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An Exploratory Case Study: Persistence and Retention of Students in an Alternative High School

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Abstract

An Exploratory Case Study: Persistence and Retention of Students with Emotional Behavioral Disorders in an Alternative High School

by

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MEd, University of West Georgia

BS, Kennesaw State University

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Students with emotional behavioral disorders (EBD) are at greater risk for dropping out of high school than other students, and are likely to experience fewer employment options and more societal marginalization. Alternative schools have been viewed as a last chance and best option for educating many students with EBD who have not actually been diagnosed. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore persistence and retention in the alternative school setting for students who may or may not have been diagnosed with EBD. Students in this study will be referred to as EBD. Although they have not been formally diagnosed, all of the students suffered with symptoms of emotional and behavioral disorders. Interview and observational data were examined through the theoretical lens of the Bandura's theory of self-efficacy and Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. The research questions focused on the meaning of academic persistence for students in an alternative school, the institutional efforts to retain students, and the processes and consequences to improve student engagement and retention. Seven teachers and administrators from an alternative school in Georgia were interviewed, and analysis and interpretation of data from the interviews, observations, and field notes revealed five major themes: support, acknowledgment for incremental gains, struggle to focus, and we are family. These results indicated that some of the most challenging students can persist when they are provided with support (parental, academic, emotional, and community), and future longitudinal research is needed on students' post-high school functioning. The results also showed the need for systemic changes that include formal assessments and diagnoses because access to psychological services are not provided until students have been properly diagnosed.

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Dedication

It was during my research for Chapter 2 when I realized that my dissertation was about my younger brother, Melvin and students like him. Although he will never get to read this dissertation nor congratulate me, I know that he would be proud. This one is for him and the graduation he never experienced.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I want to thank God for allowing me to have the most supportive family one could ask for throughout this journey and transformation. Thank you to my husband Chris, and my beautiful daughters, Zoë and Alani, for putting up with my constant distractions that pulled me away at times. Thank you for your sacrifice. I am eternally grateful for my amazing and supportive committee chairperson, Dr. Susan Marcus. Your expertise and compassion kept me on track when my personal life made it difficult to focus. The encouragement along the way and kind words of support made this possible. Thank you! To all who said “you can do this”, you were right! Thank you for your support, it made a difference.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Emotional behavioral disorder (EBD) is an emotional disability in children and adolescents characterized by an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers, parents, and teachers (Council for Exceptional Children, 2017). Students with EBD have an inability to learn that does not result from intellectual, sensory, or health factors. These students have chronic inappropriate behaviors or feelings under normal conditions, display pervasive moods of unhappiness or depression, and have serious challenges regarding their ability to graduate from high school, further their education, and get good jobs (Newman, Wagner, Cameto, Knokey, & Shaver, 2010). This diagnostic category is associated with a growing societal problem shown in the escalated incarceration and unemployment numbers (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, & Levine, 2005).

Students with diagnosed EBD have the highest dropout rate of any disability group. The national average dropout rate for students with other disabilities hovers around 38%, while the percentage for students with EBD ranges from 44% to 61% (U.S. Department of Education, 2004; Wagner et al. 2005). These adolescents pose a heavy burden on schools, health services, and society. Without a high school diploma or the equivalent, post-secondary education is not an option. The lack of a high school diploma also limits opportunities for employment and skills training (Wagner et al. 2005). Research has shown that students with EBD who drop out of high school are at greater

risk for illegal activities. More than 60% of EBD student dropouts are arrested within four years of leaving school, (Newman et al. 2010).

Students in this study will be referred to as EBD although they have not been formally diagnosed because students with EBD issues are often not diagnosed and go to schools and alternative schools with these problems, and do not receive treatment. However, all of the students described by participants' displayed symptoms and outcomes of emotional and behavioral disorders. Participants' descriptions of students' display of emotional behavioral issues aligned with the definition of EBD.

Some diagnosed and undiagnosed EBD students who are not successful in traditional school settings attend alternative schools to complete their high school credits for graduation. It is worthwhile to look closer at alternative school settings for a better understanding of persistence and retention as they relate to EBD students. In this chapter, I will summarize the pertinent literature. I will also discuss the research problem, purpose of the study, literature gap, research questions, methods for addressing those research questions, and relevant key terms.

Background

EBD characterized by excesses, deficits, or disturbances of behavior that interfere with learning and maintaining relationships. Students with EBD have the highest dropout rate of any disability group. The national average dropout rate for students with other disabilities hovers around 38%, while the percentage for students with EBD ranges from 44% to 61% (U.S. Department of Education, 2004; Wagner et al. 2006). EBD

classifications range from emotional disturbance to deviant behavior. There is a range of EBD that is classified as deviant behavior; which adversely affects student academic performance (Cooper, 1996). Adolescents with EBD are more prone to higher rates of absenteeism, in-school and out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, lower academic performance, and higher dropout rates than their non-EBD peers (National Center on Education Statistics, 2005; Levy & Chard, 2001).

One major challenge in successfully educating students with EBD is that researchers and clinical practitioners have not yet developed a valid process to assess and diagnose EBD (Newman et al. 2010). Only a small percentage of EBD students receive the services and educational resources they need to be successful in school settings and social relationships (Kaufman & Landrum, 2009). Consequently, EBD students often perform consistently and significantly lower than the expected grade levels for regular education in all subjects (Ennis & Jolivette, 2012). These students also have lower performance than other groups with disabilities. However, learning disabled (LD) students and students with EBD often perform similarly on assessments that measure academic achievement (Anderson, 2001). Without added behavioral and academic support, EBD students have disadvantages that could derail any aspirations of graduating high school. Approximately 61% of students with EBD dropout of high school and only 32% complete high school compared to national graduation rate of 75% of students (National Center on Education Statistics, 2005; Newman et al. 2010).

In addition to academic differences and challenges for students with undiagnosed and diagnosed EBD, disciplinary challenges are ongoing issues that interfere with learning and achievement. Researchers have found that 47% of EBD students have been suspended or expelled before beginning high school. During high school years, approximately 73% of EBD students receive these consequences. In comparison, about 3% of regular education high school students have been expelled. After expulsion, some students have the option of attending schools in other districts or alternative schools in the original district, depending on the school districts' regulations and protocols (SRI International, 2006; Wagner, Kutash, Duchnowski, Epstein, & Sumi, 2005).

Although, alternative schools were designed to foster and strengthen student-teacher relationships for the purpose of academic and personal success, many of the students who attend are still struggling, failing to meet graduation requirements, and/or dropping out. These facts are indicative of lingering questions about exactly what contributes to improving retention and graduation of the EBD student population (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990; Raywid, 1989; Wehlage & Rutter, 1987; Wehlage et al. 1989; Young, 1990).

Problem Statement

There was a lack of published research examining how students experience academic success (Lane & Carter, 2006). Also missing from the literature was how persistence and retention of students with diagnosed and undiagnosed EBD is experienced in alternative school settings. Stakeholders' understanding how students with

EBD, in alternative schools, experience persistence and retention, will contribute to addressing a socially relevant problem. Economic analyses consistently indicated that high school dropouts earned approximately $9,200 less, annually, than high school graduates, and that they were more than twice as likely to live consistently at or below the national poverty level (National Center on Education Statistics, 2005). These adolescents pose a heavy burden on schools and health services, especially when they are educationally underserved. More than 60% of EBD student dropouts are arrested within 4 years of leaving school (Newman et al. 2010). When students with EBD reach the age in which they are expected to transition to adulthood, their rates of substance abuse and criminal activity accelerate beyond the norm (Greenbaum et al. 1996: Janz & Banbury, 2009: Wald & Losen, 2003). Their more frequent involvement with the judicial system reduces the chances of these individuals being productive members of society (see Wagner et al. 2005).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the research was to explore students', teachers' and administrators' understandings of the meaning and experiences of persistence and retention of students with EBD, in an alternative school. However, the results of the study indicated that the students at the alternative school were undiagnosed EBD; therefore none of the students were receiving services for EBD. In this case study research, I used a variety of data collection tools to gain an in-depth understanding of student persistence and retention in a naturalistic setting. The interview and observation data and analysis

provided information from multiple viewpoints. Themes and patterns, I identified, provided insight about multiple realities of persistence and retention of students who had not been formally diagnosed with EBD, yet these students exhibited emotional and behavioral challenges. Without proper diagnosis, these students were not granted access to resources needed to address their challenges. These realities could support efforts to improve student success.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: What is the meaning of academic persistence for EBD students in an alternative school?

Subquestion 1A: How do students experience persistence?

Subquestion 1B: How do teachers experience their students' efforts as persistence?

Research Question 2: What institutional efforts have been made to retain EBD students?

Subquestion 2A: From the teacher perspective, what institutional efforts have been made to retain EBD students?

Subquestion 2B: From the administrative perspective, what efforts have been made to retain EBD students?

Research Question 3: What processes/consequences are in place to improve student engagement in efforts to improve retention?

Conceptual Framework for the Study

I used concepts from Erikson's (1968) psychosocial model and Bandura's self-efficacy and self-regulation model. I used these concepts to create a context for exploring persistence and retention challenges of students with EBD, which often complicated the process of obtaining a high school education. The theories of Bandura (1986) and Erikson (1963, 1968) concur regarding the importance of healthy adolescent social and emotional development. For example, Erikson considered the fifth stage of development as the most important stage. Normally, middle and high school students (ages 12-18) enter this stage during adolescence. Erikson's theory directly relates to the question of how students experience persistence during this stage of development, and addresses the link between adolescent psychosocial and educational needs.

Likewise, Bandura contended that the difficulties in self-regulation were related to difficulties in the educational objectives of students with EBD. Therefore, persistence was critical for this population. Bandura theorized that one's self-efficacy was the cornerstone of motivation and accomplishments. For example, Bandura (1997) believed that if humans did not believe they could bring about positive change, there would be no desire to struggle in the face of adversity. In Chapter 2, I discussed Bandura's theory of self- efficacy and Erikson's theory psychosocial development in more detail.

Nature of the study

The qualitative case study method I used allowed holistic engagement between the subjects and me which allowed investigation of multiple realities and vicarious

experiences that enrich the understanding of a phenomenon that occurs in a bounded naturalistic setting (Yin, 2003). I included the naturalistic conditions of the alternative school in the study because they were relevant to the phenomenon, and thus reinforced the suitability of the qualitative method and design. Contextual meaning was embedded in the data collection process. In Chapter 3, I detailed the data collection methods, which included interviews, observations, and other media. I examined the data using Saldana's (2016) guidelines for coding, categorizing, theming, and interpreting within and across data sources.

Definitions of Key Terms

I have used the following definitions of key terms throughout this study:

Alternative schools: In its Common Core of Data, the U.S. Department of Education's (2002) "defines an alternative education school as a public elementary/secondary school that addresses the needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special education, or vocational education" (p. 55). Lange and Sletten (2002) found that alternative schools generally have small enrollment, supportive environments, flexible structure, one-to-one interaction between students and teachers, and emphasize student decision making.

Differentiated instruction: An educational practice intended to help children with disabilities succeed in an inclusive classroom. With differentiated instruction, a broad range of activities and a variety of educational strategies are to be implemented in a

general education classroom, and there should be a wide range of abilities among the students, from learning disabled to gifted (Webster, 2012).

*Emotional behavioral disorder (EBD):*To be diagnosed as having EBD, students must exhibit one or more of the following characteristics to a marked extent and over an extended period of time: (a) an inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health-related factors, (b) inappropriate types of behaviors or feelings under normal circumstances, (c) an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with teachers and peers, (d) a general pervasive mood of depression or unhappiness, and (e) a tendency to develop physical symptoms, fears, or pains associated with personal or school problems (Merrell & Walker, 2004).

Individual education plan (IEP): An educational plan that is developed to ensure that every child receives special education and related services. The IEP creates an opportunity for parents, teachers, administrators, and related services personnel to work together to improve the educational results of children with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA): IDEA is a law that ensures delivery of services to children with disabilities throughout the United States. IDEA governs how public agencies provide early intervention, special education, and related services to more than 6.5 million eligible infants, toddlers, and children with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

Self-contained classrooms: Highly structured smaller classroom settings with fewer students designed to support students with special needs or specific difficulties. In self-contained classrooms, students are commonly instructed by teachers with a degree or certification in special education (Chen, 2009). They may also include teaching assistants, other paraprofessionals, or adaptive equipment, which are vital to the implementation of the students' IEPs. IDEA requires the following:

1. School systems to place children with disabilities in the least restrictive environment as possible,
2. For children and youth with disabilities be included with their nondisabled classmates as often as possible,
3. Children with disabilities should be placed in appropriate schools as close to their home as possible, and
4. That state and local public schools will be held accountable for failing to properly educate children with disabilities (Jaeger & Bowman, 2002).

Assumptions

I selected the alternative school that served as my study site out of convenience given its proximity to my working location. While I do not known how similar this school is to other alternative schools, I have provided sufficient information about the school's physical plant, culture, academics, employees, and students so that the reader will be able to judge the transferability of the results to their own settings and experiences (Shenton, 2014).

When conducting this study, I assumed that I would have sufficient access to the site and to participants to create a compelling and accurate narrative. Further, I assumed that participants would respond candidly to my questions, and would make every effort to provide rich, thick descriptions of their experiences. I assumed that I would be able to carry out the study as a novice researcher with reasonable levels of difficulty throughout the research. Lastly, I assumed that the questions drawn from my own experiences and research of the existing literature were pertinent for thoroughly understanding the phenomena.

Scope and Delimitations

A disproportionate number of diagnosed EBD students do not complete high school. Researchers have found that, relative to all student populations, this population had the highest percentage of students drop out of high school before graduating. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how one alternative school worked with diagnosed EBD students by collecting data from adult students, teachers, administrators. However, the students had not been diagnosed, yet they were described as having all of the symptoms of EBD. Students under the age of 18 were excluded because of the potential lack of experiences with persistence and retention. Given the alternative school setting, the results may not be applicable for students in traditional high school settings. I ensured the use of rich description and organization so that readers could judge the transferability of the results to their own experiences and settings (Shenton, 2014).

Limitations

Researcher bias was possible because my personal beliefs and experiences could have interfered with understanding and accurately representing the beliefs and interpretations of participants. Therefore, I worked to reduce bias and increase credibility and dependability by using recommended strategies from published methodological sources (Patton, 2002; Shenton, 2004). To reduce bias, I ensured that I had no affiliation with the site other than that of researcher. Establishing informed consent from the participants was another strategy I used to reduce bias. Further, I kept a journal and used only approved interview questions. To increase credibility, I used validation of transcripts from interview participants. To increase dependability, I used audiotapes and summarized transcripts

I used a sample of teachers and administrators who provided services and instruction in the selected environment. While qualitative study results are not intended for generalizability, I have provided sufficient information about the school physical plant, culture, academics, employees, and students so that readers may judge the transferability of the results to their own experiences and settings (Shenton, 2014).

Significance

The results of this research, will contribute to the body of knowledge on educating students with EBD and /or symptoms of EBD. By exploring their challenges, barriers, and academic persistence in an alternative school setting, I worked to highlight issues that are beneficial for advancing programs and future policies that may lead to improved levels of persistence and retention in the EBD student population.

This case study contributes to positive social change because its implications are consistent with improving the educational outcomes of students with EBD. I sought to call attention to how persistence is experienced by students with undiagnosed EBD, in an alternative high school setting by providing information to professional educators and community. These findings will be used in presentations for training purposes and as a basis for future studies regarding persistence and retention of students with EBD and EBD symptoms in the alternative school setting.

Summary

In Chapter 1, I have introduced the issues faced by students with diagnosed EBD such as their dropout rates, incarceration, unemployment, and lack of educational opportunities. Chapter 1 also included background information concerning the academic and disciplinary challenges these students face in traditional educational settings. The alternative school setting and its initial purpose was introduced, along with the lingering questions regarding retention and graduation of students with EBD. In this chapter, I offered the problem statement, explained the lack of published research examining how students with EBD experience academic success, and discussed the purpose of the study, which was to explore the meaning and experiences of persistence and retention of students with EBD in an alternative high school setting. In Chapter 2, I provide a detailed review and analysis of relevant academic and professional literature to identify what

scholars know about the academic challenges of students diagnosed with EBD and what future researchers still need to address.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of the research was to examine how persistence and retention of students with EBD was experienced by teachers and administrators in an alternative school setting. By better understanding persistence and retention, school leaders may be better able to design programs to designed programs to help more students with EBD to graduate. This literature review began with a discussion of the clinical definition of EBD and a brief history of the laws concerning students with EBD, with emphasis on IDEA and the Individuals with Disabilities Educational Improvement Act. I then review materials on the characteristics of students with EBD, dropout characteristics, alternative schools, inclusion, academic performance, persistence, and retention.

Research Strategies

I conducted the literature search using the databases available at Walden University, historical texts, and Google Scholar. The databases I used included PsycInfo, ERIC, ProQuest Central, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, Sage Publishers, Education Research Complete, and Teacher Reference Center. I searched for peer-reviewed articles, journal publications, scholarly books, and government publications found at edpubs.gov. Several keywords or phrases were used to conduct the searches, including *emotional behavioral disorder*, *conduct disorder*, *DSM*, *alternative school*, *EBD*, *program development for EBD*, *psychosocial development theory*, *self-efficacy*, *class inclusion*, *high school dropouts*, *EBD high school students*, *teachers' perceptions of programs for EBD students*, and *related services for EBD students in alternative school settings*.

Emergence of Educational Services for Students with EBD

The term *emotional behavioral disorder* (EBD) is used to characterize a variety of diagnoses and classifications that have evolved considerably over time. The U.S. Department of Education (1998) defines the term as

> A condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time 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. (p. 11)

The Department of Education goes on to note that "the term includes schizophrenia" but "does not apply to children who are socially maladapted, unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance" (p.11).

However, terminology and definitions have been problematic and have varied depending on the source and application, creating problems of misinterpretation and stigma (Forness, 1996; Forness & Kavale, 1997; Kaufmann, 1997). The condition was first described by G. Stanley Hall (1844-1924), a noted American psychologist who pioneered the study and treatment of children with mental illness. Hall was also the first to use the term *emotional disturbance* (Grinder & Strickland, 1963; Kauffman &

Landrum, 2000; Reinhart, 1972). Hall viewed emotional disturbance (ED) as behavior that deviated so greatly, from what was appropriate for the child's age group that it significantly interfered with the child's growth and development. *Deviation* implied a difference from some standard of behavior, with this standard linked to the individual's situation, age group, culture, and historical period.

By the 1950s, the term *conduct disorder* (CD) was also used to label a child with behavior that was considered deviant from normal or societal expectations. Subsequently, the American Psychiatric Association (2013), in *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (*DSM-5)*, defined the essential CD characteristics as a persistent pattern of behavior. Behaviors used to classify CD fall into four main categories:

1. Aggression toward people and animals,
2. Destruction of property without aggression toward people or animals,
3. Deceitfulness, lying, and theft,
4. Serious violations of rules. (p. 472).

The term *emotional disturbance* (ED) has since been used interchangeably with *CD* to describe individuals with these characteristics.

In 1957, Eli Bower further defined ED using five key characteristics that were used 18 years later to establish the IDEA (1975) definition of EBD. In 1957, the five key characteristics were developed from a study done by Bower in a California elementary school. Bower used surveys completed by teachers of students with and without ED. The

results of the surveys showed that the 207 students with ED had five characteristics in common. The five key characteristics were:

1. Difficulty to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or other health factors.
2. Difficulty to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.
3. Inappropriate types of behavior (acting out against self or others) under normal circumstances.
4. A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.
5. A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems, somatization. (Merrell & Walker, 2004, p. 899).

During the 1950s, specific programs and intervention strategies began to surface for children with behavioral disorders. In 1958, P.L. 85-926 was passed, but special education training for teachers of the mentally retarded was given insufficient financial support. The following year an amendment to P.L. 85-926 secured funding for the leadership personnel in special education programs in colleges and universities. P.L. 88-164, signed by President Kennedy in 1963, authorized federal aid to build facilities associated with the University of Kansas and other universities throughout the U.S. mental health centers funded by this legislation provided transitional services for the mentally retarded (Whelan, 2011). This initiative was an essential part of the strategy known as *deinstitutionalization and normalization*. President Kennedy's support of this

initiative was motivated by his dissatisfaction with the institutionalization, alleged sterilization, and mistreatment of his mentally retarded sister. Normalization was

> An ideology of human services based on the proposition that the quality of life increases as one's access to culturally typical activities and settings increases. Applied to individuals who are mentally retarded, normalization fosters deinstitutionalization and the development of community-based living arrangements. Closely allied with normalization is the concept of least restrictive environment (LRE). (Landesman & Butterfield, 1987, p. 809)

Normalization requires places where people can live, learn, work, and play in ways that do not restrict their involvement in the mainstream of society.

Since the 1960s, the definition of EBD has evolved. As research methods have developed in this area, evidence-based research has shown causal relationships, rather than mere descriptions (Mattison, 2004; Mattison, Gadow, Sprafkin, Nolan, & Schneider, 2003).

The empirical classification systems for students involve assessments objective clusters of behavior difficulties. Therefore, instead of the subjective diagnostic categories of the *DSM*, standardized behavioral ratings completed by teachers provide objective results that show the extent of psychopathology of students classified as EBD. Although highly valued among most psychiatrists and clinical psychologists. School districts have questioned the usefulness or relevancy of the *DSM* diagnoses in establishing EBD

eligibility and informing interventions for students with EBD in school settings (Achenbach, Howell, McConaughy, & Stanger, 1998; Mattison et al. 2003).

EBD and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) have similarities, such as inabilities to behave appropriately in certain settings. For example, results of a study of hyperactive inattention in elementary school and predictors of high school graduation within 4 years of entering high school showed that moderators such as gender and hyperactivity-inattention are associated with high school retention (Babinski, Sibley, Ross, & Pelham, 2013; Faraone et al. 2001; Jackson, & King, 2004).

Specifically, studies have shown that boys' childhood hyperactive-inattention beyond aggression did not significantly relate to retention. However, girls' childhood hyperactive-inattentiveness significantly influences high school retention (Babinski, Sibley, Ross, & Pelham, 2013; Faraone et al. 2001; Jackson, & King, 2004).

ADHD is a developmental neurobiological brain-based condition defined by a pattern of behavior, present in multiple settings (e.g., school and home), that can result in performance issues in social, educational, or work settings (Tannock, 1998). Research has indicated that the symptoms of ADHD, EBD, and learning disorder (LD) often overlap (Dykman & Ackerman, 1991; Forness, Bennett, & Tose, 1983; Handwerk & Marshall, 1998; Kaplan, Dewey, Crawford, & Wilson, 2001). For example, all of these disorders consist of behaviors that result in negative academic outcomes. *DSM-5* symptoms of ADHD also include categories such as inattention, hyperactivity, impulsivity,and the inability to organize tasks and sit appropriately, all which directly

influence the ability to learn. One difference between EBD, LD, and ADHD is that the inability to learn for EBD students cannot be explained biologically, physically, or intellectually.

In *DSM-5*, the criteria for conduct disorder (CD) were largely unchanged from *DSM-4*, but a specifier was added and applied to people who exhibit behavior patterns accompanied by lack of remorse and/or emotions associated with their actions. These individuals are characterized by lack of empathy and caring for others regardless of settings, circumstances, and relationships (APA, 2013). The commonalities between the definitions and descriptions of ADHD, CD, ED, and EBD have made classification of students with these disorders extremely difficult for special education purposes.

Significant Cases and Evolving History of Special Education Legislation

Out of evolving definitions, growth in research, grassroots efforts by parents and caregivers, and legal efforts, federal legislation continued to focus on the need for protection of education for students with special needs. The Fourteenth Amendment was part of Reconstruction after the Civil War. While not specifically developed to apply to education, it has nonetheless had considerable impact on the provision of educational opportunities to students with disabilities. In particular, federal court decisions in two critical cases spelled out the rights of special needs children and their parents.

Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. This case challenged a state law that granted public schools permission to ignore the educational needs of children who were not 5 years of age mentally when entering first grade. The case resulted in the state granting retarded children a free public education until 21 years of age. What is now known as the *standard of appropriateness* mandated that each child's abilities and learning capacities be used as a guide to develop the least restrictive individual educational placement.

Mills v. Board of Education. The focus of *Mills v. Board of Education* was seven mentally and behaviorally challenged children aged 8 to 16 years. The lawsuit was filed against the District of Columbia public schools because the school system had expelled several students because they had disabilities, and other students had been denied enrollment because they had disabilities. More than 12,000 students with disabilities within the district's boundaries were unserved educationally in the 1971–1972 school year (Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996). The court found that it was unconstitutional for school districts to deny students with disabilities admission. The decision was based on the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.

The *PARC* and *Mills* cases were the first of much litigation. Specifically, *Mills* resulted in constitutional prohibition of discrimination against special education students based on available space. However, court cases did not stop continued discrimination against special needs students. Congressional hearings in 1975 revealed that more than 3 million students with disabilities in the United States were not being properly educated.

Nearly 1 million additional students with disabilities were not being educated at all (Forness & Kavale, 2000; Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996).

These critical cases brought about by parents and advocacy groups resulted in new educational mandates and landmark decisions. These decisions made the states responsible for educating all children at no cost to the parents or guardians. *Free and appropriate public education* (FAPE) included children with disabilities. The *PARC* and *Mills* cases encouraged other states to seek protection, federal leadership, and court mandates, which resulted in financial support for special education costs. This crusade led to a civil rights law entitled The Rehabilitation Act (RA) of 1973. RA made discrimination unlawful against individuals who received funds from federal subsidies or grants. All public elementary and secondary schools received federal subsidies or grants that mandated compliance with RA under Section 504. Section 504 of the RA ensured students of equal opportunities to participate in all school activities. Parents and student advocates lobbied for federal funding for special education programs that would meet the specific needs of special needs students and provide equal quality education.

In 1975, a Congressional investigation revealed that over 4 million disabled children in the United States were not receiving appropriate educational services. Insufficient educational services in the school systems were responsible for the inconveniences and expenses of parents and guardians of students with disabilities who attempted to secure programs for their disabled students. It was determined by Congress that federally funded special education programs would benefit the school districts

nationwide. On November 19, 1975, President Gerald Ford signed Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA). EHA guaranteed protections for specific educational protocols for disabled students and their parents. P.L. 94-142 outlined the foundation for current special education practices.

P.L. 94-142 was the first federal law that was created for disabled students. The first of the key provisions of P.L. 94-142 was that it was the first law to define the *zero-reject* concept, ensuring that all children receive a free and appropriate public education (FAPE), no matter how severe their disability. The second key provision required the school system to include parents and guardians when meeting and making decisions about their student's education. The third key provision mandated an *Individualized Education Plan* (IEP) for every student with a disability. The IEP identified short and long-term goals and ensured that the necessary services and products were available for the student. The fourth provision required the student to be placed in the *least restrictive environment* (LRE), which meant that they were included in settings with regular education students. This was later referred to as *class inclusion*. The fifth key provision ensured nondiscriminatory testing to determine eligibility. *Nondiscriminatory testing* refers to testing that is conducted in a manner that is considerate of a student's native language and the effects of any disability the student has. The sixth key provision required due process procedures to be in place to protect families and students if conflicts arise with school districts. Finally, P.L. 94-142 protected children considered school age (6-21 years of age). Since 1975, P.L.94-142 has been reauthorized (amended and

renewed) four times (1986, 1990, 1997, and 2004) and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEIA). The specific changes made within each amendment were discussed in the next section, entitled *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Students with EBD*. The IDEA was designed to protect and provide appropriate education for students with disabilities. However, public school education in America was failing its students overall.

The *No Child Left Behind Act* (2002; NCLB), signed in 2002 by President George W. Bush, brought drastic changes and was supposed to be the solution to America's problems in public education. NCLB and IDEA are America's most significant educational laws to date. NCLB was designed to enrich public education for students from low-income families in particular. IDEA targeted each child with emphasis on fair and specialized education for disabled students.

The Bush administration's NCLB legislation mandated that all schools, including alternative schools, focus on performance and *annual yearly progress* (AYP) which were measured objectives in core subjects. Included in these objectives were attendance and graduation rates. Under the NCLB law, states were mandated to test third through eighth grade students. States were also mandated to report the results, for both the student population as a whole and for particular "subgroups" of students, including English-learners and students in special education, racial minorities, and children from low-income families. States were required to bring 100% of the students to the proficient level on state tests by the 2013-14 school year, although each state decided, individually, what

represented proficiency, and which tests to use. In early 2015, the deadline had passed, but no states had gotten all 100% of their students to proficiency. Questions regarding the appropriateness of the NCLB objectives in special education surfaced. Some schools were accused of not meeting the objectives because of the low performance scores of their special education students, (Allbritten, Mainzer, & Ziegler, 2004; Cole, 2006; Eckes & Swando, 2009; Yell, Katsiyannas, & Shiner, 2006).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and Students with EBD

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was a Congressional guide passed in 1975 that provided the federal and legal guidelines for understanding the Constitutional obligations of current special education programs in public school districts. As the Supreme Court explained in *Smith v. Robinson*, the states are required to participate in IDEA. IDEA has been amended four times since its initial passage in 1975. A notable change was made in 1986 (P.L. 99-457) to increase financial support for parents of special needs children from birth to school age. Under P.L. 99-457, the *Early Intervention Program* (EIP) was also established to cover families with children with disabilities from birth to 36 months. Within that amendment, children aged 3-5 years were required to have additional services. Under P.L. 99-457, the *Individualized Family Service Plan (*IFSP) was established for all families with infants and toddlers with disabilities (Yell, Shriner, & Katsiyannis, 2006).

In 1990, autism and traumatic brain injuries were additions to the IDEA as a separate category of disabilities. Congress also mandated transitional services for

students with disabilities beginning at 16 years. Revisions to IDEA focused on accountability and results by defining transition services for students with disabilities. These revisions were created to improve social and academic abilities that would help the transition from public school to post-public school life (20 U.S.C. § 1401 Sec. 602 [34]). The transitions services were designed to prepare them for independent or age appropriate living beyond high school. These transitions included employment, independent living training skills, and further educational goals (Mazzotti & Rowe, 2015; Yell et al. 2006).

Several substantial changes were made to IDEA (1997) (Public Law 105-17). The foci of P.L. 105-17 included requirements for student progress, inclusion, parental provisions, provisions for related services (e.g., transportation) and disciplinary procedures. Student progress was to be monitored in the classroom by the use of the IEP, an educational plan designed by educators, parents, students, and administrative personnel to target specific educational needs and objectives for each special needs student. The IEP description of the P.L. 105-17 stated that educational systems should students with disabilities should be held to the same high standards as those without disabilities. It also specified that provisions should be made to allow these students the opportunities for achieving these high standards and goals with the use of differentiated methodology and strategies [Section 651(a) (6) (A) of the Act.] Part B of the Act focused specifically on the participation of these students within the curriculum in general education classrooms with their non-disabled peers using related services such as

accommodations, modifications, and additional aids and assistance specific to the needs of the individual student. Another component of this substantial change of the amended P.L. 105-17 was the mandate for including disabled students in statewide or nationwide in assessments. P.L. 105-17 stated that IEPs must also include:

… a statement of measurable annual goals, including benchmarks or short-term objectives, related to--(i) meeting the child's needs that result from the child's disability to enable the child to be involved in and progress in the general curriculum; and (ii) meeting each of the child's other educational needs that result from the child's disability. [Sec. 300.347(a)(2),]

According to P.L. 105-17, parental roles in the IEP development and implementation allowed parents to be included in conferences that concerned their student's educational placement and needs evaluations.

Services that were related to special education, such as transportation and therapeutics, were mandated under the IDEA mandates for schools. Some the therapeutics that were included were speech therapy parent counseling and training, occupational therapy, social services, and psychotherapy.

Section 504 of the *Rehabilitation Act* (RA) (1973) and the *Americans with Disabilities Act* (ADA) (1990) secured the educational rights of disabled students. ADA was the result of a recommendation of enactment in 1986, by the National Council on Disability. The first version of the bill was introduced in the House and Senate in 1988. Two years later, on July 26, 1990, it became a law. President George W. Bush later

amended it effective January 1, 2009. ADA also required employers to provide reasonable accommodations to employees with disabilities, and imposed accessibility requirements on public accommodations. The *Rehabilitation Act* (RA) required any agencies and programs that received federal funding to use *affirmative action* and prohibited any discrimination against individuals who were disabled. RA shared with title I of the ADA the same criteria that outlined employment discrimination.

The Link between Diagnosis and Access to Services: Opportunities and Challenges

Although the federal laws seemed to be established to protect individuals with disabilities, getting accurate diagnoses for the purpose of special educational services was sometimes difficult to obtain. Without accurate diagnoses, individuals with disabilities could not obtain the services provided by agencies that were receiving federal funding. Guaranteed special services in school for any child with severe emotional or behavioral disorders came only with formal identification and eligibility. Excluding such a child meant that the child would have remained in the regular class with little or no assistance from the regular education teacher in dealing with his or her behavioral or emotional problems, regardless of the severity. Any emotional or behavioral disorder that could have been construed as social maladjustment could have been dismissed as ineligible for special education, thus relieving school personnel of any obligation to serve or even to refer any child for services.

Access to appropriate services had proven to be difficult with and without the assistance of school personnel (Becker, Paternite, & Evans, 2014; Forness, & Knitzer,

1992; McGinnis, & Forness, 1988). For example, Becker et al. (2014) conducted a study-nationally surveying 1,025 special education teachers on the middle and high school levels. The study resulted in the consensus that high school and middle school special education teachers reported that the most aggressive students were more likely to receive school based eligibility and services for EBD. The second most likely group to receive eligibility and services were the students with psychiatric diagnoses. Lastly, those with academic dysfunctions were considered for eligibility and services. These findings support the unfortunate reality that EBD students are often overlooked for services if they are not aggressive and disruptive of the learning environment.

Access to Public School Services

One of the biggest challenges educators and families faced was in getting a *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) diagnosis that could have been used to get access to appropriate public school educational services. While psychologists and psychiatrists who treated EBD adolescents used the DSM-V to assess and diagnose individuals, school districts typically used IDEA definitions for diagnoses. Because of the differences between the DSM and IDEA descriptors, about 25% of schoolchildren and adolescents had been diagnosed as EBD by DSM guidelines. Less than 1% of those children and adolescents who received special education services were getting services specifically for EBD because they did not meet the criteria outlined by the school districts that followed IDEA guidelines. For example, the published study reported that some of the EBD students had been receiving special education services that

addressed learning disabilities rather than services needed for emotional disabilities. There were no universally accepted systems for classifying EBDs. Psychologists have recommended relying more on situational factors and individual assessments of EBD students made by mental health professionals, teachers, and administrators to determine whether or not a student should receive services for EBD (Johnson, Hollis, Marlow, Simms, & Wolke, 2014; Provasnik & Planty, 2008; Robert, Robert, & Wenyaw, 2009).

The issue of unmet educational, psychosocial, and medical service needs within this vulnerable population has continued to draw national attention. For example, the results of one study done in 2010–2011 and 2011-2012 school years showed 5.8% of 2,500 U.S. children ages 6 to 11 had EBDs that were considered serious and 17.3% of the sample was considered minor EBDs. Serious EBD's included issues such as extreme aggression, violence towards self and others including animals. Minor EBD's included truancy, agitation, and habitual cursing. Within the entire sample of EBDs, 17.8% received both medication and psychosocial services. 28.8% received school-based and/or non-school-based psychosocial services only. 6.8% received medication only. 46.6% had neither medication nor psychosocial services.

Among children with EBDs in the 2011–2012 school year, 18.6% received school-based psychosocial services only, 11.4% received non–school-based psychosocial services only. 17.3% received both school- and non–school-based psychosocial services. In sum, in both school years 2010-2011 and 2011–2012 8.2% of children with EBDs had unmet needs for psychosocial services. It was concluded that school-age children with

EBDs received a range of mental health services, but nearly half received neither medication nor psychosocial services. School-based providers played a role in delivering psychosocial services, but not all parents of EBD students reported unmet needs for psychosocial services for their children. In a similar study, it was reported that a high proportion of children and families attending pediatric outpatient psychological services have unidentified concerns in development and/or behavior. In some of these cases, parents had mental health or psychosocial issues like their children. These concerns were often not discussed, which resulted in diminished opportunities for timely intervention. In sum, it has been established by several studies that without proper identification and services, students with EBD had little chance of academic achievement (Case, Barber, & Starkey, 2015; Simon, Pastor, Reuben, Huang, & Goldstrom, 2015; Simpson, Scott, Henderson, & Manderscheid, 2002).

Underachievement of Students with EBD

Historically, schools have been where students were primarily expected to master cognitive skills and social validation. Schools have also been where students' knowledge and thinking skills have been evaluated, assessed, and measured against their peers. Intellectual progress and mastery typically occurs when high academic standards and expectations are established and monitored. However, results of studies comparing students with EBD with their school-aged peers reflected dismal revelations. Students with EBD often perform consistently and significantly lower than the expected levels in all subjects (Ennis & Jolivette, 2012). The authors of the study explored the need for

more evidence-based intervention strategies targeting students with EBD who lagged behind their peers in areas such as writing. The authors found that there were only two published articles written addressing the writing deficits and outcomes of this population of students between grades 2 -11. For example, a longitudinal study (Anderson, 2001) compared two groups of students with disabilities. The purpose of the study was to explore the differences in the academic progress in the areas of math and reading throughout elementary school. The participants included 42 students who were EBD and 61 students who were LD. The study revealed information that indicated reading scores for the students with EBD did not improve over the 5-year period. The reading scores for the students with LD did significantly improve over the same period. Math scores indicated that there were very little gains acquired for the students with EBD, although they initially scored higher, than the students with LD at the beginning of the study. Therefore, the students with LD showed significant improvement and scored higher in math than the students with EBD (Anderson, 2001).

Although students with EBD have lower performance than other groups with disabilities, *learning disabled,* (LD) and EBD often perform similarly on assessments that measure academic achievement. Students with EBD seemed to show average performance in primary grades. Performance of students with disabilities often declined as they transitioned to secondary grades unlike students without disabilities (Nelson, Benner, Lane, & Smith, W., 2004). A similar study (Greenbaum et al. 1996) reported that math achievement deficits for EBD students grew from 25% to 97% between the ages of

12 and 14. This age group represents the transitional grades between elementary and high school. These findings support the idea that students with EBD were at high risk for dropping out or having negative academic experiences that influenced their chances of dropping out. Research has shown that students with EBD are generally the most difficult for teachers to teach of all disability groups. For example, Levy and Chard (2001) conducted a study with the purpose of evaluating the gaps in literature concerning reading instruction for students with EBD. The authors suggest that academic achievement deficits in reading are profoundly impacted by the lack of literature and effective reading instructional practices concerning students with EBD. They also found that school was viewed by the majority of these students as unenjoyable and punitive, which was notably a direct pipeline to dropping out of school or being expelled (Levy & Chard, 2001. Mayer & Patriarca, (2007) reported similar results.

Reasons for Dropping Out

There is no formula for understanding why students fail to complete high school. For example, a purposeful sample of high school dropouts, age 18 years or above at adult basic skills G.E.D completion programs were surveyed to determine some of the reasons for dropping out (Lynch, Kistner, & Allan, 2014). The research categories examined were (a) school, (b) home and family, (c) community, (d) individual characteristics, and (e) demographic data. The study revealed that there were numerous reasons for students dropping out rather one or two common denominators. For example, several students surveyed blamed issues outside of school for the reasons they left school. Other

participants said that they preferred learning in other ways rather than traditional worksheets and lectures. Many of these students dropped out of school before taking required graduation tests. This suggested that such students left school because of fear of failing the tests and not graduating (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Fears, 2004).

Student engagement within the school environment has been shown to combat social isolation that compound reasons for withdrawal and dropping out (Finn, 1989). Student engagement has been acknowledged as being influential in dropout prevention. Finn (1989) established a theory called the participation - identification model that became the most influential model of student engagement. Finn's model of participation-identification focused primarily on components that were based on students' participation in extracurricular activities and in the classrooms. The participation in classrooms and extracurricular activities were associated with a sense of belonging, often called school bonding.

The *National Center for Education Statistics* (NCES) conducted another study of high school students and concluded that there were marked differences between students who were involved in activities at school and those who were not. For example, the top quartile of mathematics and reading scores were represented by students who were active in school extracurricular. Furthermore, the students who were not involved in extracurricular activities were less interested in attending post-secondary educational programs. The findings of the NCES study supported Finn's (1989) model that established correlation between the sense of belonging and levels of student engagement.

Students described feelings of belonging as feelings of encouragement, importance, acceptance, and value by peers and teachers "in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class" (Goodenow, 1993, p. 25; O'Brien & Rollefson, 1995). For students with and without disabilities, feelings of social acceptance and positive peer groups played an integral part in motivation, retention, dropout, and the educational process as a whole (Berktold, Geis, & Kaufman, 1998; Marcus & Sanders-Reio, 2001; Tidwell, 1988; Yazejian, 1999). Research suggested that earlier school years reflected teacher support as more influential than peer support in motivation and reducing the risk of leaving before graduation (Yazejian, 1999). According to Marcus & Sanders-Reio (2001), students rely heavily on teacher support especially in the elementary and middle levels. Over time, the support from teachers lessens and peer groups become more influential in motivating special needs students.

Bossaert et al. (2012) found that special needs students, like general education students, depended on support from peer groups to remain motivated to stay in school. However, students with EBD had issues with building and maintaining social relationships with peers. Other studies suggested that students with EBD had more adult/teacher interactions in elementary school settings making them more dependent on the adults and less likely to adapt in upper secondary grades Bost & Riccomini, (2006). The study results suggested that there was a reduction of academic and behavioral support on the secondary level, yet the need for additional mental health and family

support services persists for students with EBD. Studies showed that these services were not commonly provided for EBD students in public school settings (Battin-Pearson et al. 2000; Bossaert et al. 2012; Bost & Riccomini, 2006; Finn, 1989; Kemp 2006; Reschly & Christenson, 2006;). For example, Battin-Pearson et al. (2000) conducted a study comparing five theories of early dropout prediction (before 10th grade). The theories included in the study were (a) full academic mediation, (b) general deviance, (c) general affiliation, (d) poor family affiliations, and (e) social strains. Neither of the theories were sufficient for explaining the direct causes of early dropout. However, each of the theories brought unique components of explanation of the data. The findings resulted in the idea of a more comprehensive model of social development incorporating various components of each of the five theories.

Pijl, Frostad, & Mjaavatn, (2014) conducted a study surrounding the comparison of 1,873 typical high school students and 132 special needs high school students. The purpose was to explore why students leave before graduating. However, the focus was specifically on students with special needs and the impact of strong social relations, family support, teachers support and peer influence. The study explored how these relations and support systems influence or deter these students to leave school without graduating. The findings of the study indicated that for students with and without special needs, a strong teacher support system and peer support system were the best motivators for staying in school. Teacher support was key for the academic success component, and the peer support was essential to combat loneliness and feelings of isolation.

In a similar study, Kemp (2006) sought to compare students with and without special needs in regards to their decisions to drop out of school. The purpose of the study was twofold. The first was to determine how principals calculated and predicted their dropout rates. The second was to determine what/how prevention strategies were used to minimize their dropout rates. The principals in the study surveyed students with and without special needs and found that students with special needs dropped out at higher rates than those without special needs. The results of the surveys also indicated that the dropout prevention strategies that were most effective were extracurricular activities, vocational training programs, and career awareness programs.

Discipline for Students with EBD

Exclusionary practices such as expulsion and suspension have increased as schools shifted to "zero tolerance" methods of applied consequences to undesirable behaviors in school. Studies have found that 47% of EBD students have been suspended or expelled before beginning high school. During high school years, approximately 73% of EBD students have received these consequences (SRI International, 2006; Wagner, Kutash, Duchnowski, Epstein, & Sumi, 2005). In comparison, about 3% of regular education high school students had been expelled. These students within the 73% expulsion rate were much more likely to drop out before completing high school, supporting the findings from the U.S. Dept. of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (2007) that reported 61% of EBD high school students dropped out. After expulsion, some students have the option of attending schools in other districts or

alternative schools within the original districts depending on the school districts regulations and protocol. Further, these studies have also pointed out that such practices were used arbitrarily and disproportionately for male children with disabilities. These results support the interpretation that EBD students typically have negative educational experiences leading to negative outcomes in young adulthood. This also confirmed the Congressional intent of the need to strengthen transition services and educational support leading to positive adult functioning of individuals with disabilities.

Alternative Schools

The nature of the literature reviewed regarding EBD students in alternative high school settings has not been found thus far. However, literature regarding EBD students and particular moderators such as age, gender, and socioeconomic backgrounds are considerably vast. Since the 1960's, U.S. educators have searched for ways to motivate and encourage at-risk students to stay in school. Therefore, various alternative programs that included vocational training, non -grading course formats, and student interest curriculums were established to attempt to raise the number of high school graduates nationwide. Many of the EBD students who are expelled from conventional schools are sent to alternative school settings in attempts to prepare them for transitioning to adulthood. The body of research suggests that alternative school options for at risk students could have had positive academic and life outcomes (Aud, Kewal, Romani, & Frohlich, 2011; Skiba, Eckes, & Brown, 2010; Skiba & Rauseh, 2006; Stillwell, Suble, & Plott, 2011). Advocates for alternative schools support the idea that some students need

different school settings than traditional schools had to offer (Raywid, 1994). Generally, alternative schools were viewed as schools of choice, or they were viewed as dumping grounds for students who had been marginalized in the traditional school setting. In many cases, these were students with EBD who were disengaged and at risk for dropping out (Barr & Parrett, 2001; McKee & Conner, 2007; Raywid, 1994).

Alternative programs have had to address the diverse needs of students in a non-traditional program. Raywid (1994) attempted to categorize alternative schools. Three types of programs were suggested. Type I programs were described as educational alternative programs where students were provided with different approaches to education and curriculum. Type II programs were described as alternative discipline programs where the objectives were to correct and teach appropriate behaviors to those students who displayed behavioral challenges in traditional schools. Lastly, Type III programs were described as therapeutic alternative, often attended by students who had substance abuse difficulties. More recently alternative programs have been categorized based on various factors, such as program length, educational approach, learner choice, remediation, last chance programs, comprehensive, and adult learning environments (Rix & Twining, 2007).

Although, alternative schools were designed to foster and strengthen student – teacher relationships for the purpose of academic and personal success, many of the students who attend are still struggling, failing to meet graduation requirements, and or dropping out. These facts were indicative of lingering questions about exactly what

contributed to improving retention, and graduation within the EBD student population. (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990; Raywid, 1989; Wehlage & Rutter, 1987; Wehlage et al. 1989; Young, 1990).

Conceptual Framework

The purpose of the proposed study is to explore the persistence and retention, as they are experienced at an alternative educational setting. The study focused specifically on the perceptions and experiences of teachers, social workers, school psychologists, graduation coaches and administrators in the alternative school. To explore this, concepts from two theories were used to guide the development of the research design and analysis. Concepts from Erikson's (1968) psychosocial model and Bandura's self-efficacy and self-regulation model were explored to create a context for persistence and retention challenges of EBD students that complicate the process of obtaining a high school education. Healthy social and emotional development is paramount for rearing and educating all developing adolescents (Bandura, 1986; Erikson, 1963; Erikson, 1968).

Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development

Erik Erikson, formerly Erik Homberger (1902-1994) was a Neo-Freudian psychologist who is best noted for his theory of psychosocial development and the term identity crisis. Erikson changed his surname from Homberger to Erikson in efforts of establishing his own identity rather than continuing to use his stepfather's surname. The revelation that Dr. Homberger was not his biological father was said to have created

personal identity issues for Erikson throughout his life and motivated the development of his greatest works in the field of psychology.

Erikson studied Freud and expanded Freud's psychoanalytic theory, which stopped at adulthood. Erikson's Neo-Freudian influence explored from birth through old age in the human lifespan. Erikson added the understanding of how social experiences shape human personality traits over the course of a lifetime. The theory of psychosocial development centered around eight stages of human development. Each stage is characterized by crisis and resolution and shaped by social and cultural experiences. Erikson (1968) emphasized the importance of resolving conflicts at each stage before it is possible to move successfully to the next stage of psychological development. Erikson believed that cultural variations influenced ego and personality development in the human life span. He put great emphasis on how personality is shaped by culture and how key personalities (individuals) shape and influence culture in return. For example, in his book entitled *Young Man Luther (*1958*)*, Erikson used what he discovered about the Germanic cultural influences in conjunction with family circumstances that shaped Adolf Hitler to characterize and analyze Luther. However, the interaction of Luther's childhood/family circumstances and Germanic cultural patterns created a much more favorable and constructive outcome (the Protestant Reformation) than Hitler's (the Holocaust). Erikson (1968) focused on his fifth stage of psychosocial development to analyze Luther.

Erikson's fifth stage psychosocial development is "identity versus role confusion/ self- understanding (Erikson, 1968). This stage is considered the most important of the eight stages of psychosocial development because it is the transition from childhood to adulthood. It is characterized by the adolescent period between ages 12 and 18 years. At this stage, adolescents usually begin to evaluate independence and their role in society and family (1950). This stage is also a time when adolescents begin to think about what role they will play as adults. Erikson (1950; 1968) suggested that adolescence is the time to complete the task of establishing a healthy identity and sense of well-being that will carry over into adulthood. Adolescents at this stage, re-examine themselves to try understand who they are sexually and occupationally. At this stage, adolescents seek to find the purpose of their existence while questioning why adults are still making decisions for them (Erikson, 1968). Adolescents who struggle with their identity, exploration, and commitment experience more distress and identity confusion, which often stems from not completing previous stages of development such as trust versus mistrust.

Exploration is explained by Marcia (1966) as questioning and evaluating alternatives for identity commitment. Later, Meeus (1996) expanded Marcia's definition of exploration by adding the idea that even though adolescents may make commitments, they may not be active in the information gathering and participation of the commitments. Crocetti, Rubini, and Meeus (2008) describe commitment as a choice made in an area that is relevant and descriptive of one's identity while engaging in

activities that confirm that choice. Meeus (1996) (cited by Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008) emphasized the importance of validating and maintaining the commitment through current information seeking. Unsuccessful completion of identity versus role confusion has been linked to higher anxiety levels and emotional instability (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008). Adolescents with EBD are prone to have challenges in identity formation. In some cases, psychopathological symptoms cause permanent disruption in the progress and maturation that typically takes place at this stage (Leavey, 2003).

Leavey's (2003) quantitative study sought to expand the knowledge regarding adolescent identity distress and psychopathology. The adolescent participants, ages 12-19, had such diagnoses as ADHD, Bipolar Disorder, Adjustment Disorder, Depressive Disorder, Major Depressive Disorder, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Psychotic Disorder, and Oppositional Defiant Disorder. The participants included 63.3% females and 36.7% males. The adolescents were given three questionnaires to determine their identity status. They completed the surveys in reference to their psychological symptoms, distress, and identity development. The findings of the study suggested that pathological symptoms and diffused identity status are closely related to well-being.

Erikson's stage of "identity versus role confusion/ self-understanding" addresses the changes in self-concept and self-esteem that occur for most adolescents. Some conflicts that occurred naturally may have been confounded exponentially for adolescents with emotional dysfunctions. Erikson made the connection between the natural needs as children grow into adolescents and their educational needs, including the needs of those

with learning and emotional difficulties. Erikson's theoretical framework established the connection between society and human stages of development, particularly the individual personality and the societal aspects that influence the individual personality. Like Sigmund Freud, Erikson believed that every child experienced various stages of maturity that must be successfully completed in order to achieve optimal adulthood. Specifically, Erikson's theory explained that each human being must find his or her own sense of regulation because of the interplay between the inner voice of the child, the physiological and emotional urges of the individual, and the nature of social influences (Batra, 2013). In this way, child's play was viewed as initiating and fulfilling a significant developmental need for social exchange and problem solving relevant to their age. These stages encompass life from birth until old age. The sense of self- regulation is the goal that is obtained when new instincts that come with each stage is coupled with new ways of understanding self and others. Without successful completion of each stage, self-doubt and guilt are experienced. After prolonged periods of self-doubt and guilt, self-esteem is adversely impacted. This thought and theory was directly related to Albert Bandura's theory of self-efficacy (Batra, 2013)

Students with EBD have had difficulties in self-regulation for various reasons. The difficulties in self-regulation have been related to difficulties in the educational objectives of EBD students. The disruption in the educational process influences self-efficacy. For example, diminished self-efficacy because of lowered expectations, educational goals, and objectives have historically resulted in a cycle of failure that have

plagued students with EBD. Erikson's (1968) framework addressed the link between adolescent psychosocial needs and their educational needs. These also included the needs of children and adolescents with learning and behavioral difficulties. Unfortunately, the use of Erikson's framework in instructional design were rarely seen. Commonly used were the behaviorists' practices that were rarely suitable for students with EBD. Erikson's theory referred to the inner forces of the individual, which were described as instincts, temperament, interest, emerging maturity, and the ways in which the individual seeks balance in day-to-day interactions. The outer forces referred to family, society, school, community, and culture. Conflicting emotions in each stage of Erikson's psychosocial development theory were said to promote maturity into the next stage of human development, if there was resolution of the conflicting emotions and strength gained because of the resolution in the previous stage. Erikson's theory used as a conceptual framework is a valuable source in understanding the developmental needs of adolescents. Erikson's theory explains the principles of human development that are universal and expansive. The psychosocial development theory has implications for parenting, teaching, counselling, social, and cross-cultural exchanges for typical and psychopathological adolescents.

Bandura: Self-Efficacy and Self-Regulation

Albert Bandura (1925-) is notably one of the most cited psychologists to date and founder of the social cognitive theory of human functioning, formerly known as the social learning theory. Bandura changed the name from social learning theory to social

cognitive theory of human functioning because he believed that the depth and breadth of his theory had outgrown its original label. The social cognitive theory proposes that people are self-regulated, self-organizing agents rather than reactive beings shaped by environments. Bandura (1997) proposed that human functioning is formed by behavioral, personal, and environmental factors combined. He theorized that humans had the capacity to set their own courses of action with the anticipation of consequences or positive outcomes. Furthermore, Bandura theorizes that one's self-efficacy is the cornerstone of motivation, and accomplishments. For example, Bandura believed that if humans did not believe they could bring about positive change, there would be no desire to struggle in the face of adversity (Bandura (1997).

From a young age, Bandura viewed the acquisition of knowledge as a self-directed process. He and others in his tiny school were forced to teach themselves because there were not enough teachers in the school. Later, as a college student, he studied psychology books in his spare time, which is how he was introduced to the field for the first time. He also expresses the notion that there is a multitude of empirical evidence in support of this in daily lives, individually and collectively. For example, in his book entitled *Self Efficacy: The Exercise of Control,* Bandura (1997) explained how useful self-efficacy can be when it is applied in areas that effect human growth and development, such as academic pursuits, professional goals and aspirations, athletics, and psychopathology. Educational research places great emphasis on students who are self-

efficacious because they represent tenacity and accomplishment regardless of their achievements or lack thereof.

Results of studies have shown that low levels of self-efficacy accompany escalated neurosis, feelings of anxiety, and depressed emotions, all of which can be characteristics of EBD. EBD students experience failure more often, in areas that involve building successful relationships and are easily discouraged by their failures. In addition to failure and its impact on EBD students, mood also affects judgments of personal efficacy. EBD students have moods that are socially unacceptable. Positive moods enhance perceived self-efficacy and despondent moods diminish self-efficacy. EBD students' despondent moods are compounded when failure is experienced. What is perceived as academic failure could be debilitating to self-efficacy for a student with EBD. For example, high self-efficacy correlates with higher goals, firmer commitments, and healthy well-being. Erratic analytic thinking is linked to constant self-doubt, which diminishes performance accomplishments (Bandura, 1994).

EBD students often have difficulty with self-control in settings that require controlled behaviors. Deficient self-control produces feelings of social isolation and depressed and or anxious moods for individuals with EBD. Many students often find comfort in unhealthy alternatives such as dropping out of school, controlled substances, and criminal activities.

Gap in Literature Regarding EBD Student Retention

There are a considerable number of published studies regarding EBD students and publications describing the legislation for educating and labeling them. However, literature regarding EBD students' persistence and retention in alternative school settings is sparse. Research studies suggest that intervention and prevention programs are necessary for increasing retention rates for at-risk students with EBD, (Babinski, Sibley, Ross, & Pelham, 2013; Faraone et al. 2001; Jackson, & King, 2004). However, these studies did not incorporate examination of qualities such as persistence that occur in alternative school, or the efforts to cultivate EBD students' academic persistence in alternative educational programs as experienced from multiple points of view. Therefore, this study of persistence could contribute to the existing body of knowledge within the discipline. It would provide insight about multiple realities of persistence and retention of EBD students. These realities would support efforts to improve EBD student success.

Conclusion

The literature regarding the education of students with disabilities, specifically those with EBD, is considerable with respect to studies of their characteristics, challenges, interventions, and treatment methods. The literature review included an in depth exploration most of the current research. Additionally, the history of federal legislation that mandated support services was explained and defined. The two most significant pieces of legislation regarding the education of students with disabilities were presented and the specifics of both IDEA and NCLB were presented in relation to the

education of students with EBD. Types of alternative schools were presented, along with literature regarding the inception, purposes, and types of alternative schools and students.

Current studies of EBD students' academic persistence and retention in alternative educational programs was reviewed. In sum, there is no clear picture of which approaches work best to improve persistence and retention of EBD students. Further, little has been done to look deeply into the school experience to understand the meaning of persistence for this special population from multiple points of view. This qualitative case study contributed to the field of education regarding how best to help EBD students in alternative schools.

The conceptual frameworks of this study focus on the psychosocial needs of adolescents, and these were presented as useful frameworks for exploring the special needs of EBD students. Administrative and teacher perspectives provided insights from the institution's perspective of what it takes to stay in school. Concepts from the frameworks and the literature were employed in the procedures for data collection and analysis. These are described in detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of the study was to explore the meaning of persistence and retention of students with emotional behavioral disorders in an alternative school. In this case study research, I used a variety of data collection tools to gain an in-depth understanding of student persistence and retention in a naturalistic setting.

In this chapter, I discuss the methods I used for the study and offer a description of the participants and the process of selecting those participants. Additionally, Chapter 3 includes explanations of my role as the researcher and ethical issues considered throughout the study. Lastly, I provide an explanation of the data collection tools, how data was collected and analyzed, and threats to data quality.

Research Questions

Subquestion 1A: How do students experience persistence?

Subquestion 1B: How do teachers experience their students' efforts as persistence?

Research Question 2: What institutional efforts have been made to retain EBD students?

Subquestion 2A: From the teacher perspective, what institutional efforts have been made to retain EBD students?

Subquestion 2B: From the administrative perspective, what efforts have been made to retain EBD students?

Research Question 3: What processes/consequences are in place to improve student engagement in efforts to improve retention?

Central Phenomenon of Interest

For this study, I explored the ways in which persistence and retention were experienced and perceived by teachers, and administrators in an alternative school whose mission is to work with students who are challenged to remain in school. Retention refers to students remaining in an academic setting until the program is completed. It also pertains to students' setting and obtaining individual goals that are aligned with requirements for completing the program. I sought to study the experiential interface of persistence and retention in an alternative school using a student population at greatest risk for dropping out before graduation.

Research Method and Rationale

The qualitative case study method allows for holistic engagement between the subjects and researcher so that the researcher can explore multiple realities and experiences that enrich the understanding of a phenomenon that occurs in a bounded naturalistic setting (Yin, 2003). Case study research is appropriate when the participants in a study cannot be manipulated, and when the contextual conditions of the phenomenon are essential to its understanding. In my study, the naturalistic setting of the alternative school provided contextual meaning and the foundation for rich, thick descriptions (see Stake, 1995).

Case study research required multiple data collection methods. The administrators, a graduation coach, school social worker, school psychologist, and two teachers were interviewed. The recorded conversations were instrumental in eliciting in-depth, detailed experiences. When conducting the interviews, I used Gubrium and Holstein's (2002) guidelines for interviewing. Their method emphasizes the importance of fostering a strong, informative conversation to gain insights into participants' perspectives. I asked participants to comment on interpretations of the raw data they provide during interviews.

Observational data was collected to record and describe typical contextual elements and events of the case (see Stake, 1995). I have summarized the observational data to allow the reader to get an understanding of the setting, physical space, and activities taking place in that setting. I maintained a journal to denote particular

experiences throughout the data collection process. Participants were asked to comment on my interpretations of the data collected through observations. Triangulation strengthens the dependability, credibility, and understanding of the case and phenomenon (Shenton, 2004). Data that I collected from these multiple sources came together in the data analysis phase of the study.

Role of the Researcher

My role as researcher in this case study was prominent, ongoing, and interpretive (see Stake, 1995). As a veteran educator and product of the public school system, I have a deep interest in examining one of the most crucial issues in public education. It is widely known in educational arenas that EBD students have the highest dropout rate of all special needs populations. This issue was personally compelling to me for both professional and personal reasons. As a professional, I see the implications of dropping out from high school at the societal level, in terms of greater risk for unemployment, incarceration, substance abuse, suicide, and domestic violence.

My personal experiences with this phenomenon began with watching my younger brother, who was an EBD student, drop out of high school in ninth grade at the age of 15. Within a year of dropping out of high school, he was arrested and given probation for auto theft. Within 2 years, he began using and selling illegal drugs. After three years, he was shot and was arrested again. The lack of resources at home and in the various school systems that he attended evolved into a life of crime, incarceration, substance abuse, chronic debilitating physical and mental illness, and hopelessness. Everything that my

family feared would happen to him did happen to him. His story is not unique to many EBD students. However, I have often wonder what his life would have become if he had been afforded the resources and support needed to become a contributing member of society. It was my hope that the implications of this study would provide enriched information that will improve the lives of EBD students and their families. I attempted to minimize the influences of my personal experiences on the data gathering, analysis and interpretation phases of this research using rigorous strategies recommended in the qualitative methodological literature (Creswell, 2007; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). These are described in subsequent sections.

Reflexivity and Positionality

As the primary researcher, taking an etic approach allowed me to be more analytical as an outsider rather than taking an insider's view an as educator in that school. My greatest challenge was to avoid the temptation of becoming an active teacher participant because I am an educator. It is instinctive for me to immerse myself in school culture and interact accordingly. Yin (2014) posited that the participant observer/insider's perspective is valuable in case study research because it allows for manipulation of minor events, creating a variety of situations for data collection. Because this issue is compelling for me, my specific challenges were to avoid viewing the students as my students, male students as my brother in his youth, and teachers as my colleagues. The knowledge I gained and reported during and after conducting this study allowed me to assist in the change that I want to see. The use of reflexive triangulation (Patton, 2002)

assisted me with some of the challenges. Further reflexivity allowed me to be aware of the need for self-questioning and self-understanding of my own cultural, social, personal, and ideological background knowledge as it pertained to various aspects of the study. In particular, it made me conscientious of listening to the interviewees rather than my own voice. By recording the interviews and transcribing them verbatim, I was better able to stay true to the individuals' experiences.

I cultivated the distinction between educator and researcher to avoid biases and preconceived expectations of what was observed (see Patton, 2002). However, my compassion, knowledge, and training as an experienced educator added substantial credibility, value, and integrity to what was reported.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

Population. The population of interest was students with EBD, enrolled in an alternative school setting where middle and high school students with and without EBD are educated after having been in conventional school settings. The alternative school is centrally located near downtown Atlanta, Georgia. The school serves students from various other public schools within the district. Students attend school for approximately eight hours each Monday through Friday. Faculty and staff are required to report earlier and stay later than students, which makes interviewing and observation more convenient.

The setting. The selected alternative school has approximately 350 students in grades 6-12. There are 14 staff and faculty members, 3 administrators, 1 graduation

coach, 1 counselor, 1school nurse, 1 parent liaison, and a social worker. The school offers general education, special education, and GED preparation for students who need an alternative to the traditional school setting. For this study, I interacted with only the participants of the study. I observed in the classrooms without students. However, I did observe interactions between students and various faculty members. Research field notes will be collected during these and other observations. This was a written account of what I heard, saw, experienced, and thought about in the course of collecting and reflecting on the data.

***Unit of Analysis*.** The unit of analysis for this study is the alternative school setting. However, as Yin (2003) pointed out, within an organizational unit are many voices. The purpose of this study was to examine those multiple voices. Therefore, using an embedded unit of analysis approach, I explored the persistence and retention experiences of the participants.

Sampling strategy. I used an intensity case sampling strategy to select participants. My rationale for this approach was to select participants who could provide information rich experiences and perceptions that are not extreme or highly unusual. The use of the intensity sampling strategy required me to have substantial background knowledge and considerable judgement of the phenomena in order to sample sufficiently relevant examples for the study (see Patton, 2002).

Selection criteria. The criteria for selection were as follows: being at least 18 years old and being employed at the alternative school or in the school system for at least 1 year. The interviewees included teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, and**.**

The process of selection of information rich cases allowed me to achieve saturation of the concepts that best address the research questions (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Seven participants were selected after getting permission to use the site to collect data. The special education coordinator was encouraging and informed me that I should also send my email to the principal as well. I informed them that I would not be The procedure for administrative and faculty/staff recruitment included an invitation letter and RSVP sent by email to all potential employee participants.

Faculty/staff were given invitational recruitment letters and request for R.S.V.P. I also provided participants with information about the purpose of the study. The recruitment letters for all participants contained a brief description of the study, their role as participants, and a clear statement informing them that they had an option to leave the study at any time without penalty or judgment (See Appendix A). The method for contacting participants minimized the experience of feeling pressured to participate in the study. The invitees included the principal, assistant principal, graduation coach, social worker, two teachers. And the school psychologist.

Relationship between saturation and sample size. The relationship between the desired sample size and saturation can be viewed in a cultural context because the participants (individually and collectively) possess a high degree of expertise regarding

persistence and retention of EBD students. Saturation could be achieved with the sample size because of the shared experiences of key informants in the organization, which created a greater potential for consensus (see Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

Instrumentation

Interviews. For the first data collection source, I designed a semi-structured interview guide consistent with the phenomenological approach developed by Moustakas (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). This approach gave me the flexibility I needed to amend or change questions as the interviews progress, if there is a need to do so. For example, I used iterative questions whenever there was a contradiction in the answers of any participant. This allowed me to explore the responses further to determine the usefulness of the data (Shenton, 2004). The intent of the interview questions was to identify textural and structural experiences describing what the participants have either witnessed or experienced. The purpose was to explore the essence, perception, and meaning of the phenomena. In this case, the phenomena of interest are persistence and retention of students with EBD in an alternative school setting. In developing the questions for the interviews, I pretested the questions with a veteran special education teacher who previously worked at the alternative school and traditional school settings. The questions were presented, feedback was given, and adjustments were made (see Appendix D).

Observational data. The second data source was observations. The data collection protocol sheet for recording notes on site is provided in Appendix B. On this protocol

sheet, I used a header giving information about the observational session and separate sections for both descriptive and reflective notes about my experiences learnings and feelings. Further, I recorded aspects of the informants, the physical setting, events/activities and my own thoughts and reactions to them (Creswell, 2007). This observation data also included what did not happen as well as what did happen (Patton, 2002). In the school environment, there are things that should occur. In the event that these things did not occur, there were implications of importance to the study.

Documentation and other media. The third data collection instrument included documentation and other media such as audiovisual materials., I was not provided access to any public domain information about the school, student body, programs, curriculum, and statistics. This kind of documentation would have given me access to information that cannot be seen or heard through interviews and observations. For example, if permitted by IRB and FERPA regulations, the use of attendance sheets and academic records that may have occurred prior to the study would be useful in establishing effective incentives and attendance patterns. These records could also reveal personal and academic goals that students and teachers have set in order to achieve certain performance objectives. The use of other media such as audiovisual equipment guaranteed accuracy in the transcription process and in answering the research questions.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

After obtaining IRB approval from Walden University and permission to conduct the study from the Research and Evaluation Department of Atlanta Public Schools, I

started the process of data collection by inviting interviewees. For those who met the study criteria and consent to participate, all interviewees were given a numeric code to be used in the audio recording, transcriptions, interview recording protocol, and reflective log. The record of assigned codes were kept in a locked file at my home office. Furthermore, I did not reveal the names of the participants to any other person.

Prior to starting the interviews, I inquired with each interviewee about any pending questions they might have about the project study or the consent form. At that time, I thanked them for their participation in the study. Member checking took place to ensure accuracy of the interpretation of interview data. The interviewees received a summary of the interpretation of their interviews to check to see if they wanted to add or subtract anything. Interviewees were advised that follow up interviews may be necessary.

Data was collected from narratives, participant observations, and direct observations. A journal was maintained to denote particular experiences throughout the data collection process allowing for reflections of the interpretation of data. Data recording protocols were utilized throughout the data collection with backup procedures implemented to protect the data. The backup systems included copying all digital forms, transcripts, notes, and logs onto flash drives that protected data by encryption technology, which made the data unreadable without a password. The use of numeric coding for the participants' confidentiality was stored separately in a locked file in my home office. No personal identification information was stored digitally. All digital files and flash drives were also be kept in the locked file in my home `office. Computers used in the data

collection and analysis phases were password protected. Raw data from the study were stored for a period of five years, after which raw data stored in all media forms will be destroyed.

Data Analysis Plan and Procedures

The interview recording protocol was used to outline the logistics of the interview and the background information of the participants. In addition, the interview questions were included along with field notes and any probing questions used in the interview. Initial coding was done manually (Saldana, 2013) with the use of paper and pencil. The use of manual coding allowed me to include any nuances that might have been lost in electronic data management. Saldana (2013) suggested that manually writing codes with pencil and paper gave me control and ownership of the work. I used key concepts from my theoretical framework as initial codes. For example, initial codes such as personal experiences, sense of belonging, influences (family, culture, school, and society), self-efficacy, self-control, anticipation of positive outcomes, and career/postsecondary options connote Erikson and Bandura's theoretical frameworks. The coding was more detailed as the study was conducted. After, manual coding of field notes and interviews are complete, I used one of the recommended software programs that I researched such as Nvivo, CAQDAS, Atlas TI, Quirkos or Transana (Saldana, 2013) to organize, store, manage, and reconfigure the data so that I could better analyze and reflect on what was collected. The chosen software was used to electronically code and organize audiotaped and videotaped documents.

Issues of Trustworthiness

To establish credibility of the study, I became familiar with the culture of the alternative school by visiting the school before data collection began to attempt to establish trust and rapport (Shenton, 2004). My use of reflective commentary throughout the study assisted the reader in understanding the underpinnings and credibility my research and thoughts that guided it. For example, my interpretations and theoretical formulations were better understood and trusted by the reader, due to the process by which they were derived. However, these thoughts and theories were first reviewed and discussed with the relevant participants and my dissertation supervisor in throughout the study. Frequent debriefing sessions (Shenton 2004) with my dissertation supervisor highlighted any flaws and provided guidance and alternative strategies if necessary. These discussions also allowed me to tryout ideas and develop interpretations in a forum that highlighted my biases as a researcher.

Stake (1995) supported the idea of using a collective case study strategy to supply the reader with a variety voices contributing to the information gathering process. For example, to ensure transferability, I used the concept of "circling reality" which is described by Shenton (2004) as the need to get a variety of perspectives on a phenomenon in order to establish a broader, more informed view. The purposeful participant selection process that was used in this study provided a variety of voices, viewpoints, and perspectives from administrators, teachers and administrators . These

individuals informed the body of knowledge regarding students with EBD in alternative school settings from multiple observational and participatory perspectives.

Before and after data collection, I used the triangulation process of the aforementioned strategies to establish dependability for the reader. These overlapping methods housed detailed information that allow future researchers to repeat the steps of the research project. and trust between the interviewees and me.

Prolonged engagement with participants and descriptive data gathering ensured that false conclusions were not reached based upon isolated, idiosyncratic experiences. The use of rich, thick description of participant experiences and contexts in which the experiences are imbedded ensured that a sufficient level of detail was included, so that others might draw the same or similar conclusions. This will also allow the reader to capture details of the phenomena in my case study that may be transferable to comparable experiences and situations.

Ethical Considerations

As the researcher in the case study, I am required to do whatever is necessary to protect the privacy of the participants in the research study. For example, I am expected to avoid any activity that would defame the social standing/prestige, reputation, occupation, or community of the participants. Assessing any future consequences such as *deprivatizing* the lived experiences of participants is nearly impossible to do. However, ethical judgments and interpretations vary from one researcher and circumstance to another. These fuels the problematic nature of making ethical judgements (Gubrium &

Holstein, 1995). It is important for the participants and me to be truthful. For that reason, I asked the participants to verify a summary of their interview transcripts to ensure accuracy and integrity of interview data in efforts to also promote trust between the participants This procedure is known as Whyte's "member test of validity" (Johnson, 2002).

Following IRB and federal guidelines as well as guidelines of the research and evaluation department of the public-school system was paramount to this study. Obtaining informed consent from each participant was one method of ethical consideration. Participants were informed that they were allowed to leave the study at any time without consequences.

Other ethical considerations that I provided included maintaining confidentiality. For those who meet the study criteria and consent to participate. All interviewees were given a numeric code to be used in the audio recording, transcriptions, interview recording protocol, and reflective log. Furthermore, I did not reveal the names of the participants to any other person. Prior to starting the interviews, I inquired with each interviewee about any pending questions they might have about the study or the consent form. Interviewees will also be informed that they received a summary of the transcription to check for accuracy along with my findings and a request to review the findings for credibility. The record of assigned codes were kept in a locked file at my home office and will be destroyed after 5 years.

Summary

I used a qualitative methodology to identify teachers', school psychologist, graduation coach, school social worker and administrators' experiences of persistence that contributed to retention in alternative education. I used these experiences to gain an in-depth perception of key stakeholders in the education of students with and without disabilities. The case study used the human experience through interviews and observations to establish understanding of persistence and retention for the reader through what Geertz (1973) described as "rich, thick descriptions." The study sharpened understanding so that the reader can perceive what was experienced in the testimonies as well as during direct observations and participant observations. As the primary researcher, I was responsible for analysis and interpretation of the all data, exercising subjective judgement, and synthesizing the multiple realities of the participants. I also maintained a journal of chronicled thoughts and experiences that assisted me in efforts to denote particular experiences throughout the data collection process allowing for reflections of the interpretation and analysis of data.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

This qualitative case study was to explore the meaning of persistence and retention of students with emotional behavioral disorders in an alternative school. My intent was to get a better understanding of the experiences of student persistence and retention in a naturalistic setting by exploring multiple viewpoints. The phenomenon of interest was persistence and retention in an alternative school. I conducted this case study to explore the experiences of teachers, graduation coaches, school social workers, school psychologists, and administrators. The following research questions and subquestions were explored:

Subquestion 1A: How do students experience persistence?

Subquestion 1B: How do teachers experience their students' efforts as persistence?

Research Question 2: What institutional efforts have been made to retain EBD students?

Subquestion 2A: From the teacher perspective, what institutional efforts have been made to retain EBD students?

Subquestion 2B: From the administrative perspective, what efforts have been made to retain EBD students?

Research Question 3: What processes/consequences are in place to improve student engagement in efforts to improve retention?

In Chapter 4, I present the results of the data collection process, provide analysis and interpretation of themes from the participant's interviews and transcripts, and offer a thorough description of the demographics of each participant and the differences in their experiences. Themes relevant to the experiences of persistence and retention were explored throughout the data analysis process. Later in this chapter, I revisit data collection procedures to identify adjustments I made to what was initially proposed. This is followed by a presentation of the results and a discussion of the procedures used to enhance the trustworthiness of the data gathering and analysis process. A summary and transition section conclude this chapter.

Setting

Participants were prescreened to ensure employment at the organization. Once participants agreed to be interviewed, I scheduled appointments for interviews. All participants were affiliated with the school and school district for at least one year. One of the participants left the agency to work at a different school. All interviews were conducted face to face or over the phone. In my journal, I noted that the school layout reminded me of what a small prison might be like. Every door in the building was locked at all times. Only certain individuals had access badges to move around in the building at will.

Demographics of Participants

The participants included a total of three men and four women, and their demographics are shown in Table 1. The principal, assistant principal, school social

worker, school psychologist, graduation coach, science teacher, and special education reading recovery teacher were all full-time employees working with students. All of the participants have direct interaction with students throughout the school day. Participants either provided direct and or indirect oversight and were responsible for program planning, team meetings, documentation, classroom curriculum and instruction, student supervision, community outreach, mentoring, and staff supervision. All participants reported enjoying working with at-risk students. Therefore, all of the participants had worked at the school or the district for at least 5 years.

All of the participants were experienced educators in urban settings. All participants (whom I will refer to hereafter as P1-P7) stated that they enjoyed making a difference in urban schools. P3, for instance, stated that he wanted to work with students who needed a second chance. Participants were protective and supportive of the students and wanted to make a difference in the community by making a difference with the students.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant label	Gender	Years at school	Prefers at-risk
P1	F	5	Y
P2	F	2	Y
P3	M	8	Y
P4	F	1	Y
P5	M	5	Y
P6	F	5	Y
P7	M	2	Y

Interview Summaries

P1 stated that she worked at the school for 5 years. She noted that failing students lacked support outside of school and had low reading levels. She also stated that a challenge of staying in school for the students was the school system's lack of preparation needed to support the students' reading deficits and strengths. P1 emphatically stated that reading below grade level was the most common deficit, which caused students to struggle in all subjects. P1 also stated that her biggest challenge to helping students stay in school was the lack of resources in place to help students of all ability levels to succeed. She further highlighted that a "bridge" to the next grade level should be in the curriculum. Other challenges she noted included lack of parent

participation, lack of academic and social foundations, and teacher burnout. P1 admitted that her emotional desire to help her students succeed was what gave her the energy to continue trying to save at least one or two students.

When P2 was asked what came to mind as needed for students to graduate, she stated "a great deal of support, a conversation with them making them aware of goals, setting goals, and showing them how to reach their goals in baby steps." She added that each student had an individualized instruction plan. P2 noted that students who are focused on getting the credits needed for completion, generally completed credits in half the time (quarters rather than semesters). Once students gained the motivation and momentum needed to succeed, they began to evolve and mature into responsible people who wanted more success and made better decisions. However, some of the biggest challenges to this, according to P2, included transportation to school, minimizing student reluctance, child care for those with children, and students' jobs. Another challenge she mentioned was "building student leaders" to have positive role models in the building.

When asked what the school was really good at, P2 elaborated on "supporting the students' and individualized learning by filling the gaps and deficits." She also elaborated on the social emotional learning model that was used daily. P2 stated that more consistency is needed, as is prevention of teacher burnout with incentives for teachers as well as the students.

P3 explained that students who trusted and were committed to their individualized programs were usually successful in staying with their cohort. He stated that these were

the students who did not mind being ostracized or targeted by their peers. They were unique, helpful, focused, stayed out of trouble, and had parental support and involvement. P3 also explained that the biggest challenges to students who wanted to succeed by staying in school were lack of academic and environmental experiences and parental support. Some students also had the need to earn income to help the family and lack of positive reinforcement. He also said that in many cases, even the supportive parents did not prioritize education. His greatest challenges to helping students stay in school were his own perseverance and determination while trying to keep the male students from being in situations that would end in death and/or incarceration, both of which are embraced in many of the students' communities outside of school. P3 stated that it was imperative that he made a difference every day, emphasizing that he persisted in helping students understand that life is a privilege not an obligation.

P3 stated that the school had done well at creating a safe, close, contained environment that put students first and provided individual attention and personal support, daily. P3 explained that the school could improve by providing more of the arts, such as music instruction. He also stated that the students would have benefitted by having more physical education. When asked what he wanted others to know, he added that the students at the school were not always there for behavioral issues.

When asked what qualities she had seen in students who demonstrated persistence, P4 stated, "Students who are on task to return to their traditional school, wanted to return and complete their credits to graduate. They had a goal." P4 explained

that those students were focused. When asked what the school did well, P4 explained that it did well at keeping students safe with the implementation of rules and team support. She stated that the school also provided resources from the community to assist students in and outside of school. When asked what the school could have improved upon, P4 stated that it could have done better with teacher recognition by celebrating staff birthdays and creating bonding experiences to improve the work environment.

P5 explained that the main concern for students was their lack of basic skills, socially and emotionally, which affected their academics and classroom behavior. When asked what challenges interfered with persistence and retention, he stated that the lack of ability to properly interact, socialize, and handle difficult situations was what prevented some students from completing credits for graduation. P5 explained that difficult home environments, getting to school, and being surrounded by other students with their own disorders created significant challenges to academic progress. Other challenges were academic frustration from having years of academic failure, hopelessness, self-destruction, behavioral infractions, and homelessness, all of which made it difficult to focus on school. P5 was certain that many of the students had not been taught perseverance, appropriate manners, and appropriate self-expression at home. He further explained that mental health issues like depression, anger issues, and anxiety caused some of the students to self-medicate with substances.

When asked what the school did well, P5 stated that the credit recovery virtual option gave students who were behind on credits a sense of hope for completing high

school. “Hope equals persistence.” He explained that the school could improve the climate and culture with more positivity throughout the building. He stated that positive reinforcement highlighting the strengths of individuals and rewarding small gains would be valuable.

P6 stated that to graduate students, they needed basic reading and writing skills along with basic common manners that were traditionally taught at home or in kindergarten and 1st grade. She added that, most of the male students she taught were intelligent, but they had been in trouble emotionally for so long and had gotten in trouble (in and outside of school), which took them away from class often; therefore, they were struggling academically. She stated, “the biggest challenge to staying in school was the streets and wanting to be on the streets instead of at school,” adding that “Since 2012, 14 boys under the age of 18 lost their lives [in those streets].” She reported that one student who was struggling to stay in school had been there for 4 years. She said, “He can’t focus because he can’t stay in the classroom because he wants to be in the streets. He can leave school because of his age. However, he does not have enough credits to meet the 10th grade requirements.”

P5 stated that “some of the students who have left ended up on the front page or in an obituary”, and felt that the school is the safest place for most of them. She admitted that most of the students were murdered during winter or summer break. Most of the students did not have exposure with common experiences like going to the doctor for a checkup. However, even with the lack of exposure, P6 recalled a few students who stayed

focused because they desperately wanted to complete their time and return to their own traditional school environment. Those students kept quiet, did their assignments and never returned. They ended up coming back with graduation invitations for her. Personal challenges largely affected students according to P6. The drug culture also presented a problem because some students smoked with their parents before they came to school. Her greatest challenge is that the students "don't have any hope." However, she added that the smaller classes allowed her to teach life lessons and hope. She stated that she never wanted to leave because of the positive effect she had on its students.

In addition, she stated that the blended learning model for students would be better, allowing some students to work on computers while others did not. P6 also added that the school and its students would have benefitted from a work study program, more outside professionals from the community, such as parole officers, visiting and counselling the students, as well as more parent -school involvement, community outreach, and social emotional professionals meeting with the students. She stated that the social and emotional learning aspect could have been improved upon for this environment by using a team of people to work with the students teaching them empathy, apathy, and hope for themselves and others.

Participant 7 (P7) stated that there was no typical day because every student required his or her own level of support. He explained the restorative model used as well as the social emotional component used within the school, meaning each student had his or her holistic needs addressed, upon enrollment. When asked if there were students

doing what it took to matriculate, P7 explained, that those students identified a routine and plan that worked for them. Most had done some form of peer mediation and that helped them identify their triggers. They also learned ways out of negative settings and situations through peer mediation. This strategy helped students develop strategies that were successful for them when they returned to their traditional/home school. He stated that "there is no graduation ceremony for the school, and the recidivism rate is only 3%." The GED program and partnerships with secondary educational institutions provide an alternative for students who would otherwise not matriculate. Work study was also an option for the students. When asked is there a common thread he explained that those who were ready to receive academic and behavioral "support" usually made positive changes. "Very few drop out but the ones who are not ready for support typically end up incarcerated."

I also noted that several participants said the students were "sentenced" to go to the school. Words like "time served" made me uncomfortable, although I realized later that some of the students had serious charges. In some cases, the students finished their sentences and were not wanted by the home school they came from. P7 explained that the principals at some of the students' traditional home school would make unreasonable requests of them like "blink twice rather than three times and I will send you back to alternative school."

Data Collection

Recruitment of participants began in December 2016 and ended in February 2017. Response rates to the invitation letter averaged one person per week after January 30, 2017 with three participants responding on February 7, 2017. Interested staff contacted me directly via email or by phone. The school's gatekeeper (the principal) assisted me by conducting a preliminary determination of qualified staff according to years of service at the agency and years of experience in the field. Once completed, a date and schedule of times throughout the course of one day for interested staff to meet with me to facilitate the interview was agreed upon. As indicated in Chapter 3, I planned to interview employees and adult students, however I did not include the adult students. The school's regulations did not allow this option. The other deviation from the Chapter 3 procedures was the inclusion of a former teacher at the school replaced them, per the principal's suggestion.

The first participant agreed to be interviewed by phone. The others agreed to interview on site at the alternative school where they are employed. Staff who agreed to participate were provided an informed consent agreement that included a statement of confidentiality prior to beginning the interviews. On site, interviews were conducted in the participants' offices or classrooms. Another deviation was the observation of students in the classrooms, which was also not approved. In addition, I planned to use written documents provided by the school as other artifacts. This deviation was also suggested to avoid confidentiality issues. Instead, I observed the building and took pictures of bulletin boards decorated with encouraging messages.

Each of the seven interviews averaged between 30 and 90 minutes in length and were completed in one session. Data were recorded on a digital audio recorder. All participants were informed prior to beginning the data collection that audio recordings were being utilized to facilitate accurate transcription and would be destroyed upon completion of study analysis. I created margin notes during the interview process, noting the appearances of the participants' offices or classroom, facial expressions, hand gestures, as well as, hesitations or limited responses to questions or follow-up probes. Confidentiality was secured by using letters and numbers to identify participants' and order of interviews. All research participants were debriefed following the interview.

Member checking took place via email. Each participant received a summary of his or her interview for verification of their responses and emerging themes, to ensure accuracy of the transcribed data. Member checking allowed participants to ensure that their thoughts and intentions during the interview were represented accurately.

Data Analysis

A professional transcription service was used to transcribe audio taped interviews into MSWord (2013) electronic text files. Participant data were labeled to insure confidentiality. Data analysis involved a careful review of each interview transcript in determining themes. I triangulated the data to improve credibility and dependability of the findings, and included interviews from participants in various professional capacities, field notes, artifacts and a researcher audit trail. Manual coding was employed using MS

Excel to create columns and rows to separate and compare text within each participant's interview and across cases and sources.

Coding

Coding involved listening, reading, and labeling responses of 81 pages of raw data, which reinforced my familiarity with the materials. Revisiting the raw data multiple times and making notes allowed self-reflection and questioning, which helped me avoid my biases as an educator. Memos were also reviewed, and these included observations with descriptions of the layout of the building, attitudes of personnel, the setup of the classroom communities, work displayed, metal detectors, students being patted down for weapons each day, separate entrances for the males and females, and locked doors everywhere. Some memos documented my personal feelings about the aforementioned observations. Overall, more than 150 codes were established, using the following process.

The data was so rich with narrative and emotional content, several "passes" through the data were employed, using several of Saldana's coding methods for the first cycle (Saldana, 2013). First, In Vivo coding was used. Key codes such as trust, hopelessness, acknowledgment for incremental gains, lack of support, success, rejection, dysfunctional households, drug culture, and lack of focus were used to sort, organize, and categorize the transcribed data.

A narrative coding process (Saldana, 2013) was used for the next "pass", as the data from participants were rich with stories about the students, their families, and their

lives in the classroom and on the streets. For example, one participant went to 14 funerals of former students, in one year. Her response to one of the students when asked if she was sad, was “No! I am mad because he should have been at school instead of in the streets robbing people”. Another participant shared the experience of a student whose drug addicted mother prostituted herself just a block away from the alternative school. Fights had occurred as a result of several students bragging about their experiences with his mother. The student and his family were living on the streets at the time.

Finally, descriptive coding (Saldana, 2013) was used to assign codes to describe various states and conditions that the participants identified in the students. For example, several participants stated that students suffered with anxiety, PTSD, Hood Disease, life of crime, incarceration, respect in the streets, rite of passage, and violent deaths. These codes included “lack of hope” and “lack of trust and respect for adults.” For example, P5 described the students as having never been taught basic social skills such as knocking before entering, saying “please and thank you”, and respect for their elders. Words like “please,” “excuse me”, and “thank you” were never taught at home before they entered school. The consensus among the participants was “the only time students heard the word ‘respect’ was in the streets.” Also, since many of these students were said to be the income earners (by living criminal lives), they had no respect for their parents who were most likely drug users. Their reality was that they are as much adult as any other, because they are “getting money”. Participants also stated that some of the younger students were forced to provide financially for themselves and their families by engaging in criminal

activity, because if they were caught they would get less jail or probation time if any. Many of the students, according to P6 and P7, already had probation officers. In some cases, the students were homeless which also bred disrespect for their parents, because students resented the lack of support and instability.

Categories

The process of coding all seven interviews produced 150 codes. Several of most of the codes overlapped among the interviews. Thirty-two unique categories emerged as a result. (See table 2).

Table 2

Categories

Anxiety	Home	Parenting	Self-Medicate
Depression	Hood Disease	Poverty	Social Skills
Drug Culture	Hopelessness	PTSD	Streets
Dysfunction	Love	Reading	Structure
Empathy	Male Incarceration	Respect	Support
Family	No Show	Safety	Truancy
Fatherless	No Future Plans	Self- Destruct	Trust
Foundation	Ostracize	Self-Efficacy	Violence

I then compared and consolidated these categories in a number of different ways, finally arriving at a solution of five major themes that "transcend the 'particular reality'

of the data" (Saldana. 2013, p. 14). Each theme was unique and complex, revealing sub-themes that represented how the categories came together. The five themes were: (a) Support, (b) Acknowledgment of Incremental Gains, (c) Struggle to Focus, (d) Hope, and (e) We are family. The descriptions of the themes and what they represent from the data are provided in the next section.

Results

Theme 1: Support

The overall theme of support refers to the assistance and subsistence students needed from their parents, teachers, schools, and community and is defined by four distinct sub-themes: parental, academic, emotional, and community. These are presented in Figure 1.

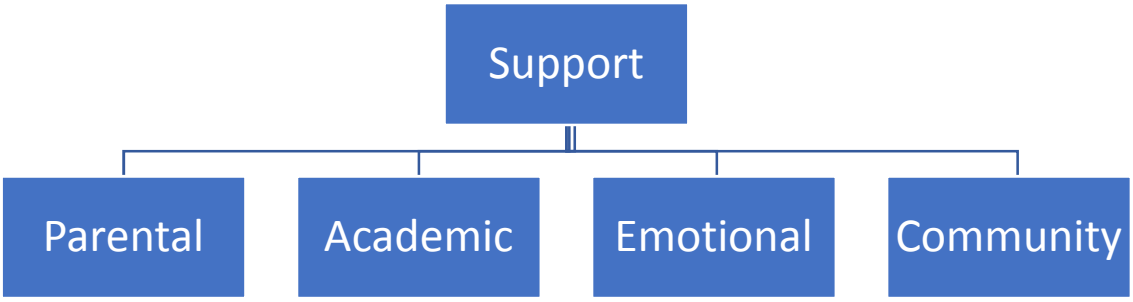

Figure 1. First major theme and four subthemes.

Parental support. Participants explained that most students in the alternative school lacked parental support. In these cases, students did not have adequate housing, food, intellectual development, stability, involvement in their educational and social development, nor fathers in the home from infancy to adulthood. Often times they were moved from place to place, relative to relative or group homes without notice. Some were even homeless. For example, P3 stressed that lack of parental involvement. P3 stated, "I think that's essential just as an educator but also as a father myself and I know the importance of parental involvement". P4 expressed, parents did not come to the school to meet with teachers and administrators unless there was a probation violation. Parents have actually threatened their children with police intervention rather than explaining that their actions were disrespectful. P1 explained, "the only thing I could say that would be common among them was lack of parental involvement". P6 stressed, "The parents don't come in here because by the time they get here they're sick of them. They're tired, they don't want to hear it.

When discussing attendance and truancy, P4 expressed, that generally 'parents only come to the school because their student was under the age of 16, which means parents are held responsible by the courts for their student's truancy'.

All of the participants agreed that the majority of the students came from lower socioeconomic, dysfunctional, and unstable home environments where they have seen traumatizing, domestic violence. In some cases, according to P6, it was not uncommon for students to smoke marijuana before arriving at school.

Several at any given time were “homeless,” living relative to relative, on the streets, or in “group homes”. P5 explained, “These are kids who have never experienced functional households.” P2 explained, “A great deal of support is needed for students at this school to graduate.” P1 explained, “in a lot of cases they did not have positive support from home … and we are a family here at this school.” P7 agreed that he was a positive male role model for the students. (See figure 2)

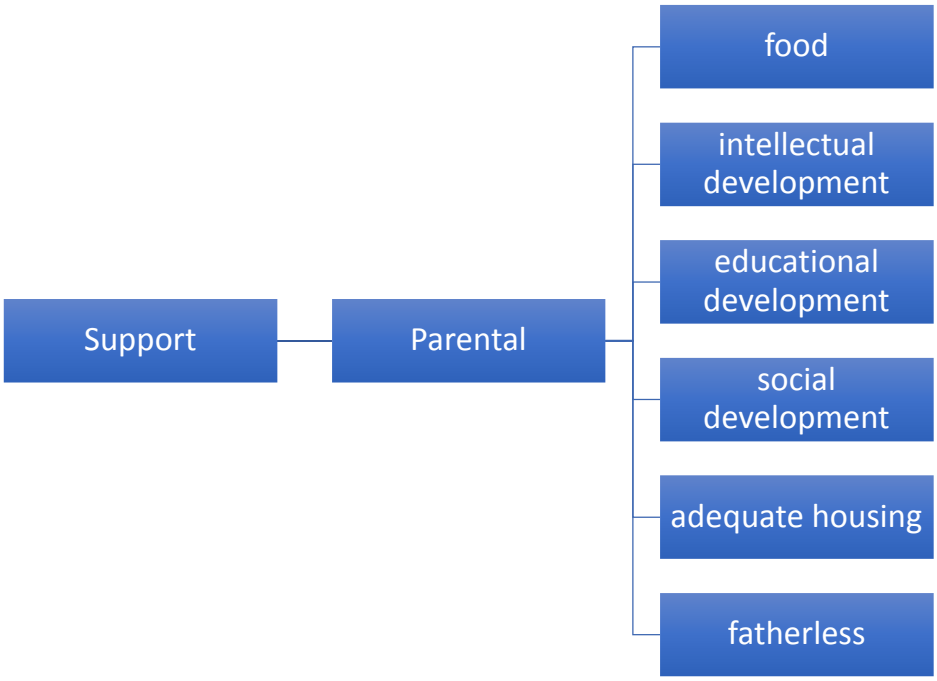

Figure 2. Sources of parental support

Academic support. Participants explained that most of the students had no foundation to build on academically and socially. For example, most of them were several grade levels behind in reading. Reading deficits had a negative impact on all subjects. Students with behavior issues in their traditional school settings did not receive reading support, primarily because of lack of resources and disruptive behavior which often led to the student being put out of class, according to P1.

Several participants admitted that the "lack of appropriate reading skills spilled over into behavior issues in class". Participants also noted that students who were behind with their high school credits were provided the opportunity to earn credits in half the time at the alternative school. This is not offered in their traditional schools, according to P2, P3, P5, P6, and P7. P2, P3, P5, P6, and P7 all stated that "as they progressed, some

students did not want to return to their traditional school, even when their time had been served." For example, P1 and P6 stated that one student came back and told the teacher that he wanted to come back, because he was not given the support and care at his traditional home school. P1 explained that "he dropped out soon after and was incarcerated".

The blended computer based learning was an example of academic support, an option most used by students who had credit deficits, so they could catch up with their cohorts. P2 noted that, "It gives them momentum because it puts them closer to the end goal." P2 also noted that, "We gave students an opportunity here within the community." P5 stated "I'm glad that we have the credit recovery virtual options where students can make up credits. That option is available for our students and I think that's a great option". (See figure 3)

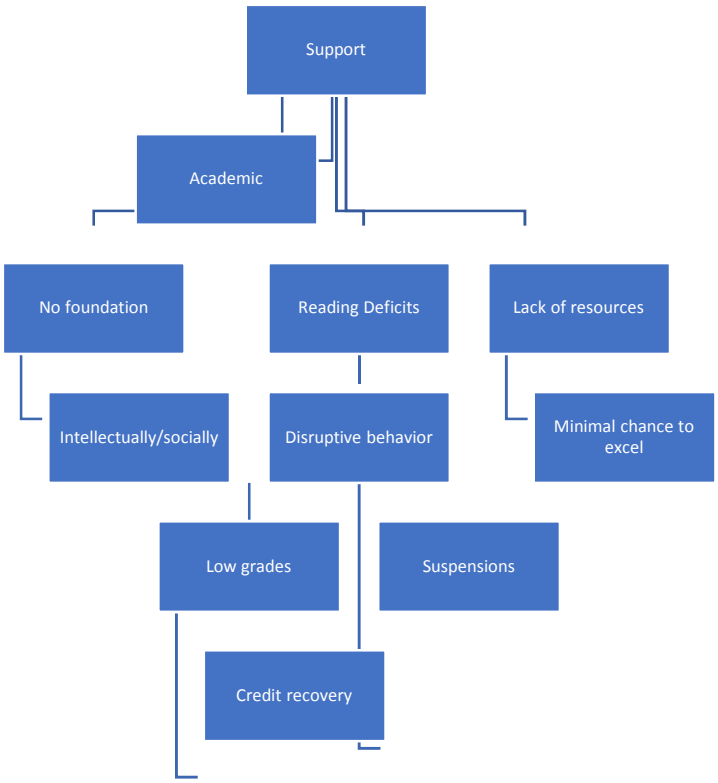

Figure 3. Sources of academic support.

Emotional support. P4, P5, and P6 expressed that most if not all of the students who were enrolled at the alternative school needed "emotional support" to learn how to function day to day. P1, P4, P5, and P6 also emphasized, "Many of our students had never learned social skills." For example, P6 stated, "they have no empathy." P5 and P6 explained that the students acted out in negative ways and "self-medicated to cope with their situations". P4 explained:

> I don't know if it's mental depression, bipolar, whatever it may be – emotional disorders and I'm talking about non-diagnosed emotionally disturbed, and not really knowing that; I'm talking about the names we've diagnosed without them being diagnosed. Because to do some of the things that they have done, there is something wrong somewhere.

"They are depressed about what is going on at home" according to P5. He stated that "it is difficult to focus) after a night in the streets and self-medicating." He stated that "many of them put their heads down on the desk and go to sleep because they simply cannot stay awake."

P1 and P6 agreed that these students see people "killed" all of the time, and never get a chance to process their feelings. For example, P6 explained that "one student's cousin committed suicide and the student was in school the next day as if nothing happened." She said, "These kids have 'Hood Disease' they have no empathy. Living in the inner city has been equivalent to living in a war zone. Hood Disease has been characterized by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) as a more complex form of PTSD. P6 vehemently expressed, "So the kids that are on probation, they really need to have people surrounding them, working with them socially and emotionally; and there needs to be more outreach with the parents." She also stated:

> We need to do more community outreach like parent visitation, more parent pull; we need to work more on having services, emotional and social services, for them

not just teachers doing social/ emotional learning. That ain't what I came here for. And we need to have more work study.

Taken together, the results indicate that academic supports do not seem to address the severity and chronicity of the emotional toll students' lives has on their ability to succeed. (See figure 4)

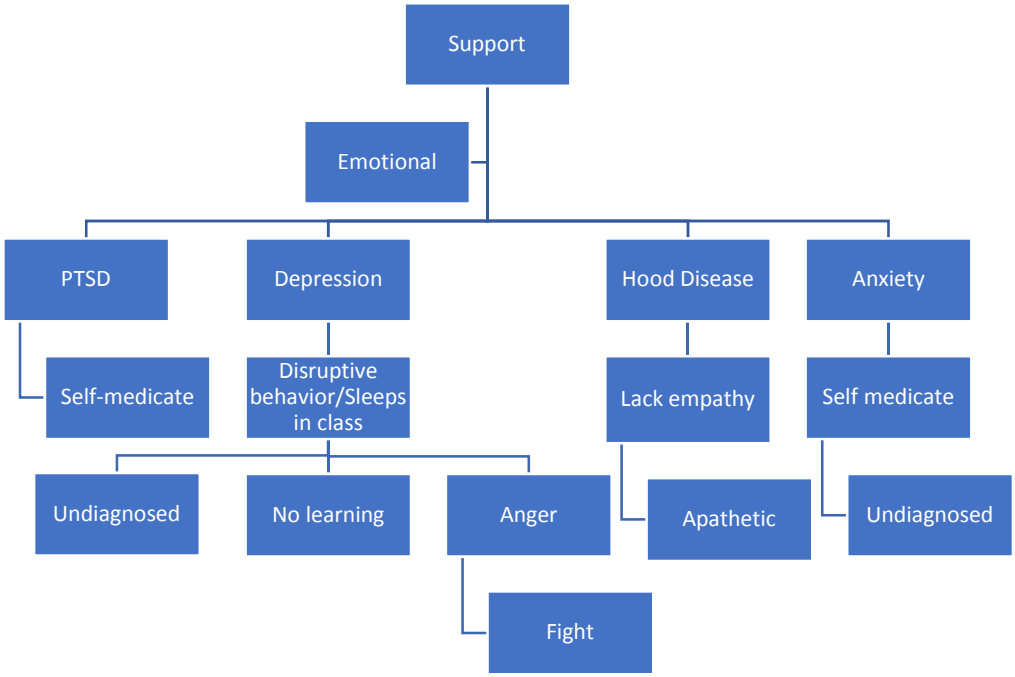

Figure 4. Undiagnosed emotional commonalities and reactions.

Community support. According to most of the participants, the students were often viewed by their own communities as menaces to society. P3 and P5 stated that they actually "self-destruct." For example, P6 stated that one of the mothers admitted telling her son that she would call his probation officer (which most of the students have) if he did not do what she wanted him to do.

"They want attention any kind of attention from the community," stated P6. P7 stated, "They wear ankle monitors as a badge of honor." He also stated that "they roll their pants up so it can be seen."

P7 also discussed the support that the school received from community businesses. Local businesses provided work study and internship opportunities for some students, haircuts for the male students, laundry detergent for the school to wash uniforms, and hygiene products such as toothpaste, toothbrushes, and deodorant. Without the support of community businesses, P5 and P7 expressed, that the school alone could not afford to provide for students' basic needs. The internships and work study provided a way for students to learn to earn money and self-respect, rather than take it from the streets while dodging bullets. P3 specifically stated, "Parents and communities are the success and demise of our youth."

P7 also stated "that all students get free breakfast and lunch, which in many cases is the only time they eat for the day." He admitted, "I've worked with Chick-fil-A, Publix, Warner Brothers, the local community barbers, local fast food restaurants, everything." P7 clarified that whatever students needed to be successful, they got it." Whatever you need to be successful, we'll tell you upfront we are going to supply you with it or help you to achieve it", stated P7. He also stated that, "We (the alternative school) had to re-brand our image to get partnerships and community support." In addition, he emphatically stated,

> Once you meet a child who is struggling and who wants to succeed, most of the community will support you in one fashion or another. We have built a lot of partnerships. How do you think I get my students jobs?

P7 stated, when showing me the laundry area of the school where uniforms are washed, "We need more from community businesses because these things run out, but we can't afford to buy these supplies." (See figure 5).

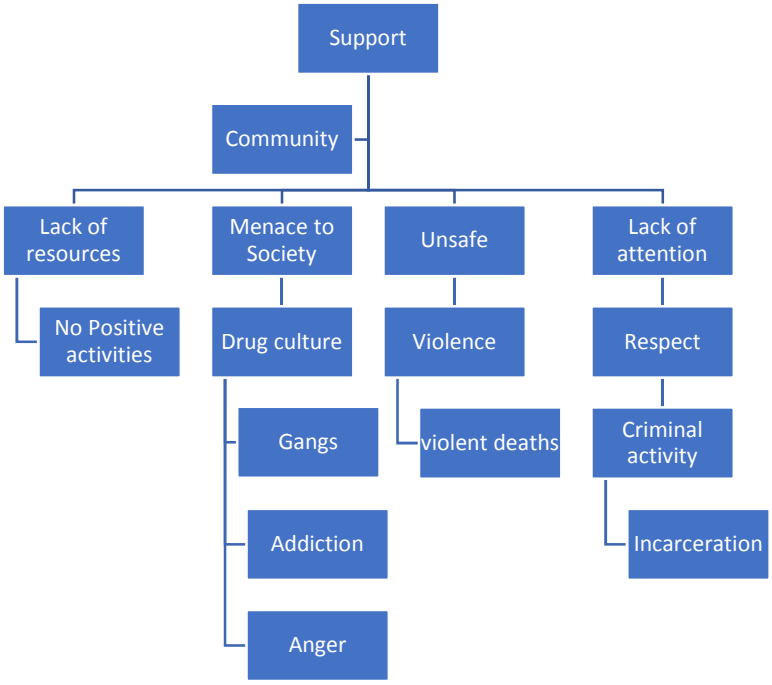

Figure 5. Common community issues across student population.

Theme 2: Acknowledgment for Incremental Gains

The second theme to emerge was acknowledgment for small gains. For example, several participants explained the value of acknowledging each defining moment of achievement for the students. Done on a daily basis, acknowledgement of incremental

gains created better decision making by the students. It was explained to students that over time, these gains and decisions would become better habits and successes.

P2 was the first to mention the importance of acknowledging incremental gains, stating:

> A little bit right after they found out about the credits but it's after making those incremental gains. As they are achieving and they see that they can do it, they have the ability. And some of them say, "Well, I should have done this a long time ago." But just realizing that it is not too late gives them that feeling like, okay I can do this. And it's such a rewarding feeling for many of them that when it is time for them to leave and go back to their home school, some of them don't want to go.
>
> We encourage the teachers to have individual meetings with the students and have an individual learning plan for each student. Within that individual learning plan, they are mapping out exactly where their deficits are and what plans the teacher has in place for them to overcome those deficits. So it puts a good deal of responsibility on the student; it makes them aware of where they are, and how they can make these incremental gains to be more successful.
>
> There is a greater percentage of students with challenges all at the same time in one location, whereas you do have a mixed group where you have some students who are gifted, and some who are not; we have more of the ones who are not and so the challenges and differences and successes, the incremental gains, are

> smaller sometimes than you would see in a traditional school. But there are still gains nonetheless.
>
> It gives them momentum because it puts them closer to the end goal. We gave students an opportunity here within the community.

P5 stated, that "showing some level of remorse, so those are all gains." He went on to explain:

> Make it a big deal – everything, and we're going to reward and acknowledge gains. We can't expect our students to go from A to Z; We're going to see you from A to B, B to C, every step and let you know that we see you. Because if you put your head down in my class every day, the day your head is up, that's a gain. when his head is up, I'm going to make it the biggest deal I've ever made it. Your head was up, you didn't participate, but your head was up and I appreciate that because you were listening. And the next time you've heard something, finally got something to say. What do you have to say? Gains; that's something I think we have to force ourselves to work on – acknowledging the gains.
>
> Gains; that's something I think we have to force ourselves to work on – acknowledging the gains. it's more than just teaching reading, writing and math. That our kids can – they can; I teach a lot of our staff about the students – where they are currently, their mentality – and they do self-destruct because of that lack of value. So, on weekends we're going to speak that and it's nothing that we're going to cure; we're going to look for gains and I always tell people to just

> continue to pat themselves on the back – teachers – to avoid burn out. Pat yourself on the back, look for those small gains, pat yourself on the back and know that we're just gonna plant those seeds. You may not see it sprout but we're just gonna plant, plant, plant.

All seven participants noted that acknowledgment for incremental gains fueled students' confidence and self-efficacy, which made them want to succeed. P2 expressed, "We encourage teachers to post quality work because that motivates them to want to do more." She also stated that when students see their classmates' work on display, they ask what they needed to do to get theirs on display as well.

All seven of the participants stated that students and staff were appreciative of acknowledgment (by the principal) of incremental gains. For example, P2 stated that some of the students have only enough credits for a first-year high school student, but they have been in high school for three years. Acknowledgement of credits completed was welcomed by the students each time they get a step closer to catching up with their cohorts. In cases where the student was already 17 or 18 years old, the GED was offered as a way out so that they could get jobs and perhaps apply to a college or trade school. P2 stated that students thrived on "seeing the light at the end of the tunnel." P2 stated, that inspired them to change their lives and taught them that they could be successful.

When asked what the school could improve upon, P2, P4, and P5, agreed that more acknowledgment and acts of appreciation for the staff and students could be improved. P1 expressed, "Proper incentives not only for the children but for the staff,

because it is hard work." Acknowledging improvement in behavior and/or academics was once in the form of free time rewards on the basketball court. In some cases, the girls who were acknowledged for incremental gains or improved behavior were given earrings and other trinkets. They even gave them free manicures for improvements academically and behaviorally. P3 expressed the need for rewarding students with time on the basketball court at the school. He emphasized that the students would benefit from physical activity rather than staying indoors every day. P3 was a coach and musician as well, who gave daily acknowledgment to students especially the males. He emphasized the need for students to have extracurricular activities to fall back on and release stress. P1 stated that they used to allow students to go outside and play basketball as incentives. P3 also stated that basketball courts in their communities were "drug turf which is why they play half court because the open space makes them easy targets for shootings." Participants stressed that acknowledgment for gains served as incentives and encouragement. (See figure 6)

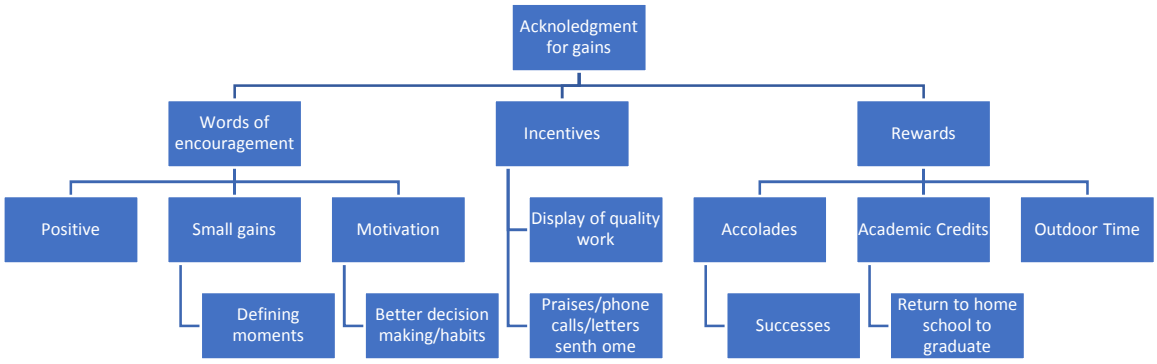

Figure 6. Second major theme.

Theme 3: Struggle to Focus

The third theme to emerge was "struggle to focus." Participants consistently expressed that the students who exemplified persistence were "focused" and that was difficult for alternative students to do. This theme started to emerge in the interview with P2, who used the word "focus" 13 times during the interview. P2 explained:

> Those students are the ones that are focused. We give students an opportunity here within the community. We have small class sizes so there is a lot of support. But those students are the ones who are focusing fast; they can finish one course in half a semester. We give them that opportunity. If they can complete a course in half a semester if they are that far behind, then in the next half we can put them in the next course. So that helps them to earn the credit in double the time. If we

> didn't do it that way, they would have to be that determined to finish in half a semester, and then if they do, the teacher verifies the course completion. Once they verify and sign off on the course completion then we put them in their next course. And so we have had some students who have been just that determined to catch up and finish their courses at a faster pace than other students. Well, that's one of those individualized instructional programs that I was talking about that we can individualize it for each student to make sure that they get exactly what they need.

When asked students who do well and persist, P3 emphasized, "these kids are unique; they stay out of trouble, they don't disrespect the teachers, they come in, get their work done, and I think it may be a testament to what has happened in their past." He also stated, "They are usually helpful, very helpful". He emphatically said:

> they don't usually get involved with crowds to the point of being negative or violent and things like that. So those are just a few of common traits that those kids have who are focused, they don't return anyway; they understand that I made a mistake; they understand that this is a consequence, almost like you're ABCs, so they don't return. So, they will remember you before you remember them just because they don't return. They are usually 'one and done.'

P4 explained:

> When students maybe have some type of behavior issues and even though behavior is typically discipline, a lot of times they'll have them come in a do

> maybe a quick one-on-one session about, you know, just refocusing and getting redirected, and the counselor works with her kids in that way, too. There are some that I'm really working close with because we also have teams here.

When asked what it takes for a student to persist, P4 stated:

> I think, this is your average student – come to school every day, being engaged is the same thing. The work doesn't change just because you are at this school. So, it's not like you're getting less than what you get at a traditional school. So stay on task here so that you can return to your school. If you're not losing any credits, that's the best thing for you. If you take the expulsion, you're not getting anything. So then when you talk about graduating, you can stay on track if you do everything you need to do here to make sure your grades are good, come to school every day for your attendance so you'll not have any issues when you go back to your next school, just remain focused. So when you're talking with them about…. There's one thing at this school that we don't do because we're not therapy, we're not like okay we can fix you this, that and the other, but when we see issues going on with you when you are here, we connect you to resources to make sure that you get the support you need.

P5 gave an example of a student who is an example of what it takes to persist:

> I have a student in my head now. Well the student is making efforts to remove himself from adverse situations or conflicts. I've noticed that this student has walked away and removed himself from situations that could have potentially

> turned into a fight and apologized a couple of times for engaging in or saying things that were inappropriate to adults; okay so showing some level of remorse, so those are all gains. In terms of work, we have a virtual academy here where students can take additional classes or they can make up classes, and I know this student is behind on some credits. So when I go in to check on classes, he's usually pretty focused on the class and he, at least, has a desire to finish and to succeed.

P5 went on to explain why some students struggle to focus:

> So I can think of a student who is homeless, and the parents are having a difficult time with life skills and the parents are struggling just to make it; so it's a challenge just for the student to come to school, just for the student to wake up in my opinion. So, coming to school… Well, they're in a hotel - like temporary housing and it's very challenging for a student who has been going through this for years. The school has been providing support but for a student to go through all of that and then have to come here or any school, and learn about reading and writing and math, and those wonderful things, it's difficult and makes students just want to give up. So, it's just a matter of teaching coping skills hoping to encourage the student to remain focused, to stay encouraged, to persevere through these challenging times and things will get better.

P6 described the struggle to focus that she observed in her class:

> They think school is boring; they feel like if they can smoke all day, they can relax, chill; nobody can tell them what to do; they can steal cars and it's fun being chased by the police; that's the biggest challenge. The biggest challenge for a lot of these kids is the focus not being here but being on the street. They can't wait – oh God, it's four o'clock, they're like Pavlov and the dog. Ring –

She also described why one student struggled:

> And the lure of the street to him is everything. He's out robbing people, he's out, you know, stealing stuff and selling stuff and he'll come in every once in a while, and do his work but he doesn't have the foundation. He can't really focus because he can't really read. He can't really focus because he hasn't been in the classroom and it feels like this is a cage to him so he has to wander up and down the hall. So that street is really what has been calling him, and we've been trying to help him a lot – giving him male mentors in the building, making sure his hair stays cut and brushed, and we can wash their clothes here and all of that. Still that's not enough for him.

P7 describes some of his students:

> I have students who have extreme charges on their records – armed robbery, gang violence – these are the same students who I put in internships who have never had academic success who are now either passing all of their classes or A-B students who are doing internships for diesel mechanics who have left the street life and now are focused, or actually now have a career plan.

The unfocused behaviors included, students falling asleep in class, not being in tune with what is happening in class at any given moment, not doing assignments, coming to class self-medicated, disruptive behavior, and continuously looking at the clock for dismissal. P5 expressed that it was difficult for students to focus when they had no support from home and inconsistent living arrangements. P3, P4, P5, and P7 all stated that it was difficult for students to focus when they had to worry about providing food for their families or daycare for their children. For example, P3 stated that "these kids eat first, and everything else comes after that."

P6 expressed that some students have "hood disease" which was defined as a term that "is about children who grow up in poverty who have no empathy." Difficulty focusing was a common thread for students who were chronically absent from school. As P6 explained the "streets are calling them", leading to lack of focus. For example, P5 noted that it was difficult for students to focus when they are self-medicated and high when they get to school. He stated that they have to teach most of them how to set goals, focus, and persist until they reach the goals.

P2 stated that students who were "focused "on obtaining credits to catch up with their cohorts and potentially complete high school rather than dropping out. P2 and P7 noted that students who identified a specific academic structure (such as the blended computer-based model) had a routine and a plan. Those students were persistent and consistently motivated. Individualized education plans, de-escalation strategies, and peer

mediation helped provided support to assist students in academic and behavior modification which allowed students to gain social skills and academic focus. (See figure 7).

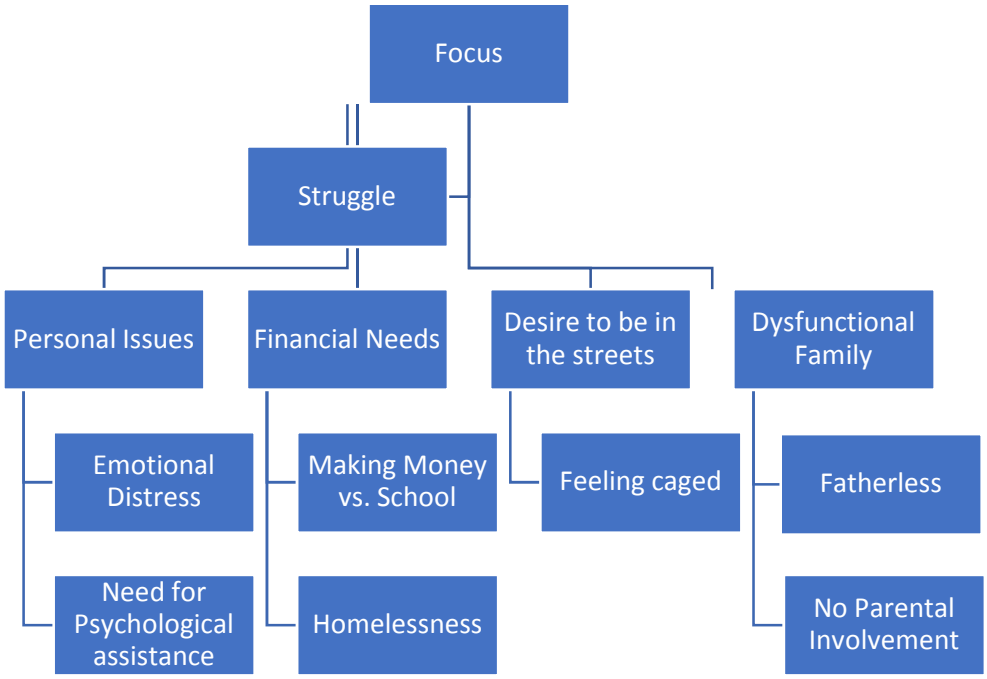

Figure 7. Third major theme (struggle to focus)

Theme 4: Continuum of Hope

The fourth theme to emerge was the continuum of hope. Students at the school, according to participants, were faced with many issues even before they arrived at school each day. Hope had to be built in the students because they had none. All participants reported being challenged daily to build hope in students who had given up on school, their futures, and themselves; and to "rally" around a message of hope to the students. For example, participants expressed "lack of hope" as the most challenging factor to help

students cultivate. P3, P4, P5, and P7 all stated that it was difficult for students to focus when they had no hope. All participants noted that for students "lose hope" when they discover they do not have nearly enough credits to graduate. For example, P2 explained:

> some students have found out that they have been in high school for years and only had enough credits to be in ninth grade. When 17 and 18-year-old students discovered that, they often lost hope of ever matriculating. We offered the option of getting a G.E.D instead, so that they could get jobs or pursue secondary education…Most of those students also had below average reading levels, which made courses more difficult to complete in their traditional schools before and after alternative school.

The continuum of hope (from "hopelessness" to hopefulness" was described by participants as a balance between academic learning and social-emotional learning. P7 had mentioned that a social-emotional component was being implemented throughout the schools. P6 expressed, however, "The social/emotional learning piece - recommended and required by the new district superintendent - is not enough." For example, P6 and P7 described peer mediation as a social/emotional tool to help students who had lost hope. Peer mediation is described as the process of having a specific person to go to when they are in distress. The social/emotional component also taught students to recognize their "triggers" to be equipped with the strategies to make better decisions for themselves. P7 explained that students' outbursts usually lasted only 20 minutes or so, and then they were ready to continue the day just fine with hopes of a better outcome. However, several

of the participants said that more professional psychological support was necessary, given the socio-emotional challenges the students face every day. For example P6 stated that the teachers were doing their best they could with the social emotional learning piece, but they were not equipped to give students the professional psychological help they needed for such things as depression, anxiety, "hood disease", and PTSD.

P2 noted, "That's something we want to give our kids, hope, because they see that tunnel, the light at the end is too far so they lose hope". P2, P7, P5, P6, and P4 expressed that celebrating a step at a time and letting them see levels of success, created hope.

P3 expressed that "lack of exposure to positive environments was a challenge to helping students who felt hopeless". P5 emphatically stated:

> That's why many of our students self-destruct because of (lack of) hope. Our superintendent talks a lot about hope and that's something we want to give our kids- hope, because they see that long tunnel, the light at the end is too far; so, I tell them you have to put it in segments; a step at a time and let them see levels of success and not give up.

P5 went on to say that "you have to give them something that is obtainable in their eyes and reachable and then just go from there." (See figure 8).

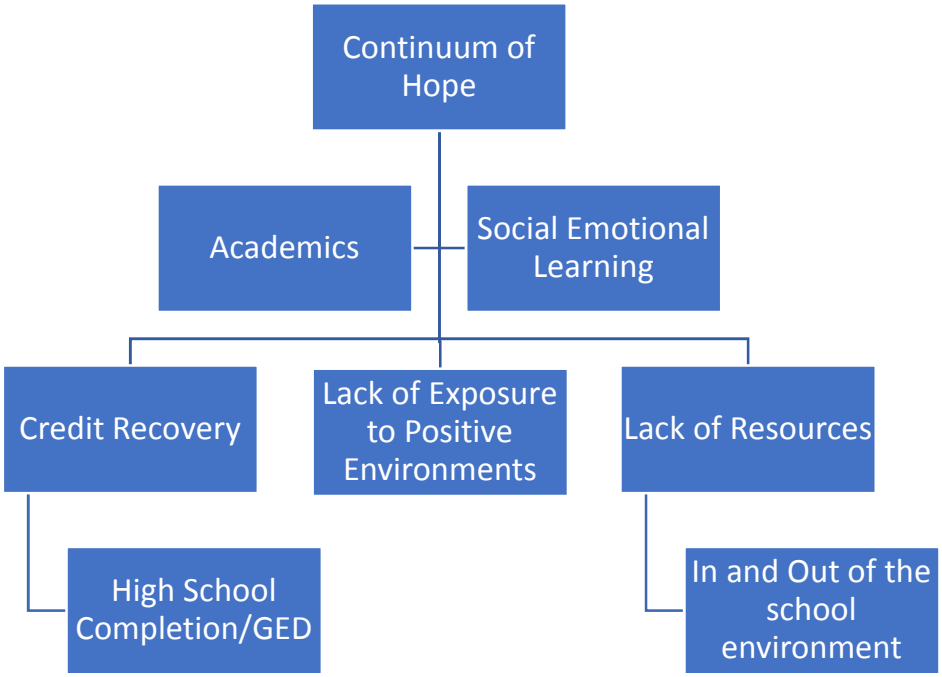

Figure 8. Fourth major theme (continuum of hope).

Theme 5: "We are Family"

Throughout every interview were expressions of caring and commitment and the word "family" was used often when describing why the participants were so moved to go beyond the expectations of academic duties. For example, all participants preferred working with at-risk students, which is uncommon. All of the participants expressed a desire to help the students "change for the better." P7 explained, "Once you come here (the alternative school) you are family." Another example, P1 referred to the students her "babies". P7 also explained that the biggest challenge to for kids to stay in school:

> Stability at home. Support and stability at home and there are a lot of components to that, you know. You move every four months; you change your residence; you're shifted from one family member to the next. And we have a population

> who is homeless and a population who is in group homes. So, there are a lot of different issues, but it's stability at home that's critical.

Another example indicative of the theme "We are family" was that P3, P5 and P6 called the male students "my boys." P5 also stated that "we take care of our students" when referring to what the school did well. In addition, P3 stated:

> We just try to provide additional support so if we're not feeling that it is going at a successful rate, we'll implement another resource of support for that student or that family; so, it could be, you know, in-house or out-house. Every situation is unique.

Furthermore, P4 explained, "when we see issues going on with you when you are here, we connect you to resources to make sure that you get the support you need."

P3 explained,

> My expectations do not diminish on ant level. Any kid here will tell you I'm going to hold you accountable; I'm going to have fun with you, I love having fun but there is a time and there is a place and that's why I think it is the biggest challenge for me to relate to them that it is a time and it is a place, and I want them to be great; I want them to enjoy their childhood and their teenage years, but I also want to make them live through it, because since I've been here, I've gone to at least three funerals since I've been here; each year at least three.

P2 expressed:

I think we treat them so well so they like that support and that love and that encouragement and that scaffolding and they have somebody watching their back and they don't have to worry about the little petty things that they worry about in their home school - somebody trying to pull them down, and so many distractions; here it is just focus. We are going to make sure that you are not getting hurt and we're going to make sure that you learn, and we're going to make sure that you go back a better person than you came here. (See figure 9)

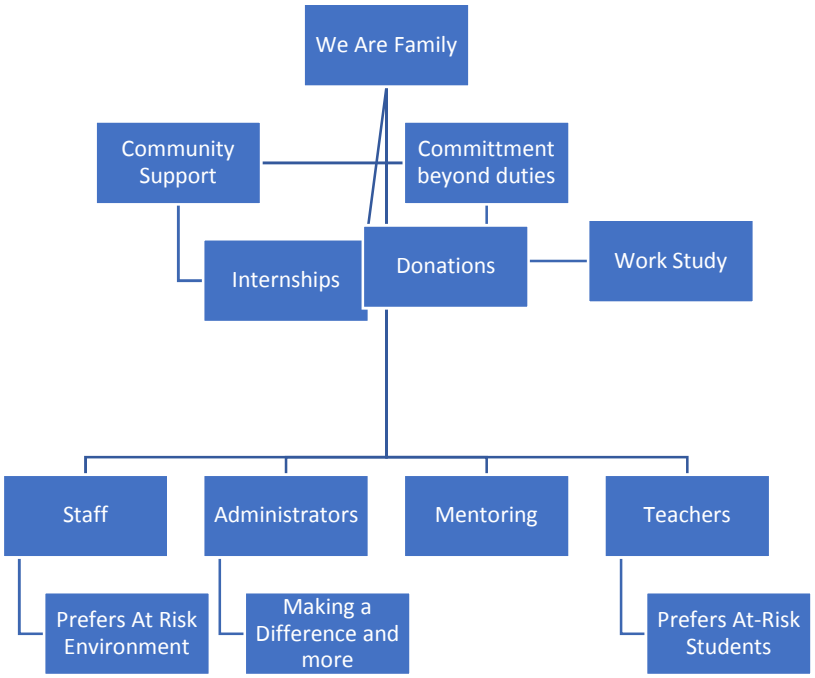

Figure 9. Fifth major theme (we are family).

Results

The results of this case study provided a multi-dimensional understanding of how persistence and retention are experienced teachers and administrators of an alternative

school. To answer the research questions, I went back to the interview guide and identified the specific interview questions that corresponded to the central research questions, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Research Questions with Associated Interview Questions

Research Questions	Interview Questions
1. What is the meaning of academic persistence for EBD students in an alternative school?	4,5,7,8,9
2. What institutional efforts have been made to retain EBD students?	12,13
3. What processes/consequences are in place to improve student engagement in efforts to improve retention?	7- 10;13- 14

What is the meaning of academic persistence for EBD students in an alternative school?

Taken together, the interview questions corresponding to this question reveal that participants described persistence as the ability to focus on goals in increments. Positive interaction between students and staff aided in goal commitment. Persistence was described as students accepting support that was offered in order to make gains. P2 explained that once students set goals to complete the credits needed using the blended learning program, for credit recovery. They were also the students who kept up with the amount of credits they had and needed to reach the next grade level. P2 explained that those students gained momentum and became excited about the possibilities of

completing high school or getting a GED. P2 and P5 stated that students matured and persisted during this process. P3 explained that students who persisted were those who did not mind being ostracized by their peers and intentionally isolated themselves from problematic situations with peers.

What institutional efforts have been made to retain students with EBD ?

Taken together, the items corresponding to this question reveal that several changes and additional programs have been made and/or created in efforts to retain students. For example, P7 specifically stated that the school had moved from a punitive model, which was ineffective, to a full restorative model and social emotional learning program. Another example, P5 started a debate program to teach students proper self – expression, critical thinking, and oral communication skills. P5 admitted, "they need coping skills. A lot of our students need this because that's the reason they are here because of lack of social skills and the lack of ability to cope; they lack basic social skills to help them process their emotions so they don't react in a negative manner to get them in trouble." He stated that the male student debaters had shown an increase in effective communication skills, confidence, self-efficacy, and self -esteem, as a result of the skills they learned in the debate program. He also stated, "That's been a great success to see them grow from the beginning to the end. We teach them how to stand, how to deliver, and how to listen and how to agree (and disagree) appropriately." He went on to say that, "They are used to speaking in one sentence."

P5 also started a peer -on-peer leadership program. He explained that he took a group of students to an elementary school where the students help the kindergarteners and first graders with their work.

> "I do that develop their self-esteem and their self-concept and also it gets them into the practice of giving back and to display basic social skills they lack in many cases-patience, empathy, compassion, -those types of things where we use kindergarteners as the subject because all the kindergarteners are going to do is love up on them because they just want to learn."

He stated that these skills are needed to become positive and contributing members of society. 'The students really enjoyed working with the little ones because they are making a change in society.' P5 stated, "that more of our kids need to be put in a situation where they are making some level of positive impact to learn things like love and respect." It also seemed to give them hope for the future.

What processes/consequences are in place to improve student engagement in efforts to improve retention?

Considerable efforts were reported by participants on what has been done to improve retention. These included the mentoring efforts, incentives, debate team, peer mentoring, blended learning, work study, internships, and other programs that the alternative school and personnel have made to improve and retention. In addition, P7 described the institutional effort to provide each incoming student with an individual educational program that specifically targets their individual needs. Institutional

consequences were never mentioned in any of the interviews. This was due to the shift from punitive to a "full-restorative" or holistic model along with the implementation of social emotional learning. The principal used the term "full restorative model", but the term was not used by any of the other participants. However, it was clear in all of the interviews that the punitive model was no longer being used.

Evidence of Quality

To establish credibility of the study, familiarity with the culture of the alternative school was established by visits to the school before data collection began to attempt to establish trust and rapport (Shenton, 2004). Use of reflective commentary throughout the visits and observations of the setting assisted in understanding the underpinnings and credibility the study and thoughts that guided it. These thoughts and theories were reviewed and discussed with the relevant participants and my dissertation supervisor throughout the study. Frequent debriefing sessions (Shenton, 2004) with my dissertation supervisor highlighted any flaws and provided guidance and alternative strategies if necessary. These discussions allowed me to tryout ideas and develop interpretations in a forum that highlighted my biases as a researcher.

Stake (1995) advocated the idea of using a collective case study strategy to supply the reader with a variety voices contributing to the information gathering process. To ensure transferability, "circling reality" was used. "Circling reality" is described by Shenton (2004) as the need to get a variety of perspectives on a phenomenon in order to establish a broader, more informed view. The purposeful participant selection process

that was used in this study. It provided a variety of voices, viewpoints, and perspectives from (2) administrators, (2) teachers, (1) graduation coach, (1) social worker, and (1) school psychologist. The aforementioned participants informed the body of knowledge from multiple observational and participatory perspectives, regarding students' persistence and retention in the alternative school setting. However, an absence of student interviews created an absence of their voice from the student perspective. Before and after data collection, the triangulation process was used to establish dependability for the reader. These overlapping methods detailed information that allowed future researchers to repeat the steps of the research project. Triangulation also established trust between the researcher and participants.

Prolonged engagement with participants and descriptive data gathering ensured that false conclusions were not reached based upon isolated, idiosyncratic experiences. The use of rich, thick description of participant experiences and contexts in which the experiences were imbedded ensured that a sufficient level of detail was included, so that others might draw the same or similar conclusions. This allowed the reader to capture details of the phenomena that may be transferable to comparable experiences and situations.

Summary and Transition

Chapter 4 described the data collection process from interviews and observations. The rich, descriptive lived experiences of several members of the staff were described in personal interviews. Chapter 4 presented the demographics of the participants, the data

collection procedures, data coding procedures, resulting in the identification and analysis of five major themes: support, acknowledgment of incremental gains, struggle to focus, continuum of hope, and we are family. A description of how each research question was addressed by the data was presented.

Academic persistence was described by participants as students who were focused on incremental gains, goal commitment, and isolation from their peers while accepting positive interaction with staff. These students utilized the blended learning model and completed credits toward graduation in half the time that was allotted for completion. The momentum allowed students to experience academic success.

Institutional efforts that were made to retain students included a shift from the punitive model to a full-restorative model along with the implementation of social emotional learning. A vital component of this model was that the students were not punished for their emotional and behavioral outbursts, like they were in traditional schools. Instead, they were taught to recognize their triggers and how to make better decisions for themselves. Participants shared that this holistic approach offered the support needed for student success (personal and academical). In addition, the institution established individual learning programs for all students which influenced retention. A blended learning program was adopted to accelerate academic success for students who were behind in credits toward high school completion.

Efforts to improve student engagement and retention included the establishment of peer mentoring in partnership with an elementary school. Students were also selected to participate in the debate team, work study, and internships.

In Chapter 5, I discuss the interpretation of the results, limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, implications for social change, and conclusions.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

In this case study research, I used a variety of data collection tools to gain an in-depth understanding of how persistence and retention were experienced in an alternative school setting. The interview and observation data and analysis provided information from participants' multiple viewpoints regarding experiences of persistence and retention. I identified emergent themes associated with emotional and institutional supports for students in order to improve student persistence and retention. The students described by participants struggled with emotional and behavioral issues in their traditional schools before they attended alternative school. However, they were not formally diagnosed as EBD and did not receive the psychiatric and emotional support from neither traditional nor alternative school.

Study participants included two administrators, two teachers, a graduation coach, a school social worker, and a school psychologist. Other data sources included two school observations and descriptive field notes. I observed empty classrooms, offices, auxiliary spaces, hallways, reception area, and student entrances and exits. An inductive analysis of the collected data concluded with the identification of 150 codes and emergence of 32 unique categories. The codes and categories revealed five major themes: *support, acknowledgement for incremental gains, struggle to focus, a continuum of hope, and we are family*.

Findings

The phenomenon of interest that guided the study was how teachers, support staff members, and administrators experienced student persistence in an alternative school. The findings of the study reflected the experiences of teachers, a social worker, a principal, an assistant principal, a school psychologist, and a graduation coach. The intent was to include adult students as participants. This was not allowed at the site. Therefore, the data collected reflected the experiences of those participants that were selected by the gatekeeper. These data were coded and analyzed, revealing the five themes noted in the introduction of this chapter. The findings showed that the meaning of academic persistence (Research Question 1) was associated with students who were focused on reaching their academic incremental gains and goals.

The results also showed that institutional efforts were made to retain EBD students (Research Question 2). For example, the school moved from a punitive disciplinary model, which was ineffective, to a social/emotional learning model. Participants mentioned that a debate program was implemented to teach students proper self-expression, critical thinking, social skills, and oral communication skills. These skills fostered improvement in students' self-efficacy.

The participants also described several processes in place to improve student engagement in efforts to improve retention (Research Question 3). For example, the school incorporated peer mentoring, blended learning, work study, internships, and credit recovery to improve persistence and retention.

Another discovery was the expressed desire to work with at-risk students. Their commitment to the students went above and beyond the duties and responsibilities established by the administration and school district. For example, P6 expressed that she loved working with alternative school students in urban settings. She explained that she felt that these students needed her more. Another example was P3 who said he always wanted to work at the alternative school and was grateful when given the chance to do so. He described a debate club program he established to assist students with improving their self -expression. He explained that students really enjoyed being in the debate club and had shown vast improvement in their communication, conflict resolution, and problem-solving skills. He also established a peer mentoring program that the students enjoyed because they went to the elementary school to read books to the kindergartens and 1st graders.

The interviews revealed unexpected findings as well. One unexpected finding was the reported frequency in which students had been murdered or incarcerated during breaks from school. Several had not reached their 18th birthdays. One unexpected finding was that the students in the alternative school had not been diagnosed as EBD but showed all of the symptoms described in the definition of the term. Without a formal diagnosis, students with these symptoms were not allowed access to psychiatric and emotional support and services through the school system. Another surprising finding was the individual assessment of students upon admission to the alternative school. Two participants reported that all students were assessed and given an individual educational

program specifically designed to foster and strengthen them personally and academically. These additional findings demonstrate how alternatives schools offer more support for marginalized students than traditional schools (see Rix & Twining, 2007).

Interpretation of Findings

Comparison with Previous Literature

Alternative schools arose as vehicles for addressing the challenges of students who are identified with emotional and behavioral problems in school. As indicated in Chapter 2, behaviors diminish the students' capacities to function appropriately. According to the results of this study, most participants reported that these students were undiagnosed and therefore never got the kind of services that were discussed in the literature. Several researchers have established that without proper identification and services, students with EBD have little chance of academic achievement (Case, Barber, & Starkey, 2015; Simon, Pastor, Reuben, Huang, & Goldstrom, 2015; Simpson, Scott, Henderson, & Manderscheid, 2002).

As I described in Chapter 2, advocates for alternative schools support the idea that some students need different school settings than traditional schools have to offer (Raywid, 1994). The results of this study were consistent with those advocates. Generally, alternative schools have been viewed as schools of choice, or as "dumping grounds" for students who had been marginalized in the traditional school setting ((Barr & Parrett, 2001; McKee & Conner, 2007; Raywid, 1994). In many cases, these are

students with EBD who have been disengaged and at risk for dropping out (Barr & Parrett, 2001; McKee & Conner, 2007; Raywid, 1994).

The results of my study were consistent with what was reported in the literature. Participants reported that students at the alternative school were given a choice of being expelled from the school district or going to the alternative school. In addition, the alternative school was previously used as a "dumping ground" for marginalized students in the school district according to several participants. However, two participants reported that the current principal of the alternative school no longer allowed such practice.

The findings also support those in the previous literature in that most of these students were not able to function in traditional school because of undiagnosed emotional and behavioral disorders (Raywid, 1994). For example, the traditional schools that they came from were not equipped with the resources to meet their emotional, psychological, and academic needs. The qualitative findings from this study also showed a more in-depth understanding of what kept students from functioning in the traditional school environment: "hood disease." One participant identified the concept of "hood disease" (extreme PTSD; Middlebrooks & Audage, 2008), which was caused by overexposure to traumatic situations such as murder or incarceration of close relatives and friends. She reported that students with this condition lacked empathy. Participants reported that many of the students often self-medicated with marijuana and/or alcohol.

Understanding and compassion for these students in these circumstances were not likely to be offered at traditional schools. This was consistent with the discussions by Rix and Twining (2007), who emphasized the positive support of alternative schools. Their research, as I described in Chapter 2, indicated that alternative schools were designed to foster and strengthen student-teacher relationships for the purpose of academic and personal success. The findings also support the body of research that indicates that alternative school options for at risk students could have positive outcomes (Aud, Kewal, Romani, & Frohlich, 2011; Skiba, Eckes, & Brown, 2010; Skiba & Rauseh, 2006; Stillwell, Suble, & Plott, 2011). However, many of the students who attended alternative school were still struggling, failing to meet graduation requirements, and/or dropping out. Therefore, lingering questions about exactly what could contribute to retention of the diagnosed and undiagnosed EBD student population and how persistence and retention were experienced remained (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990; Raywid, 1989; Wehlage & Rutter, 1987; Wehlage et al. 1989; Young, 1990). However, my findings indicated that persistence and retention were addressed through programs that were developed by faculty and staff at the school. The credit recovery program offered to students at the alternative school, for instance, allowed students to achieve incremental gains. These gains were celebrated by the teachers and administrators. Acknowledgment of these gains helped students with the desire to persist in gaining credits. As students persisted, teachers and administrators used their academic gains to shift their self-esteem and self-efficacy in a more positive direction. Previous researchers

had not highlight acknowledgment of incremental gains as a pertinent factor in EBD students' personal and academic success or failure. However, some researchers highlighted the fear of failure as reasons why students drop out. My findings indicated that acknowledgment of incremental gains gave students documentation and praise for their successes and effort, which aided in persistence and retention.

The participants emphasized how much more could be done by providing the students with professional psychological services for emotional and behavioral disorders that hinder their personal and academic success. There is considerable literature highlighting the issue of unmet educational, psychosocial, and medical service needs for students diagnosed with EBD or similar mental health issues (Johnson, Hollis, Marlow, Simms, & Wolke, 2014; Provasnik & Planty, 2008; Robert, Robert, & Wenyaw, 2009). However, federal and district-level mandates require a diagnosis in order to deliver services. In this study most of the students were undiagnosed, and therefore unable to receive such services.

The lack of services highlighted in previous literature was similar the lack of support for these students reported by participants. The lack of support in this study expanded beyond socio-economic deficits and into more holistic factors such as parental, academic, emotional, and community support. Access to appropriate services had proven to be difficult with and without the assistance of school personnel (Becker, Paternite, & Evans, 2014; Forness, & Knitzer, 1992; McGinnis, & Forness, 1988). The results of a nationally surveyed study conducted by Becker et al. (2014) showed that only the most

aggressive students with EBD were more likely to receive school-based eligibility and services for EBD after receiving a diagnosis. These findings are indicative of the theme "lack of support" in this study. Previous research I discussed in Chapter 2 shows the underachievement of EBD students and their dropout rates compared to other special needs groups. However, in this study, I identified reasons why they drop out.

The "struggle to focus" emerged as another theme in this study. Previous researchers have well documented the characteristics and academic difficulties of students with attention deficits and disorders such as ADD or ADHD. Research has indicated that the symptoms of ADHD, EBD, and LD often overlap (Dykman & Ackerman, 1991; Forness, Bennett, & Tose, 1983; Handwerk & Marshall, 1998; Kaplan, Dewey, Crawford, & Wilson, 2001). However, in this study, I identified reasons why the students at the alternative school struggled to focus. Social psychological and family issues were identified as reasons students struggled to focus.

"The continuum of hope" emerged as a theme in this study. It was indicated by the findings that students, upon arriving to the alternative school, "had no hope." Previous researchers did not mention the experience of hope in any research. Quantitative epidemiological researchers have documented academic difficulties and deficiencies of students with special needs. Hope was not documented in such research. However, I identified hope as vital to student success.

Lastly, the theme 'we are family' emerged in this exploratory case study. The holistic approach that was shared by administrators, teachers, graduation coaches, school

social workers, and school psychologists provided a rich description of family provided for the students. This holistic approach used in the alternative school was not identified in previous literature. However, one study in the previous literature, used a purposeful sample of high school dropouts, age 18 years or above at adult basic skills G.E.D completion programs. They were surveyed to determine some of the reasons for dropping out (Lynch, Kistner, & Allan, 2014). The research categories examined were (a) school, (b) home and family, (c) community, (d) individual characteristics, and (e) demographic data. The study revealed that there were numerous reasons for students dropping out rather one or two common denominators. However, family was not viewed as school staff and students. The support given at the alternative school went beyond the typical expectations.

Theoretical Relevance

Erikson's fifth stage of psychosocial development. Erikson (1968) emphasized the importance of resolving conflicts at each stage before it is possible to move successfully to the next stage of psychological development. Erikson believed that cultural variations influenced ego and personality development, in the human life span. He put great emphasis on how personality was shaped by culture and how key personalities (individuals) shaped and influenced culture in return.

Erikson's fifth stage of his psychosocial development theory (identity versus role confusion) occurs during adolescence, from about 12-18 years. At this stage, teenagers explore who they are as individuals, and seek to establish a sense of self, and may

experiment with different roles, activities, and behaviors. This is important to the process of forming a strong identity and developing a sense of direction in life. During this stage, adolescents search for a sense of self and personal identity, through an intense exploration of personal values, beliefs and goals.

Age-wise, this is the stage that the students at the alternative school were in and trying to successfully navigate without much support from their families and communities. For example, many of the students attempted to find a sense of identity through involvement with gangs. Gang affiliation provided a sense of belonging and provided a "love bond" that these students were not getting at home according to several participants. Although these students were not recipients of support from home, they found support in the streets. In this study, the overall theme of support referred to the assistance and subsistence students needed from their parents, teachers, schools, and community and was defined by four distinct sub-themes: parental, academic, emotional, and community.

The results of this study align with Erikson's belief that, "the adolescent mind was essentially a mind or moratorium, a psychosocial stage between childhood and adulthood, between the morality learned by the child, and the ethics to be developed by the adult" (Erikson, 1963, p. 245). The participants consistently reported that their students were not equipped with a foundation or social skills from home and community that would contribute to normative moral development. As previously mentioned in the Chapter 4, many of these students experienced domestic violence, criminal activity, and homicide in

their homes and communities which bred mistrust and duplicity as a moral code and means of survival (see figure 5).

Bandura's theory of self-efficacy. Emerging themes and sub-themes also supported the theoretical framework of Bandura (1997) which proposed that human functioning is formed by a combination of behavioral, personal, and environmental factors. He theorized that humans had the capacity to set their own courses of action with the anticipation of consequences or positive outcomes. Furthermore, Bandura theorized that one's self-efficacy is the cornerstone of motivation, and accomplishments. The findings exposed the theme of "acknowledgment of incremental gains" as a builder of self-efficacy (see figure 6). For example, students who were given praise and rewards anticipated more of the same because they were incentivized. In the process, they developed self-efficacy, self-worth, and confidence. Evidence of this support was reported by participants who explained that students who were behind in credits toward matriculation began to increase in momentum when they began acquiring credits and were rewarded with having their quality work displayed.

Bandura (1997) explained how useful self-efficacy was when applied in areas that affected human growth and development, such as academic pursuits, professional goals and aspirations, athletics, and psychopathology. The theory described human functioning as formed by behavioral, personal, and environmental factors combined. This was evidenced by the reported behavior and interactions of the students at the alternative school. Participants reported despondent moods and aggression as results of what the

students had seen, (not been) taught, and experienced in their homes and communities (see figure 5).

Bandura believed that if humans did not believe they could bring about positive change, there would be no desire to struggle in the face of adversity (1997).
In alignment with this theory, the results of this study revealed the reality of students who had no hope of success in the theme continuum of hope (see figure 8).

The results also revealed that students' personal experiences and interactions at home and in their communities shaped their behaviors. For example, all of the participants explained that the students lacked the social and academic skills necessary for adult success. These deficits contributed to misrepresentation of behaviors, ineffective learning styles, and breakdown of communication in their traditional schools. This also aligned with the sub-theme of lack of parental support (see figure 2). Students who lacked social skills developed at home exhibited socially unacceptable behaviors in school.

Results of studies have shown that low levels of self-efficacy accompany escalated neurosis, feelings of anxiety, and depressed emotions, all of which were characteristics of students with emotional and behavioral disorders (Bandura, 1994). The sub-theme of emotional support indicated that most if not all of the students at the alternative school suffered from undiagnosed depression, PTSD, "Hood Disease", and anxiety (see figure 4). These students experienced failure more often, and were easily discouraged by their failures. In addition to failure and its impact on these students, mood

also affected judgments of personal efficacy. Therefore, positive moods enhanced perceived self-efficacy and despondent moods diminished self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994). Likewise, these students' despondent moods were compounded when failure was experienced in their traditional schools. For example, students who were behind on high school credits were more inclined to have truancy issues, which was indicative of a sense of hopelessness and lack of parental support (see figure 1). What was perceived as academic failure in the traditional school setting was debilitating to the self-efficacy of students with emotional/behavioral disorders (see figure 8). Erratic analytic thinking was also linked to constant self-doubt, which diminished performance and accomplishments.

In accordance with the aforementioned statement, the results revealed that the "struggle to focus" theme contributed to lack of persistence and retention at the alternative school (see figure 7). For example, the data revealed that students struggled to focus on a daily basis because they wanted to be in the streets. In addition, many others struggled to focus because of their low reading levels that contributed to academic failures (see figure 3).

On the contrary, high self-efficacy correlates with higher goals, and firmer commitments to those goals. An example extracted from the data, confirmed that with the success of the credit recovery system as well as the blended learning model used by the alternative school. Students who experienced success in accumulating credits in half the allotted time went on to accelerate academically with greater momentum. Reports from participants indicated that the students realized that they were in control of how quickly

they completed credits toward graduation or a G.E.D. This realization along with "acknowledgment for incremental gains" encouraged "hope" for these students (see figures 6 & 8).

Students with emotional and behavioral disorders often had difficulty with self-control. Deficient self-control produced feelings of social isolation in addition to depressed and or anxious moods (Bandura, 1997). Participants reported having students who could not sit and focus in class. One participant said the "streets" were calling them. Evidence in Chapter 4 indicated that many students who struggle with these issues often found comfort in unhealthy alternatives such as controlled substances and criminal activities.

The results revealed that participants saw the value of peer-mediation, peer mentoring, and behavior modification strategies that were employed at the alternative school. The social skills learned through peer-mediation, debate team, and peer mentoring improved self-efficacy, effective communication, and positive self - expression, according to the facilitator/participant. Students were taught to employ these strategies to recognize their emotional triggers, to better avoid or dissolve conflicts

In sum, the themes and sub-themes aligned with both Erikson and Bandura's theories. The results were also consistent with the previous research, in Chapter 2, surrounding alternative schools and EBD students in alternative schools. For example, EBD students were found to need more than what their traditional schools had given them by way of support (Raywid, 1994). As well, alternative schools were viewed as

'dumping grounds' and a choice for marginalized students, just as the literature in Chapter 2 stated. In addition, the study supported the previous literature that EBD students were often unsuccessful in traditional school settings. Yet, unexpected findings were vital to answering the research questions of this study. For example, it was reported by participants that students were murdered and incarcerated in higher numbers when school was not in session. As evidenced by the results of the study, lingering questions regarding what contributed to persistence and retention of EBD students was potentially answered. The utilization of professional psychological services was emphasized by several participants.

Limitations

Researcher's bias was a risk because my personal beliefs and experiences may have interfered with the understanding and accurate representation of the beliefs and interpretations of participants. Many strategies were employed to minimize bias increase credibility and dependability, including the use of recommended strategies from published methodological sources (e.g., Patton, 2002; Shenton, 2004). To reduce bias, there was no affiliation between researcher and alternative school. Establishing informed consent from the participants was another planned strategy for bias reduction. Journal keeping and only using approved questions were also strategies that used to reduce bias. To increase credibility, participants validated their responses during the course of the interview. To increase dependability, audiotapes and summarized transcripts, were used, and member checking was employed.

The study incorporated a sample of teachers and administrators who provided services and instruction within the selected environment. The sample size was smaller than anticipated because, the students were not interviewed, as the principal would not allow it. As a result, the study did not reveal student experiences firsthand. This was another limitation of the study. However, the connection between teachers and students was apparent, and their expression of the full range of school experiences enhanced the credibility and accuracy of the students. However, not having the opportunity to choose any of the participants, myself leaves the question of possible bias.

While qualitative study results are not intended for generalizability, to ensure transferability, sufficient information about the school physical plant, culture, academics, employees and students were detailed so that the reader was able to judge the transferability of the setting and results to their own experience (Shenton, 2014).

Recommendations

Future research using a more rural alternative school setting would potentially provide greater insight regarding how persistence and retention are experienced in areas that are not viewed as high-risk or subject to the challenges of urban environments. An exploratory study could potentially prompt specialized programming that could uniquely incentivize students and aid persistence and retention in alternative schools in urban and rural settings

A second recommendation for further research could focus on examining the impact of programs that provided formal psychological and emotional support for

students in alternative schools on retention and persistence. Chapter 2 described the three types of alternative schools, none of which addressed the individualized psychological and emotional needs of the students. It was cited that alternative programs have had to address the diverse needs of students in a non-traditional program. However, psychological and emotional needs are not specified. Raywid (1994) attempted to categorize alternative schools. Three types of programs were suggested. Type I programs were described as educational alternative programs where students were provided with different approaches to education and curriculum. Type II programs were described as alternative discipline programs where the objectives were to correct and teach appropriate behaviors to those students who displayed behavioral challenges in traditional schools. Lastly, Type III programs were described as therapeutic alternative, often attended by students who had substance abuse difficulties. More recently alternative programs have been categorized based on various factors, such as program length, educational approach, learner choice, remediation, last chance programs, comprehensive, and adult learning environments (Rix & Twining, 2007). The alternative school for this study seemed to possess characteristics of all 3 types of alternative schools in one school. A longitudinal study is recommended to compare academic success of students who received in-school psychological services along with the social emotional learning curriculum at the alternative school and students who only received the social emotional learning curriculum. The results of such a study could provide in-depth knowledge and

understanding to the field of alternative education. A study such as this could incentivize new programs and policy change in alternative schools.

In the current study, student-teacher relationships were valued as part of the experience that contributed to academic and personal success. However, many of the students who attended continue struggling, failing to meet graduation requirements, and or dropping out. Further research is recommended to examine the role of student-teacher relationships in facilitating progress in persistence and retention in alternative schools.

Implications

The findings of this qualitative case study indicated how persistence and retention were experienced at an alternative school. The findings revealed the potential actions for positive social change on levels for individual, family, organizations, and society. The findings also suggested that some of the most challenging students can persist when they are provided with support (parental, academic, emotional, and community). Providing students with the kinds of support this school offered could improve students' opportunities for a better future.

Another implication involves the use of the term "non-traditional schools" instead of "alternative schools." Participants in this study expressed the negative connotations that were reflected in the term "alternative school." One of them suggested that the term "alternative" should be changed to non-traditional school. He stated that he did not like using alternative school to describe his school. The negative connotations associated with the use of the term suggests that students were sent there as a harsh punishment because

their traditional school expelled them. Chapter 2 mentioned the reputation of alternative schools as “dumping grounds” for marginalized students, when in fact, there are some students who were sent there for truancy rather than criminal offenses. Therefore, further research recommended to get a consensus that could potentially facilitate change policy and titles of alternative schools.

The findings clearly indicated that psychological services for students in the alternative school are needed. Providing the individualized assessments and psychological support for students could improve the students’ ability to better understand their triggers, the effects of their behavior, positive decision making, and their environment. Students receiving such services could have improved persistence, retention, as well as personal and academic success. These students would then have better opportunities to contribute to their families and communities becoming agents of social change. In sum, the findings indicate that making changes in these kinds of communities where there is impoverishment, parental dysfunction, violent crimes, illegal drugs is contributing to the well-being and opportunities for these students. Alternative schools, the work of the alternative schools, the way that alternative schools work, the more that is known about them, and the intent of the results of this study should be shared in order to create the effect of social change so that more can be done.

Conclusion

The passion that drove this research study comes from my experience as an educator with a desire to make a difference in young people's lives and minimize the waste of human life. I wanted to add to the field of knowledge surrounding marginalized students in alternative and traditional schools. These students are important, and it is important to address their needs. My brother was one of these students. The lack of support for his social emotional, academic, and psychological needs as an EBD student that contributed to a downward spiral of life events, ending in an early death. Students like him deserve a chance to thrive as much as those who have ready access to psychological, social, and academic assets.

If students are not properly supported they are at risk for not succeeding, and society is at risk to lose as well. It is our responsibility as educators, policy makers, communities, and parents to propel them to success, giving them the tools, and a chance to become contributing members of the society in which they have no choice but to live. The ability to see the possibilities in all people as contributing to society and having a purposeful life regardless of their circumstances is life-affirming, and this study was an effort to be a voice for them.

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Appendix **A:** Invitation to Participate

Hello, I am doctoral student at Walden University conducting a study of how persistence and retention are experienced in the alternative school. I am seeking teachers, administrators, graduation coaches, school social workers, or students 18 years and older who are enrolled or employed at the alternative school for at least one school year.
If you meet this description, I invite you to contact me about participating in this study. If you know someone who meets this description, I would appreciate you passing this invitation on to him or her.
As the researcher, I (LaMetrica Andrews) am a veteran teacher and graduate of the public school system. Therefore, I am quite interested in exploring multiple realities to find out what it takes to persist and graduate. If you would be interested in learning more please contact LaMetrica Andrews at lametrica.andrews@waldenu.edu. Please make sure to note this invitation in your e-mail. Thank you!

Appendix B: Observation Protocol

The purpose of this observation protocol is to gather descriptive and reflective information regarding the interview/observation session and the participant.

Participant name/number _____

Date_____

Location of interview/observation_____

(Visual sketch of the setting)

Descriptive Notes	Reflective Notes

Appendix C: Interview Guide

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me regarding persistence and retention in your alternative school. Before we begin, I want you to know that this is not only research to me, but it is also a personal journey as a teacher. I often wonder how students who struggle with EBD manage to achieve academic success against all odds. I have also wondered how my younger brother's life would be if he had completed high school. I truly appreciate the personal stories that you are willing to share with me.

So we are here to talk about your experiences. Let us begin with a bit of information about how and why you came to the school.

There are some parts of your experience that I want to make sure that we cover, so I may be asking you some questions along the way.

Teacher/Admin

1. **Tell me how you came to be at this school?**
2. **What do you do here now? How long have you been here in your current position?**
3. **Tell me about a typical day at work.**

4. **What comes to mind when you think about what it takes forthis school's students to graduate?**
    a. **Probe: Can you think of a student who is doing what it takes to graduate?**
    b. **Probe: What quality or characteristic comes to mind that describes this student**
    c. **Probe: Is there another quality that comes to mind (please describe)?.**
5. **What do you think is the biggest challenge to staying in school?**
    a. **Probe: What is another big challenge?**
    b. **Probe: Can you think of a student who is struggling to stay in school?**
    c. **Probe: What quality or characteristic comes to mind that describes this student (ask for example)? (staying in school)**
    d. **Probe: Is there another quality that comes to mind (please describe).**
6. **What can you tell me about students you know who have dropped?**
    a. **Probe: Tell about what happens when they drop out, and what students experience in dropping out**
7. **What is your role in helping students stay in school?**
    a. **Probe: Tell me about an experience in which you felt that you made a difference.**
    b. **Probe: Can you give me a recent example?**

8. How do the personal challenges that some of your students deal with affect what happens to them in school?

a. Probe: Can you give me an example?

9. What is your greatest challenge in helping students stay in school?

10. What does it mean to you to work in an alternative school rather than a traditional school setting?

11. As an educator/administrator, what does it mean to make a difference at this school?

a. Probe: What does this mean to you personally?

12. What is the school doing well at?

13. What areas need to be improved?

14. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me before we conclude the interview?

Student Retention

1. Tell me about how you got to this school?

a. And, how long have you been enrolled this time? [ask if they were enrolled previously?]

2. What comes to mind when you think about staying in school?

3. What was the biggest challenge you faced at your previous school?

4. Here, at this school, tell me about a typical day at school.

5. What comes to mind when you think about graduating?

a. Probe:

6. What does graduating mean to you?

7. Tell me about someone you know here who you think will graduate.

a. Probe: How do you know that student will graduate?

b. Probe: What quality or characteristic comes to mind that describes this student

c. Probe: What comes to mind when you think about staying in school?

8. Tell me about someone you know who dropped out or is likely to drop out?

a. Probe: How do you know that student will graduate?

b. Probe: What quality or characteristic comes to mind that describes this student

c. Probe: What comes to mind when you think about dropping out?

9. What is your greatest challenge about staying in school?

a. Probe: Can you give me an example?

10. What about this school makes it possible for you to graduate?

11. Your efforts – what are you doing? How is it working?

12. How does this school support you to stay in school?

13. How does this school discourage you?

14. What does school mean to you as a way to become what you want to be?

15. What is the social scene like at school? How do the students relate to [spend time with] each other?

a. Probe: What group do you see yourself as a part? Can you give me an example of that?

16. What advice would you give to a student like yourself about school?

17. Anything else you would like to tell me?