teaching Effectiveness

3. How do you define your own teaching effectiveness when working with students with EBD?
4. Can you share a specific experience where you felt particularly effective in helping a student with EBD succeed? What made that moment stand out?

5. Conversely, can you describe a time when you felt ineffective in working with a student with EBD? What were the key challenges?

Challenges and Support

6. What are the biggest challenges you face in teaching students with EBD, and how do you typically address them?
7. What types of support, whether from colleagues, administration, or professional development, have had the greatest impact on your teaching?

Self-Efficacy and Growth

8. How has your confidence in teaching students with EBD changed over time?
9. If you could design the perfect professional development session tailored to teaching students with EBD, what would it include?

Teacher Well-Being and Retention

10. How does working with students with EBD impact your job satisfaction and overall well-being?
11. What keeps you motivated to continue working with this student population?
12. If you could change one thing about how schools support special education teachers working with EBD students, what would it be and why?

Conclusion

Thank you for sharing your experiences and insights. Before we conclude, is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences instructing students with EBD?