SECONDARY LEVEL TEACHERS OF STUDENTS WITH EMOTIONAL DISTURBANCE:

AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

A Thesis Presented
by
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to
The School of Education

in partial fulfillment for the requirements
for a degree of

Doctor of Education

in the field of

Educational Leadership

College of Professional Studies

Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts

June 2018
Abstract

Students with emotional disturbance continue to have the most dismal outcomes when compared to all other groups of students. Addressing their complex and significant academic and therapeutic challenges can be a daunting task for the secondary level general education teachers charged with their instruction. Teachers often report feeling unprepared, unsupported, frustrated and powerless at a time when federal mandates have increased their roles, responsibilities, and accountabilities. The overarching question that drove this study is: “What are the beliefs and lived experiences of secondary level, content-area teachers regarding the instruction of students with emotional disturbance?” In order to gain a rich and deep accounting of this phenomenon, four general education high school teachers at a small, suburban high school in Massachusetts shared their stories through a semi-structured interview process. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to capture the richness of each participant’s experiences. Throughout this discourse, three themes emerged: (1) teachers’ emotional responses to the day-to-day challenges they face (i.e., difficulties with classroom management, consistently meeting academic expectations, and maintaining a positive attitude under very unpredictable conditions), (2) the beliefs teachers hold about themselves and students with emotional disturbance (i.e., the importance of the curriculum, relationships, responsibility, fairness and equity), and (3) the strategies and interventions they employ to maximize teaching and learning (i.e., practical, effective, and proven strategies that are supported by relevant and ongoing training and professional development). Not only are these findings consistent with the literature, they also provide an important opportunity for the teachers to give voice to their daily instructional challenges, specifically when instructing students with emotional disturbance.

Keywords: teacher beliefs, teacher experiences, students with emotional disturbance, curriculum
DEDICATION

For those who have supported my efforts throughout this process, I am extremely grateful. I have learned that there is no expiration date on learning, no greater joy than being surrounded by those who are caring and supportive, and no more satisfying experience than successfully attaining a goal that was challenging yet personally meaningful.

To my sister Joan, you can now comfortably respond “yes” when someone asks if your sister is a doctor. To my sons, Michael, Timothy and Patrick, you truly understand the value of family, hard work and persistence, and the celebration of accomplishment… and yes…I do love schools! To Jackie, thanks for taking the time to be present on May 25, 2018. To Ava, your artwork served as extra insurance for a positive outcome. To my husband, Tony, thanks for listening to my grumbling, reminding me that everything would work out well, and pushing me to assure that I get to the finish line.

In the words of Theodore Roosevelt, “Nothing in the world is worth having or worth doing unless it means effort, pain, difficulty… I never in my life envied a human who led an easy life. I have envied a great many people who led difficult lives and led them well”.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This has been a long and sometimes circuitous journey; however, I am extremely grateful to Dr. Kelly Conn, my advisor. She was always positive in her encouragement, quick to respond, and spot-on with her advisement. I would also like to thank Dr. Christopher Unger and Dr. William Whalen for their expertise and thoughtful guidance. It must also be acknowledged that Dr. David Heimbecker propelled me into this academic endeavor and continuously encouraged me throughout the process. Lastly, I am most grateful to the teachers who participated in this project. They truly make a difference in the lives of students — all students.
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Chapter I: Introduction

As an educational practitioner, it has been my experience that, not only do students with emotional disturbance struggle in school, so too do the teachers charged with their instruction. It is not uncommon to hear inferential statements regarding students with emotional disturbance, specifically regarding their behaviors. Too often, statements such as “the student is not motivated, lazy, can’t get along with others, refuses to comply, will not complete school work” have been used to describe students with emotional disturbance. Teachers report that when working with challenging students, they often have strong emotional responses such as feeling worried, hopeless, powerless and stuck.

Alex Shevrin, a teacher in an alternative school in Vermont, reiterates this sentiment as she shares her thoughts about working with challenging students.

To me, the challenge about challenging kids is the way that I feel working with them. Interacting with these students can bring up all kinds of emotions: sadness because of their pain, defensiveness if a student is criticizing or attacking me, protectiveness over the other students being disrupted, and even annoyance that my day didn’t go as I planned…. These are the days that push on my best intentions and idealistic visions…. when reality and philosophy collide, and it feels like my challenging students are behind the steering wheel and I’m just along for the ride. (Shevrin, 2017, para 1-2).

Colleagues from many school districts concur that the experience shared by Alex Shevrin is quite typical and reflective of what is reported by teachers. Over the last two decades, my school district has struggled to effectively meet the unique, challenging, and complex needs of students with emotional disturbance. We have added support staff (e.g., school psychologists,
adjustment counselors, social workers, and behavioral specialists), developed in-house therapeutic programs, provided professional development/training and offered consultative services. Despite these efforts, this group of students continues to demonstrate lower academic achievement both in the classroom and on high stakes tests (i.e., Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) and more disruptive behaviors compared to typical peers, particularly when placed in general education classrooms. As a result, these students have often been relegated to costly out-of-district, therapeutic placements yet they are rarely re-integrated back into their home schools once they leave the district. Not only do general education teachers report a sharp increase in the number of students with emotional and behavioral disorders now placed in their classrooms, they are also concerned about the chronic, intense and time-consuming nature of their concomitant behaviors. Consequently, general education teachers are now spending more time on discipline as their roles, responsibilities, and culpabilities for the outcomes of all students continues to expand.

**Statement of the Problem**

The literature confirms the notion that the instruction of students with emotional disturbance may be the most daunting task for general education teachers since these students often present with significantly challenging academic and therapeutic needs, yet they are required to meet the same high academic standards and social-emotional expectations as their non-disabled peers (Bradley, Doolittle, & Barlotta, 2008; Duchnowski & Kutash, 2011; Kern, Hilt-Panahon, & Sokol, 2009; Landrum, Tankersley, & Kauffman, 2003; Wagner et al., 2006). Despite substantial instructional and/or therapeutic supports, students with emotional disturbance continue to have considerably dismal outcomes when compared to all other groups of students, including students with disabilities (Bradley et al., 2008; Duchnowski & Kutash, 2011). It is
notable that they have higher rates of retention, absenteeism, suspension and expulsion, academic failure, school drop-out, poor post-school outcomes, and relational difficulties (Cullinan & Sabornie, 2004; Lane, Pierson, & Givner, 2004; Sutheland, Lewis-Palmer, Stichter & Morgan, 2008). Whereas many students with such intensive needs were previously placed in out-of-district programs or specialized classrooms, the burden for student success has now shifted to general teachers who may feel ill-equipped to adequately meet the formidable and idiosyncratic student needs.

Research Problem

The numbers of students identified with emotional disturbance continues to increase at a time when national education reform initiatives are placing increasing responsibility on general education teachers (Niesyn, 2009). Initiatives such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA) and Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) were enacted to improve the performance, outcomes and experiences for all students. There is also an unyielding move toward inclusionary instructional practices (i.e., placement of all students in general education classrooms to the greatest extent possible). This initiative is based on the belief and supported by research that children, particularly those with disabilities, do better in general education settings with typically-developing peers (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). This means that general education teachers must provide increased access to the general curriculum for all students, prepare them for participation in high-stakes assessments, provide tiered and differentiated instructional supports in general education settings, and be evaluated on and responsible for student growth (Bradley et al., 2008; Duchnowski & Kutash, 2011; Kern et al., 2009; Landrum et al., 2003; Wagner et al., 2006). Although most general education teachers philosophically support
inclusion as a general concept, they may hold differing beliefs and attitudes based on the nature of the student’s disability (Avramidis & Norwich, 2010). Consequently, teachers report that students with emotional disturbance are the least desirable of all students, including students with disabilities, to have in general education classrooms (Wagner & Davis, 2006). Many general education teachers feel unprepared, unqualified and unsupported in the instruction of students with emotional disturbance, particularly at the secondary level where necessary supports may be inadequate (Lane, Carter, Pierson, & Glaeser, 2006). What is more, teacher beliefs and experiences may serve to filter, interpret, or displace expectations and responsibilities, particularly regarding specific education reform initiatives (Bryan, 2012; Pajaras, 1992). As a result, general education teachers may actively resist the placement of students with emotional disturbance in their classrooms (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Wagner & Davis, 2006). This is important since the concept of successful inclusion is dependent upon positive teacher’s beliefs, attitudes, and experiences (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002).

To address the complex, chronic, and often unpredictable challenges posed by students with emotional disturbance, teachers often struggle to meet their daily responsibilities, notably adequately covering the curriculum — a curriculum that has been expanded to now include social-emotional skill-building competencies as well as content mastery. As both the number of students with emotional disturbance as well as the severity of their symptomology increases, teachers report spending more time on classroom management than actual instruction. As a result, they are often unsatisfied, overwhelmed, and ill-prepared.

**Justification for Research Problem**

“The ‘purpose’ in this era of educational reform must be “the abiding commitment to raise the bar and close the gap for all students, regardless of background” (Fullan, 2009, p. 8).
Ultimately, the solitary responsibility to meet the multiple, pervasive, and complex needs of students with emotional disturbance rests with the nations’ public schools, rather than any other public sector agency (Malmgren & Meisel, 2002). Fullan (2009) reminds us that and this includes students with emotional disturbance. Likewise, Maurice Elias, Director of Rutgers University Social-Emotional Learning Lab, reiterates that schools “have a moral and ethical imperative” to address both the academic and social-emotional competencies of all students. In fact, there may be an added urgency for secondary level teachers to assure that students be well-prepared with academic capabilities and social-emotional skills to successfully negotiate the looming demands of adult life (i.e., college and career readiness). There continues to be an unrelenting move toward increased roles and responsibilities for secondary level general education teachers in this endeavor; therefore, it is important that secondary level, content-area teachers have opportunities to share their beliefs and the meanings they attach to the day-to-day challenges they face regarding the instruction of students with emotional disturbance. In this way, we may gain a better understanding of their difficulties and concerns whereby more efficacious responses for both teachers and students may be identified, supported by adequate and practicable training and professional development, and realistically implemented.

**Deficiencies in the Evidence**

Teachers’ beliefs, experiences, and the corresponding influence on instructional practices have been a topic of study for more than twenty years, yet there are only a few, modest investigations of the influence teacher beliefs and experiences regarding the instruction of students with emotional disturbance (Ashton, 2015; Herron & Samarapungavan, 2011). Existing research on teacher beliefs and instructional practices has generally been content-based (e.g., math, literacy technology), specific to subgroups of students (e.g., students with learning
disabilities, English learners, high risk students, etc.), accountability issues (e.g., teacher evaluations) and educational contexts (e.g., grade levels, special education vs. general education classrooms) (Buehl & Beck, 2015). Although veteran teachers have weighed in on this topic, the vast majority of contributors have been preservice teachers or teachers new to the field (Buehl & Beck, 2015). Very few studies have explored the experiences that general education teachers have or the explanations they hold for the challenging behaviors of their students, particularly at the secondary level (Andreou & Rapti, 2010; Poulou & Norwich, 2002). The majority of studies have been descriptive rather than experiential and they have focused on academic achievement rather than social-emotional factors (Erbas, Aslan, Gulec, & Dunlap, 2010; Kulinnna, 2008).

Nespor (1987) adds that many factors may affect teaching and learning; however, “little attention has been accorded to the structure of teachers’ beliefs about their roles, their students, the subject matter areas they teach, and the schools they work in” (p. 317). There is a glaring lack of information on the topic of teacher beliefs, explanations and experiences regarding secondary level general education teachers of students with emotional disturbance. Therefore, a review of the literature includes representative articles that include teacher beliefs and experiences, students with emotional disturbance, challenging behavior, and the influence of national initiatives on teachers.

Riley (2010) strongly suggests that improving outcomes for students is a complex task, which must include the identification of the attitudes and beliefs that affect instructional practices. Furthermore, when attributions regarding students remain unchallenged, biases or misattributions may infiltrate daily instructional practices and reduce learning opportunities with long-lasting negative effects (Riley, 2010, p. 238).
Relating the Discussion to the Audience

The primary aim of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the beliefs general education, secondary level teachers hold and the lived experiences they have regarding the instruction of students with emotional disturbance. However, results could also benefit general and special education teachers as well as building-based and district-level administrators since they also share responsibility for the outcomes of this group of students. In 2015, the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents (M.A.S.S.) made it clear that all educators should understand that academic instruction is necessary but not sufficient. Educators have an added responsibility to meet the social-emotional needs of students as well as incorporate social-emotional learning into their instructional repertoires. Confirming the complexity of this issue, M.A.S.S. reiterated that one in five children struggle with significant behavioral health problems that are complicated by higher academic expectations, social media intrusions, exposure to trauma, and decreased access to social-emotional resources and interventions. Therefore, all educators must find a way to effectively address the significant challenges posed by students with emotional disturbance at a time characterized by increased pressure (i.e., emphasis on accountability, the implementation of new curriculum requirements (i.e., Massachusetts Standards for Social-Emotional Learning), technological advances, reduction in funding, and increased criticism regarding public education in general). In this era of accountability, there is also an increased emphasis on reflective practice — a time when teachers are encouraged to take a more critical look at “taken-for-granted” beliefs, assumptions, and expectations. Considering the scope, intensity and challenges inherent in the instruction of students with emotional disturbance, a benefit may be realized when the level of consciousness is raised, the status quo is questioned, and instructional practices are objectively filtered and framed. This may facilitate the
identification and facilitation of sound, strength-based classroom strategies and interventions that are truly helpful to teachers and support positive student outcomes.

**Significance of Research Problem**

In general, decades of research regarding teacher beliefs, experiences, and the resultant role on instructional practices provide strong evidence that the topic is important, ongoing, and unresolved (Skott, 2015). In fact, Nespor (1987) contends that in order ‘to understand teaching from teachers’ perspectives we have to understand the beliefs with which they define their work” (p. 323). Due to a number of current, contextual considerations (e.g., the increasing number of students with emotional disturbance, stricter accountability measures, and a focus on inclusion and differentiated instruction), it is important to gain a deeper understanding of teachers’ beliefs and lived experiences regarding students with emotional disturbance, particularly at the secondary level. Therefore, this study aims to: (1) add to the body of knowledge on the topic (2) gain a deep understanding of the lived experiences and meanings attached to those experiences regarding this phenomenon, and (3) take note of the instructional practices currently implemented in the classroom in response to social-emotional and behavioral challenges. This is important since these teachers hold a key role in addressing and improving students’ academic and social-emotional functioning; therefore, it is imperative that we understand what they believe, how they explain or interpret such beliefs, and how their experiences influence the attitudes and dispositions they hold toward this group of students. The in-depth conversations may uncover beliefs that may be contextually and culturally-determined, swayed by political policies, influenced by the demands of instruction and classroom management, and/or susceptible to a personal perception of a particular disability (Fives & Buehl, 2012; Soodak, Podell & Lehman, 1998).
Positionality Statement

The positionality statement reflects the researcher’s rational for conducting the study as well as the personal perceptions regarding the problem of practice. In this case, the problem of practice is the daunting task general education teachers face every day in their classrooms regarding the instruction of students with emotional disturbance. The rationale is to give voice to these teachers in order to better understand their personal experiences regarding this phenomenon. It is important to note that in this case, the researcher is the superintendent in the district under study with the responsibility for teachers’ performance and student success. The relationship is further complicated in that the researcher also served as the school psychologist at the high school, the Director of Special Education, and the Director of Pupil Personnel Services in the same district. In those capacities, there was an enduring focus on student placement, programming, and therapeutic support, notably for students with emotional disturbance.

As an educator in the district for over 20 years, my experiences as a psychologist had the most influence on the topic under study. The role was diverse to include assessment, oversight of team meetings, the determination of special education eligibility, recommendations for strategies and interventions, parent outreach, and staff collaboration. For me, the therapeutic responsibilities were the most formidable, yet the most satisfying. I was able to truly get to know students on a personal level, hear their stories, and empathize with their plights. I typically met with students individually — with no distractions nor demands unlike their classroom teachers. There were times that I shuddered to think that some ‘very disregulated’ students would have to go back to class with the expectation that they complete their school work and maintain appropriate behavior. Admittedly, there were times I crossed my fingers and held my breath that
all would be right. My one lament, however, was not offering the teachers the same opportunities to share their frustrations, apprehensions, and sometimes disappointments. This study aims to give voice to those teachers who worked with diligence and care — often under difficult conditions.

Acknowledging my personal beliefs and experiences, care was taken throughout this study to eliminate both personal and professional bias by engaging in a continuing reflective and reflexive practice throughout all phases of the research process.

**Research Question**

Given the link between teachers’ beliefs, experiences and instructional practices, the overarching goal of this study is to gain a deeper, more precise understanding of this phenomenon. The overarching question that drove this study is: “What are the beliefs and lived experiences of secondary level, content-area teachers regarding the instruction of students with emotional disturbance?” Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), four general education high school teachers at a small, suburban high school in Massachusetts shared their stories.

**Definitions of Key Concepts**

For the purposes of this project, the following definitions will be used:

- **Beliefs**: “states of mind that link a person or group or object or concept with one or more attributes, and this is held by the believer to be true” (Clore & Palmer, 2009, p. 5)
- **Experiences**: “to do or see (something) or have (something) happen to you or to feel or be affected by (something)(Merriam-Webster Learners’ Dictionary)
- **Students with emotional disturbance**: For the purposes of this study a broader, teacher-prescribed definition for “students with emotional disturbance” will be used. The general
definition includes but is not limited to students who exhibit behaviors that are more
frequent and severe than typically demonstrated by same-age peers. These behaviors may
include but are not limited to the following: chronically-disruptive behaviors that
interfere with the teaching process or impede the learning of others (e.g., talking out,
getting out of seat, acting in a disrespectful, harassing and argumentative manner, rule-
breaking, difficulty getting along with others, etc.), lack of preparedness, inconsistent
schoolwork or attendance, or lack of motivation). Although not a prerequisite, students
may also meet the criteria for emotional disturbance according to the Diagnostic and
Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) and/or meet eligibility
criteria for special education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education
Improvement Act (IDEIA 2004).

- **Attribution:** “attribution is the process by which people use information to make
  inferences about the causes of behavior or events” (Roeckelein, 2006, p. 51)

**Theoretical Framework**

This section is a comprehensive review of attribution theory, which is the theoretical
framework that guides this study. Attribution theory provides a sound and longstanding
framework for the examination of the relationship between the causal thinking of teachers
regarding students with emotional disturbance, the influence of beliefs on personal experiences,
and the subsequent effect of such beliefs on instructional practice and student outcomes. Based
on Weiner’s attribution theory (1980), when teachers have opportunities to reflect upon their
beliefs, explanations and experiences and they are able to articulate detailed descriptions in their
own words, they may find explicit evidence relating to influences on actual instructional
practices (He & Levin, 2008).
Attribution Theory

This theory has its roots in social cognitive theory and is comprised of a complex array of interrelated components rather than a singular concept (Greene & Mitchel, 1979; Martinko & Thompson, 1998; Kelley & Michela, 1980). It is a broad group of theories that describe a socially perceived process whereby behavioral consequences are filtered through social inference and causal judgments (Crittenden, 1989, p. 2). Essentially, attribution theory as described by Weiner (1984) is an attempt to gain a clearer understanding of events, behaviors, and outcomes. Simply put, it is a subjective way to explain how people make sense of their own behaviors or the behaviors of others. Attributions can be made about oneself (intrapersonal), others (interpersonal), or groups (intergroup) in order to control a situation, share understandings or beliefs, make predictions, or guide behaviors (Fosterling & Rudolph, 1988). Greenhaus and Parasuraman (1993) add that attributions are developed when people are required to determine a reason or cause of an action, particularly in an area of performance or achievement, notably in a school context. Attribution assumptions will be made when the available information appears to be ambiguous, insufficient, or incomplete; therefore, people will attempt to make sense of what they observe (Martinko & Thomson, 1998; Zuckerman, 1978). It should be noted that individuals tend to prefer causal explanations that align with their existing beliefs and values which, in turn, influence their affect, attitudes, and decisions (Martinko & Thompson, 1998); however, such causal analysis may actually result in errors in one’s thinking (Heider, 1958). Heider (1958), a widely cited attribution theorist, suggested that the ordinary person continually engages in a process of drawing inferences in order to find a simple and predictable way to make sense of confusing and sometimes contradictory behaviors. Attributions as defined by Heider (1958), are
attempts to “predict and control the world by assigning transient behavior to relatively unchanging dispositions” (p. 79). Essentially, his classical attribution theory was an attempt to shed light on the need to both understand and control one’s environment with a primary focus on the personal traits and motives of individuals. Accordingly, attributions can have a significant influence on one’s expectations, emotions, and behaviors (Martinko & Thompson, 1998).

Likewise, Heider (1958) suggested that human beings have a basic, and perhaps subconscious, tendency to place responsibility and blame on others for negative results or blame external circumstances for personal failures. Furthermore, personal choice or intention may be particularly salient when parceling out blame, praise, or responsibility (Heider (1958). In other words, if circumstances were perceived to be beyond one’s control (teacher or student), there would be no cause for blame or personal responsibility. In contrast, if one was perceived to have intention, choice or control, then blame or responsibility could be ascribed. For example, if the teacher were to attribute a student’s challenging behaviors to a biological origin or a skill deficit rather than to a willful, non-compliant personal disposition, it would be more likely that no personal blame or responsibility would be assigned to either the teacher or the student. If, however, the teacher perceived that the student purposely displayed a lack of effort or motivation to control disruptive behavior, responsibility and blame would be assigned to the student and a more punitive response would be likely (Chaplain, 2003).

Kelley (1967) expanded the work of Heider by attempting to determine if the etiology of behavior originated from the person, the object, or the situational context. Specifically, he posited that individuals tend to consider factors such as consensus (i.e., behaviors that are similar or dissimilar to others in the same situation or context), consistency (i.e., the same behavior is exhibited over time within the same situation or context), and distinctiveness (i.e., the
comparison of one’s behavior to others in similar situations of contexts) when developing causal attributions. Once these factors are considered, the individual will provide an explanation for causation based on the person, the stimulus, or the situation (Martinko & Thompson, 1998). Interestingly, these factors are consistent with the Individual with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA) eligibility criteria for emotional disturbance whereby students struggle with social-emotional-behavioral functioning over a long period of time and to a marked degree when compared to typically-developing peers under comparable conditions.

Although Kelley (1973) posits that there may be multiple factors involved in attribution development, he suggests that teachers tend to be satisfied with a plausible, satisfactory, yet unitary explanation that would not require further consideration of multiple causes. Kelley (1971) cautions, however, that a lack of knowledge regarding alternative causal explanations (i.e., ‘fundamental attribution error’) as well as a lack of understanding regarding the negative effects of labeling students may contribute to the presumption that no further exploration is required. Riley (2010) emphasizes that students, such as those with emotional disturbance, may become stigmatized when teachers attach meanings to student behaviors or characteristics that are demeaning, devalued, and discrediting (p. 233). Chaplain (2003) proposes that the tendency to blame the student rather than the situation or attribute success to oneself and blame others for failure does serve to preserve self-esteem while justifying one’s reasoning (Chaplain, 2003).

Weiner’s attribution theory (1974, 1980, 1985) continues to evolve and influence educational practice. Pansu and Jouffre (2008) support Weiner’s notion that causal attributions involve both cognitive and emotional components that can significantly influence personal relationships and social judgments. Unlike Kelley’s model that focuses on the process of attribution formation, Weiner’s model tends to focus on the explanation one has for personal
behaviors and outcomes. Essentially, attribution theory as described by Weiner (1984) is an attempt to understand events, behaviors, and outcomes that contribute to attitude development and behavioral responses. Weiner (1995) posits that “causal beliefs give rise to inferences about personal responsibility, which, in turn, generates feelings of anger and sympathy…then directs social behavior toward others (p. 3). According to Weiner (1985), one’s explanations are based on the perceived cause of success or failure and whether this causality is internally or externally driven. In other words, Weiner’s (1979) attribution theory focuses on the degree to which a person perceives control over the action or formulates an explanation, which subsequently influences affect, effort, expectations, motivation, and persistence (Kelly & Mickella, 1980; Weiner, 1978). Weiner (1993, 1995, 2006) notes that causal attributions drive the judgments that people make about the problem, how the problem should be solved, and who is responsible for solving the problem. The causes for events, behaviors, or outcomes may be external (i.e., not under one’s control), internal (i.e., due to inherent individual characteristics), stable (i.e., constant over time), unstable (i.e., can change over time, or controllable), (i.e., under the volition of the actor). For example, in the case of students with emotional disturbance, external factors could include biological predisposition, instructional mismatches, or family issues whereas internal factors could include aptitude, temperament, talent or intellectual capacity. Too often however, teachers blame the family for misbehavior (i.e., external cause) or the child for volitional and willful behavior (i.e., internal cause) (Miller, Ferguson & Moore, 2002; Ross & Fletcher, 1985).

The integration of Kelley’s attribution model (i.e., informational cues to develop attributions) and Weiner’s attributions model (i.e., the reliance on the motivational consequences
of attributions) aptly serve to incorporate the two key areas to be investigated in this research project: the attribution process and the influence of attributions on instructional practice.

**Organization of the Document**

This document is comprised of the following five sections: introduction and theoretical framework, literature review, research design, report of research findings, and discussion of research findings. Contained within the first section is a comprehensive review of the theoretical framework, attribution theory, which guides this investigation. Literature and research pertaining to the national and state initiatives to improve student outcomes with increased responsibility for teachers, the characteristics and outcomes of students with emotional disturbance, and the alignment of teachers’ beliefs and actual instructional practices will be examined. Following the literature review is a qualitative research design section that focuses on teachers’ beliefs, explanations, experiences, and instructional practices regarding students with emotional disturbance. In the research design section, the data collection and analysis techniques are introduced, as is the plan for preserving the validity and credibility of the research, and the plans to protect the rights of the research participants. Next, the research findings will be presented, examined and explained thoroughly. Finally, the researcher offers some implications for educational practice.

**Summary**

Currently, as an administrator and educational leader, there appears to be a professional as well as a moral duty to close any academic and/or social-emotional gaps for all students, including students with emotional disturbance. Integral to this process is the recognition of the importance of integrating teachers’ beliefs and experiences. Denzin (2010) makes it clear that the qualitative research process is intended to create change by facilitating new ways of viewing,
interpreting and responding. Therefore, the proposed research may actually have the potential to improve instructional practices beyond the scope of this project.

The next section provides a comprehensive overview of research that includes numerous, relevant, and influential factors related to the study.
Chapter II: Literature Review

Ridley (2008) states that the purpose of the literature review is to draw from the current body of knowledge in order to gain a deeper contextual understanding of the phenomenon as well as to identify gaps in research regarding that phenomenon (p. 2). The literature review also serves to identify relevant theories, methodological traditions, and important variables that influence the topic, provide the background and justification for the research, and guide the proposed study (Hart & Whalon, 2012; Maxwell, 2005; Ridley, 2008).

A review of existing literature suggests that the investigation of the following three areas may shed light on the interplay between the beliefs and experiences of secondary level teachers and their instructional practices regarding students with emotional disturbance. These three areas include legislative initiatives that drive instructional practice and tie teacher responsibility to student achievement, the unique and complex challenges posed by students with emotional disturbance, and the influence of teachers’ beliefs to their instructional practices.

The concepts embedded in attribution theory noted in the chapter on the theoretical framework guided this literature review. Although attribution theory is comprised of numerous and interrelated components, in simple terms, it posits that people continually attempt to make sense of their behaviors and the behaviors of others, particularly when they are required to determine a reason or to take a course of action (Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1993). In turn, personal beliefs, values, and experiences tend to influence affect, attitudes, expectations, emotions, decisions, and behaviors (Martinko & Thompson, 1998). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that one must understand not only the beliefs that one holds, but the meaning that is attached to these beliefs. Feldman and Weiss (2010) argue that this process must be critical, self-reflective, active, and ongoing in order to better align theory and practice. A review of the
literature identified factors that may influence teachers’ beliefs, explanations, and experiences regarding the instruction of students with emotional disturbance at the secondary level to include:

- federal and state legislative initiatives regarding instructional practices and accountability for the outcomes students with emotional disturbance
- assumptions about the nature of emotional disturbance (i.e., definition, dispositions, characteristics, and challenges
- characteristics of emotional disturbance that teachers find most challenging
- personal beliefs, explanations, and experiences regarding the instruction of students with emotional disturbance
- research regarding best practices for the instruction of students with emotional disturbance

**Legislative Initiatives**

This section addresses the influence of legislative initiatives on teachers’ beliefs, experiences, and responsibilities regarding the instruction of students with emotional disturbance as well as the outcomes for these students. It is clear that legislative initiatives to improve outcomes for all students, including students with emotional disturbance, continue to place responsibility for student performance on the shoulders of general education teachers. In recent years a movement, referred to as education reform, was initiated to improve student learning with a major focus on the quantitative measurement of student performance and graduation rates. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) imposed standards that focused on accountability, high expectations, instruction by highly-qualified teachers, participation in high stakes assessments, and reliance on evidence-based practices
for all students, including those with emotional disturbance (Duchnowski & Kutask, 2011). Moreover, the President’s Commission on Excellence in Special Education (2002) urged that in an era of educational reform, students must be equipped with the requisite skills to transition into adult life (Lane et al., 2006). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA) mandated that students with disabilities receive individually designed accommodations in order to provide full access to and meaningful participation in the general education curriculum (Friend & Bursuck, 2006). In 2010, the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers introduced the Common Core Standards to provide a nationally consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn. A number of states, including Massachusetts, voluntarily adopted these standards and incorporated an aligned assessment system to measure student achievement (e.g., Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers). In December 2015, Every Student Succeeds Act was signed into law to replace NCLB and it is set for implementation in 2017-18. One key component of this legislation is the expectation that all students, notably those who demonstrate a significant lag in achievement and graduation rates, demonstrate proficiency.

It has become clear that proficiency in academic content is necessary but not sufficient to ensure successful student outcomes. Employers stress that skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, cooperation, empathy, and flexibility are essential for success in the workplace, yet these are the very skills that students with emotional disturbance have difficulty attaining consistently and/or competently. As a result, current educational reforms now include social-emotional learning as a priority.
In response to notable and continuing increases in student mental health issues, trauma and disciplinary actions, a research study was conducted to identify the most efficacious way to implement social emotional-learning in public schools in Massachusetts. The Rennie Center, an educational research and policy organization, in collaboration with the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) found “tensions between accountability and assessment – two important concepts that are often conflated in education but have unique implications for Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)” (Rennie Center, 2015, p. 5). In other words, although some form of progress monitoring is important to assess and improve practice, implementation of the social-emotional learning mandates without adequate funding, resources, training, assignment of responsibility, and staff buy-in will be impeded (Rennie Center, 2015, pp. 9-11). The results also made it clear that the leaders in each district hold ultimate responsibility with states relegated to highlighting the importance of this initiative, identifying the mechanisms for implementation, and developing priorities, policies and standards.

In January 2015, the Massachusetts Consortium for Social-Emotional Learning in Teacher Education (MA SEL-TED) developed professional standards for social-emotional competencies designed to be aligned with or embedded into content-area instruction. These competencies include: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. At the same time, The Educator Effectiveness Guidebook for Inclusive Practices was developed to promote general education opportunities for all students. This tool is aligned with the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation Frameworks and it has a strong focus on inclusionary practices.
Without question, there is a continuing urgency to assure student competencies (i.e., cognitive, affective and behavioral), college and career-readiness, and assessment matched to student instruction that serves to challenge all students to excel in the general curriculum under the direction of the general education teacher in a general education setting. Levenson (2011) strongly argues that “The commitment to inclusion as a philosophical imperative and a civil right remains strong” (p. 6). This belief is further evidenced in the President’s Commission on Excellence in Special Education Report (2002) where it is described as “one of the most important symbols of American compassion, inclusion and educational opportunity” (p. 3). In essence, all children should be considered to be regular education students first with general education teachers playing a predominant role in both academic and social-emotional areas. Whether the continued move toward inclusion is the result of regulatory mandates, best practice, or financial considerations, at least 50% of students with disabilities and 25% of students with emotional disturbance will spend most of the school day in a general education setting (Wagner & Davis, 2006).

As a result of this wave of federal and state policy initiatives, teachers report frustration regarding the ever-increasing emphasis on assessment and accountability, the negative public opinions regarding teaching as a profession, the lack of clarity regarding expectations and compliance, and reduced creativity in instructional practices (Mackenzie, Morrell, & Cook, 2004). These initiatives, albeit laudably intended, add to the growing list of expectations and duties for general education teachers. However, despite these concerns, teachers generally remain committed to student learning (Mackenzie, Morrell, & Cook, 2004).
Teacher Responsibilities

As a result of federal mandates, more students with emotional are receiving services in the general education classroom. Classroom teachers are now expected to teach all children, maintain a well-managed, challenging and rubric-bound learning environment, assure that all children meet high standards, and demonstrate pedagogical proficiency. Consequently, the legislative shift from compliance to improved outcomes for students presents general education teachers with a complicated, comprehensive, and daunting responsibility when addressing the diverse needs of students with emotional disturbance (Wagner et al., 2005). Schools continue to rely on rigorous academic standards, high quality assessments, data-supported decision-making, evidence of effective instructional practice, and improved teaching and learning through personal reflection. Student achievement is a primary indicator of the instructional effectiveness of teachers, principals, and superintendents and will be reflected in a comprehensive evaluation protocol (National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality, 2010). Further confounding issues of responsibility in this era of accountability, consequential and corrective actions will be enforced when students fail to meet annual yearly progress standards (AYP) (Wagner et al., 2006). There may be significant implications for teachers if student scores on standardized tests become the defining variable deciding a teacher’s job security, particularly when students with emotional disturbance continue to lag behind peers in all areas of school functioning (Bradley et al. 2008; Duchnowski & Kutask, 2001). In fact, ineffective instruction resulting in inadequate student growth could have implications for tenure, dismissal, and ultimately revocation of credentialing (National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality, 2010). The federal definition of an effective teacher is as follows:
**Effective teacher** means a teacher whose students achieve acceptable rates (e.g., at least one grade level in an academic year) of student growth (as defined in this notice). A method for determining if a teacher is effective must include multiple measures, and effectiveness must be evaluated, in significant part, on the basis of student growth (as defined in this notice). Supplemental measures may include, for example, high school graduation rates (as defined in this notice) and college enrollment rates, as well as evidence of providing supportive teaching and learning conditions, strong instructional leadership, and positive family and community engagement (Secretary’s Priorities for Discretionary Grant Priorities, 2010, p. 47288).

Although these legislative initiatives and related policies were developed to insure grade-level mastery and positive post-secondary outcomes, results continue to be disappointing for students with emotional disturbance and troubling for teachers (Lane, Gresham, & O’Shaughnessy, 2002; Levenson, 2011; Wagner et al., 2006). Rather, they have resulted in rapidly rising costs for special education and increased administrator and teacher accountability for student achievement (Levenson, 2011).

Despite the substantial responsibility for the instruction of students with emotional disturbance, general education teachers say they are rarely provided the opportunity to share critical input for the successful implementation of practices, specifically input regarding “respect for the intricacies of content-specific instruction” (Juane, 1999; Eisenman, Pleet, Wandry & McGinley, 2011, p. 102). The incorporation of these suggestions could have a significant impact on teacher responsiveness, persistence, engagement, program fidelity, and willingness to maintain students with emotional
disturbance in the general education classroom (Matteucci, Tomasetto, Selleri, & Carugati, 2008). General education teachers highlight the importance of a sound professional learning culture, a clear definition of roles and responsibilities, sufficient planning time, and the development of practical and shared goals (Eisneman et al., 2011). It is no wonder that this controversy exists regarding programming, responsibility, and accountability for students with emotional disturbance (Guchnowski & Kutask, 2011; Juane, 1999; Smith, Katsiyannis & Ryan, 2011). Despite the ever-increasing need for behavioral programming, it is often difficult to find or retain teachers to instruct students with emotional disturbance (Prather-Jones, 2011). In fact, 44% of general education teachers reported that challenging behaviors made them think about quitting (Westling, 2010). When teachers were asked to describe the dispositions and attitudes necessary to educate this underserved population, characteristics such as flexibility, acceptance of one’s personal limitations, intrinsic motivation, an ability to separate oneself from the student’s behavior, and a sincere interest in children with emotional and behavioral issues were cited (Prather-Jones, 2011).

**Students Identified with Emotional Disturbance**

In order to understand the challenges that teachers face with students identified with emotional disturbance it is important to better understand these students. This section focuses on the formal definition of emotional disturbance as well as the demographic and dispositional characteristics (i.e., learning, relational, and social-emotional difficulties). This section also explores how the characteristics exhibited by students with emotional disturbance influence instructional practices.
Definition of Emotional Disturbance

The term “emotional disturbance” is one of thirteen categories of disability identified in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA), which may result in eligibility for special education and/or related services for students who attend public schools. It may be considered an “umbrella” term since it includes a wide range of conditions that differ in characteristics and response to treatment (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2010). IDEIA’s definition may include physical, social, cognitive, and emotional concerns that may interfere with the daily functioning and personal relationships of students (National Alliance on Mental Illness; 2010). A search of relevant literature indicates that students with emotional disturbance may be described in interchangeable terms such as having serious emotional disturbance, behavior disorder, serious behavior disorder, disruptive behavior disorder or emotional handicap (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011, p. 2).

According to federal regulations, students are eligible for special education services if they meet the following criteria:

1. The term means a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree, which adversely affects educational performance: (a) An inability to learn which cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors; (b) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers; (c) Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances; (d) A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; or
(e) A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.

2. The term includes children who have schizophrenia. The term does not include children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance. (Section 300.7(b)(9).

The federal definition uses the term “serious emotional disturbance”. Statutes in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts require that the term “emotional impairment” be synonymous with the term “serious emotional disturbance” (MA 34 CFR § 300.7). For the purposes of this study, reference will be made to the federal definition; however, due to interpretative variability and for purposes of individual teacher interviews, the broader, teacher-prescribed definition noted previously will be adopted.

Since the term “emotional disturbance” is context-dependent and based on personal expectations and perceptions, it is often difficult for educators to make sound eligibility decisions (Cullinan, Osborne, & Epstein, 2004). Complicating the process is the gap that exists between the IDEIA definition and considerable variability in the assessment of the diverse characteristics of emotional disturbance (Cullinan et al., 2004). Since the 1980s, attempts have been made to refine the identification criteria yet some challenges remain. These challenges include ambiguous categorization, co-morbidity with other disorders, difficulty with the assessment of emotional disturbance, contextual and environmental factors, and one’s personal perceptions of what constitutes appropriate behavior (Cullinan et al., 2004; Cunninan & Sabornie, 2004; Kaufman, 2005). Macleod (2010) cautions that the term ‘social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties’ is “something of a minefield…subjective…too vague…overlaps with other labels” (p. 97). Lane et al. (2011) suggest that the identification of
only 1% of students found eligible under IDEIA guidelines may be a significant underestimate. Rather, a range between 3% and 20% of students may be more accurate (Kaufman & Landrum, 2006; Lane, 2011). Students with emotional disturbance may present with multiple disabilities; therefore, they may be found eligible under other IDEIA categories (Ryan, Reid, & Epstein, 2004). Further complicating the identification process, Harry, Hart, Klinger, & Cramer (2009) add “issues of stigma, restrictive placement in EBD [emotionally-behaviorally disturbed] programs, and the concept of prevention (p. 165). Failure to identify or to treat social-emotional issues early may result in intractable behaviors that respond poorly to intervention and add to the risk of failure (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 6). Disappointingly, early intervention services tend to lag when compared to other groups of disabilities suggesting that there may be an institutional aversion to the early identification of students with significant behavioral concerns (Kauffman, 1999).

**Demographic Characteristics**

Students with emotional disturbance tend to have more personal and demographic characteristics that predispose them to negative outcomes when compared to all other groups of students (Wagner et al., 2005). According to Cullinan and Sabornei (2004), 65% of students identified with emotional disturbance are 12 years of age or older with most falling into the 15-year old age group; however, most research has primarily focused on elementary rather than secondary level students (p. 157). In fact, Waguespack and Moore (1993) add that there are relatively few studies that address the perceptions secondary level teachers hold regarding students with emotional disturbance, particularly their [teachers’] tolerance for the chronically disruptive behaviors often exhibited by students with emotional disturbance.
Students with emotional disturbance are overwhelmingly male (80%), disruptive and disturbing, aggressive and non-compliant, irritating and alienating (Reid, Gonzalez, Nordness, Trout, & Epstein, 2004, p. 130). Stable school experiences are often compromised due to frequent changes in schools, school programs, or excessive absenteeism when compared to both non-disabled and other disability groups (Wagner et al., 2005). Students with emotional disturbance have rates of suspension and expulsion at least four times higher and they are retained more often than all other groups of students (Wagner et al., 2005).

Longitudinal studies such as the Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study of 2002 (SEELS) and the National Longitudinal Transition Study of 2007 (NATLS-2) indicate that many parents of students with emotional disturbance have reported personally challenging school experiences. They are often less satisfied with the school, teachers, and programs compared to parents whose children fall into all other disability categories (Wagner et al., 2005). Parents report that they must put forth much effort to receive appropriate services, which often results in due process and mediation hearings (Wagner et al., 2005).

**Dispositions of Students with Emotional Disturbance**

This section addresses the question “What characteristics of emotional disturbance do teachers find the most challenging?” It is reasonable to suggest that students at the secondary level may present with more extreme, complex, and therapy-resistant behaviors (Cullinan & Sabornei, 2004, p. 157). This is further complicated by the more rigorous academic, behavioral, and personal responsibility expectations at the secondary level where academic and behavioral supports are less common than at the elementary level (Wagner et al., 2006). Specifically, the areas of self-control, compliance, and academic work habits are particularly challenging for students with social-emotional concerns (Lane et al., 2004). High school requires substantial
changes in teacher expectations for both academic and behavioral functioning as well as a greater reliance on satisfactory peer relationships and independent learning (Lane et al., 2006; Wagner et al., 2006). Cullinan and Sabornie, (2004) suggest that students with emotional disturbance may demonstrate low levels of overall competence and a poor ability to identify personal strengths and social resources; however, they may be keenly aware of the discrepancies in their performance when compared to peers (Sutherland, Lewis-Palmer, Stichter, & Morgan, 2008). This awareness may further exacerbate academic and behavioral problems and create ongoing and reciprocal negative teacher-student interactions (Sutherland et al. 2008).

Although the profiles of students with emotional disturbance may vary, the interplay of learning, relational, and social-emotional difficulties present significant challenges to secondary level teachers. As previously stated, general education teachers now assume more responsibility for content mastery, passing scores on high stakes tests, completion of graduation requirements, and positive, post-secondary outcomes. Increasingly, more states are imposing learning standards that require the attainment of both academic proficiencies as well as social and adaptive competencies. Therefore, further examination of learning, relational, and behavioral issues may be particularly relevant since students with emotional disturbance continue to show little or no improvement in academic achievement and social functioning and teachers continue to incur more responsibility to address these deficits (Siperstein, Wiley & Forness, 2011, p. 172).

**Inability to learn.** In addition to behavioral excesses and deficits, students with emotional disturbance generally demonstrate an overall lack of academic competence (Cullinan, 2004). Accordingly, academic underachievement is a hallmark of emotional disturbance according to the federal definition (U.S Department of Education, 1998, p. II-46). Although students with emotional disturbance may demonstrate learning difficulties in elementary school,
the IDEIA criteria have often relied on evidence of deficient academic achievement prior to identification. Too often, the “wait to fail” model has resulted in delayed or insufficient responding, particularly in the area of social-emotional-behavioral functioning (Kutash et al., 2005; Wagner et al., 2005). In fact, there may be a two-year delay between the identification of emotional disturbance and the implementation of services (Kutash et al., 2005; Wagner et al., 2005). Rarely do students with emotional disturbance receive early intervention services, which are strongly recommended for students with disabilities (Wagner et al., 2005). According to Kauffman (1999), the reasons most often expressed for this lag are economic constraints, resistance to the medical model, and concerns about labeling or stigma.

Comparing ability to achievement, students with emotional disturbance continue to demonstrate academic achievement significantly lower than non-disabled students and other students with disabilities (Bradley et al., 2008; Cullinan & Sabornie, 2004; Smith et al. (2011); Kutash & Duchnowski, 2001; Reid et al., 2004). Both standardized achievement scores and academic grades tend to fall below developmental expectations in reading and math and these gaps widen throughout high school (Wagner, et al., 2006). Smith et al. (2011) posit that 31% to 81% of students with emotional disturbance read two years below grade level and 97% perform below grade level in math (p. 186). Unlike their peers with learning disabilities, students with emotional disturbance do not demonstrate academic improvement despite support and they often regress over time (Lane et al., 2006). As a result, this group of students tend to fail more courses, drop out of school before graduation, and fail to seek out postsecondary opportunities (Reid et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2011).

The discrepancy between ability and lower academic achievement may be further exacerbated if teachers hold negative perceptions, which may result in lower classroom grades
(Bradley et al., 2007, p. 11). Even when students with emotional disturbance demonstrate comparable academic performance, teachers tend to assign lower grades compared to students with other disabilities (Bradley et al., 2007, p. 12). Bradley et al. (2007) suggest that teachers may place greater emphasis on perceived rather than actual classroom performance and may explain the discrepancy between achievement and assigned grades. Teachers generally base grades on a student’s daily class performance, participation, and attitude, yet students with emotional disturbance have difficulty consistently managing these behaviors, which result in lowered grades (Kauffman, 2005; Wagner et al., 2006). Teachers often report that frequent and disruptive behaviors serve to focus attention on behavioral management rather than high quality academic instruction (Wehby, Lane, & Falk, 2003). In fact, at the secondary level, the primary and almost exclusive focus continues to be on behavioral programming rather than academic competence (Lane, 2006).

**Relational difficulties.** When compared to those without disabilities as well as those in other eligibility areas, students with emotional disturbance experience more pervasive and intensive relational difficulties (Cullinan & Sabornie, 2004). They are more likely to be rejected by peers and teachers and less likely to develop pro-social attachments (Crews, Bender, Cook, Gresham, Kern, & Vanderwood, 2007).

Impaired social skills and chronically challenging and aversive behavioral patterns arouse negative feelings and impede the development and maintenance of friendships (Lane et al., 2010; Reid et al., 2004). At the secondary level, these students may exhibit lower levels of empathy, optimism, and personal well-being which are integral to the development of reciprocally satisfying relationships (Gresham, Lane, MacMillan, & Bocian, 1999; Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, & Thompson, 2010; Schonert-Reichl, 1993). Although multiple factors contribute to the
development of caring and supportive student-teacher relationships, the structure, demands, and climate of high school may create additional barriers to mutually satisfying relationships (Mihalas et al., 2008). Consequently, relational difficulties between students with emotional disturbance and regular education and special education teachers are noted (Cullinan & Sabornie, 2004).

Dysfunctional relationships are also evidenced in the students’ families, employment, and community and they serve to impede the formation of essential social and supportive networks (Wagner et al., 1992). A significant number of students with emotional disturbance are involved in the juvenile justice system and at least 47.7% of those incarcerated have a diagnosis of emotional disturbance. Moreover, they overwhelmingly indicate general dissatisfaction with social relationships which compromise their sense of belonging and overall quality of life (Sacks & Kern, 2008).

**Emotional variability.** Park (2013) offers that recent advances about the nature of emotional variability indicate that “emotions are both products and processes of social interactions, relationships, and contexts” (p. 158). In other words, although some aspects may be biologically-based, socialization has a strong influence (Park, 2013, p. 163). Students may have significant difficulty regulating their cognitive and emotional reactions; therefore, they tend to demonstrate frustration, irritability, disorganization, and poor coping in the general education classroom (Cunningham, Mendez, & Sundman-Wheat, 2011). This may result in a poor fit regarding teacher expectations and acceptable behaviors (Greenberg, 2006; Rothbart & Jones, 1998). As a result, teachers may demonstrate negative attributions and view behaviors as purposeful (Rothbart & Jones, 1998). Since neurocognitive maturation of the frontal lobes continues well beyond adolescence, well-considered interventions can have a profound influence
on school experiences, particularly in the areas of attention, self-regulation, adaptability, reactivity, aggression, delinquency, and depression (Greenberg, 2006).

**Social-emotional and behavioral factors.** Students with emotional disturbance often exhibit behavioral excesses or deficits that are significantly different than peers and may result in teacher resistance to inclusionary practices (Ogden, 2001). In addition to anecdotal information reported by teachers, school records indicate significant behavioral differences, negative comments, and disciplinary referrals (Lane et al., 2006). Teachers tend to agree that when compared to all other groups of students, the chronically disruptive behaviors demonstrated by students with emotional disturbance impede the learning of other students and create a more unsettling school climate for the child, teacher, and classmates (Jull, 2008).

The variable array of challenging behaviors includes externalizing behaviors (hyperactivity, aggression, impulse control, inattentiveness, distractibility and self-injury, and non-compliance) and internalizing behaviors (fear, anxiety, withdrawal, psychosis, distorted thinking, and mood swings) (Achenbach, et al., 2007; National Institute of Mental Health, 2010). Teachers often refer to students with emotional disturbance as the “behavior problem” in a classroom (Sacks & Kern, 2008, p. 124). In 67% of the cases, they exhibit multiple behavioral difficulties such as poor self-control, uncooperativeness, aggressiveness, disruptiveness, oppositionality, and violence (Cullinan & Sabornie, 2004; Taylor, Eddy, & Biglan, 1999). Teachers reported that the most common externalizing behaviors in the classroom are innocuous but frequent and they included: getting out of one’s seat, yelling and talking out loud, disturbing others, arguing, ignoring teacher directives, lying, not completing assignments, rule-breaking, and bullying (Walker, 1997, p. 13; Beaman, Whedall & Kemp, 2007). With a specific focus on adolescents, Harrison, Vannest, Davis & Reynolds (2012) found that teachers reported worrying,
carelessness, distractibility, difficulty following directions, and hyperactivity as the most troublesome behaviors (p. 60).

Although less disturbing to teachers, students with internalizing behaviors appear to be withdrawn, immature, fearful, anxious, and lacking in age-appropriate social skills (Walker, 1997, p. 13). Twenty-one percent of high school students with emotional disturbance reported depressive symptomology (Maag & Behrens, 1989; Cullinan & Sabornie, 2004). Depression and externalizing symptoms are highly comorbid with adolescents, particularly for boys whereas more suicidal ideation and attempts are reported for girls (Lane et al., 2006). Both self-reports and teacher reports indicate that students with emotional disturbance exhibit more somatic symptoms or fears (Cullinan & Sabornie, 2004).

Greene (2008) would posit that “Behind every challenging behavior is an unsolved problem or lagging skill (or both)” (p. 162). Greene (2008) stresses that based on thirty years of neuropsychological research regarding challenging behaviors, it is clear that they represent developmental delays, specifically in the areas of flexibility, adaptability, frustration tolerance, and problem-solving (p. 161). Minahan and Rappaport (2012) also include abilities such as self-regulation (i.e., calming oneself or managing frustration), thought stopping (i.e., interrupting cycle of negative thinking), social skills (i.e., perspective taking and conversational skills), and executive functioning (i.e., efficient planning and execution of a task). This means that students may act out when they have poorly developed skills in the aforementioned areas or the demands presented are beyond their capacity to respond adaptively (Greene, 2008, p. 162). Therefore, rather than attributing challenging behaviors to obstructive explanations (i.e., “the student just wants attention…is manipulative, unmotivated, has a bad attitude, makes bad choices, has incompetent parents, has mental health issues”), teachers could cognitively re-structure their
assumptions to view behavior as a form of communication (Greene, 2008, p. 164; Minahan & Rappaport, 2012). For example, alternative explanations could include statements such as “the student has difficulty maintaining focus, understanding consequences of actions, finding a suitable solution to a problem, or shifting tasks” (Greene, 2008, pp. 164-165).

Since behavior is a form of communication, it is important that teachers determine the meaning of challenging behaviors. To that end, Gage, Lewis, & Stichter (2012) recommend that a functional behavioral assessment be conducted. Accordingly, a functional behavioral assessment (FBA) is “a broadly defined set of methods that collect information to identify environmental events, antecedents and consequences, to predict problem behaviors” (p. 55). Essentially, the goal of a functional behavioral assessment is to reduce or extinguish problem behaviors and increase more functional and developmentally-appropriate behaviors. This is important since chronic, intensive and retractable behaviors are cause for removal from the regular education classroom. Gage et al. (2012) found FBA-based interventions for students with emotional disturbance can be very effective in general education classrooms, particularly when teachers had the knowledge and skills to implement them (p. 72). Armed with this tool, teachers would be better able to anticipate a problematic situation, formulate a plan, and more effectively respond to challenging behaviors (Gage et al., 2012).

**Teacher Attributions, Experiences, and Self-Efficacy**

This section addresses the question “What are teachers’ beliefs and experiences regarding the instruction of students with emotional disturbance?” by reviewing the literature on teacher attributions, experiences and self-efficacy.
Teacher attributions. It is reasonable to conclude that, as the number of students with significant social-emotional and behavioral concerns continue to rise, teachers will face increasing responsibilities and challenges. Since teachers hold a key role in addressing and improving students’ academic and social-emotional functioning, it is important to understand how they interpret, experience, and in turn, develop attitudes and dispositions toward students with emotional disturbance and the concomitant behaviors (Kulinna, 2007). Despite legislation that requires access to the general education curriculum, teachers’ beliefs, attitudes, and causal explanations may have the most significant influence on instructional practice (Sutheland et al., 2008). Attitudes may be considered to be the interplay between one’s beliefs, values, and preferences for acting according to such beliefs (Grieve, 2009, p. 173).

Teachers report that the management of challenging, intractable, and disruptive behaviors has consistently been a significant concern and has been identified as a priority on many national surveys (Ford, 2007; Walter, Gouge, & Lim, 2006; Wiley & Siperstein, 2011). Beaman, Whendall, & Kemp (2007) described disruptive behavior as “an activity that interferes significantly with a student’s own learning, interferes with another’s student’s learning or responses, interferes with the teacher’s ability to operate effectively, or any combination of these (p. 47). General education teachers report that at least 24% of students exhibit some type of challenging behavior in their classrooms and they [teachers] are critical agents in the development of effective responses (Westling, 2010). Education reform efforts have focused on high achievement, inclusionary practices, and increased accountability for general education teachers; yet little guidance has been provided for the effective instruction and behavioral management of students with emotional disturbance (Bradley et al., 2008; Westling, 2010). Teachers report spending so much time addressing the disruptive behaviors and emotional
outbursts of students with emotional disturbance that academic issues, usually given a higher priority, are sometimes given relatively little consideration (Wehby et al., 2003, p. 195).

As teachers attempt to understand, explain, and respond to the disruptive or challenging behaviors demonstrated by students with emotional disturbance, they will subsequently make inferential and influential causal attributions (Poulou & Norwich, 2000). For example, aggressive students may have a strong and aversive influence on their teachers which creates a reciprocal relationship between low academic achievement and behavioral difficulties (Reid et al., 2004; Wehby et al., 2003). When teachers place a primary value on the behaviors that lead to academic achievement, their expectations may exacerbate problem behaviors for students who lack these skills (Mihalas et al., 2009). Cook and Cameron (2010) illustrate another example when they suggest that students who exhibit defiance and hostility trigger rejection by teachers who may blame the students for the behaviors. Consequently, teachers may develop feelings toward these students that include frustration, anger, and stress (Male, 2003). School discipline policies and teachers’ perceptions of inappropriate behavior often result in discipline actions such as suspension and expulsion that actually keep students with emotional disturbance away from school (Bradley et al., 2007; Mihalas et al., 2009).

Erbas, Turan, Aslan, & Dunlap (2009) suggested that a number of studies regarding teacher attributions reflected a tendency to consider the problem to be within the child or the child’s family rather than within the classroom or as a result of instructional practices. In fact, regardless of cultural background, Erbas et al. (2009) noted that lack of effort and self-discipline by the child were most often cited as contributors of inappropriate behaviors. Both general education and special education teachers believed that such behaviors originated in the family or the community, were attributed to the student’s personality, and could be improved (Andreou &
Rapti, 2010; Westling, 2010). Special education teachers, however, were more likely than general education teachers to consider physical or medical explanations as other possible contributors to challenging behaviors (Westling, 2010). For example, teachers may view significant cognitive deficits to be beyond the control of the child; therefore, they may have fewer negative emotions (Weiner, 1985).

It is a reasonable assumption that teachers and students can affect each other reciprocally (Sutherland & Oswald, 2005). Olsen (1997) found that teachers who supported inclusion described themselves to be tolerant, reflective, and responsible for the success of all students. Furthermore, Prather & Jones (2011) noted “When teachers were asked to describe the dispositions and attitudes necessary to educate this underserved population, characteristics such as flexibility, acceptance of one’s personal limitations, intrinsic motivation, and an ability to separate oneself from the student’s behavioral issues” were cited. Other critical factors include satisfaction with the intrinsic rewards of “doing the right thing” or “making a difference” (Prather-Jones, 2011, p. 6), willingness to try new things (Brady & Woolfson, 2008), actively listening to the ideas, thoughts, values, and experiences of students (Mihalas at al., 2008), and being open-minded and willing to learn about students with emotional disturbance (Elik, Wiener, & Corkum, 2010).

**Teacher experiences.** This section focuses on teachers’ beliefs and experiences regarding the instruction of students with emotional disturbance. Axup and Gersch (2008) suggest a link between teachers’ perceptions and interpretations regarding challenging student behavior and their [teachers’] resultant emotional responses and experiences. For example, Axup and Gersch (2008) report that chronic exposure to such behaviors may increase teacher stress which is considered to be “…the experience by teachers of unpleasant, negative emotions,
such as anger, tension, frustration, depression, resulting from some aspect of their work as a teacher” (p. 145). The level of perceived stress, however, may be affected by the teacher’s personal sensitivity and tolerance toward challenging behaviors, the ability to develop functional and effective coping strategies, and the social context and culture of the school (Axup & Gersch, 2008). Therefore, the diverse array of behaviors exhibited by students with emotional disturbance may be differentially disturbing to teachers (Algozzine, 1977; Coleman & Gilliam, 2001).

Student characteristics, teacher beliefs, teacher competence, and school context may affect teacher tolerance for such behaviors (Algozzine, 1980; Axup & Gersch, 2008; Brigham, 2010; Coleman & Gilliam, 2001). For example, schools with a high value on academic proficiency may be less tolerant of disruptive behaviors and the stigma of the emotional disturbance label may be highest in high performing high schools (Wiley et al., 2010, p. 458). School discipline policies that foster zero tolerance exclusion policies and punitive responses for inappropriate behavior often have higher rates of suspension and expulsion that actually keep students with emotional disturbance away from school (Bradley et al., 2007; Mihalas et al., 2009).

Teachers may be resistant to the inclusion of this group of students in the general education setting since they feel unprepared, overwhelmed by current workloads, and concerned about safety issues (Juane & Bullock, 1999). It is reasonable to assume that teacher evaluations based on student growth may increase resistance to the notion of inclusion. In other words, general education teachers may be required to work with students whose complicated needs do not match their [teachers’] existing repertoire of skills. The perception by teachers that appropriate training and support are lacking or inadequate could result in decreased persistence,
diminished confidence in instructional skills, professional and emotional disconnect, and increased levels of stress (Axup & Gersch, 2008). Axup and Gersch (2008) suggest that challenging behaviors are not definitive terms, but rather, they are context-dependent and subject to personal interpretation (p. 144). Perusal of the literature suggests that challenging behaviors range from benign and distracting to acute and dangerous. The majority of teachers consistently and overwhelmingly reported that overt disruptive and aggressive behaviors (i.e., hyperactivity, distractibility, defiance, inappropriate language, and fighting) had the greatest negative impact on instruction (Coleman & Gilliam, 2001; Walter et al., 2006, p. 6). Beaman et al., (2007) reported that the most troubling classroom behaviors are “innocuous but occurred frequently as to be the recurrent cause for concern” (p. 46). When asked to explain the causes for challenging behaviors, teachers rank-ordered from highest to lowest attention-seeking, demand avoidance, communication problems, stress, interference with routines, and provocation (Kierman & Kerman, 1994). As a result, these behaviors often result in negative teacher attitudes and chronic removals from class (Walker, 1979; Walter et al., 2006). Not only do these behaviors disrupt the educational process, they require considerable time and energy for classroom management which results in increased frustration and stress for teachers (Coleman & Coleman, 2001). Similarly, Erbas Turna Aslan, & Dunlap (2010) noted that teachers reported increased stress when required to instruct students with problem behaviors and this results in fewer opportunities for interaction and lowered student outcomes.

Axup and Gersch (2008) offered some practical suggestions to improve teachers’ experiences with students with emotional disturbance including: engagement in a self-reflective process, validation of instructional challenges, the provision of opportunities to demonstrate effective instructional practices, and collaborative articulation of ideas and beliefs to better
understand the needs of students with emotional disturbance (pp. 150-151). Weiner (1985) would most likely concur noting that when teachers were able to reflect on their attributions with other potential explanations (e.g. communication issues, skills deficits, physiological responses, environmental mismatch), they were better able to understand the child’s need to escape an unpleasant task, exhibit non-compliance, or demand for attention. When teachers actively seek to identify alternative explanations (i.e., they consider that the problem may be within the environment rather than within the child) they may be more likely to accept some responsibility, persevere, and problem-solve (Stelios, 2002; Brady & Woolfson, 2008). Likewise, when teachers engage in a reflective practice, they may be more sympathetic and willing to help (Andreou & Rapti, 2010).

**Teacher self-efficacy.** Teacher self-efficacy, or the belief that one can bring about a desired outcome, is worthy of investigation since it is related to student success, particularly when teachers feel competent to address academic and behavioral issues (Andreou & Rapti, 2010). Bandura (1977) posited that self-efficacy is a dynamic and reciprocal process whereby beliefs about competency affect one’s choices for action. As a construct, teacher self-efficacy may have a profound influence on teacher beliefs, attitudes, concerns, attributions, judgments, and instruction (Boz & Boz, 2010) and may affect motivation, effort, persistence, aspirations and convictions (Brudnik, 2009). Brady and Woolfson (2008) reported that teachers with a higher sense of self-efficacy regarding the management of challenging behaviors and more positive experiences were more likely to consider external factors rather than the child’s disposition as contributors to learning and behavioral difficulties. Teachers who reported lowered self-efficacy regarding the management of challenging behaviors were more likely to experience “anger, anxiety, tension, frustration, and depression” (Axup & Gersch, 2008, p. 145). Teachers who feel
less competent may respond more punitively and blame the student or the student’s parents for misbehavior (Andreou & Rapti, 2010). As noted earlier, teachers who lack confidence in their abilities to manage challenging behaviors may resist the inclusion of students with emotional disturbance in general education settings since they don’t believe they have the necessary skills and training, are overwhelmed by the demands of the job, and concerned about safety issues (Juane & Bullock, 1999). General education teachers may view their classrooms as inappropriate placements and refuse to implement necessary classroom-based interventions and accommodations with fidelity (Siperstein et al., 2010; Sutherland et al., 2008). As a result, general education teachers often recommend more restrictive settings whereby the responsibility is shifted to special educators (Cheney & Muscott, 1996).

**Best Instructional Practices for Students with Emotional Disturbance**

This section addresses the question “What does the existing research reveal about best practice for the instruction of students with emotional disturbance?” Axup & Gersch (2008) suggested previously that when teachers have opportunities to demonstrate good instructional practices, their experiences are viewed more positively, self-efficacy is enhanced, and more functional relationships and attitudes toward students with emotional disturbance can be developed. However, despite attempts to standardize evidence-based instructional practices for this group of students, a clear direction remains elusive due to a “lack of ongoing and sustained research on this topic” (Farley, Torres, Wailehua, & Cook, 2012; Gage et al., 2010, p. 291; Simpson, Peterson, & Smith, 2011). Evidence-based practices have been defined as “the integration of (1) best available evidence (2) professional judgment, and (3) client values and context” (Sackett, Straus, Richardson, Rosenberg, & Haynes, 2000). Typically, a vast number of studies have focused on elementary level, single-subject research designs; however, these
findings may offer insight regarding the instruction of secondary level students as well (Haydon, Conroy, Scott, Sindelar, Barber & Orlando, 2010).

As noted earlier, secondary level students with emotional disturbance often present with extreme, complex, and therapy-resistant behaviors (Cullinan & Sabornie, 2004; Wagner et al., 2006). Landrum et al. (2003) identified three broad areas aligned with IDEA 2004 eligibility criteria for emotional disturbance that must be addressed: academic deficits, social-emotional-behavioral challenges, and relational difficulties (Landrum et al., 2003). Competence in these three areas is particularly important at the secondary level where there is a greater emphasis on personal responsibility for academic and behavioral functioning, satisfactory peer relationships, and independent learning (Cullinan & Sabornie, 2004). Secondary level teachers are also responsible for content mastery, social and adaptive competencies, passing scores on high stakes tests, completion of graduation requirements, and positive, post-secondary outcomes. Therefore, for the purposes of this project, the primary focus will be on teacher-mediated evidence-based interventions that address the academic, social-emotional-behavioral, and relational challenges posed by students with emotional disturbance at the secondary level.

Inability to Learn and Challenging Behaviors

Students with emotional disturbance demonstrate both challenging behaviors and an overall lack of academic competence (Algozzine, Wang, & Violette, 2011; Cullinan, 2004). As a result, teachers often spend more time addressing disruptive and non-compliant behaviors than delivering high quality academic instruction (Lane et al., 2006; Wehby et al. 2003). Landrum, Tankersley, & Kauffman (2003) reiterate that behavioral improvements may be short-lived if there is inadequate academic improvement. Currently, research indicates that the focus of intervention must be two-pronged: increased attention to the reduction of disruptive behaviors
with the simultaneous development of academic skills (Gage et al., 2010). Algozzine et al. (2011) make it clear that “academic failure is one of the most powerful predictors of problem behavior” often resulting in a student’s attempt to escape academic demands thus falling further behind (p. 13). Furthermore, the demand posed in content-area classes increases frustration, behavioral excesses or deficits, and academic failure (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffe, 2006). At the secondary level, too often classroom instruction tends to reflect whole-class, teacher lecture or independent, text-related tasks (Scruggs et al., 2006). For students with emotional disturbance, this may highlight the incompatibility between their characteristics and the learning environment (Scruggs, Berkerley, & Graetz, 2010, p. 438).

Academic and Behavioral Instructional Strategies

A review of current research highlights four effective and overlapping instructional practices for students with emotional disturbance that effectively address both academic and behavioral issues including: explicit instruction, peer-mediated learning, self-management skills, and feedback regarding performance (Farley et al., 2012; Scruggs et al., 2010).

**Explicit instruction.** Explicit instruction (i.e., direct, explicit, rule-based instruction) was found to be the most effective intervention when compared to other strategies (Scruggs et al., 2010). Rosenshine (1987) defines explicit instruction as a “systematic method of teaching with an emphasis on proceeding in small steps, checking [students] for understanding, and achieving active and successful participation by all students” (p. 34). As a strategy, explicit instruction may improve skill development, increase student engagement and participation, increase on-task behavior, and decrease challenging behaviors for low-achieving students with emotional disturbance (Landrum et al. (2003). Although this instructional practice has shown positive responses for all students when learning new skills or content, it is essential for those who
struggle academically or behaviorally (Archer & Hughes, 2011). Landrum et al. (2003) stress that, as a strategy, direct instruction may improve skill development, increase student engagement and participation, increase on-task behavior, and decrease challenging behaviors for low-achieving students. In this model, the delivery of instruction takes place in small groups and includes teaching in incremental steps with both guided and independent opportunities for practice. It is particularly effective when content is relevant, unambiguous, and condensed, rules and procedures are made explicit, examples offered, and immediate feedback about performance provided (Scruggs et al., 2010). During the initial stages of skill development or the presentation of new content, there may be high levels of teacher support that is systematically faded as the student achieves mastery. Examples of explicit instruction that contribute to academic and gains and increased prosocial behaviors include teaching self-questioning skills, note-taking, thematic identification and application, self-monitoring, summarization, use of advance organizers, outlines, modeling, cueing, and study guides (Scruggs, 2010).

Peer-assisted learning strategies. Peer-assisted learning strategies include mixed-ability grouping and reciprocal pairing whereby each student serves as both the teacher and the learner. The incorporation of peer-mediated interventions such as peer tutoring may result in academic gains in math reading, spelling and history (Ryan, Reid, & Epstein, 2004, p. 340). Although most research regarding peer-assisted learning is based on elementary level students, Roseth and Johnson (2008) noted a positive effect for adolescents based on the results of 148 international studies. Essentially, peer-assisted learning strategies provide opportunities for instruction, practice, and feedback (Farley et al., 2012). Given the nature of emotional disturbance, students also benefit from the increased rate of peer interactions (Wagner et al., 2006).
One model, Class-wide Peer Tutoring (CWPT), effectively addresses academic engagement, rates of responding, attention, and self-monitoring using socially acceptable opportunities to practice skills and receive corrective feedback (Farley et al., 2012; Landrum et al., 2003). CWPT utilizes current curriculum; therefore, it is reasonably easy to implement in all content areas. The teacher trains students in tutoring skills before pairing each student with a peer. Each student takes turns as the teacher or learner as they review a prior lesson. Students can earn points for correct responding which can be converted for a desired reward at the end of the week. Cooper & Jacobs (2011) report that this intervention supports student learning and relationship building since it incorporates group goals (interdependence) and personal accountability (p. 67). When compared to conventional instructional practices, students increase time on task and spend less time requesting teacher assistance (Cooper & Jacobs, 2011). The incorporation of peer-mediated interventions such as CWPT may result in academic gains in math reading, spelling and history (Ryan, Reid, & Epstein, 2004; Sutherland & Snyder, 2007). Also, CWPT has effectively addressed academic engagement, rates of responding, attention, and self-monitoring via a socially acceptable opportunity to practice skills and receive corrective feedback (Landrum et al., 2003; Sutherland & Snyder, 2007).

**Feedback.** “Feedback is conceptualized as information provided by an agent (e.g., teacher, peer, book, parent, self, experience) regarding aspects of one’s performance or understanding” (Hattie & Timperley (2007), p. 81). There are many forms of feedback and substantial variability in its effectiveness (Hattie & Timperley (2007). For example, feedback such as praise, punishment, and contingent extrinsic rewards may actually decrease motivation, personal responsibility, competence, and task engagement (Deci & Ryan, 1985); yet, this is typically the type of feedback used by teachers (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). In contrast,
feedback that specifically provides information about the process or the student’s performance can increase learning and prosocial behaviors (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Essentially, teachers must reduce the discrepancy between what the student currently understands or can perform and what is desired or expected (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Since most classrooms address the acquisition of information or the utilization of established skills, it is important that students have the necessary knowledge or abilities to complete the task; otherwise, further instruction rather than feedback should be provided (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

**Corrective feedback.** Corrective feedback is a strategy that can be applied in the general education environment in all content areas. Essentially, corrective feedback is any information provided to a student that specifically relates to some aspect of student performance. Similar to praise and positive statements, corrective feedback is most effective when delivered in a timely, specific and contextual manner. Moreover, the impact of corrective feedback is increased when the goals are clear and specific, challenging yet not overwhelming, contain information regarding previous attempts, and do not appear to be threatening to the student (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Corrective feedback includes information about how well or in what way a task is performed according to some criteria (i.e., correctness, neatness, behavior, strategies etc.). Ultimately, the goal is to have students manage their own learning and develop self-regulated “commitment, control, and confidence” (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 93).

**Self-management strategies.** Self-management strategies are “methods used by students to manage, monitor, record and/or assess their behavior and academic achievement” (Reid, Trout, & Schwartz, 2005, p. 362). Reid et al. (2005) identified five areas of self-management strategies that may be particularly useful for teachers at the high school level since students with emotional disturbance typically have difficulty independently attending to, processing, and
generalizing information. The strategies identified are self-monitoring (i.e., student observes and records own performance), self-evaluation (i.e., student compares performance to others), self-instruction (i.e., student plans, organizes, directs, and reinforces own performance), and strategy instruction (i.e., student uses techniques independently without teacher prompting) (Reid et al., 2005). At the secondary level, Ryan, Pierce, & Mooney (2008) have found that these self-management strategies have a strong positive influence on academic performance, response to instruction, and goal setting.

Within the self-management category, self-monitoring is the most common strategy to facilitate the independent student functioning required at the secondary level (Hughes, Copeland, Agran, Wehmeyer, & Rodi, 2002). It has been found to be effective for a wide range of academic and social behaviors and is fairly easy to implement and integrate into secondary level curriculum (Farley et al., 2012). In fact, a recent meta-analysis of literature over the last three decades indicated that self-monitoring resulted in “meaningful improvements in student on-task behavior, academic productivity and accuracy, and reduction in inappropriate or disruptive behavior” (Reid et al., 2005, p. 327). In this model, the teacher conferences with the student using samples of the student’s work or behaviors, shares expectations about criteria, performance, or goals, provides guidance for task completion or behavioral compliance, and develops and models the use of a tracking system to monitor progress. Although the use of these strategies can improve academic skills, behavioral outcomes, and student motivation, teachers must also regularly monitor student outcomes in order to evaluate the effectiveness of these practices (Reid et al., 2005).
Social and Relational Competencies

Students with emotional disturbance exhibit severe deficits in social competence that overwhelmingly and negatively impact their relationships with peers, families, employers, and other community members (Cook, Gresham, Kern, Barreras, Thornton, & Crews, 2008; Lane, MacMillan, & Bocian, 1999; Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, & Thompson, 2010; Schonert-Reichl, 1993). This overall lack of social competence becomes particularly poignant at the secondary level where expectations for social functioning become more complex (Cook et al., 2008). Since high school students increasingly rely on peers for social support, students with emotional disturbance must have the skills to meet the increasing social demands. Also, the quality of student-teacher relationships is an important factor when addressing the intense and pervasive relational difficulties exhibited by students with emotional disturbance.

**Student-teacher relationships.** Since teaching is an interpersonal endeavor, the quality of the student-teacher relationship may have a profound influence on student learning and behavior (Smith, Katsmannis, & Ryan, 2011). In order to maintain positive relational interactions, the teacher would develop and model a caring, therapeutic relationship within a nurturing and non-judgmental environment so that students could develop resilience and a positive self-concept (Cooper & Tiknaz, 2006). Respectful, compassionate, and patient interactions (e.g., smiling, making eye contact, calling students by their name) would be evidenced in the classroom (Bernard, 2004; Smith et al., 2011). Based on student reports of positive teacher qualities, open-mindedness, concern, accessibility, approachability, honest and constructive feedback, and fairness would enhance rapport (Smith et al., 2011, p. 234). The learning environment would be non-threatening, predictable, safe, and supportive (Smith et al., 2011). Essentially, the teacher would offer protection from aversive outside influences, taking
care to notice and celebrate student academic and social-emotional competencies, be willing to view the world through the eyes of the student, and validate student feelings (Cooper & Jacobs, 2011). Teachers would serve as models of positive communicative behaviors and they would continually reflect upon and adjust emotional responses and classroom management strategies (Cooper & Jacobs, 2011, p. 61). Although disapproving of disruptive and undesirable behaviors, the teacher would separate the behavior from the student as a person (Cooper & Jacob, 2011). Teachers would hold high expectations for academic achievement and appropriate behaviors, and instruction would be differentiated and paced to reflect the personal strengths and interests of individual students (Cooper & Jacobs, 2011; Nichols & Zhang, 2011). In other words, teachers would create personally interesting activities, materials, and choices. Students would be actively engaged in classroom activities with ample opportunities to respond, voice opinions, and take personal responsibility (Cooper & Jacobs, 2011). The strong commitment to the welfare of all students would be characterized by a classroom that is set up for student success whereby there is a sense of cohesion, support, belonging, respect, cooperation, and identity (Connecting IDEAS Project, 2005).

**Peer-assisted learning strategies.** Since peer approval is an integrated aspect of the secondary level school experience, it can have a strong influence on a student’s attitude, behavior, and achievement (Smith et al., 2011, p. 27). Students who exhibit disruptive classroom behaviors as well as inefficient social skills may be unpopular with peers and have difficulty making and maintaining friendships (Smith, et al., 2011).

Just as the use of peer-assisted learning opportunities, as described in the previous section, is effective in academic endeavors, so too can they improve positive social behaviors, foster empathy, and enhance conflict resolution skills (Bru, 2006). Social skills are specific
behaviors or competencies directed toward social tasks (e.g., active listening skills, reciprocal communication, ignoring, anger management, coping skills, etc.) (Cook et al., 2008). Social skills instruction can be embedded into classroom activities so that students are able to identify, practice, and receive feedback from peers regarding socially valid, prosocial behaviors. It is important to note that the effectiveness of social skills instruction is dependent on the congruence between the identified behavior, the specific demands and expectations, and the context.

When students with emotional disturbance engage in peer-assisted learning opportunities, they may be able to re-structure their personal interpretations of social situations, identify socially-appropriate strategies, and generalize strategies to novel situations with peer input (Cook et al., 2008). This is particularly important for students with emotional disturbance since they often engage in maladaptive or distorted thinking which results in non-productive behaviors and unsatisfactory interpersonal relationships.

**General Effective Teaching Practices**

Farley et al. (2012) warn that the implementation of evidence-based practices doesn’t guarantee improved outcomes, particularly for students with emotional disturbance; therefore, general effective teaching practices must be implemented with fidelity, routinely monitored for effectiveness, and adjusted if necessary. In fact, the purpose of classroom management is to engage students in learning rather than merely enforce compliance (Zucherman, 2007). A number of critical components are necessary for an efficacious learning environment (Wagner et al., 2006). These include structure and consistency regarding expectations and routines, interactive, engaging and collaborative learning opportunities, strong classroom management skills, individualized, differentiated, and direct instructional practices, pacing, pre-teaching,
previewing, and demonstrating a strong commitment to the welfare of all students (Niesyn, 2009; Wagner et al., 2006).

Students with emotional disturbance, however, often exhibit multiple behavioral difficulties in the classroom such as poor self-control, uncooperativeness, aggressiveness, disruptiveness, oppositionality, and violence (Cullinan & Sabornie, 2004; Taylor, Eddy, & Biglan, 1999). When addressing problematic behaviors, Simpson, Peterson, & Smith (2011) suggest that teachers engage in preventative rather than reactive measures. For example, teachers may articulate directions and expectations prior to the onset of disruptive behavior, establish a distraction-free environment, set clear boundaries and limits, provide regular feedback to students, and remain calm and controlled. Niesyn (2009) would suggest that teachers also include the following proactive, behaviorally-based interventions to deter challenging behaviors:

- scaffolding (e.g., breaking work down into smaller, more manageable components to reduce frustration and anxiety, spatial organizers)
- movement breaks or non-punitive time outs
- opportunities for successful responding (front-loading student with sufficient information, cueing, allowing for sufficient wait time, and positive reinforcement)
- direct instruction (fortify academic and behavioral skills, provide guided practice, review lessons, maintain student attention and task completion, evaluate independent student functioning)
- visual representations (classroom rules, schedules, expectations, consequences, expectations for transitions)
- consistent routines and seamless transitions
• precise requests (clear, explicit directions with sufficient wait time for processing and responding)
• directions delivered orally and in writing
• proactive self-management strategies (anger management, self-monitoring, self-evaluation, social skills, self-instruction, goal setting, and study skills and strategy instruction)

**Technology as a Tool**

In an era of rapid technological advances, some consideration must be given to the use of assistive technology in the instruction of students with emotional disturbance. The academic and behavioral challenges they face often compromise their ability to focus on a task, manage frustration, demonstrate acceptable classroom behaviors, and meet age equivalent academic expectations (Parette, Crowley, & Wajcik, 2007). Difficulties that may trigger undesirable behaviors include word recognition, spelling, handwriting, organization and retrieval of information and materials, and self-management skills (Parette et al., 2007). The use of assistive technology devices in the regular education classroom could reduce the cognitive effort that would otherwise lead to frustration and behavioral outbursts (Parette et al., 2007). Technological assistance is available including text-to-speech devices, graphic organizers, speech recognition software, specialized math calculators, and behavior monitoring tools.

The use of technology may be particularly helpful when students are required to complete independent work (Neisyn, 2009). Assistive technology programs can structure lessons sequentially, provide a visual map to assist organization, reduce the demands of complex information processing and output, provide immediate feedback, and assist with self-monitoring (Parette et al., 2007). Assistive technology applications can also promote prosocial behavior.
through the use of social stories or selected literature whereby these scripts or stories provide information that is personally relevant to the student, aligns with acceptable classroom behaviors, and fortifies individual skills.

Since self-monitoring has a robust history of effectiveness when addressing commonly occurring disruptive classroom behaviors (e.g., talking out of turn, getting out of seat, verbal and physical aggression, lack of focus or task completion), technological tools such as handheld computer devices can provide a cost-effective, socially valid, and efficient data collection tool (Gulchak, 2008). In fact, computer-based training has been found to be an effective intervention for students with weaknesses in attention and executive functioning (Greenberg, 2006).

This section emphasized the need to address the multiple and complex needs of students with emotional disturbance in the classroom including academic, social-emotional-behavioral, and interpersonal difficulties. The literature supports the notion that evidence-based practices may result in higher academic achievement, increased prosocial behaviors, and more satisfying teacher-student relationships.

**Summary**

Emergent in the literature are a number of relevant themes that may influence outcomes for students with emotional disturbance. This project focuses on four salient areas for inquiry: legislative mandates, characteristics of students with emotional disturbance, teachers’ beliefs, explanations, and experiences regarding students with emotional disturbance, and the implementation of best instructional practice strategies and interventions.

**Legislative mandates.** It is clear that legislative initiatives to improve outcomes for all students, including students with emotional disturbance, continue to place responsibility for student performance on the shoulders of general education teachers. General education teachers
are required to insure content mastery, academic achievement, passing scores on high stakes tests, timely graduation rates, and successful post-school outcomes. This is a particularly daunting task when one considers the complex and multi-dimensional needs of students with emotional disturbance who participate in general education classrooms and who continue to experience relatively dismal outcomes when compared to all other groups of students. In this era of accountability, teachers aptly note concerns regarding potential professional consequences when performance evaluations are so closely linked to student growth and positive outcomes.

**Characteristics of students with emotional disturbance.** Students with emotional disturbance often present with a number of characteristics that predispose them to negative outcomes including significantly challenging academic and social-emotional needs requiring a broad array of instructional responses which may place prohibitive demands on regular education teachers. The instruction of students with emotional disturbance at the secondary level becomes more complicated as academic rigor, personal student responsibility, and the confounding effects of mental health issues increases.

**Teachers’ beliefs, explanations, and experiences.** Teachers’ attitudes, interpretations, and experiences may have a significant role in the instruction of students with emotional disturbance since they [teachers] must develop and implement effective responses. Teachers may hold predetermined beliefs regarding the etiology of emotional disturbance, the origin of student behavior (i.e., internal versus external factors), and their ability to effectively address challenging behaviors, accept responsibility, problem-solve and persevere. Tolerance for challenging behaviors may be related to personal experiences, sense of efficacy, school climate, and preparation and training.
Implementation of best instructional practices, strategies, and interventions. Given the unique demands posed by the instruction of students with emotional disturbance, it is crucial that general education teachers have the knowledge, skills, and experiences to create a learning environment that promotes academic and social-emotional success. Teachers may be required to demonstrate an array of specialized skills including environmental management techniques, individual instructional modifications, social and adaptive skill-building, and measurement and monitoring of student progress. The identification of evidence-based practices for students with emotional disturbance at the secondary level specifically includes teacher-mediated strategies to address the deficits in academic, social-emotional, behavior, and interpersonal relationships that are particularly problematic. Ultimately, through a firsthand, personal accounting, this project seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the interplay between teachers’ beliefs, explanations, experiences and any potential influence of these factors on the instructional practices regarding students with emotional disturbance.
Chapter III: Research Design

The purpose of this qualitative study is to gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the beliefs and personal lived experiences of secondary level teachers of students with emotional disturbance. Currently, there is a paucity of information available on the topic, notably at the secondary level; therefore, providing an opportunity for teachers to engage in a thoughtful, emergent, and interactive dialogue in order better understand the interplay of their beliefs, experiences, and instructional practices may shed light on this important phenomenon. If it is both a moral responsibility and a legislative mandate to improve the outcomes for all students, including students with emotional disturbance, then the findings of this study may help to close the gap in the literature regarding the role of teachers with this group of students. The overarching research question “What are the beliefs and lived experiences of secondary level, content-area teachers regarding the instruction of students with emotional disturbance?” guides this analysis. This section provides the rationale for and description of the research design. It reflects the following sections: method, conceptual framework, sample, data collection, data analysis, integrity measures, and data management.

Research Design

When the methodology or strategy of action, Crotty (2003) stressed that care should be taken to match the methods (procedures used to gather data) to the theoretical perspective (philosophy) and the epistemology (knowledge and understanding). A qualitative research design was selected, specifically interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), because the research goals of the study focus on the personal beliefs and lived experiences of secondary level teachers who are charged with the instruction of students with emotional disturbance. Interpretative phenomenology is well-suited philosophically and methodologically when the goal
is to gain a “complex and detailed understanding of the issues…empower individuals to share their stories…understand the contexts and settings of the participants…and unveil the deeper thoughts and behaviors that govern their responses” (Cresswell, 2007, p. 40). Qualitative research has a strong focus on contextual factors and rich, personal descriptions of the phenomenon being studied; therefore, it may be particularly well-suited to the complex array of variables that influence the instructional practice of teachers regarding students with emotional disturbance (Conroy, Stichter, Daunic, & Hayden; Sallee & Flood, 2012).

Sallee and Flood (2012) suggest that a qualitative research methodology is suitable in educational contexts, particularly when the goal is to close gaps between research and educational practices. It may be particularly useful when attempting to understand new, complicated, challenging beliefs, practices, and relationships (Creswell, 2013; Fang, 1996; Smith & Osborn, 2008). It has been suggested that quantitative research, with its reliance on numbers, may be more generalizable and rigorous (Yin, 2011); however, for the purposes of this study, qualitative research is a better match because it is context-dependent, emergent, subjective, naturalistic and fitting for the exploration of human experiences (Conroy et al., 2008; de Witt, 2006; Lopez & Willis, 2004; Maxwell, 2005). Furthermore, it could be argued that “what is objective and what is subjective cannot be teased apart in any simple fashion” (Larkin et al., 2006, p. 109). Pajares (1992) further contends that although teacher beliefs are an important area of inquiry, “researchers have avoided so formidable a concept...since it does not lend itself easily to empirical investigation” (p. 308). Perhaps researchers should take the perspective that since teacher beliefs are the best indicators of the instructional decision-making, they “should become an important focus of educational inquiry” (Pajares, 1992, p. 307). More importantly, in this era of educational accountability for successful student outcomes, the personal stories behind the
numbers should be represented in order to gain a more complete rendering of the phenomenon under study (i.e., the continually disappointing outcomes of students with emotional disturbance and the challenges their teachers face).

The notion of flexible conversations and experiential sharing is well-aligned to the theoretical framework identified in this study, attribution theory. The attribution process (i.e., engagement in interactive dialogue with the researcher) may not only help teachers identify their beliefs about students with emotional disturbance, it may also shed light on the influence of teachers’ personal beliefs and experiences on their instructional practice and future decision-making. This is important since one of the greatest challenges teachers face is trying to make sense of and respond to student learning and behavioral needs (Gage et al., 2012; Greene, 2008).

Research Tradition

In order to begin a thorough inquiry based on interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the historical and philosophical foundations must be reviewed. Specifically, three key underpinnings must be considered in this process: phenomenology, interpretation (hermeneutics), and idiography (Smith et al., 2009).

Phenomenology. Under the banner of qualitative research, phenomenology is a long-standing and sound method of inquiry that has many philosophical and methodological variants and philosophies (Cresswell, 2013; Findley, 2009). As a research tradition, phenomenology is based on concepts, assumptions, and beliefs found to be acceptable in the research literature (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Despite diverse perspectives, interests, and applications, it is ultimately “concerned with exploring human lived experience and the meanings which people attribute to their experiences” (Shinebourne, 2011, p. 18). Lopez and Willis (2004) concur that the basic aim is to gain deeper insight, a clearer understanding, and a more authentic relational
and contextual accounting of a particular phenomenon of an everyday life experience (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

For example, Abeln (2015) used a phenomenological research approach to examine the beliefs and experiences of teachers regarding daily instructional decision-making. The enquiry, described as a “narration of experiences”, sought to better understand the influence of high stakes testing and accountability policies and the levels of stress experienced by teachers. Similarly, Bean and Gillet (2009) conducted an investigation of how teachers react to day-to-day behavioral problems in the classroom. This study focused on how difficult it was for teachers to make so many educational and disciplinary decisions in the course of a day that they felt constrained and frustrated. Turner, Christiansen and Meyer (2009) attempted to understand what beliefs teachers hold regarding student learning and motivation, how their beliefs developed, and how their beliefs influenced instructional changes. In each case, the participants were able to recount their own stories in their own words which is a core component of phenomenology (Smith et al., 2009).

Phenomenology as a research philosophy and methodology, was first developed by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) as a naturalistic countermovement to a quantitative positivism (Reiners, 2012). According to Husserl, phenomenology is not merely a deductive or empirical description of experiences regarding a particular phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). Rather, it is a systematic and reflective process whereby individuals attempt to make sense of and give meaning to everyday lived experiences (Giorgi, 1997; Smith et al., 2009). Although there are two philosophical orientations in phenomenology, descriptive and interpretative, Husserl (1927) was particularly concerned with the descriptive component focusing on how individuals described their experiences with any predetermined notions or assumptions set aside (i.e., bracketing)
In this way, participants are able to provide an emergent and often times unanticipated accounting of their personal beliefs and experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

**Interpretation (Hermeneutics).** Schleiermacher, Heidegger, and Gadamer were three major contributors to the second philosophical underpinning of the phenomenological approach, hermeneutics (Charlick, Pincombe, McKeller & Fielder, 2016). Simply put, hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on the interpretative, subjective experiences of individuals. Unlike Husserl, Schleiermacher (1998) stressed that the meaningful interpretation of experiences is a process that is intuitional, comprehensive, and insightful (Charlick et al., 2016). Schleiermacher (1998) also emphasized the value of psychological analysis and the linguistic interpretation of text to uncover meaning and motivation that may be beyond the personal awareness of the individual (Smith et al., 2009). Similarly, as the originator of interpretative phenomenology, Heidegger (1962) moved beyond mere descriptions in order to more fully understand individual personal experiences, meanings and interpretations with regard to a particular phenomenon (Charlick et al., 2016; Reiners, 2012). In other words, he merged the theories of phenomenology and hermeneutics based on the premise that that everyone’s life experiences are inseparably entrenched in the world around them (Smith et al., 2009). For Heidegger (1962) bracketing (i.e., setting aside notions, perceptions, and assumptions) is not necessary since the researcher should be acknowledged as an active and intrinsic participant in the reflective and cyclical process with the participant (Reiners, 2012, p. 2).

Similarly, Gadamer (1962) stressed the complex, interactive, embedded, and biased relationship between the researcher and the participant that he termed the “fusion of horizons” (Smith et al., 2009). Gadamer (1962) cautioned that although the researcher’s lived experiences
may help provide access to the lived experiences of the participants, researcher prejudices and predispositions must be continually identified, acknowledged and adjusted so as not to be a hindrance (Smith et al., 2009).

**Idiography.** Idiography is the exploration of single case perspectives that are personal, unique and contextually-based (Eatough & Smith, 2008; Smith et al., 2009). By paying particular attention and demonstrating sensitivity to an individual’s personal story, a more complete description and understanding of the subjective experience can be gleaned by the researcher (Eatough & Smith, 2008). Essential to this inquiry is the notion that themes (i.e., meaningful patterns of data) be thoroughly examined for each case prior to moving on to the next (Smith et al., 2009). Themes provide a source for future, more general comparisons of similarities and differences while preserving the uniqueness of the individual experience.

**Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

Based on the principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography, interpretative phenomenology analysis (IPA) is a qualitative research approach that seeks to provide a detailed examination of an individual’s lived experiences, particularly when the topic of study is complex, sensitive, and emotionally-laden (Smith et al., 2009). In the mid-1990s, Smith (1996) claimed that IPA was a complimentary approach to quantitative and qualitative methodologies suggesting that psychology should be both experimental and experiential. Smith (1996) stressed that the individuals’ subjective accountings were necessary in order to capture the full nature of their personal experiences.

IPA, as a relatively new but growing research method, has been widely adopted across many disciplines including health psychology and educational research (Chapman & Smith, 1990; Reid et al., 2005). According to Smith et al. (2009), IPA is a dynamic, iterative, and
engaging concept of the ‘hermeneutic circle’ and is based on the premise that people attempt to make sense of their personal experiences and the world around them by continually interpreting and creating subjective narratives (p. 25).

Phenomenology has both descriptive and interpretative underpinnings. Descriptive phenomenology, seeks to establish a more general, whole aspect of a phenomenon whereas IPA emphasizes a more individually and contextually focused interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). Furthermore, descriptive phenomenology excludes the participant’s voices in the final accounting but interpretive phenomenology retains the interview language (Shinebourne, 2011). Rather than merely describing the individual’s concerns, IPA uses a rigorous and detailed analysis that not only seeks to gain a thorough understanding of the person’s world but also seeks to provide an objective accounting the participant’s lived experience (Larken, Watts, & Clifton, 2006).

IPA is a particularly useful model for this study for a number of reasons. Teachers’ beliefs and experiences are multi-layered and complex. They may be influenced by a number of factors including but not limited to personal experiences regarding emotional disturbance both in and out of school, building-based norms and routines, district policies and guidelines, teacher roles and responsibilities, expectations for students, and national requirements. For example, over the last few decades, there has been a shift from observable teacher behaviors to teacher beliefs and experiences when attempting to explain student outcomes and achievement (Hsieh & Shannon, 1996; Pajares, 1992). Specifically, teacher attributions (i.e., perceptions of responsibility, nature of emotional disturbance, causes of challenging behaviors, etc.) may be predictive of how teachers behave toward their students (i.e., instructional practices, levels of support, emotional responses, blame, etc.) (Poulou & Norwich, 2000; Reyna & Weiner, 2001).
Teacher beliefs may be entrenched, subjectively-filtered, emotionally and experientially-bound, and resistant to change (Hsieh & Shannon, 1996; Kagan, 1992; Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992). Pajares (1992) certainly considers this to be a “messy construct”, particularly since teachers may not even be aware of the impact on their students.

IPA not only provides an opportunity for teachers to give voice to their beliefs and experiences, it may also address the frustrations noted by practitioners and policymakers regarding a lack of practical and useful academic research (Sallee & Flood, 2012, p. 137). When teachers do not have a voice, the research may be irrelevant, incompatible or unrealistic in a classroom context (Sallee & Flood, 2012). This is not to diminish the significance of quantitative research, particularly in this era of accountability; however, teachers face day-to-day difficulties in the classroom and they need solutions that are accessible with real-time applicability (Sallee & Flood). This requires a contextual, emerging and subjective inquiry that cannot be found in a purely quantitative methodology.

IPA clearly aligns with the overarching goal of this study which is to learn about and understand the complexity of teachers’ personal beliefs and every-day, subjective experiences regarding the instruction of students with emotional disturbance. Heidegger’s work may be particularly useful since it is fundamental to hermeneutic phenomenology. In other words, individuals (i.e., secondary level general education teachers) are always contextually and relationally engaged in their world (i.e., the classroom) taking into account the past (i.e., previous experiences), the present (i.e., daily challenges, expectations, and responsibilities), and the future (i.e., possible changes in beliefs and/or instructional practices) (Yardley, 2017).

The following chart provides an overview of the primary components of the methods section of this chapter.
Sample

There are no specific rules for determining sample size in qualitative investigations (Patton, 2002, p. 244); however, it is recommended that between four and ten, purposefully-selected participants align with IPA goals and ideographic methodology (Brocki & Wearden, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). In this case, the sample size of four participants is uniquely related to the research problem and questions whereby it is large enough to achieve a sound and cohesive understanding of the phenomenon while preserving the distinctive personal differences often inhibited with a larger sample (Charlick, 2016; Fischer & Rennie, 1999; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Also, small sample sizes are more likely to encourage the sharing of personal details and similar experiences, particularly when the sample is purposely chosen, broadly homogeneous, convenient, and criterion-based (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Likewise, when participants are both demographically and experientially similar regarding the topic or phenomenon, it is easier to
capture their unique, rich, and detailed perspectives and shared experience thus justifying a single case interview (Shinbourne, 2011; Smith et al., 2009).

Such is the case in this study where recruitment and inclusion is predicated on being a secondary level (i.e., grades 9 through 12) general education teacher who is currently content-certified in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts with at least one year of teaching experience and some experience instructing students with emotional disturbance.

The participant selection process began following receipt of permission to conduct the study from both the school committee and the building principal. A recruitment flyer that contained relevant information was sent to the high school principal for dissemination to staff. (see Appendix A) Staff willing to participate affirmed their decision via email to the researcher. A formal recruitment letter was then sent to participants to provide an introduction, state the purpose of the study, describe procedures, and clarify expectations, confidentiality, risks and benefits. (see Appendix B) The participants were also provided potential dates, times, and the location of meetings. A follow-up letter was sent to thank the participants for participating in the study and an email confirmed meeting details. (see Appendix C)

During the first of three meetings, participants were provided a detailed overview of the process as well as expectations for participation, requested to sign the Informed Consent Form (see Appendix D), and asked to choose a pseudo name. Participants also provided demographic information and responded to open-ended opinion questions regarding students with emotional disturbance. (*see Appendix E) The second meeting was a 90-minute, one-to-one, in-depth interview that explored the beliefs and lived experiences of four teachers who were familiar with the phenomenon under study. The third meeting provided an opportunity for teachers to check transcript summaries for accuracy, provide additional information, and/or request deletions.
Data Collection

The aim of this research project was to gain a clearer understanding of the teachers’ lived experiences and associated meanings of those experiences when instructing students with emotional disturbance. Reflective of IPA methodology, the data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews (i.e., “conversations with a purpose”) (Smith et al., 2009, p. 57) which are the preferred modality for this type of research (Cresswell, 2013; Martinko, 1998; Levin et al., 2008; Simon & Goes, 2011; Thompson, 1992). Furthermore, this interview format is typical of phenomenological research that focuses on experientially-shared, relevant, and practitioner-based information (Brocki & Weardon, 2006). Smith and Osborn (2009) note that semi-structured interviews are not only suitable, they are exemplary in that they are reliant on rapport, provide flexibility in questioning and encouraging, allow for new or emergent ideas, and truly reflect the participants’ personal stories and concerns (p. 57). Miles and Huberman (1994) concur stating that “…words, especially organized into incidents or stories, have a concrete, vivid, meaningful flavor that often proves far more convincing…than pages of summarized numbers” (p. 1) Moreover, conversations may be one of the most effective ways to collect data since they are “the best window into causal reasoning (defensive or productive) used by actors” (Argyris, 1997, p. 13) Such conversations may be particularly useful when seeking to “explore a phenomenon about which little has been written” (Flowerday & Schrave, 2000, p. 635). Such is the case for this study since there is a paucity of research on the topic as noted in the literature review section of this document. Furthermore, the semi-structured interviews are well-aligned to the theoretical framework of this study, attribution theory, since they serve to capture accurate, authentic, complex, idiosyncratic, and multidimensional accountings of teachers’ beliefs, explanations, and lived experiences from their subjective points of view (i.e., causal attributions).
Besides, participation in an interview process may even help teachers understand and make sense of their experiences and interpretations. The interviews were held a few days apart and conducted in a conference room at the high school during the school day or after school based on the preference of the teacher. Four female, content area, secondary level teachers met individually to share their experiences on this topic. With permission from the participants, the interviews were audiotaped to allow the researcher to re-visit and review the conversational details, take notes and make comments, monitor participants’ engagement, non-verbal behaviors and affective responses, and make adjustments as needed. A summary was provided at the end of the interview process so that the teachers had an opportunity to provide clarifications or additional information or delete information deemed too sensitive (Collins & Nicolson (2002).

During the first meeting and prior to the interview sessions, each participant was provided an overview of the research project as well as an opportunity to respond to expectations for participation. Each participant signed the Informed Consent Document and provided demographic information (i.e., years of teaching experience, highest educational attainment, gender, and confirmation of experience teaching students with emotional disturbance). Participants were also asked to respond to open-ended questions regarding the characteristics they typically attribute to students with emotional disturbance when compared to peers (i.e., academic, organization/time management, oppositionality/non-compliance, self-regulation skills, emotional lability, and personal relationships). In order to protect anonymity, participants were asked to choose a pseudo name to be used throughout the entirety the project.

Typical of a study of this nature, the research question was framed broadly and openly in order to encourage unencumbered exploration. Participants were assured that there were no right
or wrong answers. Rather, the intent was to have an authentic personal accounting of their personal beliefs and day-to-day experiences.

Although participant-driven conversations were encouraged, Smith and Osborn (2003, 2015) strongly recommend the use of some type of interview schedule to cover relevant and predetermined topics in a logical sequence. Therefore, a series of general questions reflective of current literature on the topic and aligned with IPA methodology served to guide the open-ended, non-prescriptive, and emergent discussion (see Appendix G). Basically, questions in the interview schedule reflected three general areas of inquiry: the beliefs teacher’s hold, the experiences they have, and the instructional practices they use regarding students with emotional disturbance. It is important to note that these questions merely provided dialogic pathways rather than a priori imposition. Prompts and probes were minimized so that participants could share their own personal narratives and the researcher could note any effect of the questions on the participant (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Based on the recommendations of Eatough and Smith (2008), the discussions began with the sharing of general thoughts and feelings with the easier, less sensitive questions asked first. For example, the initial question was: “Generally speaking, what is it like to be a teacher of students with emotional disturbance?” Subsequent questions were more personally-focused and included such topics as successes, frustrations, challenges, responsibilities and expectations. Examples would include: “What aspects of teaching this group of students do you find to be the most challenging?” or “What do you consider to be the most demanding task or expectation you face in the instruction of students with emotional disturbance?” Although consistency in the presentation of each question across interviews could enhance overall comparability, there was no obligation for adherence (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007; Smith & Osborn, 2009).
Data Management

The interviews were audiotaped and all text fully transcribed. Data included the participants’ verbatim statements and researcher notes, comments and hypothesis. The data will be kept in an electronic file that is password protected on the researcher’s personal laptop computer. Participants were clearly and specifically informed about the use and dissemination of the data as well as the potential audience. The collection of demographic data was limited to what was relevant to the project and personally-identifiable information was de-identified. De-identification also included researcher notes and memos, interview transcripts, data spreadsheets, and the thematic map. Participants were asked to choose a pseudo name that was used in all phases of the research study in order to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. No school district affiliation or contextual information will be used when sharing the results of the project.

Protection of Participants

A primary concern when conducting research with human subjects is the safety and well-being of the participants. Ethical practices were implemented throughout the entire research process whereby the researcher anticipated and continually addressed issues (Cresswell, 2009).

As noted previously, participants were provided a substantial understanding of the purpose, process, and expectations regarding their participation (i.e., informed consent: clear understanding of the purpose of the research project and the sponsoring institutions, relevant contact information, the participant selection process, the benefits and risks of participation, limits of confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time).

Since confidentiality enhances the trust necessary for sharing salient, authentic, and sensitive information, the researcher stressed that every precaution would be taken to maintain confidentiality and privacy, data security, and dissemination. The accuracy of data was
supported through a continuing process of participant feedback and all data will be discarded within seven years which is a reasonable timeframe (Sieber, 1998). Care was taken to consider the power differential since the researcher is currently the superintendent in the district.

Data Analysis

Since the primary focus of this study is to elicit a deep understanding of teachers’ beliefs and lived experiences from their first-person accounting, an inductive, integrated analytic model was used that is the hallmark of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Smith and Osborn’s (2015) procedural steps guided the case-by-case analysis in order to maintain the integrity of the idiographic nature of IPA; however, Braun and Clark’s (2006) model of thematic analysis served to provide an organizational framework for analysis as well as to facilitate the interpretation across cases, thus completing the hermeneutic circle. Since there is ‘no single way to do IPA”, Smith and Osborn (2015) suggests that the choice of methodology is based on the researcher’s personal preference whereby “one can sometimes usefully draw on other methodologies” and still adhere to IPA (p. 39). Despite differences in terminology (e.g., “units of meaning” vs. “codes”), the essential features of each model are similar in that themes are the primary units of analysis, the researcher is an active participant, and the goal is to access the participant’s perspective regarding the phenomenon in their everyday lives (Clark & Braun, 2016; Joffe & Yardley, 2004; Smith & Osborn, 2015; Tomkins & Eatough, 2014). Both methodologies are generic, emergent, accessible, transparent, flexible, and place high value on a rigorous, high quality analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006, 2012; Smith et al., 2013). Often used in psychology, particularly health-related psychology, the interpretation begins with an individually-centered orientation then moves to a broader, group-centered accounting of the phenomenon (i.e., teachers’ personal beliefs and experiences both individually and as a group) (Clark & Braun,
Both methodologies may be particularly appropriate for researchers new to the field (Clark & Braun, 2016; Yardley, 2017). Such is the case for this research study. Simply put, the overall goal at this juncture is to make sense of seemingly unrelated material by providing an organizational framework as well as systematic procedures for data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The methodologies used in the research study is not without challenges, specifically the ideographic commitment to identify patterns across cases yet maintain individual uniqueness (Touroni & Coyle, 2002). The integration of methodologies attempts to address this issue.

Based on the work of Braun & Clark (2006) and Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009), a six-phase, thematic analytic model served as a general guide for the identification of relevant themes this study as noted below.

*Figure 2. Six Step Interpretative Phenomenological Framework for Data Analysis*

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<td>Case-by-case familiarization with data</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Identification of patterns of meaning</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Search for initial themes</td>
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<td>Review and categorization of themes</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Definition and categorization of themes and subthemes</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Discussion and interpretation of findings</td>
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</table>

Step 1: Case-by-case familiarization with data. Becoming familiar with the data was an important, albeit time-consuming, process that began with the detailed analysis of each case. Audiotapes of the interviews were reviewed several times and each word was transcribed verbatim taking care to use correct spelling and grammatical conventions in order to assure accurate meanings and emphasis. Likewise, utterances, inflections, pauses, and intonations were noted. To facilitate this open-ended analysis, two sets of transcripts were developed for each participant. One transcript contained the original verbatim language derived from the audiotape and one transcript mirrored the original transcript but was double-spaced with an area allocated for comments, questions, clarifications, ideas, or impressions. Line numbering of all transcripts provided easy access to the location of salient text.

Step 2: Identification of patterns of meaning (i.e., codes). The primary goal at this stage of analysis was to cast a broad and inclusive net to identify questions, emerging ideas, similarities, differences, and contradictions (i.e., units of meaning) (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Consideration was given to any data that could potentially be relevant and/or meaningful, being mindful that this was a flexible and evolving process. Individual transcripts were read and re-read one-by-one and line-by-line in order to identify any words, phrases, and/or sentences that appeared to be meaningful, recurrent, surprising, stated as important by the participant, or noted in literature on the topic. In order to capture the essence of the teachers’ beliefs and lived experiences, care was taken to note participant reflections regarding content (i.e., what was being said), language (i.e., metaphors or repetitions), and context (i.e., non-verbal behaviors and emotional responses) were carefully and continually considered (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Notes, comments, questions, possible associations, and/or connections were recorded in the margin throughout the entire transcript.
Beginning in this early phase and continuing throughout the entire data collection and analysis, decision-making, and interpretation process, the researcher was vigilant regarding any bias or limitations. Personal reactions, observations, feelings, and subjectivity were acknowledged since it would not be possible to disavow any personal connection to this research study. This is consistent, however, with the philosophical underpinnings of IPA which doesn’t require that the researcher bracket herself out of the research.

**Step 3: Search for initial themes.** Search for initial themes Following the identification of initial patterns of meaning, the researcher’s comments, questions, and general reflections were refined to better reflect new insights, ideas, or interpretations. In other words, the preliminary commentary was translated into potential themes. Essential to the iterative process, these emerging themes were compared and supported by the actual words of the participants (i.e., primary sources) and an initial list of themes was developed based on their chronological sequence in the text. It should be noted that for smaller data sets and modest analysis needs such as those reflected in this research study, sorting, organizing and scoring did not require a software analysis program such as NVivo. In fact, the analysis process may even be enhanced when the researcher is immersed in the text, able to make connections and provide evidence of connections, and minimize any extra distance between the researcher and the data (King & Brooks, 2017; Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Therefore, the manual coding of data was completed through a systematic process that included color-coded highlighting for key phrases, notes on the text being analyzed, clustering of similar concepts, and the generation of a thematic map. These procedures provided an organizational framework for the transcripts, researcher comments, observations, and open-ended questions throughout the iterative process.
Step 4: Review and categorization of themes. The goal at this step was to move to a higher level of analytic interpretation regarding the phenomenon primarily based on individual cases (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 41). It was a more explicit investigation of the meanings (i.e., beliefs and attributions), the events (i.e., lived experiences), and states (i.e., emotional responses) of the participants. At this point, it was important to maintain the authenticity and complexity of the data, albeit in a more concise and streamlined manner. The researcher continued to make comments, reflect on personal insights, and ask questions about individual teachers but there was now some consideration regarding the group as a whole. In other words, both individual analysis and cross-participant analysis of similarities, differences, and theoretical connections began both concurrently and cyclically (Galser & Straus, 1967).

During this phase, Javadi and Zarea (2016) emphasize that the researcher’s determination of what is to be considered a theme is more important than the frequency or prevalence of words, codes, or patterns of meaning. Some themes were combined or merged based on commonalities or overlaps related to a particular set or overarching theme. Others were dropped because of a poor categorical fit and unique, idiosyncratic, or leftover topics were separated for further consideration since they could provide a voice that may not have been articulated otherwise. Subordinate themes or patterns of meaning began to emerge and were assigned to the most relevant category. To facilitate the clustering of themes, a word-processing, cut and paste tool helped to organize the information, including the text excerpts used to support the color-coded grouping of themes.

Step 5: Definition and categorization of themes and subthemes. The entire data set was then further reviewed to confirm recurrent themes, ideas, or concepts and/or re-define, add, or eliminate categories. In other words, at this point it was important to determine if the themes
across the group were truly internally homogeneous (i.e., meaningfully related) and externally heterogeneous (i.e., explicitly different from other themes) (Patton, 1980). Again, categorical decisions were supported by the data. When no further review or refinement was warranted, themes and subthemes were organized hierarchically on the thematic map. A concise and informative written summary of the scope and contents of each theme was developed so that the information would be clear to the reader.

The thematic map served as a visual tool to list, organize, identify similarities (i.e., congruence), differences (i.e., divergence), and points of interest. The information was again re-coded into clusters of similar topics or topics that were too broad and re-named and clearly defined with a new, more fitting category that was supported for inclusion (Joffee, 2012). Categories included topics noted in the literature, questions of interest to the researcher, or topics that were deemed important by the participants.

**Step 6: Discussion and interpretation of findings.** This final goal in the analysis process was to translate the themes into a compelling narrative. The task was to essentially widen the themes with a persuasive, plausible, and compelling rationale about the data by integrating the narrative with existing literature on the topic. Based on the interpretative focus of IPA and the subjective and contextual experiences of the participants and the researcher, results were based on congruency with the participants’ accounting and meanings supported by verbatim extracts rather than a definitive analysis.

**Integrity Measures**

For almost a century, the qualitative phenomenological approach was used to investigate the lived experiences of individuals (Churchill & Wertz, 2001; Giorgi, 2009; Wertz, 2014); however, rigor has typically been defined by quantitative criteria (i.e., sampling, reliability, and
replicability) (Yardley, 2002). This may not be applicable or appropriate when investigating individual beliefs and experiences since quantitative methodologies may exclude the important personal characteristics that are integral to answering the research questions (Hollway, 2007); therefore, Yardley’s four integrity measures were used for this study. These measures were particularly well-suited for this study since the research focuses on real world problems and experiences (Patton, 2002). The essential integrity components include: sensitivity and context, commitment and rigor, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance.

Sensitivity and context. The interpretation of findings within the phenomenological setting or context is an important interpretative consideration (Morrow & Smith, 2000). For this reason, demographic consistency (i.e., secondary level, content-area teachers who work at the same high school and have experience regarding the instruction of students with emotional disturbance) was a criterion for inclusion in this study. This group of teachers was deemed to have the similar roles, skills, expectations, and political influences, and/or legislative requirements.

For this study, it was also important to understand the dynamic interplay of any influences that could moderate, invalidate, or impair the quality or authenticity of the participants’ responses, particularly since the topic could be emotionally-laden. As noted previously, teachers may have a number of emotional responses when working with students with emotional disturbance (e.g., anger, frustration, or depression) or they may feel unprepared, unskilled, or unsupported (Axup & Gersch, 2008; Brigham, 2010). Therefore, care was taken to build rapport, provide a sense of safety and well-being, and understand and acknowledge the participants’ experiences and subjective realities (i.e., “walk in their shoes”). In this way, genuine and personally relevant themes would be more likely to emerge from the conversations.
Braun and Clark (2006) reiterate the importance of such candid and unencumbered themes “since they reflect something extracted from the data that is important, meaningful, recurrent, agreed upon, concise, and clear and relates to the research questions” (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 82). To that end, analytic integrity was also supported through a thorough investigation of themes identified as relevant, noteworthy, and integral to the daily lived experiences of these teachers.

**Commitment to rigor.** Commitment and rigor was established through in-depth conversations, sound data collection techniques, and skilled interpretation and analysis (Yardley, 2017, p. 295). The semi-structured interviews that served as the primary data collection method for this study were not only an effective way to get a clear and authentic accounting from each participant, they also allowed for the necessary sufficiency and richness of information as well as the cross-comparison of individuals who were interviewed about this phenomenon, thus improving fidelity (Morrow, 2005). Although there has been an ongoing debate regarding rigor in qualitative research, step-by-step procedures typically applied in IPA studies were used to analyze the data. In the early stage of data analysis, Smith and Osborn’s (2015) procedures were followed to provide a robust, thorough, and emergent single-case path for interpretation. Smith and Osborn (2015) reiterated that this is not a “prescriptive methodology” (p. 39); therefore, thematic analysis was applied in the later stages of interpretation when the goal was to identify cross-participant convergences, divergences, and connections. This allowed for the creativity and flexibility integral to and consistent with IPA methodology yet it established an organized, and integrated thematic framework (Sandelowski, 2004). Moreover, the combination of both analytical methodologies enriched the interpretative process regarding the subject matter (i.e. teachers’ beliefs and experiences), the theoretical framework (i.e., attribution theory), and the
research question (i.e., teachers’ first-hand accounting regarding the instruction of students with emotional disturbance) (Silverman, 1993). The analytic methodology provided an opportunity for readers to trace the process from start to finish and the researcher’s reflexive commentary shed light on how conclusions were reached.

**Transparency and coherence.** As stated, it was important to create a transparent, reasonably justifiable, and consistent trail with respect to sample selection, data collection and analysis techniques, the formulation of themes and subthemes, and sufficient evidence to support interpretations and conclusions (Silverman, 1993; Smith & Osborn, 2015; Yardley, 2000). It is also important to address the role of the researcher. Unlike quantitative research that tends to be intolerant of researcher bias or subjectivity, the methodology chosen for this study both supports and embraces the embedded role as a means for enrichment of the process (Gough, 2003; Finley, 2008). It is acknowledged that the goal of this study was not to assure objectivity but rather to get a deeper and unencumbered understanding of the topic; therefore, there was a strong reliance on rapport-building, continued engagement, and empathy throughout the process. For this reason, the researcher clearly understood and was continually mindful of any personal preconceptions or biases (i.e., preferences, affinities, personal beliefs, choice of topic, expectations, experiences, etc.) and made them explicit through reflexive commentary (Gough, 2016; Holloway & Biley, 2011; Smith, 2004; Smith & Osborn, 2009; Yardley, 2017). For example, even though the multiple roles held by this researcher in the school district under study (i.e., psychologist, Director of Special Education, Director of Pupil Personnel Services, and Superintendent), provided first-hand knowledge, experience, and personal inclinations regarding the topic, the somewhat complicated relationships between the researcher and the participants cannot be ignored. In the previous role as psychologist at the high school, the researcher was a
colleague who served as an advocate for students with emotional disturbance. Currently, the role of superintendent is one of assigned authority and may be perceived as a potential risk to the participants due to the inherent power imbalance. Similarly, it must be acknowledged that since schools tend to have carefully delineated roles and political hierarchies, teachers may also perceive the research process as evaluative or agenda-driven. Therefore, care was taken to be balanced, respectful, non-threatening, and aware of the social dynamics and culture of the high school. These potential problems were addressed at the beginning of the interview process to alleviate any participant concern. Since it was important to reach a balanced interpretation, the following strategies were used: written reflections to increase self-awareness, participant feedback at the end of each interview and overall findings, review of the data within and across interviews, gathering of sufficient thick, rich descriptions, verbatim exemplar quotes found within the data to support findings, flexible and open-ended questions, and researcher openness to re-consideration of interpretations, explanations, or predispositions (Lincoln & Guba, 2010).

**Impact and importance.** It has been my experience, and the literature supports the notion, that outcomes for students with emotional disturbance have not improved over the years (Gonzalez et al., 2004; Mooney et al., 2003; Reid et al. 2004). There is extensive evidence that this group of students continues to have dire outcomes despite ongoing, and often ineffective, legislative mandates (Bradley et al., 2008; Duchnowski & Kutash, 2011; Kern et al., 2009; Landrum, 2003; Wagner, 2006). As stated previously, there are a number of possible factors that may influence teachers’ beliefs, experiences, and instructional practices. Currently, as an administrator and educational leader, there appears to be a professional as well as a moral duty to improve the outcomes for students with emotional disturbance. The difficulties and frustrations
expressed by teachers and students with emotional disturbance may serve as the catalyst for further exploration.

Unlike other institutions, public schools are charged with the solitary responsibility of meeting the needs of students with emotional disturbance and teachers play a significant role in this process (Kulinna, 2007; Malgren & Meisel, 2002). However, the responsibility to improve the longstanding and perniciously poor outcomes for this group of students goes beyond that of classroom teachers. Since teachers’ beliefs, explanations and experiences can exert a strong influence over instructional practices, it would also serve school administrators well to have a well-informed understanding of this phenomenon in order to provide professional development, strategies, and support (Levin et al., 2013). Although the findings of this study may represent the first step in the process of improvement, they may eventually influence policies, practices, or ongoing research on this topic (Madill & Gough, 2008).

Summary

A qualitative research methodology, interpretative phenomenological analysis, was chosen for this study since it is well-aligned with the research questions, theoretical framework, and relevant literature on the topic. The foundations of IPA are grounded in three key underpinnings and are reflected throughout the research process: phenomenology, interpretation, and idiography. IPA is a suitable methodology for educational contexts where the goal is to gain a deeper understanding of the beliefs and assumptions teachers hold and the experiences they have regarding the instruction of students with emotional disturbance. It is dynamic, flexible, contextually-based, subjective, emergent, and experiential. A small, purposely-chosen group of participants shared their personal stories through a single case, in-depth interview process guided by the open-ended prompts based on the research question and other relevant
information. An integrated data analysis methodology was used that included step-by-step procedures based on the work of Smith & Osborn (2015) and Braun and Clark (2006). This permitted alignment with the idiographic nature of IPA while providing an organizational framework for data collection, organization, and analysis. Compatible with the IPA methodology, integrity was enhanced through sensitivity and context, commitment to rigor, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance.
Chapter IV: Report of Research Findings

Since the purpose of this study was to capture the thoughts and lived experiences of teachers who instruct students with emotional disturbance, four high school teachers, representing different content areas, graciously shared their day-to-day experiences on a topic that has received little attention in the literature, yet may have a significant influence on instructional practices and professional development regarding this group of challenging students. The bulk of information was gleaned from the 90-minute interview transcripts that were confirmed for accuracy by the participants. Participants also shared demographic information as well as responses to opinion questions regarding the nature of students with emotional disturbance compared to peers. Interviews took place within a few days of each other and lasted approximately 90 minutes. The interview schedule provided a flexible framework for discussion and the same questions were posed to each of the participants at some point during this conversational process; however, the participants were free to lead the discussion in the direction of their choosing. By listening to the audio recordings multiple times, transcribing the narratives into text, and reading and re-reading each transcript, some preliminary ideas or questions began to emerge. During this initial phase, any words phrases, or sentences that were repeated, stated by the participant as important, appeared to be surprising, or related the literature were noted in order to get a general feeling of the text. As important themes and patterns began to emerge, a color-coded thematic map was developed for each participant. It must be acknowledged that the judgements for categorization were subjectively determined by the researcher yet consistently supported by participant’s verbatim statements. In order to provide a systematic and consistent focus for categorization, salient terms were loosely defined to include the following:
Belief: any opinion, attitude, value, thought or idea

Challenge: something that takes great mental or physical effort to be successful

Characteristic: any attribute, feature, or trait that is used to describe students with emotional disturbance

Dilemmas: confusing or difficult questions, no clear right or wrong answers

Curriculum and instruction: what teachers teach and how they teach it

Feeling: any words or phrases used to describe an emotion or emotional state

Experience: the process of doing something or having something happen to the participant

Relationship: the manner in which people behave toward or interact with others

Skill: competencies, strengths, problem-solving abilities

Insight: awareness, understanding, comprehension

Responsibility: accountability, duties, obligations

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach was used since it is an idiographic exploration of each participant’s personal, contextually-based perspectives of the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). Larkin et al. (2006) notes that the goal of IPA is to go beyond mere description when conducting analysis (p. 104); therefore, a step-by-step analysis process was systematically and thoroughly completed for each participant before any attempts were made to identify inter-participant connections, similarities, or differences.

This chapter describes the key findings by identifying individually-generated themes as well as the thematic connections between the themes as they relate to the research question. The following figure provides an overview of the thematic map that guided the analysis. It illustrates both the main themes and the corresponding subordinate themes that emerged from the data.
Figure 3: Major Themes and Subthemes

Theme 1: Affective Responses to Daily Challenges
- Exhaustion & Frustration
- Confusion & Uncertainty
- Constant Vigilance
- Resignation

Theme 2: General Beliefs and Assumptions
- Teachers' Beliefs about Self
- Preparing Students for the Real World
- The Value of Relationships
- Fairness & Inequity

Theme 3: Maximizing Teaching and Learning
- Instructional Strategies & Interventions
- Training & Professional Development

Beliefs about Students with ED (Characteristics, Roles, Responsibilities)
Participant Profiles

Siedman (2013) suggests that it is important to create a profile for each of the participants when sharing and interpreting interview information. In this study, the participants work at a high school that is located in a suburban town in the southern region of Massachusetts. The student population is just under 600 students with a fairly equal gender breakdown and low minority enrollment. Most students demonstrate proficiency on state-required tests and a growing number of students are now taking Advanced Placement courses and scoring well on the exams. There is a low dropout rate and high graduation rate.

The four participants were diverse in that they taught different content areas, had different years of experience ranging from 10 to 42 years, and worked in suburban as well as inner city schools. They were similar in that they are currently full-time teachers who have experience instructing students with emotional disturbance and were willing to participate in all phases of the study.

Jean. Jean is a science teacher with 11 years of experience. Her students differ widely with regard to academic and social-emotional abilities to include students with significant learning issues as well students taking advanced placement courses. Jean described herself as being “very aware of her strengths and weakness, logical, a ‘fix the problem’ type of person, not tactful, and sometimes aggressive”. Jean reiterated multiple times and with great emphasis that she was *not warm or fuzzy*, yet her physical and emotional presentation did not align with her words stated so matter-of-factly. In order to explore this discrepancy, the following exchange took place.

Researcher: It’s interesting because you say that you are not warm and fuzzy, yet…
Jean: *(inserted quickly)* I am! As I’m sitting here welling up! …*Yes! Yes! I care!* (great emphasis). They know I care — but I can’t [show it] because I’d be like (long paused) — dogs, bees, and children smell fear. If they knew I was emotional, they would utilize that.

Despite Jean’s initial protestations regarding any show of emotion or vulnerability and her inclination to default to established rules, Jean recognized that she often changed her teaching style based on the needs of the students. She provided extra attention to those who were “sad or in need of a little positive reinforcement” as long as they were “truthful about their circumstances” and not trying to game the system. As a kinesthetic learner, Jean relies on active, hands-on learning with a strong focus on lab work in her sciences classes.

**Sophia.** Sophia is a world language teacher with 10 years of experience in both an inner city school district as well as this suburban school district. She is the only teacher of one specific world language at the high school; therefore, she typically has students with varying abilities and grade levels, often in the same class. Sophia reports that this diverse grouping presents many daily instructional challenges due to so many individual student needs.

Sophia refers to herself as a continuously cautious person who treads carefully to avoid major blowouts that could result in safety issues or disruptions to instruction. Although she does not see herself as overly sensitive to minor things, she recognizes that she becomes very quiet when she encounters a problem. She values sustained encouragement so that students can gain the confidence to achieve personal expectations. Like Jean, Sophia describes herself as a kinesthetic learner and she promotes active learning in the classroom, believing that it’s not realistic to expect students to “just sit still all day”.

**Misty.** Misty, a social studies teacher with 17 years of experience, teaches both advanced placement classes and serves as a co-teacher in a specialized therapeutic classroom designed for
students with emotional disturbance. Misty understands that she is relationally-oriented and values the differing roles and areas of expertise demonstrated by her colleagues. She strongly believes that teachers should model professionalism, responsibility, and the importance of education for students. She sets high expectations for herself and expects no less from her students. The implications for instruction are that rules and expectations should be based on individual student needs, respect and kindness in the classroom are mandatory, and only necessary accommodations should be implemented so that the playing field is level and fair.

Mary. Mary is a math teacher with 42 years of experience. Although she did not give specific details about the district in which she previously worked, she did allude to the fact that her last district was “more dangerous” than the current district. She referred to “breaking up fights” in the hallway on a regular basis. Many of Mary’s students either struggle academically or demonstrate average performance. She does not teach any advanced placement classes.

Mary sees herself as being very different from other teachers; however, she did not offer any specific rationale for such differences. She stated that she generally does a good job and gets positive feedback from others, particularly parents. Mary reports that she relies on camaraderie and collaboration with colleagues, is open-minded and non-judgmental, and takes care to be extremely organized, consistent, accommodating to her students. She values growth and achievement, albeit at the student’s pace rather than externally imposed parameters and expectations. With regard to instructional implications, Mary provides individualized modifications and accommodations, flexible timelines, and personal attention so that every student can benefit.
Themes

When weaving together a cohesive story to accurately represent the beliefs, meanings, and experiences described by these four teachers, it became clear that, although there were some areas of divergence, there were also obvious commonalities that were repeatedly emphasized throughout the narratives. The participants identified three central themes: (1) their emotional reactions to the challenges they face daily, (2) the general beliefs they hold regarding students with emotional disturbance, and (3) maximizing teaching and learning. A number of superordinate themes also emerged to include: (Theme 1) exhaustion and frustration, confusion and uncertainty, constant vigilance, resignation; (Theme 2) teachers’ beliefs about self, preparing students for the real world, the value of relationships, fairness and equity, beliefs about students with emotional disturbance, and (Theme 3) instructional strategies and interventions, and training and professional development.

Theme one: affective responses to daily challenges. This first section describes the subjective, multi-dimensional, and sometimes mixed emotional reactions each participant described in the day-to-day interactions with challenging students. The aim of the in-depth conversation was to accurately understand what the participant feels and how they interpret those feelings in the context of their classrooms. In this theme, a number of subordinate themes emerged: (1) frustration and exhaustion, (2) confusion, uncertainty, self-doubt, helplessness, (3) constant vigilance, and finally (4) resignation.

Frustration and exhaustion. The importance or meaning of statements was conveyed directly (i.e., stated explicitly, confirmed in response to researcher query or request for clarification, or indirectly (i.e., repetition, tone of voice, emotional responses). For example, when the participants were asked to describe their everyday experiences working with this group
of students, each responded repeatedly and with great emphasis that it was “exhausting”. Rather than make inaccurate assumptions regarding the meaning of terms such as ‘exhaustion’, it was often necessary to check for accuracy and understanding throughout the interview process by querying, re-phrasing, and requesting further explanation. Such an example is noted when Jean was asked to describe a particularly chaotic day.

   Researcher: “So, are you saying that rather than instructing students every day you are really just dealing with classroom management?”

   Jean: “Yes, yes, yes!”

   In this case, the clarification served to confirm the researcher’s understanding of the participant’s accurate and intended meaning. The overwhelming sense of utter frustration and exhaustion was noted consistently, repeatedly, and with great emphasis by all participants. In fact, three of four teachers were so emotionally upset during the discussion, they became teary-eyed and choked up when describing how difficult instructing this group of students could be in daily practice.

   Jean described both the physical and mental strain she experienced throughout her 11-year career. She was clear that the difficulties she faced were not limited to students with emotional disturbance, sharing that students in the advanced placement courses were reported to be “draining as well”. However, Jean did stress that students with emotional disturbance were “more exhausting” since they required and extraordinary amount of time, effort, and personal attention every day. The following quote is an apt depiction and a powerful and persuasive sentiment shared stated by Jean, but confirmed by all participants, throughout the interviews.

   It is physically and mentally exhausting. I remember the days of crying hysterically, having so much to do, not sleeping. I used to joke that I had a prep right after class so I
could cry for 15 minutes. And so, they would leave and I would cry. I would re-group and I would continue on doing what I needed to do in my prep… by the time class was over, you have wound yourself into this giant ball that you just needed to release... It’s *exhausting*!

In addition to re-grouping or re-gaining composure after a particularly difficult encounter, all participants tactically attempted to ward off such exasperating and draining situations. Daily rituals were implemented in order to head off extreme emotional responses [*teacher and student*] and disruptive behaviors so that classes could run smoothly. This proactive stance that could be described as a cautiously deliberated dance to keep things under control. An example is illustrated by Jean’s excerpt below.

> It’s like a constant negotiation…a constant smolder fire so you don’t want it to turn into a full-blown fire…You have to constantly go and squash the flames…especially with kids who have a tendency to shut down or get angry…so, if I can get them to not get to that point, then we’re better off.

Similarly, Sophia expressed the same sense of frustration and exhaustion when trying to accomplish her daily instructional goals. For her, it is particularly difficult because her classes are heterogeneously grouped whereby the students have a diverse variety of different needs, including a high percentage of students with social-emotional challenges. She underscores the fact that many of her students struggle with their native language; therefore, taking a mandated foreign language can strain both their academic and emotional capacities. Although multiple languages are offered at the high school, Sophia is the only person to teach this particular language. As a result, her students not only have differing abilities, they also are grouped by different grade levels in the same class which complicates the already difficult instructional
expectations. Sophia notes that student learning difficulties and poor frustration tolerance can exacerbate behavioral issues in her classroom. Like Jean, Sophia implements preventative strategies in order to ward off any disruptions or extreme emotional outbursts.

So, it’s exhausting sometimes and if I can’t engage that student, he’s going to get upset and cause turmoil in the classroom…[long pause, teared up] but sometimes it’s just very hard, I mean, I do have classes with very high numbers with students with needs. And their needs are very difficult for one body… So, it’s just like today — it’s only October and it feels like April. I guess I could say one word, ‘frustrated’… I’m really just trying to remain calm every day and not lose it.

Misty also stated that she often felt frustrated and overwhelmed; however, unlike Jean and Sophia, she focused primarily on the inordinate amount of paperwork required when instructing students with emotional disturbance. In addition to the challenges these students present in the classroom, Misty added her difficulty keeping up with the paperwork, accommodations, meetings, and other points of regulatory compliance required by the student’s Individual Education Plans (IEPs). Here Misty describes her concerns.

Keeping up with the paperwork is tough. Keeping up with what they missed…always figuring out what they can make up… grading… how much do you really have to go beyond figuring out who owes you what and when they owe it?

Mary’s frustration and fatigue, unlike the other participants, resulted from her personal experiences with emotional disturbance rather than her experiences with the students in her classes. Specifically, in addition to her own two children who struggled with learning issues, Mary also provided foster care for a number of children with significant emotional issues over the years. This is not to say that she has not experienced the challenges of extremely disruptive
and aggressive students in her 42 years as a teacher. Rather, the day-to-day struggles at home often spill over into school as she shares below

I don’t know if it’s so much my class but having a foster child has given me a lot to deal with… This one [current foster student] is probably the worst. In 42 years, this has been my biggest challenge… you know… with kids with emotional disturbance… it was so much that we finally had to get outside help.

Unlike the other participants, Mary reports that the frustration she experiences in school doesn’t compare to the exasperation she experiences at home. For her, the relationships at home are personal, family issues. Her disclosure gives some insight into her determination, and the determination of the other participants, to handle things on her own for as long as possible. Furthermore, although the participants make it clear that frustration and exhaustion are the most striking feelings they experience, they also struggle with a number of different emotional responses throughout the school day.

Beyond feeling frustrated, overwhelmed, and exhausted, all four participants described a sense of confusion, uncertainty, and self-doubt in their daily practice. Their accounts indicated that, not only has the number of students with emotional disturbance increased, so too has the accompanying levels of severity, complexity, and teacher responsibility. To make it even more perplexing is the notion that emotional-disturbance has also changed over the years. Previously, students were more likely to present with disruptive, defiant, or aggressive behaviors; therefore, it was easier to gauge the efficacy of interventions by reading how the students “outwardly responded” (Jean).

All participants agreed that more students are being diagnosed with emotional disturbance now than in previous years and these students are now included in the general
education classrooms. The challenges are “hard to keep up with” (Misty), “always present and resistant to change” (Sophia), “more difficult than ever before” (Jean), and “a lot to deal with” (Mary). The significant increase in anxiety and depression has just added another layer to an already difficult job as Misty stated: “Anxiety...I think every kid might have anxiety”.

As a result of the ever-increasing numbers of students diagnosed with anxiety and depression, all participants shared that they are now more confused or lack the confidence that they are “doing the right thing” (Sophia) since it’s “really hard to tell with students with anxiety and depression” (Jean, Misty). This is not to say that externalizing behaviors are non-existent today. Rather, a new layer has been added. Jean aptly reflected the sentiments of all participants in the following excerpt.

I feel like it’s such a jumble of all these things going on or like it was much easier for me to see what was setting them off when it was outward. They would throw a chair or swear at you and I knew not to give in. Previously rules and structure worked. Now, because it’s internalized, they don’t give you anything to respond to. I really can’t determine if it is me or the class before, or something that happened over the weekend… It’s almost more difficult now… it’s a different animal and kind of harder to determine what you can or cannot do to try to intervene with the situation.

When they reflected on their abilities to fully understand or effectively react to the myriad problems these students face, the participants lamented that the interventions and strategies previously found to be successful just didn’t work anymore. They reported feeling ill-equipped and unsure about what to do, particularly how hard they should push students with emotional disturbance. The dilemma the participants face daily is how to maintain order and get through the lesson but not exacerbate a situation or cause harm to a student with emotional
disturbance or other members of the class. In other words, they try to balance what is good for the student with emotional disturbance with what is good for the class. Sophia’s solution was to break things down into manageable parts and separate the academic from the social-emotional issues, rather than chase an elusive or ineffective behavioral intervention. Instead, Sophia said that she focuses on what she can actually do in the classroom. She clarified by saying that she works to accommodate specific learning issues since they often influence behaviors; she continues to investigate promising instructional strategies to expand her repertoire; and she tries to determine the best ways to assess the students both academically and social-emotionally.

Although this is well-intentioned, she still remains plagued by the weight of these responsibilities and still unsure of what to do as noted in the following extract.

So, what do I do? How do I break things down? What am I supposed to measure? Maybe I’m expecting them to do something and there’s a piece of their learning disability that’s going to bleed into this class. I try to adapt to that too?

On the other hand, Misty reported that she usually does quite well with emotionally-challenging students. She does acknowledge that there are times that she defers to those with more knowledge and expertise whereas her colleagues rarely seek help from others until absolutely necessary. Unlike the other participants, Misty, a co-teacher in a specialized therapeutic classroom, emphasizes that she shares responsibility with the special education teacher in the specialized therapeutic program where she is primarily responsible for the academic component whereas the special education teacher is responsible for student behaviors. This is not the case, however, in her advanced placement classes where she is solely responsible for both academics and behaviors. In this case, although Misty said that she is usually effective with students with
emotional disturbance, she too questioned her skills, sense of efficacy, and feelings of helplessness as noted in the following excerpt.

So... knock on wood, I don’t typically have any discipline issues with those kids...I’m like an atypical personality, proactive...I make sure that I do my best to help all those kids... but sometimes I don’t know what I’m doing. After you leave college and unless you specialize in sped, I don’t think there’s enough out there to help teachers... like being thrown into the specialized classroom or being responsible in your own classroom...I don’t always know what to expect. It’s one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do [co-teacher in the Therapeutic Alternative Program (TAP).

Mary, like her colleagues, shared her confusion and questioned her efficacy when things don’t go as expected, when previously successful strategies and interventions don’t work, and when it’s difficult to pinpoint the problem. She provides an example of her self-doubt and uncertainty in the following text: “I tried everything and he wouldn’t buy into anything I had to say. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know if he just didn’t like my personality...but he wouldn’t try anything”.

As noted previously, most of the participants try to handle things on their own and are reluctant to seek support from others until they have exhausted every possibility. There is a point, however, that assistance from those with experience, expertise, or administrative clout would be approached for advisement or assistance. This typically occurs when the problem is viewed as significant, ongoing, extremely disruptive, or dangerous. Common to all participants, however, was the idea that when all else fails, when you don’t know what else to do, when advisement hasn’t helped, then you just take responsibility and use your intuition to guide your decisions. Jean provides relevant commentary. “When there’s no way I can be sure of
anything, essentially I just go with my gut. You have to just go by what you see in those 65 minutes…how they are behaving and take it from there.”

Similarly, Sophia stressed that figuring out a solution to a problem was up to her. She had to find a better way to communicate or understand why a situation happened. When asked what it would be like for her to ask for help and why she did not seek it out, Sophia paused before responding reporting that this was only her third year in the district she was still trying to figure things out. Her uncertainty is noted as she explains further. “But, like who do I ask for help? Who can help me with this? Where do I find it? I guess that it’s OK to say I don’t know what to do since I’ve tried everything”.

Conversely, Misty reported that she often sought assistance from others, particularly when they had the appropriate training, expertise, and a successful track record with students with emotional disturbance. She consulted with the school psychologist, guidance counselor, adjustment counselor, and special education teacher to get a better understanding of what was hindering the student’s classroom performance. Similar to the other participants, when Misty decided that she had exhausted all options, she too would make her own decisions based on intuition.

I guess that at some point I got enough information…I guess I got to the point like OK…does this feel like the right thing to do for the kid? Then I would do what I thought was best.

Mary was the most vocal in her rejection of the opinions of others. She proudly reported that if she “doesn’t see it”, she will just go with what she thinks rather than rely on what others say. This includes her refusal to read the Individual Education Programs (IEPs) of students prior to their entry into her classes. Whereas Mary’s colleagues may find that reading the IEP prior to
meeting the students would color their judgement, they maintain regulatory compliance, often begrudgingly so. Mary, however, insists that she will wait to see what the students can do first, discounting any prescribed accommodations.

We’re told that they have these problems but they probably don’t. OK, I don’t know. I’m not a doctor [laughed] but I don’t feel that they should always be told they have extra time. Sometimes they just don’t get down to the task right away. If I feel they need more time, then I’ll give them more time.

It appears that some uncertainty may actually be preferable in that each student has a clean, bias-free slate before entering the classroom and participants are free to define their own perspective of the student and the application of instructional practices.

**Constant vigilance.** As noted previously, all participants relied on preventative daily routines and strategies in order to head off potentially disruptive behaviors or major confrontations - the primary justification being to “take the temperature” of the students in order to make preemptive adjustments as necessary. Although this rationale was to essentially deter significant interruptions to the learning process, further exploration revealed that participants also worried about the safety and well-being of those in the classroom. They expressed uncertainty regarding the limits to which one could push a student, fearing that any miscalculation could cause harm to that student or others. This appeared to create a constant state of tension and admittedly affected instructional decisions. Strategies included greeting students as they entered the classroom, taking note of their reactions, or surveying their non-verbal behaviors. In essence, all confirmed that these strategies, albeit exhausting, were generally successful when attempting to avoid major confrontations or outbursts. The hallmark of these routines was the reliance on constant vigilance as noted in the following extract.
And so, just from my experiences, I’ve learned that you have to take baby steps...you have to learn how to read them very quickly and their ever-changing mental states… A way to put it is whether it’s Monday morning or Friday afternoon, there’s just certain times that you’re just not going to have a functional day. The dynamics are really important. So, you may have a much better day if that student isn’t there because he sets off the other three… It’s definitely a far more treacherous area I’m in now. I don’t know what they can handle. (Jean)

Sophia reiterated that she wants all of the students to feel comfortable, complete their work, and keep outside influences at bay. To accomplish this, she too had to tread carefully to avoid meltdowns. In other words, she had to be “constantly be cautious”. When asked what she was thinking during those times, Sophia stated the following.

When kids come in I would just try to see by their demeanor…the way the student would walk down the hall…just by their posture. I would say: “Good Morning. How’s everything going?” I’d start that way and watch, keep an eye, and see how much I could push because sometimes it could be a very volatile class where the other students were afraid… It was like “Oh God [sigh] please don’t blow up, please! I was scared. I don’t want a physical interaction. That shouldn’t be happening… that student is going to get upset and it’s going to cause turmoil in the classroom and deteriorate everything for everyone.

Likewise, Misty recalled a time when an angry student threw a book in class. She reported being torn between holding the line on behavioral expectations and the emotional liability of this student. She also took note of the student’s nonverbal presentation prior to responding.
I don’t think you can really define a line at that time. You start to notice the mannerisms or body language… when you start to get like that uncomfortable feeling… so maybe it’s just time to move on or just find a way of re-directing.

Similarly, Mary follows a daily routine each day when students enter her classroom. She said that this not only provides the consistency and predictability students with emotional disturbance need, but it also cues her to adaptations she must make that day.

I approach every class the same way. When they come in the door I greet them. When they leave I say: “Have a good day”. You pick up the ones who respond to you and which ones don’t… just visually… just looking. I don’t need to see a piece of paper that says this kid has a problem.

The participants’ excerpts make it clear that simultaneous processes are happening during these daily routines. They are greeting students and making judgements based on their responses, observing tell-tale, non-verbal presentations, thinking of possible instructional adjustments, and hoping they are ready to respond appropriately to maintain order and safety, not to mention covering the curriculum.

**Resignation.** Although the participants voiced a substantial commitment to the students, each reached a point at which they gave themselves permission to give up, reach out for help, or defer responsibility. Essentially, this occurred when felt that they had exhausted all the options in their repertoire of ideas or strategies or the motivation to persist (Jean, Sophia, Misty). Examples of this exasperation and willingness to hand over responsibility is reflected in the following excerpts.

Now I’ll just send them to the special education teacher… the ball is in their court… I’m not going to get every kid but it’s alright because it’s their [student’s] choice. (Jean)
Sometimes you just can’t get to it everything every day… that’s just how it is. (Sophia)

Sometimes you just have to cut your losses. (Misty)

Indicative of ongoing internal struggles, resignation, giving in or re-assigning responsibility was often associated with a sense of regret and underlying feelings of failure, disappointment, and guilt. An example of this internal struggle is shared by Sophia:

I didn’t think that he was going to be successful and that’s horrible because we’re teachers and we should never [give up] [long pause, teary-eyed] and that felt like defeat to me.

This sense of resignation is important in light of the effort the participants report investing in each of their students, especially students who are significantly challenging. Knowing their intention to exhaust all options before reluctantly seeking assistance from others, the notion of resignation clearly depicts their struggle conceding that they have not successfully reached all of their students.

**Theme two: general beliefs and assumptions.** This theme aims to capture the general beliefs and assumptions teachers hold regarding teaching and learning with regard to students with emotional disturbance. Teachers’ beliefs influence how they make instructional decisions, how they relate to their students, and how they view their roles and responsibilities. Personal experiences, upbringing, education, training, and emotions have an interactive influence on both beliefs and practice (Kagan, 1992; Buehl & Beck, p. 2915). In this section, the participants identified a number of personally relevant beliefs: (1) roles and responsibilities, (2) the importance of relationships, (3) fairness and equity, and (4) beliefs about students with emotional disturbance.
Beliefs about responsibility. The participants agreed that it was their responsibility to make sure that students felt comfortable, cared for, safe, supported and respected. (Jean, Sophia, Misty, Mary) To that end, they put great effort into building strong relationships and getting to really know the students. (Jean, Sophia, Misty, Mary) In that way, the participants could make things easier by personally tailoring instruction, a laudable but possibly unrealistic goal (Jean, Misty, Mary), anticipating problems (Jean, Sophia, Misty, Mary), and providing opportunities for students to work at a reasonable pace from a position of strength (Mary). Prominent was the idea that students should be pushed and challenged (Jean), held to high expectations (Sophia), continually show growth and achievement (Mary), and demonstrate competence on real world skills and basic curriculum concepts (Misty). All participants believed that their role now goes far beyond academics and they are now required to address the everyday stressors in the students’ lives (Jean, Sophia, Misty). In the following excerpt, Sophia describes an example of what she faces between classes.

I have all these calls coming in—these emotional pieces. Then you get yet another call telling you to check your email. You find out that you have another student to deal with before the end of the day…and of course, you don’t even realize at the time that this email is connected to another email…someone I was already called about but couldn’t get to…So I try to relax and remain calm but it’s really hard.

The notion of persistence was supported by all participants in that teachers should carry on and never give up (Jean), continually find ways to keep kids in your classroom (Sophia), try to work things out on your own and resist sending students to administration (Sophia, Misty), and exhaust every possibility before giving up (Misty).
Ultimately, the primary driver of this tenacious persistence is the acknowledgement that classroom teachers must make sure that all students gain the knowledge and skills expected of them. In other words, they must meet the learning standards, both state and district, and the classroom teacher is key to that objective.

Curriculum is who we are and what we do. Essentially, the curriculum is a set of learning standards or competencies that each student must master in order to move from grade to grade or graduate from high school. To that end, teachers are charged with creating a classroom environment and instructional activities that provide full access to and successful completion of curriculum objectives. Moreover, recently implemented teacher evaluation systems and accountability measures are imposed on classroom teachers and school districts to assure that students are meeting expectations. Despite the relative importance of this essential condition for learning, the word ‘curriculum’ was only mentioned twice throughout the entire discourse. However, the notion of curriculum is something that can best be described as something that was ‘hiding in plain sight’. After multiple readings of the transcripts, it became clear that the raison d’être for a teacher was to make sure that students learn what teachers are supposed to teach. In other words, teachers must make sure that they cover the required curriculum, regularly assess student progress, and make adjustments to assure content mastery for all students, even students who were not readily available to learn. In her opening statement, Jean referred to curriculum as the first priority and it was subsequently referenced, usually indirectly, throughout all of the interviews. Despite constant vigilance and proactive interventions, lessons could be interrupted or sidelined due to an extreme emotional or behavioral outburst. As a result, all participants reported uncertainty regarding the implementation of a prepared lesson on any given day. Furthermore, there was agreement that students with emotional disturbance could significantly
impede the day-to-day instruction whereby they couldn’t adequately cover the required curriculum. This was an ongoing point of tension as captured below.

“You have to get them [students] to a certain point and others are prohibiting that from happening.” (Jean)

“We have to do what we have to do to make these kids successful. I’m here to teach. We need to get through the curriculum. That’s what we’re here for.” (Sophia)

“Sometimes you feel that if you don’t achieve those numbers then you haven’t done what you’re supposed to do… you have to get back on track to what’s (sic) education.” (Misty)

“We only got halfway and I have to finish these problems…we want to make sure they get a high school diploma… they graduate high school.” (Mary)

**Preparing students for the real world.** To further complicate matters, academic mastery is now a necessary but not sufficient condition of teaching. As schools move toward educating the ‘whole child’ with the addition of a social-emotional component to curriculum and preparing students with ‘College and Career Readiness’ skills, teachers must now prepare students academically, emotionally, and behaviorally. This means that students must not only pass required classes, they must demonstrate initiative, persistence, self-control, responsibility and relationship skills. For students with emotional disturbance and their teachers, this can be a daunting task.

All participants held the belief that students should acquire the essential skills, both academic and social-emotional, to be prepared for life after school – life as an adult – life in the real world. What's more, each participant placed a high value on making sure this is the case for all students, including students with emotional disturbance. It’s important that students develop relevant, sustainable, and practical skills (Jean, Sophia, Misty, Mary), have access to the
curriculum in order to be successful in a more competitive world (Jean, Sophia, Misty Mary), and develop self-confidence and skills they need when they graduate (Sophia, Misty, Mary).

I think we knew it was a struggle to be in that class… We both knew it was tough… I did give him a bad time. So it’s now like all beautiful… and it made me feel great that I made him feel good. I can see him making it into the National Honor Society in four years.

Sophia, like the other participants, encouraged and reinforced students, often getting them to believe that they were capable of achieving more than they had imagined. They attributed these successes to the personal connections and mutual respect that was developed between the teacher and the student. They learned when to push and when to pull back.

**The importance of relationships.** Through the course of these conversations, it became clear that all participants believe that a sound and trusting teacher-student relationship is a necessary condition for academic achievement and social-emotional functioning. In fact, all participants report that the establishment of such a relationship may even be a prerequisite for student access to the curriculum, sustained motivation and engagement, regular attendance, work completion, and a sense of safety and support. The value of the relationship between teachers and students and successful outcomes was underscored by the following comments:

I’ve learned that relationships with those kids is number one and then the actual education stuff can only occur after the relationship is firmed up… the students do things because I ask them to but they don’t really want to because I have a great relationship with them… If someone else asked them they would say “f--- off”. (Jean)

We’d start with something small but I felt that I could deal… I hate to use that term but we could relate very well… We both understood that we had things in common… We
were both adapting to a new school…so I could calm him…That’s important because you know what the relationship is, where it is, and where it’s not. (Sophia)

Relationships are important because some students are hesitant to think that anybody cares about them…they need a connection to the school and people to trust. (Mary)

Misty had a different slant on the importance of relationships. She warned that although a solid relationship is important, it can sometimes unwittingly backfire when boundaries are blurred and professionalism is compromised.

There are some teachers who will use relationships to find out what’s going on with a child…then they turn around and use that against kids because they think that joking around is a way to connect…They [students] don’t’ even know their place in the world right now…I think that when you connect in a way that you think is funny, it can be unprofessional and inappropriate. (Misty)

The importance of good relationships — of knowing each student personally — may be more important now since the teaching profession is more complicated, intense, and demanding. In other words, it is no longer sufficient to focus primarily on instruction (Jean, Sophia, Misty, Mary). Often times, participants agree that they must now take on responsibilities that were previously relegated to parents. Jean, who self-admittedly operates from a rule-bound, high expectation, and personal accountability framework, shared that she would sometimes respond with a softer, more maternal approach, particularly when she sensed that nurturing was what the student needed. This motherly approach was typically applied when Jean sensed that the student was anxious, depressed or just “limping along”. Although Jean noted that this approach was usually successful, there were times that it didn’t work as well as she had expected. In that case, she would return to more rigid, stern method since for her it was more “historically effective”.

Similarly, Misty shares that the best way to approach students is to respond in a way you would want your own children to be treated. Like Jean, there are times to be motherly and times to “hold the line” and be respectful of boundaries. Mary articulated that her role as a mother and foster mother greatly influences her role as a teacher, particularly with regard to struggling students who may need that type of nurturing. Sophia was more likely to provide a motherly response to students in the inner city school where she previously taught rather than her current district. She explains below.

It’s not that I’m not sensitive because I don’t feel like those are severe problems [problems presented by students in current district]. When you come from a district where kids are literally struggling about where they’re going to lay their head at night.

We can see they haven’t eaten. You know their clothes haven’t been washed.

Although the participants acknowledged the importance of meaningful and respectful relationships, they also felt stretched by the amount of personal attention students with emotional disturbance required. This was confounded by the high numbers of challenging students placed in their classrooms when compared to the classrooms of colleagues.

**Things should be fair and equitable.** The issue of fairness was a prevalent topic for three of the participants (Jean, Sophia, Misty). It usually pertained to the large number of students placed in their classes, the greater degree of student need, and the more complicated instructional responses required when compared to colleagues.

Jean emphasized that the equity and responsibility for students with emotional disturbance are definitely not shared with colleagues noting she that typically has classes of 30 students whereas “other teachers only have 11 or 12 for the same type of class”. She makes it clear that one should not assume that challenges exist only with students who struggle
academically sharing that even students in her advanced placement classes have social-emotional issues. Although she takes pride in her ability to be successful with a broad array of students, Jean questions why good teachers get more students and more work.

It’s not fair because why does me being a better teacher get me punished? You’re really not giving me any motivation to be a better teacher. I get the harder students. I want to call the kettle black…but you just can’t go up to someone and say you suck and that’s why you have 10 kids in your class…It’s not a coincidence…It’s not just the way the schedule worked out…It’s that you’re a shitty teacher.

For Jean, the idea of fairness extended to students as well. She made it clear that when students cheat on tests, plagiarize, or take advantage of accommodations that are not necessary, they too are being unfair.

Similarly, Sophia noted that she has extremely large classes and many students with and significant academic and social-emotional needs. For her, this can be very frustrating, particularly when others don’t have the same responsibilities. Fairness in her case focuses on what is fair for the students rather than what is fair for teachers as described below.

If given a magic wand I would not have classes with 30 kids! Almost half of my students are on IEPs…It’s a lot for one person…It’s a disservice to the kids because it’s really hard when you want to pull the best out of everybody.

Although Misty agreed that things were not always fair, she attributed the disparity to scheduling issues rather than intentionality. In fact, like Jean, she takes pride in the fact that she has large or difficult classes as noted in the following excerpt. “I take it as a pat on the back but some see it as a punch in the face since there is more paperwork involved…more to keep track of…but it’s also rewarding”. All participants also applied the notion of fairness to students who
could ‘fall through the cracks’ since so much time is spent addressing the significant and complex needs of very challenging students. Sophia speaks for the other participants when she states:

They’re plunked in the middle because no one really pays too much attention to them. They don’t cause that much trouble and they don’t need so much so we’re just going to … just let them coast which is a disservice to these kids.

Unlike the other participants, fairness did not appear to be an issue for Mary. Although she does not teach advanced placement courses, she has had multiple opportunities to observe such classrooms. She stated that there are as many challenges in those classrooms as the lower level classes. Although she has many students with emotional issues, students with IEPs, and students with 504 Plans in her classes, she finds things to be quite manageable, particularly since she has an effective and knowledgeable special education teacher supporting daily instruction which is not typical at the high school.

**Beliefs about students with emotional disturbance.** When examining the characteristics ascribed to students with emotional disturbance, both the open-ended section of the questionnaire as well as the interview comments were accessed. The participants not only provided their own personal attributions regarding these students, they also made attributions from the points of view of colleagues. The participants noted the following features to describe students with emotional disturbance:

unpredictable, ever-changing, emotionally erratic, more difficult than peers, aggressive or trouble-making, high strung or wired, dramatic, unfocused, immature, disruptive, complex, poor relationships with others, academic difficulties, poor sense of self,
emotional baggage, influenced by factors outside of school, in need of connections, creating contagion, and overly sensitive

Although the participants easily generated this list of general, whole-group characteristics, they did note some level of discomfort when ascribing the label ‘emotional disturbance’ to students who are actually placed in their classrooms. Jean explained: “These kids are labeled emotionally disturbed but they are so much more that the scores on a particular test…I just don’t like to have my opinion colored by that label”. Sophia also voiced concern that labeling students could be misleading in her statement. “I think the term ‘emotional disturbance’ can be spread around too much. Maybe some kids are just extremely nervous, very quiet”. Misty had difficulty articulating her sentiments when she offered an apology when describing students with emotional disturbance. She is apologetic in her response.

I don’t want to offend anyone when I say this…just because they have a specific label…that they might have severe…maybe not severe…I mean certain behaviors that are…like that doesn’t mean they can’t learn.

Mary was also troubled by the term ‘emotional disturbance’ being unclear and overused.

There are so many acronyms that I can’t keep them straight all of the time. I’d rather just say they are someone who has problems. To me, it could be physical, mental, or anything. They just have problems.

All four participants reported that getting too much information about students before having an opportunity to work with them could color their judgment, be detrimental, and perhaps even harmful, thus confirming implications of the term ‘emotional disturbance’. In essence, participants suggested that teachers should take a non-judgmental stance whereby alternative explanations for disruptive or challenging behaviors could be considered.
This belief is specifically reflected with regard to information contained in the student’s Individual Education Program (IEP), a highly regulated document that includes such things as the student’s designated disability, personal strengths and concerns, instructional requirements, and related supports that could include therapeutic services. Most of the participants were adamant that they would not read the IEP before the students entered the class even though this is a regulatory requirement. Jean begrudgingly complied citing that she was merely “doing due diligence” but she also worried that this could have an adverse effect in that it would always be there, in the back of her mind.

Interestingly, and in contrast to the preceding statements, all participants stressed that they may not always have sufficient background information about the student and this could affect daily practice. For example, Misty made it clear that unknown external factors could really make a difference in how she responded to students. For example, she stated the “if you know that so-and-so’s mother was diagnosed with cancer and that’s why they’re not coming to school or why they’re acting out” then you can respond more effectively. She made it clear that confidentiality should be maintained and she didn’t need to know all of the details—only those that would have an effect on instruction. Likewise, Jean reiterated that “When you get a heads-up or an email saying they’re depressed… you have things on your radar… and they can hand in homework a day late”. However, both Misty and Jean concurred that confidentiality should not be discounted.

When participants were asked how their colleagues would describe students with emotional disturbance, the responses typically took on a negative tone as evidenced in the following remarks.
They think they’re just lazy… doing things just to piss you off… faking it… they’re not really depressed. (Jean)

Generally speaking, they just think they’re bad kids…You hear people talking and saying stuff like this one did ‘da da da’ and they don’t take into consideration that maybe something else is going on. (Sophia)

Depending on their perspective, they might say that they’re not the greatest kids…don’t stress yourself out for them…they’re probably going to fail anyway. (Mary)

It is clear that the views participants hold regarding students with emotional disturbance is complex and sometimes contradictory; however, they also appeared to have strong emotional responses on the behalf of these students as noted in the following section.

Students with emotional disturbance may be vulnerable. The notion of a well-managed classroom emerged earlier as a key factor with implications on two levels: the provision of a distraction-free environment and the promotion of a milieu that was safe for both teachers and students. This was reflected in the proactive routines each participant put in place every day. The primary focus was to mediate the behaviors of students with emotional disturbance who could potentially create regular and ongoing disruptions. Participants acknowledged that students with emotional disturbance could also become victims in such circumstances. Participants made it clear that constant vigilance, intervention, and support may be called for to address these vulnerabilities. In this case, the participants strive to find a balance whereby students are not singled out as different from peers yet they are provided special protective considerations when warranted.

“I don’t want to treat the delicate kids delicately… I like to treat them like everybody else but I don’t want them to feel like they are singled out because that action sometimes
makes them more anxious… so, I’ll pull them aside and say I’m not going to bring attention to you… They then know they can come to me to tag out.” (Jean)

“I try not to respond to kids differently… I do things in class so that no one sticks out like a sore thumb…and that method seems to work.” (Sophia)

“I don’t ever want to call a student out as being different from their peers. There’s got to be a way to address things depending on the classroom situation.” (Misty)

“If it looks like the kid is going to have a bad day I take the student aside and quietly just say It’s OK. Just do the best you can today.” (Misty)

Despite the participants’ overwhelming desire to demonstrate sensitivity to the needs of students with emotional disturbance, they all drew clear lines to determine when students were no longer appropriate for inclusion in their classes. By and large, the participants separated themselves from their colleagues stating that they rarely request to have students removed. In fact, they all expressed extreme pride in the fact that they, unlike their colleagues, usually find ways to meet challenges “by going the extra mile” (Jean). Participants articulated that it would be appropriate to remove a student from class based on significant disruption to the learning process or a safety issue as noted below.

“The only time a student is not appropriate is if they are the keystone to the class not functioning—I’ll call it the ‘life boat mentality’—like, I can save you or 25 other kids, I’m going to save them and I’ll throw you out to drown because it’s just good for the many at that point… It’s nothing personal.” (Jean)

“Since you’re still in charge of the whole class… you have to look at the whole picture and pay attention to the impact on others.” (Misty)

“When they’re physically harming to others.” (Mary)
Although the participants are willing to make reasonable accommodations, demonstrate flexibility, and offer support to students with emotional disturbance, they were clear that the students must take some responsibility for their outcomes. Both Sophia and Mary believe that the students should advocate for themselves, become self-sufficient, and take personal responsibility for their actions. Jean and Misty went on to say that students have the power to make good decisions. Jean clarified: “So…whether it be their choice to do nothing or whether it be their choice to plagiarize…they’re going to be held responsible for their actions”.

Theme three: strategies and interventions. Lastly, this theme describes the actions teachers take in their classrooms to maximize teaching and learning in light of the challenges presented by students with emotional disturbance. The research makes it clear that emotions, beliefs, and behaviors are inextricably intertwined (Poulou & Norwich, 2002); therefore, if teachers believe that everyone is capable of learning despite their struggles and everyone should be challenged and encouraged to grow and improve, then teachers have a responsibility to identify, implement, monitor, and modify a host of strategies and interventions.

As noted previously, many students with emotional disturbance have Individual Educational Programs (IEPs) that specifically dictate the manner and method of response. Sometimes teachers employ evidence-based instructional practices and other times the response is merely a trial-and-error process.

Jean reported that she tends to break things done into small, incremental steps (i.e., ‘baby steps’) so that students will be “more likely to comply”. In this way, she is better able to gauge when to push and when to pull back. Although Jean believes that the ultimate goal is to master the course content, she acknowledges that the interventions may aim to merely avoid a meltdown or shut down. In other words, she “picks her battles”. Jean noted that the composition of the
class can have a significant impact on the success or failure of interventions, particularly for students who act out. The following excerpt is a good example of this sentiment.

It becomes a problem if you have too many [challenging students] and so the chess board doesn’t work anymore. There are only so many places you can move them to keep them away from triggers – like the other kids who will feed off them…You end up with the problem that BJ can’t stim [to engage in a repetitive body movements common in individuals with autism spectrum disorders] because if he stims he’s literally flying through the center of the room. My two ADD kids can’t handle that extra stimulus so now they’re acting out…and then the kid across from them is getting pissed off at the ADD kids because they won’t stop moving…and now I have another who can’t handle the conflict of these two screaming at each other so they crawl into their shells…I’d just like this class to suck less.

With regard to students who internalize rather than externalize, Jean revealed that she was “just like those high anxiety students” she now teaches – competitive with self-imposed pressure. Jean said that this insight provided an instructional edge as noted in the following excerpt.

I can manipulate certain students and make them feel guilty to get the work done…with certain kids, you can almost dangle a carrot…If you can figure out what that is, you can typically get some product, some kind of work…That’s why I’m so good with those honors – AP kids.

Similarly, Sophia shared that shared experiences or commonalities between students and teachers can be helpful when planning and implementing instructional strategies. For example, since she describes herself as someone who can’t sit still, she doesn’t expect her students to sit still either. Rather than place the students in rows, she gets them up and moving, provides personally-geared
work stations, and differentiate her instruction to meet the specific needs of each student. When these responses are not sufficient, Sophia like Jean, finds that separating students can be helpful.

I get a call from the adjustment counselor saying: “Hey, watch out because this is what’s happening”… So I now have to move a couple of seats so some students are not near others. I tell them to keep that stuff [bickering] out of class. I’m here to teach you and get to the curriculum.

As noted previously, Misty seeks out ideas for classroom management from colleagues with relevant expertise including guidance counselors, the school psychologist, and special education staff. Although she values creativity, a more structured environment that offers consistency and predictability is preferable. As a co-teacher in the therapeutic classroom, Misty must be sure to align her rules for behavior with the special education teacher to avoid confusing the students. She finds this to be very difficult as she explains.

There are just two of us in the classroom and we’re doing ten different things. Bill doesn’t have the history background and I don’t have the sped background so we kind of have to be one, but we’re not…It’s difficult because you have to personalize everything but I can’t…I try but I never know what to expect.

Mary has a set of strategies that she employs for every student every day. Examples of these strategies include: providing clear expectations, reminders and prompts, using humor, connecting content to something personally relevant to the student, employing hands-on activities, reading directions aloud, and offering organizational props. Despite her longstanding and generally effective routine, Mary often has to make judgements and adjust her expectations as necessary depending how the students appear each day. She provided the following example.
At the beginning of class, he put his head down…didn’t want to say anything…put the hood over his head…like closing himself off totally…So, I didn’t say anything. I just moved the paper in front of him…I tried not to be invasive…I hoped he would actually do something.

All participants engaged in negotiation, praise, encouragement, kinesthetic activities, leniency (when deemed appropriate), and consistent routines. Simply put, the efficacy of these strategies was invariably variable.

Despite the number of strategies and interventions that the participants implemented, it was clear that they continued to feel frustrated, confused, and unprepared to deal with the relentless challenges they faced daily. Earlier, Misty suggested that she did not get the training in her college programming that is vital in actual practice. Furthermore, the participants begrudgingly sought support from those who had more training or expertise, those who had the “important conversations with the students”, those who knew “all of the important details”, and those who were specifically trained to deal with such problems.

Training and professional development. One thing that was made clear by all participants was the need to have practical, every day, realistic strategies and interventions rather than theory-based recommendations. Participants expressed disappointment with the district-wide professional development opportunities over the last few years. Even though the topics were geared to the areas of expressed concern (i.e., increases in anxiety and depression), the focus was on the etiology of the mental health condition rather than a meaningful and applicable skill. Jean shared the following.

What we learned was not helpful. I prefer to work with the students, and by trial and error, determine what is working. In other words, I would rather “learn as I go… Instead,
I would appreciate opportunities to work with colleagues to better understand how to improve my practice, know what I’m doing wrong, and have someone understand my perspective, and essentially find ways to make things easier for kids.

Likewise, Sophia found that the professional development offered by the district was either not sufficient or not specific enough to address the number of problems she encounters daily.

All participants yearned to have ongoing and regular opportunities to learn from colleagues and desired time to collaboratively work on the problems that occur daily in the classroom. This was particularly important since the participants in this study are often assigned the most challenging students, most traditional strategies are ineffective, cumbersome, or unrealistic. They would appreciate more opportunities to generate new and creative ideas, apply them, and then receive feedback. In other words, all participants wanted regular and continuing feedback on their performance regarding both behavior management and academic instruction pertaining to students with emotional disturbance. They were also curious to know how colleagues handled similar problems. All reiterated that they are already overwhelmed with too many demands; therefore, they would appreciate occasions to share frustrations and perspectives.

Sophia’s sentiment reflects comments made by all participants as noted in the following excerpt.

OK. I know that there’s a lot of anxiety, but what do I do? I need to practice… Show me what something looks like in the classroom and I’ll do it… how to scaffold… break things down… how measure things… how to grade the students.

*Evaluations and accountability.* With regard to the teacher evaluation system, legislative mandates, and regulations, the participants offered modest responses that did not rise to the level of thematic importance; however, they may be worthy of note when integrated into the overall narratives.
Jean noted that there are some good and bad points regarding legislative mandates and district accountability systems. Specifically, she expressed that regularly engaging in reflective practices [a mandatory component of the district’s evaluation process] can be helpful to help one “become more self-aware”. However, she adamantly stated that the mandated Sheltered English Immersion training (SEI) is both unnecessary and “demeaning” since she is well aware of the course content and goals, practices them daily, and doesn’t want them spelled out. She stated that such training is “just a waste of time that can really p-ss you off”.

Sophia also doesn’t view the current evaluation system to be a problem. Rather, she views it as “just more work”. Misty noted that much depends on who evaluates you, stressing that sometimes you feel that “if you don’t get the numbers right, you feel like you didn’t really achieve” but in the end, it [evaluation] really doesn’t have an impact on practice. Similarly, Mary made it clear that she doesn’t worry about the regulations or initiatives as they relate to accountability and performance evaluations stating: “they really don’t bother me”. She, like her colleagues, was more concerned with the obligations to take state-mandated courses to maintain her certification (i.e., Sheltered English Immersion). Mary was adamant that she is already well-versed in the areas that are covered in the courses and she considers them to be “a waste of time”. In fact, she would prefer to merely “rely on her own personal instincts”. For Mary, evaluations should focus on the teacher’s effort rather than student achievement.

**Summary of Research Findings**

The purpose of the research was to gain a better understanding of the ways in which the participants experienced daily challenges in the instruction of students with emotional disturbance as well as the meanings they attributed to those experiences. The findings as reported in this chapter clustered around three emergent themes: the affective responses the participants
experienced in response to daily challenges, the general beliefs and assumptions they hold about themselves and their students, and the implications for teaching and learning. The participants described a host of negative affective responses to include extreme exhaustion and frustration, confusion and uncertainty, a state of constant vigilance and worry, and finally resignation when they reached their limits of viable and actionable options. Teachers then described their roles and responsibilities, particularly with regard to the importance of student mastery of the curriculum, the value of relationships, the notion of fairness and equity, and their beliefs about students with emotional disturbance. Finally, in their attempts to maximize teaching and learning, the participants shared the strategies and interventions they employed instructing this group of students and they shared their expectations for effective training, skill-building, and professional development.

The following chapter attempts to understand, interpret, and connect the emergent themes to the theoretical framework. It also includes the limitations of the study as well as implications for practice and future research on the topic.
Chapter V: Discussion of Findings

Chapter five provides a discussion of the dissertation’s research findings, connects the findings to existing literature on the topic, and describes its confluence with the theoretical framework. The research question that guided this study is: “What are the beliefs and lived experiences of secondary level, content-area teachers regarding the instruction of students with emotional disturbance?” Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2009) was the methodology used to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants’ lived experiences and attribution theory was the theoretical framework that guided the exploration of their beliefs, understandings, assumptions, and meanings (Crittenden, 1989; Kelley & Michela, 1980; Weiner, 1985). The significance and implications for the study as well as future areas for exploration regarding the topic are covered.

The Purpose of the Study Reviewed

The main goal of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the day-to-day experiences of secondary level, general education teachers regarding the instruction of students with emotional disturbance who are placed in their classrooms. This inquiry is important since it is a relatively under-researched topic that is now gaining prominence, particularly with regard to the continued move toward inclusionary practices for all students and increasing accountability for their outcomes. To achieve this goal, four teachers shared their personal stories whereby three overarching themes emerged: (1) affective responses to day-to-day challenges, (2) salient beliefs (i.e., curriculum, relationships, fairness and equity, and students with emotional disturbance), and (3) teaching and learning (i.e., instructional strategies, training, and professional development). These findings will guide the following discussion.
Findings and Relationship to the Literature

Affective responses to daily challenges. When the participants’ shared their day-to-day lived experiences regarding the instruction of students with emotional disturbance, they clearly, repeatedly, and emphatically identified a number of prominent emotional reactions. These reactions were primarily tied to three areas: (1) difficulties managing their classrooms, (2) sufficiently and regularly meeting academic expectations for all of their students, and (3) preserving a positive emotional stance under often difficult and unpredictable conditions. Consistent with the literature, the participants considered classroom management to be a major challenge, particularly when students regularly disrupted the educational process (Ford, 2007; Wiley & Siperstein, 2011). Also aligned with existing research is the sense of exasperation they reported when repeatedly forced to address emotional outbursts, aggression, non-compliance, and poor self-control rather than focus on academic issues (Wehby et al., 2003). Although the participants made it clear that most students will at some time pose challenges for classroom teachers, students with emotional disturbance tended to have more chronic and difficult to manage behaviors when compared to their peers (Jull, 2008). It is also important to note that students who tend to be quiet, moody, fearful, or withdrawn may be as worrisome as those who act out (Walker, 1977). In fact, all participants noted that the dramatic increase in students with anxiety presents its own unique challenges. In this case, the participants described feeling confused, unsure, helpless, and doubtful of their skills with this student population since it was often difficult to readily gauge the student’s response to an intervention or strategy. Although not directly stated, the implication was that any miscalculation such as pushing a student too far could result in a bad outcome.
In order to anticipate problems, mediate disruptions or emotional outbursts, and minimize danger, the participants engaged in daily preventative routines. It is noteworthy that, despite minor individual variations, they each attempted to gauge the student’s emotional state before they [students] entered the classroom, made an initial assessment, and took quick action to head off any anticipated problems. This is consistent with the literature whereby teachers continually attempt to maintain a calm and safe environment so that other students are not disturbed or inhibited in their learning (Gidlund & Bostrom, 2017, p. 451). This required ongoing vigilance, contextual and relational sensitivity, and flexibility. Although sometimes helpful, these strategies could not always inoculate the participants from personal psychological distress. Farley et al. (2012) cautions that the implementation of well-deliberated, evidence-based practices do not guarantee a satisfactory outcome. As a result, this enduring tension resulted in a wide variety of negative emotional reactions characterized by an overwhelming and relentless sense of exhaustion and frustration which was mentioned repeatedly and to a high degree throughout all narratives. In fact, the participants reported using so much time and energy addressing daily happenings in the classroom that they felt both physically and mentally drained. Consistent with literature on the topic, teaching may be considered one of the most stressful occupations whereby tension and discomfort may be exacerbated by chronic exposure to the unpredictable and relentless challenges presented by students with emotional disturbance (Johnson et al., 2005). Research on teacher burnout suggests that feeling frustrated, overwhelmed, and exhausted by the workload, struggling with daily classroom management issues, and holding high academic and behavioral expectations may be contributing factors to this phenomenon (Axup & Gersch, 2008; Marzano & Heflebower, 2012). This may be particularly relevant when participants believe that
they have exhausted their capacity to respond (Martinetz, 2012). In other words, when they are “taking on too much, for too long, and too intensely (Freudenberger, 1975, p. 74).

Although the teachers found the daily challenges to be differentially disturbing, each identified personal coping strategies to manage daily responsibilities and reduce negative emotional responses. These strategies included taking a personal time-out to re-group, identifying alternative ways to maintain consistency and predictability, modifying instruction, changing expectations, or sharing responsibility. For the most part, the participants were resolute in their attempts to handle challenges on their own; however, when it was perceived that all options had been exhausted, they reluctantly shared or re-assigned responsibility. Gidlund and Bostrom (2017) suggests that there is a point of ‘impossibility’ whereby the inclusion of students with emotional disturbance in the general education classroom has become unmanageable, particularly without the support or expertise of others. Moreover, the recognition that current efforts were no longer effective or caused extreme distress was enough to provide sufficient justification for decisions to re-direct responsibility. For the participants in this study, identifying and responding to the complex, unpredictable, and idiosyncratic needs of students with emotional disturbance while continuing to maintain high expectations for content mastery appeared to significantly stretch the participants’ capacity to effectively respond. For example, Jean who professed to be a pragmatic and goal-driven person, was able to recognize her struggles working with anxious students. On occasion, she would seek out the support of the teacher in the therapeutic program. For Sophia, students who interrupt academic learning can be justifiably deferred to others whereas Misty more readily accessed support from others including guidance counselors, the school psychologist or adjustment counselor, and special education staff.
Despite the unwavering challenges that the participants faced every day in their classrooms, they all reported joy and satisfaction when their persistence, encouragement, and shared ownership resulted in student success. Consistent with the literature, negative emotions such as exhaustion and frustration can also lead to satisfaction when teachers are ultimately successful (Cloninger et al., 2012).

**Teachers’ beliefs.** Although the primary role of the teacher has historically been classroom instruction, the participants reported that the profession is now multi-faceted whereby their roles have become more complicated, and sometimes more confusing. However, integral to the participants’ beliefs regarding their roles and responsibilities, the following salient concepts were identified: (1) curriculum, (2) relationships, (3) fairness and equity, and (4) the dispositions ascribed to students with emotional disturbance.

**Curriculum.** The concept of curriculum was often referenced indirectly; however, it is possible that its importance is so ingrained that it doesn’t require formal articulation. For example, participants alluded to keeping up with the work, getting on with the lesson, demonstrating mastery, preparing for the test, and getting good grades. In any case, they made it clear that curriculum is an essential and overarching part of their job. This is supported in the literature whereby most teachers have firm beliefs about their roles in schools, most notably their responsibility to teach what students are supposed to learn — this means mastering the curriculum (Thompson, 1984). However, the participants expressed difficulty balancing academic expectations in light of daily classroom realities, admitting that it was a daunting and sometimes unrealistic expectation. On one hand, they want to successfully instruct all of their students, believe that all students are capable of learning, and have an expectation of success, yet they also voiced major concerns about the time and effort it takes to adequately meet the ever-
increasing social, emotional, behavioral, and academic needs of students with emotional disturbance at the expense of other students in the class. Gidlund & Bostrom (2017) reports that including students with such complicated and time-consuming needs creates significant dilemmas for teachers and he suggests that teachers may officially or unofficially blame class size, inadequate resources, or untenable classroom management issues when expectations for curriculum mastery are not satisfactorily met. Confirming this notion, the participants cited their comparatively larger class sizes and greater numbers of students with complex needs which results in more time spent on classroom management and less time dedicated to academic tasks.

**Importance of relationships.** The participants acknowledged the value of good student-teacher relationships as a prerequisite for successful academic outcomes and healthy social-emotional functioning. Moreover, they considered the establishment of such relationships to be the key to student access, engagement, and sense of safety and security. This aligns with the literature in that caring and supportive relationships are essential for students to meet the demands of high school (Mihalas et al., 2008). The research also suggests that student-teacher relationships are often strained with regard to students with emotional disturbance (Cullinan & Sabornie, 2004); however, this was not endorsed by the participants in this study. Not only did they report caring, reciprocal, respectful, and personally satisfying relationships, they believed that they were more adept than their colleagues in this domain. In fact, they often used the strength of the relationship to connect, challenge, and even ‘manipulate’ students [with a dose of guilt (Jean)] to behave in a certain way. The participants cautioned, however, that having a good relationship did not mean that it was a trouble-free relationship. Rather, it was a relationship that could better tolerate adversity, allow the participants to push and challenge the students, and allow students to reveal their vulnerabilities.
Fairness and equity. The participants shared the belief that all students should have access to high quality instruction, resources, support, and teacher attention. They clearly recognized that all students have different needs, skills, and affinities; therefore, individually tailored responses are necessary, particularly when addressing the complicated, chronic, and intense needs of students with emotional disturbance. However, the participants suggested that inequities exist (i.e., the comparatively larger number of challenging students placed in their classrooms) that strain their patience, capacity, and skillfulness.

The issue of fairness was also extended to students who have Individual Education Programs (IEPs) since they are afforded personalized supports as well as behavioral and academic modifications. All participants shared the belief that some students may be more capable than what is reflected on their Individual Education Programs (IEPs). When those students take advantage of what they [participants] consider to be excessive and perhaps unnecessary modifications and accommodations, the students are essentially ‘cheating’ and this is not fair to the other students in the classroom who do not have such additional supports. Particularly noted are those students who are ‘caught in the middle’ or ‘fly under the radar’ since they are typically quiet, unobtrusive, difficult to read, and often overlooked. The participants identified students with anxiety as falling in this category since they don’t typically interfere with daily routines whereas students with disruptive behaviors garner much teacher attention (Kaufman & Landrum, 2012). Overall, consistent with the research, the participants strongly believe that all students should put in consistent effort and use their abilities to the fullest extent (Good & Brophy, 1986).

Beliefs about students. Although all participants ascribed somewhat negative characteristics to students with emotional disturbance (e.g., difficult, unfocused, trouble-making,
disruptive), they appeared to be uncomfortable and even apologetic when using the term ‘emotional disturbance’, noting that it may actually be overused and/or inaccurate. The participants clearly had an understanding of the many contributing factors that impact these students (i.e., unable to handle the stressors of school, poor eating and sleeping habits, medical and family issues, etc.) and this is consistent with the literature whereby students with emotional disturbance are a heterogeneous group with a myriad of social, emotional, and behavioral issues (Wagner et al., 2005). With this understanding, the participants attempted to respond fairly and without bias, each making an effort to get to know the students unencumbered by preconceived notions. This may explain their resistance to reading the IEP beforehand. They were able to articulate the rationale for modified academic and behavioral expectations; however, they struggled to find a balance between their responsibility for these adaptations and the student’s responsibility for personal actions and outcomes. Each agreed that ultimately students, notably students with externalizing behaviors, had choices, made decisions, and had to accept the consequences. This is inconsistent with the work of Greene (2008) and Minahan (2012) who stressed that teachers should consider alternative explanations for challenging behaviors. In other words, there should be the consideration that students act out when they do not have the capacity to adaptively respond to the demands of the task.

**Strategies and interventions.** Based on the notion that there is a connection between what teachers believe and the instructional practices they implement, it is important to note that all participants diligently attempted to create an environment that was conducive to teaching and learning. To accomplish this, they used strategies and interventions that were collapsed into three categories: (1) strategies based on evidence and best practices, (2) strategies considered effective based on the teacher’s personal experiences, and (3) and strategies based trial and error
successes. Although each participant had a preferred method, all used strategies that are well-supported in the literature to include consistent and predictable routines, organization and time management techniques, clear rules and expectations, structure, scaffolding, and positive reinforcement (Niesyn, 2009; Wagner et al., 2006). These proactive, whole-class methods served to assist with classroom management as well as provide differentiated instruction (i.e., universal instructional procedures that meet the multiple needs of all students); however, they were often disappointing, particularly for the students with emotional disturbance who responded differentially and inconsistently (Farley et al., 2012; MacSuga-Gage, & Scott, 2018). As a result, the participants would attempt to identify what had been effective previously, with whom it worked, and under what conditions it was successful. They would then incorporate these strategies into their existing repertoires — until they were no longer useful. Trial and error methods, although sometimes serendipitously successful, were generally adopted when all other tactics were exhausted. At this point, they would begrudgingly request assistance from colleagues acknowledging that their skills and training were no longer sufficient to meet the complex and often unrelenting needs of the students.

**Training and professional development.** The participants made it clear that most training and professional development opportunities, although interesting, were not helpful, realistic, or targeted to support the instruction of students with emotional disturbance. Consistent with the research, the participants preferred to focus on efficacious strategies and interventions that addressed academic concerns, reduced behavior problems, and moderated emotional distress (Bradley et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2017; Westling, 2010). Furthermore, they expressed the need for regularly scheduled in-house consultation and collaboration with colleagues, observations and walkthroughs, and informative feedback from those who struggled with similar problems. As
Jean stated: “I would appreciate opportunities to work with colleagues to better understand how to improve my practice…and essentially find ways to make things easier for kids”. Likewise, the participants requested more time to generate new and creative ideas, apply them, and receive guidance regarding behavior management and academic instruction. “Just show me what something looks like and I’ll do it.” (Sophia) All reiterated that they are already overwhelmed with too many demands; therefore, they would appreciate opportunities to share their frustrations and perspectives. The participants unanimously recognized that no strategy was foolproof understanding that multiple and complex challenges require multiple strategies and solutions.

**Connections to the Theoretical Framework**

Since the aim of this study was to gain a better understanding of the beliefs the participants hold regarding themselves, the students with emotional disturbance placed in their classrooms, and the decisions they make regarding instructional practices, Weiner’s (1979, 1985) attribution theory provided a suitable framework. In fact, it is the most comprehensive and most used model in educational contexts and it continues to yield substantial research in this area (Graham & Williams, 2009). Consistent with the literature, the participants’ beliefs were complex, impactful, sometimes contradictory, and served as primary drivers regarding their instructional decisions (Dweck & Bempechat, 1983; Gutshall, 2016). Furthermore, their beliefs were inextricably intertwined with their emotional or affective responses and also served to influence their judgments and actions (Pansu & Jouffre, 2008; Poulou & Norwich, 2002; Weiner, 1974, 1980, 1985). The following section addresses the results of this study in light of this theoretical framework.

**General beliefs about teaching and learning.** All participants shared their core beliefs about teaching and learning and the interplay of such beliefs on their affective reactions and
instructional practices. The major beliefs that permeated their narratives included: preparing students with the requisite knowledge and skills required for success after graduation, assuring continual student growth and achievement, holding high expectations and accountability for all (i.e., teachers and students), creating a safe and organized environment conducive to learning, and developing positive and caring student-teacher relationships. They placed a high value on these goals, were fairly confident that they possessed the necessary skills or could acquire them, and generally anticipated a successful outcome; therefore, the pursuit for success was worth the time and effort despite any challenges they could encounter (Rotter, 1966). Moreover, they made decisions that were filtered through their personal attributions, explanations, and experiences (Weiner, 1974, 1986, 2000).

**Beliefs about success and failure.** Linked to decision-making is the notion of success and failure that is particularly relevant to teaching and learning (Weiner, 1974, 1986, 2000). Inherent in this process was the participants’ reliance on standards and guidelines used to measure success or failure that were both externally imposed (e.g., state and/or district curriculum expectations) and personally imposed (e.g., the participants’ personal values and goals). In accordance with Weiner’s (1955) attribution theory, the participants continually made appraisals regarding success and failure based on the aforementioned standards and guidelines using the concepts of locus of causality (i.e., the cause of the outcome), controllability (i.e., responsibility for the outcome), and stability (i.e., the predictability or unpredictability of the outcome).

**Locus of causality.** With regard to locus of causality, the participants in this study were generally motivated to demonstrate effort and persistence when they believed there would be a positive outcome. If they were successful, they would not only express pride and satisfaction,
they would also credit their personal efforts as contributory to the success (internal and intentional). Sophia cited a good example when she described the experience of lavishly reinforcing and encouraging a student who lacked confidence but was perceived by her to have the essential abilities to successfully complete the task. Although she acknowledged that this was a time-consuming and labor-intensive effort, the student was ultimately successful and she expressed joy and gratification despite the hard work. It must be noted, however, that the extraordinary challenges posed by students with emotional disturbance often resulted in feelings of exhaustion, frustration, and confusion when the results did not meet the participants’ expectations. Consistent with both Weiner’s (1985) and Heider’s (1958) propositions, these affective responses were accompanied by a number of explanations for the lack of perceived success to include having too many students with intensive academic and social-emotional needs in their classrooms, a lack of time, inadequate training or support, and unrealistic expectations imposed upon them with regard to curriculum mastery (external).

Controllability. With regard to controllability, the participants attempted to make decisions about the designation of responsibility for success or failure. They shared an exhaustive list of beliefs regarding their personal responsibilities that included working hard every day, demonstrating extraordinary effort, persistence, and commitment, problem-solving, maintaining professionalism and high expectations, covering the curriculum, and assuring a safe and comfortable environment conducive to learning for all students — activities they believed to be under their control. In this case, when successful, they felt competent, skilled, empowered, motivated, and expectant of continuing success. When goals were not satisfactorily met under their personal volition, the participants continued to assume responsibility but they expressed a sense of guilt, exasperation, and lament. If, however, they believed that success was beyond their
control and they had sufficiently met all of their personally-attributed duties, they felt free to re-assign responsibility to others, “put the ball in their court” (Jean), or “cut your losses” (Misty). At this point, they declared that the onus was on the student to demonstrate sufficient effort, motivation, or personal accountability, noting that ultimately the student has the power to make personal choices, advocate, and take ownership — activities perceived to be under the control of the student (Hastings et al., 1993).

**Stability.** The participants emphasized that the only constant regarding the instruction of students with emotional disturbance was its enduring unpredictability. For the participants, this meant that there was always a chance that the outcome could be successful; therefore, the accompanying emotional responses were positive (e.g., happiness, satisfaction, or hopefulness). Strategies and interventions were sometimes purposeful (i.e., intentional) but more often serendipitous (i.e., luck). In any case, the participants were intermittently yet adequately positively reinforced and this appeared to serve as sufficient motivation for continued effort and persistence since they estimated that there was a probability that they would accomplish what they intended (i.e., to reduce distractions or emotional outbursts, complete the lesson, ensure safety, etc.) (Weiner, 2010). Considered to be stable, unmalleable, and externally-generated, the participants’ referenced characteristics attributed to students with emotional disturbance such as “emotionally erratic, high strung, having lots of baggage”; therefore, any lack of success could be deferred since it was out of the participant’s control. However, since the very nature of emotional disturbance is based on its complexity, diversity, and perhaps subjectivity, the participants’ were often faced with dilemmas regarding blame and responsibility. For example, if students were determined to be vulnerable and in need of protection, they [students] would be considered blameless and the responsibility would shift to the participant.
Self-efficacy. In this discussion, it is important to also consider the Bandura’s (1977, 1986, 1997) model of self-efficacy since it is integrated with attribution theory. Although the participants put in significant effort and persisted to achieve successful outcomes, they also recognized that they could be ill-equipped to respond to the intense, chronic, and challenging needs of students with emotional disturbance. As a result, they would begrudgingly defer to others with expertise, some more readily than others, leaving them feeling disappointed, frustrated, helpless, and hopeless. As Bandura (1997) explained, “People avoid activities and environments they believe exceed their capabilities, but they readily undertake and pick social environments they judge themselves capable of handling” (p. 160). Consistent with the notion that self-efficacy is context-specific (Tschannen-Moran, et al., 1998), Misty provided a fitting example when she explained that she had a strong grasp of content knowledge that served her well in the general education classroom; however, it was less useful in the therapeutic classroom whereby she deferred responsibility to the special education teacher.

Conversely, when the participants believed that they had the requisite skills and abilities to meet the demands of the task, they were more likely to assume responsibility, demonstrate confidence and motivation, and expect a positive outcome thereby enhancing their self-efficacy (Buehl & Beck, 2015). When compared to colleagues, the participants generally believed that they were more tolerant, persistent, sensitive, flexible, supportive of inclusion, and accepting of the needs of this group of students (Algozzine, 1980; Axup & Gersch, 2008; Coleman & Gillian, 2001). This was especially true with regard to their appraisals regarding positive teacher-student relationships and this afforded them greater instructional leverage (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007). Consistent with the research, when one strongly believes in the value and power of relationships, they can encourage, push, provide feedback, and celebrate success (Cooper &
This is not to say that the participants viewed relationships as the panacea for managing challenging and intrusive behaviors. In fact, they admittedly questioned their skills when reliance on the relationship was not sufficient to meet their goals resulting in disappointment, lowered self-efficacy, anxiety, frustration, and exhaustion (Axup & Gersch, 2008).

**Emotions and affect.** It would be impossible to ignore the important role that affect (i.e., reactions) and emotions (i.e., interpretations) play in the teaching and learning process as endorsed by the participants in this study (Weiner, 1985). The participants expressed their emotional responses to the challenges they faced vividly and repeatedly throughout the interviews. All participants believed that they were charged with the regulation of their emotional states as well as the emotional states of their students (Gill & Hardin, 2015) and that they were more effective when they could accomplish this (Sutton, Mudrey-Camino, & Knight, 2009). They believed it was their responsibility to maintain control at all times in order to assure a safe and well-run classroom, suggesting that any display of emotion would render them vulnerable and lacking control whereby students “could take advantage”. Consistent with the research, emotional regulation became a primary goal when the participants believed that learning would be disrupted (Gill & Hardin, 2015). When they were successful, they felt both satisfied and exhausted.

**Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study make it clear that students with emotional disturbance require extraordinary effort and expertise, time-consuming and labor-intensive supports and interventions, and targeted training and skill-development. Although there may be an awareness of these responsibilities, it has become increasing clear that general education teachers may feel
overwhelmed and unprepared. In addition to the assurance of academic competence, passing scores on high stakes tests, and meeting other graduation requirements, the recent addition of college and career and social-emotional readiness skills adds a new layer of accountability to general education teachers. This includes, but is not limited to, career awareness, community experience, parent and inter-agency collaboration, relational skills, prosocial attitudes and behaviors, and emotional growth (Swank, 2013, p. 74). Although there may be some sharing of these responsibilities, general education teachers maintain a key role with regard to overall student outcomes and typically have a part in each of the aforementioned components (Taylor, Oberle, Durlak & Weissberg, 2017, p. 1158).

For this group of participants, it was clear that they worked diligently, persistently, and typically as independently as possible, often resulting in physical and emotional exhaustion. Their commentary is reflective of concerns expressed by many teachers nationwide. When addressing such negatively impactful affective responses, recent brain-based research has shifted attention to an individual’s chronic exposure to trauma — trauma that often results in difficulty with social-emotional functioning, academic performance, and mental health problems (e.g., anxiety and depression). (Maynard, Farina, & Dell, 2017). To that end, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has offered workshops, videos, literature, and self-assessment tools to create trauma-sensitive schools in the Commonwealth. Our district like so many others, viewed this as a response relegated to low income, diverse, inner city schools. It may be time to acknowledge that all districts could benefit from a deeper understanding and response to the impact of trauma on both students and staff.

Administrators may need to be mindful that teachers may be affected vicariously by the trauma experienced by their students. They may feel a sense of obligation or duty to help these
students leaving them [teachers] feeling overwhelmed by the responsibilities. Jean aptly described this dilemma when she shared her emotional and sometimes paralyzing connection to students who struggled with anxiety, sometimes taking on their symptomology.

Administrators should also be vigilant regarding any signs of stress and burnout, particularly since teachers may be hesitant to confirm any distress. They should also make sure that the primary responsibilities for such challenging students not be relegated to only those who put forth more effort, tolerance, and creativity. Furthermore, administrators should be cognizant of the tipping point whereby teachers may no longer be able to manage their daily duties and they [administrators] should be ready to step in and provide relief from distress or provide additional support. Not only should teachers receive administrative attention and support, they should have opportunities to share their frustrations and receive validation for their efforts.

When describing their stories, the participants in this study referenced inconsistent, unpredictable, and unexpected (i.e., intermittent), positive experiences that were generally sustaining and motivating to them. In other words, they perceived enough success and satisfaction despite the daily challenges to continue their work, anticipating that they would be rewarded again at some point. It has been my experience that teachers relish that ‘aha’ moment when a student finally understands a lesson or concept, an unexpected ‘thank you’, or a lesson that turned out better than expected. Setting aside times for reflection regarding these positive moments may help teachers cognitively re-structure negative thoughts or beliefs. This is evidenced by the increasing numbers of school districts that are incorporating mindfulness activities into their daily routines and emphasizing personal insight and reflective practice.

If at its core, collaboration, problem-solving, and working toward mutually-determined goals are important factors that contribute to the improvement of teaching and learning, then it
should be expected that teachers’ voices should not only be welcomed, they should be strongly encouraged. This may include opportunities to share ideas and experiences, give and get feedback, and engage in genuine reflective practice. To begin this process, perhaps small groups of teachers could participate in school, district, or content area action research projects. Based on the work of Agryris and Schön (1996) and aligned with the notion of reflective practice, an exploration of teachers’ espoused theories (i.e., what they say they value and believe) and their theories-in-use (i.e., what they actually do) could identify incongruities and discrepancies between these two concepts. For example, the participants in this study made it clear that current training and professional development opportunities often missed the mark, not an uncommon response across school districts. This, however, was inconsistent with responses they provided on surveys and in conversations used to identify what would be useful, relevant, and practical with regard to training or professional development. Staff overwhelmingly requested information about the nature of anxiety and depression, strategies to address social emotional issues in the classroom, and ongoing consultation with experts in these areas. Although district complied with these requests, they were still viewed as disappointing or irrelevant. Perhaps offering ongoing opportunities to look at things from differing perspectives at deeper levels would better help to understand the nature of the teachers’ work, the dilemmas they face, the day-to-day resolutions they discover, and the objections they hold. This may shed light on professional development that is better matched to their preferences and needs and more closely related to actual daily instruction.

The participants in this study stressed that they will need time to observe colleagues, identify new and innovative ideas and strategies, experiment, and receive constructive feedback rather than focus on the ‘one-size-fits-all’ model. Districts will need to continue the creation of
district-wide conditions that build positive, collective beliefs and norms. This should include the shared goals of embracing professionalism, maintaining high expectations, effort, persistence, responsibility, accountability, and high quality, engaging, and effective instruction for all students. Those in leadership positions will need to create an environment that underscores trust and embraces the calculated risk-taking that may be required to address the complicated challenges presented by students with emotional disturbance. The result may be that teachers are more likely to be honest and authentic, share resources, cooperatively problem-solve, and believe they have agency (i.e., the power to make changes) without blame or shame. This may require that both teachers and administrators “go beyond contractual duties” (Tschannen-Moran, Salloum, & Goddard, 2015, p. 311).

**Recommendations for Future Research**

If we can argue that students with emotional disturbance continue to have relatively dismal outcomes compared to all other groups of students, that teachers charged with their instruction face considerable day-to-day challenges, and that current strategies and interventions may be perceived as inadequate, unrealistic, or unsustainable in general education classrooms, then it will be important to get a better understanding of each of these factors through further research. This investigation could take a deeper look at why the outcomes for this particular group of students remains unchanged, what prevailing beliefs regarding mental health issues continue to permeate instructional practices, what interventions and strategies have promise or should be discarded, and how teachers can best assess, implement, and measure success and student growth for this group of students.

The literature suggests that general education teachers are typically favorable, at least philosophically, to the notion of inclusionary practices (Greene, 2008; Minahan & Rappoport,
2012; Scruggs & Mastropiere, 1996). However, it is now clear that the extensive and increasing list of teacher responsibilities confound an already long list of competing priorities. Resistance to inclusionary practices is typically based on teachers’ beliefs that they do not have the time, skills, support, or endurance to be truly successful in their endeavors. Further investigation into the rationale for prioritization, decision-making, and actions taken by teachers to address such competing responsibilities may shed light on what gets done and why it gets done. Furthermore, future investigations should include a larger sample and wider variety of demographic characteristics beyond those captured in the current research. This is important since this study is merely speculative, being based on the personal narratives of only four teachers who work at a small, homogeneous, middle class high school that may be culturally and politically different than a larger, economically-challenged, and more diverse district. Sophia alluded to this when she compared her general perceptions of the severity of students concerns she currently encounters now compared to those in her previous district. Specifically, the students in her previous district had significant physiological and safety concerns whereby their basic needs were not consistently met (e.g., food and shelter). This is not generally the case in the current district. Moreover, the staff in her previous district established a sense of support and belongingness in order to survive the daily challenges they faced. This need does not exist currently whereby collaboration focuses more on content-area issues rather than relationships.

On an individual level, an instrument could be developed to identify the prevailing beliefs teachers hold regarding their roles, responsibilities, perceived levels of competence, expectations, personal characteristics, and willingness to instruct students with emotional disturbance. This would be a relatively easy and quick way to gather information and account for ideographic nuances.
Finally, the concept of co-teaching whereby special education teachers share expertise and accountability with content-knowledgeable general education teachers should be further explored. Although this is merely supposition, Misty, a teacher who more readily sought support from colleagues and was a co-teacher in a therapeutic program, expressed less negative affect than her colleagues regarding the instruction of students with emotional disturbance. Research in this area could reflect two concepts: (1) the characteristics or circumstances that facilitate collaboration and (2) the effect of the shared experience embedded in co-teaching.

Limitations

This study was based on the analysis of interview data provided by four secondary level, content-area teachers who work at a small, homogeneous, middle class high school in Southeastern Massachusetts. Although the sample is considered to be relatively small, it was purposely selected in order to gain a deep and personally meaningful understanding of the participants’ beliefs and experiences regarding the instruction of students with emotional disturbance. Since the findings are context-specific and limited to participants who were willing to take part in the study, it is acknowledged that generalizability may be compromised; however, this study does not seek to generalize results. Rather, the goal is to shed light on an under-researched topic and uncover the subjective reality of the participants within their environmental context.

The very nature of qualitative research may have inherent limitations since it is an inductive approach whereby researcher bias must be acknowledged regarding data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Furthermore, the theoretical foundation of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) includes a series of procedural steps and guidelines that were applied to all stages of phenomenological analysis. Despite attempts to limit bias, however, it is
cautioned that the researcher’s role as superintendent in the district constitutes one of positional power. The researcher also has a well-established propensity for the inclusion of all students in general education classrooms to the greatest extent possible. As a result, it is possible that participants may have engaged in socially-appropriate responding, particularly since the topic may be of sensitive nature and a perceived evaluative component since the researcher is an administrator in the district.

**Conclusion**

The intention of this study was to shed light on an under-researched topic — the personal experiences of secondary level, content-area teachers of students with emotional disturbance. The participants shared their beliefs about their roles, responsibilities, expectations, the characteristics of this group of students, their teachers’ affective responses to everyday challenges, and perceived efficacy of existing professional development and training opportunities.

Their narratives reflected both an unwavering persistence to assure the academic competence of students within a well-managed classroom as well as a sense of joy and satisfaction when their efforts were successful. They reported varying inclinations toward support from colleagues or school administrators, generally preferring to work things out without assistance until they exhausted their capacity to respond effectively. They generally felt unprepared, under-skilled, and inadequately trained, suggesting that current professional development opportunities regarding students with emotional disturbance were poorly aligned to their needs. Furthermore, the participants preferred training that included two primary components: (1) access to practical, realistic, and effective strategies and interventions and
ongoing opportunities to meet with colleagues in order to share personal experiences, provide and receive feedback regarding teaching and learning, and more importantly receive validation for their hard work. This is aptly summed up by Jean who stated: “I think it’s great if people can tell me that there’s a better way to handle things — how I can make things easier for them [students with emotional disturbance], but I really just want someone to look at things from my perspective…like being in my shoes”. In other words, she mirrored the desires expressed by all of the participants — ongoing opportunities to share and reflect upon their lived experiences, the meanings of these experiences, and implications for practice based on these experiences.

**Personal Reflection**

The purpose of this study was to provide an opportunity for secondary level content area teachers to share their day-to-day experiences regarding the instruction of students with emotional disturbance. I am grateful for the participants’ willingness to take part in this study and for their authentic accounting of the challenges they face. It was clear that they hold high expectations for their students, believed that all students can be successful, and underscored the importance of effort, diligence, and encouragement. The same can be said for the participants themselves. They hold strong convictions regarding their duty to educate all of the students placed in their classrooms, even those who present extreme challenges.

I became clear that the participants’ role is multifaceted, sometimes unpredictable, and filled with daily academic and social-emotional dilemmas whereby they are required to demonstrate remarkable flexibility and patience. In other words, they must continually juggle competing demands and make instructional decisions based on the ‘problem du jour’. Their daily tasks too often exceed their capacity to satisfactorily or adaptively respond — a notion that has been attributed to students (Greene, 2008). For me, there were three surprising findings: (1)
the sheer intensity of their emotional responses, (2) the incredible effort, persistence, and ownership they exhibited — often to the point of exhaustion, and (3) the resilience they demonstrated despite the significant challenges they faced.

Now armed with a better understanding of their beliefs, feelings, and reasons for instructional decisions and actions, perhaps there should be a re-consideration of the notion of resistance to inclusion, particularly with regard to this group of students. The participants made it clear that they are willing and eager to learn new skills and strategies if provided the time and opportunity. Therefore, there should be an increased focus on collegial discussions for teachers in the district in order to motivate, support, and inspire each other. Through collective insight and problem-solving, encouragement and feedback, the provision of more opportunities for success, and an acknowledgement of the hard work it takes to improve student outcomes, students with emotional disturbance may realize the success that has been so elusive.

Furthermore, the results of this study are timely in light of the increase in current research on teacher stress and burnout as well as the flurry of news stories regarding teacher concerns about the current state of education in the United States as noted in the following statement by Madeline Will.

As schools across the country put more of a focus on social-emotional learning for the students, experts have come to the realization that the teachers’ social-emotional competencies, especially their stress management skills and their ability to regulate their emotions, are a vital part of the puzzle. (Mammina, para 9)
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April 10, 2017

Dear Participant,

My name is Arlene Bosco and I am currently a doctoral student at Northeastern University in the College of Professional Studies, School of Education. I am currently working under the supervision of Kelly Conn, Ph.D., Principal Investigator. The name of my research project is: “Secondary level teachers of students with emotional disturbance: Is what you believe what you practice?” You were chosen to participate in the study because you are currently a secondary level, content-certified teacher with some experience working with students with emotional disturbance.

The purpose of the study is to help teachers (1) identify and share their current beliefs and experiences regarding students with emotional disturbance, (2) gain new insights regarding the link between personal beliefs and experiences and instructional practices, and (3) consider new or alternative ways to view, explain, or respond to the significant challenges posed by this group of students.

Approximately 4 to 6 teachers from your district will participate in this research project. You will be asked to attend three one-to-one sessions (approximately 20 minutes, 60 minutes, and 20 minutes).

There are no identified risks nor are there any direct benefits from participating in this research project. Participation is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate at any time without consequence. Although you will not receive compensation, you may be able to accrue evidence aligned to standards and indicators in the Massachusetts Teacher Evaluation System. Confidentiality, anonymity, and data security will be safeguarded throughout all phases of the research project. If you are interested in participating in this research project, please forward your contact information (i.e., name, address, telephone number and email address) to me within the next 5 days at bosco.a@husky.neu.edu or call 401-300-9750.

Again, thank you so much for your consideration.

Regards,

Arlene F. Bosco
April 10, 2017

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your interest in participating in the research project: “Secondary level teachers of students with emotional disturbance: Is what you believe what you practice?” You will receive a formal invitation in the mail within the next 5 days that contains details such as the time, date, location of the interviews, a pseudo name will be used rather than your name throughout the project.

I sincerely appreciate your assistance and I truly value your input. Please feel free to contact me at any time if you have any questions.

Again, thank you for your participation.

Arlene Bosco
April 20, 2017

Dear Participant,

Thank you for agreeing to take part in the research study. You have been recruited because you are a content-certified secondary level general education teacher in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts who has had some experience regarding the instruction of students with emotional disturbance.

It has been my experience that teachers who work with students with emotional disturbance often report feeling overwhelmed, unprepared, and unsupported. Therefore, it is important to gain a clearer understanding of your beliefs and experiences, instructional practices, roles, and responsibilities regarding students with emotional disturbance. As a result, we may be able to find new or more effective ways to meet the challenges we face when instructing this group of students.

As part of this research project, you will be asked to meet with me for three one-to-one interview sessions. The first session (approximately 20 minutes) will be comprised of an overview of the research process (i.e., informed consent, expectations, dates, time, and the assignment of a pseudo name, etc.) as well as the collection of demographic information and personal opinions regarding students with emotional disturbance. This will be followed by a 60-minute, one-to-one discussion intended to gain a deeper understanding of your beliefs and experiences with this group of students. In the third session (approximately 20 minutes), a summary will be provided and you will be encouraged to provide feedback, ask for clarification, or make comments. The meetings will take place at a time and place convenient to you and sanctioned by the building principal, Dr. Christopher Jones.

Although you will be encouraged to participate in all three phases of the research project, you are not bound to do so and can withdraw at any time. If you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as an employee of your school district. Care will be taken to maintain anonymity, confidentiality, and data security.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact me (cell phone: 401-300-9750; email: bosco.a@husky.neu.edu), the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Kelly Conn, Ph.D. (cell phone: 857-205-9585; email: k.conn@neu.edu), the Principal Investigator. If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Again, thank you for your participation,

Arlene Bosco
Appendix D Informed Consent Form

Signed Informed Consent Document
Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
School of Education
369 Huntington, 20 BV
Boston, MA 02115-5000

Name of Investigators: Principle Investigator: Kelly Conn, Ph.D.
Student Researcher: Arlene F. Bosco, MA, C.A.G.S.

Title of Project: Secondary level teachers of students with emotional disturbance: Is what you believe what you practice?

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

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You are being recruited for this study because you are a content-certified secondary level regular education teacher in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts who has had some experience regarding the instruction of students with emotional disturbance in your regular education classroom.

Why is this research study being done?
The aim of this research is to help secondary level teachers gain a deeper understanding of their beliefs, experiences, and instructional practices regarding the students with emotional disturbance who are placed in their classrooms.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study:
On or around May 1, 2017, you will be asked to participate in the first of three one-to-one interview sessions. The first session (approximately 20 minutes) will be comprised of an overview of the research process (i.e., informed consent, expectations, dates, times and the assignment of a pseudo name, etc.) as well as the collection of demographic information (e.g., years of teaching, experience, specific content area, etc.) and personal opinions regarding students with emotional disturbance.

On or around May 15, 2017 you will be asked to participate in the second one-to-one interview session (approximately 60 minutes) guided by a set of 4 to 6 related questions (e.g., “What have been your experiences working with students with emotional disturbance?”), “What
do you think about the continuing move toward inclusion of students with emotional disturbance in regular education classrooms?”, “What are the specific instructional challenges you have faced with this group of students?”, etc.). On or around May 30, 2017, you will be asked to participate in the third interview session (approximately 20 minutes). A summary/review will be provided and you will be asked to provide feedback, ask for clarifications, or make comments.

Although you will be encouraged to participate in all three sessions in this research project, you are not bound to do so and can withdraw at any time.

**Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?**

As noted earlier, the first session will take approximately 20 minutes, the second session approximately 60 minutes, and the third session approximately 20 minutes. It is anticipated that all sessions will be completed between May 1, 2017 and June 10, 2017. This project is affiliated with Northeastern University and all contact will be made via the NEU email system or my personal cell phone (401-300-9750). All interviews will take place at a time and place convenient for you (e.g., in your school building after school in a room designated by the building principal).

**Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?**

Participation in the study poses minimal risks to participants both personally and professionally. Although there are no physical, financial, social, or legal risks associated with participation in this study, the researcher’s current position of Superintendent of Schools in the Seekonk School District may constitute subtle or perceived vulnerability for participants. Also, under the Massachusetts Teacher Evaluation System, there may be increased sensitivity regarding teacher performance, competencies, and student outcomes. To address this potential concern, participants will be reminded throughout the project that continued participation is voluntary and care will be taken to maintain confidentiality, anonymity and protection from harm. You will be clearly and specifically informed about the use and dissemination of data as well as the potential audience.

Although there does not appear to be any foreseeable risks or discomfort, care will be taken to provide a trusting and safe environment. The building principal will be reminded of the confidential nature of data collection and dissemination.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**

While there are no direct benefits, participants can reasonably expect to benefit from participation in the project in a number of ways. Participants may:

- become aware of the link between personal beliefs and experiences and emotional reactions and behaviors regarding students with emotional disturbance
- gain new insights about the nature of emotional disturbance
- consider new or alternative ways to view, explain, and respond to the challenges posed by students with emotional disturbance
- clarify roles, responsibilities, and expectations
- increase the range of efficacious instructional options
- become conscientious inquirers who can better understand and respond to the challenges presented by students with emotional disturbance by engaging in a dynamic, constructive,
and collegial social process that may extend beyond the scope of this project (*building-based action research)

Who will see the information about me?

Only the researcher on this study will have access to the information. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being part of this project. Personally-identifiable information will be de-identified (i.e. name of school district, content area, years of teaching experience). De-identification will include, but will not be limited to the following: questionnaires, audiotapes, researcher notes and memos, interview transcripts, and data spreadsheets. Furthermore, so that the project will not be linked to either individual responses or personal identities, a pseudo name will be assigned to each participant prior to the collection of any data. The researcher will take the necessary steps, including the modification of names and contextual information, in order to maintain student privacy and avoid retribution to participants. The pseudo name will be used in all phases of the data collection and recording process. Only demographic data that is relevant to the project will be collected. The data will be kept in an electronic file that will be password protected on the researcher’s personal laptop computer. The pseudo name list will be destroyed upon completion of the project. All materials including the audiotapes, consent forms, are researcher field notes will be stored for three years in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher’s home. On rare occasions to be sure that the research is done properly, organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board may be authorized to see this information.

What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?

No special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for treatment solely because of your participation in this research.

Can I stop my participation in this study?

Your participation in this research project is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question or actively participate in the interviews. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as an employee of your school district.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Arlene F. Bosco (cell phone: 401-300-9750; email: bosco.a@husky.neu.edu), the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Kelly Conn, Ph.D. (cell phone: 857-205-9585; email: k.conn@neu.edu), the Principal Investigator.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?
Although participation will be voluntary, teachers may be able to collect evidence that is aligned with standards and indicators contained in the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation System.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
There should be no costs incurred for your participation in this research project.

Is there anything else I need to know?
This research project is being conducted in partial fulfillment of a Doctor of Education (Ed. D) from Northeastern University. In order to participate, you must be a Commonwealth of Massachusetts content-certified teacher employed as a public school or collaborative day school teacher in grades 9 through 12. You must have at least one year of teaching experience, have experience with students with emotional disturbance, and demonstrate a willingness to participate in the research project.

I agree to take part in this research.

___________________________________________   _____ _____________
Signature of person agreeing to take part                            Date

___________________________________________
Printed name of person above

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

___________________________________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix E Interview Guide

Goals:

(1) to gain an overall understanding of the participant’s general experiences regarding the instruction of students with emotional disturbance
(2) to understand specific concerns in everyday practice that are related to relevant research on the topic

Process: a semi-structured structured interview guided by a series of open-ended, dynamic, non-directive and flexible questions using a funneling method

Questions:

Generally speaking, could you tell me about your experiences as a secondary level, content-area teacher regarding the instruction of students with emotional disturbance who are placed in your classroom?

1. What aspects of teaching this group of students do you find to be the most challenging?
   a. Could you give me a specific example of a situation that was particularly challenging (i.e., academic, social-emotional, classroom management)?
   b. What were you thinking or feeling at the time?
   c. How did you respond?
   d. If you could do it over, what would you do now?

2. Can you think of an example that was particularly rewarding?
   a. Again, what were you thinking or feeling at the time?
   b. Why was it so successful?
   c. Would you do anything differently?

3. What comes to mind when you hear the term “emotional disturbance”?
   a. Can you describe four or five students with emotional disturbance with whom you have worked?
   b. What characteristics or commonalities come to mind?
   c. What stands out most?

4. What beliefs do you think general education secondary level teachers typically hold regarding students with emotional disturbance?
   a. Do you think there is a connection between a teacher’s personal beliefs and experiences regarding students with emotional disturbance and actual classroom instruction (e.g., expectations and notions of responsibility)?
   b. How does this play out in the classroom?

5. Could you describe how federal and state initiatives (e.g., move toward inclusionary practices, expectations for student achievement, teacher evaluations, social-emotional curriculum) have influenced your instructional practices regarding students with emotional disturbance?
a. Could you share your thoughts about the role of personal responsibility, both teacher and student responsibility in positive student outcomes?
b. Under what circumstances should students with emotional disturbance not be included in the general education setting?

6. What skills, strategies, or knowledge would help you respond more successfully with this group of students?
   a. What types of professional development, course work, webinars, or training opportunities have you had regarding students with emotional disturbance?
   b. What has been the most useful, practical, or effective?

7. What do you consider to be the most demanding task or expectation you face in the instruction of students with emotional disturbance?
   a. How would you describe any physical, emotional, or emotional stress you feel in your day-to-day life as a teacher with regard to your role regarding this group of students?
   b. Tell me about the support you receive regarding academic, social-emotional and behavioral concerns?
Appendix F Demographic Information/Questionnaire

Demographic Information/Questionnaire

How many years have you been teaching? ___________________________________________

What is your highest level of educational attainment? ________________________________

What is your gender? ____________________________________________________________

What content area courses do you currently teach? _________________________________

Do you teach outside of your content area certification? (specify) _____________________

Have you had experience teaching students with emotional disturbance? ______________

The following characteristics are often observed in students with emotional disturbance. Please
note to what degree students with emotional disturbance with whom you work compare to peers
in each of the categories.

Academic or learning problems ____________________________________________________

Organization/time management ____________________________________________________

Oppositionality/non-compliance __________________________________________________

Self-regulation skills _____________________________________________________________

Emotional lability __________________________________________________________________
Getting along with classmates

Getting along with teachers

Getting along with administrators

What you consider to be the most important teacher characteristics or dispositions necessary to work with students with emotional disturbance?

1. ________________________________

2. ________________________________

3. ________________________________
## Appendix G Demographic Information/Questionnaire Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years of Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Highest Degree</th>
<th>Content Area</th>
<th>Teaching outside Content Area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jean</td>
<td>Female 11</td>
<td>MA Science</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophia</td>
<td>Female 10</td>
<td>MA World Language</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misty</td>
<td>Female 17</td>
<td>MA Social Studies</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>Female 41</td>
<td>MA Math</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Characteristics attributed to students with emotional disturbance when compared to peers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Academic/ Learning</th>
<th>Organization/ Time Management</th>
<th>Non-Compliance</th>
<th>Self-Regulation</th>
<th>Emotional Lability Mood Swings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jean</td>
<td>More</td>
<td>Less</td>
<td>More</td>
<td>Less</td>
<td>More severe often over-reacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophia</td>
<td>Longer to get on task</td>
<td>Extremely more disorganized</td>
<td>Depends on type of ED</td>
<td>Must work harder in this area</td>
<td>Depends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misty</td>
<td>Same</td>
<td>Same</td>
<td>More</td>
<td>Lacking</td>
<td>More</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### What are the most important characteristics or dispositions necessary to work with students with emotional disturbance?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Jean</th>
<th>Patience</th>
<th>Empathy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Building personal relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophia</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misty</td>
<td>Patience</td>
<td>Understanding external factors</td>
<td>Upholding expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>