TEACHING TROUBLED TEENS: 
A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF EDUCATING 
STUDENTS WITH EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL DISORDERS IN A PRIVATE 
SPECIAL EDUCATION SCHOOL

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Paul Bottome

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Abstract

This qualitative case study investigated the impact of one private special education school on the students it serves who have been diagnosed with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). Wehlage’s theory of school membership and the role that plays in helping students progress as well as Prochaska’s theory of the Stages of Change informed the research. With these theories in mind the researcher attempted to answer the following two research questions: How and to what extent does this private special education school impact students with emotional and behavioral disorders engagement and participation in school different than the typical public school environments, as perceived by the students, administrators, and teachers of the private school serving them? And, what specific strategies and school-based practices used by the private school are the most effective at helping students change their behavior and become more engaged in school and connected to the school community, as perceived by students and school personnel? Data collection included interviews and focus groups with students and school personnel at the state approved private special education school in Massachusetts, as well as an analysis of student outcome data, and document review. The goal of data analysis was to help identify strategies and practices that could be employed at other schools serving students with EBD as well as how the particular strategies and practices identified contribute to students with EBD feelings of school membership and their engagement in the stages of change.

Key Words: Emotional Behavioral Disorder (EBD), Private Special Education School, Dropout, School Membership
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“Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the equalizer of the conditions of men, the great balance wheel of the social machinery.”  -Horace Mann

**Introduction**

**Statement of the Problem**

Students leaving school before earning a high school diploma is a pervasive problem. Among the students who decide to drop out there is one group who leave school at a much higher rate than many of their peers; students with an individualized education program (IEP) who have been diagnosed with an emotional and behavioral disorder (EBD) drop out at almost twice the rate as other students not on an IEP (Christenson & Reschly, 2006). In Massachusetts, the four year graduation rate of students with EBD for the 2013/14 school year was 61% compared to 95% for the overall student population (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2015). It has been well documented that these students tend to become disenchanted with school, fall behind in their classes, and demonstrate disruptive behaviors in class contributing to their desire to abandon school and give up on their quest to earn a high school diploma (Riccomini & Bost, 2006).

Different strategies are employed to try and help students with emotional and behavioral disorders finish school. Most strategies include placing these students in inclusion classrooms. Section 504 of the Individuals with Disabilities Act dictates that schools must educate their students in the least restrictive environment possible (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, “Students with Disabilities Must” para. 1s). However, there are times when due to the extensive needs of the students or the disruption they cause in the classroom school districts must place students with EBD in alternative schools that specialize in educating this population of students. It is one of these alternative schools that I investigated. I sought to understand what effect a
school for students with EBD has on the dropout rate of these students and on the feelings of school membership for the students who are sent there. Additionally, I wanted to examine what specifically is working at this school to help students earn their diploma. Students with EBD are the most likely group to be educated in an alternative school setting (Adera & Hughes, 2006) and it was, and continues to be, important to examine the efficacy of special education schools.

**Significance of the Problem**

This issue is important because the high dropout rate of students with EBD increases the likelihood that they will be unemployed and even if they do find work will earn less than those with a diploma (Christenson & Reschly, 2006). This will remain a problem with the increasing educational expectations of our economy. Compounding the problem is the fact that students who drop out of high school are less likely to enroll in post-secondary education programs (Christenson & Reschly) and as Christenson and Reschly (2006) argue “our society is becoming increasingly technological, and accordingly the importance of a post-secondary education is also increasing” (p. 277). These demands will ensure that differences in academic achievement between students with EBD and their peers will remain an important issue for educational leaders to examine.

Students with EBD are capable learners who, when provided with the right environment, are able to succeed in school (Adera & Hughes, 2006). The fact that many do graduate and continue their education after high school helps to illustrate this point. Finding the proper means to educate this group of learners is necessary because to maintain a system that fails so many does them a great disservice. While some schools place students with EBD in inclusion classrooms, research has shown that placing them in inclusion classrooms is unsuccessful (Adera and Hughes, 2006). Students with certain disabilities in fact do worse when placed in inclusion
classrooms. Because of this, it is important to look at the success rate of substantially separate environments and whether or not they have demonstrated better results. The most successful alternative schools often offer students with EBD a highly structured learning environment with small class sizes, more individualized instruction, weekly counseling services, transition support, and the existence of a non-punitive behavior management system (Adera & Hughes, 2006).

If we wish to reduce the dropout rate of students with EBD in traditional public schools, perhaps identifying those strategies and practices that better assist students in other environments might inform those strategies and practices that could be practiced by traditional schools.

**Practical Goals**

In order to ensure that students with EBD are given the same chance to succeed as other students more attention should be given to finding strategies and practices that have a demonstrated record of success. For example, programs that treat students both in and out of school as well as programs that target academic and mental health issues have been shown to provide the greatest benefit to students (Chun, De Thomas, Newman, and Reddy 2009). The practical goals of this study were to identify those strategies and school practices that seem to better contribute to students with EBD success in school. By examining the strategies and practices employed in this well regarded alternative school, the research may be able to recommend such strategies and practices for other schools. This may be useful to both current private schools serving students with EBD specifically as well as public schools, whereby incorporating such strategies and practices could reduce the number of students districts have to send to out-of-district placements and may also be able to encourage in-district students with EBD to graduate.
Intellectual Goals

There are several intellectual goals that provided the foundation for this project. The first was a desire to understand how teachers and school administrators perceive students with EBD and their views about school. Student attitudes toward and engagement in school is a valuable predictor for an increased risk of dropping out (Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, and Pagani 2009) and it was important to examine how administrators, students, and teachers perceive student attitudes toward this school.

Another important intellectual goal was to try and identify what specific elements of school act as a trigger for students with EBD that increases their desire to dropout. Certain elements of the school day may have been particularly frustrating for students with EBD and in order to create a comprehensive plan to help these students it was necessary to determine what elements of prior school placements were acting as inhibitors to their ability to remain present and engaged in school.

Once these common triggers and issues with previous placements were established it was important to determine strategies that may be successful in helping students with EBD overcome them. Identifying strategies and practices that both educators and students perceive to greatly contribute to students’ success in school can greatly benefit our knowledge of such strategies and practices as well as provide recommendations regarding their potential use elsewhere.

A final intellectual goal for this project was to better understand the role that an alternative school plays in helping students with EBD and the impact that this school has had on creating a welcoming environment for students who have previously never felt welcomed at school. After trying to determine if this school is working toward creating an environment where
students feel as though they are a part of the community it became important to look at specific strategies that the school is using.

**Research Questions**

Two research questions will guide the research design and collection and analysis of data.

1. How and to what extent does this private special education school impact students with emotional and behavioral disorders engagement and participation in school, as perceived by the students, administrators and teachers of the private school serving this student population specifically?

2. What specific strategies and school-based practices used by the private school are the most effective at helping students change their behavior and become more engaged in school and connected to the school community, as perceived by students, and school personnel?

**Paper Contents and Organization**

The remaining sections of this paper will provide the foundation for the research to be undertaken, and a description of the research findings. First is an explanation of the Stages of Change Theory and Wehlage’s Theoretical Model of School Membership which are the theoretical frameworks being used to guide this study. Next, is the literature review which provides a summary of the research surrounding students with EBD that has been completed thus far. After that is the proposed research design which outlines the specific research methods that will be utilized for this study. Then is a description of how human subjects will be protected throughout the course of the research. This is followed by a presentation of the research findings, and finally a discussion of those findings.
Theoretical Framework

Two theories informed this study: Prochaska’s Transtheoretical Stages of Change Model, and Wehlage’s Theory of School Membership.

**Prochaska’s Transtheoretical stages of change model.** The Transtheoretical Model developed by Prochaska, Norcross, and DiClemente (1994) was initially developed to help people who wanted to change a health related behavior. It can also be useful, however, when looking to explore the transformation undergone by students who attend private special education schools for students with EBD. Norcross, Krebs, and Prochaska (2011) wrote “in the Transtheoretical Model, behavior change is conceptualized as a process that unfolds over time and involves a progression through a series of five stages” (p. 143).

In some cases, students who have been unsuccessful in moderating their behaviors in traditional public schools have been able to resist their impulses to misbehave and graduate. Stages of change theory can be useful in examining the process of change, as witnessed by school leaders, that students undergo upon enrollment in a private special education school. The stages of change model proposes several stages a person may go through when changing a behavior: Precontemplation; Contemplation; Preparation; Action; and Maintenance. These stages are undertaken both consciously and sub-consciously and can be used to gauge peoples’ readiness to change their behavior (Norcross, Krebs, & Prochaska, 2011).

In the stages of change model Norcross et al. note “the stages represent a period of time as well as a set of tasks needed for movement to the next stage” (p.143). The stages of change, as presented by Norcross, Krebs, and Prochaska, are as follows:

**Stage 1: Precontemplation.** Precontemplation is the stage in which there is no intention to change behavior in the foreseeable future. Most patients in this stage are unaware or
under aware of their problems. Families, friends, neighbors or employees, however, are often well aware that the precontemplators suffer from the problems.

**Stage Two: Contemplation.** Contemplation is the stage in which patients are aware that a problem exists and are seriously thinking about overcoming it but have not yet made a commitment to take action. Contemplators struggle with their positive evaluations of their dysfunctional behavior and the amount of effort, energy, and loss it will cost to overcome it.

**Stage Three: Preparation.** Preparation is the stage in which individuals are intending to take action in the next month and are reporting some small behavioral changes (‘‘baby steps’’). Although they have made some reductions in their problem behaviors, patients in the preparation stage have not yet reached a criterion for effective action.

**Stage Four: Action.** Action is the stage in which individuals modify their behavior, experiences, and/or environment to overcome their problems. Action involves the most overt behavioral changes and requires considerable commitment of time and energy. Individuals are classified in the action stage if they have successfully altered the dysfunctional behavior for a period from 1 day to 6 months.

**Stage Five: Maintenance.** Maintenance is the stage in which people work to prevent relapse and consolidate the gains attained during action. This stage extends from 6 months to an indeterminate period past the initial action. Remaining free of the problem and/or consistently engaging in a new incompatible behavior for more than 6 months are the criteria for the maintenance stage.

Initially, Prochaska et al. (1994) wrote of a sixth stage which they called termination. However, they wrote that “there is lively debate about termination” (p. X) and noted that “some
experts believe that certain problems cannot be terminated but only kept at bay through a life of decreasingly wary maintenance” (p. 46). Since many students that have been diagnosed with EBD suffer from mental illness which is a lifelong affliction the termination stage does not apply and in fact was left out of the Norcross et al. writing on the topic from 2011.

While the descriptions of the stages may be different it was necessary to examine if those working with students with EBD noted a similar progression in the changing behavior of their students. The approaches used by the school as students progress through the changes was interesting to note.

Also, it was important to examine whether or not school personnel are cognizant of students’ readiness and ability to go through the process of change not just participate in the stages of change. Norcross et al. (2011) noted that “the stages of change represent when people change; the process of change entails how people change.” Norcross et al. go on to state that “Transtheoretical model posits that the processes of change are differentially effective in certain stages of change” (p. 144). When examining the change that students with EBD undertake when attending a private special education school it was important to remember this distinction and to investigate whether or not school personnel supported their students through this process of change, whether consciously aware of it or not.

Many schools working with students with EBD provide both individual and group therapy for their students. Norcross et al. (2011) wrote about the role played by psychotherapists when taking clients through the stages of change:

With patients in precontemplation, often the role is like that of a nurturing parent, who joins with a resistant and defensive youngster who is both drawn to and repelled by the prospects of becoming more independent. With clients in contemplation, the role is akin
to a Socratic teacher, who encourages clients to achieve their own insights into their condition. With clients who are in the preparation stage, the stance is more like that of an experienced coach, who has been through many crucial matches and can provide a fine game plan or can review the participant’s own plan. With clients who are progressing into action and maintenance, the psychotherapist becomes more of a consultant, who is available to provide expert advice and support when action is not progressing smoothly (p.145).

For the Stages of Change theory to be most effective there is some research regarding therapies that can help foster change. Among the most crucial of these is the accurate assessment of student’s readiness for change (Prochaska et al., 1994). Where in the process each student is can determine strategies and expectations for dealing with the student. Almost as important is the concept of treating each student uniquely and realizing that not all students will be prepared to undergo change as soon as they arrive at school. Norcross et al. noted that it is crucial to “tailor the process to the stages” (p. 152). Their research highlights that students benefit when the change process aligns “with the insight and awareness therapies for the early stages, and the change processes associated with the action therapies (ex. stimulus control, and reinforcement management) for the later stages” (p.152). Finally, schools must be prepared for students to regress to some degree after taking the step from one stage to the next “programs expecting people to progress linearly through the stages of change are likely to gather disappointing results” (Norcross et al., 2011 p. 152).

The first stages are the most important when looking at students with EBD and the change that they undertake. Many who begin attending a dedicated private special education school are in the precontemplation stage often not even recognizing the need for change. For the
school the most difficult step is taking their students from precontemplation to contemplation. While there is often regression, once this first step has been accomplished students are now in a much better position to succeed. As Prochaska et al. (1994) noted “most precontemplators are doomed to remain in the precontemplation stage without help from others (p. 75). Prochaska et al. wrote that there are three characteristics of precontemplators preventing them from moving to the contemplation stage. Precontemplators are: “usually defensive about their behaviors” they “avoid learning about their problems” and they “rarely take responsibility for the negative consequences of their behaviors” (p. 78). It was important to look at the school for students with EBD to see if and how they have been able to overcome these obstacles to change.

Once students have moved past precontemplation they enter the contemplation stage. In this stage students become aware that they have a problem, they struggle to understand the reason for their problem, and they have now begun to seriously consider how to change (Prochaska et al. 1994). There is still much to overcome in this stage and Prochaska et al. noted “contemplators want to change, but this desire exists simultaneously with an unwitting resistance to it” (p. 110).

Students who have progressed through the first two stages become ready for stages three and four: Preparation and Action. Preparation is a short stage where the student is ready to begin the action stage and will do so within the next month (Prochaska et al. 1994). Here it was important to look at how the school fosters this process and what is done to help students make the leap into the action stage.

At the action stage schools have begun to work with students on actually altering their behaviors with an end goal of seeing them have a rewarding school experience. Prochaska et al. (1994) noted that “a step-by-step approach, with reinforcement following each successive
movement is much more likely to be successful” (p. 194) then setting overly optimistic and unrealistic goals. Prochaska et al. went on to note that “action is the busiest period of change “now more than ever, you need to depend on your helping relationships” (p.195).

In the final stage, helping students maintain the change they have undergone is the primary goal. Additionally, students must be made to realize that, for many, maintenance may be a lifelong endeavor that may get easier, but will never completely go away. Schools must offer support and understanding if and when students relapse into their old behaviors. These setbacks are almost bound to happen, and how they are handled will help determine how lasting the change is.

Stages of Change Theory helped the researcher recognize specific strategies used by schools to help their students overcome their behavioral difficulties, and gave the researcher an opportunity to view the school as an agent of change in the lives of its students.

Wehlage’s theoretical model of school membership. While The Stages of Change Theory may inform our understanding and analysis of how special education schools might serve students with EBD, Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, and Fernandez (1989) investigated the relationship between students and their school, developing a model for how schools could increase student connectedness. Wehlage et al. found that successful schools are able to create an environment that is supportive for students and shows them how to become more engaged in school. Additionally, they highlighted the importance of showing students the relevance of the curriculum, and the need for teachers to take responsibility for the education of their students while individualizing approaches to meet the unique needs of all members of the classroom.

When students are regularly confronted with people doubting them and making them feel as though they do not belong, attending school on a daily basis can become an insurmountable
task for some “many students go to school each day only to be told in various subtle and direct ways that they are not good at anything…Repeated assaults on their self-esteem make school intolerable” (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). When trying to convince all students that they can be successful in school Wehlage et al (1989) discussed the concept of “school membership” which they noted “becomes a fundamental concept in the theory explaining how schools can prevent students from dropping out” (p. 47). This may be especially true for students with EBD as they have often felt like outcasts at school for most of their education.

School membership means different things to different students and developing individualized solutions that meet the unique needs of students is critical. Wehlage et al. (1989) wrote “generic programs intended to serve all who might be in danger of dropping out are unlikely to be as effective as programs designed with specific students, situations and aims in mind” (p. 75). So, schools for students with EBD will have a different approach than a school that has been designed to help poor urban students. The uniqueness of approaches can help the students involved further develop their feelings of school membership and as Wehlage et al. noted “while schools must adapt to the particular needs of students, their interventions must also be grounded upon what all students have in common as social beings and as young learners” (p. 112). Furthermore, “schools must take an active role in responding to fundamental needs that frequently are unmet by contemporary schools. One need shared by most students is school membership” (p. 113).

School membership is not only the need to be a part of a peer group, but also the need to have the approval of adults (Wehlage, et al., 1989). Many students face obstacles to achieving a sense of school membership and these obstacles can be extremely difficult for students with EBD
to overcome. “Four common impediments to school membership are: adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, and isolation” (Wehlage, et al., 1989, p. 121). Adjustment involves the transition to a new school with new teachers and new peers. This can be a very challenging time for students with EBD. Difficulty refers to struggles that students face academically. For students with EBD these struggles can be dramatic and isolating. Incongruence as noted by Wehlage et al. (1989) “describes the personal and social match between the student and the institution” (p.126). For students with EBD this fit between themselves and school can be a critical component and is something that has been lacking for most of their schooling. The final impediment, isolation, refers to the frequency and quality of student interactions with adults. Wehlage et al. wrote “that students who had persistent conflicts with adults or who found no teacher with whom to establish a personal relationship were at risk of dropping out” (p. 131). It is important to examine the extent to which schools for students with EBD take into account the above impediments to school membership.

When students are sent to an out-of-district private special education school they have typically failed to meet behavioral and academic expectations at their previous schools and have been unable to develop any feelings of school membership. Prochaska’s theory of change along with Wehlage’s theoretical model frame the research in a way that helped explain how this school, working with students with EBD, is able to create an environment that encourages strong feelings of membership toward the school and encourages students to progress through the change process.

**Chapter II: Literature Review**

To understand the problem of practice and its significance, it was necessary to review the literature on students with emotional and behavioral disorders in order to establish who this
population of students is and to describe the challenges they face. Additionally, it was important to determine what strategies and school practices have been used to help this population and investigate the extent to which schools specializing in helping this population have been studied. Furthermore, a review of the literature regarding school membership and attachment can be helpful to determine if this concept has been or could be applied to students with EBD.

With this in mind, a review of the literature will be presented in the following four sections:

1. The literature on Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders,
2. Students with EBD Engagement and Persistence in Traditional Public School Settings,
3. Out of District Placements (ODP): Emotional-Behavioral Schools, and
4. School Belonging and Membership

**Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders**

*Guiding Questions: Who are students with emotional and behavioral disorders and what differentiates them from students who have been diagnosed with other disabilities? What are the challenges faced by schools trying to educate them?*

For children growing up in the United States there are many changes and challenges that they must overcome. This can be a difficult time for any child, but students who struggle with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) have an experience that is quite unlike that of their peers. In order to fully explore the issue of students with EBD a brief history is needed to highlight its initial identification as an impediment to learning and to determine what has been learned thus far in regards to helping students who are struggling with EBD.
What is EBD? Emotional and behavioral disorders do not fit neatly into predetermined categories that are easy to diagnose and to treat. In fact even finding agreement on a standard definition has taken years as Kauffman and Landrum (2009) noted “during the past 40 years numerous definitions of emotional or behavioral disorders have been constructed…but none has resolved the problems of terminology, specificity, clarity, and usefulness” (p. 17). There is however an agreed upon list of characteristics that students must meet one of in order to be considered to receive services for an emotional or behavioral disorder (Bower, 1981, pp. 115-116). This list is:

1. An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors
2. An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers
3. Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal conditions
4. A general, pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression
5. A tendency to develop physical symptoms, pains, or fears associated with personal or school problems

In order to qualify for special education services a student must meet at least one of the above criteria and it must be shown that the condition is negatively affecting academic performance (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). There are many legitimate arguments against this definition of EBD; however it is used for the purpose of this research design because the researcher is focused on students who have been identified as having an emotional or behavioral disorder by standards set by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 2004.
While the problem of children with emotional and behavioral disorders certainly predates the 20th century, the idea of special education and helping this population succeed in school is a relatively new development. Ollendick and Herson (1983) noted that it was in the early 20th century that educators became concerned with the mental health of their students and Kauffman (2009) noted that “the first teacher training program in special education began in Michigan in 1914” (p.41). However, there were few programs specifically designed for students with emotional and behavioral disorders through the middle part of the 20th century (Kauffman 2009). Kornberg and Bower were early researchers in the 50’s and 60’s and at that time there became an increased focus on what to do with students who acted out at home and in school.

By the late 20th century Rhodes and Tracey had developed models explaining EBD and how to best educate this difficult population. Through the 1990’s many students with EBD were sent to out of district private schools or placed in substantially separate classrooms in out of the way locations so they did not disrupt the college preparatory classrooms (Kauffman & Landrum, 2009). Then starting in the 1990’s an inclusion model gained in popularity and along with it the birth of the least restrictive environment (LRE) (IDEA, 1997), least restrictive environment meaning that all students, regardless of disability, must be educated with their nondisabled peers to the maximum extent possible. This forced schools to look more closely at how they were educating students with special needs. One of the most difficult groups of students to place in inclusion classrooms were and are students with EBD (Gable, Hendrickson, Tonelson, & Van Acker, 2000). Teachers and administrators have been reluctant to put this population into inclusion classrooms for fear of disturbing the education of other students (Muscott, 1995). In fact in 1995 the president of the American Federation of Teachers used a student with EBD who disrupts his peers as an example for why inclusion is not the best practice for educating students.
with special needs (Muscott). The inclusion model at times conflicts with the concept of a free and appropriate education (FAPE). As what many students with special needs require is specialized services not general education services. It has been argued that those services can be provided in an inclusion classroom, and while that is attractive to administrators it is not necessarily applicable in reality and in many cases does not meet the needs of all students (Gable, et al., 2000).

Because of this many students with emotional and behavioral disorders continue to be educated outside of the mainstream classroom and in many cases outside of public school altogether. In an attempt to reduce the number of students being sent out-of-district many schools have tried implementing their own behavior intervention plans (Kalberg, Lane, Driscoll, & Wehby, 2011). However, students with emotional and behavioral disorders often have very complex needs and the solution is not as simple as providing more one-to-one assistance or giving more time on an exam (Katsiyannis, Ryan, & Smith, 2011).

An additional concern for students with EBD is their outcomes after an intervention as well as their post-secondary achievements. Black and Leake (2011) noted that “students with EBD experience worse postsecondary outcomes than students in other disability categories” (pp. 147-148). For example, Katsiyannis et al. (2011) noted that “students with EBD who are served under IDEA face dismal outcomes both while at school and upon exiting the educational system” (p185). Katsiyannis et al. went on to note that “students with EBD received lower academic grades than other students with disabilities, despite having scores comparable to students with learning disabilities (LD) and other health impairments (OHI) on standardized measures” (p. 185).
Because of the many challenges they present and the potential disruption to the classroom, students with EBD are the disability group least likely to be educated in an inclusion classroom, and as Katsiyannis et al (2011) noted “only slightly over a third (37.3%) of students with EBD spend more than 80% of their time inside the regular education classroom, as compared with over half (56.8%) of students with other disabilities” (p. 185). However, it seems that oftentimes regardless of the setting students with EBD struggle to make educational gains, and that “across all placements (i.e., general education, resource, self-contained, and special school placement) students with EBD continue to exhibit significant academic delays” (Barton-Arwood, Nelson, & Wehby, 2007).

Students with EBD Engagement and Persistence in Traditional Public School Settings

Guiding Question: What strategies have been used in public schools to teach students with EBD?

Students with EBD often feel unprepared to participate academically and feel a sense of relief after they have made the decision to quit school (Scanlon, & Mellard, 2002). This feeling is quite temporary though as these young adults often find themselves quickly thrown into a workforce in which they are unprepared to compete. Their perceived unpreparedness for school has forced them to prematurely enter the labor market where they have even fewer opportunities for success. Vannest et al. (2011) noted that “by definition, students with EBD exhibit an inability to learn that is not explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors; therefore, the academic and general school achievement that is critical for lifelong success is significantly in jeopardy for students with EBD” (p.531).

In Massachusetts the graduation rate for students with EBD was 61% for the 2013/14 school year (MA DESE, 2015) and The National Mental Health Association (2007) noted that 3-
6% of school aged children have EBD which negatively impacts their daily functioning. Taken together those numbers illustrate the vast number of students who are not able to finish school due to their disability. Compounding the problem is the fact that students with EBD are identified and receive services at a later age then their disabled peers. Hayling, Cook, Gresham, State, and Kern (2007) wrote that “even though challenging behaviors often start at an early age, students with EBD are the oldest of any disability group at the time of initiation of special education services” (p25). Furthermore, Hayling et al. went on to point out that “students with EBD also experience heightened school mobility, with 40% attending five or more schools in their academic careers” (p.25).

All of this leads to students with EBD being educated in general education settings at a lower rate than any other high incidence disability group (Wagner, & Cameto, 2004). While students with EBD are identified later as needing services at an older age, once identified the services that they are given tend to be more intense than those offered to peers with other disabilities. Hayling et al. (2007) noted that “the poor outcome data suggest that special education programs and the services they offer are not even beginning to meet the needs of this population of students” (p.26). The different strategies used by school systems to educate students with EBD require a deeper examination of what is being done in order to find the most effective methods of instruction for this population.

One strategy that school systems are exploring is a tiered approach similar to response to intervention (RTI) that utilizes positive behavioral supports (Kalberg, Lane, Driscoll, & Wehby, 2011). This is a proactive attempt to institute the supports necessary for students with EBD before they become necessary in hopes of providing a learning environment that encourages pro-social behavior for everyone without stigmatizing those students who struggle with the
behavioral expectations of school. Within a three tiered approach all students participate in the first level intervention, 10-15% take part in the second level, and third level efforts are reserved for the 1-5% who are unresponsive to the first two levels (Kalberg et al., 2011). Since screenings for EBD do not exist and an adequate diagnosis can be left to interpretation, implementing school wide positive behavioral supports may or may not help provide students with, or at risk for, EBD in an environment to succeed. Kalberg et al. noted that these tools:

provide a context for (a) preventing the development of new instances of EBD and (b) responding to current cases using data based procedures to determine which students require additional supports…central to this model is a systematic, reliable, and valid approach to examining student behavior (p. 516).

While this tiered system with positive behavioral supports is new to many public schools, strategies like these have been used for years in private special education schools dedicated to working with students with EBD. The implementation in public schools is a positive step and should help with an earlier and more accurate diagnosis of students with EBD.

Another hope for public schools is that the use of positive behavioral supports will allow them to educate a higher percentage of students with EBD in inclusion settings. However, as Niesyn (2009) wrote “a review of the literature on teachers’ attitudes toward working with students with EBD reveals that general education teachers frequently report a resistance to full inclusion” (p.228). This helps to explain why so many students with EBD are educated outside general education classrooms. However, the reason teachers may feel this way is not because they do not want to work with students with EBD but instead lack proper training on how to best
teach children with EBD. Niesyn noted “their resistance generally is not a result of rejecting students, rather their resistance results from feelings of a lack of competency” (p, 228).

Another method being widely implemented in schools is the use of behavior intervention plans. Mather, Turton, and Umbreit, (2011) completed a study that examined the use of a behavior intervention plan or as they refer to it a function based intervention. Mather, et al. selected three students to participate in their study. The students were chosen by teachers in the school who were asked to name their most behaviorally challenging students. Researchers first had the students undergo a functional behavioral assessment to determine the purpose of the behavior. An intervention was then designed that was specific to each student. A baseline of behavioral data was established for the students and the intervention was implemented. Researchers used teacher responses and student data as a measurement tool. Additionally, on task behavior was measured as a replacement tool for a successful intervention. This case study establishes that the use of behavior intervention plans when the functional behavioral analysis is completed in a thorough manner and the intervention plan is implemented with fidelity is a highly effective tool to use when working with students with challenging behaviors. Additional studies are needed to determine the most effective ways for ensuring that these plans are being implemented with fidelity.

School systems are also trying to increase the counseling services offered to students with EBD. School adjustment counselors and guidance counselors can provide students with EBD some in school supports that have previously been hard to come by. Another case study was completed that examined the effect counseling had when trying to help students with EBD graduate high school (Neree, 2010). There were 16 participants from two separate schools that were the sites for this study. The researcher used focus groups and interviews in order to obtain
the most complete data set and to allow for a discussion among participants to gain a deeper understanding of their positions. The researcher first conducted focus group research which was then used to frame the individual interviews. The researcher sought to gain a better understanding of the shared experiences of teachers of students with EBD. Specific open ended questions were used to gather data. All sessions were recorded and transcribed, then coded and examined for themes. Researchers were able to determine that counseling services provide a valuable tool when working with students with emotional disorders. Participants believed that the students had very serious issues that inhibited their ability to receive an education and until those issues were worked out the students would not be able to be successful in school. Because the participants were so invested in their careers, an issue with this study may be participant bias. It would have been helpful in this instance to have quantitative data to support the suppositions of the teachers and counselors involved in the study.

A study completed by Daunic, et al., (2012) did incorporate a quantitative design in order to determine the effectiveness of a specific therapeutic intervention. In this study the researchers analyzed pre and post intervention data from teacher reports and student self-reports. Tools for Getting Along (TFGA), a classroom based intervention, was to be implemented in a random selection of classrooms. Teachers were trained on the use of the intervention and a pre-test was given to students prior to the start of the intervention. Pre and Post test data was analyzed and measured for efficacy, treatment fidelity, social validity, and effects of student characteristics. Results indicated that TFGA had a positive impact on students' executive functioning ability and a significant positive effect on students' abilities to improve the problem solving abilities. Less clear was the impact on students internalizing or externalizing behaviors or their reactive aggressive behaviors. However, students were able to reduce incidents of
proactive behaviors after the treatment. This study provided researchers with an opportunity to examine the effectiveness of a program as it was being implemented which is often difficult to do in educational research. Results from this type of research can be quite beneficial when educators are looking for effective strategies.

An additional study that utilized a quantitative approach in public schools was completed in the towns immediately surrounding Boston, MA. The purpose was to look for differences in performance among students with EBD attending schools in wealthy versus poorer districts (Sipperstein, Wiley, & Forness, 2010). Researchers analyzed the academic performance and problem behaviors of a cohort of students. Students were assessed in the spring of back to back years in order to gather the data. There were four academic measures and three behavioral measures that were used by researchers. The results from the low income districts were compared against the results from the high income districts and analyzed for discrepancies. Results indicated a dramatic lack of progress made by students with EBD in both wealthy and poorer school districts. Students did not improve academically or behaviorally over the course of one year as measured from April to April. This is an important study that can be used to illustrate the lack of learning for students with EBD and is noteworthy because, unlike most discrepancies in achievement, the poor results are consistent across socioeconomic lines.

An additional challenge faced in the public schools is teacher retention. Finding teachers who are willing to work with students who have been diagnosed with EBD can be difficult. One study focused on strategies used by administrators to retain teachers who work with students with EBD (Prather, 2011). In this study the researcher gathered 13 participants from various schools in a mid-west metropolitan area including: elementary schools; middle schools; high schools; and a public alternative school for students with EBD. Data were collected through the
use of face-to-face in-depth interviews. A semi-structure interview approach was employed and interviews were conducted in a conversational manner. Interviewees were asked to provide information involving their personal backgrounds, beliefs, and experiences. Interviewees were interviewed either once or twice in the school where they were employed. The interviews were followed up with a focus group consisting of seven of the initial participants. The data was then coded and through the use of inductive analysis descriptive patterns emerged. The respondents indicated that administrative support had a strong influence on their decision to remain in the profession. Of particular note was the importance they placed on the need for support during the initial teaching experience, and all participants reported that administrative support was of paramount importance. The importance of administrative support was supported with evidence from the interviews, which was supported by existing quantitative studies that corroborate the important role played by school leaders. Furthermore, the study sought to highlight what specifically administrative support entails. Teachers wanted principals to: enforce consequences; support in-class decisions; and help teachers support one another in their respective roles.

This illustrates the need for more research into what are the most effective social and pedagogical approaches to helping students with EBD. Fox and Conroy (2010) noted that “EBD students are often the least well understood and some of the most problematic students with whom teachers, therapists and parents interact” (p. 531). Teachers often struggle to provide a class that engages and encourages participation from students with EBD, which often “exacerbates the connection between problem behavior and academic difficulties and results in less academic instruction, decreased exposure to academic material, course content and opportunities to learn” (Blood, 2010, p. 214). Blood went on to note that “past research has
established a relationship between high rates of task engagement and responding to teacher questioning and improved academic achievement and student behavior” (p. 214).

**Out of District Placements (ODP): Emotional-Behavioral Schools**

*Guiding Question: What are Out of District Placements and what role do they play in the education of students with EBD?*

Students who have been diagnosed with EBD present educators with the challenge of knowing that these students have the ability to succeed, but are seldom given the tools to do so. As Vannest, Harrison, Temple-Harvey, Ramsey, and Parker, (2011) noted “students with EBD are characterized by an ability to achieve academically but demonstrate a failure to do so” (p. 521). The strategy of sending students with EBD to out-of-district placements (ODP) while widely used has had mixed results and requires further research. For the 2011/12 school year Thomas Hehir (2013) noted that 22.2% of students with EBD were educated in an out-of-district placement. ODPs are used when public school systems have decided that they can no longer meet a student’s needs in a general education setting. Because IDEA has mandated that all students are educated in the least restrictive environment students who are sent to ODPs represent some of the most challenging cases.

Like traditional public schools ODPs often struggle with teacher retention and satisfaction. Adera & Bullock (2010) sought to better understand job stressors and job satisfaction among teachers who work with students with EBD. The researchers designed a study that identified teachers working with students with EBD who had participated in professional development. One hundred fifty six participants responded to the survey. Twelve respondents then participated in focus groups. Results from the survey indicated that too many job duties were among the most problematic issues for participants. "Role overload" and non-
instructional tasks were found to be the most frequent areas of complaint. The focus groups confirmed this and highlighted the "diverse roles and responsibilities" that they are expected to assume caused them to spend less time teaching and more time on unrelated tasks. Teacher qualifications of teachers of students with EBD do not play a role in their decision to leave their jobs.

While the focus of this research will be on ODPs that is a private day program, there is also widespread use of residential schools to help students with EBD. Young, Chesney, Spurlinger, Misch, and Collins, (2009) completed a phenomenological study that sought to examine students with EBD who have been placed in a residential school. Young, et al. selected five adolescents who were currently living in a secure residential setting. Through analysis of a semi-structured interview, three themes were identified: 1) loss 2) a search for belonging; and 3) responses to confinement.

In spite of their potential, students with EBD “earn lower grades, are less likely to pass classes, and experience higher rates of school dropout than typical students and student with other high incidence disabilities” (Barton-Arwood, Lane, Nelson, and Wehby, 2007, p. 44). Lane, Wehby, Little, and Cooley (2005) conducted a study that suggested that students with EBD in self-contained schools had lower academic achievement that students who were educated in the less restrictive self-contained classrooms. This study however did not take into account the issue that the severity of the disability is almost assuredly more severe in students who were sent to an ODP and that could very well explain a discrepancy in academic achievement.

One study sought to further investigate the extent to which state testing occurred at ODPs and how school leaders went about instituting their testing policies. Gagnon, Maccini, and Haydan (2011) sought to highlight the assessment practices at day and residential treatment
programs for students with EBD. Results indicated that school leaders believe that students in alternative schools should participate in state mandated testing and they believe that accommodations must be given. Participants indicated that their students were participating in state assessments, but were less sure when asked if their students from other states were participating in their home state's assessments. Respondents also indicated that accommodations are being used in the classroom, but there was not as much surety that they were being used to the maximum extent allowable during tests.

**School Belonging and Membership**

*Guiding question: What role does school belonging and membership play in a student’s decision to drop out?*

The problem of students leaving school early without receiving a diploma is not unique to any one group of students and affects students of all abilities and backgrounds. However, there are certain risk factors that increase a student’s likelihood of dropping out. These students drop out for a variety of reasons that are sometimes unrelated to their school experiences and understanding the reasons behind students’ decisions to dropout are difficult. As Rumberger (2001) noted “understanding why students drop out of school is a near impossible task because, as with other forms of educational achievement, it is influenced by an array of individual and institutional factors” (p. 28). Rumberger went on to note that “dropping out is not simply a result of academic failure, but rather often results from both social and academic problems in school. These problems are influenced by a lack of support and resources in families, schools, and communities” (p. 28).

This lack of support or at least perceived lack of support felt by students who drop out highlights the need for schools to increase their efforts in the area of school membership. As
mentioned earlier school membership is the sense that students are a part of not only a peer
group but also feel as though the adults see them as a critical component of the school they
attend (Wehlage, et al., 1989). Schools that focus on “higher attendance rates and grade point
averages, the reduced incidence of behavior problems and the increased experience of social
bonding to the school, teachers and peers all point to the success these programs have achieved
in overcoming the isolation, alienation, or estrangement of many potential dropouts” (Wehlage et
al., 1989, p. 218).

Related to the concept of school membership is the notion of student engagement and the
role it plays in student dropouts. According to Archambault, Jonosz, Fallu, and Pagani (2009)
there are “six concepts that are closely related to the different facets of engagement: school
attendance and discipline; liking school; interest in academic work; and willingness to learn
language arts and mathematics” (p. 665). Archambault, et al., noted in their study that “only the
behavioral dimension predicted dropout. That is, student compliance and attendance forecasted
dropout better than student willingness and effort to learn the basic curriculum” (p. 666). This
finding presents quite a challenge to schools who work solely with a population of students
whose primary challenges are attendance and compliance.

One strategy that may be used to help meet these challenges is the increased use of
emotional supports. Kidger et al. (2009) completed a mixed-methods study in England that
examined teacher and student beliefs surrounding the need for schools to provide emotional
support to students with EBD. Eight schools were selected to be the source of the qualitative
data. In each of these schools focus groups were conducted with students who were 12-14 years
of age. Participants in the study held the belief that school is an important place for addressing
emotional health. Students and staff felt that more support is needed for those in emotional
distress and students were not always aware as to what support was available. It was also reported that the school environment plays a role in supporting or damaging students' emotional health.

**Summary.** The review of the literature helped establish who students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders are and illustrated some of the challenges they face. Additionally, some strategies that are used to help these students were examined along with the role played by school membership and attachment as it may apply to students with EBD.

**Chapter III: Research Design**

This study examined the impact that a school for students with emotional and behavioral disorders has on the students’ perceptions and experience at school. Additionally, this study sought to illustrate which strategies are the most effective at giving students an opportunity to change their behaviors and become more involved in the school community. This was important because students with EBD are being educated in this environment and there is little research around what is happening at these types of schools. If determined to be effective, then the strategies being used should be highlighted as effective intervention methods and shared with other schools serving this at risk population.

**Research Questions**

Two research questions acted as a guide the design for this study:

1. How and to what extent does a private special education school impact students with emotional and behavioral disorders engagement and participation in school different than the typical school public school environment, as perceived by the students, administrators and teachers of private schools serving this student population specifically?
2. What specific strategies and school-based practices used by the private school are the most effective at helping students change their behavior and become more engaged in school and connected to the school community, as perceived by students, and school personnel?

Research question one was designed to examine the impact that a private special education school has on students with emotional and behavioral disorders, as perceived by students, school administrators and teachers. Through the use of a case study involving document review, interviews and focus groups it was be possible to gain the perspective of students, teachers, and administrators at this school as to the effect their school has had on improving the engagement and participation in school for students with EBD. Additionally, the researcher analyzed student records to ascertain if there was any documentation indicating the degree of efficacy of certain programs for supporting high school persistence in this population.

Research question two gave the researcher an opportunity to examine the specific strategies used by the school that help students become more invested in their school and their education, as reported by students, administrators, and teachers of this school. It gave the researcher an opportunity to discover the unique perspective of those directly involved in the students’ education and helped to determine what their philosophy is around the best approaches to helping this challenging population.

**Methodology**

The most effective method to gaining insight into the philosophies and beliefs of the research participants and the particular strategies and practices of a community is through a qualitative case study approach. The use of a qualitative case study gave the researcher an opportunity to develop in-depth findings regarding the community and to better understand “the
situations and events from the viewpoint of the participants” (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2008, p. 15). Furthermore, as Creswell (2009) noted regarding qualitative methods “those who engage in this form of inquiry support a way of looking at research that honors and inductive style, and focus on individual meaning, and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation” (p.4).

Where relevant and applicable, a comparison of high school persistence data for students with EBD in the identified private school in this study in comparison to public schools will be reviewed and discussed.

How to best educate students with EBD is a complex question and to fully understand the issue it was necessary to gain in-depth perspectives of the participants. A case study allowed the researcher to examine a school for students with EBD in the real-life environment. Yin (2009) notes that in Case Studies:

- there are at least four different applications. The most important is to explore the presumed causal links in real-life interventions that are too complex for the survey or experimental strategies.
- A second application is to describe an intervention and the real-life context in which it occurred. Third, case studies can illustrate certain topics within an evaluation, again in a descriptive mode. Fourth, the case study strategy may be used to enlighten those situations in which the intervention being evaluated has no clear, single set of outcomes (p.46)

Administrators at schools for students with EBD often have many years of experience in the field and have developed intricate and layered philosophies surrounding the strategies they use. Because of this it was necessary to use a qualitative case study approach to gain a more complete understanding of the issue. As Creswell (2007) noted “we also conduct qualitative research because we need a complex, detailed understanding of the issue” (p. 40). Creswell
continued “This detail can only be established by talking directly with people, going to their homes or places of work, and allowing them to tell the stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in the literature” (p. 40).

Frankel and Wallen (2009) noted five elements that highlight the characteristics of qualitative research:

1. The natural setting is the direct source of data, and the researcher is the key instrument in qualitative research.
2. Qualitative data are collected in the form of words or pictures rather than numbers.
3. Qualitative researchers are concerned with process as well as product.
4. Qualitative researchers tend to analyze their data inductively.
5. How people make sense out of their lives is a major concern to qualitative researchers.

Taken together these elements incorporated into a case study helped the researcher gain a better understanding of the issue and complete a study that answers the research questions.

**Site and Participants.** A search of the Massachusetts Association of Approved Private Schools indicates there are 45 day schools in Massachusetts who identify themselves as working with students who have been diagnosed with an emotional disturbance. Many of these schools are solely residential education facilities and those were discounted. Further analysis identified eight day schools in the Boston metropolitan region that exclusively serve students diagnosed with EBD as their primary diagnosis. Through communication with public school district administrators and as part of the researcher’s position at the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education a list of potential research sites was developed. Of these schools one school was selected as an exemplar. Schools that met the criteria were identified
and school leaders were contacted to determine their level of interest in participating in the study. This gave the researcher an opportunity to obtain a purposeful selection of schools dedicated to working with the target population. By selecting one school that was representative of the community of schools the researcher was allowed to conduct an in-depth study that focused on the specific and detailed elements of a school working with students with EBD. Yin noted “the distinctive need for case studies arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena…the case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (p 20).

Because of the uniqueness of the population it was necessary for the researcher to use a strategy of purposeful selection when determining who the participants will be. Maxwell (2005) noted that “there are least four possible goals for purposeful selection…the first is achieving representativeness or typicality of the settings, individuals, or activities selected” (p. 89). “The second goal that purposeful selection can achieve is the opposite of the first –to adequately capture the heterogeneity of the population. The purpose here is to ensure that the conclusions represent the entire range of variation” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 89). The third goal, noted Maxwell, “is to deliberately examine cases that are critical for the theories that you began the study with or that you have subsequently developed” (p. 90).

The participants in the study were students, school administrators, and teachers who work in the selected school. School leaders and teachers were able to provide unique insight into the programs’ philosophies and goals as well as the particular strategies and practices employed at the school, and were able to give their perceptions on the effectiveness of these strategies and practices. Participation was encouraged by highlighting the need for additional research into meeting the needs of students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Additionally, coffee and
refreshments were provided to focus group participants to express appreciation. Participants were informed that confidentiality will be maintained.

**Data Collection.** For this study the primary data collection method was the use of interviews, focus groups, and a document analysis. Interview and focus group questions were open ended and designed to illicit participants’ perspectives in relationship to the two research questions. In addition to interviews with school administrators and focus groups with teachers and students, any relevant documents detailing the design and philosophy of each school’s program, including their specific strategies and practices in service of their students with EBD, were reviewed and compared with the expectation of either confirming or adding to the school staff’s commentary.

The first step in data collection was interviews with the executive director and school administrators. The program’s administrative team was asked for information about their beliefs and philosophies around how they run their school dedicated to serving students with EBD. They were also asked about their perceptions as to the effectiveness of the program, including specific strategies and practices, towards benefitting the students with EBD. It was important to delve specifically into the areas of students’ abilities to change and their school’s ability to foster that change. Additionally, questions were asked as to the overall sense of school membership that students feel and the role this plays in their potential for success.

The results of the interviews helped determine how the focus groups with the teachers and students were conducted. Focus groups consisted of groups of eight teachers and five students who took part in a discussion focused on the school’s philosophy, goals, strategies, practices, and teaching and learning. Teachers were asked for their views on the effectiveness of the school at achieving its stated mission. Additionally, teachers were asked to comment on the
role that school membership plays in student achievement and whether or not they believe that the school provides an atmosphere conducive to fostering change. Students were asked to comment on their perceptions of the school they are attending as well as their experience with school in the past. This information is interesting when examining whether or not the administrator’s vision of how the school operates matches teachers and students perspectives of the school.

In order to get the views of the most possible students and teachers in a manner that will give participants the greatest opportunity to expound on their answers, focus groups were used. Creswell (2007) wrote that “focus groups are advantageous when the interaction among interviewees will likely yield the best information, when interviewees are similar and cooperative with each other, when time to collect information is limited” (p. 133). The use of focus groups in this situation was appropriate because the group dynamic of teachers and students who have previously established relationships gave the researcher insight into the group’s perception of the school and provided valuable information about the true nature of the school. It was important for the researcher to take care to ensure that all members of the group are allowed to fully participate and that the group was not controlled by one or two individuals (Creswell, 2007).

For this case study it was important to have multiple data collection methods. As Maxwell (2005) noted “this strategy reduces the risk that your conclusions will reflect only the systematic bias or limitations of a specific source or method” (p. 93). The use of focus groups to confirm that the vision of program director, school administrators, and teachers is being implemented gave the researcher valuable information when examining the perceptions of the
effectiveness of the interventions being provided at the school. Additionally, a review of outcomes data helped to quantify student outcomes.

The design for both the interviews and the focus groups was semi-structured. This gave the researcher the flexibility to investigate the beliefs and philosophies held by the participants without influencing the outcome with a predetermined agenda. Maxwell (2005) noted that a semi-structured approach is “particularly useful in revealing the processes that led to specific outcomes” (p. 80). Since the goal of the research was to obtain educators’ perspectives around what led to their students’ ability to complete school and earn their diploma an unstructured approach provided the best route toward obtaining the most in-depth and unbiased data.

**Document Analysis.** Document analysis was conducted as a means to support or refute claims made by participants. A review of the program’s mission and vision was conducted to see if it aligns with staff and student perceptions. Additionally, a review of outcomes for all students who entered the program starting in the fall of 2010 until June of 2015 gave the researcher an indication whether or not students have had largely desired or largely undesired results. Desired results will be defined as those students who were able to either graduate or transition into a less restrictive setting, and undesired results will be defined as those students who were unable to earn a diploma, or transferred to a more restrictive setting. While not generalizable outside of this study this information will be useful when considering the common approaches, philosophies, and results from other schools.

**Data Analysis.** In qualitative research, the researcher has several options available when analyzing data. Here, interviews were coded and analyzed for themes as recommended by Saldana (2009). Interview data was recorded, transcribed and saved with copies made and secured in a password protected data base. All interviews and focus groups were analyzed as
soon after completion as was possible. Maxwell (2005) warns against letting interview data pile up and then coding and analyzing once all interviews have been completed. As he notes, “The experienced qualitative researcher begins data analysis immediately after finishing the first interview or observation, and continues to analyze as long as he or she is working on the research” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 95).

To ensure that nothing was missed during the research, memos were written throughout the process. This not only kept the researchers thoughts and observations organized, but also helped with analysis. As Maxwell (2005) noted “memos not only capture your analytic thinking about your data, but also facilitate such thinking, stimulating analytic insights” (p. 96).

After the interviews and focus groups were completed the recordings were transcribed and coded. Coding in qualitative research involves arranging the data into categories so that potential themes may emerge (Maxwell, 2005). Coding was done through first and second cycle coding methods. In first cycle coding the data were divided into subcategories (Saladna, 2009). Here, in vivo coding was used in order to closely represent the participants’ true feelings (King, 2008). Following first cycle coding was second cycle. Saladna (2009) noted that “second cycle coding methods, if needed, are ways of reorganizing and reanalyzing the data through First Cycle methods (p. 149). This gave the researcher an opportunity to look for themes and relationships that were not clearly evident during the first cycle..

**Validity and Credibility**

One critical component that must be addressed before undertaking any research is the concept of validity. “Qualitative validity means that the researcher checks for the accuracy of the findings by employing certain procedures” (Creswell, 2009, p. 190). Fraenkel and Wallen (2009) highlighted some procedures for ensuring validity. They include: “Using a variety of
instruments to collect data; checking one informant’s descriptions against another’s; learning to understand…the vocabulary of the group; recording personal thoughts; using audiotapes; and describing the context in which the questions are being asked” (p. 453). By using these different techniques the researcher helped to ensure the validity of the study in an ongoing manner and was able to make adjustments as needed.

While following the above procedures was necessary, that alone does not guarantee the validity of the study. Maxwell (2005) wrote validity “depends on the relationship of your conclusions to reality, and there are no methods that can completely assure that you have captured this” (p. 105). However, in qualitative research the most important component to keep in mind are validity threats. The two biggest threats to validity in qualitative research according to Maxwell are researcher bias and reactivity. Eliminating researcher bias is not the goal here, but instead acknowledging that bias exists and then determining how to overcome it. Since the researcher worked for almost ten years in schools for students with emotional and behavioral disorders there exists a certain bias toward those schools. Having a personal relationship to these schools was an area of concern. To overcome this potential bias the researcher used what Fraenkel and Wallen (2009) called an “external audit” which is simply “an individual outside of the study to review and evaluate the report” (p. 453).

Another threat to validity, according to Maxwell (2005) is the concept of reactivity. This is the effect that the researcher has on the participants in the research (Maxwell, 2005). Reactivity is a potential threat in this study due to my current position. As an educational specialist for the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education the researcher’s primary job responsibility is to work with public and private schools on issues in special education relating to assessment and discipline practices. The primary concern is that
interview responses will not be completely honest if school leaders do not believe that the research is wholly unconnected to the researcher’s professional role. To combat this it was important for the researcher to foster a solid relationship with the participants and to ensure a level of trust when they were told that their participation will have no negative consequences.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

When studying issues involving high school students and students who have an IEP there are many ethical dimensions that must be considered. However since the students who participated in the research were 18 or older the ethical concerns regarding studying a vulnerable population were minimalized. However, care was taken to ensure that proper procedures were followed in regards to the protection of the human subjects participating in the research. Additionally, the researcher passed the National Institutes of Health’s (NIH) online course entitled, “Protecting Human Research Subjects” offered through the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to undertaking any research.

The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects in Biomedical and Behavioral Research developed ethical standards that all research should follow. There are three principles highlighted that should guide research. The first is beneficence. Researchers should at all times avoid unnecessary risk while also maximizing the positive outcomes (Mertens, 2005). Furthermore, researchers should always treat participants with respect and courtesy including those who are not autonomous (Mertens, 2005). The third principle is “ensuring that those who bear the risk in the research are the ones who benefit from it; ensuring that the procedures are reasonable, non-exploitative, carefully considered, and fairly administered” (Mertens, 2005, p.33). It was important for the research to be mindful of these principles. Also,
there exist potential benefits for the participants since the findings of the research may result in improved educational strategies for the population being studied.

As mentioned earlier the researcher’s professional relationship to the participants was a potential area of concern. Therefore, extra care had to be taken to ensure all participants that participation was voluntary and that they will remain anonymous. In the case of the focus groups, all sessions began with an explanation of the confidential nature of the discussions and participants were reminded to respect each other’s privacy and refrain from sharing what was discussed with those who did not participate. When writing the findings the researcher was careful to ensure that any potentially identifying information was not be included.

Chapter IV: Research Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine a school that specializes in working with students who have been diagnosed with an emotional or behavioral disorder in order to determine what strategies the school is using to help its students persist and succeed in school. To help determine that, this study was guided by the following questions:

1. How and to what extent does a private special education school impact students with emotional and behavioral disorders engagement and participation in school, as perceived by the students, administrators and teachers of private schools serving this student population specifically?

2. What specific strategies and school-based practices used by the private school are the most effective at helping students change their behavior and become more engaged in school and connected to the school community, as perceived by students, and school personnel?
Study Context

The research for this study was conducted at a Massachusetts state approved private special education school. This school focuses its work on helping students who have been found to have an emotional or behavioral disorder that significantly impacts their ability to learn. The school has been working with students in Massachusetts for over 50 years. Over that time the mission and focus of the school has evolved as the various needs of students in Massachusetts have changed.

Initially established to help students with developmental disabilities the school modified its focus around 30 years ago to meet the needs of a population of students that was becoming increasingly common in the state. The school was well positioned to help the growing population of students with EBD. It provides a structured environment with a high staff to student ratio that allows teachers to focus on customizing instruction. Teachers are assisted with by the behavioral support staff located in the classroom.

In addition to providing strong classroom support the school also employs school counselors to meet with students in weekly individual and group therapy sessions. The school is designed to work with students on both academic and social emotional learning issues throughout all programming at the school. Additionally, students are provided opportunities to enhance their learning through various vocational programs to better prepare them for college and career readiness.

Students attend school on a 12-month schedule to help prevent both academic and emotional regression. They are all expected to carry a full caseload of courses while also participating in therapeutic, vocational, and enrichment programming. Students typically arrive at school by 8:00 and like a traditional high school will report to homeroom for attendance and
announcements. One difference is that, unlike many of the schools they come from, the students are greeted by name upon entering the building and are greeted again when entering the classroom. Once at their seats they find themselves in a classroom usually with only six or seven other students.

After homeroom, students begin their day. In the early periods the focus is on academics and, like homeroom, their classes will typically have only six or seven students. Classes will have a head teacher in the room accompanied by a paraprofessional who is there to provide academic support to the teacher and behavioral support if students need it.

In addition to teachers and paraprofessionals, there are administrators, therapists, speech and language counselors, and occupational therapists on staff and present throughout the school building to provide student support. All of the school personnel are a part of the students’ treatment team and can be available to offer support for students who are in need of additional assistance.

A stated goal of the school is to help children heal from previous traumatic experiences and to increase their self-confidence. This is done with the hope that it will open the door for them to improve their academic abilities, and gain better control of their emotional regulation. An important outcome is students becoming aware of the interconnectedness of all aspects of their lives and recognizing that when one facet is not working well it affects all the other pieces.

This philosophy of treating the whole individual provides a foundational component to the school’s programming, and while it is not unique to this school it is a staff intensive approach that requires strong professional development and a staff that are all committed to its principles. Administrators, teachers, therapists, and support staff must all be working in conjunction in order
to be effective. This study sought to illicit input from the parties involved and to try to determine the level of efficacy in helping these students succeed in school.

**Participants and Data Collected**

The participants for this study were: a group of five students who have received a high school diploma, eight teachers of various levels of experience who work with students in the high school, the program’s director of curriculum development, the program’s director of therapeutic services, and the program’s executive director.

Interviews were conducted with the program’s administrative staff, and focus groups were conducted with the students and the teachers. The teachers’ classroom experience ranged from one teacher who had been with the school for two months to a teacher who had been working there for over thirty years. All three administrators had extensive experience in education ranging from 9 to over 30 years.

In addition to interviews and focus groups research also consisted of a review of program documentation to determine the philosophy and goals of the program. Furthermore, the school provided outcomes data for the students that had been enrolled from the 2010-11 school year until June 2015. The variety of data allowed the researcher to develop a clear understanding of the philosophy and goals of the school, and to determine whether the philosophy and goals are being implemented and are effective at helping the students.

**Research Question 1: How and to what extent does a private special education school impact students with emotional and behavioral disorders engagement and participation in school, as perceived by the students, administrators and teachers of a private school serving this student population specifically?**
Research question one will be divided into three parts. The first will examine the administrators’ perceptions. The second parts will describe research from gathered from the teachers. Lastly, the students’ ideas will be presented.

**Administrators’ Perspectives**

In this section, administrators’ comments in response to research question 1 is provided and discussed. Five themes were identified through a careful analysis of responses across the 3 administrators at the school.

Table 1

*Administrator themes emerging from the question: How and to what extent does a private special education school impact students with emotional and behavioral disorders engagement and participation in school as perceived by administrators of a private special education school serving this student population?*

<table>
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<th>Theme</th>
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<td>By utilizing an individualized approach to helping the students</td>
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<td>By building relationships with the students to make them feel welcome</td>
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<tr>
<td>By focusing on the social emotional development of the students</td>
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<tr>
<td>By fostering a sense of hope for the future</td>
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<tr>
<td>By creating an academic environment with high expectations that isn’t ostracizing</td>
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**By utilizing an individualized approach to helping the students.** Through interviews with school administrators it became clear that individualizing all aspects of service delivery was an important part of what they wanted to do. Their belief is that each student has unique strengths and deficits and in order to successfully help students succeed the school must individualize programming. As one administrator put it “we don’t have equal treatment of
students here, we have fair treatment of students here.” She went on to explain that the concept of fair versus equal treatment can be tough for kids to get, but she explains they all have such unique educational and mental health challenges that it is critical for them to differentiate their approach.

This individualized approach, while sometimes difficult for students to understand, gives the school the opportunity to tailor elements of programming to best meet the needs of the students. As an administrator put it “in general the principle is to tailor as much as you can tailor a program for kids that will allow them to build on their strengths.”

The school tries to go beyond the individualization of an IEP that happens in public schools and wants to apply the concept to all elements and aspects of programming. One administrator noted this by saying

We’re going to accept certain behaviors, tolerate certain little idiosyncrasies, take the curriculum and really make it accessible for the skills deficits. Chunking out, differentiating, looking at the student’s ability to present, it might be something that is totally unacceptable in a public school where they want a five page report whereas our student might give you the same information only in a very different way. That’s what our teachers specialize in. The ability to understand those challenges…each student gets a different plan.

The work to individualize and tailor approaches extends to the clinical side and giving students an opportunity to develop a sense of self-worth. Clinicians encourage student self-exploration and looking inward before trying to make changes. One administrator, when discussing the importance of getting to know each student, said “when you feel safe then you can be who you are and then we can get to the real…work.” She continued “it’s clinicians reading a
good history, knowing where a student is and just posing thoughtful questions, trying to understand…why they had such a difficult time at their last school.”

Part of individualization is getting to know student histories, and while this is very valuable the school feels that it is important that past behaviors not cloud how students are perceived. An administrator noted this importance

From the beginning the milieu is very welcoming and those first days or weeks we have to help the student acclimate…have them understand that there are people here to support them, that if there has been a past history of problems, while its important for us to know it’s also history and now is the time to start to move on.

By building relationships with the students to make them feel welcome. One theme, which was mentioned briefly above, is the importance of building relationships with the students. When the one senior member of the administration team was asked how quickly students felt welcomed at the school he responded

I’m delighted that it happens very quickly…after five, six, eight days, a couple of weeks you go back and read that scary admissions packet that you looked at and said I don’t know about this, and then you say is this the same kid? In this environment they will flourish. In this environment, they will see that there are others who have challenges worse than them. They will see that it’s safe and they can talk to people. There’s not 26 kids in the class. The teacher and aides have time for you. I think they get comfortable very quickly.

While this isn’t the case with all students and some students do not ever end up acclimating, the impression that most get comfortable very quickly was commonly held. In order to help build relationships one administrator spoke of the importance of building personal connections she
said “It’s your ability to make a personal connection with a student and all your body language.” She spoke of teachers’ ability to show students that they want them in their class, and of their ability to build connections. She said “It’s that whole connection, that personal connection that says, no matter what, we’re going to go through this together and we are going to conquer this situation together.”

Part of the relationship building involves ensuring that staff members are working to build relationships with the students at all levels. When asked about how staff members are encouraged to develop strong relationships one administrator said “we focus on professional development.” She went on to say “we’re always modelling that [relationship building] for students and for our staff, our staff are good at modeling too, modeling when they make mistakes, making apologies, when they need to make apologies.” Administrators believe that for students who have struggled with forming solid relationships the explicit instruction in this area plays an important role “we’re showing that we’re not going to leave them in any way or let them fail, we will be here constantly.”

Administrators spoke of the importance of relationship building and trust when trying to help with academics as well. As one administrator put it

If they’re going to be successful they’ve got to be willing to take risks academically, emotionally, behaviorally, socially. They have to feel safe in order to do it. It’s that relationship that comes early on. We consistently get feedback…everyone looks happy. That’s a big part of the culture here. Kids feel safe. It’s a warm welcoming environment. Another administrator put it very succinctly when speaking of a key to student success “it’s that relationship building we’ve done with the kids.”
By focusing on the social emotional development of the students. Administrators emphasized the fact that in order for students to be successful in school they must have the necessary social and emotional foundation. As one administrator put it:

Our goal, first and foremost is to get students back to the [public school] district and we work very hard with teachers to create a team that clinical, speech, OT, reading, teaching team to create an environment that supports them, always bearing in mind that no student can really access curriculum unless they are socially, emotionally balanced.

The recognition of the importance of social emotional instruction informs how administrators interact with, and develop teams. When asked about finding and creating teaching teams, one administrator said “finding teachers and staff that can understand and really helping them create an environment that understands that yes you’re a teacher, you’re an educator, but until your student can access their social and emotional balance they’re not going to learn anything.” She went on to speak about the importance of collaborative problem solving and trauma informed care and rolling those concepts into the classroom and the education curriculum.

When teaching social emotional learning principles the school has identified that many of their students do not have a clear understanding of what the behavioral expectations are at a given school. Some would think that because these students have become so involved in disciplinary procedures that they have a clear understanding of expectations. But inconsistent and poorly applied discipline with constant negative feedback has had a confusing effect on many students and leads to an increase in undesirable behaviors. This school works to reverse that trend through explicit instruction of expectations and positive reinforcement when expectations are met. One administrator said
If I could just add to one of the most important things if you think about it from the perspective of any age child, they hear negatives about what they’ve done wrong, but it’s telling them positives about what they’re doing right that is oftentimes overlooked. We try to present every possible moment to positively reinforce positive behavior. That’s a huge way to really promote successful behaviors is you’re promoting the positive ones versus the negative ones. Kids want attention. Every child does. If they only get negative attention they seek that no matter what. But if you hit them with the positives that really promotes their shift [in behavior] in that direction

There is a belief that using social emotional principles allows for a more meaningful discipline process. As one administrator put it

You don’t’ have to get into power struggles with kids. Why’d you say that? Why’d you do that…the questioning that you put forward is in a very nonjudgmental way. Jose, Johnny, Mary whoever it happens to be, lets analyze what just happened…what were you feeling that made you say what you did…that’s a two minute conversation then we’re back in the classroom again and everyone understands what happened, what went wrong.

The feeling is that this process allows for the students to feel more empowered and the staff members are able to get a better sense of what challenges the student is experiencing.

**By fostering a sense of hope for the future.** Administrators felt that students who entered the program often did not have dreams or a lot of hope for what the future would bring. One administrator spoke of the importance of future planning, when asked about how to combat the impulse that many students have to drop out of school he said “by challenging them, getting them to try to have a little longer term perspective.” He continued “we call it the light at the end
of the tunnel; it’s certainly not a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Things can get better and a lot of that is on your shoulders. A lot of those decisions are decisions you can make.”

The desire to get students to be more forward thinking is supported by having activities that students may not have previously had an opportunity to experience. A senior administrator noted

I’ve been criticized because we have so much here; we have pools and dirt bikes. People have said to me when they leave here they’re not going to have that. That doesn’t mean they shouldn’t have it while they’re here. That’s part of my belief in the future perspective in kids seeing that a lot of good stuff can come depending on how you conduct yourself and how hard you work.

The importance of promoting a sense of a bright future was shared by other administrators who spoke of its benefit. One administrator spoke of the importance of creating ‘that hopeful futuristic vision for kids.” She went on to expand on its importance

[be]cause I think so many times, with all that they’ve struggled with they’re not forward thinking. They’re in the moment thinking what’s got them here. Its’ that hope for a different future. It’s really kind of getting them to talk about what their vision is for themselves

The administrators that I spoke with recognized the importance of creating a hopeful vision for the future, but there was also recognition that to instill that in students who do not have a positive outlook can be a substantial challenge and requires hard work on the students’ part. One administrator noted that “That hopeful vision for their future to be what they want it to be whatever they come up with can be managed if there is commitment, effort, and hard work put in place.”
By creating an academic environment with high expectations that isn’t ostracizing.

The administrators spoke of a desire to create an environment with high academic expectations while providing specialized services to the students without making them feel ostracized. An administrator said

The goal is to give the kids in the classroom a program that’s challenging and one that they see is almost like the public school if you will. We’ve taken great pains to make it look, when you come on this campus this looks like, by intent, it looks like a prep school. It doesn’t look like a ‘special facility.’ I think it’s important that they not feel different and ostracized.

He went on to discuss the importance of combining that feeling with the increased academic vigor “we put a lot of emphasis on it, worked at it, worked at curriculum, worked at the frameworks and aligning what we did with what the state requirements were.” He noted this increased focus on academics is a recent development over the last ten years at the school. In that time they have made a concerted effort to bring the academic focus on par with their therapeutic offerings and to prepare students for their post high school lives.

Other administrators spoke of the increased focus on academics and the role that plays in preparing the students. One administrator said

I think over the years we’ve just gotten stronger academically in terms of curriculum and it being aligned with the state and I think a real shift too, the shift years ago around the quality of the teaching staff and putting effort into retaining good teachers

This change that the administrators spoke of occurred as part of a restructuring of the school that involved a substantial increase in the enrollment of day students and a drastic reduction in the enrollment of its residential population. This was brought upon in large part because of a
conscious decision by the Massachusetts Department of Children in Families to reduce the use of residential education facilities and increase reliance on foster care for youth. So, the school decided to recast themselves as a therapeutic program that placed a heavy emphasis on the educational component. A senior administrator said of the program prior to the reimaging “We got very, very good at behavioral stuff and I think from a counseling and therapeutic standpoint we were where we needed to be. I frankly wasn’t happy with what was going on in the class in terms of challenging the kids.”

This theme among administrators continued as they spoke of the importance of curriculum development and ensuring that students are learning the same content that is being taught in their home schools. Because, while graduation from this school is one potential goal the desired outcome is that the student is able to return to his or her home school and finish their schooling there. Another administrator noted

When I came on nine years ago the curriculum wasn’t necessarily aligned so the task I was chartered with was to align it to the Mass frameworks and to make sure we emulate what districts do so that our students would be covering the same content. This is seen as being a critical component for helping students that are able to return to their home school district.

**Teachers’ comments in relationship to Research Question 1**

In this section, teachers’ comments in relationship to research question 1 is provided and discussed. Three themes, as presented in Table 2, were identified through a careful analysis of responses across the 8 teachers at the school.

Table 2
Teacher themes emerging from the question: *How and to what extent does a private special education school impact students with emotional and behavioral disorders engagement and participation in school as perceived by teachers of a private special education school serving this student population?*

- By creating a safe environment where students engage in relationship building with caring, supportive, and empathic staff
- By emphasizing the use of an individualized, strengths based approach to helping the students succeed
- By emphasizing the importance of a team approach to improving student behavior

**By creating a safe environment where students engage in relationship building with caring, supportive, and empathic staff.** The focus group with teachers sought to illicit their perspective around how the school is able to encourage students with EBD to remain in school and help them earn a high school diploma. One theme that was common in the teacher responses was the importance of developing positive relationships with the students. As one teacher said “the first thing is kind of like, being welcoming, and developing that relationship, getting them to get to trust us.” Another teacher noted that the process begins as soon as students walk through the door on their first day. He said “I think one of the first things we do is we roll out that welcome mat, and we really to focus on getting them settled as soon as possible and showing that this is a nurturing safe environment.

The importance of immediately making students feel welcome was echoed by other staff well. As one relatively new teacher said “I think they’re very scared and they don’t know what really lies ahead, so it’s just building those relationships…I think that’s important that they see right away that we’re all here for their benefit.”
Another staff member when speaking of getting new students acclimated spoke of what students may be feeling as they start showing some undesirable behaviors noting that they may be feeling like “all right, this is who I am, are you going to turn me away now? Or are you going to be able to handle this?” She went on to say that “handling that with empathy…is part of that hump [when new students are testing the environment] and then they kind of fall into their own rhythm.” She also noted that a large part of showing the students that the teachers care about them is moving on from past behaviors. She said the students must recognize that “no matter what happened yesterday, that today we’re going to be with you.” Another teacher who has experience working in several different school environments said that it’s critical to get to know the student so that “you can build that relationship and help them grow.”

The notion of empathy came up again during the discussion with another staff member saying “There’s a huge emphasis on empathy and working through things, and supporting [them] that again is not something that they consistently have gotten.” She said that staff members try to be cognizant in their interactions with their students and “to make sure that we’re phrasing things in a positive way, in an empathic way.” Speaking on the role of empathy another staff noted the importance of making sure that they [staff] understand where some of these kids are coming from. I think when you run into a kid and they’re having a problem and you’re like ‘this is so unacceptable’ but then if you know their history and where they’re coming from it does kind of open your eyes…that this isn’t his or her choice. There are a lot of things that have occurred beforehand that’s why we’re seeing this, and now what do we do to get beyond that.
By emphasizing the use of an individualized, strengths based approach to helping the students succeed. The important role that empathy plays in student success relates to another theme that came from this focus group which is the need for a strengths based approach that focuses on the individual needs of the students. A senior staff member spoke of the importance of always reminding herself that “this is what this kid’s dealing with or this is where this kid’s coming from...those reminders it’s just a helpful tool.” And, as another staff member noted “Another thing was really getting a good grasp of differentiations, so you can show the students that you’ve seen where they are, and you’re helping them build that skill...in order to keep that momentum going.”

Teachers noted that an important part of individualizing the approach is to, as one teacher put it “always be evaluating daily.” Another teacher continued “we don’t have cookie cutters. You can’t just say ‘this works so I’m just going to do this lesson the same exact way I did it last year.” He went on to say “there’s always tweaks to your lessons, there’s always changes because of the different students you have...so you really do need to individualize for each kid.”

As part of meeting individual needs the teachers discussed the strengths based approach that they use. One teacher said “we try to meet them at their level...everyone’s different and here’s how we can help you be successful.” Another staff mentioned that knowing individual student limitations is a critical piece so “you’re pushing them, but not giving them something way too hard and outside of their skill level [because] once they shut down it’s very hard to get them back up and running again.” A staff member also noted while working to the students’ strengths it is important to remind them of those strengths. He said “I think you try to help them point out their successes, no matter how small, not just saying ‘good job coming to school.’ Trying to map out and show them where they’re succeeding, where they’re improving.”
By emphasizing the importance of a team approach to improving student behavior.

A final theme that emerged from the teachers’ focus group was the importance of utilizing a team-based approach. As one of the more seasoned teachers put it “I think it helps that they see that all the staff works together as a team to help them, the whole staff is there to help them…they see right away that we’re all there for their benefit.” The teachers all seemed to agree with this assessment and echoed its importance.

As they described the team approach in more detail they spoke of not only the academic team, but all members of the school community and how important it is “for everybody to be on the same page and understand what’s really happening with each student.” One teacher said “I feel like I can always email the clinicians if something comes up.” Another teacher said “I think communication between the clinicians, other team members, and the teacher is really important…for everyone to be on the same page and understand what’s really happening with each student.”

The teachers continued to note the important role played by the clinicians. One said “they [clinicians] also do a really good job of helping you connect with the students.” She expanded on this point saying “getting to know the child through the clinician…with what they like and dislike, you can build that relationship and help them grow.”

The teachers also noted that it is critical to meet frequently to discuss issues arising with the students. Meetings are regularly scheduled to discuss student issues, but if a teacher or anyone notices something going on they might call a meeting. One teacher said “I think one of the things we do well is when we collaborate whether it’s ‘I’m seeing something in my students and I want to bring a team together to talk about it’…then someone else says ‘this might be
something we want to address.’” The meetings will often involve all members of the team and another teacher noted:

We have a lot of student meetings, that anybody, a teacher, clinician, anybody could call, and it’s a mix of the teacher, the clinician, the behavioral staff, there’s usually four or five members of the team and it’s just kind of … because you don’t always see the same kid in the same light and stuff, so being able to be like ‘this is what I’m seeing…” then we come up with these personal support plans that we revisit.”

Teachers also feel like the team not only supports the student but offers them support as well. One teacher noted that “I know that when I’m struggling or when I’m unsure of something that I’m doing with a student, I’m going to call somebody.” There are a host of people available to offer support for teachers as this teacher went on to note “I’m going to call the person who I think may be able to help me the most, it may be the clinician, or it may be the other 11th grade teacher… a lot of times it’s the curriculum coordinator.” She echoed the fact that the collaboration is often informal “I think we have a lot of collaboration that’s not necessarily formal collaboration, but we kind of check in with each other.”

**Students’ comments in relationship to Research Question 1**

In this section, students’ comments in relationship to research question 1 is provided and discussed. Four themes, as presented in Table 3, were identified through a careful analysis of responses across the five students at the school.

**Table 3**

*Student themes emerging from the question: How and to what extent does a private special education school impact students with emotional and behavioral disorders engagement and*
participation in school as perceived by students of a private special education school serving this student population?

- By staff caring about what happens to the students
- By helping students overcome poor prior school experiences and changing their perception of what school can be
- By being able to develop relationships with other students
- By helping students improve attendance and grades

**By staff caring about what happens to the students.** The students at the school believed that staff investment in them was critical to their success. As one student said “there’s a lot of support here. There’s a lot of people who are willing to step it up and make sure that your experience here is worthwhile, just the help and the kindness and just being welcome.” This comment was followed by another student who chimed in “there are a lot of good teachers like that.”

The students spoke of teachers helping them overcome areas that they have struggled with. One student who has been at the school for several years and struggles with social anxiety said “the staff, when I talk to them, would help me figure out ways to go around that social interaction and asking someone a question…they helped me become more social in my surroundings.”

Another student, who has struggled with school phobia and a general dislike for school noted

One thing was it’s like even if I don’t understand a subject, and even if I think that the teacher was not doing a very good job…at least I get to know that they’re actually
trying…you can tell they’re trying to teach and they’re also very good at perceiving when something is wrong.

This student, who had a lot to say about poor prior school experiences and poor teachers in general, begrudgingly gave the staff at this school credit for their commitment to the students and their ability to help him. And, in a lighter moment expressed the following “Even if I don’t agree with something…I might not think that they know what they’re doing, but they have shown that they know what they’re doing. I have faith that the diploma on their wall is real and not photo shopped.”

Another student spoke of a time when her family was going through a difficult period and expressed her appreciation for staff support during that time. She said “the fact that everybody took the time…they would check in with me.” She continued with a story about some challenges at home and how supported she felt at school and noted “they really helped me. Those people [school staff] they are almost like family.”

As students were recounting instances when staff members had been supportive one student told of a time that she was upset and crying in class. She said that the teacher “noticed that, she took me for walk and we talked for an hour about it. She really helped me. That’s what the staff, they’re really good. If they notice that something’s wrong, they’ll step right up and…help you with that. She went on to say “that’s what the best part about this school is that the staff are willing to help you even in the worst time. Even if they’re busy, they’ll stop what they’re doing and help you.”

Stories like these were common among all the participants and the students credit staff willingness to listen with being able to stop a situation where they might become emotionally dysregulated. One student noted
I have times where I get very emotional. I shut down and I tend to not want to deal with the situation. The staff will come over and ask me if I want to talk about it. Or they’ll ask me if I want to write it down. I’ll tend to ask them to take a walk or talk to them or talk to my clinician. That way it helps me to get out my frustrations and my pent up emotions that I’m feeling at that point because I don’t want to blow up in the classroom. They help me to not get into that situation where I will melt down.

**By helping students overcome poor prior school experiences and changing their perception of what school can be.** Another common theme during the student focus group was their shared experience of having poor experiences in prior schools. Most of the students were in public school before attending this private special education school and those experiences were filled with significant involvement in the disciplinary process, poor interactions with teachers, and poor relationships and bullying experience with peers. One student noted “I went from [previous public school] feeling like a total nobody, couldn’t fit in, feeling pretty worthless…I managed to go from feeling like I can’t fit in anywhere to feeling like I’m on top of the world here.” Another student noted “I’ve been bullied in the past a lot…I came here because I have emotional problems and anger issues, and I like this place because it helps me take care of myself and helps me control my emotions.”

Problems with peers was something that all of these students identified as one of their struggles at previous schools. One student said

“I am here because at my old school I had problems connecting with people and just socializing, but when I came here I…my classes were smaller…and nobody was really doing things that the teachers don’t know about. It’s a more safe environment so everyone feels like they belong here and they don’t want to not feel safe.”
Another student spoke of his trouble with peers at a previous school as well “The problem was the people who were bullying they took advantage of the fact that if you’re not hitting someone it’s seen as okay.” He continued “the problem is as long as they can say whatever they want continually as long as they don’t hit you. Then if you it or say something back, then you’re in trouble.”

The students in the focus group also discussed some difficulties with teachers in their previous schools. One student said of teachers in his previous school “It’s like the staff usually don’t bother doing something unless their paycheck is involved.” He also noted that he felt like his previous teachers were patronizing by “using that voice that some people use when they are talking to a dog or a puppy.” He went to say “and people [the teachers] wonder why the person gets so annoyed at them because anyone can tell that you’re being condescending.”

The students noted a change in their feelings about school after they began at this private special education school. One student noted that “[this school] is the best thing that has ever happened to me. I really like coming here.” Another student said “I think [this school] is a really good school…they’ve helped me a lot.” The students were able to offer examples as to why this school helped them in ways previous schools had been unable to. One student noted that at his old school he got into a trouble a lot. He has Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and anxiety. He believes the combination of those factors along with a lack of understanding on his teacher’s part would lead to problems. At this school he feels like people understand what his issues are. He said “even if I have an anxiety attack I don’t have to worry…and since I have an incredibly hard time understanding anything remotely social I’m going to take heart in the fact that’s at least one thing someone else is working on.”
By being able to develop relationships with other students. While the students in the focus group spoke of trouble with peers and forming peer groups, one thing they highlighted about this school was their ability to make friends here. One of the first things that one of the students said was “I’ve made a lot of friends.” That was echoed by others when talking about what was different about this school and what helped set it apart from previous experiences. One said “when I came here I made so many friends.”

Students felt like finding other kids with similar issues and interests is important, but can be difficult. One student said “I feel better here because I’ve met a lot of friends that have my likes and a lot of my interests and they’re just open and considerate of my feelings.” This came from a student who struggles with significant social anxiety, and who became emotional when speaking about the relationships that she has developed. Another student spoke of the importance of being able to connect with other kids with similar challenges. She said “I think making new friends realizing that I’m not alone in a lot of the situations I’m in. I’m not just some kid who was born different. There are kids who have what I have.”

The students also credited the school with not only exposing them to students with similar backgrounds, but helping them better navigate social situations. One student said “the school helps me socially-wise what to say and what’s not okay to say…I have a great sense of humor but it [the school] teaches me when I go too far for a joke.” The student above who became emotional when talking about making friends at the school spoke of her difficulties speaking to new people, and she talked about how school personnel were able to help her find ways to open and begin dialogues with people. She credits the school with helping her to become a far more social person.
By helping students improve attendance and grades. The students discussed their attitudes toward school and the academic struggles that they faced. For some, attendance had been a significant impediment to academic success. One student noted that in her last year in public school she missed fifty days of school. In her senior year, at this school, she noted that she missed just two and those were “because I was actually sick.” She said “I loved going to school…I’m a senior in high school. I want to represent the school and show people what I can do for myself.”

Another student spoke of the challenges she faced when trying to improve her grades. She said “I used to be really bad at staying on top of my grades and getting help and asking for it when I needed it.” Historically her anxiety prevented her from seeking assistance when the material was too difficult and her grades suffered. She said “I worried that the teachers wouldn’t hear me or understand what I was saying. I worry that I’m going to say the wrong thing or it’s going to come out wrong. They [the teachers here] just get around that barrier.” One student when speaking of how her grades changed said “My grades went from F’s and D’s to all A’s and B’s.” She paused, thought, and then did note “probably the lowest grade I got this year was a C+ in my senior year, so one C+ basically.” It was evident that this improvement was a great source of pride and instilled in her a new vision of what she could accomplish.

The students also spoke of learning opportunities outside of the classroom and the value that those provide. Students here participate in various vocational and skill building activities designed to help obtain and maintain employment after they are finished with school. The program has a wide selection of activities that students can choose from to help prepare them for employment. Participants in the focus group found these activities to be very rewarding and greatly enhanced their school experience. One student said “they have these job skills, people
need to finish school and develop their skills. It’s pretty cool. They have all these cool skills.”

Another student said “we have this place called the snack shack we work at. We serve coffee…tea and soda, and food every Friday. It’s kind of awesome.” This comment was from a student who was reluctant at first to speak and did not want to offer too much to the discussion, but when the topic turned to the job skills program he became engaged and was clearly motivated by this program.

**Summary.** By analyzing responses in relation to research question one several findings emerged. It was apparent that teachers and administrators at the school try to create an environment that addresses the unique challenges posed by their students. The students were able to express that they recognized the benefits that this school offered them in their pursuit of a high school diploma.

**Research Question 2: What specific strategies and school-based practices used by the private school are the most effective at helping students change their behavior and become more engaged in school and connected to the school community, as perceived by students, and school personnel?**

Research question two will be divided into two sections. The first will examine specific strategies and school based strategies that school is implementing to help students change their behavior and become more engaged in school as from perspective of school personnel. The second section will look at what student perceptions are around the strategies and school practices utilized by the school.

**Comments made by school personnel in relationship to Research Question 2**
In this section, comments provided by school personnel in relationship to research question 2 are provided and discussed. Four themes, as presented in Table 4, were identified through a careful analysis of responses across the 8 teachers and 3 administrators at the school.

Table 4

*What specific strategies and school-based practices used by the private school are the most effective at helping students change their behavior and become more engaged in school and connected to the school community, as perceived by school personnel?*

| Incorporation of the principles of trauma informed care - trustworthiness, safety, choice, collaboration, empowerment- across all areas of programming |
| The use of the Collaborative Problem Solving model to help improve student behavior |
| Small classes that allow for relationship development – both between students and between students and staff |
| The role family engagement plays in improving school performance |

**Incorporation of the principles of trauma informed care - trustworthiness, safety, choice, collaboration, empowerment - across all areas of programming.** When discussing with staff members about helping students with EBD to improve behavior they spoke of the importance of recognizing that many of their students have a history of trauma. This is a theme that runs throughout the school. In fact, a review of documentation found that the principles of trauma informed care was in the first line of the school’s philosophy. It said “[the school] approaches work with children and adolescents from a philosophy of trauma informed care.” An administrator when speaking about helping students said

> It’s the processing that happens in terms of learning, what are the triggers? How do we put in perspective what coping skills we are building? Clinicians look at what trauma
history might be there? What risk factors? What can we develop for healthy coping skills?

Another administrator noted “you have this whole social emotional unbalance. You have kids acting out because of their challenges, their trauma history.

One part of trauma informed care is empowering students and letting them make their own decisions even if staff members feel that they might not make the best choice. An administrator noted the challenge in this, but spoke of its importance noting “the reality is kids are experimental. We have to allow them to experience they have a choice. Good or bad we have to let them.” She continued “it’s hard to let people make mistakes sometimes…we have to say that they have a right to make bad mistakes. It’s the time that people take processing things afterwards that can really get a lot of traction.”

School personnel discussed the importance of safety and how critical that is when helping students start to become more invested in school. A teacher spoke about how that starts as soon as the student walks in the door and said that it is important to “focus on getting them settled as soon as possible and showing them that this is a nurturing safe environment.” Another teacher followed up agreeing with point and spoke of the importance of “getting them to trust us.” An administrator, when speaking about foundational elements needed to help students succeed, noted that in order for students to “buy in” to the program they first need to feel safe.

**The use of collaborative problem solving to help improve student behavior.** Another specific behavioral support strategy that is utilized at the school is the collaborative problem solving approach. When asked about what specific approaches that teachers were taught were most effective at helping students improve behavior a senior administrator said “the collaborative problem solving that we use” has been very effective. He went on to explain that “with
collaborative problem solving you don’t have to get into power struggles with kids [instead] you quickly analyze with the kid. Questions are put forward in a non-judgmental way.” He noted that this allows teachers to take responsibility for how they react in a given situation and noted that “sometimes what went wrong wasn’t necessarily the kids fault and sometimes there’s acknowledgement of that. Yeah. I did kind of jump the gun.” He said that the implementation of collaborative problem solving has been a great change because “for years they’ve [teachers] been getting into power struggles with kids, and with our kind of kid your usually lose them because they’re masters of power struggles and they enjoy the combat.”

Teachers spoke of the importance of utilizing the principles of collaborative problem solving which involve not being accusatory and judgmental when speaking to the students. One teacher said “I think we’re phrasing things in a positive way… [saying] maybe ‘that wasn’t the best choice or let’s find another choice.”’ Another staff noted that after an aggressive acting out behavior had been resolved she might say something like “I really didn’t like you throwing the chair at me, but we’re beyond that now. You’re safe. I’m safe, let’s get to work.” Teachers emphasized that with collaborative problem solving there is a recognition it is important to handle instances of acting out in a respectful manner and recognize where the student is coming from, but not by, as one teacher said, “making excuses. I think because you could do that too. I think people can say ‘they’re like this because of this…they’re not making an excuse for it, ‘let’s change that. How do we work with them?’”

Staff members spoke of the important role that open communication plays within the framework of collaborative problem solving. One administrator noted that they try to model desired behaviors for the students and “they see you modeling, you’re practicing what you’re
preaching, you’re philosophy of talking to them about their concerns, your concerns, going back and forth. It’s letting them have a voice in what they need.” Another administrator said

I think one of the biggest pieces in place is the process. Here we know processing isn’t just after, you need to do the initial after, but the real work comes from the follow-up processing that is a day, a week. It’s saying you know what I remember, that month when you struggled with this, I really see a difference…It’s recognizing to use good moments to learn from kids.

The administrators also noted that they also approach working with staff members with the same collaborative mind-set. One administrator noted “we try very hard to provide the support mechanisms to our staff that we have their back. We’re very honest and open.” She went on to say “we have expectations for them; we hold them accountable for those expectations. We also understand that their lives outside of work are a key to who they are and to their success.” She likened this work to the philosophy of the school and said

It’s that same model of what we’re asking teachers to do for students. Modeling that behavior, we’re looking for positives, and we’re always there for our staff, to really show them that we’re all human. We all make mistakes. We need to work together in promoting a positive culture that, it’s not, we’re not looking for mistakes. We’re looking always looking for the better picture of a close collaborative team that is working together.

**Small classes that allow for relationship development –both between students and between students and staff.** Class sizes at the school are small by design which is reflected in the school’s philosophy “[The School] provides education and specialized instruction in small classroom settings.” The benefit of the small class sizes was a common theme among
administrators and teachers. When speaking about the class size one administrator noted that “They’ve [teachers] got to be responsible for the seven or eight kids in their class and be very carefully analyzing and calculating what the next step for them is on an academic level.” Another administrator when speaking about helping students to feel comfortable noted “some of that is a functioning of the environment, the classrooms, I don’t have 22, 20 plus kids, so it’s a lot easier to support.”

The teachers spoke frequently about the importance of building relationships with their students and felt that a big part of their ability to do that rested with the small class sizes. One teacher noted “I think our ratio is extremely helpful. Having a full class be 10 students and having an aide in every single class with a teacher.” Another teacher when speaking about developing relationships said “we sit with our kids, we eat with our kids during lunch every, so that’s a social skills opportunity that we usually take part in every single day.” It was interactions like these that staff felt gave them the chance to really bond with their students.

Most classes are fewer than 10 students and the high staff to student ratio was also credited with freeing teachers and aides up to really individualize their approach. One teacher noted “it’s a lot easier to pull a student out and give that one-on-one time that they need.” When asked what helped differentiate between what was done at this school from what is being done at public schools the small class size was something that was pointed to. As one of the veteran teachers said “there are some kids that really need that extra support, if even only for a few years.”

 Teachers also noted the benefits of small class sizes for helping students develop peer relationships. They said that many of their students have struggled to make lasting friendships, but here they are able to do so more easily. As one teacher said “they get to know each other so
quickly because they have such small classes, so it’s easy. They know everyone in the school.”

Another teacher noted they can use the class to help foster interactions “we have small classes, so from a teaching perspective we can sort of manipulate the groups and the pairs in the classroom” another teacher chimed in “to see who gets along.”

**The role family engagement plays in improving school performance.** One final theme that emerged from the document review and conversations with school personnel around specific strategies to help students in school was the important role that families should play in student success. School documentation indicated that family partnerships were critical and noted the following goals:

- Guide the family to identify the behaviors and stresses that have contributed to the child’s need for treatment
- Support the family to develop appropriate activities, supports, and resources for the child
- Strengthen positive family parenting skills
- Assist families in being able to meet the needs of their child

When asked what about what specific things the school was doing to help students one teacher noted

[There’s] a big involvement with families, like we have a parent series that the clinicians do, where we focus on different things. This coming year will be anxiety. So getting the parents involved in that...we have communication logs that the teachers write to the parents every day. All the parents have the emails of all the teachers, of all the clinicians, so there’s a lot of back and forth…because obviously it doesn’t just stop at school it needs to be carried out at home too.

An administrator, when speaking of the important role of family, noted “we’re not just working with the kids; we’re working with the families as well so we’re helping them.” She
continued “I think families really do feel that they’re connected here, that they belong, that their concerns will be taken seriously, will be responded to in a positive way, they are a big part of the team here.” When noting the role of communication with families an administrator said “families appreciate honest, direct feedback on their kids.”

When one administrator was speaking of keys to future success she said “when you look at the kids who we’ve had the greatest success with…they have to have someone in their life that has joined us with hope.” Another administrator noted the importance of “having those parental supports, having that team that is your external school support, the family.” And, when speaking of something that can hold students back from succeeding that administrator noted it’s when “that family connection is not there.”

**Students’ comments in relationship to Research Question 2**

In this section, students’ comments in relationship to research question 2 are provided and discussed. Three themes, as presented in Table 5, were identified through a careful analysis of responses across the 5 students at the school.

Table 5

*What specific strategies and school-based practices used by the private school are the most effective at helping students change their behavior and become more engaged in school and connected to the school community, as perceived by students?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students are able to get to know each other and develop friendships quickly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff members regularly check in with students to see how they are doing and to help them manage their problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students trust that the school is trying to work in their best interests</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Students are able to get to know each other and develop friendships quickly.** During the focus group with students a common theme that emerged quickly was the student’s ability to make friends at the school. Students when asked to talk about their initial experiences at the school spoke of the friends they had made upon starting as one student noted that upon enrolling “I made more friends…and I met [girl’s name] which she’s like my best friend.” Another student when speaking of first enrolling said “When I first came here, I felt like a lot of the kids who are my friends now treated me with kindness.” Someone else noted “when I first came here I was very shy and self-conscious…I made a friend and she helped me because when I first came she was very kind, and she helped me open up to other people.”

Another student when speaking of the difference between this school and previous ones ‘it’s better than my previous ones I’ve met a lot of people. I’ve made a lot of friends.” This point was reiterated again by another student “I’ve made a lot of friends that have a lot of my likes and a lot of my interests, and they’re just open and considerate of my feelings.” She went on to say “I’ve had problems with connecting with people and just socializing, but when I came here I felt, when my classes were smaller I felt like it was more helpful.”

The students also spoke of their struggles at previous schools in developing friendships and feeling left out. One student spoke about feeling worthless at her previous school and about how that changed when she became a student here. Another student noted that at past schools “I’ve been bullied a lot.” And, someone else spoke of the trouble that he previously had developing relationships told of instances of bullying and the lack of staff supervision to prevent such instances.

**Staff members regularly check in with students to see how they are doing and to help them manage their problems.** When students were speaking about things that the school
does that have helped them they spoke of staff members’ ability to perceive when something is wrong and to help them work through it. One student noted the tremendous amount of support she receives, and talked about teachers being there to ensure that students’ experiences are worthwhile. She also said “when I needed help [the school] was always there. If I needed help in math [the teachers] were there, and if I ever needed to take space they’d help me.” Another student when speaking about the staff said “It’s just, the effort shows.”

Students when talking about what has helped them the most spoke of the attention they get from their teachers. One student said “Even if they’re busy, they’ll stop what they’re doing and help you.” Another student recounted an experience when she was really struggling said “I manage to get through a lot with my staffs help.” She continued “they’re [staff] like ‘well if you need to talk, we’re here.”

The students related personal experiences where teachers or behavioral support staff members were able to offer help and prevent them from having anxiety attacks, or emotionally shutting down, or having angry outbursts. One student who was struggling with some issues outside of school said that staff took her for a walk and talked with her about her problems for an hour. She said “that’s what they’re really good at. If they notice something’s wrong they’ll…help you with that.”

**Students trust that the school is trying to work in their best interests.** The students at this school all relayed poor prior school experiences and some expressed some skepticism about the motivations of teachers at previous placements. One student noted “it’s like the staff usually don’t bother doing something unless their paycheck is involved.” He continued on talking about his faith in the teachers intentions. He said that he might not always agree with
what they were doing or how they were teaching, but said that at least at this school he can know that they are qualified to teach and want to help him learn.

The high staffing ratio is something that the students recognized as a helpful tool in providing them assistance when needed. One student, when speaking about assistance received in class, said “the fact that they take the time and especially that they have an extra teaching assistant that the public schools just wouldn’t bother having.” The staff allows for the students to feel how attentive they are to their needs. As one student noted

The thing about this school is that they know something’s wrong. You can’t just act like nothing’s wrong because they’ll know. They’ll come up to you and be like ‘hey, are you okay. You can’t get away from them. They’re going to obviously know something’s wrong.

This comment illustrates that while sometimes the extra staffing can seem burdensome to teenagers there is also an appreciation there that the school will be there when something is wrong.

Comparison of Focus Groups

Perceptions around the efficacy, strategies, and role of the school were similar across the three focus groups in many regards. Each group had a different way of speaking about the issues, and certain areas had a greater focus depending upon which group was being interviewed on participating in the focus group.

One area where all three groups agreed was the important role that relationships play in helping the students to succeed at school. From the executive director and other administrators down to the students, the role of relationship development was discussed. For students, they said that the relationships they’ve develop with peers is a highlight, and the fact that they were able to
quickly make friends was important to them. Teachers spoke of the need to begin relationship building as soon as the students walked in the door on their first day. And, administrators spoke of their desire to create an environment where the students know they will be supported by staff members who care for them.

Another area of commonality was the recognition of previous negative experiences and the impact that has on the students’ education. The teachers and administrators both spoke of the importance of trauma informed care and that in-depth knowledge of a student’s history can help inform treatment and expectations moving forward. The students were not as articulate in this area, but all spoke of previous troubles that they have experienced with a specific focus on issues that they encountered in prior schools.

One area that administrators felt was important, but was not reflected as consistently throughout was the fostering of a sense of future potential. However, this is understandable as administrators tend to have a broader view of what the school hopes to accomplish and the students may be too close to recognize a change in their own thinking. The teachers did not note this as something that was important to helping the students engage in school.

In terms of specific strategies that the school uses to help students change their behavior and become more engaged in school, there were commonalities between what school personnel had to say and what the students said. While the school personnel were able to speak about the strategies in specific terms and explain how they are implemented, the students spoke of their perceptions for what works for them without necessarily knowing the names of the strategies used. For example, teachers and administrators spoke about the use of collaborative problem solving and trauma informed care. Principles from these were woven throughout the discussion about how the school tries to help the students. But, when students were talking they didn’t
reference specific strategies or methods they instead spoke of what they saw. They saw staff members caring about their issues, they saw staff members asking if they need assistance, and they saw staff members working with them to help them through difficult situations.

**Summary.** Through a thorough analysis of the data the researcher was able to develop several findings in relation to research question two. The study participants emphasized the importance of relationship building when helping students succeed in school. Additionally, they spoke of students struggles at previous schools and a need to address and then move on from those experiences.

**Review of Outcomes Data**

As a final piece of data collection the researcher reviewed data from the school to determine the extent to which the private special education school was impacting student engagement and participation in school. Determining graduation rates for students who have been placed in out-of-district placements is a difficult task, and even when provided with outcome data for students enrolled in this school the researcher was unable to develop a clear graduation rate. However, the data was informative and can provide some information about the level of school participation.

The student’s home school district is ultimately responsible for tracking the student and reporting back to the state about their educational attainment. So, when a student un-enrolls in the private special education school the school does not always get informed about what the student’s plans are. There are many reasons for students to un-enroll. One reason may be that the student is leaving school altogether, but it could also be that the student’s family is moving to another town that is too far to still attend, or the student may have been in a state foster placement and was returned to the family, also it could be that the student has been taken from
the family and placed in a foster home, group home, or residential facility. The school is often notified about these changes, but it is not mandated by law or regulations and does not always happen. Below is data for students who enrolled in the school in grades 9-12 from the 2010/11 school year until June 2015. Not all of the students counted in the below table have reached 12th grade, but all students were included in order to count the students who returned to public school or were returned to their families because both should be considered a desired outcome as is articulated in the school’s goals. Additionally, a significant number of students who have been students or enrolled in that time frame are still students working towards a diploma.

Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item of Focus</th>
<th>Number of students (out of 137 counted in grades 9-12 during 2014-15 school year)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Graduated</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Still Enrolled (over 18-2)</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Returned to Public School</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Returned to Family</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another Private School/Day Program</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moved</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster Care, Group Home, Residential</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Runaway/Unenrolled in school</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Upon initial review of this data there are several things which are striking. One is the high number of unknown outcomes. As was described above this is due to a variety of reasons, and while many of these students may not have persisted in their education and earned a diploma many probably have. This challenge with the data makes it difficult to draw meaningful broadly applicable conclusions. However, it is still possible to illicit some interesting information from the data that can be useful when examining the degree to which the school is meeting its goals.

A helpful way to look at the data is to break the categories up into desired outcomes, undesired outcomes, and undetermined outcomes. As can be seen in Table 7 this helps paint a clearer picture. Students who moved to a group home, foster home, or residential placement went to a more restrictive placement and should be considered to be an undesired outcome. While students who returned to public school, were returned to their families, graduated, or are still enrolled should be considered a desired outcome. Student who transferred to a different private school, a collaborative, or a therapeutic day school have essentially made a lateral move which is neither the desired outcome nor an undesired outcome and will be grouped with the unknown group of students.

Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Desired Outcome</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undesired Outcome</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undetermined Outcome</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Looking at table seven one can see that there is at least a 60% success rate with the students who attended the school during the time period being examined. The undesired outcomes number of 5% is not particularly helpful because it is impossible to determine how many of the 35% of students with undetermined outcomes will be positive or negative. However, our baseline of 60% positive outcomes is informative and while not directly comparable to statewide graduation data it is helpful to look at in conjunction with the statewide outcomes. Table 8 shows statewide data for students with EBD and students without disabilities (MA DESE, 2015).

Table 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>4 Year Graduation Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2013-14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students Without Disabilities</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students With EBD</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Also informative is statewide data around outcomes for students with EBD based on placement. As shown in Table 9 there are significant differences in the graduation rate when placement is taken into account (MA DESE, 2015). While this information is helpful it is not surprising since those students whom are placed in more restrictive environment typically have more involved needs and are more significantly impacted by their disability.

Table 9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Placement of Students With EBD</th>
<th>4 Year Graduation Rate (2013-14)</th>
<th>Number of Students Graduating (2013-14)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full Inclusion</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>587</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placement Type</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial Inclusion</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substantially Separate</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Separate Day School</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Separate Day School</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential School</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Facilities</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While a direct comparison of desired outcomes for students attending this school against the graduation rates of the various placement options is not apples to apples, it is helpful to review these rates to illustrate the substantial challenge that students with EBD are faced with when trying to persist and engage in school. The school’s positive outcomes number is similar to the statewide graduation rate for students with EBD, and while calculating an exact graduation rate for the school is not currently feasible, the success rate of the school is similar to the success rate of the population of students with EBD as a whole if we project that students who progressed enough in the school to return to their public schools and families continue on that trajectory. This must be kept in mind when reviewing graduation data by placement, because students who are successful in private special education schools do sometimes return to their home school district and graduate from there. The students who continue to struggle are some of the most challenging students to educate, and if they continue to struggle and don’t obtain a diploma that is reflected on the placement.

**Summary of Findings**

The goal of this study was to determine what strategies used by a private special education school are most effective at helping students with EBD persist and engage in school.
The research for this study was completed using a case study where the researcher conducted interviews with school administrators, a focus group with teachers, a focus group with students, a document review of the school’s philosophy, goals, policies, and procedures, and data analysis of outcomes for students with EBD in this school and throughout the state.

Data analysis revealed that this school specializing in working with students with EBD faces challenges found among all educators throughout the state who are working with this group of students. While difficult to determine an accurate graduation rate, the success rate of the school reflects that the school is successful with 61% of the students who attend. This number aligns with the statewide graduation rate for students with EBD. When considering that students who are sent to a private special education school often face more serious mental health issues than those who are able to remain in more inclusive settings this data shows that this particular school can be a valuable resource for students with EBD.

Interviews and focus groups indicated that there are several factors that the school incorporates to help students with EBD succeed. One theme across all populations was the important role that relationships play when helping students persist and engage in school. Additionally, participants indicated the important role played by utilizing a truly individualized approach that attempts to meet the need of each student by building on their strengths and teaching them to overcome areas in which they struggle. As part of the individualized approach school personnel discussed the importance of small class sizes, and of using trauma informed care and collaborative problem solving when working with students with EBD.

Chapter V: Discussion of Findings

Revisiting the Problem of Practice
The overall graduation rate in the United State persists as a serious problem in education. Students in Massachusetts with an individualized education program (IEP) who have been diagnosed with EBD have a graduation rate over 30% points less than their nondisabled peers (MA DESE). These students tend to fall behind in their classes, lose interest in school, and demonstrate disruptive behaviors in class contributing to their desire to abandon school and give up on their quest to earn a high school diploma (Riccomini & Bost, 2006).

Many strategies are employed to help students with emotional and behavioral disorders finish school. The use of inclusion classrooms and RTI is one of the biggest strategies used. Section 504 of the Individuals with Disabilities Act dictates that schools must educate their students in the least restrictive environment possible (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, “Students with Disabilities Must” para. 1s). However, there are times when this is not possible, and school districts must place students with EBD in alternative schools that specialize in educating this population of students. It is one of these alternative schools that was the subject of this research.

**Review of Methodology**

This case study sought to determine the efficacy of one private special education school for students with EBD and to explain what strategies are most effective with the students who it is able to help. Research was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. How and to what extent does a private special education school impact students with emotional and behavioral disorders engagement and participation in school, as perceived by the students, administrators and teachers of private schools serving this student population specifically?
2. What specific strategies and school-based practices used by the private school are the
most effective at helping students change their behavior and become more engaged in
school and connected to the school community, as perceived by students, and school
personnel?

In order to best answer these questions a case study method was utilized. The case study
consisted of interviews with school administrators, a focus group with teachers, a focus group
with students, document review, and data analysis. The interviews, focus groups, and document
review sought to determine strategies and structures within the school that are the most effective
at helping students with EBD persist and engage in school. Data analysis was utilized to
determine how successful the school has been at achieving a desired outcome for the students
who have attended over the last five years.

Discussion of Major Findings

A thorough review of research collected during the case study revealed several findings.
The findings suggest that the private special education school participating in this study was able
to have an impact on the engagement and persistence of students with EBD in school. School
administrators, teachers, and students supported the notion that this school was able to encourage
engagement in school and helped students overcome previous difficulties that they had faced in
prior educational settings. The school was able to do this by using an individualized approach
for each student that sought to make students feel like they were a part of the school community.
Additionally, the students were able to develop important relationships with teachers and peers
that helped keep them engaged in school.

Participants were also able to identify several strategies that they felt were most
important in helping the students succeed in school. The small class sizes were identified by
both school personnel and students as playing an important role in the school's ability to foster an environment where students were able to develop meaningful relationships. Additionally, students noted that teachers and other school personnel were invested in helping them succeed and provided regular feedback and opportunities to check in and see how they were doing. Likewise, school personnel noted that this was by design and used elements of both collaborative problem solving, and trauma-informed care. Both of these strategies can be seen as being a part of a larger goal of overall social emotional instruction that was identified as playing an important role in student development.

**Data analysis shows a positive outcome for many students.** Finding from data analysis of school outcome data from the 2010-11 school year through June 2015 indicated that the school was able to achieve a desired outcome for many of the students who attended during that time. While determining a graduation rate was not possible, the outcome data was able to provide an indication that the school can be effective when helping this challenging group of students. Data analysis indicated that 60% of students attending the school in the selected time period had a positive school outcome. This was defined as either receiving a diploma, returning to their public school district which would represent an less restrictive environment, or returned from state care, which included foster care and group homes, to their family.

The positive outcome rate of 60% represents outcomes for students that the school has information for. As indicated above there are many students who, for a variety of reasons, the school did not have any information for regarding what happened to them after they left the school. These students represent 35% of the students who attended the school during the selected timeframe. While it is probable that many of those students did not have a desirable outcome, it is also probable that there were some in that group that did return to a less restrictive
environment, persisted in their education, and earned a high school diploma. So, the 60% desirable outcome number represents a baseline for what the potential positive outcome percent would be.

The statewide graduation rate in Massachusetts for students with EBD is 61% (MA DESE). So, while the desirable outcome rate of 60% is not directly comparable to the graduation rate it is helpful in highlighting that the school is able to achieve its goal of either helping students with EBD earn a diploma or return to a less restrictive environment at about the same rate that this student group as a whole is earning a diploma.

The statewide graduation rate of students with EBD attending private special education day schools is 44%. The researcher was unable to determine a specific graduation rate for this school because of the high percentage of students with an unknown outcome. It would be inaccurate to count those students as not graduating because that may or may not be the case, however it is also inaccurate to remove them from calculations altogether for the same reason.

The utilization of an individualized strengths based approach. The findings for this study showed the important role that individualization and differentiation plays when educating students with EBD. Administrators and teachers all spoke of the importance of “meeting students where they’re at” and “building on their strengths.” These principals help guide teachers and other staff members when working with students to help them overcome their challenges. There is recognition that the students they are serving have unique needs and unique histories that have led them to be at the school.

The students’ needs are so varied that this individualization is required and must be implemented as soon as students enroll. As one administrator noted “because everyone is here for different reasons, they have different educational issues, they have different mental health
issues, so we differentiate in our responses to kids.’’ This concept was echoed by teachers as one said “Another thing was really getting a good grasp of differentiations, so you can show the students that you’ve seen where they are, and you’re helping them build that skill”

This finding aligns with the concept of differentiated instruction and is something that one administrator noted

We’re going to accept certain behaviors, tolerate certain little idiosyncrasies, take the curriculum and really make it accessible for the skills deficits. Chunking out, differentiating, looking at the student’s ability to present, it might be something that is totally unacceptable in a public school where they want a five page report whereas our student might give you the same information only in a very different way. That’s what our teachers specialize in. The ability to understand those challenges…each student gets a different plan.

The recognition that differentiation is not only important for the presentation of material, but it is also important to let students display their knowledge of the material in a way that they are capable of doing. This then allows the student to access the curriculum in a meaningful way and display their knowledge of the material.

Students’ are able to develop meaningful relationships. The ability of students with EBD to build strong meaningful relationships was a finding that was reflected throughout the research. This was a constant theme in the administrator interviews, and teacher and student focus groups.

Students cited this as being a very important element to their ability to succeed at the school. They spoke of how quickly they made friends with peers upon enrolling and how their friends helped them feel more comfortable at school. Students also spoke about times when
school personnel were able to display empathy and made students feel like their teachers and therapists were truly invested in helping them succeed at school.

There was also recognition on the part of the teaching staff that relationship development with the students was a critical component toward helping them. They spoke of “rolling out that welcome mat” as soon as the student arrives on campus. And, they spoke of the importance of building a level of trust with the students so they knew that staff members are there to help. This represented a challenge for many because most of their students have very poor prior school experiences and it can be difficult for them to trust their teachers. The teachers believed that continued support and talking about problems with students in a nonjudgmental way was important to helping build that trust and develop the relationship.

When administrators were speaking about important elements of the school one administrator said “one of the biggest things is that personal connection. It’s your ability to make a personal connection with a student.” She went on to say “It’s that whole connection, that personal connection that says, no matter what, we’re going to go through this together and we are going to conquer this situation together.”

**Small class sizes play an important role in the success of the students.** This finding was developed through interviews, a review of documentation, and focus groups with school personnel and students. The students focused more on the small classes as being helpful for them to make friends. While school personnel saw the small class sizes primarily as an academic benefit but also recognized the social emotional role that class sizes can have.

As was noted above students felt that their ability to make friends quickly was an important factor in how much they liked the school. Most of these students spoke of previous struggles with peers and being the victim of bullying incidents. They spoke about being able to
get to know their classmates and about having friends that were there to help them. One student also spoke about the small class size as a benefit because the teachers know what is going on and “nobody was really doing things that teachers didn’t know about.”

School personnel also recognized the benefits of small class sizes, and while they did see the social benefit with one teacher saying “They get to know each other so quickly because they have such small classes, so it’s easy. They know everyone in the school” they also liked the small class size for instructional purposes. Teachers spoke about liking the ability to easily manipulate the groupings, and to be able to quickly recognize if a student was struggling and needed to be pulled aside for remediation.

The classes at the school are small by design as noted in the school handbook “[The School] provides education and specialized instruction in small classroom settings.” An administrator when speaking about the small class sizes noted that it is much easier to individualize one’s approach when teachers aren’t dealing with the typical large high school class size.

Social emotional learning principles, including trauma informed care and collaborative problem solving, are used to help students overcome the challenges they face in emotional and behavioral regulation. The school utilizes a trauma informed approach combined with collaborative problem solving to help meet the social emotional learning needs of the students. Administrators were best able to describe the theoretical reasons behind this approach, while teachers spoke of implementing principles of the approach, and students were able to give some perceptions of what they saw in their interactions with staff members.

Themes from school administrators indicated that they have spent a significant amount of time working to develop and tailor an approach to helping their students that will incorporate
both trauma informed care and collaborative problem solving. Administrators spoke of the importance of learning about student histories and recognizing past abuse. They also spoke of the need to have open communications with students in order to best help them when they are experiencing emotional dysregulation.

Teachers shared that a critical component of fostering student success was their ability to empathize with their students. They recognized that many of the students in their classrooms are victims of past trauma and that their behaviors are often a reflection of that. Teachers spoke of the need to be understanding of the issues that their students are struggling with and to help them move forward.

Understandably the students did not speak specifically of trauma informed care or collaborative problem solving. However, their comments did reflect that they feel as though staff care about them. They also indicated that they felt like school personnel understood some of their struggles. Students expressed that they felt supported by staff members and they were able to recount stories of instances when they were having a difficult time in class and a teacher or therapist was able to help them address and move past what was bothering them.

**Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study was Stages of Change theory and the Theory of School Membership. These were selected because students entering the school would need to change what they had been doing in school up until enrolling if they hoped to be successful in their new school. Additionally, school membership theory helped to inform the degree to which the school was making students feel welcome and engaged in school.

**Stages of change theory.** The stages of change theory developed by Prochaska (1994) identifies different stages that people pass through as they are changing a behavior. This theory
was applied to students attending a private special education school to see if there was any recognition on the part of school personnel around the stages of change that students were working through. Students who have been successful at the school have been able to overcome previous instances of emotional dysregulation and persist in school.

Focus groups and interviews indicated that there was not a conscious effort to specifically address the stages of change as students progressed through the program. However, behavioral programming was designed to help students change their behavior and followed some of the stages. Students enter the school typically displaying the behavioral challenges that caused them to be sent out-of-district. According to stages of change theory these students would be classified at one of the first three stages precontemplation, contemplation, or preparation. Some students who entered the school and were described by administrators as being ready for a fresh start could be considered to be in the fourth stage, action. Teachers referred to these students as having a “honeymoon period” and some could maintain that for a couple of months before slipping up and displaying some of the behaviors that caused them to be sent to the school in the first place.

For other students there is recognition that the school has some work to do before moving forward. As one administrator noted “if someone’s just holding it together it takes a little longer to get to the real meaty work.” When asked to expand and what might be done to help she said “it’s reflecting on that past. It’s that push, step back, push [overcoming] the ‘what was in the past,’ [the] ‘I don’t want to talk about it.’” This describes the school working through the change process with a struggling student. The “push, step back, push” describes what is done to help students move from precontemplation, to contemplation, and then on to preparation and action.
Stages of change theory places a lot of focus on the stages leading up to the action stage, recognizing that the foundational work that each individual needs to do. Stages of change theory notes the importance of treating each student uniquely and realizing that not all students will be prepared to undergo change as soon as they arrive at school. Norcross et al. noted that it is crucial to “tailor the process to the stages” (p. 152). Their research highlights that students benefit when the change process aligns “with the insight and awareness therapies for the early stages, and the change processes associated with the action therapies (ex. stimulus control, and reinforcement management) for the later stages” (p.152). Here, stages of change theory relates to the individualization of the approach taken at the school and the recognition that each student will present unique challenges.

**Wehlage's theoretical model of school membership.** The theory of school membership developed by Wehlage et al (1989) postulates that in order for students to achieve their goals at school there must exist within them an intrinsic feeling that school is a place where people, both peers and school personnel, care about what happens to them. Successful schools are able to create an environment that is supportive for students and shows them how to become more engaged in school. Additionally, Wehlage et al. highlighted the importance of showing students the relevance of the curriculum, and the need for teachers to take responsibility for the education of their students while individualizing approaches to meet the unique needs of all members of the classroom.

Research indicated that promoting a feeling of school membership is something that the school makes a concerted effort to do, and is something that students feel the effects of. Many students spoke about how this school is different from where they have previously attended.
They talked about making friends, and about the ability of school personnel to notice when something is wrong and help students work through whatever is bothering them.

Likewise, school personnel spoke at length about the importance of creating an environment where the students felt supported and were comfortable to be themselves. They spoke about individualizing the approach that they take with each student in order to meet all of the various challenges the students face.

The school’s small class sizes, personalized approach to education, use of collaborative problem solving and trauma informed care, and the ability of students to develop meaningful relationships with school personnel and their peers all help the school foster a sense of school membership. As one student noted

I went form in [previous school district] feeling like a total nobody, couldn’t fit in, feeling pretty worthless. When I came here I made so many friends…From feeling like I can’t fit in anywhere to feeling like I’m on top of the world here.

A teacher when speaking about how the school tries to help students said

I think one of the first things we do is we roll out that welcome mat, and we really to need to focus on getting them settled as soon as possible and showing that this is a nurturing safe environment. To begin to focus more on their strengths

Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Literature Review

The literature review in the second chapter explained some struggles faced by students with EBD, how these students do when trying to earn a high school diploma, the use of out-of-district placements and their use for students with EBD, and what school belonging and membership mean in context to helping students persist in school
The literature on Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders. Students with disabilities all have very unique needs, and approaches to their education must be tailored to take advantage of their individual strengths while also targeting those areas that present difficulties. This also holds true for students with EBD as these students often have very complex needs and the solution is not as simple as providing more one-to-one assistance or giving more time on an exam (Katsiyannis, Ryan, & Smith, 2011).

The site for this study has developed an approach that tries to recognize the unique learning needs of its students. This approach presents challenges and is difficult to implement with fidelity, but members of the school community believed that the individualized approach they take gives their students the best chance of having success in school. For example one teacher noted that it is important “for everybody to be on the same page and understand what’s really happening with each student.”

Students with EBD engagement and persistence in traditional public school settings. While it is true that some students with EBD are able to achieve a great deal of success the population as a whole does not have the outcomes that they deserve. Hayling et al. (2007) noted that “the poor outcome data suggest that special education programs and the services they offer are not even beginning to meet the needs of this population of students.” This means that different approaches need to utilized in order to better target the needs of these students. The students who participated in the focus group spoke of poor prior school experiences that included being the victims of bullying, and poor interactions and relationships with teachers. This study indicated the students felt that this school presented them with a new opportunity to be successful in school. One student noted his problems with a prior school by saying “it was like the staff usually don’t bother doing something unless their paycheck was involved, and it was not
a very fun thing. Even the teachers would insult people. The specialized education people would insult people.” Another student said of changing to this school “it’s a more safe environment, so everyone feels like they belong.”

**Out of District Placements (ODP): Schools for students with EBD.** The use of out of district placements for students with EBD is relatively common in Massachusetts with 10% of students with EBD being educated in an out-of-district private special education day school for the 2013/14 school year (MA DESE, 2015). This accounts for 1,455 students in Massachusetts being educated in one of these schools. Information around the efficacy of these schools is limited and while this study will add to that body of work a great deal of research is still needed. One study completed by Lane et al. (2005) suggested that students with EBD in self-contained schools had lower academic achievement than students who were educated in the less restrictive self-contained classrooms. While those findings are understandable they are also self-evident as it would be expected that the students with the most significant needs would have lower academic achievement. The findings from this study also indicated that there were a significant number of students who attended the school who may have had an undesired outcome. There were 35% of the students in the research grouping who had an unknown outcome, and many of those students may not have persisted in school. So, even though this school was able to be successful for many students and is an appropriate placement for a significant number of adolescents there are still a significant number who require something different

**School belonging and membership.** One finding from the research suggests that the school is working hard to create an atmosphere where students feel like they belong. A review of the literature indicated that school belonging and membership are incredibly important factors in students’ decisions to persist in school. As Rumberger (2001) noted “dropping out is not
simply a result of academic failure, but rather often results from both social and academic problems in school.” Research for this study indicated that the school focuses a great amount of effort on targeting the social problems that students have faced in school. When speaking about what the school tries to do to be successful one administrator said

Yes, you’re a teacher, you’re an educator but until your students access their social and emotional well balance they’re not going to learn anything. All of the theories of trauma informed care, collaborative problem solving, all of those things we combine and embed into the curriculum itself…the classroom environment is always that balance of social, emotional, academic engagement.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine one state approved private special education school using a case study method to investigate administrator, teacher, and student perceptions around the ability of the school to help students persist and be successful in school. The case study utilized interviews of administrators, focus groups with teachers and students, a review of school documentation, and an analysis of school and state outcome data for students with EBD. The research was designed to answer the following two questions:

1. How and to what extent does a private special education school impact students with emotional and behavioral disorders engagement and participation in school, as perceived by the students, administrators and teachers of private schools serving this student population specifically?

2. What specific strategies and school-based practices used by the private school are the most effective at helping students change their behavior and become more engaged in
school and connected to the school community, as perceived by students, and school personnel?

Data was collected from interviews, focus groups, documents, and outcome data and was coded and analyzed for themes.

Results from this study indicate that this state approved private special education school is able to impact students participation and engagement in school by creating a place where students are able to develop friendships and engage with caring school personnel who are invested in helping them succeed. The school is able to achieve this by incorporating elements of trauma informed care and collaborative problem solving into a social emotional learning environment that utilizes small class sizes to help create a caring and nurturing atmosphere.

**Significance of the Study**

With an uncertain future, a chaotic present, and often a traumatic past, students with EBD are faced with significant obstacles to success. It is critical that both public and private schools work to develop strategies and structures that will help these students succeed in school and prepare them for the evolving demands of the 21st century. Schools that specialize in working with students with EBD have been developing ways to create a school environment that helps these students thrive. While these schools are constantly updating their approaches it was important to examine what works best to help these students succeed in school. Many of these approaches would be beneficial to students with EBD who are still attending public schools as well, and all educational settings can incorporate some of the principles outlined here to provide a better school experience for all students with emotional and behavioral struggles.

This study sought to investigate one school that specializes in helping students with EBD and to determine what approaches are the most effective. Through the use of focus groups and
interviews the researcher was able to illicit valuable information as it pertains to helping students with EBD. The findings from this study can help educators who are looking for suggestions for how best to work with students with EBD.

By incorporating the principles utilized by this school regarding trauma informed care and collaborative problem solving public and private schools may be able to better address their students’ social emotional learning needs. Greater use of these principles started in the earlier grades is something that districts may be starting to incorporate in their programming, and if they are not doing it now it is important that they start to examine how these principles might benefit their students with EBD.

Lastly, an important finding from this study was the important role that relationships play in student success. This theme, from across both focus groups and the interviews, highlights how critical it is for students to have emotional connections at school. School can be a scary and lonely place for any student, and when a student struggles with EBD those feelings can get amplified. School leaders and teachers at both public and private schools need to focus their attention on creating welcoming environments for those students that struggle the most to make friends and develop meaningful relationships with school personnel. Relationship building with these students does not always occur organically and instead needs to be explicitly nurtured and developed.

**Limitations**

The results from this study are important and relevant to anyone working with students with EBD. However, the decision to use a case study methods approach does limit the ability to generalize the results to a great degree. A case study was chosen to give the researcher an opportunity to create an in-depth investigation of one school, and this provided valuable results.
But, these results are just one picture of what is being done at one school and do not represent the work being done at other private special education schools, or the work being done in the public schools. Additionally, the difficulties around calculating an accurate graduation rate make the comparisons of outcomes across placements difficult.

Validity

As noted above concerns around the validity of research must be addressed. Maxwell (2005) noted that two of the biggest threats to validity in qualitative research are researcher bias and reactivity. The goal in this study was not to eliminate researcher bias, but to acknowledge that the bias exists since the researcher worked in private special education schools for students with EBD for 10 years. In order to overcome this bias it was important to examine the data for other meanings before drawing conclusions.

The concept of reactivity also presents a potential threat to validity in a qualitative study. Since the researcher is employed by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education the potential existed for respondents to answer how they thought the researcher wanted them to. This was combated through the development of a strong rapport with interview and focus group respondents, and creating an open and safe atmosphere for participants. Ultimately, this did not pose a threat to validity as respondents felt empowered to speak freely and did not appear to hold back from speaking about how they felt.

Future Research

This research was able to examine the philosophies, perceptions, and attitudes at one private special education school for students with EBD. Students with EBD are a small portion of students in the state, but they have significant needs and require significant resources to
participate in school. There is a need to study these students in far greater numbers and detail than was possible for this research.

The schools that specialize in serving these students can provide a wealth of data about successful strategies for helping them succeed. However, in order to truly capture what works, what doesn’t work, and what happens after high school, large scale cohort studies need to be done. These studies should pick up students when an IEP is first written for them citing EBD as the category of disability. Then studies should track the students as they progress through school conducting both quantitative and qualitative analysis about what strategies are being implemented and what strategies are having the most success. Future studies should examine what is being done at public schools that do not send any students with EBD to out-of-district placements and determine if their outcomes any better. Additionally, school districts should be examined to see if there are any that are able to educate all of their students with EBD in fully inclusive settings. These are all questions that will need to be addressed if we hope to find the most effective ways to help these students and to provide the tools for them to achieve at rates similar to their nondisabled peers.

**Personal Comments and Recommendations**

Having worked with students with emotional and behavioral disorders for a number of years I have become very familiar with their struggles and obstacles to success. I wanted to examine what was being done, that was showing positive signs of working, to help them stay in school and earn a high school diploma. When a society is faced with a high percentage of students from a particular subgroup that are failing at a high number then it is time to examine if it is the students who are failing the system, or if it is the system that is failing the students.
The atrocious graduation and post-graduation outcome numbers for students with EBD in the typical school environment indicates that it is the school system that is failing these students. Throughout the research process it was clear that these students have significant challenges that will be with them for their entire lives. They need to be taught how to manage the challenges not only to achieve success in school, but they will need to manage these challenges in order to achieve success in college and in their careers.

There are four implications from this study.

- First, social and emotional learning principles outlined above like trauma informed care and collaborative problem solving should be a part of the programming at all schools for students with emotional and behavioral disorders. These approaches can have a significant impact on how students perceive school and their relationships to school personnel.

- Second, these same principles would be beneficial to students with EBD still attending public schools. General education teachers are not often adequately trained in these areas and the use of collaborative problem solving and trauma informed care may prevent the need to utilize a private special education school for some students.

- Third, school personnel working with students with EBD must receive professional development in how to best support these students. Teachers in public and private schools require additional resources to help these students acclimate to their classrooms. Training around the need to provide explicit instruction of behavioral expectations to students with EBD and how to best support them would benefit all teachers.
Fourth, public schools should incorporate the strategies outlined here, and provide more intimate and supportive educational settings for those students who struggle with EBD. Developing positive student relationships with peers is a critical component of creating a welcoming school environment and it is an area that students with EBD often find very challenging. Smaller class sizes are one element that can help students with EBD build relationships more quickly. Public schools that can find ways to incorporate these strategies may be able to reduce their reliance on private special education schools while keeping students with EBD in more inclusive environments.

The findings for this study outline some ideas that educators can utilize when working with students with EBD. However, like anything, fidelity of implementation is a critical element. Many administrators and teachers have empathy for their students, and many want to individualize their approach to instruction, and many want to develop meaningful relationships with all of their students, and many want to create an environment where all of their students feel welcome, and many want to collaborate with their students on both academic and social-emotional challenges. However, when the stress of the school year bears down, some things get forgotten or set aside for later. Teachers and administrators must not set these principles aside for later, for they are every bit as important as curriculum development, lesson planning and grading papers. These principles provide the foundation for everything that the school hopes to achieve.
References


Appendix A

Signed Informed Consent Document For School Administrators

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Paul Bottome Student Researcher, Chris Unger Principal Investigator
Teaching Troubled Teens: A Qualitative Study of Educating Students with Emotional and Behavioral disorders in Private Special Education Schools

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
You are invited to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You are being asked to participate in this study because of your knowledge surrounding the education of students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD).

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this research is to determine what effect private special education schools that specialize in working with students with EBD have on their students’ education.

What will I be asked to do?
You will be asked to participate in an hour-long interview with a possible follow up interview if needed.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
The interview will take place at a location that is convenient to you and will take approximately one hour. If needed, the follow up interview will be in the same location and will last approximately one hour.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There is very little foreseeable risk or discomfort to you.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may help other schools like yours develop a best practices approach toward helping this challenging population.

Who will see the information about me?
Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way. Data from the interview will be transcribed by foxtranscribe.com and will be maintained in a
password secured database and will be destroyed at the completion of the study. Audio recordings and any hardcopies of transcripts will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and will also be destroyed at the completion of the study.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to see this information.

If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have? Participation in this study is voluntary and if you choose not to participate you do not have to sign this form.

What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research? There are no foreseeable risks involved in being a participant in this study.

Can I stop my participation in this study? Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems? Paul Bottome

Bottome.p@husky.neu.edu

Cell #401-323-6784

Christopher Unger, Ed. D.

c.unger@neu.edu

Cell # 857-272-8941

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant? If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation? You will be given a $10 gift card to a local coffee shop at the completion of the interviews

Will it cost me anything to participate? The will be no costs incurred by you for participating in this study
I have read, understood, and had the opportunity to ask questions regarding this consent form. I fully understand the nature and character of my involvement in this research program as a participant and the potential risks. Should I be selected, I agree to participate in this study on a voluntary basis.

____________________________________________ ________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part Date

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above

____________________________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the Date
participant above and obtained consent

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above

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Appendix B

Signed Informed Consent Document For Teachers
Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Paul Bottome Student Researcher, Chris Unger Principal Investigator
Teaching Troubled Teens: A Qualitative Study of Educating Students with Emotional and Behavioral disorders in Private Special Education Schools

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
You are invited to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You are being asked to participate in this study because of your knowledge surrounding the education of students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD).

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this research is to determine what effect private special education schools that specialize in working with students with EBD have on their students’ education.

What will I be asked to do?
You will be asked to participate in an hour-long focus group with a possible follow up interview if needed.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
The focus group will take place at the school and will take approximately one hour. If needed, the follow up interview will be in the same location and will last approximately one hour.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There is very little foreseeable risk or discomfort to you.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may help other schools like yours develop a best practices approach toward helping this challenging population.

Who will see the information about me?
Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way. Data from the interview will be transcribed by foxtranscribe.com and will be maintained in a
password secured database and will be destroyed at the completion of the study. Audio recordings and any hardcopies of transcripts will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and will also be destroyed at the completion of the study.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to see this information.

If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?
Participation in this study is voluntary and if you choose not to participate you do not have to sign this form.

What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?
There are no foreseeable risks involved in being a participant in this study.

Can I stop my participation in this study?
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
Paul Bottome
Bottome.p@husky.neu.edu
Cell #401-323-6784

Christopher Unger, Ed. D.
c.unger@neu.edu
Cell # 857-272-8941

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?
You will be given a $10 gift card to a local coffee shop at the completion of the interviews

Will it cost me anything to participate?
The will be no costs incurred by you for participating in this study
I have read, understood, and had the opportunity to ask questions regarding this consent form. I fully understand the nature and character of my involvement in this research program as a participant and the potential risks. Should I be selected, I agree to participate in this study on a voluntary basis.

____________________________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part Date

________________________
Printed name of person above

___________________________________________ __________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the Date participant above and obtained consent

________________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix C

Signed Informed Consent Document For Students

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Paul Bottome Student Researcher, Chris Unger Principal Investigator
Teaching Troubled Teens: A Qualitative Study of Educating Students with Emotional and Behavioral disorders in Private Special Education Schools

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Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You are being asked to participate in this study because of your experience in school.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this research is to determine what effect private special education schools that specialize in working with students with EBD have on their students’ education.

What will I be asked to do?
You will be asked to participate in a focus group with a possible follow up interview if needed.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
The focus group will take place at the school and will take approximately one hour. If needed, the follow up interview will be in the same location and will last approximately one hour.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There is very little foreseeable risk or discomfort to you.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may help other schools like yours develop a best practices approach toward helping its students.

Who will see the information about me?
Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any
way. Data from the interview will be transcribed by foxtranscribe.com and will be maintained in a password secured database and will be destroyed at the completion of the study. Audio recordings and any hardcopies of transcripts will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and will also be destroyed at the completion of the study.

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**If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?**
Participation in this study is voluntary and if you choose not to participate you do not have to sign this form.

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**
There are no foreseeable risks involved in being a participant in this study.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**
Paul Bottome
Bottome.p@husky.neu.edu

Cell #401-323-6784

Christopher Unger, Ed. D.
c.unger@neu.edu
Cell # 857-272-8941

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**
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**Will I be paid for my participation?**
You will be given a $10 gift card to a local coffee shop at the completion of the interviews.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**
The will be no costs incurred by you for participating in this study.
I have read, understood, and had the opportunity to ask questions regarding this consent form. I fully understand the nature and character of my involvement in this research program as a participant and the potential risks. Should I be selected, I agree to participate in this study on a voluntary basis.

____________________________________________ ________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part Date

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above

____________________________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the Date
participant above and obtained consent

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix D

Dear XXX

I am currently enrolled in a doctoral program at Northeastern University and am in the process of completing the dissertation stage of the program. Prior to my current position of Educational Specialist for the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education I was a teacher at several different schools that specialize in working with students who have Emotional and Behavioral Disorders. This experience developed my desire to conduct research on the effectiveness of private special education schools that specialize in working with students who have been diagnosed with an emotional and behavioral disorder. Your program has a reputation of helping these students succeed in school.

Through the qualitative case study method approach, I will investigate the role played by your school through the perspectives of teachers and school administrators. Staff perceptions of the school and determining what factors are most successful when helping students transform their behavior and become more invested in their education will provide the data for this study. The research process will involve designing questions and procedures, collecting data at your school, and developing general themes inducted by the analysis of data. Through the use of a comparative study model, interviews will be conducted with administrators at several different schools. Additionally, I would like permission to contact teachers at your school via email and ask that they complete an online survey. This will lead to the identification of specific philosophies and strategies that have been most successful when helping this very challenging group of students.

I believe this study will serve to benefit schools who are working with students with emotional and behavioral disorders and help them see what strategies other schools are using that have been successful.

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact me directly at (401) 323-6784 or via e-mail at bottome.p@husky.neu.edu or the chairperson of my committee, Dr. Christopher Unger at Northeastern University, at c.unger@neu.edu or by phone at (617) 909-1360. Thank you in advance for your time. I look forward to hearing from you regarding this request for permission.

Sincerely,

Paul Bottome

Doctoral Candidate, College of Professional Studies

Northeastern University, Boston, MA
Appendix E

Interview Protocol for School Administrators

1. What is your current role at your school?

2. What is the school’s stated mission?

3. What are the driving philosophies behind the implementation of that mission?

4. When a new student is admitted what strategies are used to integrate him/her into the program?

5. What is the typical progression for a new student as they acclimate to school?
   a. To what extent do the school’s policies help foster that progression?
   b. What are some elements of school that hamper that progression?

6. Do students feel as though they are part of the school community?

7. Is there a noticeable change in students’ behavior after they have been here for a while?
   a. How long does that typically take?
   b. Are there protocols that help foster a change in behavior?

8. What are the most successful aspects of your program that encourage student persistence in school?

9. How are students made to feel welcome at school?

10. Is there a noticeable difference between the behavior of new students and that of students who have been here for a while?
   a. What do you attribute that to?
11. Do many students drop out or fail to succeed at your school?

   a. To what do you attribute their failure?

12. Is your school meeting its mission, goals, and objectives?
Appendix F

Guiding Questions and Topics for the Focus Group

What are the behavior management philosophies of the school?

What strategies does the school use to integrate a student into the program?

Once enrolled what structures and strategies does the school employ to help students change their behavior?

What structures and strategies do you feel are the most effective at helping students change their behavior?

What structures and strategies are the least effective at helping students change their behavior?

In cases where the school has had a great impact on students’ behavior what do you feel has made the greatest difference for the students?

In cases where the school has not been effective what do you think could have been done differently?
Topics for Discussion

How much importance is placed on helping students graduate?

How much importance is placed on helping students overcome their academic difficulties?

How much importance is placed on helping students overcome their behavioral difficulties?

How important is it for the school to emphasize the need for students to change their behavior?

How much importance is placed on helping students develop strong relationships with members of the school staff?

The strategies used by the school are effective in helping students with emotional and behavioral disorders overcome their academic difficulties.

The strategies used by the school to manage behaviors are consistently implemented by all staff members.

The strategies used by the school are effective in helping students control their behavioral outbursts.

The strategies used by the school are effective in helping students graduate.

The school creates a welcoming environment for its students.

The staff members at the school treat students with respect.

The school works to develop a strong sense of community among students and staff members.

The school works to help students realize the need to change their behavior.

The school is able to provide an environment where students feel the desire to change their behavior.

The students develop strong connections to other students at school.

How much importance is placed on helping students to develop strong peer relationships at school in order to improve their chances of success?

How much importance is placed on having teachers take personal responsibility for the success of their students?

How important does the school feel it is for students to embrace the need for change in order for them to be successful at school?

How much importance is placed on ensuring that students feel like they are part of the school community?

How much importance is placed on fostering students’ ability to relate to one another?
Appendix F

Recruiting Permission Letter

Dear

I am currently enrolled in a doctoral program at Northeastern University and am in the process of completing the dissertation stage of the program. Prior to my current position of Educational Specialist for the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education I was a teacher at several different schools that specialize in working with students who have Emotional and Behavioral Disorders. This experience developed my desire to conduct research on the effectiveness of private special education schools that specialize in working with students who have been diagnosed with an emotional and behavioral disorder. Your program has a reputation of helping these students succeed in school.

I am requesting permission to contact students over the age of 18 and teachers in your program to ask them to participate in a focus group with their peers. The focus group will seek to illicit the students’ and separately the teachers’ perspective in regards to what strategies and structures are most successful in helping students with emotional and behavioral disorders. The focus group will take 45-60 minutes to complete. All participants will remain anonymous and the contact information that you provide will be kept confidential. Contact information, notes and recordings of the focus group will be deleted at the completion of the study.

____________________________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part Date

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above

____________________________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the Date
participant above and obtained consent

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix G

Phone Script

Hello may I speak to (name of director)

Hi Ms/Mr._______

My name is Paul Bottome. I am following up on an email that I sent two weeks ago.

I am currently enrolled in a doctoral program at Northeastern University and am in the process of completing the dissertation stage of the program. I’m calling you today because your program has a reputation of helping students who have been diagnosed with an emotional and behavioral disorder succeed in school.

I would like to investigate the role played by your school through the perspectives of teachers, students and school administrators.

The research will involve reviewing school records to determine outcomes for students who have recently attended your school and interviewing you in order to obtain your thoughts and ideas about how to best educate students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Additionally, I would like permission to contact teachers and students over 18 at your school to see if they would be interested in participating in a focus group. This will lead to the identification of specific philosophies and strategies that have been most successful when helping this very challenging group of students.

I believe this study will serve to benefit schools who are working with students with emotional and behavioral disorders and help them see what strategies other schools are using that have been successful.

(If interested) I will send you copies of the permission letter and consent form that I will need to have signed before beginning my research.
Thank you for taking some time to speak with me.