Perceptions of School by Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders: A Qualitative Investigation of School Connectedness within a Substantially Separate Classroom

by

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Dedication

To my Grandfather, an educator and inspiration. The man who has always been there for me, and made sure I never lost my way.

To my Mother and Aunt, the two strongest women I know, my best friends.

To my Sister, through all of our ups and downs, our bond never waivered. And of course, I thank you for always wanting to be a nurse.
Abstract

This interpretive phenomenological analysis investigated the perceptions of school by students with emotional and/or behavioral disabilities (EBD) educated in a substantially separate classroom setting, and whether or not they reported connections to their teachers, peers, and school community. Nussbaum’s Capability theory and Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model informed the research, aiming to answer the following research question: What are the experiences of middle school students with emotional and/or behavioral disabilities who are educated in one substantially separate classroom? Data collection included semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, along with a review of student records in order to understand the shared school experiences of the specific population of students. The goal of the data analysis was to identify themes that shed light on the students’ sense of belonging within this school community.

Key Words: Emotional and/or Behavioral Disorder (EBD), School Connectedness, Inclusion
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Chapter I: Introduction

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) are accountable for providing equal access to education for all students regardless of demographics. Despite protective laws, many special education students face the presumption by educators, policymakers and even parents that students with special learning needs need to be taught outside of the regular education setting. Students with special learning needs also face stigmatization and many programs address failure rather than prevention (Polat, 2011). Though there has been a significant shift in education towards inclusion, the integration of students with disabilities into general education classes, over the past 30 years, it has been a longstanding battle; a fight for resources and unhurried access for equal access to education for all (Polat, 2011).

Statement of the Problem

Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Orsati and Cosier (2011) state that approximately 23% of children with disabilities in the United States are educated in substantially separate educational settings. According to Maggin (2011), “Students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) are the most likely of all children with disabilities to be segregated from the general population” (p. 84). According to the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) (2004) an “emotional and behavioral disorder is an emotional disability characterized by the following:

(i) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and/or teachers. For preschool-age children, this would include other care providers.

(ii) An inability to learn which cannot be adequately explained by intellectual, sensory or health factors.
(iii) A consistent or chronic inappropriate type of behavior or feelings under normal conditions.

(iv) A displayed pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.

(v) A displayed tendency to develop physical symptoms, pains or unreasonable fears associated with personal or school problems. (34 C.F.R. § 300.8(c)(4)(i)(A-E))

Cooper (2004) posits that unlike any other groups of students with identified special needs, students with EBD continue to be as likely to be placed in substantially separate settings as they were 30 years ago. In addition, only 40% of students with EBD will graduate from high school (Thurlow, Sinclair, & Johnson, 2002). Students with EBD are three times as likely as other students to be arrested before graduating, and students with EBD are two times as likely as other students with disabilities to live in a correctional facility, drug treatment center, or on the street after leaving school (Thurlow et al., 2002).

Despite the statistics that students with EBD are the most likely of all students with disabilities to be placed in a substantially separate classroom (Maggin, 2011), there is little evidence to suggest that these students make significant academic, emotional, or social progress, as compared to their peers in the general education/inclusive setting. Furthermore, findings from Panacek and Dunlap (2003) found that children with EBD have minimal opportunities to engage in integrated school activities and their educational and social networks consist mainly of special education students and staff. As a result, EBD students in self-contained classrooms may have minimal interactions with peers, feel disconnected from their school environment, and do not make significant social progress.

Additional research supports the claim that students’ perceptions of school may positively or negatively affect their school experience. For example, students’ relationships with
teachers and peers influence their sense of belonging to the school community, their wellbeing, and their academic success (Cameron, 2006). Students who feel connected to their school, their peers, and their teachers are also less likely to dropout (Fall & Roberts, 2012). Furthermore, research shows that at-risk students’ relationships within the school predict disruptive behavior and social and emotional adjustment (Silver, Measelle, Armstrong, & Essex, 2005). Students characterized as having an emotional and/or mental disability often perceive themselves as being treated differently and this treatment involves, “feeling that educators underestimate their abilities, isolate them from others, unfairly blame or scrutinize them, avoid, dislike, or fear them” (Moses, 2010, p. 992).

**Purpose and Significance of the Study**

The issue of educating students with EBD in substantially separate classrooms is importance because students with EBD in substantially separate classrooms report feelings of isolation and a disconnect from school (Moses, 2010). Academic reports show a decline in academic progress as compared to typical peers (Lane, 2005). Longitudinal studies show a rise in dropout and incarceration rates among EBD students, along with increased drug and alcohol addiction (Thurlow et al., 2002). These statistics represent a population of students who are in crisis, who need their voices heard, and who lack access to opportunities for an equal and inclusive education.

Identifying and then educating students with special needs in a substantially separate placement allows the interests of those in power to be enhanced and perpetuated by placing this population of students at a predetermined disadvantage (Brantlinger, 1997). Weis and Fine (2012) speak to the “production and reproduction” (p. 176) of privilege. As segregation in education becomes common practice and the testing industry dominates public schools,
inequality gaps are increasing. As these inequality gaps swell, the rich get richer, the poor get poorer, and the vicious cycle of institutionalized oppression continues. According to Lorde (2007), “In a society where the good is defined in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, there must always be some group of people, who, through systemized oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the place of the dehumanized inferior” (p. 114). The exclusion of students with special learning, social, and/or emotional needs within the public school setting perpetuates inequalities and systemized oppression. Public schools, through substantially separate programs, purposefully exclude students, denying them an equal access to education, a basic human right. This research set forth to present Emotional/Behavioral (EB) students’ perceptions of school, and determine if placing these students in a classroom isolated from their peers for all or part of the day perpetuated a feeling of isolation from their school community.

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological analysis was to examine middle school students with emotional and/or behavioral disabilities perceptions of their connectedness to school. Adolescent isolation is particularly significant in the school environment. According to Schulz and Rubel (2011), there are four dimensions to describe the alienation of youth in schools: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, and social estrangement. Students who describe themselves as outcasts from school “may be ill-prepared for future responsibilities” (Schulz and Rubel, 2011, p. 286), and may experience behaviors that include hostility, passivity, withdrawal, suspensions, expulsions, non-completion, violence, and suicidal ideation. Paired with these dimensions, are the statistics regarding students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. According to Thurlow et al. (2002), students with EBD are three times as likely as other students to be arrested before leaving school, and are two times as likely as other students with disabilities to live in a correctional facility, drug treatment center, or on the street after
leaving school. According to Wilson (2014), the United States houses 25% of the world’s prisoners, the United States’ incarceration rates have quadrupled since the 1980’s, and more than half of the prisoners who enter the criminal justice system do not hold high school diplomas. Nongraduates are more likely to be unemployed, to receive public assistance, to suffer from poor health, and engage in criminal behavior (Muennig, 2007). There is a connection between school connectedness, exclusion due to disability, and the school-to-prison pipeline (Wilson, 2014) that cannot be ignored. The perpetuation of programs that do not promote a students’ connection to school, coupled with exclusionary practices that address failure rather than proactive strategies that promote success, ensure that school systems are contributing to the continued failure and incarceration of at-risk youth.

There is little research to support that substantially separate programs benefit students with EBD. As previously stated, there is research that shows little to no academic, behavioral, or social emotional growth of students in a substantially separate classroom setting. The unfounded benefit of substantially separate education, coupled with the perpetuation of negative stereotypes placed upon students with special learning and behavioral needs, should be reason enough to ensure these students are afforded equal educative experiences as their peers and a school experience that promotes inclusion.

**Research Question**

This interpretive phenomenological analysis used a qualitative approach to investigate the perceptions of school and their school connectedness by students with EBD educated for all or some of their education in a substantially separate classroom.

1. What are the experiences of middle school students with emotional and behavioral disabilities who are educated in a substantially separate classroom?
Positionality

There are challenges scholarly researchers face when approaching a problem of practice. Jupp and Slattery (2010) claim, the structure of school represents the dominant class and “reflects the ideologies favored by dominant groups” (p. 202). They also argue that, “deficit understandings in schools re-articulate historical difference and inequality as ‘problems’ of genetics, culture, neighborhood, and family” (Jupp & Slattery, 2010, p. 204). As a white, middle-class female working in a middle to lower class community, it is important, when taking an inclusive approach (Briscoe, 2005) to this research, to understand that this is a specific, more sensitive population of students, with very specific needs, who come from a variety of backgrounds. It is also important to consider that there are many different perspectives in regards to special education and inclusion, and a variety of philosophical beliefs. Teachers, parents, and students each have their own background experiences that determine their own beliefs. As such, Briscoe (2005) proposes that it is important for researchers “to other in ways that not only mutually respect each other, but confirm each other in their otherness” (p. 34).

When participating in scholarly discourse about special education and inclusion, the researcher must not only take the standpoint of an administrator in a middle school, but must also take into consideration the perspectives of teachers, parents, and students from a variety of experiences and backgrounds.

In addition, this researcher’s experience as a student, teacher, and administrator in a diverse group of educational settings served her well in her research. Though the researcher was not able to relate to all groups, such as those who come from a low socioeconomic background, or, more specifically, those with an emotional and/or behavioral disability, it was imperative to take an inclusive approach to research, representing a diverse group of learners from an
objective, research-based perspective. This researcher continues to stand to improve the practices of substantially separate programming only to better the academic achievement and educational experience of students with emotional and behavioral needs.

**Definitions**

This research discusses specific terminology as it relates to the laws and regulations regarding special education in Massachusetts, specifically under Massachusetts General Law, 603 CMR 28. Selected terms are defined in Table 1.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American with Disabilities Act (ADA)</td>
<td>The American with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in employment, transportation, public accommodation, communications, and governmental activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Impairment</td>
<td>The student exhibits one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects educational performance: an inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors; an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers; inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances; a general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; or a tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE)</td>
<td>An educational right of children with disabilities in the United States that is guaranteed by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)</td>
<td>The law that outlines rights and regulations for students with disabilities in the U.S. who require special education. Under the IDEA, all children with disabilities are entitled to a free and appropriate education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>Inclusion is a term that expresses commitment to educate each child, to the maximum extent appropriate, in the school and classroom he or she would otherwise attend. It involves bringing the support services to the child (rather than moving the child to the services) and requires only that the child will benefit from being in the class (rather than having to keep up with the other students).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)</td>
<td>The educational placement that assures that, to the maximum extent appropriate, students with disabilities, including students in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with students who are not disabled, and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of students with disabilities from the general education environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the student's disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-of-district Program</td>
<td>Out-of-district program shall mean a special education program located in a building or facility outside of the general education environment that provides educational services primarily to students with disabilities. Such program may be operated by a private organization or individual, a public school district, or a collaborative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School-to-Prison Pipeline</td>
<td>The causal link between educational exclusion and criminalization of youth is called the school-to-prison pipeline.</td>
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Substantially Separate Classroom
Those programs that are located in a public school classroom or facility that serves primarily or solely children with disabilities. Substantially separate programs shall adhere to the following standards:
1. Substantially separate programs shall be programs in which more than 50% of the children have disabilities.
2. Substantially separate programs operated by public schools shall limit class sizes to nine students with one teacher and one aide.

Team
The special education team shall mean a group of persons, meeting participant requirements of federal special education law who, together, discuss evaluation results, determine eligibility, develop or modify an IEP, or determine placement.

Paper Contents and Organization
The remaining sections of this paper will provide the foundations for the research, and the description of the research findings. First, is an explanation of Nussbaum’s capability theory and Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model, the theoretical frameworks that guided this study. Next, the literature review provides a summary of the research regarding students with EBD that has been completed thus far. Following the literature review is the outline of the research design, and the specific research methods utilized for this study. It also includes a description of the participants, and how they were protected throughout the study. This paper concludes with the presentation of the research findings, as well as the significance of and limitations to the study.

Theoretical Frameworks
This study used Nussbaum’s (2006) capability theory to place the research within the context of social justice, in support of the idea that students with EBD who receive an education in a substantially separate classroom are being denied access to an education equal to their peers due to perceptions of isolation and a lack of school connectedness. In addition, the study used Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model to highlight the importance of school connectedness
to a student’s academic, behavioral, and social success. Allen and Bowles (2012) research found, “Individuals who report a sense of belonging to groups and networks are likely to exhibit positive psychological functioning across a range of variables including self-esteem, self-efficacy, and life satisfaction” (p. 100). Both theories speak to the inclusion of all students in order to promote basic life functions and access, school connectedness, and academic, social, and emotional success.

**Capability theory.** Nussbaum’s (2006) capability theory, which emerged from Amartya Sen’s capability approach, developed in the early 1980’s. Nussbaum’s theory is named as one of the few social justice theories that place topics of special education and people with disabilities within the social justice debate. Nussbaum’s capability approach is philosophical and focuses on human development and the threshold for living. She characterizes ten universal central entitlements (Table 2), which she argues, define human dignity as a bare minimum. These central entitlements are: life, bodily health, bodily integrity, using one’s senses, imagination and thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, other species, play, and control over one’s environment (2006).
<table>
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<th>Table 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nussbaum’s Ten Central Entitlements</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Life</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dying prematurely, or before one’s life is so reduced as to not be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>worth living</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bodily health</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Bodily integrity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being able to move freely from place to place; to be secured against</td>
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<tr>
<td>violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of reproduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Using one’s senses, imagination, and thought</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason—and to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>do these things in a &quot;truly human&quot; way, a way informed and cultivated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>by an adequate education, including, but by no means limited to,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training. Being able to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>producing works and events of one's own choice, religious, literary,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>musical, and so forth. Being able to use one's mind in ways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>political and artistic speech, and freedom of religious exercise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being able to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid non-beneficial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to love those who love and care for us, to grieve at their absence;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in general, to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude, and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>justified anger. Not having one's emotional development blighted by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fear and anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Practical reason</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reflection about the planning of one's life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Affiliation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>concern for other humans, to engage in various forms of social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interaction; to be able to imagine the situation</td>
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Nussbaum (2006) posits that the inclusion of disabled people is a public responsibility that enables them to function at their maximum capability. She argues, “It would be progress if we could acknowledge that there is no such thing as ‘the normal child’: instead, there are children with varying capabilities and impediments, all of whom need individualized attention as their capabilities develop” (p. 210). Nussbaum’s theory is critical to positioning students with disabilities within the social justice debate, as she contends that it is the responsibility of public education to empower disadvantaged people and supply them with life’s central entitlements.

Nussbaum’s theory is widely used in feminist, economic, environmental, political, international, and educational topics, having been cited by Des Gasper, Ingrid Robeyns, and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Other species</th>
<th>Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Play</td>
<td>Being able to laugh, play and enjoy recreational activities</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| Control over one’s environment | **Political.** Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the right of political participation, protections of free speech and association.  
**Material.** Being able to hold property (both land and movable goods), and having property rights on an equal basis with others; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. In work, being able to work as a human, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers |

| of another. Having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. This entails provisions of non-discrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, religion, national origin and species |
Diego Lanzi. For example, much of the work of Des Gasper relies heavily on the seminal work of Nussbaum and Sen. His work contributes to the development of public policy and socio-economic development, with a focus on improving the abilities of all persons to lead a valuable life (Frediani, Boni, & Gasper, 2014) and human security as it pertains to global public health (Gasper, 2013). Robeyns (2003) uses the capability approach to address feminist concerns and questions, mainly gender inequality. Lanzi (2007) posits that the capability approach connects education with human freedom, and states that “education has to provide not only job orientated competencies and skills, but also life-skills and life-options in terms of being able to know, to act and to live together in a social environment” (p. 426). The process of providing inclusive opportunities for all students requires an in-depth analysis of key stakeholders and their views on the barriers and obstacles, to educational access and achievement, as well as the ways these barriers can be eliminated (Polat, 2011).

**Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model.** Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model “provides the most comprehensive theoretical construct to date with which to investigate belonging in an organizational setting such as a school” (Allen & Bowles, 2012, p. 107). Bronfenbrenner’s model places children at the center of their environment and discusses the influence that each layer of the environment has on a child’s development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner identifies four layers of influence, the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem (Figure 1).
In schools, the microsystem is the students’ social networks, friends, teachers and peers. The mesosystem represents the school management systems and culture. The exosystem is how the broader community interacts with the school, and the macrosystem encompasses school politics and law.

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model (1979) is important to research on substantially separate education due to the emphasis it places on a child’s sense of belonging to his or her environment. Individuals who report a sense of belonging are also more likely to report positive satisfaction with life (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009). In addition, isolation has been associated with reports of emotional distress, psycho-socio disturbance, suicide and mental
illness (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Sanchez, Colon, and Esparaza (2005) found that a sense of belonging, in school specifically, meaningfully projected academic outcomes, motivation, effort, low absenteeism, and an overall more positive attitude towards school and learning.

Researchers have used Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) model to address educational topics such as language acquisition, school connectedness, and poverty. This model is frequently referenced in this type of research and has been cited by authors such as Jonathan Tudge and Alexandra Loukas. For example, Elliott and Tudge (2012) use Bronfenbrenner’s model to examine student motivation and engagement and how multiple levels of the context, most importantly school, influence them. Loukas, Ripperger-Suhler, and Herrera (2012) utilize Bronfenbrenner’s model to recognize the impact a student’s immediate environment has on their feelings of school connectedness, and the link between depressive symptoms and school connectedness.

**Conclusion.** Nussbaum’s (2006) capability theory and Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model are inherently connected; educators and policymakers have an obligation to provide all students, regardless of disability, a free and appropriate education without doing harm. To do so, educators and policymakers must consider the psychological, academic, social and behavioral benefits of school connectedness and avoid attaching stigma to an already isolated population of students.

**Summary**

Public education is a basic human right, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, gender, and/or disability (Nussbaum, 2006). By continuing to place students with special needs in substantially separate learning environments, educators may be denying students an equal access to education, and perpetuating stereotypes that these students are unable to function in the mainstream learning environment. There is little research to suggest that students benefit from a
separate learning environment. As educators and policy makers continue to allow students to be placed in non-inclusive settings, there will be a cost to the students who continue to be paced there. As stated by Brantlinger (1997), “If scholars fail to address deep cultural and structural causes of inequality, they are unlikely to have a constructive impact on the democratic ends that could be achieved through schooling” (p. 449).
Chapter II: Literature Review

This literature review begins with a discussion of special education law and regulation with a specific focus on students who are educated in a substantially separate classroom, a classroom composed solely of students with disabilities outside of the regular education classroom setting, for students with emotional and/or behavioral disabilities.

Lane (2005) proposes, “Students with emotional behavior disorders commonly engage in behaviors (e.g., verbal and physical aggression; social skills acquisition and performance deficits) that negatively influence both their ability to successfully negotiate peer and adult relationships and their educational experience” (p. 44). The introduction on special education law and regulation leads into a discussion of the research on the disadvantages of educating students with EBD in a substantially separate classroom, and includes a discussion of whether are not providing students an education in a substantially separate classroom is a violation of their basic human rights. This leads into a discussion on the importance of school perceptions and connectedness, supported by research that shows students who feel connected to their school achieve high levels of academic success, are less likely to drop out, and report overall feelings of satisfaction when it comes to school (Allen & Bowles, 2013; Cook 2001; Fall & Roberts, 2012). The review then includes a discussion of social emotional learning, and how schools can incorporate innovate strategies into their school day to address the social and emotional needs of all students. Finally, this review of the literature looks at counterarguments to inclusion and concludes with a discussion of the implications for practice and future research, and the need to address a specific gap in the literature.
Special Education Law and Regulation

Laws and regulations such as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 and the 2004’s Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) have been put into place in order to ensure that all students are provided with a Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE). In accordance with IDEA (2004), schools must place students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE) meaning:

To the maximum extent appropriate, school districts must educate students with disabilities in the regular classroom with appropriate aids and supports… Under LRE, the general education classroom is the first place to be considered for educating a student with a disability before more restricted options are considered (IDEA, 2004).

It is the responsibility of the school district and special education Team to determine the specific program setting in which special education services will be provided (MGL 603. CMR 28:00). When considering programming for students with EBD, the Team must first consider an in-district placement, such as a general education setting or a substantially separate setting within the public school setting. If the needs of the student and the services identified by the Team are considered complex, the Team may consider an out-of-district placement for the student, however, an out of district placement is considered the most restrictive environment for a student with special needs (MGL 603. CMR 28:00).

In her seminal article, Will (1986) identified that approximately 10% of school-aged children in the United States are eligible for special education services. According to IDEA (2004), the number of school-aged children accessing special education services has risen to over 30%. According to Koller and Bertel (2006), approximately 20% of adolescent’s have a diagnosable mental health disorder. In addition, one in ten youth in the United States experience
a mental health disorder severe enough to limit daily functioning in their school and community (Chandra & Minkovitz, 2006). It is also important to note that boys show a greater prevalence of behavior problems than girls, and are four times more likely to be suspended or expelled from school than girls (Cooper, Masi, & Vick, 2009). These noteworthy statistics call for increased attention to how students with special needs, especially emotional and behavioral needs, access education in public schools.

Causton-Theoharis et al. (2011) state that approximately 23% of children with disabilities in the United States are educated in substantially separate educational settings. According to Maggin (2011), “Students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) are the most likely of all children with disabilities to be segregated from the general population” (p. 84). Furthermore, Cooper (2004) posits, unlike other groups of students with identified special needs, students with EBD are still as likely to be placed in substantially separate settings as they were 30 years ago. In addition, only 40% of students with EBD will graduate from high school (Thurlow et al., 2002). Students with EBD are three times as likely as other students to be arrested before leaving school, and students with EBD are two times as likely as other students with disabilities to live in a correctional facility, drug treatment center, or on the street after leaving school (Thurlow et al., 2002).

**Substantially Separate Programming**

According to Panacek and Dunlap (2003), students with emotional and/or behavioral needs may, even more so than their typical peers, require access to “normal” social interactions and positive social experiences. However, schools often place students with emotional and behavioral needs in substantially separate classrooms, restricting access to typical social relationships and friendships. Panacek and Dunlap (2003) also found that students with EBD
“had little opportunity to engage in integrated school activities and their social networks in
school were dominated by children and adults affiliated with special education” (p. 333). This
study showed that only 8% of the students studied reported opportunities to engage in social
interactions, two of the students reported having no opportunities for social interaction at all, and
the school social networks of the students in the EBD group were far smaller than those of the
typical group (Panacek & Dunlap, 2003). Furthermore, the students in the EBD group reported
having typical peer relationships outside of school. This suggests that their segregated school
placement is the largest contributing factor to the diversity of their social network, not their
emotional and behavioral challenges (Panacek & Dunlap, 2003). Panacek and Dunlap go on to
state, “While the needs of children with EBD are complex and multidimensional, their social
needs should undoubtedly be one of the highest priorities” (p. 346). Educators, administrators,
and parents must exhibit special consideration and caution when considering whether a self-
contained classroom is an appropriate placement for students with EBD. A substantially separate
classroom setting may inhibit students’ abilities to interact with typical peers, and may contribute
to increased feelings of isolation from their school community.

Lane (2005) found that there is no significant progress in academics or behavior of the
students with emotional or behavioral disorders educated in a self-contained classroom. In fact,
her study showed a significant decrease in written language, and a majority of the students do not
make grade level progress (Lane, 2005). In light of the decreased behavioral, social and
academic benefits of placing students in substantially separate classrooms, Lane (2005) calls for
ongoing placement, evaluation, and special attention to academic instruction, and highlights the
benefit of educating students in the least restrictive environment.
Further research conducted by Lane, Barton-Arwood, Nelson and Wehby (2008) on the academic, social and behavioral performance of students with EBD educated in a substantially separate classroom, found the academic scores for these students were well below the 25th percentile in reading, math and written expression. The research also cited below average social skills and school adjustment, along with above average problem behaviors and absenteeism. Academic research in the area of special education repeatedly contradicts the notion that placing students with EBD in self-contained classrooms will raise their academic or social abilities. Moreover, Mattison and Blader (2013) posit that academic factors for students with EBD are more significantly related to academic achievement and GPA than their emotional and/or behavioral problems. Their findings highlight the importance of a rigorous academic environment where the focus on academics is equally, if not more, focused on than behavioral interventions.

Causton-Theoharis et al. (2011) counter argue four rationales for self-contained learning environments: the need for community, the need for limited distractions, specialized instruction, and positive behavioral supports. The data from their research suggests that, in the six self-contained classrooms they studied, there was a lack of focus on community building, severe behavioral distractions were heightened, significant portions of the school day were based on nonacademic tasks, and there did not seem to be a focus on structure, schedule, positive behavior interventions, or appropriate responses to inappropriate behavior. Ultimately, Causton-Theoharis et al. (2011) stated, “We found it difficult to argue for fixing or improving these self-contained settings because everything we observed that could have been considered educational could have been transported to inclusive settings without compromising the education these students were receiving” (p. 73). Ultimately, the behavioral structures that educators should implement in
substantially separate classrooms can be implemented in a less restrictive environment with the necessary supports and resources. In addition, the academic rigor and expectations of a mainstream, inclusive classroom will offer students with EBD the opportunity to access the same curricular as their peers.

Maggin (2011) conducted a study comparing the instructional practices and strategies used by general education teachers and self-contained teachers to promote academic and social progress for students with behavior difficulties. Results of this study showed that “academic performance diminishes with regard to the classroom’s restrictiveness” (Maggin, 2011, p. 94). Students in self-contained classrooms were less academically capable than their general education peers and emitted more disruptive behaviors. Teachers in self-contained classrooms were less likely to utilize effective instructional strategies and elicit active involvement from students (Maggin, 2011, p. 96). Similar to the work of Causton-Theoharis et al. (2011) and Mattison and Blader (2013), Maggin (2011) found little evidence to support that students with EBD educated in substantially separate classrooms demonstrated behavioral or academic growth, or had access to specialized instructional practices designed to engage students in their learning.

The inclusion of students with EBD has consistently reported to be problematic for teachers (Cook, 2001). McFarlane and Marks-Woolfson (2013), using the theory of planned behavior (TPB), found that teachers who had more positive beliefs about student behavior and academic success and higher perceived levels of behavioral control had a “higher level of behavioral intention to engage in includes practices in working with children with EBD” (p. 51). The implications of this study demonstrate the importance of teacher education and development concerning inclusion practices, and the specific supports that administrators and policymakers
need to put into place in order to ensure that students with EBD can achieve academic, social, and behavioral success in the least restrictive environment.

Increasing evidence supports a pattern of negative academic and social outcomes from educating students with EBD in substantially separate classroom settings. It is, therefore, crucial to offer students with emotional behavioral needs the tools and behavioral supports they need to access an academically rigorous curriculum, along with inclusive experiences as early and as frequently as possible, to enhance their chances of joining the mainstream population. In addition, it is necessary for leaders and policy makers to be mindful of the needs of teachers who work with this population of students.

**School Perceptions, Connectedness, and Academic Success**

Additional research supports the claim that students’ perceptions of school may positively and/or negatively affect their school experience. According to Allen and Bowles (2012), “Belonging to groups, whether they are school, family, community or otherwise, positively affects a number of key factors that contribute to our overall health and wellbeing” (p. 108). Individuals who report a sense of belonging to these groups are more likely to exhibit higher levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and life satisfaction (Allen & Bowles, 2012). However, individuals who feel isolated from social groups report higher levels of loneliness, emotional distress, depression, and suicidal ideations (Hagerty, Williams, Coyne, & Early, 1996). It is, therefore, essential for schools to foster a student’s feelings of connectedness to their peers, teachers, and school community.

Students who feel connected to their school, their peers, and their teachers are less likely to dropout (Fall & Roberts, 2012). An analysis of the Educational Longitudinal Study found that perceptions of social context, control and identification with school, and students’ perceptions of
themselves, predict academic and behavioral engagement and, in turn, academic success (Fall & Roberts, 2012). Fall and Roberts (2012) also found four contextual factors linked to positive or negative student perceptions of school: parent and teacher support, control and identification with school, academic and behavioral engagement, and academic achievement. The researchers go on to state that, “when teachers show interest in students, praise their efforts, and contribute to community building within the school; they directly influence students’ perception of self and nurture students’ levels of school engagement” (Fall & Roberts, 2012, p. 795). In addition, students who feel they connect to their school are more likely to follow classroom rules, and students who believe they can control their educational experience are more likely to work hard, achieve higher scores, and are less likely to dropout.

Wilkinson-Lee, Zhang, Nuno, and Wilhelm (2011) examined the risk factors that may influence emotional distress during adolescence and found that emotional distress can hinder social, emotional, and academic development. Their research sought to examine if an adolescents connection to school, or lack thereof, can predict adolescent distress, as “developmental milestones occur within complex contextual relationships” (p. 227) often emerging in school settings. Their analysis revealed that students’ perceptions of school connectedness significantly lowered their self-reports of emotional distress, therefore contributing to the claim that students’ perceptions of their connectedness to school are an indicator of academic, behavioral, and social growth and success.

School connectedness, comprising of feelings of being respected, belonging, and comfort, may also be a key determinant of adolescent mental health (Millings, Buck, Montgomery, Spears, & Stallard, 2012). Millings et al. (2012) found that peer relationships and school connectedness are statistically predicting symptoms of low mood, which may lead to depression,
and suggest that schools should increase interventions to address school connectedness and foster positive peer relationships. Furthermore, research shows that at-risk students’ relationships within the school predict disruptive behavior and social and emotional adjustment (Silver, et al., 2005). Continuing to isolate students with EBD from their peers and positive social interactions may contribute to decreased feelings of academic and social success and schools must make it a priority to ensure a sense of belonging for all students.

Finally, a 2010 cross-sectional study of youths’ experiences with mental illness stigma found that students characterized as having an emotional or mental disability perceived themselves as being treated differently and this treatment involved, “feeling that educators underestimate their abilities, isolate them from others, unfairly blame or scrutinize them, avoid, dislike, or fear them” (Moses, 2010, p. 992). Aronson (2004) posits, “Stereotype threat and the response it elicits can play a powerful role in the relatively poor achievement of certain students” (p. 1) and educators must create cooperative classrooms and reconsider the nature of intelligence. Teachers who perceive that students with EBD will not be able to perform at the level of their peers perpetuate negative stereotypes, thus contributing to students’ feelings of inferiority and imminent failure. It is, therefore, necessary for educators to consider the stereotype that is placed upon students with EBD who are educated in a substantially separate classroom, and minimize these stereotypes by ensuring students feel included in and connected to their school.

Research suggests that students who feel supported at home and in school have higher levels of self-confidence, are more involved in school and achieve higher levels of success. However, these connections seem to be missing for students with EBD who are educated in a substantially separate classroom setting.
Inclusion versus Segregation

One specific barrier to the success of many special education students is the presumption by educators, policymakers and even parents that students with special learning needs need to be taught outside of the regular education setting. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization affirms that students with disabilities must have the opportunity to be educated in a mainstream setting (UNESCO, 1994) and, according to Stoutjesdijk, Scholte, and Swaab (2012), inclusion is a human rights concern and “these rights are contravened by segregating children with disabilities from the mainstream educational curriculum and practices” (p. 92). In addition, students with special learning needs face stigmatization while many programs address failure rather than prevention. Though there has been a significant shift in education towards inclusion, the integration of students with disabilities into general education classes has been a longstanding battle; a fight for resources and unhurried access for equal access to education for all. “Segregating children into ‘special needs’ and ‘mainstream’ schools prevents equal access to social and curricular opportunities and labels children” (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 2009).

The IDEA, as amended in 2004 “requires that children with disabilities be educated in the least restrictive environment appropriate to meet their unique needs.” IDEA considers that the least restrictive environment will begin with placement of students with special needs within the regular education classroom.

Polat (2011) posits that inclusion goes far beyond the presence of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. He argues that, “Inclusion involves the processes of changing values, attitudes, policies and practices within the school setting and beyond” (p. 50). Polat (2011) continues by arguing that inclusion of young people is not limited to those with
disabilities. “Inclusion is inclusion of all regardless of race, ethnicity, disability, gender, sexual orientation, language, socio-economic status, and any other aspect of an individual’s identity that might be perceived as different” (p. 51). The problem is global, not all students have equal access to education and educators and policymakers needs to place inclusion in education at the forefront of social justice conversations, as equal education is a basic human right.

“When institutions exist, they tend to be used” (Brantlinger, 1997, p. 435). If there is a specialized place to educate students with special needs, they will be put there. Brantlinger (1997) claims that labels like “at risk” and “mentally handicapped” allow middle class professionals to “study, intervene and gain employment” (p. 441). Identifying and then educating students with special needs in a substantially separate placement allows the interests of those in power to be enhanced and perpetuated (Brantlinger, 1997, p. 438). Weis and Fine (2012) speak to the “production and reproduction” (p. 176) of privilege. As segregation in education becomes common practice and the testing industry dominates public schools, inequality gaps are increasing. As these inequality gaps swell, the rich get richer, the poor get poorer, and the vicious cycle of institutionalized oppression continues. According to Lorde (2007), “In a society where the good is defined in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, there must always be some group of people, who, through systemized oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the place of the dehumanized inferior” (p. 114). The exclusion of students with special learning, social, and/or emotional needs within the public school setting perpetuates inequalities and systemized oppression. Public schools, through substantially separate programs, purposefully exclude students, denying them an equal access to education, a basic human right. Furthermore, there is little research to support that substantially separate programs benefit students. As discussed in the subsequent section, there is research that shows
little to no academic and/or behavioral growth of students in substantially separate classrooms. The unfounded benefit of substantially separate education, coupled with the perpetuation of negative stereotypes placed upon students with special learning needs should be reason enough to ensure these students are afforded equal educative experiences as their peers.

According to Brantlinger (1997), “Schools accomplish exclusion through such routine as special education. Thus education contributes to social hierarchies, advantage and poverty, and the negative and positive identities of groups and individuals. Schools not only produce unequal distributions of personal capita but the ideologies that legitimate inequality” (p. 441).

Public education is a basic human right, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, gender, and/or disability. By continuing to place students with special needs in substantially separate learning environments, students are being denied an equal access to education, while being stereotyped as unable to function in the mainstream learning environment. There is little research to suggest that students benefit from a separate learning environment, but rather, the opposite. As educators and policy makers continue to allow students to be placed in non-inclusive settings, what will be the cost to the students who are placed there? “If scholars fail to address deep cultural and structural causes of inequality, they are unlikely to have a constructive impact on the democratic ends that could be achieved through schooling” (Brantlinger, 1997, p. 449).

Social Emotional Learning

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is “the process through which children and adults develop skills, attitudes and values necessary to acquire social emotional competence” (Taylor & Larson, 1999, p. 331) meaning the ability to manage life tasks, control impulsive behavior, and effectively manage emotions (p. 331). Stress is an inevitable part of growing up, even more so in
students already identified with social and/or emotional challenges. Physical changes, multiple transitions, changing relationships among parents and peers, and the formation of a personal identity, alongside the increased societal and academic pressures, lead to high levels of perceived stress among adolescents (Foret, Scult, Wilcher, Chudnofsky, Malloy, Hasheminejad and Park, 2012, p. 325). Foret et al., (2012) study examined the viability and potential impact of a relaxation response (RR)-based curriculum integrated daily as part of a high school student’s day. The curriculum, which included “moral instruction, relaxation exercises, positive psychology, and cognitive restructuring” (p. 327), showed significant improvements in perceived stress, anxiety and health-promoting behaviors. “If stressors are present in the absence of proper coping, students are vulnerable to increasingly alarming negative outcomes. Stress is documented to contribute to the escalation of substance abuse, violence, depression and suicide” (Foret et al., 2012, p. 326). Students need to learn skills in order to deal with the high-levels of perceived stress they face on a daily basis. This study shows that a program that explicitly teaches coping mechanisms is both doable and effective.

Gueldner and Merrell (2011) advance, “The mental health needs of school-age youth continue to be a significant area of concern when considering the transaction between typical developmental stressors and the ability to cope effectively” (p. 1). Their research examined the Strong Kids program, a 12 lesson, skilled based SEL program that teaches resiliency, coping skills, social wellness, and future empowerment (p. 2). The purpose of their study was to evaluate whether or not students could explicitly be taught mental health skills and the effectiveness of the Strong Kids program. Overall, the students demonstrated gains in skills associated with health social and emotional behaviors, but there was not a significant reduction
in stress symptoms over time, though the study did not examine the effects of the program over time (p.19).

Rosenblatt and Elias (2008), cite a number of studies that show a decline in academic achievement from elementary to middle school, with students, on average, dropping one whole letter grade (p. 549). Rosenblatt and Elias implemented a case study to examine the efficacy of changing levels of a social-emotional learning intervention, Talking with TJ, finding that classrooms with high levels of intervention saw smaller decreases in grade point average (GPA) across the elementary to middle school transition.

Basic social emotional skills are necessary in order for learning to take place and “in the absence of adequate coping skills, the bulk of the child’s attention and resources will be directed towards responding to emotional stressors, at the expense of academic learning: (Rosenblatt & Elias, 2008, p. 536). The implications of this study suggest the clear need for school-based social-emotional intervention and that SEL interventions may help students more successfully transition from elementary school to middle school. The purpose for the varying levels of implementation was to determine the effect of the intervention across multiple exposures, with the understanding that not all programs are, or can be, implemented faithfully. While there was a decline in academic regression with higher levels of intervention, those students exposed to small doses still benefited, supporting the idea that regardless of the exposure, or time spent on intervention, there are still benefits.

“The onset of mental illness, such as depression, is routinely linked to ongoing emotional distress and downward spirals in behavior that can hinder social, emotional, and academic development” (Wilkinson, Zhang, Nuno, & Wilhelm, 2011, p. 221). Based upon ecodevelopmental theory, this study draws upon the characteristics of family and school to
determine patterns among students who report emotional distress. Wilkinson et al., (2011), study found that students who feel connected to their school report less instances of emotional distress. The study also found that students who had high levels of family obligations, felt the least connected to their schools and had the highest levels of emotional distress (p. 227). The implications are vast and speak to the notion that both school and home impact emotional well-being. Family obligations do affect how a student perceives school, resources to help students in school and at home are vital and a student’s sense of community within the school is important. Wilkinson et al., posits:

The creation of a program that takes a holistic approach, in order to curtail the levels of highly emotionally distressed adolescents, must continue to address the ever changing demands that adolescents encounter and prepare youth to deal with functioning within multiple contexts and do so while maintaining emotional well-being. (Wilkinson, Zhang, Nuno, & Wilhelm, 2011, p. 230)

Taylor and Larson (1999) address several questions in their article: What is social emotional learning (SEL)? Why is it necessary? And why do teachers have to focus on SEL in middle school? Furthermore, Taylor and Larson explain how SEL can take place in a middle school social studies classroom. Taylor and Larson (1999) posit, “Without social and emotional competence, students lack the skills to manage everyday life tasks such as working cooperatively, solving everyday problems, and controlling impulsive behavior” (p. 331). They add that without SEL, students’ attendance, motivation and academic success are at risk making it necessary to provide middle schools students to develop social and emotional competence. Suggestions they offer are: collaborative group work, active engagement in problem solving and opportunities to discuss relationships, diversity, and provocative or moral dilemmas. Taylor and
Larson’s article (1999) presents practical information on SEL and provides examples teachers can use in their class to promote SEL on a regular basis.

A recent study done in a large urban school in California showed a decrease in suspensions by 45% within one year of implementation of daily yoga/meditation practices (Kirp, 2014). In this large urban middle school, nine students were shot in the month of January, fights occurred on a regular basis, and the school recorded some of the state’s highest rates of suspension and absenteeism. Four years into the QuietTime program, the school’s attendance rate climbed to 98%, the suspension rates dropped to some of the lowest in the state, and grade point averages markedly improved, with some 20% of students being accepted into elite high schools. Furthermore, students are reporting less stress and depression, higher self-esteem, and higher levels of engagement within their school.

Kirp’s (2014) research supports the idea of providing students with opportunities to learn and practice relaxation techniques that will be of value to the students in and beyond the school day. This means finding time before, after or during the school day to provide opportunities for students to learn and practice these skills. Helping students to develop sounds bodies and minds through relaxation will benefit academics and behavior, supporting the healthy development of the whole child.

The continued increase of the achievement gap, underperforming schools, disciplinary action and the placement of students with EBD in substantially separate classrooms, speak to the importance of providing all students with equal access to an education, while recognizing that though there are contributing factors beyond our control, it is our responsibility to educate the whole child. Those who are considered at-risk may need increased attention to coping skills and other components of SEL. “Closing the achievement gap must be more than a one-front
operation. Educators must hold ourselves responsible and accountable for improving schools when and where we can” (Kirp, 2014, p. 13).

Social emotional learning is a relatively new area of study, suggesting the need for additional research to be conducted. Based on the findings of Gueldner and Merrell (2011), there is a high need for SEL to be implemented in the school setting and though the benefits of this particular program vary and there may not be a one-size-fits all approach, it is becoming increasingly important for schools to consider implementing an SEL component to their school day.

**Counterargument**

In spite of the research that suggests higher achievement occurs in an inclusive setting, researchers Kauffman, Landrum, Mock, Sayeski, and Sayeski (2005) argue that students with more intensive learning needs learn best in a homogenous setting and there is a lack of evidence to suggest that regular education teachers can teach all students within a heterogeneous setting. Furthermore, this group of researchers argues that self-contained classrooms provide the structure, special skill set, individualized instruction, and smaller class sizes that students with intensive special needs require (Kauffman et al., 2005). Meadows, Neel, Scott, and Parker (1994) have long argued that the benefits of more restrictive settings include smaller class sizes, paraprofessional support, teachers who are trained specifically in social and behavioral skills and who have strong classroom management schools, modified curriculum, and access to therapeutic supports not generally offered in mainstream classrooms.

Brantlinger’s (1997) critical review addresses specific authors who, through their writings, criticize the inclusion movement, citing that antinclusionists or traditionalists believe that disabilities are innate conditions that require specialized treatment and the natural place for
these students comes in separate treatments and classroom settings. Traditionalists maintain that the special treatment and placement of students with disabilities if for their sake, and not for the convenience of regular education teachers and students.

**Implications**

There are many implications regarding the work that needs to be done as it pertains to providing all students an equal access to education. Perhaps the most important is that educators and policy makers must take a much closer look at the practice of special education and ask themselves how do we raise success and achievement for all students, in the least restrictive environment, with equal access to opportunities and resources? In addition, this research will address a gap in the literature. There is substantial research to support the idea that students in substantially separate classrooms make little, if any, academic progress. There is also substantial research to support the idea that school connectedness is vital to a student’s academic, social, emotional and behavioral development. However, there is little research that gives the students with EBD who are educated in substantially separate classrooms a voice about their own educational experiences and their connectedness to their peers, their teachers, and their school community.

**Summary**

Victor shared his experiences regarding his education in self-contained classrooms as part of Causton-Theoharis’ 2001 study. Victor spent much of his education in a self-contained classroom and spoke to the limited educational experiences his schooling offered. In that study he shared the following:

Please know that self-deadening places are hard places to make progress and learn stuff. They don’t have people wanting you to really learn anything except: person, place or
things... nouns I know. That’s my take. But I’m just one person. I know lots of people love those rooms. More often they just play games, like Uno... A school should be what we all love. But my experiences about broke my freaking soul - Victor (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011, p. 61).

Not only do self-contained classrooms infringe on a student’s right to an equal education, there is little research to support that students make social, emotional, or academic gains in these classrooms. Furthermore, students are denied critical social and community opportunities and there is a lack of exposure to the behavior of their typical peers. Finally, students report not feeling a sense of belonging to their school community.

Little has changed for students with EBD over the past thirty years. It is time to listen to the voices of the students who are placed in self-contained classrooms, and begin to make the changes necessary to ensure that all students are provided with equal educational experiences, that promote academic, social, emotional and behavioral growth.
Chapter III: Methodology

This interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) intended to describe the perceptions of school by students with EBD educated in a substantially separate classroom setting, and whether or not they reported connections to their teachers, peers, and school community. This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, along with a review of student records in order to understand the shared school experiences of this specific population of students.

Research Question

The aim of this analysis was to focus upon individual’s shared experiences and/or understanding of a phenomenon, their experience in a substantially separate classroom, and the primary research question was open and focused upon the individual’s understanding of their experience within the classroom, and the entire school (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The following research question guided this study.

1. What are the experiences of middle school students with emotional and behavioral disabilities who are educated in a substantially separate classroom?

Research Design

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological analysis was to use a qualitative approach using student interviews and record review, to examine the perceptions of school by students with emotional and/or behavioral disabilities placed in a substantially separate classroom in a suburban middle school in western Massachusetts. This analysis set out to examine a particular group of students with similar experiences, find out what the experience for these students was like, and examine how they made sense of what was happening to them (Smith et al., 2009). The sample included students identified as having an emotional and/or
behavioral disorder, ranging from grades 6 - 8, who were enrolled in a substantially separate classroom at one public middle school.

The researcher analyzed the interview data through careful coding and transcript analysis, identifying themes that emerged throughout the students’ answers and within the record review. The focus was particularly on attendance, behavior, and students’ perceptions regarding curriculum, community and peer interactions. The analysis was turned into a narrative account, which included this researcher’s analytical interpretation of the data supported by excerpts from the participants’ answers (Smith et al., 2009). According to Moustakas (1994), the primary focus of a phenomenological study is to explore and determine the meaning individuals make of a life experience. Therefore, the researcher examined the school experiences of students with emotional and behavioral disorders in a critical, qualitative analysis, facilitating an in-depth examination of the meaning students with EBD educated in substantially separate classrooms give to their school experiences.

Site and Participants

This interpretive phenomenological analysis intended to investigate the perceptions of school of students with emotional and/or behavioral needs educated in a substantially separate classroom. The site, a middle school in Western Massachusetts, was selected primarily for its proximity to the researcher. The public middle school housed approximately 640 students in grades six through eight. The student population was 73% white, approximately 23% low-income, and approximately 25% of students qualified for special education services. The school had several substantially separate classrooms, including one for students with emotional and/or behavioral needs. The sample size was relatively small, as there were nine students identified as having an emotional and/or behavioral disorder who have been educated in a substantially
separate classroom for all or part of their education, six of whom agreed, and received parental consent to participate in the study. All of the identified participants were males, spread across all three grade levels. IPA studies’ participants are generally a small, homogenous sample, selected based on the access they can provide the researcher on a specific experience (Smith et al., 2009). It is noteworthy to mention the there is a higher prevalence of males with emotional and/or behavioral disorders and it is not uncommon to find substantially separate classrooms composed almost entirely of males (Cooper, et a., 2009).

The researcher asked permission of the parents/guardians of all nine students to participate in the semi-structured, open-ended interviews, and received informed consent and student assent from six of the students. The researcher asked each of the six students, on an individual basis, the same set of pre-determined questions, and the researcher allowed for follow-up questions and interactions. The interviews occurred at the middle school immediately after school, and each student, along with their parent/guardian could request the presence of a school adjustment counselor or guidance counselor to be present at the interview. Students were not offered compensation for their participation in this study.

In addition, the researcher asked permission of the parents/guardians to conduct a record review of each of the students in the substantially separate classroom. The researcher used the record review to uncover themes and/or patterns regarding grades, attendance rates, and student discipline.

**The role of the researcher.** The researcher facilitated the interviews and collected the data using standardized procedures. This allowed the researcher to assume a more participatory role. The researcher is the Associate Principal at the middle school where the research was conducted. However, it is important to note that a second Associate Principal is the primary
disciplinarian for this specific population of students. Smith et al. (2009) discuss the importance of the researcher to develop a rapport with the participant at the onset of the interview. It was, therefore, critical for the researcher to develop a relationship with each student during the school year, and provide a level of comfort and transparency at the onset of each meeting with each student.

IPA’s roots are strongly influenced by the hermeneutic version of phenomenology, and this analysis always involves some level of interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). IPA emphasizes the importance of the “positive process of engaging with participant more than the process of bracketing prior concerns” (Smith et al., 2009. p.35). In this way, IPA involves a double hermeneutic, or the duality of the researcher. According to Smith et al. (2009),

In one sense, the researcher is like the participant, is a human being drawing on everyday human resources in order to make sense of the world. On the other hand, the researcher is not the participant, she only has access to the participant’s experiences through what the participant reports about it, and is also seeing through the researcher’s own, experientially-informed lens (p. 36).

It is important to note that this researcher identifies that she is different from the participants. She does not have a personal experience with EBD, and she has not been educated for any part of her education in a substantially separate classroom. While this researcher engaged with the participants, and uncovered themes to help make sense of the participants’ experiences, she acknowledged that she only reported the information that the participants allowed her access to.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

To protect human subjects in this study, the researcher obtained permission from the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB)
to conduct research. The researcher also obtained written agreement from the parents/guardians of each student, as well as verbal assent from each of the students involved. The researcher disclosed the purpose of the study, any potential risks, and assured the protection of the students’ privacy. In addition, the researcher gave each participant the right to withdraw from the process at any time and provided access to a school adjustment counselor or guidance counselor during the interview.

Instrument

According to Smith et al. (2009), “A qualitative research interview is often described as a conversation with a purpose” (p. 57). The semi-structured interviews consisted of open-ended questions that allowed participants to tell their story in their own words, with the interviewer as the facilitator and listener (Smith et al., 2009). The research question was written in a way that allowed the researcher to gather information regarding the students’ perceptions of school, including academics and social opportunities, and their feelings of connectedness to their peers, teachers, and overall school community.

Procedures

The site was selected because of its proximity to the researcher, as the researcher is one of two assistant principals at the middle school. Informed consent was mailed home, and students’ families were given two weeks to respond with follow up consent letters. Due to the small size of the selected population, the researcher called the parents/guardians of the students from whom she did not receive a reply after the second consent letter. Interviews were set up and conducted soon after receiving consent. The semi-structured interviews lasted approximately one to two hours and were conducted over the course of several days. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher for further analysis.
The records review began soon after receiving consent of the students and their guardians. The purpose of the record review was to gather information and detect themes amongst students’ attendance patterns, grades, and discipline referrals.

**Data Analysis**

According to Wertz (2005), “Phenomenological analysis begins by focusing on particular situations prior to attempting general knowledge” (p. 172). The researcher moved through the transcribed interviews and verbal descriptions reflecting on the relationships of each part and their relevance, omitting redundancy, and synthesizing insights about the lived experiences (Wertz, 2005). It is important, during the first stage that the researcher reads and re-reads the original data, ensuring the participant becomes the sole focus of the analysis (Smith et al., 2009).

The second step of analysis explored the semantic content and language of the transcribed interviews in a “free textual analysis” with the aim of producing a “comprehensive and detailed set of notes and comments” on the data (Smith et al., 2009, p. 83). The researcher then developed emergent themes and identified connections across these themes. Upon completion of the initial steps across all interview transcriptions, the researcher developed emergent themes and connections across cases, conducting a careful analysis of what the participants said (Smith et al., 2009).

Following the initial analysis of the data and identification of themes, the researcher followed-up with the participants, soliciting their views on the credibility of the preliminary findings (Creswell, 2013). According to Creswell (2013), this “member checking” “involves taking data, analyses and interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so that the researcher can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account” (p. 253).
Validity, Reliability, and Generalizability

Smith et al. (2009) rely on Yardley’s (2000, 2008) criteria for assessing the validity and reliability of qualitative research. Yardley (2000) presents four qualities, sensitivity to context, commitment and rigor, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance. Sensitivity is inherent in interviewing students with emotional and/or behavioral needs, and began early on in the research process. Developing a rapport with both the participants, and their parents, was “central to the viability of an IPA project” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 180).

IPA requires a personal commitment to the process, attentiveness to the participants, and a thorough and systematic approach to developing and analyzing research and interview topics and questions (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher was tremendously committed to the work involved in this analysis and she has a deep understanding of the needs of the population of students.

Transparency and coherency refer to the clearly articulated stages of the research process and the cohesiveness and logic of the argument at hand (Yardley, 2000, 2008). The researcher expected that the study was be consistent with the principals of IPA, and was not contradictory in nature. In addition, the researcher intended to clearly outline the research process and outcomes in a way that lent itself to reasonable understanding on behalf of the reader, while remaining true to the experience of the participants.

Yardley’s (2000, 2008) final principle, impact and importance, speaks to the implications of the research conducted, and whether it tells the reader something “interesting, important, or useful” (Smith et al., 2009). This research contended that there would be several implications regarding the work that needs to be done as it pertains to providing all students an equal access to education, especially those students with emotional and/or behavioral needs. In addition, this
research aimed to contribute to the breadth of research regarding the importance of a student’s connection to their school community
Chapter IV: Research Findings

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study was to use a qualitative approach using student interviews and records review to examine the perceptions of school by students with EBD placed in a substantially separate classroom in one local middle school, and whether or not this population of students reports feeling connected to their school community. The research was guided by the following research question:

1. What are the experiences of middle school students with emotional and/or behavioral disabilities who are educated in a substantially separate classroom?

Study Context

The research for this study was conducted at one middle school in western, Massachusetts. The public middle school housed approximately 640 students in grades six through eight. The student population was 73% white, approximately 23% low-income, and approximately 25% of students qualified for special education services. The school housed several substantially separate classrooms, including one specific classroom, the alternative learning program (ALP), designed for students with emotional and/or behavioral needs. Students in all of the substantially separate classrooms at the middle school spent varying amounts of time within the substantially separate classroom, and utilized a variety of support staff. Some students attended all but one or two classes within the inclusion setting, while other students spent up to six class periods within the substantially separate classroom. At any point in time, a student may have been assigned to the substantially separate classroom for their entire school day. This may have been as a consequence, or if a student was not demonstrating their ability to be successful in the mainstream inclusion setting as determined by a level system and/or behavior plan.
The philosophy of the Alternative Learning Program stated that “all students in the program can progress to successful social functioning and learning in less restrictive environments and that all students in the program have a right to ‘best practice’ effort towards success.” According to their mission statement, the staff of the program, one teacher, three educational support professionals (ESP), a designated school adjustment counselor, and a designated administrator, were committed to: making program decisions that are the result of the team process, respecting the rights and needs of students at all times, keeping in close contact with parents/guardians, basing program decisions about a student upon knowledge of their strengths, providing students with a strong basic skill set and academic focus, providing students with opportunities to participate in integrated activities, and providing students with opportunities to try again when difficulties occur. Positive behavioral supports were considered an integral part of the learning process, and all students in the ALP classroom had an individualized behavioral support plan, matched from results from a functional behavioral assessment (FBA), and all students participated in an overarching level system, which addressed basic cooperation with school and program rules. All students and parents signed a contract upon the student’s start in the ALP classroom.

Participants

The participants for this study were six students, four sixth graders, one seventh grader, and one eighth grader, who have all been diagnosed with an emotional and/or behavioral disability, and who have all been educated for some or all of their school experience in a substantially separate classroom within a public school. All six participants were males. The six students spent various amounts of time within the substantially separate classroom. All six students chose a pseudonym in order to ensure their confidentiality throughout the process.
Bob. Bob is an energetic sixth grade student with a great sense of humor. He enjoys playing sports, especially basketball, and video games. Bob has been part of a substantially separate program since fifth grade. At the time of his interview, he was attending two of his classes within the substantially separate classroom, and the remainder of his classes in the mainstream inclusion setting with the support of an ESP. In fifth grade, Bob remained in the substantially separate classroom for the majority of his school day.

Julio. Julio is an athletic eighth grade student who joined the substantially separate classroom at the start of seventh grade after several behavioral incidents in sixth grade that resulted in a multitude of suspensions. At the time of his interview, Julio remained in the substantially separate classroom for all but three of his classes, and he had just recently begun attending math in the mainstream inclusion setting. Julio enjoys playing football, physical education, art, and enrichment are his favorite classes.

Joe. Joe is a creative sixth grade student who has been part of a substantially separate classroom since first grade, and, in elementary school, was supported by a one-to-one ESP. At the time of his interview, Joe was attending all but two of his classes in the mainstream, inclusion setting with the support of an ESP. Joe enjoys playing video games, being on the computer, and creating new card games. Joe would love to go on some exciting field trips while he is in middle school.

Juan. Juan is a sixth grade student who has been in a substantially separate classroom since third grade. At the time of his interview, he was attending all but two of his classes in the mainstream inclusion setting with the support of an ESP. Juan enjoys playing outside, especially football and basketball. His favorite class is science because he likes to do “hands on experiments.” Juan has a sister who is in the seventh grade at the same middle school.
**Gregpa.** Gregpa is a sixth grade student who is new to the substantially separate classroom this school year. At the time of his interview, he was attending three of his classes in the substantially separate classroom, and was supported by an ESP in his inclusion classes. Gregpa enjoys learning and wants to get good grades and make his mother proud. Gregpa enjoys playing outside, especially football, when the weather is nice, and playing video games when it is cold outside.

**Rupert.** Rupert is a quiet seventh grade student who has been in a substantially separate classroom since third grade. During elementary school, he was supported by a one-to-one ESP, but, at the time of his interview, did not require the additional support. At the time of his interview, Rupert was attending all but two of his classes in the mainstream inclusion setting. Rupert is an avid reader, and his favorite subject is math, because he likes “solving puzzles.”

**Data Collected**

This researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with all six students with the intention of uncovering students’ perceptions regarding their school experiences, and whether or not they feel connected to their school community.

A careful analysis of the participants’ descriptions of their experiences in school revealed the following themes:

- peer relationships,
- adult relationships,
- substantially separate versus inclusion,
- positive behavioral support strategies,
- class size,
- feelings about school rules and/or structure,
- attitudes about school and learning

**Peer relationships.** Throughout the interviews with the students, it was clear that peer relationships were an important, if not, the most important part of their educational experience. All six students discussed, on more than one occasion, “time with their friends,” identifying peer relationships as an important part of their school day. Many students identified peer relationships as their main enjoyment for school, and reason for wanting to attend mainstream inclusion classes. Five out of the six students identified their peer group as those outside of the substantially separate classroom, though one student did report that being in the same classroom with kids “similar” to him made it “easier to get to know people.”

Bob, Julio, Rupert, and Juan all answered that they like school because they get to see their friends, and their favorite classes are the classes that their friends are in. Bob, when asked how he felt about going to school everyday, replied, “It’s not really a bother, it’s just boring, but I get to see my friends, and that’s really it.” When asked what he likes about school he replied, “Umm, just being able to see my friends.” Bob also reported that he enjoys attending his mainstream classes more than his classes in the substantially separate classroom because he gets to be with his friends in “those classes.”

Juan explained that he did not like to be in the ALP classroom too much because when he is there, he does not get to see his friends. When asked what he likes about being in the inclusion classroom rather than the ALP classroom he explained

Yea I don’t like being in there [the substantially separate classroom] if it’s, like, a certain ALP room, I don’t like being there all the time ‘cause then I don’t get to see, like, my other friends ‘cause usually the kids that are in there are really loud, and they’re not my friends.
He described one of the classes he really likes because, he explained, “There’s this one kid, he’s my friend, and he’s totally chill and he’s funny.” He also explained that he likes lunch because he “gets to sit with his friends.”

Julio also reported that his favorite classes are the classes his friends are in. For example, when asked what he likes about school Julio responded, “Well, I like art class ‘cause, like, I have a couple of friends in there . . . and enrichment, ‘cause I have my friend [student’s name] in there, and he’s funny, yea, he’s just really funny. Julio did, however, report that being part of the substantially separate program did make it easier for him to make friends. For example, when asked about the differences between the inclusion classrooms and the ALP classroom Julio replied

Well, there’s not really many differences, besides that classroom [the ALP classroom] is filled with a bunch of people who either have the same problems as you or are dealing with problems so it is easier to get to know people ‘cause they basically just do the same things you do.

Bob’s responses regarding his friends and peer relationships seemed to focus on the time he did not get to have with his friends during the school day. For example, when asked who he spent his time with during the school day he responded, “It’s hard to spend time with anybody because we only get, like, two minutes, and that’s during lunch and even then we’re not really allowed to do anything.” When asked how he would design the perfect school, Bob’s responses included time for “trading cards” and being allowed to bring games and cards in to play with his friends, without the teachers “taking stuff away.”

Gregpa and Rupert did not mention their friends and/or peer relationships as frequently as the other four participants. However, Rupert valued his time with his two “best friends” who he
has breakfast with every morning, and he identified his favorite part of the school day as lunch because that is when he gets to “see his friends.” He also explained that he looks forward to coming to school each day because he “gets to see his friends.” Gregpa looks forward to the weekends because he gets to spend more time with his friends on the weekends than he does when he is in school.

Overall, the students, for the most part, did not identify their like peers, or students within the substantially separate classroom, as those in their friend group. The students did not report that the substantially separate classroom was a place where they could see their friends, but rather as a place that kept them from their friends. Students overwhelmingly identified seeing their friends as a main motivator for attending school, and their main enjoyment in many of their classes.

**Adult relationships.** All six students reported spending most of their time during the school day with staff members who are members of the special education staff, and specifically identified as being part of their substantially separate programming, whether it was a teacher, counselor, or ESP. Two out of the six students reported positive connections with these adults.

When asked if there are adults in the building with whom he spends more time, Bob reported, “I usually spend time with [ESP’s name], cause he’s like the ESP.” Bob did not elaborate on his relationship with the ESP, nor identify other adults with whom he had a positive relationship. He did identify several adults who “talk to him” on a daily basis, but did not identify either positive or negative connections with these adults.

Julio also identified one adult who he spends most of his day with, the teacher in the ALP classroom. Like Bob, Julio did not report a positive or negative connection with this adult, or any other adults in the building.
Juan reported that his ESP, associated with the ALP classroom, is “awesome” because “he usually does not yell a lot, like other teachers . . . he’s not really strict, and he lets us go outside a lot.” Juan, when discussing his struggles in one particular inclusion class, described the teacher as “strict” and always making comments like, “I’m going to call you mom or dad.” Juan also reported that he had teachers in the past who would “just send kids home when they got a little bit mad ‘cause they didn’t want to deal with it.” He said that teachers in the ALP room let him learn a different way, and helped more than the “regular teachers.”

Gregpa reported that his favorite teacher, also one of the ESPs associated with the ALP classroom, is “the one who is really good at reminding me to do my homework, and he brings us outside.” Gregpa reported a sense of frustration with a teacher who reported to his mother, “We’ve tried everything with him.” and stated, “I don’t like that.” He also stated that he felt like he would get in trouble with this teacher for “taking breaks.”

Rupert reported spending most of his time with his “one to, like, five ESP” associated with the substantially separate program. He did not report positive or negative connections with teachers, but stated, “None of my teachers really stand out.” Rupert did report one negative connection with a teacher who he identified as “strict.” He said, “I don’t like [teacher’s name] that much. She’s really strict. On the third day of gym, she said if I didn’t bring my clothes that I would get an hour long detention – she’s just really strict.”

Joe, who did not report any positive connections with his teachers, made statements like, “He [an ESP] is mainly walking around and nagging me most of the time” and “They’re always taking stuff away from me.” He also reported
Umm, it seems like almost every other teacher is extremely sarcastic. ‘Oh don’t worry you don’t have to stop working,’ ‘oh don’t worry you don’t have to continue working I will just give you a grade of zero and move on.’ Joe also reported that his teachers’ expectations of him are too high, and that everything is hard for him, especially paying attention. He also reported that teachers get frustrated with him when he cannot find something in his binder “fast enough.” He reported feeling like he is getting in trouble when he’s “just not able to get the homework or the work out right away . . .” When asked how adults could support him and not “nag” him Joe reported, “Not chewing me out for literally everything then usually punishing me for everything with usually something that does not fit the crime or not listening to my side of the story.”

Overall, students who did report positive connections with adults in the building, named these connections only as adults who are members of the special education staff within their substantially separate programming, specifically, the ESPs and one teacher associated with the substantially separate program. When the students spoke of adults in the inclusion, mainstream setting, they often described them as “strict” and that they would make “threats” to call their parents. They identified feeling like they were going to get in trouble with those teachers, and claimed that they were unable to take breaks or access free time. Only two students identified a counselor, teacher, or administrator as an adult with whom they connected with in the building, even those associated with the substantially separate program.

**Substantially separate versus inclusion.** Five out of the six students identified the substantially separate classroom as an alternate space where they could take breaks throughout the school day, though each of the students described the room quite differently. Bob, who spends most of his time outside of the substantially separate classroom, described it as a place
where he could go when he was having “trouble listening” in class. He also described the room as “louder, and more energetic” than his other classes, and the one class he does attend in the classroom, his strategies class, is a class where he can finish homework and have free time. During his interview, Bob reflected on his time in fifth grade, when he spent his entire day in the substantially separate classroom. He explained that during this time they did “the exact same stuff, but we could move around a little bit more.” When asked if he felt like he could be successful without the classroom Bob responded, “Not as successful, like, I, no not really, ‘cause I need a place I can go relax.”

Julio spends most of his day within the substantially separate classroom, but described his favorite classes as those outside of the classroom. He stated that he would probably not be successful without the substantially separate classroom because he would, “probably get off topic and I probably wouldn’t do any of my work.” He described the substantially separate classroom as a place where he would get rewarded for having his work done, like getting to play basketball, while in the other classes it’s either “do your work or get in trouble.” When asked if he felt successful in school Julio replied, “Well yea, I mean, last year at the second quarter I had, like, two F’s, but this year I’m gonna keep my grades up.”

Joe, like Bob, spends most of his time outside of the substantially separate classroom and described being in the substantially separate classroom “like a leaf decaying under snow.” However, he did report that he has the potential for having “a little more freedom” in that classroom because when he finishes all of his work he is allowed to go on the computer. Joe conveyed that the teachers in the mainstream setting are more “sarcastic” and can be “impatient” with him. He also reported that he gets “yelled at” more in “those classes” because teachers do not understand him or listen to him.
Juan reported only having one class in the substantially separate classroom, and in that class they “go outside most of the time.” He reported that he avoids the substantially separate classroom at certain times of the day because of the “kids in there” and because it can be “too loud.” He did report, however, that he feels like he gets “a lot more attention and help by being in that classroom.” He also discussed his experience in math prior to entering the substantially separate program.

Well, it’s definitely a lot better because you get more attention and more help . . . one time [in elementary school] I got really frustrated ‘cause the teacher, well, I learned how to do the standard algorithm earlier and the teacher was like, ‘oh you can’t do it that way cause we haven’t learned that yet,’ cause my mom taught me that that was the easiest way for me to do it but she still didn’t let me do it. Lets say I was in the ALP room at that same time. They would probably be fine with that because that’s the easiest way for me to do that.

Gregpa remains in the substantially separate classroom for three of his classes, and described the classroom as “pretty noisy.” When asked if he felt like he could be successful without the substantially separate program he responded, “I mean I think I could live without it, but it’s pretty fun in there.”

In sixth grade, Rupert spent five out of seven periods in the substantially separate classroom, and at the time of his interview, in seventh grade, he was in the substantially separate classroom for one or two periods a day. He described the substantially separate classroom as a place where “students who have disabilities go” and where he is allowed to do his homework. When asked if he felt like he could be successful without the substantially separate classroom he
said, “I don’t know.” When asked if there were certain strategies taught in that classroom he said, “No, we just get to do our homework.”

All of the students reported being assigned to the substantially separate classroom if they received a lunch detention or did not attend their regularly scheduled classes. Rupert reported that his least favorite part of school is getting assigned lunch detentions in the substantially separate classroom. The participants’ opinions regarding the substantially separate classroom varied among all of the students. Some identified it as a place where they could take a break, some identified it as a place where they get to play games and have free times, and others identified it as a place they would try to avoid. Four of the six students felt like they needed the substantially separate classroom in order to be successful, but none of the six students identified specific strategies they were taught within the substantially separate classroom.

**Positive behavioral support strategies.** Though the ALP program description relied heavily on the use of level systems and a token economy, none of the six students specifically mentioned a level system or token economy as part of their responses. However, five of the six students discussed some elements of a reward system in association with the substantially separate classroom. They described it as a place where they were “rewarded” with free time, games, computer time, etc. for completing their work, something they did not report happening in their inclusion classes.

Julio explained that in the inclusion classes it is “do your work or get in trouble.” He stated

Well, cause in ALP you either have a choice of doing your work and getting to do, like, the fun things we have, like going on the computer or going to play football or basketball.
But in regular classrooms it’s either do your work or get in trouble or whatever. But I
don’t care about getting in trouble, I’m used to it.

Joe reported having more freedom in the substantially separate classroom to go on the
computer when he finished his work. When asked what was different about being in the
substantially separate classroom he answered, “There is a possibility of having a little more
freedom in [teacher’s name] room. Like, if you finish all of your work within the period then
there is a possibility of using the computer if you’ve done well.”

Bob, Juan, and Gregpa reported opportunities to go outside and play football or
basketball. When asked what he does when he is in the substantially separate classroom Bob
responded

We finish our homework, we do papers, sometimes strategy papers when we don’t have
any homework, and we get to have free time, and we relax go on the computer, go
outside, yea.

Bob also reported that when he is in the substantially separate classroom he gets to move around
a little bit more, and he reported that he feels like that is something that he needs. Gregpa
reported that when he is with his favorite ESP in the substantially separate classroom they go
outside to play basketball, “when it is warm,” when he has finished all of his work.

Rupert did not mention any type of positive behavioral supports or reward system within
his answers. He only described the substantially separate classroom as a place where he was
allowed to finish his homework, or had to go if he had a lunch detention.

In terms of consequences, all six participants discussed the substantially separate
classroom as a place they also go for consequences. For example, all students reported that if
they do not eat lunch in the cafeteria, they do in the substantially separate classroom as a lunch
detention. Only one student, Gregpa, reported never having to serve a lunch detention.

While behavior plans, incentives, and a tiered system of rewards appear to be an integral
part of the substantially separate programming, it is not something the students explicitly
reference. It is, however, important to note that the students seemed to be extrinsically motivated
to complete their work, and were more apt to do so when they would receive something positive,
rather than a consequence, for work completion.

Class size. Four out of the six students described one of the benefits of the substantially
separate classroom was the smaller class size. Bob recalled when he was first moved from the
mainstream to a substantially separate classroom in elementary school and described it as being
“much easier” because “there wasn’t as much kids.” He explained

Um, well, in ALP last year I started being in there all the time because of problems I had
in the mainstream, in the main classroom, but it wasn’t that different ‘cause we did the
same exact stuff, but there were less kids and we could move around a little bit more.

Julio explained the expectation that he begin to attend more inclusion classes, and was
hesitant to do, saying, “I hate big classrooms, too many people.” He also explained that one of
the main differences between the substantially separate classroom and the inclusion classrooms
was that is a smaller classroom with less people in it. It is important to note that one month after
his interview, Julio had not transitioned into additional inclusion classes.

Juan reported a recent change in his schedule to a different reading class, “That’s why I
switched my reading class ‘cause there were too many kids in there that’s why I went to
[Reading teacher’s name] where there’s only two other kids.” He also explained that he likes
smaller classes because, “There’s not as much people, and stuff.”
Gregpa described the mainstream, inclusion classrooms as “much more noisy” and explained that he has an easier time when there are “less people around.” He also explained that one of his least favorite parts of the school day is having to “be in the hallway with all of the other kids, especially the eighth graders.”

Overall, class size was identified as an important factor by four out of the six students for a variety of reasons. The four students who did discuss class size identified feeling more “comfortable” in smaller classes, found smaller classes to be “less noisy” and identified needing a smaller class as place to take a break. Rupert and Joe were the two students who did not identify smaller classes sizes as something that was specifically beneficial to them, but Rupert did describe the substantially separate classroom as a place that did have fewer students in it, and could be beneficial to “some kids.”

**School rules and structure.** All six students reported aspects of school rules and structure that they either struggled with or disagreed with, and many associated a sense of “freedom” from these expectations within the substantially separate classroom. For example, Bob reported that his least favorite part of school is, “Having to like, sitting down, usually, during the day, and like having to listen a lot, and not really being able to talk.” He reported, however, that he was able to do these things, move around, talk, etc. in his classes in the substantially separate classroom. Bob also identified that he needed a place where he can “go and relax” and he did not feel like he could do that if he was not part of the substantially separate classroom.

Julio reported that he does not like or understand the “very strict rules” like no gum and no music. When asked what he did not like about school he answered
Well, I don’t like the very strict rules like no gum, I don’t get that . . . Um, and no music, I mean I somewhat get that, but I mean music is relaxing. For the most part I come to school just so I don’t have to go home and do my chores.

Like previously mentioned, Julio also relates being in the inclusion setting to getting in trouble if he does not do his work.

Joe reported that he does not get a lot of “freedom” during the school day, and reported that he only gets “like two minutes” to even talk to his friends. He also stated, “I just feel like there’s nothing I can really do without getting in trouble.” When asked to clarify what getting in trouble meant, Joe responded

Sometimes I’m just not able to get the homework out or the work out right away because it is somewhere stuck in the infinite void that is my binder and umm somebody usually walks in and starts acting like a nag.

Juan reported really struggling with having to change for physical education (PE) class, and reported that he really does not like that class because he does not like having to change into different clothes. He also reported that afternoons are really difficult for him.

Well, it’s weird, like the mornings, surprisingly, are pretty easy, but when it’s more the afternoon, that’s when I am pretty anxious and stuff. That’s when, like, it’s harder for me to pay attention and stuff, so it’s like that’s usually when I have harder times.

Rupert also struggled with having to change for PE class and did not like the “strictness” of the rule, and the feeling that he would “get a detention” or not be able to participate in class if he did not change into PE clothes. Like previously mentioned, Rupert also stated that he really disliked getting assigned detentions and being sent to the office, but he reported, “It used to
happen a lot more in elementary school cause I lost my temper a lot more, and once I lose my temper it’s really hard for me to stop being angry.”

Gregpa reported struggling with the crowded hallways, and felt like school would be “better” if there were more “quiet spaces” for him to go to. He also conveyed experiences, prior to being in the substantially separate classroom, when he would get in trouble for taking breaks.

All six students were able to reflect on certain school rules or structures of school that are were difficult for them to comply with, including changing for PE class, waking up early, crowded hallways, and just an overall sense of “getting in trouble” for things. This theme was seen woven throughout the responses of each of the participants.

**Attitude regarding school and learning.** Five of the six students displayed an overall negative attitude about school and/or learning. Bob reported that school was “boring” and the only part he enjoyed about it was “getting to see his friends.” When asked what he liked about school Bob responded, “Ummm, just being able to see my friends.”

Julio stated that he did not “like the very strict rules at school” and that he did not feel very successful in school last year because he had, “like two F’s.” He described the suggestion of adding more inclusion classes to his schedule as, “They’re making me go to science.” Julio also specifically discussed discipline with regards to suspension. He explained, “I don’t care about getting suspended or in school suspended or like detention or whatever, it’s not that big of a deal.” When asked what would be a big deal Julio responded, “I don’t know, like getting expelled, that’s pretty much it.”

Joe reported that his least favorite part about school was “arriving” and that his favorite part about school was “leaving.” He also reported that school is boring, and coming to school
“feels like falling through a window into a bush.” In addition, when asked what his typical school day looked like Joe responded

   Um, usually it’s just walk out of bed the day looks extremely boring and yes most of it is boring . . . but honest, I usually just wake up and then I’m brain dead for half the day and then just out nowhere completely random I just wake up and it’s like the middle of fifth period and I am like what the hell is happening? So that’s most of what my day is like.

Joe also explained, “the school day makes very bad things seems very awesome, like a gas leak or a fire drill.” Juan reported that his favorite part about school is the end of the school week, but he did report having fun in at least one of his classes. When Gregpa was asked how he felt about school he reported, “I feel like when is it gonna be the weekend?” and when asked what his favorite part of the school day was he answered, “Dismissal.”

Rupert reported, overall, that he enjoyed school, “except waking up early in the morning” because he gets to see his friends. He also reported that he likes school because he “gets to learn” and that his favorite class is math because he “loves puzzles and math is like a puzzle.”

Like previously mentioned, Rupert does participate in one after school activity once per week. This activity began in January, but does not last the entire school year. He also reported that this is the first time he has participated in an after school activity.

The students, overall, reported feelings of negativity for and/or a disconnect from their school community. In fact, two of the six students reported that they did not feel a connection to their school community. They did not report an enjoyment of attending school, and they associate many aspects of school with feelings of getting in trouble. In addition, students spend a majority of their day with special education staff, and get to spend less time with their identified peer group when they are in the substantially separate classroom. Only one of the six students
reported participating in after school activities, though all students are eligible to participate in after school activities. Rupert did report that he did start staying after once a week in January for the Mine Craft club. All six students reported that after school they go home, and usually, play video games. One student reported that he only plays video games when it is cold outside. Two of the six students reported that they spend time with friends outside of school.

Record Review

In addition to semi-structured, open-ended interviews, the researcher conducted a record review of each of the participants with the intention of gathering data regarding attendance, discipline, and academic achievement for each of the participants, and connecting this data to their overall perceptions of school. Table 3 represents data from September to December of the 2016 school year, and displays the number of days each student has been absent, the number of days each student has spent in an school or out of school suspension, and their first term report card grades.

Table 3
Student Attendance, Discipline and Grades for the 2016/2-17 School Year as of December 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Student A</th>
<th>Student B</th>
<th>Student C</th>
<th>Student D</th>
<th>Student E</th>
<th>Student F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Days Absent</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of Days Suspended</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grades</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>F</td>
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<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td></td>
<td>6</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4 represents data for the entire 2015-2016 school year, and displays the number of days each student was absent, the number of days each student spent in in-school or out-of-school suspension, and their statewide standardized testing scores.

| Table 4                                                                 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Student Attendance, Discipline and MCAS results for the 2015/2016 School Year** | **Student** | **Student** | **Student** | **Student** | **Student** | **Student** |
|   | A  | B  | C  | D  | E  | F  |
| **Days Absent** | 10 | 22 | 32 | 16 | 8  | 5  |
| **# of Days Suspended** | 0  | 1  | 5.5| 0  | 4  | 0  |
| **MCAS** | **ELA** | NI | NI | P  | NI | P  |
| **Math** | NI | P  | NI | P  | NI | P  |
| **Science** | P  | P  | N/A| N/A| P  | P  |

**Attendance.** According to the school and district profile reported by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA DESE) for the 2015-2016 school year, the average number of days absent for a student at this middle school was 8.0 days, and the average number of days absent for the state was 8.4 days. Less than halfway through the 2016-2017 school year, three of the six students were approaching both the school and the state average for number of days absent from school in an entire school year. In addition, during the previous school year, four of the six students missed ten or more days of school, with one student missing thirty-two days, 17% of his school year. All but one of the students missed equal to or more than the school and state average for school days missed.

The research states that students who feel less connected to school or more likely to be absent from school. This attendance data matches that of the perceptions of the participants, who
do not report connections to their school community. Rather, the students report attending school to “avoid chores at home” and to “see their friends.” Overall, this data represents a group of students who perceive school to be an overall negative experience, and therefore do have high rates of absenteeism greater than or equal to both the school and state average.

**Discipline.** According to the school and district profile reported by the MA DESE for the 2015-2016 school year, twenty-eight total students were disciplined, with 4.1% (26) of students receiving in-school suspension, and 1.6% (2) of students receiving out of school suspension. Less than half way into the school year, four out of the six students have been suspended at least one time, with two students having been suspended three times. During the 2015/2016 school year, three of the six participants were suspended at least once, with two of the participants suspended for four or more school days. Data regarding after school detentions and lunch detentions was not available, however, all but one participant reported receiving at least one detention since the start of the 2016/2017 school year.

According to The Texas Study (Fabelo, Thompson, & Plotkin, 2011), 31% of students who were suspended or expelled from school repeated a grade, middle school and high school students who were suspended from school were twice as likely to drop out, and 23% of middle and high school students who were suspended or expelled from school ended up in contact with a juvenile probation office, as compared to 2% of those not disciplined. Despite these statistics, all but one of the participants had been suspended from school at least once in the past one and one half school years. In addition, Julio, who reported that he “did not care about getting in trouble” was suspended for 5.5 days during the 2015/2016 school year, and three days from September to December during the 2016/2017 school year. The other five participants did not discuss getting suspended from school, and only one student specifically mentioned disliking lunch detentions.
One may contend, then, that school discipline, specifically detentions and suspensions, are not a deterrent for their behavior. In addition, one may ask what, if any, strategies and alternate forms of discipline are in place to address behaviors among a population of students already at identified as at risk.

**Academic performance.** None of the six students failed a course during the first quarter of the 2016-2017 school year. All six students’ grades fell within the average range with only one student receiving a grade between 65% and 69%. On the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), the state wide standardized test that all Massachusetts public school students take, one student scored proficient (P) in both testing areas, while the other five students scored either proficient or needs improvement (NI).

The six students, overall, did not discuss their academic performance in specifics, and only two students, Gregpa and Julio, talked about earning good grades. Gregpa felt that earning good grades was important, particularly, to “make his mother proud” and Julio, who received at least two F’s in seventh grade, was working to not earn any F’s in eighth grade, and reported that not earning any F’s would help him to feel more successful at school. It is difficult to determine from the participant’s answers if they value academic learning, though some of the themes that emerged, specifically in regards to feelings about school and learning, and teacher relationships, suggest that the students either do not think they can do well, or they do not care if they do well. In addition, they report that their teachers are too hard on them, and they associate not completing work with getting in trouble. Only one student, Julio, identified the teachers as having high expectations for his learning, and that was because they were “making him” go to science in the mainstream inclusion setting.
Summary of Findings

The goal of this study was to examine the perceptions of school by students with EBD placed for all or part of their education in a substantially separate classroom in one local middle school, and whether or not this group of students reported feeling connected to their school community. The research for this phenomenological study was completed using semi-structured, open-ended interviews of students with EBD, along with a record review of these same students.

Data analysis revealed several themes regarding the students’ perceptions of school and their school connectedness. One theme across all six participants’ responses was the importance of peer relationships, and their opportunities for interactions with friends throughout the school day. It was repeatedly mentioned by the participants that the main reason they come to school, and their main enjoyment in school, was the access they had to their friends. Additionally, participants felt varying degrees of connections with adults in the building, but all indicated a need to feel supported by the adults with whom they work. All six participants identified that they spent a majority of their school day with the special education staff that support the substantially separate program, and none of the participants reported having a positive connection with adults outside of the substantially separate classroom. Most of the participants indicated a need for a quiet space and the benefit of smaller classrooms. The students indicated an appreciation for earning a reward for completing their work, rather than the idea of “do your work or else.” Overall, the students did not portray an enjoyment of, or a connection to school, but rather described school as “boring.”

The record review indicated above average rates of absenteeism for four out of the six participants, along with higher instances of suspension, both in and out of school. Grades and MCAS scores for all students were in the average to below average range. The data from the
record review is consistent with the themes that emerged from the participants’ responses in that it represents a group of students who are disconnected from their school community.
Chapter V: Discussion of Findings

Problem of Practice

Causton-Theoharis, et al. (2011) state that approximately 23% of children with disabilities in the United States are educated in substantially separate educational settings. Cooper (2004) advances that unlike any other groups of students with identified special needs, students with EBD continue to be as likely to be placed in substantially separate settings as they were 30 years ago. In addition, only 40% of students with EBD will graduate from high school (Thurlow, et al., 2002). Students with EBD are three times as likely as other students to be arrested before leaving school, and students with EBD are two times as likely as other students with disabilities to live in a correctional facility, drug treatment center, or on the street after leaving school (Thurlow et al., 2002).

Despite the statistics that students with EBD are the most likely of all students with disabilities to be placed in a substantially separate classroom (Maggin, 2011), there is little evidence to suggest that these students make significant academic, emotional, or social progress, as compared to their peers, in a self-contained setting. Furthermore, findings from Panacek and Dunlap (2003) state that children with EBD have minimal opportunities to engage in integrated school activities and their educational and social networks consist mainly of special education students and staff. As a result, EBD students in self-contained classrooms have minimal interactions with peers, feel disconnected from their school environment, and do not make significant social progress.

Review of Methodology

This interpretive phenomenological analysis intended to describe the perceptions of school by students with EBD educated in a substantially separate classroom setting, and whether
or not they reported connections to their teachers, peers, and school community. This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, along with a review of student records in order to understand the shared school experiences of this specific population of students.

The following research question guided this study:

1. What are the experiences of middle school students with emotional and behavioral disabilities who are educated in one substantially separate classroom?

Discussion of Major Findings

A thorough review of research collected during this study revealed several findings regarding the students’ perceptions of school and their school connectedness. These themes were: peer relationships, adult connections, positive behavior supports, small class sizes and attitudes regarding school and learning. The importance of peer relationships, along with adult connections, describe the students’ emphasis on spending time with their friends, along with the positive connections they did, or did not, form with adults. The utilization of positive behavioral supports describes the students’ beliefs in regards to earning something for completing their work, rather than being assigned consequences. Small class sizes refers to the students’ beliefs that they benefit from, and, in some cases, need to be in classes with fewer students. Finally, attitudes regarding school and learning is a summation of the students’ feelings about school, and their perceived connections to their school community.

The importance of peer relationships. All six students discussed varying aspects of peer relationships during the interviews. Students reported that seeing their friends was their favorite part of the school day, and often a motivation for attending mainstream inclusion classes. The students did not identify peers within the substantially separate programming as
those in their peer group and, therefore, felt that they did not necessarily receive enough time during the day to spend with their friends. One student reported that he did not necessarily want to be in the substantially separate classroom because he would not be able to see his friends.

Based on the analysis of the students responses, one may conclude that placing students in a substantially separate classroom for more time than necessary, separates students from what they identify to be the most important part of their school day; their friends. Separating students from their friends may perpetuate a feeling of disconnect from an already disconnected population of students.

**The importance of adult connections.** All six students reported spending most of their school day with special education staff members who were associated with the substantially separate classroom, and they all reported varying connections with these adults, and other adults with whom they came in contact. It is important to note that the students who reported positive connections with adults, reported feelings of being understood and supported, and that the adult was both fair and fun. The students who reported negative relationships with adults reported feelings of failure, being misunderstood, and the idea of getting in trouble for something they perceived they did not and/or could not do.

There also seemed to be a connection in the data between school connectedness and adult connections. The students who reported more positive connections with adults in the building spoke more favorably about school than those who reported less positive connections with adults. Additionally, the characteristics the students described as positive, were not characteristics that could only be attributed to those adults associated with substantially separate programming. All adults working with this, or any, population of students can, and should, foster positive relationships with their students, built on a foundation of trust. Developing
relationships with students may help students feel more connected to their school community, and students who report feeling more connected to their school community, demonstrate higher levels of academic success, and increased social and emotional adjustment.

**The utilization of positive behavioral support systems.** Though the ALP classroom’s program philosophy and mission statement clearly outlines positive behavioral support systems, including a level system and token economy, none of the participants specifically mentioned this during their interviews. Several participants, however, did associate being in a substantially separate classroom with the ability to earn something, free time, a tangible reward, and/or computer time, for completing their work. One of the participants specifically highlighted the fact that he did not like being in a regular education classroom where the message from the teachers is, “Do your work, or else.”

Though none of the six students mentioned the level system, specifically, in their interviews, they all discussed getting in trouble as the one reason they would not be allowed to eat lunch in the cafeteria. If students in the substantially classroom get in trouble or do not attend their regularly scheduled class, they are assigned a lunch detention in the substantially separate classroom, or, sometimes, a full day in the substantially separate classroom. All but one of the participants reported having been assigned at least one lunch detention this school year. It is difficult to determine from the students’ answers if they are aware of the dichotomy that exists within this setup: the substantially separate classroom as a place that is utilized for a classroom (positive), a break space (positive), lunch detentions (negative), and potentially an all day assignment (negative).

It is also important to note that none of the six participants identified specific strategies being taught to them to address their behavioral and/or emotional needs, though all six students
identified being in a “strategies” class within the substantially separate classroom. All six students described the strategies class as a place where they could get their homework done, and where they had free time to go on the computer or go outside. Though the mission of the ALP program does specify working on building basic skill sets for the students within the classroom, the opportunity seems to have been missed to provide the students with the emotional and behavioral supports needed to access the mainstream inclusion setting, without the reoccurrence of detentions and suspensions.

**Small class sizes.** Four of the six students specifically mentioned their preference for a smaller class, and two students mentioned their hesitancy to enter the larger inclusion classes due to their size. However, five of the six students were hesitant to want to spend time in their assigned smaller classroom for several reasons: it separated them from their friends, it was “too loud,” they did not want to be with “the other kids in there,” and/or “it smelled funny.” In addition, as mentioned previously, the substantially separate classroom is sometimes used as a place of discipline, whether it is for a lunch detention, or a student having to spend the entire day in the classroom, rather than attend his inclusion classes. Though the students did not specifically mention this, it may be confusing to the students, and one may wonder what the benefit is of “taking away” inclusion academics as a punishment.

None of the six students identified academic reasons, peer conflict, or a fear of failure for not wanting to attend mainstream, inclusion classes. Rather, besides acknowledging that they feel more comfortable in a smaller setting, the participants seemed to want a classroom where the teacher was fair and flexible, understood their disability, was less strict, and allowed small rewards for work completion, rather than punishment for non compliance. These expectations
can all be met within a mainstream, inclusion classroom, rather than continuing to separate students from an inclusive learning environment.

**Attitude regarding school and learning.** All six students made comments during their interviews that implied a disengagement from their school community. Only one of the six students participate in after school activities, once a week for part of the school year, five of the six students did not report a connection with an adult outside of the substantially separate classroom, and none of the students reported that they enjoyed being in school, except when they were allowed to spend time with their friends or have free time.

In addition, five of the six students have more absences than the average student, four of the six students have been suspended at least once in the past school year, and five of the six students scored in the Needs Improvement area on standardized testing. The perceptions and experiences of this group of students match the research: students with EBD who are educated in a substantially separate classroom for all or part of their education report a disconnect from their school, increasing the number of absences and suspension, and decreasing social and emotional adjustment.

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

This study used Nussbaum’s (2006) capability theory to place the research within the context of social justice, in support of the idea that students with EBD who receive an education in a substantially separate classroom may be denied access to an education equal to their peers due to perceptions of isolation and a lack of school connectedness. In addition, the study used Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model (1979) to highlight the importance of school connectedness to a student’s academic, behavioral, and social success. According to Allen and Bowles (2012), “Individuals who report a sense of belonging to groups and networks are likely to exhibit
positive psychological functioning across a range of variables including self-esteem, self-efficacy, and life satisfaction” (p. 100). Both theories speak to the inclusion of all students in order to promote basic life functions and access, school connectedness, and academic, social, and emotional success.

**Nussbaum’s capability theory.** Nussbaum’s (2006) theory is critical to positioning students with disabilities within the social justice debate, as she argues that it is the responsibility of public education to empower disadvantaged people and supply them with life’s central entitlements.

Upon careful review and analysis of all of the participant’s responses, it is difficult to argue that in this particular setting the students with EBD are being afforded an opportunity equal to their non-emotionally or behaviorally disabled peers. Through their answers, the students voiced the importance of spending time with their peers, but felt that their time in the substantially separate classroom took them away from those opportunities. The students voiced their reasoning for their connections with adults, but did not report any connections with mainstream, inclusion teachers, and instead spoke of them as strict and, often, inflexible. Though the students are offered the opportunity to participate in after school activities, only one of them does, once a week for only part of the school year. Several of the students are on the trajectory to surpass the average rate of absenteeism, and several have been suspended from school within the first four months of the 2016/2017 school year.

Some may argue that in order to ensure equal access to all students, that the strategies the students are asking for, smaller class sizes, positive relationships with fair and supporting adults, positive behavioral support strategies, and access to breaks, can be accommodated in the mainstream inclusion setting, supported by trained staff.
**Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model.** Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model (1979) is
important to research on substantially separate education due to the emphasis it places on a
child’s sense of belonging to his or her environment. Sanchez et al. (2005) found that a sense of
belonging, in school specifically, meaningfully projected academic outcomes, motivation, effort,
low absenteeism, and an overall more positive attitude towards school and learning. In addition,
isolation has been associated with reports of emotional distress, psycho-social disturbance,
suicide and mental illness (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

It is also difficult to argue that this group of students perceives a sense of belonging
within their school community, and the data from the student interviews demonstrates a
perpetuation of the risk factors that plague this population of students. According to Cameron
(2006) and Silver et al. (2005), students relationships with their teachers, peers, and school
community influence their well-being and academic success, and predict social and emotional
adjustment. Overall, the students in this research did not report a positive attitude towards
school. They reported feeling bored, wanting to go home, having a difficult time sitting still
and/or concentrating, and/or getting in trouble. The record review demonstrates a higher rate of
absenteeism with this population of students as compared to both the school, and the state
average, and several of the students have been suspended more than once this school year, as
well as in the previous school year. Many of their academics show average to below average
scores. The data presented here demonstrates a group of students who do not feel connected to
their school and, therefore, based on research regarding school connectedness, are at a greater
risk of dropping out.
Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Literature Review

The literature review in chapter two highlights several concerns for students with EBD educated in substantially separate classrooms. The research on this population of students reports that these students have minimal interactions with peers, feel disconnected from their school environment, and do not make significant academic or social progress.

Peer interactions. According to Panacek and Dunlap (2003), students with EBD require access to “normal” social interactions and positive social experiences, however, they found that students with EBD “had little opportunity to engage in integrated school activities and their social networks in school were dominated by children and adults affiliated with special education” (p. 333). Aligned with Panacek and Dunlap’s findings, all of the participants in this study reported adult connections that were affiliated with special education and their substantially separate program, and they all reported spending most of their time with these adults throughout the school day. Also similar to Panacek and Dunlap’s findings, the participants did report that a majority of their peer connections and friendships were students outside of the substantially separate classroom, suggesting that their segregated school placement is the largest contributing factor to the diversity of their social network, not their emotional and behavioral challenges (Panacek & Dunlap, 2003). In this way, these students are being isolated from their non-disabled peers not due to their disability, but by their placement within the substantially separate classroom.

In addition, all of the participants reported that the time they have with their identified friends is outside of the substantially separate classroom, including in the cafeteria. Meaning, the more time a student spends in the substantially separate classroom, the less access he has to
his friends. The less access a student has to his friends, the more disconnected they feel from their school community.

**School engagement.** Students who feel connected to their school, their peers, and their teachers are less likely to dropout (Fall & Roberts, 2012). Individuals who report a sense of belonging to these groups are more likely to exhibit higher levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and life satisfaction (Allen & Bowles, 2012). However, individuals who feel isolated from social groups report higher levels of loneliness, emotional distress, depression, and suicidal ideations (Hagerty, et al., 1996).

One of the six participants specifically articulated that he does not feel connected to his school community. The remaining five students did not report that they did not feel connected to their school community, but many of their answers suggest their engagement in school is minimal. For example, only one of the students participates in after school activities, and the students do not, overall, discuss school as a positive experience, except when they get to spend time with their friends. All students reported that their main interactions with adults are with those who are special education staff associated with the substantially separate program, and many of the students have more absences and suspensions than their non-emotionally disabled peers.

Across all of the participants’ responses, it was evident that the students were lacking engagement in their school community, and the worry continues that by placing this population of students within a substantially separate program, the risk factors are being perpetuated, and the population becomes even more at risk.

**Academic progress.** Lane (2005) found that there is no significant progress in academics or behavior of the students with emotional or behavioral disorders educated in a self-
contained classroom. In fact, the study showed a significant decrease in written language, and a majority of the students do not make grade level progress (Lane, 2005).

Based on their first term report cards and the previous year’s standardized testing scores, all six participants fall into the below average to average range, though one may argue that the more days of school they continue to miss, due to absences and suspensions, the farther behind they will fall. In addition, if the students continue to feel disconnected from their school community, they are at a greater risk for dropping out (Fall & Roberts, 2012). Further researcher may be needed to determine, longitudinally, how this population of students progresses academically over time, especially as they continue on to high school.

Conclusion

This interpretive phenomenological analysis described the perceptions of school by students with EBD educated in a substantially separate classroom setting, and whether or not they reported connections to their teachers, peers, and school community.

The following research question guided this study:

1. What are the experiences of middle school students with emotional and behavioral disabilities who are educated in a substantially separate classroom?

This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, along with a review of student records in order to understand the shared school experiences of the specific population of students and was analyzed for themes.

Results from this study indicate that many of the risk factors (higher rates of absenteeism, higher rates of suspension, minimal connections with peers and/or adults, a lack of school engagement) associated with this population of students were present by placing them for all or
part of their day in a substantially separate classroom, while giving the perception that they need to be associated with the substantially separate programming in order to be successful.

**Significance of the Study**

Little has changed for students with EBD over the past thirty years, as they continue to face significant obstacles to success. It is essential that schools begin to make the changes necessary to ensure that all students are provided with equal educational experiences, that promote academic, social, emotional and behavioral growth. The findings from this study can help educators make informed decisions about placement and programming for students with EBD.

This study sought to investigate one group of students’ perceptions of their school experiences, along with their perceived connections to their school community. Through the use of interviews and record review, this researcher was able to illicit valuable information from students with EBD educated in substantially separate classrooms. The findings from this study can help educators make informed decisions about placement and programming for students with EBD.

An important finding from this study was the role that both teacher and peer relationships play. This theme, from across all six interviews, highlights the importance that students feel they have access to their peer group throughout the school day, and teachers who help and understand them, without giving up on them.

Another important finding from this study was that idea that many of the interventions the students identify as helpful, like positive behavior support systems and access to breaks and/or a quiet space, are strategies that can be implemented in the mainstream inclusion setting without removing students from the general population of students.
This study may also contribute to the research around the importance of social emotional learning. The continued increase of the achievement gap, higher rates of absenteeism and disciplinary action, and the continued placement of students with EBD in substantially separate classrooms, speak to the importance of providing all students with equal access to an education, while recognizing that though there are contributing factors beyond educators control, it is necessary and possible to educate the whole child. Students who are already at-risk, like those with EBD, need increased attention to coping skills and other components of SEL.

What can schools do? The students voices told us: ensure to include positive behavioral supports, investigate alternate strategies such as yoga and meditation, explore school rules and their meaning, and educate all school staff who work with students with EBD. Knowing and understanding why students may behave the way they do, while continuously working to offer students strategies to address their behavior, is a key component in ensuring the success of this population, and all students.

Limitations

The results from this study are important and relevant to those making decisions about the educational placement of students with EBD. However, the decision to use an IPA study with one group of students within one public school limits the ability to generalize the results. These results are one picture of one group of students in one school, and do not represent the perceptions of students with EBD educated in substantially separate classrooms in other public school districts.

In addition, this researcher is one of two assistant principals at the middle school where the research was conducted. Though this researcher is not responsible for the discipline of this specific population of students, she is one of the disciplinarians, and though she told students that
their answers were anonymous, there is still a level of uncertainty with the participants’ comfort with fully disclosing their feelings. It is difficult to determine if the students held back on any of their responses due to the researchers role within the building.

Validity

As noted above, the researcher must address concerns regarding the validity of the research. Yardley (2000) presents four criteria for assessing the validity and reliability of qualitative research; sensitivity to context, commitment and rigor, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance. Sensitivity was an inherent part in interviewing students with EBD and began early on in the research process. The researcher developed a rapport with both the participants, and their parents, and ensured the comfort of the participants throughout the interview process. The researcher made it clear to each student that he did not have to answer any question that he did not want to answer, and that all of his answers were completely confidential and would not be shared, especially with the staff members they mentioned during the interview process.

IPA also requires a personal commitment to the process, attentiveness to the participants, and a thorough and systematic approach to developing and analyzing research and interview topics and questions (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher was tremendously committed to the work involved in this analysis and has a deep understanding of the needs of the population of students.

Transparency and coherency refer to the clearly articulated stages of the research process and the cohesiveness and logic of the argument at hand (Yardley, 2000, 2008). The researcher intended that the study be consistent with the principals of IPA, and should not be contradictory in nature. In addition, the researcher clearly outlined the research process and outcomes in a way
that lent itself to reasonable understanding on behalf of the reader, while remaining true to the experience of the participants.

Yardley’s (2000, 2008) final principle, impact and importance, speaks to the implications of the research conducted, and whether it tells the reader something “interesting, important, or useful” (Smith et al., 2009). There are several implications regarding the work that needs to be done as it pertains to providing all students an equal access to education, especially those students with emotional and/or behavioral needs. In addition, this research will contribute to the breadth of research regarding the importance of a student’s connection to their school community.

**Future Research**

This research examined the perceptions of school by one group of students with EBD educated in substantially separate classrooms in one public middle school. Students with EBD are a population of students who are at high risk, and there is a great need to study this population of students in far greater detail than was possible than this study.

Further research should be done in schools that house substantially separate classrooms for students with EBD. Researchers should closely examine the success of these classrooms, and ask; do these students feel part of the school community? Do these students have equal access to educational opportunities throughout their school day? Do these students demonstrate higher rates of suspension and/or absenteeism? Are these students offered inclusive opportunities whenever possible? And, perhaps, most importantly, how do the students within the classrooms describe their own academic and social experiences at school? These are all questions that researchers and educators alike need to address in order to ensure that students with EBD are afforded an equal access to education.
In addition, further research could be conducted longitudinally to determine how the same group of students progresses socially and academically over time, and if the very same students who report these feelings, do drop out of school at a higher rate than their non-emotionally disabled peers. Additional research may also include interviews of the teachers and parents of students with EBD placed in substantially separate classrooms, as well as interviews of mainstream/regular education students to determine how their perceptions of school differ than those of students who are educated in substantially separate classrooms.

**Personal Comments and Recommendations**

I first began working, more formally, with students with EBD six years ago as a middle school assistant principal. At the time, the students with EBD were placed in a substantially separate classroom in a separate part of the building, and remained there for most, if not all, of their school day. Some of the students did not eat lunch in the cafeteria, and they were often discouraged from participating in after school activities. Some teachers referred to the students as “those students” or “his [the teacher’s] kids” and many often feared their behaviors. Observations of the classroom showed limited time on learning, and lessons that lacked high expectations for learning. It was then I realized my passion to help this population of students, and the system that is failing them.

For a population of students with higher dropout and incarceration rates, it is essential educators create an environment where students can foster positive relationships with peers and adults, and have access to all the opportunities the school has to offer. Throughout the research process, it was clear that the students knew they required alternate strategies in order to be successful, but still wanted to be a part of the school community.
How can we do this? It begins with prevention rather than failure. First, we must, in the early stages of education, incorporate into our schools a social emotional learning curriculum that helps students to understand how they feel, why they feel the way they feel, and what they can do when they are feeling anxious, angry, etc. We must also look at alternatives to suspension – Why do we send a student home who is already disengaged from school? Why do we continue to suspend students when we know that there is a definite correlation between suspension and dropout rates and rates of incarceration? Finally, we must explore alternate and innovative approaches to education that are very different from the traditional school day, and ask ourselves why are we still doing this? Why do we still have standard desks lined up in rows? Why aren’t students allowed to chew gum? Why do we still attend school 180 days a year from 7:30 – 2:30? We need to stop trying to fit all students into one mold, and instead, change the mold to fit all of the students.
References


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Appendix A

Permission Letter to Conduct Research to/From the Superintendent of Schools
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

September 14, 2016

Dear Superintendent:

As you know, I am currently a student researcher in the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University in Boston, MA, and I will soon begin conducting a research study for my doctoral thesis. I am researching the perceptions of school of students with emotional and/or behavioral needs who have spent all or part of their schooling in a substantially separate classroom. My goal is to contribute to the research regarding inclusion and school connectedness, and raise awareness regarding the social, behavioral and academic importance of a student’s connection to their school.

The purpose of this letter is to request permission to conduct research at your middle school. The proposed study would include interviews and a record review of the students with emotional and/or behavioral needs educated in the substantially separate classroom. Consent will be necessary from parents and participation will be voluntary. Following your approval, I will apply to the NEU Internal Review Board for further approval to conduct research with human subjects.

Please contact me directly at (774) 644-4729 or via email demers.k@husky.neu.edu if you have additional questions. Thank you in advance for your time and consideration, I look forward to hearing from you regarding this request.

Respectfully,

Katelyn Champine
Doctoral Candidate, College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University, Boston, MA
Appendix B

Recruitment Letter
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I hope this letter finds you well.

I would like to take this opportunity to introduce myself. My name is Katelyn Champine and I am a student in the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University in Boston, MA, and I will soon begin conducting a research study for my doctoral thesis. I am hoping your student will volunteer as a participant for this study.

I am researching the perceptions of school of students with emotional and or behavioral needs who have spent all or part of their schooling in a substantially separate classroom. My goal is contribute to the research regarding inclusion and school connectedness, and raise awareness regarding the social, behavioral and academic importance of a student’s connection to their school.

I am writing to request consideration for your student to participate in this study. If your student chooses to participate, I will interview your student about their experiences in school. The expected time commitment is between one to two hours over the course of two meetings. You will have the option of having a school adjustment counselor present during the interview.

In addition, I would also like to conduct a record review of your student’s school file. This record review will look specifically for patterns among grades, discipline referrals, and absenteeism.

If you are interested in learning more about this study, please email me at demers.k@husky.neu.edu.

Thank you for your consideration.

Best,

Katelyn Champine
Appendix C

Recruitment Letter
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Dear Parent/Guardian/Student,

Thank you for your interest in my research study.

As previously presented, I am researching the perceptions of school of students with emotional and or behavioral needs who have spent all or part of their schooling in a substantially separate classroom setting within a public school. My goal is contribute to the research regarding inclusion and school connectedness, and raise awareness regarding the social, behavioral and academic importance of a student’s connection to their school.

For this study, I am recruiting participants that meet the following criteria:

- Students diagnosed with an emotional and/or behavioral disability; who
- Have been educated for all of or part of their schooling in a substantially separate classroom within a public school

If your student decides to participate, I will have two interactions with him/her. The first interaction will be a short meeting to gather information about your student, have your student select a pseudonym to protect his/her identity, and give your student an opportunity to ask questions about the study. The second interaction will be an in-depth interview lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes regarding your student’s perceptions of school. This interview will be audio recorded and transcribed, and you will have the option of having your student’s school adjustment counselor sit in on the interview. I have attached the questions that I will ask your student so you can review them in advance. I will provide you/your student with the transcript of the interview and a summary of my interpretation of your student’s account. Your student will have the opportunity to share additional information and clarify points of inaccuracy.

In addition, with your consent, I would also like to conduct a record review of your student’s school file. This record review will look specifically for patterns among grades, discipline referrals, and absenteeism.

I would like to propose ________ as the time for our first meeting. Our meeting will take place in the library at the high school.

Please email me at demers.k@husky.neu.edu or call me 774-644-4729 to confirm this meeting and/or if you have any questions.

Thank you again.
Best,

Katelyn Champine
Appendix D

Informed Consent Form
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Title: Perceptions of School by Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders: A Qualitative Investigation of School Connectedness within a Substantially Separate Classroom

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of school of students with emotional and/or behavioral needs who have spent all or part of their schooling in a substantially separate classroom setting within a public school. My goal is contribute to the research regarding inclusion and school connectedness, and raise awareness regarding the social, behavioral and academic importance of a student’s connection to their school. The study will involve two points of contact with the researcher. The first point of contact will be an initial meeting lasting approximately 30 minutes, and the second point of contact will be the in-depth interview with the researcher lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The interviews will be audio recorded for transcription and analysis purposes.

For this study, I am recruiting participants in middle school who have been diagnosed with an emotional and/or behavioral disability and who have been educated for all of or part of their schooling in a substantially separate classroom within a public school

Procedure: If the student decides to take part in this study, along with parental consent, the student will participate in in individual interview at the middle school immediately following the school day. The interviews will audio recorded and transcribed into writing. All materials will be stored securely, and the student’s name will be omitted, replaced by a pseudonym of the participant’s choice.

In addition, the researcher will conduct a record review of your student’s school file. This record review will look specifically for patterns among grades, discipline referrals, and absenteeism.

Risks: The primary risk associated with this study is the discomfort the participant may feel when discussing their school experiences. The participant and/or their guardian may choose to have the student’s school adjustment counselor present during the interview. In addition, the researcher will respect participant’s boundaries during the interview, and allow the student to skip questions he/she does not wish to answer.

Benefits: There will be no direct benefit to the participant for taking part in this study. However, the goal of this research is contribute to the research regarding inclusion and school connectedness, and raise awareness regarding the social, behavioral and academic importance of a student’s connection to their school.

Confidentiality: The participant’s part in this study will be confidential. Only the researcher will see the information about you. If the student chooses to participate, he/she will select a pseudonym that will be used throughout the study to protect the student’s identity. Any reports,
presentations, or discussions associated with this study will utilize the pseudonym and will not include any personal information that can be directly linked to the student. The interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed into writing, then coded to identify themes within and across the interviews. All physical documents associated with the research will be stored in a locked file cabinet and all electronic files will be stored in a password protected online file storage program. Only the research will have access to the files and all data will be destroyed after seven years.

**Voluntary Participation:** The student’s participation in this study is voluntary and the student may choose not to participate or withdraw at any time. The students are not obligated to answer any interview questions he/she does not feel comfortable answering.

**Contact Person:** Please contact Katelyn Champine at (774) 644-4729 or via email at demers.k@husky.neu.edu

I give my student permission to take part in this research.

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Katelyn Champine, Student Researcher  Date
Appendix E

Interview Guide
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

1. What does your typical school day look like?
   Possible prompts: How much time do you spend in one classroom? What does lunch look like? How do you spend time with during the school day?

2. What afterschool activities do you participate in?
   Possible prompts: Clubs? Sports? Homework help? If you go right home, what do you do once you get there? If you do not go right home, where do you spend your time?

3. Who do you spend the most time with during the school day?
   Possible prompts: Specific teachers or students? Who do you sit with at lunch?

4. How do you feel about going to school every day?
   Possible prompts: Do you like school? Do you feel successful at school?

5. Do your teachers have high expectations for your learning?

6. What do you feel are the differences between being in the substantially separate classroom versus the inclusion classroom?

7. What is your favorite part of the school day? What is your least favorite part of the school day? Why?

8. Who do you spend time with in school? Who do you spend time with outside of school?
Appendix F

Participant Questionnaire
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Personal Information

Today’s date: ________________________________

Full name: ________________________________

Pseudonym: ________________________________

Date of birth: ________________________________

Tell me about your educational background. (When did the student begin in the substantially separate classroom? When did the student start joining inclusion classes? What classes do they join now for inclusion classes?)

________________________________________

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