Trends in the Match of Early Intervention to Student Need: A Grounded Theory Study in Student Support within One Florida School District

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Trends in the Match of Early Intervention to Student Need: A Grounded Theory Study in Student Support within One Florida School District

by

Amanda Ellzey

A Dissertation Presented to the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences of Nova Southeastern University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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This dissertation was submitted by Amanda K. Ellzey under the direction of the chair of the dissertation committee listed below. It was submitted to the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences and approved in partial fulfillment for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Conflict Analysis and Resolution at Nova Southeastern University.

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Dedication

With pride, love, and humility, I dedicate this work to the people that are most inspirational and supportive in my life. First, my mother, Brenda Jarvis, who has always been my soul when I felt lost, my backbone when I felt spineless, and my inspiration when I needed strength—I love you mom. To my amazing husband, Bill—I love you more than you know. Your belief that I could do this work, your humor when the moment needed “a little lightness”, your willingness to sacrifice so much time together during the past several years, and your patience with me during all those times I wanted to quit always kept me going. Quitting was not an option. Thank you. And lastly, to my sister, Becky, and to my brother, Kris, I dedicate this dissertation and thank you so much for your love and encouragement. I am forever grateful to each of you for what you bring to my life.
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Abstract

The educational research literature confirms that students identified with emotional and/or behavioral disabilities are the most at-risk for school failure, grade retention, and dropout of all student groups. Legislation passed by federal and state entities seeks to support these and all students with recommendations for emotional, behavioral, and academic tiers of intensified supports; yet with dwindling funding and resources, these well-intentioned mandates often go unmet. Using archived records of 16 students in one Florida school district that were eventually placed into Self-Contained Emotional/Behavioral Disability classrooms, this dissertation examined existing trends in the match of intervention to student need, patterns in the etiology of conflict behavior, and practices for helping students to develop new skills for effectively resolving conflict. By means of constructivist grounded theory methodology, this qualitative research study uncovered trends in student intervention reflective of current behavior intervention and conflict analysis and resolution literature. Disability theory, as it applies to the marginalization and stigmatization of persons with disabilities and those with suspected disabilities, served as the lens through which this topic was examined. This dissertation provides recommendations for further research, considerations for intensifying student support best matched to student need, and a greater focus on understanding the impact of conflict on students with behavioral disabilities.

Key words: conflict, intervention, emotional/behavioral, tiers of intervention
Chapter 1: Introduction

A great body of research indicates that students with Emotional/Behavioral Disabilities (E/BD) or unmet mental health needs are among the most at risk of failure, both socially and academically, and are the most likely to drop out of school of all student groups. Unlike students with physical or cognitive disabilities who have traditionally had access to a wider range of services assisting with limitations of communication, occupational, or physical ability, students with mental health or emotional needs are frequently left with limited or no true educational or behavioral supports in the school. This issue has not gone unnoticed; however, with limited knowledge or resources to meet the often immense children’s mental health and behavioral needs, public school professionals continue to struggle to help these children to experience success socially, emotionally and academically.

“According to the US Department of Education, approximately one-third of all students have emotional problems that act as a barrier to their ability to learn, resulting in poor academic progress” (Axley, 2014, p. 1). In a class of 30 students, that equals ten that may be dealing with issues such as abuse, homelessness, neglect, poverty, alcohol and drug abuse, trauma and unpredictable home lives that affect their behavior, and for which we have few meaningful systems to identify the risk of failure and to intervene early and consistently. Gresham (2005) states as well that while only one percent of students are identified as having an Emotional Disability (ED), the term used in the federal legislation, there are an additional 20 percent of students that are not identified but live with an undiagnosed mental illness.
It is without doubt that students with emotional and behavioral issues challenge school personnel, families, and community-based professionals (Reddy & Newman, 2009); and as many of the student behaviors can significantly disrupt the learning environment, the need to develop systems of support for these students is critical. Children with emotional disabilities present a “broad array of mental health problems that affect their social and academic success in schools” (Reddy & Newman, 2009, p. 170). Behavioral issues most often reported are externalizing behaviors such as verbal and physical aggression, violence, disruption, and open defiance that have a significant negative impact on the classroom and school community. It is important to realize, however, that internalizing behavior such as withdrawal, depression, somatic complaints, nervousness or even suicidal tendencies (Reddy & Newman, 2009) are often present yet unidentified or misunderstood. Behaviors such as these are often the source behind externalizing behaviors yet will, again, go undetected due to the disruptive and overt nature of externalizing behaviors. Unfortunately, because of the difficulty in identifying and addressing internalizing behaviors in a school setting, the possibility of being overlooked due to a lack of understanding and resources is highly probable.

While not every child that exhibits behavioral problems is labeled as E/BD, the poor outcomes for those students that are identified are arguably some of the most significant of all classes of disabilities (Gresham, Hunter, Corwin, & Fischer, 2013). The occurrence of years of academic, social, and behavioral challenges often adversely affects the student’s educational experience but also has a negative impact on parents, peers, teachers, and schools (Gresham et al., 2013; Reddy & Newman, 2009). This negative impact will often affect the student’s reputation, teacher tolerance, and social acceptance
to the point that, unfortunately, students identified as E/BD are often classified in public schools as “those kids” or “the bad kids;” They may even be labeled by the building in which they are educated (e.g., “those Building 8 kids”).

Beyond some of the stigmatic issues, school experiences for these students furthermore can include poor grades, repeated retention, placement in the most restrictive classrooms, frequent suspensions or expulsion, and may later result in poor employability, conflicted interpersonal relationships, and high rates of incarceration (Gresham et al., 2013). Widely based upon their unpredictable and volatile behavior, E/BD students can be excluded from play or group activities from an early age. Challenges presented by their behavior and the frequent inability to control impulses or irritability can result in this exclusion, which in turn intensifies withdrawal, angry outbursts, or even retaliation and can ignite increased conflict with peers and adults. These negative interactions often develop into a destructive cycle whereby undesirable behavior negatively impacts the development of the student’s sense of worth and esteem, worsens the student tolerance for frustration, weakens their initiative to try new behaviors, and can create the perfect opportunity for continued negative experiences in the school and in the community.

Another key point with regard to our students identified or showing characteristics of E/BD is that they often exist in a storm of conflict and isolation due to the nature of their disability or suspected disability. The impact that these student’s behaviors can have on peer and teachers’ relationships is likely to escalate and even generate a cyclical pattern of conflict. For example, the student that is perpetually excluded or only hesitantly included by a group will respond with a great deal of self-
doubt and perhaps angry retaliation against the group when the opportunity to interact arises (Folger, Marshall, & Randall, 2009). Referred to by Folger et al. (2009) as *face*, concerned with self-concept or identity needs, saving *face* often makes the resistance from peers stronger and the resentment by the student more intense, thus increasing conflict and isolation. While society prefers that we present ourselves as moralistic, strong, attractive, and possessing other positive traits, when a student with behavioral problems is unable to function in a positive manner with peers, his experience of “face-loss” can contribute to a deadlock in communication or an increase in conflict or humiliation for the student (Folger et al., 2009).

An additional danger is a long-held belief that the mental health needs of students are not the responsibility of the public school system (Gresham et al., 2013). This trend is slowly changing as the required response to student behaviors by school personnel cannot be overlooked; yet with limited human and financial resources committed to public education as a whole, compounded by overstretched or limited community mental health resources, this change is long drawn out and very difficult to fully realize. A current movement in the U.S. encourages “wrap-around” services in schools to include community mental health providers and medical accessibility on school campuses; however, again, the availability of these services overall is often stretched too thin to establish a significant presence in schools.

Despite the challenges of meeting the needs of students with emotional disabilities, these students do attend our schools, and it is up to the educational team to find and develop the appropriate interventions and supports to help these children achieve and reach their maximum potential. Because behaviors of E/BD students can be so
disruptive to the classroom environment, historically it has become common for educators to focus on the problems they present (Farmer, Farmer, & Brooks, 2010) versus the more time-consuming and difficult process of behavior change. Recently, researchers and practitioners have distinguished between strategies that center on the reduction of problem behavior and strategies that are designed to teach and develop positive behaviors (Farmer et al., 2010; Lewis & Horner, 2010) through the use of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).

**Positive Behavior Intervention and Support/Response to Intervention**

PBIS focuses on identifying a student’s strengths, targeting behavioral deficits, and providing early interventions to help the student to develop new competencies (Farmer et al., 2010). PBIS has proven to be the most effective approach to helping students stabilize and experience success. Attempting to decrease negative behavior without recognizing and building upon the student’s strengths tends to increase the unwanted behavior and typically has no positive effect on student outcomes. New approaches in behavioral and mental health assessment and early intervention of behavior disorders continue to emerge and focus more than ever on problem solving to develop strength-based perspectives, positive behavior, and the emphasis on matching interventions to student need (Farmer et al., 2010; Florida MTSS Project, 2011).

Additionally, within the PBIS framework is the implementation of a Response to Intervention (RtI) system whereby global student data (e.g., social, academic, behavioral, disciplinary, etc.) are used to identify the true needs of the student and drive the interventions while consistently monitoring for progress or the need for revision or change in interventions.
The execution of an RtI system for PBIS, both in the academic and behavioral context, seeks to provide a platform for school personnel to assess student need early and consistently. An RtI approach is designed to identify any skill or knowledge deficit affecting student achievement and match the intervention, whether academic or behavioral, to that need through a process of problem solving. This problem-solving approach of 1) identifying the problem, 2) analyzing the problem, 3) identifying interventions, and 4) on-going progress monitoring (Florida MTSS Project, 2011) appears to be the most logical approach for intervention. The RtI framework additionally stresses the need to develop screening measures that provide early identification of struggling students from a perspective of risk rather than deficit and emphasizes focusing on problem solving to achieve positive student outcomes (Gresham et al., 2013).

The early identification of student needs through an RtI approach is based on the risk of failure and helps to curve the wait-to-fail approach in the general education setting (Gresham et al., 2013). The risk a student faces, whether academically, behaviorally, or both is identified through a system of early screening through academic assessments or behavioral ratings. An RtI approach encourages objectivity by helping educators to see the benefit of adjusting the environment and adult behaviors to support the students versus the immediate need to hold the student responsible (Gresham et al., 2013).

Educators have for decades relied upon punitive measures for student discipline; however, with at-risk students, in particular, these measures are proving to be ineffective and frequently increase conflict and aggressive behavior. With an escalation of undesired behavior resulting from this perceived rejection, school staff can easily deem that the
student’s behavior is the result of an inability for self-control instead of the student’s feelings of exclusion or rejection. This often results in an increase in restrictive services and distance from non-disabled peers versus helping the child to learn new skills to correct what initially could have been considered mild or moderate behavior before escalation.

The Legislative Road to Response to Intervention

The Response to Intervention approach has been developed over time as federal legislation mandated structured school intervention protocols as a result of schools, families, and communities demanding responses from school districts. As early as the 1950’s and 60’s, requests for supports from families and advocacy groups serving individuals with disabilities prompted the federal government to respond and develop policies intended to require school system guidelines for supporting children with disabilities and their families (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Throughout the years, the federal policies have seemingly been responsive to the most current trends in educating students with special needs. While legislation protecting the rights of persons with disabilities had been developing for some time, in 1975 the first landmark legislation, PL 94-142, now known as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), was signed into law by then President Gerald Ford. The passage of this law opened the public school doors for many students with disabilities who were previously excluded from public education and also secured a commitment of the nation to advance our expectations for all children, including those with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). IDEA protected children with disabilities from discrimination, opened opportunities for early intervention, and ensured a free and appropriate education for all
children. As well, it increased the development of programs and education for those who work with these students.

The law has been amended many times since 1975 as definitions of disabilities changed or gaps in supports or educational provisions were identified. Movements toward including students with special needs into the least restrictive settings pushed schools to adapt supports to allow students to learn in the most mainstream environment that they could manage. Over time it became evident that students with physical disabilities were becoming increasingly more accepted into mainstream classes due in part to the inclusion movement, but there was also growing evidence that students with behavioral problems were filling the newly vacated special education spaces (Casella & Page, 2004). As a result of this trend and the acknowledgement that students were increasingly being identified as needing behavioral intervention, in 1997 the use of PBIS became a fundamental component in the special education law, and definitions for what constituted an educational emotional/behavioral disability were developed.

With the reauthorization of IDEA in 2001, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, also known as No Child Left Behind) further emphasized the supports of students with disabilities. This legislation required schools in the U.S. to implement research-based, proactive approaches to student academics and behavior that used behavior analysis to match interventions to the need of the student. States were provided the flexibility to determine what system would be utilized to meet the law; however, ESEA required the use of scientific, research-based approaches to education. The mandated approach was again defined as PBIS. This evolution of the law prompted state educational systems to begin the development of state-funded initiatives for the
implementation of PBIS protocols in schools, and the tiered models for intervention began to emerge, as well as some redefinitions of various exceptionalities, including emotional/behavioral disabilities.

IDEA, advanced again in 2004, constituted federal definitions for a child to be identified as Emotionally Disabled (ED) and prompted a more aggressive approach to meeting the needs of students with Emotional/Behavioral Disabilities. IDEA 2004 established that for a child to be labeled as ED he must be determined to “possess one or more of the following characteristics: (a) an inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors; (b) an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers or teachers; (c) inappropriate types of behaviors 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” (Gresham et al., 2013, p. 20; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). For reference, the state of Florida in 2004 used the term Severely Emotionally Disturbed to identify students with Emotional Disabilities until the exceptionality was redefined and renamed Emotionally/Behaviorally Disabled in 2007. Gresham (2005) further explains that “RtI is based on the logic that if a student’s behavioral excesses and/or deficits continue at unacceptable levels subsequent to an evidence-based intervention implemented with integrity, then the student can and should be eligible for ED services” (p. 331). Additionally, the guidelines state that the symptomology should be present for six or more months, must affect the student in a significant way, and must adversely affect the educational performance of the student (Florida Department of Education, 2011).
The re-authorization of IDEA in 2004 strengthened the implementation of PBIS by adding that states develop a measure for response to intervention. The platform for this requirement was again left to individual states’ discretion. The state of Florida chose to initiate the RtI system, which is defined as “the practice of providing high-quality instruction and interventions that are matched to student need, monitoring progress frequently to make decisions about changes in instruction or goals, and applying student response data to important educational decisions” (Florida's MTSS Project, 2011, p. 1).

**Statement of the Problem**

Several articles and studies have highlighted the difficulties of implementing a comprehensive RtI structure, which can be complicated and costly. A true RtI approach to early identification and intervention would include as best practice: “1) use of data-based, systematic student interventions, 2) ongoing, continuous assessment of response to intervention and measure of progress, 3) opportunity to practice new skills, 4) intervention matched to student need, 5) multi-component provision of supports, 6) programmatic opportunity for transfer and generalization of new skills, and 7) continuance and commitment for ongoing interventions” (Lewis et al., 2010, p. 84). To establish a system this comprehensive is the most evidence-based approach to student intervention, including the development of pro-social student skills and the decrease in student-student and student-adult conflict; however, it is also one of the costliest and challenging for school systems lacking in funding, time, and resources, both human and material.
With the challenges of developing an effective and comprehensive system of student supports within an RtI structure, literature increasingly supports the theory of increased student emotional and behavioral volatility when positive behavioral supports are not in place. In fact, Gresham (2005) states that a profound and upsetting finding is that “students exhibiting severe emotional and behavioral challenges are either underserved or unserved by educational and mental health systems in the United States” (p. 328). The specific focus of this grounded theory study will concentrate on students who have been identified with an emotional/behavioral disability, the trends in early intervention and support during their educational experience, and the impact these practices have on instances of student conflict.

Identifying trends and practices used in the decision-making process when school teams are determining the most appropriate supports and educational setting for a student could likely shed light on areas of strength in the determination system as well as gaps for student support and intervention. My hope is that by discovering any trends in service provision for students, a district leadership team will be able to build or commend a solid determination system and also provide information that is lacking and in turn help school systems to best support students with emotional and/or behavioral issues.

The archived educational records of the students of interest will also provide a snapshot of any evidence of conflict that may be the result of behavioral problems and/or a match/mismatch of intervention to behavior. For example, is there evidence to indicate that a student who engages in frequent peer conflicts received intervention for social skills, problem solving, or anger management? Was the student taught new skills for conflict resolution, or instead disciplined? As ample research indicates, students with
externalizing behaviors such as verbal or physical aggression who receive targeted individualized interventions have better outcomes than those that do not.

Axley (2014) points out that for students with emotional-behavioral disabilities, social interactions with the teacher and classmates are often difficult, making teaching and learning challenging. However, with increased structure, focus on student success, and quick intervention, E/BD students will benefit. Furthermore, with the commitment of qualified professionals who focus on environmental supports, behavior management supports, and social skills instruction, parental and community supports for students with E/BD positive outcomes increase substantially (Huzinec, 2014). At the same time, when internalizing behaviors such as depression or anxiety are not identified or addressed, the emotional outcomes are often worsened and many of the internalizing behaviors turn to externalization in the form of aggression, violence, or self-harm as well as increased conflict with peers and adults.

**Theoretical Framework**

Disability theory, as it applies to the marginalization of persons with disabilities and those with suspected disabilities, will serve as the lens through which this topic will be examined. Tobin Siebers (2011), former co-chair of the University of Michigan Initiative on Disability Studies, was one of the leading contributors on disability theory and initially inspired this researcher’s reflection on students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. Continuing the transition from viewing disability from solely a medical model to a social model, Siebers (2011) declared that the “emerging field of disability studies defines disability not as an individual defect but as the product of social injustice” (p. 3). The marginalization of persons with disabilities exists, and social
acceptance of persons with disabilities “does not require the cure or elimination of the defective person but significant changes in the social and built environment” (Siebers, 2011, page 3).

“The presence of a disability creates a different picture of identity – one less stable than identities associated with gender, race, sexuality, nation, and class” (Siebers, 2011, p.5), all of which are more common to general society. Unlike other theoretical frameworks such as feminism, critical race theory, and queer theory, for example, disability is a brand that is not easily interpreted by the common person. Disability creates a sense of fear and anxiety. This trepidation in those unsure about disability inadvertently creates a life of isolation for the person with a disability based solely on its existence. Siebers (2011) delivered the reference of Ideology of Ability or the “preference for able-bodiness” (p. 7) when weighing the perspective of non-disabled persons against that of persons with disabilities. This preference, or perspective, incites non-disabled persons to fear disability and distance themselves from those that are seen as afflicted.

In alignment with the framework of disability theory, the implications of being marginalized based on their disability and perhaps excluded from fair social treatment will exist for the students, whether the placement in the SC-E/BD setting is a positive or a negative experience for them. Once labeled with a disability, the stigma of having a disability, being one of “those kids” or the kids in “those classes” is one that does not easily change despite positive behavioral skills the student may exhibit. Unfortunately, it has been my professional experience that once these students become labeled, they are feared based upon the unpredictability of their behavior, are isolated from the larger
student community, and are frequently unable to shake that identification despite significant behavioral change.

The immense obstacles experienced by disabled persons, whether in the educational environment, job inequality, benefits and supports, or most likely all of these and more (Oliver, 2009) suggest the sadness that the “cultural environment in which we all grow up usually sees impairment as unattractive and unwanted” (Oliver, 2009, p. 45). These factors, however, have not gone unnoticed. The social model of disability movement dates back as far as the 1970’s, with a primary focus on removing the barriers that prohibit disabled persons from living full and productive lives. Using this model as the theoretical framework while examining the educational and social opportunities which can be slimly afforded to students suspected of having or identified as having an emotional/behavioral disability may enlighten educational institutions to opportunities missed in developing competent, prepared high school graduates. Michael Oliver (2009) asserts that “the social model of disability does not ignore questions or concerns relating to impairment and/or the importance of medical and therapeutic treatments…but acknowledges that in many cases, the suffering associated with disabled lifestyles is due primarily to the lack of medical and other services” (p. 47). Unfortunately, this may indicate that the true misfortune is that discrimination in society continues to exclude and subjugate persons with impairments (Oliver, 2009).

**Emotional/Behavioral Disability in Education**

An educational environment for students with “different” behaviors and educational needs has fortunately evolved from the institutionalization of these children in past decades, but the need for growth still exists. Oliver (2009) notes that schools and
programs designed for these students had historically been designated as “schools for the delicate” and were more designed to keep the students “safe and secure” as opposed to providing them an education that will help them capitalize on their unique skills.

Educators, while always developing more unique programs and curricula to help students learn to the best of their ability, continue to struggle to find the balance to identify the distinctive skill levels of students with disabilities and develop these skills to build on student strengths while engaging the student with curriculum that ignores individualities. According to Collins, the regimentation in instructional practices and the expectation to stay with the curriculum as it is developed contribute to increased exclusion of children with learning differences (as cited in Casella & Page, 2004). Again, as educators, we are attempting to build individual skills with social and educational tools that are not designed to bring out exceptionalities and uniqueness.

Within most schools, the intention is not to cause discrimination or isolation when students with disabilities are taught separately, but the increase in segregation is often an unintended consequence. If one is to consider the relationship between general education and special education settings, children placed in these special settings are typically the ones that the rest of the education system could not cope with (Oliver, 2009), particularly student with E/BD. IDEA, while developed for the best supports of students in need, unwittingly created the “safety valve” wherein these children could be educated separately in many circumstances, in order to meet their needs.

Baglieri and Moses (2010) explain that well-intentioned teachers will frequently seek a disability diagnosis for a struggling student in order to obtain the educational
support they feel is needed; however, the consequence of assenting to the unequal educational system can have grave outcomes for our E/BD students. Despite what might be considered as well intentioned, all too often special education systems are organized and set up in a way that marginalizes and separates students based on a variety of factors related to academic and behavioral abilities, socioeconomic status, and racial group identification (Casella and Page, 2004).

It is relevant to explore how IDEA influenced and designed a system of students with behavioral problems that are quickly taking spots in special education that were formally designated for students with physical disabilities (Casella & Page, 2004). As students with more physical disabilities are becoming more mainstreamed due to the inclusion movement (Casella & Page, 2004), students with behavioral disabilities seem not to be gaining the skills to move back into the general education environment. In fact, the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA was designed to address the number of students with behavioral problems and the question of how to address their needs more precisely. It may, in fact, have unintentionally created silos of disability with grave consequences for the students with emotional and/or behavioral needs.

When placing a student into a self-contained classroom with some of the most significant “other” problem behaviors, one must consider what the outcomes will be for the student. Casella and Page (2004) point out that these placements are seen as deserved, and even offer well-intentioned interventions that provide for the special needs of students with behavioral disabilities—and it is even possible that individualized attention is what these youths need. However, the services provided in many of the settings into which these students are placed too often have little to do with the youths’
needs and rather than maintain order, they seemed to create disorder in the form of divisions, animosities, and conflicts that arose almost naturally when institutional processes created hierarchical categories of people.

Considering the application of disability theory to the identification of an emotional or behavioral “disability” in our students, researcher questions relevant to this study would be 1) *does this E/BD label expose these students to a phenomenon of social injustice in the school environment and increase instance of conflict?*; and 2) *do the educational professionals within an established system respond appropriately to the needs of these students, or are their supports further disabling these students from the opportunity to learn socially appropriate behaviors?* The relevance of disability theory to students placed in SC-E/BD settings denotes how the label of E/BD places these students in a learner category with implications that may have lifelong effects on the personal, social/emotional and educational success of these students.

This researcher has experienced school communities where students identified with or suspected of having an emotional or behavioral disability were not allowed to be involved in athletics, school events, or activities because of the adult concern that they would not be able to behaviorally manage themselves. Unfortunately, personal experience has further denoted that it is rare that the students’ opportunities are based upon the individual strengths or abilities but more often that they are categorized as a “group,” and the group is deterred from participation in the general education environment. Furthermore, this researcher has witnessed the resistance to transition of many students identified with an emotional/behavioral disability back into the mainstream setting based upon what might also be categorized as fear of regression or
even an expectation of failure for these students. “In the broadest sense, the social model of disability is about nothing more complicated than a clear focus on the economic, environmental and cultural barriers encountered by people who are viewed by others as having some form of impairment - whether physical, sensory or intellectual” (Oliver, 2009, p. 47).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this grounded theory study will be twofold: to generate an account of any common trends or practices that may exist when determining supports and interventions for students identified or suspected of having an emotional/behavioral disability; and second, to identify any existing patterns that affect the etiology of conflict that is likely to evolve if behavior is not addressed with appropriate intervention. The intervention trends prior to the placement into SC E/BD settings will be critical in determining if there are commonalities in the supports provided to students with behavioral problems. It is likely that students who exhibit behavior problems and are predictably predisposed to conflict are being considered for placement in a restrictive learning environment without the match of intervention.

Hummel & Prizant (as cited in Armstrong, 2011) note that interventions such as social skills instruction provide students the tools and strategies for positive conflict resolution and problem solving and aim to instill the ability to identify emotions and articulate feelings as they occur, a skill that reduces anxiety and unwarranted aggression. The importance of the development of this grounded theory, being based strictly on student archival data, will be to support practices that are responsive to student needs or to provide insight into practices that could be better developed.
Research Questions

The characteristics of students with E/BD, the challenges educators face when supporting these students, and the poor outcomes for many identified in this disability group is richly documented. What is lacking in my review of the literature is an actual analysis of trends and protocols for student placement into SC-E/BD settings within an educational setting. Considering this gap in the research, the questions that drove this study are:

1. Are there relevant trends evidenced in the archival records that denote a match of student need to intervention?

Deficits in teacher skills, lack of resources, knowledge for intervention implementation, or oversight of matching interventions to student need are often precursors to students being placed in Self-contained Emotional/Behavioral Disability (SC-E/BD) type classrooms or centers at high rates. While it is common to maintain that interventions were attempted but failed, a question remains as to whether there are common trends in matching interventions to the true function of the student’s behavior. Despite the regulation mandated by federal and state statutes and supported in educational research, public school systems continue to struggle with this area.

Additionally, due to the nature of internalizing behaviors such as depression or anxiety being overshadowed by externalizing behaviors, which tend to be much more aggressive and disruptive, opportunities to provide interventions for internalizing behaviors are frequently overlooked and receive no attention or intervention. A common result of misidentifying or overlooking a child’s needs is the increase in behaviors, both internalizing and externalizing, and the likelihood of these children becoming members
of the marginalized group of students with behavior problems that may likely experience increased isolation from typical peers.

2. *What is the nature of the etiology of conflict, if any, in interpersonal relationships in the classroom if the adult intervention is not matched to student need?*

The evidence of behavioral or emotional issues missed early or addressed with disciplinary responses versus interventions frequently cause school personnel to unconsciously foster increased and intensifying behaviors and amplify the likelihood of social and personal conflict. If this were a trend that goes unnoticed, this group of students would tend to become increasingly more ostracized based upon the intensity of conflicts and increase in behavioral problems.

3. *If trends in the etiology of conflict are identified, are there common practices in the district for addressing and teaching pro-social, conflict resolution skills?*

By using these questions to drive this research, I could find trends in the identification, assessment and intervention of students identified as E/BD as well as the social/emotional education in conflict resolution to be considered by educators. If student needs are identified and addressed early, the circumstance of marginalization and isolation may be thwarted; if not, these students may be more likely to experience segregation and pejorative treatment by the general school population based upon the existence of behavioral excesses, conflictual relationships and interactions, and lack of prosocial skills.

**Conceptual Framework**

**Grounded Theory.** Grounded theory research was founded in the late 1960’s by Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser and was rooted in the Chicago school of traditions of
pragmatism and field research design (Johanek, 2015). Grounded theory allows the researcher to escape dubious efforts to research and verify facts of many research methodologies and instead let the data tell the story. According to Glaser and Strauss (2010), “Theory that is based on data can usually not be completely refuted by more data or replaced by another theory” (p. 4). The discovered theory is so intimately linked to the data, it will sustain despite revisions and modification and drive the explanation of findings (Glaser & Strauss, 2010). This methodology is ideal for this research based on the intent to discover trends in the provision of supports to E/BD students, provide an analysis for good practices with challenging students, and/or identify gaps in practices that can be considered for improving student supports.

Additionally, the substantive theory regarding student intervention, support, and conflict resolution drawn from this study provides information that other professionals involved in this area of education should be able to understand and apply immediately (Glaser & Strauss, 2010). As Glaser and Strauss (2010) emphasize “The interrelated jobs of theory in sociology are: 1) to enable prediction and explanation of behavior; 2) to be useful in theoretical advance in sociology; 3) to be usable in practical applications – prediction and explanation should be able to give the practitioner understanding and some control of situations; 4) to provide a perspective on behavior – a stance to be taken toward data; and 5) to guide and provide a style for research on particular areas of behavior” (p. 3). Based upon these principles, grounded theory is the most effective research method for this study.

Grounded theory, being an inductive theory discovery methodology (Alony & Jones, 2011), allows the emergence of trends or patterns from the research area through
the process of sampling, coding, memoing, and reflecting on existing data from processes, systems, groups, or other phenomena. The primary intent of grounded theory is the discovery of theory from the data in its natural state and through the process of archival data analysis relationships between abstract concepts drawn from the data that can emerge for better and clearer understanding of systems (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2011). As stated by Glaser & Strauss (2010), “Generating a theory from data means that most hypotheses and concepts not only come from the data, but are systematically worked out in relations to the data during the course of the research” (p. 6).

**Constructivist Grounded Theory.** This grounded theory methodology, more precisely, will be that of constructivist grounded theory, a revision of the original Glaser and Strauss version. Constructivist grounded theory compels reflexivity throughout the process of data collection and analysis. According to Charmaz in Morse, Stern, Corbin, Bowers, Charmaz, and Clarke (2009), the constructivist develops analysis knowing full well that an interpretation is contingent upon our knowledge as *qualified researchers* (Institutional Review Board, NSU, 2016).

In this qualitative study, the data were collected from confidential educational records. The student records accessed contained a comprehensive account of the student’s educational activities and presence, which were sufficient for the research. Within the data analysis, the person behind the record was not revealed, as only the demographic and educational data were examined. This final product, the dissertation, is a reflection of the collected data with the student names and the school district unidentified.
Credibility of the Study

The literature on substantiating the credibility of research outcomes is rich in theory, but four aspects of conducting qualitative studies have stuck out for this researcher: credibility, transferability, conformability, and dependability. Each of these has a personal richness in that this researcher's hope is to contribute to the improvement of educational services for all struggling students, but, additionally, they are also critical for the reliability of the study.

Because this research can have strong implications on the provision of services for children, credibility of this researcher’s findings is obviously crucial for educational practices but also for the respect of colleagues and readers of the study. Using the student educational records provided a wealth of information for examination, and this researcher took several protections to produce validity, both internal and external. At the outset of the study, personal biases were examined and scrutinized as this researcher’s occupation has been focused on student behavior and intervention for over 20 years. Throughout the research process, these biases were tirelessly examined and defined through reflection and memoing, allowing true theory to emerge from the data as intended in grounded theory.

By establishing a system of peer review both with professional colleagues and with access to a dissertation coach, hard questions are asked. Questions around methodology, interpretations, and hypotheses were the role of many a “devil’s advocate” (Creswell, 2007). Also, the opportunity to maintain realism in the examination of the data and development of the outcomes could be checked through peer scrutiny and feedback.
Lastly, by providing a detailed description of the format of the data, the process by which the data (reports) was obtained, and the circumstances of the analysis, the intent was to provide the reader with the opportunity to transfer the finding to other circumstances. As stated earlier, transferability was a top priority of the project. This research examined the match of intervention to student need for a particular population; however, the intent was to provide insight into the process of examining interventions for students in need from all populations. Additionally, the thorough description of the research process and importance of the data advances the credibility of the study through transparency and intended reader understanding of the study and outcomes.

Through the process of each of the practices stated above—checking biases, allowing peer review, and providing a rich description of the research details—the study will establish a position of confirmability among readers. Building this confirmability through an audit trail completed throughout the study will help to demonstrate how each decision was made. Readers from a similar profession will be able to identify common threads within their own practices, and by detailing each step in the systematic process, the outcomes will be confirmed and validated in education and conflict resolution work.

**Contributions to the Field of Conflict Resolution and Education**

There are two ways that this study will contribute to the field of conflict resolution and education. First, students that are identified with a disability of any kind will inevitably experience some type of marginalization or discrimination during their lifetime. Because students with emotional/behavioral disabilities do not always look disabled on the outside, their intense, conflict-laden behavior can create penetrating biases and a lack of understanding from society. If early interventions provided to these
students are not matched to their individual need, behaviors can intensify and create increased conflict in their relationships at home, in the community, and at school. Therefore, this study examines what interventions were provided or attempted, what outcomes are reported, and whether the students experienced behavior change.

Second, much of the behavior of E/BD students is aggressive, argumentative, and even self-injurious. These students are often the most at-risk of personal and social failure, involvement with juvenile justice, and eventually failing to graduate. When their behaviors are not addressed early and intentionally the behaviors are likely to increase and cause more and more social isolation and conflict. This study, with the true intention to provide the most comprehensive, apposite grounded theory reflective of the system of student support, will provide rich information for districts to assess their own educational systems and thereby enhance teacher, student, and systematic capacity for conflict prevention and resolution.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

The literature on students with disabilities, response to intervention, and positive behavioral supports is wide-reaching across areas such as education, psychology, and sociology. The text varies from discussion of disability identification, the increasing awareness of children’s mental health issues, interventions for addressing problem behaviors, family engagement, and exclusionary discipline such as suspension or expulsion (Comstock-Galahan, n.d.; Gresham et al., 2013; Lewis & Horner, 2010; Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.; Sullivan, Klingbeil, & Van Norman, 2013), but a significant gap exists in in-depth analyses of actual educational practices and trends in intervention.

Children’s Mental Health

In the United States, children’s mental health is a growing concern and one that families and schools are struggling with. According to Merikangas, et al., it is currently estimated that 20% of children will experience some type of severe mental health problem at some point in their lifetime (as cited by Marsh, 2016). Furthermore, the Centers for Disease Control estimates that of children between the ages of 8 to 15, 13% will experience issues with mental health, with the most frequent diagnoses being attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), mood disorder, and major depressive disorder (Marsh, 2016). Children experiencing these problems and attending public school are forcing education professionals to develop practices such as early screening, assessment, behavior intervention, and specialized programming. Additionally, these students under IDEA related to mental health typically fall under the category of emotionally and behaviorally disabled or other health categories (Marsh, 2016).
Furthermore, according to Marsh (2016), students identified with mental health issues experience difficulties with mood regulation, distortion in thoughts, and behavior. What is of more concern, yet, is that many students are not identified as having mental health problems due to a lack of family resources, mental health resources, or understanding, and these children are often receiving no intervention prior to entering school or when problems surface. Repie noted that general education teachers as well as special education teachers, school psychologists, counselors, and other educational providers are often in unfamiliar territory in understanding the mental health needs of the children they seek to educate, yet they are being required to be the first line of prevention and intervention with these students (as cited by Marsh, 2016).

Moreover, Anthony, Anthony, Morrel and Acosta state that current research supports interventions provided at the classroom level can prevent social and emotional problems in children and youth as well as modify negative thought patterns and increase self-regulation (as cited by Marsh, 2016). Yet for students to receive the support needed, they must first be identified (Gresham, 2005; Gresham et al., 2013; Marsh, 2016), which requires educators to be knowledgeable about mental health needs of children and the importance of early screening, identification and intervention (Gresham, 2005; Gresham et al., 2013). And most importantly, Johnson, Johnson and Walker state “teacher awareness of behaviors associated with mental health issues is essential as they are in the unique position of observing student behavior on a daily basis” (as cited by Marsh, 2016, p. 322).
Early Screening and Identification

Contemporary literature on student intervention clearly identifies the need for early assessment to determine which students might be at risk for not meeting academic and behavioral goals and may require additional supports, interventions, or alternative learning systems (Axley, 2014; Florida Department of Education, 2011; Florida MTSS Project, 2011; Gresham, 2005; Lewis & Horner, 2010). However, according to Lewis and Horner (2010) the need for early screening or identification as a practice has been a hard sell with public schools. With the underfunding of education nationally, money to support a comprehensive assessment and intervention system is naturally of great concern, but more frequent is the difficulty of creating a comprehensive cost-efficient system of screening, identifying, and supporting students with emotional and behavioral issues (Lewis & Horner, 2010; Schanding & Nowell, 2013; Sprague & Walker, 2005).

Sprague and Walker (2005) expand on these challenges by also pointing out that educational decision makers often justify resistance to provide extra or more intensive mental health supports to struggling students to avoid possible stigmatization of labeling students as having emotional or behavioral problems. Traditionally, “labels used such as learning disability (LD) and emotional disturbance (ED), and terms such as 'co-morbidity' if disabilities such as LD and ED are combined, were used to determine the physical location, class type placement, forms of instruction, and teachers for disabled students” (Connor, 2014, p. 23). This, in itself, may indicate the possibility that educational institutions were simply structural systems and practices that may inadvertently further disable students who already struggling (Connor, 2014). School administrators, furthermore, note that the cost and intrusiveness of screening and providing services to
students, the challenges of identifying students with such a disability when the needed services are non-existent, possible bias among referral and screening agents, the danger of identifying large numbers of students for whom special accommodations and protections under IDEA are required, and the specialized placements that would have to be provided make identification and intervention more daunting than doable.

Additional research in the area of early screening by Lloyd, Kauffman, Landrum, and Roe indicates that students are far more likely to be screened and referred for academic problems than behavioral problems (as cited by Sprague & Walker, 2005). While this research is dated, the trend still exists today. Sprague and Walker (2005) restate that “These findings and this observation [many students with emotional and behavioral problems are likely referred and certified for special education in eligibility categories other than emotional disturbance] further buttress the case that schools are generally biased against the proactive identification and treatment of students who have serious emotional and behavioral problems” (p. 126).

Despite the challenge of conducting early screening and identification of disabilities, the literature is clear as to the benefit of developing this practice. Gresham, Hunter, Corwin, and Fischer (2013) emphasize the point of early identification and intervention by stating that “Conceptualizing problems from a risk perspective is beneficial as evidence-based interventions are matched to problem severity before a student falls too far behind in a general education setting” (p. 22). Risk factors such as substance abuse, proneness toward engaging in aggressive behavior, living in poverty, or homelessness are often manifested in warning signs such as social withdrawal, excessive emotionality, lack of school engagement or interests, and few social relationships
Correspondingly, using an RtI model includes benefits such as early identification of learning and behavior problems, conceptualization of problems based on level of risk rather than level of deficit, decrease of identification biases, and increased focus on positive student outcomes (Barnett et al., 2006; Batsche et al., 2005; Gresham et al., 2013).

Unfortunately, the literature is also saturated with the claim that few schools are able to effectively recognize or implement the practice of periodically looking at students’ behavioral and social skills to determine if there are any underlying emotional or mental health problems that might negatively impact a student’s ability to learn. Walker and Gresham point out the irony that schools have been “so slow to recognize the educational needs and demands that these student pose to themselves, to the major social agents in their lives (e.g., parents and teachers) and society at large” (as cited by Gresham, p. 329) but instead continue to expend considerable time attempting to manage the behavior through discipline which most often proves ineffective. Despite the evidence that proactive, positive school-wide behavior interventions are effective and have positive results for children, many systems continue to rely on punitive discipline practices (Gresham et al., 2013; Lewis & Horner, 2010; Muyskens, 2007).

**Teacher Preparedness and Understanding**

Another issue frequently referenced in the literature is that of teacher misunderstanding or intolerance of student differences. Teachers, often unknowingly, have historically made behavior referrals based upon non-academic factors (e.g. minority status, gender or socio-economic status), which can often be due to a lack of understanding of cultural or ethnic norms (Gresham, 2013; Huzinec, 2014). Minority
students, particularly black male students, are over-identified as E/BD, with some research hypothesizing that black students from poverty engage in more problem behaviors (Sullivan et al., 2013) and are more difficult to support.

Despite trends in professional development to raise awareness of cultural diversity intended to help educators understand and embrace differences, a lack of true understanding exists (Sullivan et al., 2013). Struggling to teach children that the educator feels don’t respond sufficiently or that fail to respond at all to the teacher expectations is frequently the precursor to frustration with student behavior (Sullivan et al., 2013), when often the issue is a misunderstanding of culture or ethnicity. These phenomena create a pattern of blaming the student first before sufficiently analyzing the adult behavior, learning environment, and the impact on student outcomes as well as a mismatch of interventions that fail to address the true needs of the student.

**Response to Intervention/Positive Behavior Intervention and Support**

The literature on Response to Intervention/Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (RtI/PBIS) abounds with the focus on building upon a child’s strengths by changing adult behavior versus faulting the child first. Despite the most recommended practices to build more proactive strength-based protocols, there remain challenges to the RtI/PBIS approach, such as the existence of the “research-to-practice” gap and the continued inconsistencies in the provision of services (Lewis & Horner, 2010). A Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS) is the most current model of intervention recommended to help schools provide a comprehensive system of student support. This model, based upon adopting an “evidence-based model that uses data-based problem-solving to integrate academic and behavioral instruction and intervention” (Florida MTSS
Project, 2011, p. 2) suggests building a comprehensive protocol of systemic proactive practices that most students will respond to while developing a system for increasingly more intense supports for those students that require more.

Equally important, the MTSS framework provides a comprehensive model based upon a four-step problem-solving process designed for increasingly more intensive interventions based upon the student need (Florida Department of Education, 2011). This problem-solving process begins with problem identification, assessing the need, providing interventions based upon the need, and monitoring for response to the provided intervention whereby supports can be increased, decreased, maintained or terminated.

Other competency-based models for intervention also exist and can be built most effectively as part of the tiered system of MTSS. Practices such as positive psychology or positive youth development through mentoring or empowerment are showing significant results. Both of these models are also based upon a system of building upon student strengths that support healthier development of skills and that build on social-emotional regulation and relationship development that enhance adaptability (Farmer et al., 2010). “In working with children and adolescents with or at-risk of emotional and behavioral disorders (E/BD), it is easy to become focused on the problems that they display” (Farmer et al., 2010, p. 53). The development of any comprehensive multi-leveled system of student support is challenging with academics, and therefore behavior supports often feels impossible (Batsche, Elliot, Graden, Grimes, Kovaleski & Prasse, 2005). Additionally, classroom teachers are often not well-versed in the development of a comprehensive system of support or the skills to implement appropriate interventions,
and with limited time and resources continue to use old practices that are not sufficient to address increasing student need.

An added challenge speaks to the conflict of interweaving intervention programs into existing delivery systems or other educational structures in the classroom (McInerney, Zumeta, Gandhi & Gersten, 2014). Teachers are overwhelmed with the curriculum and assessment demands being placed upon them, and this challenges the ability to adjust teaching methods to meet the academic and behavioral needs of all students in the classroom. Effective intervention requires that educators change how they teach so that efforts to effect behavior change do not take away from academic progress for all students. Two problems that can exist when attempting to initiate a new system for identifying students in need of intervention: 1) the use of too broad an approach, identifying too many students needing support and overwhelming the system, or 2) the use of too narrow a scope or one that lacks the flexibility to meet the needs of the individual students (McInerney, et al., 2014). The integrity of the interventions depends also on factors such as the complexity of the interventions, the intensity of the interventions, the time needed to implement the interventions, non-existent or limited resources needed, as well as the true effectiveness of the interventions (Gresham, 2005). All of these factors, while complex, must be considered and planned for emotional and behavioral support and change to occur.

**Teacher Education and Readiness**

While improving due to the changing look of education, professional skill deficits caused by insufficient levels of training and knowledge for providing interventions to student behavioral challenges still exist, leaving teachers frustrated and students
struggling to achieve (Gresham et al., 2013; Lewis & Horner, 2010; Stormont, Rodriguez, & Reinke, 2016; Wehby & Kern, 2014). University curriculum and teacher preparation in behavior interventions are deficient (Teagarden, Zabel & Kaff, 2016; Wehby & Kern, 2014) in many college-level education programs, causing teachers to be ill-prepared for classroom challenges with behavior. Unfortunately, this lack of understanding and preparedness causes students to be removed from the classroom, hence reducing the amount of time they have for instruction and social interactions with peers (Stormont et al., 2016).

When deficient in training and coaching in positive behavior intervention, teachers and administrators go back to punitive methods of removing students from classroom environments as their intervention (Baglieri & Moses, 2010; Wehby & Kern, 2014). This practice exacerbates the problem and increases instances of interpersonal conflict and failure as students fall farther behind and teachers become increasingly more intolerant of student misbehavior. Removing students from the learning environment for unwanted behavior can likely backfire and may actually reinforce challenging behavior, increase the frequency or intensity of unwanted behavior and conflict in the classroom (Stormont et al., 2016). Students who feel unwelcome in the classroom are often hardened by disciplinary responses, escape undesired tasks and instruction, and develop resistance to peer interactions and academic direction.

George Sugai, in an interview on high-fidelity interventions with struggling students, explains a recent revelation that while we have a strong menu of effective interventions, the knowledge about and opportunity for teachers to implement with fidelity is lacking (Teagarden et al., 2016). Sugai explains that “successful teacher
education programs prepare teachers, school psychologists, counselors, administrators, etc., to be smart consumers and, more importantly, smart implementers of effective interventions and practices” (Teagarden et al., 2016, p. 325). Increasing the degree of preparedness coupled with the understanding that intertwined academic and behavior support create success and are the teacher’s responsibility will create a more proactive, effective teacher.

**Disability or Escape**

Beyond the complexity of preparedness and the ability to establish a system to support these students, moreover, is a major argument about whether or when a school is responsible for addressing the emotional needs of students (Gresham, 2005). As a philosophical and fiscal challenge, questions remain as to whether a child’s behavior is the responsibility of the child or whether emotional/behavioral problems are a true disability and beyond the child’s control (Gresham, 2005) and must be addressed in the public education system. Baglieri and Moses (2010) explain that well-intentioned teachers will frequently seek a disability diagnosis for a struggling student in order to obtain the educational support they feel is needed; however, the consequence of yielding to unequal educational practices can have grave outcomes for our E/BD students. Within most schools, it is not intended to cause discrimination or isolation when students are placed in SC-E/BD settings, but an increase in segregation is often an unintended consequence. If one is to consider the relationship between general education and special education settings, children placed in these special settings are typically the ones that the rest of the education system could not cope with (Oliver, 2009). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, while developed for the best supports of students in need,
unwittingly created the “safety valve,” where these children could be educated separately from their typical peers in many circumstances, in order to meet their needs.

Casella and Page (2004) extensively examined the verity that students with behavioral problems are quickly taking spots in special education that were formally designated for students with physical disabilities. As students with more physical disabilities are becoming more mainstreamed due to the inclusion movement (Casella & Page, 2004), students with behavioral disabilities seem not to be gaining the skills to move back into the general education environment. As was discussed in the Legislative Road to Response to Intervention section, the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA was a response to increased numbers of ESE students with behavioral problems and the question of how to address their needs more precisely. This legislation, while well intended, may have unwittingly marginalized a large population of students with disabilities.

The literature is extensive regarding behavior intervention with students exhibiting E/BD type behaviors and in identifying the necessary elements for behavior intervention and change, staff preparation needs, and systemic recommendations such as prioritizing and formatting programs so as not to overwhelm existing structures. What is not sufficiently explored, however, is an actual analysis of whether educators are truly matching student need to intervention and what the effects of a mismatch, if existing, on student outcomes are. This study is unique because real-life trends or patterns regarding the intervention of students identified or suspected of having an emotional or behavioral disability is under-researched. Throughout the literature, plentiful in theory and recommended practices, analysis of school district practices for assessment, intervention
and identification of a student with disabilities is minimal. What we know in theory and what was discovered in actual practice is intended to support the best practices for school districts when developing a comprehensive RtI structure. As well, this information may help schools to examine practices that are not only overwhelming their systems but unduly isolating students that might be better served with the appropriate supports established, utilized, and monitored for effectiveness.
Chapter 3: Methodology

The focus of this dissertation was to discover and describe any trends in matching intervention to student need, identify any patterns in the etiology of conflict in classroom relationships, and examine possible practices for teaching skills in conflict resolution as evidenced in the records of students eventually placed in Self-Contained Emotional/Behavioral Disability (SC-E/BD) settings. The specific questions asked are 1) Are there relevant trends evidenced in the student records that denote a match of need to intervention? 2) What is the nature of etiology of conflict, if any, in interpersonal relationships in the classroom if adult intervention is not matched to student need? and 3) If trends are identified, what are common practices for addressing and teaching pro-social conflict resolution skills? The intent of this research is to make a contribution to the field of education and conflict resolution as to how we are supporting our most volatile and at-risk students prior to being placed in Exceptional Student Education, particularly SC-E/BD learning environments.

Rationale for Qualitative Design

The trademark of qualitative research is the use of inductive logic within an area of interest and allowing the research design to materialize from the data (Kennedy, 2013). As my professional and personal interest is in behavior intervention and support, I appreciated using actual archived educational records as the data source. With the understanding that schools are dynamic institutions with varying stakeholders and ever-changing students, this researcher developed this study with the intent of understanding, interpreting, and even making meaning of that data as a story. As stated by Creswell (2007) “Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a
theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 37). Utilizing my own familiarity with this population of students, working with field of behavior intervention, and understanding the content and where to find archived student records, qualitative research was the only logical fit into my research inquiries.

To identify the appropriate records for analysis, purposive sampling seemed the most valid protocol. According to the Assessment Capacities Project (2011), “purposive sampling produces a sample where the included groups are selected according to specific characteristics that are considered to be important” (p. 4). By accessing psychological reports relevant to the population used in this study, this researcher was able to extract data that reflected behavior typology and adult response to those behaviors, code the data, and begin to explore categories reflected in the data revealing a snapshot of “stories” of kids that were eventually placed in SC-E/BD learning environments. The reports used for the study not only reflected a collection of behavior typology and classroom or adult supports and/or interventions provided to address undesirable behavior, but in many cases the student response to those supports in the school setting.

**Grounded Theory (GT)**

By nature of its design, using grounded theory to organize and drive my data analysis was logical. GT allowed me to escape the ambiguous measures of quantitative methodology loaded with verifying facts derived from an established theory and instead let the data drive my discovery of trends and practices (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 2010). The natural flow of using this methodology as a platform for data analysis and hence using the “language” of the records to guide interpretation of the data fulfilled this
researcher's expectation that throughout the research the data analysis naturally allowed the establishment of something that would 1) be readily understandable to the social scientist as well as the layman reader, 2) allow the eventual categories to emerge from an in-depth examination of the data, and 3) connect the eventual theory directly to the data (Creswell, 2007).

Another strong consideration for choosing GT as my methodology was the flexibility of guidelines. Consistent with the guidance from Thornberg and Charmaz (2011), this flexibility allowed me to be deeply involved with the data collection and analysis and move data and categories around as my thinking evolved and new patterns emerged. As I discovered, review of the student records required repeated dissection and review. Moreover, the flexibility within GT prompted me to distinguish and tap which categories were more relevant to my research questions, which categories required further analysis and re-examination of the records, and which categories were not pertinent to the research questions. As Charmaz (2006) describes, grounded theory “favors analysis over description, fresh categories over preconceived ideas and extant theories, and systematically focuses sequential data collection over large initial samples” (p. 187). I found my work consistent with this summarization.

Furthermore, understanding that school systems and school communities are dynamic institutions and are ever changing to meet federal and state guidelines and, most importantly, to meet the needs of the human beings within them, GT promotes the logic of sensitizing for a meaningful picture using the characteristics of the entities portrayed in the records versus the entities themselves (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative design allowed my research to be driven by the documented context of the student behavior, involvement
provided to the students, the experiences of the adults involved, and by the environment and stakeholders within the school building.

**Using Archival Records**

Using the archived records for my analysis was also a natural fit to working in grounded theory. Using the records of students, this researcher was able to build a sense of exploring life records (Elder, Pavalko, & Clipp, 1993) reflective of a chronology of each student’s educational experience. Also, because those records were developed as one piece of a student assessment process, the records could be considered authentic reflections on multiple facets of each case. This, in turn, may be more reflective of the nature of the student experience as opposed to data being prepared for the purpose of research.

According to Hurworth (2005), in like manner, the analysis of documents in research is useful to the analyst because: 1) analysis allows the gathering of new facts about a program, to understand why a program is the way it is, 2) it is useful for determining the purpose or rationale of a program, 3) it may help in determining the major stakeholders involved, 4) it can assist in determining the history and other retrospective information about a program (and this may be the only way that such information is available), and 5) it can help the evaluator to see what data still need to be collected. In conducting the document analysis, I found all of these points considerable as to, for example, who are the key stakeholders in providing more intensive supports to students, how and if interventions can be implemented with fidelity, and how practices could be supported or fine-tuned if necessary.
One consideration as this researcher worked to develop the methodology was the concern of using archival records versus live subjects. Studying Charmaz (2009), this concern was eased by understanding that the use of only records as data is sufficient as long as “our data collection flows from the research question” (p. 134) and that “a particular data collection or analytic strategy cannot drive the research questions” (p. 134). This methodological eclecticism challenges prior beliefs by scholars that interviews are the only appropriate method for gathering data when often documents are the only data that the researcher can safely or ethically obtain. Block-Pedego, Todis, and Severson (1998) state that educational records serve as a rich source of data for study in that school records “simultaneously provide an ongoing record of the manner in which the school system attempts to accommodate the broad range of students it serves” (p. 1).

The Specific Methodology

In order to best allow me to discover particular characteristics or trends related to the research questions, I first used purposive sampling to identify my cases. Purposive sampling is defined as judgmental, selective or subjective sampling that relies on the judgment of the researcher when it comes to selecting the units (e.g., people, cases/organizations, events, pieces of data) that are to be studied (Laerd Dissertation, n.d.). Purposive sampling is a common sampling method in qualitative research and allowed me to use my knowledge of the subject matter and the experience of students with disabilities to draw on the intricacies of the sample instead of making generalizations more common in probability sampling.

Moreover, choosing purposive sampling provided the opportunity that when gathering my selected documents, I was able to identify the group of records/cases that
would provide the most homogeneous insight into the research questions. The children represented by the records used for this research shared the same features of being a student from the same school district that were placed in a SC-E/BD classroom at any time during their 3rd through 5th grade school year.

**Role of the Researcher**

As a current district specialist in children’s mental health and behavioral needs, this researcher has been able to observe and consult with teachers attempting to manage disruptive student behavior for over 20 years. Additionally, my career has allowed me to provide mental health services to at-risk children, persons struggling with addiction, behavior analysis, and preventative discipline and behavior management. These experiences have enriched my understanding of how challenging student intervention truly is as well as how challenging behavioral change can be. As a professional and a scholar, I am continuously seeking new research and guidance on student intervention and support and have a desire to contribute by providing insight and fuel for increasing the world’s effectiveness in growing more successful and secure children.

This researcher understands that personal experience and knowledge influences the views of the world that one maintains. My practice as a mental health counselor and behavior change practitioner makes bias a reality. As a researcher I had the responsibility to table my beliefs and knowledge about student intervention and allow only the data to guide my study. The responsibility to be objective was mine, and although understanding that I know what I want to see, my role as the researcher was to put away my practitioner lens and cultivate and utilize my understanding of disability theory, conflict resolution, and social theory to give me a context through which to study this subject matter.
Research Design

As the research ideas were developed, I explored varied methodologies. My choices came down to case study, an ethnographic study, or grounded theory. While conducting a case study would have been a good fit, I maintained the desire to look objectively at the data for answers to my research questions and preferred the experience of allowing the data to drive my analysis. An ethnographic study would be a fascinating experience; however, understanding how new persons can disrupt the flow of an SC-E/BD classroom and strongly wanting to avoid any negative impact on the students which this researcher would be observing, I selected a less disruptive approach.

Grounded theory research allows the flexibility for data collection methods to be the best fit to researching a problem and advancing the ongoing analysis of the data (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2011), and while GT can involve interviews and personal interaction, understanding the need for the most structure and least distraction, this researcher preferred using archived records for my data analysis. By accessing student records, particularly psychological reports, I felt strongly that the data would reflect typography and perhaps frequency of behavior, the context and intensity of student behavior, interventions, supports, similarities, and scenarios of conflict and/or discipline incidents.

Student Records. The first phase of this project was to identify the prospective pool of records according to parameters established to ensure that 1) the pool was neither too narrow nor too broad, 2) the pool was representative of students that have been educated in the district since their kindergarten year, and 3) the students were placed in the more restrictive setting (SC-E/BD) during the 3rd through 5th grade year.
Additionally, all students represented in this study were placed in SC-E/BD classrooms, which indicated that they had experienced persistent emotional or behavioral patterns that have been unresponsive to implemented evidence-based interventions and are not attributable to age, culture, gender or ethnicity (Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services Resource and Information Center, 2013).

**Subject Population.** Student records accessed for this study were the psychological reports and discipline records for students who were placed in SC E/BD learning environments during their 3rd–5th grade years during the 2014-15 school year. This resulted in a total of 16 student records. Thirteen of the students were male, two Hispanic, two Multi-racial, and nine Black students. Three of the students were female, one Black student and two White students. Authorization to access the records was received after the submission of the Request to Conduct Research document required by the school district. This document requires that no names or otherwise confidential information will be included that may, in any way, cause harm to the person whose records were reviewed.

The list of records was initially requested from an Office Specialist within the Department of Exceptional Student Education and Student Services of the school district. This list was then provided to the Coordinator of School Psychological Services who requested from the Psychologists who wrote each report to send the reports to this researcher. Reports were submitted through electronic mail. Finally, the affiliated discipline records for each student were pulled from the Crosspointe Student Information Portal and filed electronically.
To protect the confidentiality of the student record as well as to further maintain researcher biases, the records were then imported into Adobe PDF Services electronic platform, exported to a Word file which would then allow this researcher to use the “Find and Replace” option where all names and identifying student Alpha codes were deleted and replaced with an identifying student number (e.g., S1, S2, S3, etc.). The same actions were then taken with the student discipline records.

**Ethical Implications and Considerations**

When conducting qualitative research, the protection of the research participant or subject matter must be taken into consideration throughout the study. There are five core ethical principles that must be adhered to: 1) the minimization of harm to the participants must be primary in the process and product of the research, 2) the participants must provide informed written consent to take part in the research, 3) the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants must be protected, 4) the research must be transparent and upstanding with no intent for malicious practices, and 5) the participants have the right to withdraw consent to participate at any point in the research (Laerd Dissertation, n.d.). All of these considerations were carefully thought through during this research venture. Because the data represents students in the school district in which this researcher works and because many of the students would be familiar, particular attention was paid to concealing the identity of the students. Fortunately, this researcher is not intimately knowledgeable or involved with the student population at this time; therefore, no demographic, familial, or background information was recognized.
Data Collection and Instrumentation

Within the GT context, initial coding took me through the defined steps including a close reading of the records while working to remain open to all possible directions prompted by the reading of the data, followed by an initiation of progressively more sophisticated levels of coding of the data, and leading to focusing the data to develop more salient categories for progressing through generating theory from data (Charmaz, 2006). As expected, my initial reading of the documents allowed me to understand the format and context of the reports and gain initial understandings of possible categories. While initial coding can take the form of word-by-word coding, line-by-line coding, or incident-by-incident coding all of which gets the researcher deep into the data and removes the possibility of too many unconnected codes (Glaser & Strauss, 2010), for my research I found word-by-word and line-by-line coding the most effective. This was logical since when using archival documents such as psychological reports it is infrequent that full quotes or a full description of an incident were available as would be in an interview. However, words describing a student’s affect, behavior, impact of behavior, and adult responses to the student’s behavior were extensive.

In an attempt to find a platform or tool for logging my coding, after some research I discovered NVIVO software, produced by Qualitative Research Solutions International (QSR). According to Bringer, Johnston, & Brackenridge (2004), the original QSR program for the purpose of qualitative data analysis was known as Non-numerical Unstructured Data, Indexing, Searching, and Theorizing (NUD*IST) developed by Professors Lyn and Tom Richards in the early 1980s. The purpose of the software was to create easier methods for coding, highlighting, and filing interviews and coding. In 1999,
QSR NUD*IST VIVO, more commonly known as NVIVO was developed with the emphasis on “in vivo” coding, that is, naming a category directly from the interviewee’s own words (Bringer et al., 2004).

The NVIVO for Mac software was purchased and downloaded from the QSR site (http://www.qsrinternational.com/product/nvivo-mac) and was easily installed. After reviewing the tutorials, this researcher began to upload the documents used for the research. The use of the NVIVO software at this point was simple and easily permitted new projects to be created. The projects this researcher created were titled “Dissertation Research” and “Discipline Records” as shown in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. Welcome to NVivo for Mac project database. This figure shows the separations available for projects in NVivo.](image)

The scope for using the NVivo software includes the ability to work with documents, datasets, and web content, as well as create nodes, code text, record memos, work with sets, and run queries. What was unknown to this researcher when the software
was selected for use was that some of the options to help with data analysis were not available yet to NVivo for Mac.

Once the software was installed, I imported all student records into the platform without challenges. I created two projects—Dissertation Research, which contained all psychological records, and Discipline Records, which contained the discipline records for each of the students. Two separate projects were created because of the difference in record type and as a way for this researcher to explore the two record types for the different types of information that are contained in the records. For this researcher, keeping the two projects (records) separate helped with organization.

Working with the records within the software was very similar to manually coding data. As shown in figure 2, when a record is ready for review it is opened in the software and the researcher manually takes terms and phrases and places them into nodes, which serve as the initial categories of the data. It is important to note, also, that the method employed for coding the data was a word-by-word process. The report data, in the form of documents versus interview or observation data, lent itself to extracting hot words, giving me more substantial information in which to define my categories and sub-categories.
Initially, the following categories were created: externalizing, internalizing, using interventions, seeking attention (hypothesis), avoiding (hypothesis), "if" statements (hypothesis), complying, having conflicts, social interactions, communicating, discipline, consequences, referrals, when/where, diagnosis, living conditions, observations, reporting/quoting, strengths, and testing behavior. As I began with initial coding I attempted to label my codes with gerunds as recommended by Glaser (as cited by Charmaz, 2006) but found this increasingly more difficult as much of the terminology within the documents did not lend itself to the act of "detecting processes" as Glaser noted. As is consistent with GT, these categories grew, evolved, changed, were deleted or were combined as the records were continuously and repeatedly reviewed.

As the initial nodes were created, as shown in Figure 3, tree node structures were created that would serve as the next phase of coding. Within the NVivo software, tree
nodes may serve as sub-categories under an umbrella category. The tree nodes allowed the categories to be expanded and truly inspired the beginnings of the next step of coding and narrowing the scope of the larger category.

Figure 3. Creation of Nodes from text. This figure displays the nodes (categories) being created from the text as well as tree nodes or sub-categories.

The second phase of coding is focused coding, during which the codes are more selective, directed, and conceptual (Charmaz, 2006). This phase in the coding required the researcher to begin categorizing the data and making decisions about what makes the most analytic sense and how the data should be revisited, discarded, or examined through another lens (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 2002). Consistent with the logic of grounded theory, this researcher found the coding of the data an evolving process whereby the trends emerged through the constant comparison of the text and enabling of emerging categories.
The categories, as they began to emerge, naturally pushed the student information into groups, and the core components eventually led to the synthesis of causal relationships. But this phase was not without challenges for this researcher. As explained by Alony and Jones (2011), the theoretical codes drawn from the data help to recognize the patterns and trends that will emerge, hence synthesizing the natural trends that exist within the record collection. These trends will guide the development of the grounded theory for how this school district responded to the behavior of students placed in SC-E/BD classes. Using the NVIVO software significantly helped with the review of the data, however, once the categories began to emerge the inability of the software to fully support Mac capabilities, as well as this researcher’s need to be more interactive with the data, prompted a change in strategy—the building of a data wall.

Each of the categories (nodes) within the NVIVO software provided the text that was then extracted and written on sticky notes. The main nodes were made into labels (see Figure 4) and the varying categories were color coded using different color notes for visual prompt. For example, all of the behaviors that were coded into the externalizing behavior node were placed onto orange notes, internalizing behavior onto yellow notes, interventions onto purple notes, and so forth. The use of different colored sticky notes helped in the categorizing of the various types of behavior, interventions, and responses by making the categories visually distinct when grouping.

After each behavior, intervention, and response was written onto a sticky note, all notes in their specific categories were then grouped, or stuck, onto the wall. Behaviors were grouped in one area of the wall, interventions next to the behaviors, and responses on the other side of the interventions in a left to right order so as to begin showing the
interconnectedness or relationship. This process of manipulating the data on the wall allowed this researcher to begin visualizing a "flow" and relationships between the categories as well as move the categories around as the relationships, the grounded theory, developed during theoretical coding.

Figure 4. Manual categorization of categories. Data/text extracted from NVivo software and transferred to colored sticky notes and manually placed into categories.

Theoretical coding is a final stage of coding and entails taking the primary codes selected during focused coding, analyzing relationships between the categories, and introducing theoretical codes that conceptualize “how the substantive codes may relate to each other and hypotheses to be integrated into a theory” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 63). This stage in the coding permitted the relationships among the categories to emerge and helps the researcher to tell a story that is integrated and coherent (Charmaz, 2006). As Glaser states “In short, like any other extant concept, theoretical codes must earn their way into your grounded theory” (as cited by Charmaz, 2006, p. 64). This clearly makes this a rich
and liberating step in the founding of theory from the data and was consistent with this researcher's experience.

Throughout the activity of coding data, a process the developers of grounded theory describe as critical, is memoing. Charmaz (2006) describes memoing as a “pivotal intermediate step between data collection and writing drafts of papers” (p. 72) and forces the researcher to stop and examine ideas generated about the codes while keeping the researcher involved in the data. Memoing is further defined by Glaser as “the core stage in the process of generating theory, the bedrock of theory generation” (as cited by Alony & Jones, 2011, p. 106). Memoing leads to the generation of ideas, free and without discrimination, and drives much of the categorization and establishment of boundaries within the data collected. Memoing gives the researcher the opportunity for making “comparisons between data and data, data and codes, codes of data and other codes, codes and category, and category and concept and for articulating conjectures about these comparisons” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 72).

Memoing also encourages the researcher to take the time to stop and analyze thoughts and ideas about coding, according to Glazer, and helps the researcher to track the development of theories while also promoting the researcher’s involvement in the data and increasing the level of abstraction of ideas (Charmaz, 2006). Consistent with the concept behind memoing, my notes became more complex and thoughtful as I became more engaged in the data and more consistent with recording thoughts and ideas. This researcher's memos reflected thoughts about emerging categories, gaps in the analysis, and notions for growing data resources but also acknowledgement for how to further flesh out ideas about the data. The challenge of memoing, for this researcher, was to
remember to memo and be cognizant that it was not a mechanical process (Charmaz, 2006) but one that must be spontaneous. Additionally, memoing allowed me to track my thoughts on data that did not contribute to my research questions or the focus of the research and helped me to dig deeper in relevant material and concepts.

Consistent with Charmaz’ (2006) ideas, memoing encouraged this researcher to “dig into implicit, unstated, and condensed meanings” (p. 83) which led to memos about the core components of the data such as behavior typology, conflict typology, behavioral intensity and behavioral frequency as well as intervention categories. As Glaser and Strauss (2010) point out, the importance of memoing during data analysis creates the benefit of being able to return to the data for more analysis with clear ideas on the emerging theory safely recorded.

Descriptions of memoing, as well as guidance on coding provided by the lead theorists on grounded theory, typically refer to the analysis of interviews and observations. However, since this research data was drawn from documents, the coding and memoing presented a different challenge. Some of the cautions that are required when using archival data as primary resource include being mindful of pieces of information missing, lack of details, author biases, and variability between the various creators of similar records (Elder, Pavalko & Clipp, 1993).
Chapter 4: Findings

Are the emotional and behavioral needs of our struggling students being met at the level of intensity that is required to incite change and eventual success? Are teachers of students exhibiting physical and verbal aggression, avoidance, withdrawal, truancy, and frequent conflict with adults and peers knowledgeable and prepared to provide the necessary interventions that will support behavioral change in the school community? Are we providing needed behavioral intervention early enough to change patterns of conflict and marginalization? These questions and the concern that children are being placed in the most restrictive educational settings without appropriate interventions are what stimulated this research. Readers of this study will have to determine if the grounded theory that was developed is relevant to their own specific organization or practices (Glaser & Strauss, 2010) as well as whether, perhaps, consideration into their own practice is warranted.

This project was not intended to provide all the answers and broad grandiose solutions to a decades-long problem. Rather, the intent was to research trends in a real-world school system that may prompt an assessment of practices in early screening for identification of behavioral concerns, assessment of practices in matching intervention to true student need, professional development for teachers and educational professionals, or programs or routines that will support struggling students early and with fidelity. To accomplish this goal, this project focused on documented interventions for students that showed early signs of emotional and/or behavioral dysregulation in the classroom and who were eventually placed in the most restrictive setting, known as a Self-Contained Emotional/Behavioral Disability classroom. The intent behind this placement exists to
help the students learn new skills to regulate their behavior where the goal is to eventually transition these students back into a lesser restrictive learning environment.

The high degree of importance in intervening early with strategies that are specific to the student’s behavioral needs merits examination. Significant decisions regarding the most appropriate learning environment for students occur daily in public education. These decisions can have significant impact on a student’s future and opportunities. The intent of federal legislation is to always consider placing students in the Least Restrictive Environment (Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services Resource and Information Center, Division of Public Schools, Florida Department of Education, 2013) so as to protect the educational experience allowed to ALL students versus isolating students from common educational experiences; however, educators often struggle to keep students in the general education classroom or lesser restrictive special education classroom due to intense needs rooted in physical, cognitive, or emotional disabilities. Furthermore, students with identified disabilities are also unfortunately often faced with marginalization and isolation due to the disability alone but also due to the separation and stigma a special education setting inadvertently elicits.

Varied perspectives permeate the public education dialogue about how to best meet the needs of a student suspected of or identified as having an emotional and/or behavioral need. Being a child mental health and behavioral practitioner for over 20 years, this researcher is entrenched in the latest research and practices on a daily basis. This researcher is also entrenched in the discourse about the demands placed on teachers to improve student’s test scores, raise student engagement, and mandates to meet all student needs, both academically and behaviorally in the classroom. From presidential
sound bites to university studies to newspaper articles, the increasing emphasis on educational performance while teachers are saddled with the intensifying needs of their students merits investigation into how to support all students to succeed, a journey that is vital to the future of our country.

The student sample in this study consisted of sixteen 3rd-5th grade students in one school district that were ultimately placed into SC-E/BD classrooms due to behavioral problems. While this is a smaller subject pool than expected, common threads promptly emerged providing data that were rich and more than sufficient for analysis. The primary aim of the project was to determine if any trends or practices existed that indicate intervention practices with behaviorally challenging students and share these findings to, confidently provide readers a means to assess and compare practices with other educational institutions. Focus was also placed on practices to help students learn conflict resolution skills, as conflict is a frequent and intense phenomenon with these students. Specifically, the research questions driving this inquiry were: 1) Are there relevant trends evidenced in the records that denote a match of need to intervention?, 2) What is the nature of etiology of conflict, if any, in interpersonal relationships in the classroom if adult intervention is not matched to student need?, and 3) If trends are identified, what are common district practices for addressing and teaching pro-social conflict resolution skills?

Demographic Profile of District

By accessing the district website, I retrieved the district demographics. The district, being large with over 50 schools and over 60,000 students, appeared representative of a diverse area with farming, collegiate, beach, inner city, and ranching
communities. The ethnicity data indicated the student population was over 60% White and 15-20% both Black and Hispanic and included small populations of American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Multi-racial students. The district data also indicate that 16% of students receive special education and supports, a percentage that is 3% above the state rate and is possibly therefore symptomatic of over-identifying students for special education services. Sixty-one percent of students are eligible for free and reduced meals indicate a high number of schools receiving Federal Title I support. This support can be in the manner of professional development, additional teachers, extra time for teaching, parent involvement activities, and other events designed to raise student achievement (Florida Department of Education, 2016).

This research did not consider if the student subjects attended a school which was identified as Title I, hence receiving additional funding for educational enhancement, however this indicator of the district need can imply high rates of homelessness, poverty, transience, and poor living conditions, which can be additional factors educators that students must struggle with.

**Student Demographics**

The sixteen students that were identified for review in this study were placed into SC-E/BD classrooms at some point during their 3-5th grade school year. The students did not attend the same elementary schools nor were they placed into the same SC-E/BD classrooms intentionally. Rather the practice in the district is to identify schools where SC-E/BD classrooms could be placed based upon space and zoning across the district, allowing students to attend SC-E/BD programs in a school according to the home address
provided to the school, preferably fairly close to the home. The student demographics are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1

*Study Student Demographics. This table displays the demographic profile for gender, race and age of the students during the evaluation phase of the student study.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>7y 5 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>11y 4 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>9y 2 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>11y 2m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>9y 10m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>7y 9m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>7y 9m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>8y 8m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>10y 10m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>9y 6m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>8y 1m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>8y 7m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>8y 4m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>11y 2m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>10y 1m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>8y 9m</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary of Demographics

The demographics of the school district are reflective of the Central Florida area, including commerce in tourism, agriculture, the service industry, medical, manufacturing and education, among others. The community experiences a high rate of family mobility. The school district rate of 61% of students eligible for free and reduced lunch suggests a high rate of economically disadvantaged students. Additionally, the district rate of 16% of students receiving Exceptional Student Education supports and services was higher than the state rate of 13% during the 2015 school year. The district reports an attendance rate of 71.6%, lower than the state rate of 77.9% and a graduation rate for students with disabilities of 47%, lower than the state rate of 55%.

The student demographics are also similar to national trends, in that male students are more frequently referred for special education services, most often due to learning and behavioral disabilities. The rate of placement based on gender reflects that only three of the students represented in this study are female, with the thirteen remaining being male. Minority students are also frequently recommended for ESE services and often disproportionately placed, although the student demographics for this study differ from that trend in that 37% of the students are in a minority class, not necessarily indicative of a disproportionate rate.

Overview of the Grounded Theory

In the fall of the 2015-16 school year this researcher requested from the office of School Psychologists a breakdown of 3rd-5th grade students placed in SC-E/BD classrooms during the 2014-15 school year. This data was easily pulled from a larger district database and provided to the researcher. The student psychological evaluation
reports were then requested from the psychologists that completed the report and sent electronically to the researcher. Additionally, the discipline records for each of these students were pulled from the district discipline database in order to capture, more concisely, additional information about student behavior and measures taken to address problem behaviors. The student identifiers such as name and ALPHA code were redacted and replaced with a number (e.g., S1, S2, S3, etc.) to protect confidentiality on both sets of records.

The coding of the archival reports contributed to the development of the grounded theory. The grounded theory that was generated illuminated what has been perceived, nationally, as a trend in the provision of supports and interventions for students with moderate to severe emotional and behavioral challenges. Themes emerged as to punitive measures used more often to manage student behavior, token interventions used with both disruptive and severe behavior as opposed to more in-depth assessment of behavior and more intense intervention, interventions beyond discipline being absent or undocumented, and teacher ability to use interventions with fidelity in a highly demanding educational environment as noted in some records.

Concisely put, the data on which the grounded theory stands support the research that teachers and student support teams are not consistently providing the match or intensity of the interventions students with emotional and behavioral issues need. Recorded interventions in the classroom were found to take the form of individualized point charts, class-wide incentive programs such as in a token economy, daily behavior report cards, or the reinforcement of appropriate behavior through incentives; yet the behaviors identified in the reports were presented as much more intense (i.e., “attention
seeking”, “aggression”, “defiant”, “depression”, “bullies”, “somatization”). Table 2 depicts the frequency of words used to describe student behavior and the perception of cause of student behavior (e.g., “internalizing, externalizing, stress, etc.).

Table 2

Behavior Descriptions. The words used to describe student behavior weighted by count and percentage of the cumulative text.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Weighted Percentage</th>
<th>Similar Words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attention</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>3.33%</td>
<td>Attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyperactivity</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>2.55%</td>
<td>Hyperactivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>2.30%</td>
<td>Depression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>2.26%</td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>1.81%</td>
<td>Aggression, Aggressive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>1.77%</td>
<td>Attitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somatization</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>1.28%</td>
<td>Somatization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequacy</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1.07%</td>
<td>Inadequacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0.86%</td>
<td>Stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esteem</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0.82%</td>
<td>Esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliance</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0.82%</td>
<td>Reliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inattention</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0.66%</td>
<td>Inattention, Inattentive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0.58%</td>
<td>Verbal, Verbalizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internalizing</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.49%</td>
<td>Internalizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inappropriate</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.49%</td>
<td>Inappropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.45%</td>
<td>Avoid, Avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harm</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.45%</td>
<td>Harm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullies</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.37%</td>
<td>Bullies, Bully</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excessive</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.37%</td>
<td>Excessive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Externalizing</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.37%</td>
<td>Externalizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defiance</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.33%</td>
<td>Defiance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insubordination</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.33%</td>
<td>Insubordination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annoyed</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.29%</td>
<td>Annoyed, Annoys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.29%</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table captures what is noted in the archived documents that record the student history of behavior, the descriptors of behaviors of concern, and possible causes of behavior.
Table 3 is visually descriptive of the trend that attention, with 81 or 3.3% of the total words used to describe student behavior, hyperactivity with 62 occurrences or 2.55% of the total, and depression with 56 occurrences totaling 2.30% of the total, were among the most frequent of the noted behaviors of concern; however, the range of behaviors does indicate a concern over student anxiety, stress, and possible feeling of inadequacy among other categories. When analyzing the descriptors used by educational professionals to describe student behavior, it must be noted that the typology of behavior is varied and possibly indicative that the behaviors mentioned could be associated with a mental illness or emotional problem that may have been or may go undiagnosed or untreated (i.e., somatization, depression, anxiety).

Another trend discovered in the data is that there is not a consistent methodology of intervention for the identified problem behaviors, as indicated in Table 3. Consistent with the research on intervention and student support for emotional and behavioral problems in the U.S. is that intensive interventions are challenging if not impossible in the classroom. Teachers, serving large numbers of students, must be provided the opportunity to provide behavioral support to struggling students, yet the opportunities are limited in that individualized intervention can be overwhelming when trying to meet all academic and behavioral needs of all students under their care.
Table 3

*Intervention Count. This table illustrates the reported interventions used to persuade behavior change in the study students.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Weighted Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behavior contract</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior incentive chart</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily behavior chart</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal prompt</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to use office area to avoid situations</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awarded for appropriate behavior</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior report card</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily behavior point sheet</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily behavior report</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escorted around campus</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequent redirection</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance group</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individually working on coping skills</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One on one with teacher</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive attention</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praise</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving skills</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforcement of skills</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforcer survey</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reteaching</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seated at the back of the room at a desk by himself</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Step curriculum</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small group</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small group targeted intervention</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific praise</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong Start curriculum</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tokens for computer time</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual prompts</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole class guidance intervention</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most prominent responses to student behavior, consistent with the educational research across the country, is that punitive measures are most frequently
used to address behavior problems. Unfortunately, these punitive measures often result in the student being removed from the classroom or instruction. Disciplinary actions such as time out, suspension out of school, and conferences with student and parent seemed to be most frequent, as shown in Table 4. However, it should be noted that with disciplinary action a conference with both student and parent should be part of any intervention or disciplinary action, and while in theory it is preferable that a conference is the game-changer for problem behavior, this is often unlikely with our most challenging students.

Table 4

Behavior Responses Count. This table shows a response to student behavior as well as the count of each response and the weighted percentage of the cumulative total of responses reported.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Weighted Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time Out</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>31.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of School Suspension</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>24.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conference with Student</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>12.48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Conference</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>10.24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In School Suspension</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>5.28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern of Harm</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3.04%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Café Restriction</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2.24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warning</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1.92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detention</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspension Pending Expulsion</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Services Referral</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspension Bus</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior Contract</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Intervention</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law Enforcement</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspension Privileges</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended Detention</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baker Act</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The data indicated that time out is the most frequently recorded disciplinary action for student behavior, with 195 incidents or 31.20% of actions taken. Out-of-school suspension, with 155 recorded incidents counting for 24.80% of disciplinary actions, and in-school suspension, 33 instances recorded, accounted for 5.28% of the disciplinary actions for these students. Most notable, however, should be that of the actions taken to address the problem, behavior resulted in these students being removed from instruction over 61.28% of the time.

**Discovering the Theory through Theoretical Sampling and Coding**

This section describes how the grounded theory emerged through a process of microanalysis, open coding, focused coding, and finally theoretical coding of the data as depicted in Table 5. The researcher, using the NVIVO software described in the previous chapter, worked line-by-line and word-by-word to capture the significant words to describe student behavior. The words were then added into Nodes developed within the software that supported initial coding of categories. Through this initial coding activity of reading reports and records and categorizing significant language, the following behavior categories first emerged: externalizing, internalizing, social interactions/having conflicts, seeking attention (hypotheses), avoiding, and aggression.
Table 5

Summary of Coding Process. This table summarizes the process of data coding that was implemented.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Microanalysis</th>
<th>Line-by-line coding of <em>substantive</em> phrases used to describe student behavior in the classroom</th>
<th>Begin to build Nodes in NVIVO for Mac software to organizing data while memoing within the software</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Open Coding</td>
<td>Focus on patterns among incidents to identify, name and categorize behavior typology</td>
<td>Cluster like typology of both behaviors and responses to behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Focus on patterns among responses to behavior to identify, name and categorize typology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focused Coding</td>
<td>Relating codes among the data</td>
<td>Cease open coding and delineate coding to variables that are most relevant core variables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Coding</td>
<td>Identify emerging relationships among categories to begin to tell an integrated and coherent story</td>
<td>Significant and intense classroom behaviors that occur in the general education were unchanged by classroom interventions and/or discipline actions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the coding process evolved, the use of memos became critical to this researcher’s decision-making. In the evolution of each category, the memos recorded prompted me to stay true to the research questions and to focus the initial categories into relevant data, hence delineating the data to form the core categories. One of the most relevant memos, *my inclination is to remove categories that do not lend themselves to the research questions or fragment the categories*, allowed a constant reminder to make constant comparisons within the data until relevancy was established. Other memos were also key in my analysis such as: *Impression # 1 - As is consistent with the literature it appears that the primary or more frequent interventions involve a discipline referral,*
when asking the core questions: what was the process? What influenced the
process to occur? **Could this be one of the trends that I am looking for? Is there an
increase in conflict and undesirable behavior that occurred before the identification of
E/BD, and Because there are many descriptors of behavior typology I attach detailed
behavior under a natural category (i.e., Externalizing = physical aggression, pushed
TOA, hitting, throwing chairs). As is consistent with the grounded theory experts’
messages about memoing, in my perception my initial memos appeared insignificant but
the relevancy developed with time and the importance was invaluable as the data coding
became more and more precise.

**Emerging Core Categories**

Following the analysis of types of behaviors of concern and responses or
management of these behaviors, the core categories began to emerge and were in the
larger context of behaviors, interventions in the classroom, disciplinary activities, and
finally response to intervention. This section will describe in more detail the categories
that emerged with behavior and intervention/discipline and the outcomes of these
activities.

As shown earlier, documented interventions in the classroom were minimal.
Whether they were not attempted or not documented is undeterminable. This researcher
theorizes that more classroom interventions may have been implemented yet were not
reported or were not recorded in the records. What was captured significantly were
disciplinary procedures. My notion here is that the district, as most school districts, are
mandated to record disciplinary actions as opposed to the recommendation to record all
behavior interventions implemented.
Externalizing Behavior Categories. Externalizing behaviors, a term used to describe overtly observable behaviors (Gresham, 2005; Gresham et al., 2013; Reddy & Newman, 2009), was the term used by this researcher as an umbrella term for obvious behaviors that were described in the records. Descriptions of behaviors used in the records included statements such as interrupted the learning of others, significant behavioral concern on campus, stubborn, defiant with adults, physical and/or verbal aggression, screaming, extremely disruptive in class. The psychological reports, which include a brief interview with the primary teacher, described responses such as using a behavior chart to reward positive behaviors, restating expectations, re-teaching, tokens for computer time, office discipline referral, and one reference to using the Second Step Anger Management curriculum, which is intended to teach alternatives to inappropriate behaviors and anger management skills. Within the discipline files these behaviors most often met with punitive measures such as time out, conference, detentions, and in-school and out-of-school suspensions.

Social interactions/having conflicts were evident throughout the various records. Many of the conflicts were attributed to the externalizing behaviors such as disruption of the classroom or wandering around the room which was described as distracting to others. Terms used to describe this large category were poor peer relationships with both peers and adults, difficulty with social skills, mean and disrespectful toward others, conflicts with peers, does not engage with peers, fighting, hitting and striking others, hitting the teacher, threatening peers, stating he was “going to shoot them in the head”, cursing and yelling, and verbal aggression, tipping chairs, continually engaging in behaviors that threatened safety.
The category of attention or attention-seeking should also be considered as complicated groupings. The broader category of attention was described as struggling to stay on task, not paying attention, doing 0% of work, out of seat, and off task. This grouping could represent a variety of issues such as symptoms of a cognitive or mental health issue such as Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, Anxiety Disorder, Depressive Disorder, as well as distractibility due to life circumstances, academic problems, or medical concerns.

Attention-seeking behaviors were described alternatively as escalating when not given immediate attention, seeking my attention, and responding only to one-to-one attention. These descriptions of student behavior, provided by the teacher(s), were based on a general hypothesis or guess of the function of that behavior but reflect a common need of students with behavioral difficulties. Unfortunately, the manner in which the attention is sought by the student frequently manifests in behaviors that are unwanted in the learning environment, such as talking/yelling out, bothering peers, making noises to the extent that redirection is frequent and disruptive to the learning environment.

Avoidance as a behavior concern was reported and documented eleven times across the records. Teachers reported behaviors in this large category as puts head down when time to work, refusing to participate, isolated in the back of the room, or refusing to go to special area. As with all behavior categories, until a formal Functional Behavior Assessment is conducted, function of the behavior can frequently be simply conjecture. Observation and assessment of the behavior may provide more concise data. Is the student avoiding to gain something (e.g., attention, a break, etc.) or to avoid a non-preferred task, challenging curricula, or peer interaction perhaps?
Aggression as a behavior category is another that can encompass many behaviors that may be reported differently such as bullying, verbal (meaning verbal aggression), or physical (meaning physical aggression). Aggression as a behavior description is frequent with students that are placed in SC-E/BD, and the data indicate this area as one that most often, by safety and necessity, is met with behavior referrals or removal from the classroom. Without a formal assessment, aggression and the causes for the behavior are difficult for the classroom teacher to manage without the necessary tools and structure, particularly when the student is in a large class size of 18-25 students.

**Internalizing Behavior Categories.** Internalizing is an overarching term used to describe less observable and often missed behaviors (Gresham, 2005; Gresham et al., 2013; Reddy & Newman, 2009) such as withdrawal, isolating, avoidance, and sad or unhappy. Words used to describe what might be considered internalizing were sadness, depression, sad or unhappy expression, sat in the back of the room by himself, sitting away from group, anxiety, and fidgetiness. What is frequently stated in the literature and must be considered when providing interventions is that internalizing behaviors often manifest in externalizing behaviors when undiagnosed or inadvertently unrecognized (Reddy & Newman, 2009).

**Response to Student Behaviors.** Behavior, not being a precise science, is complicated, and out of necessity or frustration educators often have to make the most educated guess they can when providing intervention. Avoidance, aggression, isolation, insubordination, or any of the other behavioral categories can also be an escape type behavior, particularly when academic or cognitive difficulties exist and are perhaps yet undetected, as is common in the general education setting. As well, behavior typography
can be attributed to an attempt to gain something such as attention, access to a more preferred task or activity, or peer or adult acceptance, for example. Noted throughout the records reviewed was that the behavior, whatever typography was recorded, was unmanageable in the classroom and unresponsive to the interventions that were noted by the assessor.

What was distinct throughout the analysis of the psychological reports and discipline records was the frequency, intensity and impact of the student’s behavior on the classroom environment. This was evident by some of the phrases used by teachers to describe the student behavior and the discipline records that described the social interactions, conflicts with peers, disruptive behavior, and aggression displayed by the struggling students. Most teachers, it was apparent from the reports, wanted to help the children in their classroom but were unable to sustain the support and provide interventions consistently due to the intensity of the behavior. Throughout this research, however, it is apparent that the behavior of the students was the primary change agent in the classroom and teachers struggled to provide the level of involvement needed with these students.

As this researcher began to finalize the data analysis it became clear that behavior intervention for the student subjects was not adequate to meet their needs in the general education classrooms. Whether due to teacher inexperience with intervention for the level of the behavior exhibited by these students, inability to manage effective interventions while meeting the other demands in the classroom, or the student emotional and behavioral needs being worthy of further assessment, it was evident that the students experienced an increase in both peer and adult conflict and were in need of the eventual
assessments that occurred. While all efforts are made to support struggling children in every classroom, the process to gain further supports when the response to intervention, whether classroom interventions or disciplinary actions, often is the referral for further assessment.

**Intervention Categories.** Through much of the analysis, trends were evident that the students were displaying behaviors that were, many times, highly disruptive to the classroom and that interventions were not matched to the need, they were not intense enough to cause behavior change, or the needs of the student required further assessment to determine the supports or services needed as well as the most appropriate classroom setting. What was evident was that disciplinary procedures were the common response to student behavior. The discipline data, as well, indicated that the students were experiencing a great deal of conflict with both adults and peers. The evidence of fighting, bullying, seeking attention, and hyperactivity was described as disturbing to peers and in some cases caused alienation and perhaps isolation for the struggling students. While the data were not always specific to the occurrence of "conflict" as a term or that the students experienced an increase in conflict, peer relations appeared troublesome as evidenced by some teacher reports (i.e., “hits other children,” “threatens peers,” “threatens to hurt others,” “frequently blames others for his behavior”).

As stated previously, this researcher found the data minimal when describing interventions attempted or implemented in the classroom. As is typical in a general education classroom, incentive or reward programs such as *behavior incentive chart, tokens, daily behavior report, or tokens earned for computer time* were most often utilized. This type of intervention is most easily used with student behavior due to the
simplicity and because these methods are less disruptive to the routine in the classroom if done correctly. *Behavior contracting*, also, is a simple and lesser disruptive behavior change tool but with only two recorded instances of use cannot be considered a significant category.

Due to the marginal amount of data with behavior interventions in the classroom, this researcher found only two trends in classroom interventions: incentive programs used to increase desirable behavior and/or decrease unwanted behavior and teaching or re-teaching of desirable pro-social skills. The instruction of new prosocial skills could be the intent with the use of *individual instruction of coping skills, mediation, Second Step curriculum, or guidance group*. Yet again, only one each of these interventions was recorded and in this researcher’s opinion cannot be recognized as significant.

Disciplinary procedures, however, were highly utilized with the behaviors this group of students exhibited. As stated previously, exclusionary or isolation actions such as *time out, out of school suspension, in school suspension, and suspension pending expulsion* were most frequently recorded and accounted for 62.72% of recorded disciplinary procedures. Other less restrictive actions were also taken such as *conferencing, detention or cafe restriction, or suspension of privileges*. What this researcher finds intriguing when analyzing the data is the use of 19 assessments of Concern of Harm, four reports of Law Enforcement involvement, and one instance of Baker Act. The question that could be raised by administrators choosing to use these actions was whether these activities could have or did warrant the decision to refer the students for further assessment.
The Concern of Harm procedures as part of the State of Florida Threat Assessment recommendations that is used in this district is an assessment of the intensity level of a student’s emotional/psychological state after making threats of self-harm, suicidal ideation, intent to harm others, and/or showing symptoms of depression. A Baker Act, both voluntary and involuntary, is used across the state of Florida as a means of providing a protective evaluation of an individual’s mental state when unsafe or highly harmful behavior is noticed. Within the public school systems, this action is commonly associated with Law Enforcement as a mean of transport to a mental health facility when a parent or guardian refuses or is not able to transport.

It was at this time, after seeing the trend that students were not finding success in their general education classroom and the educators were unable to bring about behavior change, that this researcher began to refine the theory. Terminology used to describe the behavior began to merge into categories. The systematic grounded theory methodology of constant comparison whereby the data were continually collected, developed, coded, and verified “within individual narratives, between individuals, within incidents with other incidents and within categories and other categories” (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2011, p. 49) allowed the final large categories to be narrowed and fused into the process depicted in Figure 5.
Figure 5. Visual Interpretation of the primary categories in the study. This visual description displays that externalizing behaviors, primarily aggression and social conflict, made up the most prominent category of student behavior, followed by avoidance behaviors and internalizing behaviors. Discipline procedures were more prominent responses to the behavior, eventually followed by referral for further assessment when interventions did not change student behavior.

Response to Intervention. The area of Response to Intervention in the data yielded thought-provoking consideration as well. Aside from two statements about positive response to intervention—

*shows an upward trend in general when considering all of the desired replacement behaviors* and *shows a slight upward trend in his focused attention and classwork completion*—response to intervention data did not show a positive trend. Statements such as *shows minimal change or improvement in his ability to remain in his seat*, *difficulty with increasing his compliance, not making progress towards his goal*, *after the first week of intervention he displayed 0% appropriate behavior*, *was not responding to behavior management strategies being implemented*, and
disruptive behaviors have escalated are reflective of the sum of the recorded responses to the interventions provided. What this researcher found thought provoking, however, was that from the analysis of the documents it was unreasonable to conclude that the interventions were truly matched to the intensity of many of the reported behaviors. With the intensity of the behaviors and the high degrees of conflict both with peers and adults, there was minimal reference to conflict resolution or social/emotional instruction that would allow the student to gain new skills in conflict resolution and emotional regulation. For example, if the student was exhibiting bullying behaviors, or is physically or verbally aggressive, is a simple incentive program going to change this severe behavior, and how is it determined by the education team that interventions were implemented with fidelity?

**Summary**

The resulting grounded theory is one that this researcher recommends school districts take into consideration. Based upon a close analysis of activities that occur within a general education classroom to address severe, persistent student behaviors, the theory that emerged indicated that neither the interventions applied in the general education classroom nor punitive disciplinary measures were matched to the true student need and did not stimulate significant change in student behavior. First, due to a lack of understanding, time, or ability, if a teacher is not providing the intervention that is matched to the level, intensity, and function of the student’s behavior, then both will see a resistance or increase unwanted conflict and disruption. Second, if this mismatch is due to underlying emotional or mental health needs of the child that have gone unnoticed, misdiagnosed or are not adequately addressed, incentive programs, again, will fail. Third,
punitive discipline used with a child suffering from emotional or behavioral issues is likely to increase the unwanted behavior and further isolate the student from the mainstream environment. In short, if it is appropriate and justified for a student with behavioral challenges to remain in the general education setting, the individualized need of the student must be recognized, the teacher must be knowledgeable and skilled in intervention delivery, and the education team must provide the classroom supports to help generalize the appropriate behavior into the larger school environment in order to be successful.
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This chapter will summarize conclusions of the research while also conveying implications of the grounded theory, limitations of the study, as well as areas for future research. This research project used archival psychological reports and discipline records of students ultimately placed in SC-E/BD classroom settings due to their behavior in the general education classroom to develop theory of any common trends in the response to serious behavior problems. Most importantly, this research is intended to help educators to more fully understand practices in intervention and seek to ensure or refine practices to intervene early and effectively with student behavior. Specific questions that guided the study included: Are there relevant trends evidenced in the archival records that denote a match of student need to intervention? What is the nature of the etiology of conflict, if any, in interpersonal relationships in the classroom if the adult intervention is not matched to student need? If trends in the etiology of conflict are identified, are there common practices in the district for addressing and teaching pro-social, conflict resolution skills?

Each of the research questions was addressed by the analysis and coding of the student data as a whole versus individually. This whole picture analysis allowed the researcher to look at trends as opposed to a case-by-case format. By extracting the key terminology used to describe student behaviors, intervention practices defined by the classroom teacher, disciplinary practices to respond to the behavior, as well as responses to interventions to the practices employed by the schools as a whole, educators are provided a context to better understand what appear to be common practices with regard to behavior management in the classroom.
Discussion of Findings and Implications

Grounded theory allows the conceptual framework of the theory to fully evolve from the data. According to Morse, et al. (2009) “Grounded theory methods provide a frame for qualitative inquiry and guidelines for conducting it. We may have different starting points and conceptual agendas, yet we all begin with inductive logic, subject our data to rigorous analysis, aim to develop theoretical analyses, and value grounded theory studies for informing policy and practice” (p. 127). It is through this context that the resulting theory provided insight into the research questions and seeks to provide fodder for thought for the readers of this document.

Consistent with the literature addressing this area of education and student intervention, and succinctly stated, this grounded theory study finds that substantial student behavior problems in the classroom are most typically addressed with punitive disciplinary measures after what could be considered typical classroom interventions (i.e., behavior charts, token economies, incentive programs) fail to inspire better student behavior. Behaviors classified as externalizing, which include behaviors common among students identified with ED, are often too severe, dangerous, or disruptive, and perhaps indicative of more significant unmet emotional or mental health needs, too challenging to be addressed at the level of need by most general education classroom teachers. Additionally, behaviors that could be categorized as internalizing (e.g., depression, sadness, anxiety, etc.) are often the genesis of externalizing behaviors that go unnoticed or under-identified by the education community.

Externalizing. The presence of classroom behaviors that could be classified as externalizing in nature can have significant implications for the success of students,
interventions that are possible in the classroom, and opportunities to provide the
intensity of intervention to promote behavior change. As is evident in the subcategories
found in the data—*social interactions/conflict, attention-seeking, avoidance,* and
*aggression* (both physical and verbal)—can be highly disruptive to the learning of others
as well as the student. As the data indicated, these behaviors were frequent and intense in
the classroom.

Particularly in the psychological reports, teachers describe using classroom
incentives to build desirable behavior and decrease undesired behavior but met with little
to no success in changing the student behavior. What is frequently not available for the
classroom teacher is the knowledge and opportunity to determine why the student is
behaving the way they are, or determining the function of the student’s behavior, and
without this step they are unknowingly not addressing the true need of the student.
According to Stormont, et. al. (2016), “the first step in considering whether an
intervention is likely to be successful is to determine why the student is engaging in the
problem behavior (i.e., the function it serves for the student)” (p. 302). In the typical
general education classroom, and as is the case in this district, the knowledge and
opportunity for more formal behavior analysis is marginal. Furthermore, Payne et. al.,
explain that “…interventions that fail to address why students are exhibiting problem
behaviors (i.e., the function of the behavior) may actually result in increasing behavioral
problems” (as cited in Stormont et al., 2016, p. 302).

What is most prevalent in the data is the use of discipline to address behaviors
categorized as externalizing. Due to the nature of the behavior as indicated in the
records, behaviors described as *threatens to hurt others, threatens peers, tipped chairs,*
hits other children, punched chair and wall, or lifting up the desk among others are not behaviors that are easily de-escalated in the classroom and often require removal. As stated previously, discipline referrals were the most common response to these types of behaviors. It is hypothesized that the behavior interventions in the classroom, as well as the intensity of behaviors that these students demonstrated, left teachers without other options in order to protect the safety of the student as well as the other students in the proximity.

School administrators, understandably, are also likely without resources to address and meet the severe needs of these students. As previously measured, removing the student from the learning environment, whether by the use of in-school time out or suspension or out-of-school suspensions accounted to 67.72% of disciplinary actions which can result in grave consequences for the student. According to Bauserman (2016), speaking to a study conducted in the state of Maryland, the average out-of-school suspension for students identified with E/BD is 3.3 days. Furthermore, although the students in this study were not identified but were suspected of likely having a disability, the U.S. Department of Education reports that students that receive special services are suspended 2 times more often than their general education peers (Bauserman, 2016).

The exclusionary practice of suspension is high on the radar of educators nationwide, especially in view of the disproportionate suspension of minority male students. Although not the subject of this study, the implications of seeing this practice so relevant with these students must be acknowledged. Wagner notes that students with E/BD are 50% more likely to drop out of school (as cited by Bauserman, 2016) and with
this practice the opportunity for skill-building instruction is removed. Moreover,

Skiba, Peterson and Williams point out that:

Equally important is the emerging research that indicates that these consequences
are not likely to change the inappropriate behavior of the students involved, nor
do they serve to deter other students from engaging in the same. Instead, these
consequences make the suspended student’s academic progress more difficult,
and they may increase the likelihood of the student dropping out of school or
having other negative outcomes (as cited by Peterson, 2005, p. 10).

Sugai conveys that “It is troubling that some kids experience no daily adult
contact and if that contact does occur it is corrective, directive, and negative” (as cited by
Teagarden et al., 2016, p. 325), which further excludes students from positive interactions
with the prospect of learning skills to change behavior and increase positive conflict
resolution skills. Removing students from any learning environment often results in the
student being left unsupervised if parents are away from home, removes them from adult
and peer interaction often to find unsavory peers also suspended or expelled from school,
and voids them the opportunity to build more positive personal and social interactions.

Social conflict such as fighting, bullying, and verbal or physical aggression was
prevalent throughout the records analyzed, yet the interventions for addressing this
significant behavior were not recorded or were underutilized or not utilized at all. One
instance of whole-group guidance intervention and one instance of mediation were
reported, as well as one instance each of use of Second Step Anger Management
instruction and Strong Start curriculum instruction were used. This researcher’s
hypothesis is that these interventions were used to increase positive interactions with
others, and it is likely that additional interventions were provided by support staff such as guidance counselors or administrators, but these were not reported in the records reviewed. The implication that early intervention and instruction intended to build social competencies is critical but indeterminable from the records in the study.

**Internalizing.** Behaviors that would be considered as internalizing are much more difficult to identify and are often overlooked. Noted in the data were descriptors such as *sadness, depression, seated in the back of the room by himself, sitting away from the group, did not respond to support from the teacher, anxiety, withdrawn.* It is typical in behavior intervention that behaviors that are not overtly disruptive to the learning environment are not viewed as significantly problematic, however, when the behaviors become intensified or persistent they may manifest as externalizing and problematic. Anxiety, for example, is often categorized as both internalizing and externalizing due to actions affiliated with the term such as *fidgeting and jerking; wrote, erased, and rewrote responses often; needed constant restating of directions; or crying hysterically when prompted.* While these behaviors can often be soothed it is theorized that the intensity of the behavior must be more severe if noted by the teacher.

Additionally, if internalizing behaviors are not managed well, or are inefficiently managed, they can escalate to the point of more aggressive manifestations. According to Coplan (2013) "internalizing behaviors often go unrecognized until the child becomes so distressed that he or she begins to engage in externalizing behavior. By then, however, much time has been lost, and much damage has been done to the child’s self-esteem" (p. 1). The implication with this oversight or mismanagement of the behavior is that the
student may regress deeper into their own distress or the behavior will begin to become more overt and disruptive or dangerous.

**Interventions and Response to Interventions.** It is understandable, from analyzing the student records, that the intensity of the behavior of these 16 students was more than difficult to manage in the general education classroom. With student numbers ranging from 18 to 25 in a typical class, the demands of academic curriculum, and student behavior that can be both highly disruptive and persistent, even the seasoned teacher may struggle to incite behavior change. As is typical in any well-run schoolroom, teachers have basic strategies and practices to help students learn and follow procedures and will typically have a fundamental understanding of rewarding students that follow procedures, show safe behavior, and act responsibility. Yet the student that is not responsive to these procedures can draw attention away from the other students and challenge teacher knowledge and understanding in managing more aggressive, disruptive behaviors. Without the prospect of conducting a more formal behavior assessment to identify true student need and determine a function-based intervention or the time and ability to implement more strategic behavior interventions, behavior charts, token economies, and incentive programs are the most common intervention strategies used in a typical learning environment. Yet the student records used for this research indicated that the student behaviors were more severe and intense to be fully impacted by these low-level interventions.

The use of effective interventions that are matched to the needs of the student lends itself to the issue of teacher preparedness to provide interventions after determining the function of the behavior, aside from time and opportunity. As previously mentioned,
Sugai, in an interview conducted by Teagarden, et. al., (2016) on the topic of providing high-intensity interventions states that “I think successful teacher education programs prepare teachers, school psychologists, counselors, administrators, etc. to be smart consumers and more importantly, smart implementers of effective interventions and practices” (p. 325). Many university programs are increasing the instruction on behavior intervention in the classroom, but there are limitations as to the daily practice, time it takes to provide intervention with fidelity, and availability to work with a well-informed team to determine, implement, and monitor the interventions. It is likely, although not able to be determined in the data, that the opportunities to provide behavioral intervention in the classroom was not consistent with the need due to the high demands of curriculum, scheduling, and testing preparation demands placed on educators.

The implication here is that with the stresses on teachers to understand and teach demanding curriculum as well as monitor student gains and achievement, highly challenging behavior such as was exhibited by these students is unmanageable in the typical classroom. In this researcher’s experience, effective teachers are frequently in pursuit of more knowledge of behavior intervention and are often successful in addressing less severe student behaviors, but the behavior of this student sample was subject to further evaluation and services.

A second implication of providing interventions that are matched to the student need is that of early identification and need. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act permits educators to use a Response to Intervention process with the encouragement and intent that if educators screen and intervene early, children at risk of
school failure will receive the supports or interventions that will increase learning and decrease the number of students given a disability label (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2001). The challenge has been, however, that IDEA does not give guidance for how to provide RtI and is vague on definitions for what constitutes a student with an emotional disability (Gresham et al., 2013), so often education practitioners are left guessing. Additionally, assessment procedures and intervention strategies vary widely across the nation (Gresham et al., 2013), which can leave districts struggling to implement an effective RtI structure.

A third implication of this study is the lack of, but true need, for wraparound services for students with or suspected of having emotional or behavioral disabilities and their families. “Wraparound plans are comprehensive and address multiple life domains across home, school, and community, including living environment; basic needs; safety; and social, emotional, educational, spiritual, and cultural needs” (Positive Behavior Intervention and Support [PBIS], 2016, p. 1). While this is becoming a more common goal for school districts across the country, communities around that nation are still lacking in behavioral or mental health services for persons in need. Students with the apparent emotional and behavioral needs such as the ones sampled for this study would possibly have benefitted from mental health services which in many school districts are scarce or non-existent. “Wraparound distinguishes itself from traditional service delivery in special education and mental health with its focus on connecting families, schools, and community partners in effective problem solving relationships” (PBIS, 2016, p. 1). So the question remains, with additional services could these students have made sufficient
emotional and behavioral progress to have maintained in the general education classroom?

Finally, the fourth implication of this study is in relevance to social relationships and conflict. From the archival records, explicit terms were scarcely used to identify conflict with peers and adults; however, terms such as fighting, bullying, threatening, defiance, and disrespectful may be considered indicative of conflictual relationships with others. As noted by Gresham, et. al., (2013), the outcomes for students identified with emotional disabilities are among the poorest of any disability group and include not only alarmingly low graduation rates, poor academic achievement, extremely high rates of suspension and expulsion, but also chronic interpersonal problems. The student samples within this study, it was evident, experienced periods of interpersonal conflict but the mention of obvious intervention arose on only two instances. The said interventions were the use of Second Step Anger Management and Strong Start programs, which, by design, include instruction for resolving conflict and managing emotions.

**Response to Essential Research Questions**

*Research Question 1: Are there relevant trends evidenced in the records that denote a match of need to intervention?*

The answer to this question resulted in several conclusions. First, there is a strong indication that students who are exhibiting characteristics of an emotional and/or behavioral disability are not getting their intense needs met in the general education classroom. Second, the general education teacher is, a) not able to identify the need of the student and match, to the level needed, intervention to effectively change behavior, b) without the knowledge or skill level to provide needed interventions, and/or c) without
the needed professional input (e.g., behavior analyst, psychologist, counselor, etc.). Third, students are coming to public school with emotional and behavioral needs that are too intense to be addressed in the general educational setting by the general education teacher. Fourth, students with emotional and behavioral needs are more likely to be managed with punitive discipline versus the behavioral and mental health services needed to meet their needs. Finally, school districts are often ill-equipped to provide the wraparound services to students and families that are in need of mental health services.

The grounded theory developed in this study strongly supports the research behind the necessity for school districts to begin developing practices to address not only the academic, nutritional, and developmental needs of students, but the mental health and emotional needs of students as well. The existing paradigm that guides public education revolves around student success measured by formative and summative academic assessments and achievement tests. There is a great deal of pressure placed on teachers and students to succeed in an environment organized around academics. Unfortunately, the mental health and emotional supports needed for children are minimal at best.

The student records used in this study indicated severe behaviors of students that were eventually placed in SC-E/BD programs. Instances of significant aggression, non-compliance, disruptive behavior and social conflict were repeatedly noted in both the psychological records and the discipline reports. Students were documented as engaging in threatening behavior with peers and adults, and as likely appropriate, these instances were met with discipline such as time-out or suspension. What was not noted in the documents was the use of intervention services to help the student and families address the emotional needs that may be the precursor to the behaviors.
Research Question 2: What is the nature of etiology of conflict, if any, in interpersonal relationships in the classroom if adult intervention is not matched to student need?

The data used in this study was not sufficient to determine the etiology of conflict of the student cases reviewed. While there are recurrent themes and references to student-to-student conflict as well as student-to-adult conflict, information as to etiology was not recorded nor captured in the documents. The interventions referenced are theorized to help the student change his/her behavior to more prosocial and compliant behaviors but were not explicitly stated to address conflict. Likewise, the most common response to student behavior recorded was with disciplinary measures. This response may have been warranted, in many instances, as the intensity of many reported behaviors was unsafe and highly disruptive to the classroom environment. However, while it is likely that conflict with others initiated or intensified behaviors, explicit instruction in conflict resolution, anger management, and social skills could not be determined from the records.

This being said, it is this researcher’s hypothesis that interpersonal conflict was present with these students and may have intensified as the student was recognized by teachers and peers as a problem student. If it is to be indicated that these students were suspected of having an emotional or behavioral disability, as evidenced by the intensity of their behavior, the student was likely to begin experiencing marginalization early and prominently. In studies of disability, the intent is not to treat disability as an illness or disease with hopes of a cure, but instead consider the “social meanings, symbols, and stigmas attached to disability identity and asks how they related to enforced systems of
exclusion and oppression, attacking the widespread belief that having an able body and mind determines whether one is a quality human being” (Siebers, 2008, p. 3). Students with behavioral problems, by societal norms, are often the subject of rejection and isolation. Exclusionary practices such as suspension from school contribute to the social opinion that the only safe response to severe behavior is by exclusion from the classroom and likely exacerbates behavioral deficits and marginalization.

**Research Question 3: If trends are identified, what are common district practices for addressing and teaching pro-social conflict resolution skills?**

One reference to the use of Second Step Anger Management and one of Strong Start curriculum was referenced in the data, as was one instance of mediation mentioned, but no other meaningful references to conflict resolution intervention, anger management counseling, or explicit social-emotional learning instruction were referenced specifically in the records. However, within the discipline records, 78 references to student conference and 64 references to parent conference were noted, so it could be possible that conflicts with others was discussed but that the text did not express, specifically, the content of the conferences.

The severity of the student behavior cannot fully be captured in writing, of course, and conceivably not the full extent of the interventions; however, considering the high incidence of conflict, aggression, and emotionality described in the text, the student’s needs might be better met by explicit teaching in Emotional Intelligence, Peace Education, and/or Conflict Resolution versus disciplinary approaches. Instruction in these areas is showing significant promise in helping students to gain self-regulation skills, increase the ability to interact positively with others, and learn to resolve conflict.
peacefully and confidently. Correspondingly, with the renewed emphasis on conflict resolution and peace studies in educational discourse, the establishing of restorative practices, and the development of diversity competence starting in childhood, educators are striving to build behaviorally and emotionally safer schools.

Within the data used for this study, reference to these skill-building approaches was absent. It could be hypothesized that this district has not yet developed consistent practices in these areas; or it could be that, if used at the school level, interventions of this type were not clearly documented. Honoring the significance of these approaches, the absence is likely indicative that the practices are not yet in place.

The data did indicate, however, practices that were disciplinary in nature. In-school, out-of-school, and time-out were used most often to address the severity of the behavior exhibited by these students. This trend, triggering exclusion and isolation of these children, is under great national scrutiny. Just as the general education teachers attempting to work with these students struggled to find the opportunity to make significant change, the school community might also be struggling to adopt more proactive interventions with the demands of academic curriculum and student assessment often superseding time for social-emotional and behavioral interventions.

**Theoretical Framework Connections to Research Findings**

As the previous sections indicate, there is a substantial amount of literature that supports this study. Unfortunately, prior to a disability identification, and often after identification, students with emotional and behavioral challenges most often find themselves managed with discipline and intervention that is unmatched to the true need
or level of intensity needed and are often, due to their behavior, marginalized in the school community.

Disability theory, moving away from the medical model of disability, seeks to move “disability” as a label away from an individual defect to the exploration of how society has historically treated persons with disability unjustly and inspire changes in the social environments within one lives (Siebers, 2008). Disability in public schools has contributed to the isolation of persons with disabilities by maintaining a “general education” and a “special education” and while the intent is pure, the marginalization of persons with disabilities has been the common result. As previously noted but equally relevant here, “Labels used such as learning disability (LD) and emotional disturbance (ED), and terms such as ‘co-morbidity’ of disabilities such as LD and ED combined, were used to determine the physical location, class type placement, forms of instruction, and teachers for disabled students” (Connor, 2014, p. 2). Furthermore, Connor (2014) states that the practices within education that are intended to help actually support struggling children with disabilities may actually unintentionally limit access to common curriculum, activities and even preferred classrooms and classroom locations.

Students suspected of having, or identified as having, emotional and behavioral difficulties are frequently the least tolerated of students with disabilities due to the excessiveness of their behavior and the societal intolerance of students who could not fit the mold required in schools. “Driven by stigma and justified in the reality of children unable to keep up with the curriculum or approximate complicit behavior, special education and disability labeling emerged as an acceptable form of discrimination – a way to name and contain ‘unruly bodies’” (Baglieri & Moses, 2010, p. 6). What is more
disheartening with the labeling of ED is that with these students, whether by reputation, lack of behavioral instruction, or mental health concerns, placement in an SC-E/BD setting is often termed a “life sentence” in public schools, meaning that these students’ returning to the mainstream general education classroom is not always consistent practice. Whether this phenomenon is due to the student’s need for the more structured environment, or the fear of the student’s inability to control their behavior, or both, is uncertain.

**Recommendations**

The student cases used in this study and the interventions provided by the educators represents a wide range of variables that compel consideration. First, the findings present significant opportunities for educational institutions to examine their practices and seek to further their supports for students experiencing emotional and behavioral difficulties. Second, this dissertation demonstrates an opportunity to analyze and refine professional learning opportunities for teachers who are facing an increase of students entering school unprepared to learn or who are experiencing environmental challenges such as poverty, homelessness, and abuse, or who are experiencing mental health issues. Third, public school districts across the country should seek to begin or continue to build community relationships as well as internal prospects for the provision of mental health, conflict resolution, and child and family support involvement.

Taking the first finding into consideration, while the Response to Intervention framework is vague and varied, the core components of early screening for both learning and behavioral challenges as well as the provision of evidenced-based intervention must become common practice. Within the literature are blueprints produced to help
educational institutions elect teacher screening practices or tools that, while they may take some time to implement, may provide the needed information for early identification of problem areas. This practice should be considered proactive in nature and an opportunity to catch a problem early with the intent to deter the possible escalation of behavior. Furthermore, this opportunity for early identification and intervention might well preserve the dignity and reputation of students with challenges and keep them from becoming the “problem child” in the classroom.

As was examined in Chapter 2, the second recommendation would be to prepare our teachers to the fullest extent possible so they are equipped to meet both the academic needs of the students but also the social-emotional needs. Teachers are often entering the classroom lacking in the knowledge and understanding for how to manage more severe student behavior. University curriculum has historically been deficient in behavioral intervention instruction and while this is changing, school districts can develop opportunities for this learning. With this opportunity, teachers, even if not successful in changing a student’s behavior, are provided with the realization that not all students will come into their classrooms ready to learn and it can most often be attributed to circumstances beyond the child’s control. Professional learning in the mental health needs of students, the characteristics of common mental health diagnoses, the social and emotional needs of students, and the importance of building relationships with students should be as emphasized by all school districts just as is academic instruction.

A third recommendation is to explore developing a system of broad supports for children and families. School districts across the country, realizing the intense needs of families today, are beginning or continuing to build wraparound and community involved
services frequently coordinated by school personnel as the first point of contact.

This practice, establishing a network of civic resources, law enforcement, mental health services, and medical entities can greatly contribute to student success, but also the achievement scores of a district as students and families become healthier and more stable. It has long been the belief that the public school was intended to provide academic instruction and foster achievement; however, our children are arriving to school with much greater emotional and behavioral need than ever before. Problems within the family and community, poor health, hunger, abuse, and so forth inhibit focus and engagement. Public schools, whether by design or necessity, must adapt the learning environment to meet *all* needs, and this will often require the involvement of community partners such as mental health providers, counselors, social services, and perhaps behavior analysts more commonly.

An additional consideration is a district assessment of practices particular to exclusionary discipline that, just by design, can alienate or marginalize children. "Students who are forced out of school for disruptive behavior are usually sent back to the origin of their angst and unhappiness—their home environments or their neighborhoods, which are filled with negative influence" (Amurao, n.d., para. 2). As well, when these students are subject to suspension and expulsion, the harshest of school discipline penalties, often falling under a zero-tolerance mindset, the opportunity to become involved with the juvenile justice system grows. Since the 1990’s with the passage of zero-tolerance policies which authorized harsh punishments regardless of the circumstances, incidents of the incarceration of children, also known as the “School-to-Prison-Pipeline,” have substantially grown.
According to Gjelten (n.d.), after the Columbine tragedy the passing of zero-tolerance policies was adapted to education from the field of criminology with the intent to make schools safer places to learn. However, since the instituting of the practices researchers have found no conclusive evidence that these policies have been effective in changing student behavior or developing safer schools. An unintended consequence, conversely, is skyrocketing suspension rates and increased incidence of incarceration of minors. By statistic, under zero-tolerance mentality, one out of five middle and high school students will be suspended in any given year (Gillespie, 2015).

Fortunately, zero tolerance practices in schools was amended by the Florida Legislature in 2009. Known as Senate Bill (SB) 1540, the amendment passed unanimously in both the House and Senate and was signed into law by then Governor Charlie Crist. This type of reform must remain a critical focus for legislators and school districts across this state and the nation in order to shift from a punishment mindset to the establishment of skill-building and intervention opportunities for children.

Leadership from the Southern Poverty Law Center in fighting for children’s rights, for example, focuses on three substantial areas: stopping the school-to-prison-pipeline, ensuring equal access to education, and ensuring access to mental health services for all children. Using grassroots organizing, advocacy, and even litigation, the Center is pushing school districts across the country to make changes. In Mobile, Alabama, for example, modifications in district disciplinary practices resulted in a 75 percent reduction in school days lost to suspension. Likewise, the Department of Education and the Department of Justice jointly have encouraged school districts to end the practice where campus officers are acting as the disciplinarians and instead encourage
campus law enforcement to learn how to work with children and comply with civil rights laws (Lhamon & Samuels, 2014).

With this transformation in process, districts across the nation are taking on anticipatory opportunities for change. The PROMISE (Preventing Recidivism through Opportunities, Mentoring, Interventions, Supports & Education) Program in a large South Florida district is an initiative designed to provide intervention to students and families who have committed offenses that might otherwise lead to juvenile delinquency and entry into the juvenile justice system. Other Florida districts are increasing the use of Civil Citations for minor infractions as a means to providing alternatives to formal judicial involvement yet still holding an individual accountable. Restorative Justice initiatives are becoming more mainstream and are working well with the combined implementation of PBIS and community collaboration. The research supporting such practices wherein the school, community, families, mental health agencies and social services come together to provide a collaborative approach to supporting at-risk children is exhaustive and warrants consideration if change is to occur.

And finally, a focus on Conflict Resolution Education (CRE) and Peace Education must be considered and integrated into the curriculum provided to children. Public schools, being domains suppressed by federal and state bureaucracy focused on standards, grades, and curriculum, unfortunately have been slow to integrate intentional dialogue on equity, marginalization, peace, and resolving conflict positively. Duckworth (2015) states that "Most of the literature on and curriculum in peace education, very reasonably, addresses developing communication skills, cross-cultural skills, listening, compromise, and peer mediation" (p. 168). Additionally, public schools struggle to
incorporate spaces for discussing differences that are wrought with emotional content and are often challenged to create the safe spaces where students can discuss, debate, and gain knowledge in the onerous history of suppression and one's role in conflict and resolution. For all students, not only those that historically exhibit behaviors that are aggressive and disruptive, these are prominent skills needed for successful participation within a peaceful community yet skills often lacking.

Within the data used for this study was a reference to the use of the Second Step Anger Management program, and while this is a positive evidence-based curriculum, according to Compton, practices can also be created to integrate conflict education into academic areas such as language arts, social studies, math, and science (as cited by Jones, 2007). Moreover, according to Duckworth, Allen and Williams (2012), "Mainstreaming conflict resolution and peace education programs into our schools' curriculums appears to be a straightforward approach in light of the pervasive problem of youth violence and bullying" (p. 82). CRE, when integrated into the educational setting, has positive effects that are focused on creating safe and constructive learning environments, enhancing children's social and emotional development, and creating a constructive conflict community (Jones, 2007).

Danesh (2008), describing youth and peace education, states that "As schools are at least partially charged with the task of communicating and transferring societal norms and expectations, they are naturally important breeding grounds for both war and peace" (p. 3). The educational experience, by its very nature, has the opportunity to prepare youth to emerge prepared to generate conflict or rise above it (Danesh, 2008). Furthermore, Hammond and Collins stress that social responsibility must be included in
traditional education, arguing that "the traditional teaching of the three Rs (wRiting, Reading, aRithmetic) must now include a fourth R, social Responsibility, as young people must be equipped with the critical skills 'to cope with the incessant negative lessons coming at them from all directions'" (as cited by Bajaj & Chiu, 2009, p. 445). By helping students to learn the skills of accepting differences, understanding the peril of violence and bullying, and how to resolve conflict peaceably, children, whether in need of additional interventions or not, will be more likely to experience emotional, cognitive and behavior change. "A successful peace education program, it stands to reason, will be one which creates a space for students to connect, reflect, create, be heard, and to critically analyze what the sources and causes of violence in their schools and communities might be (including the role they may be playing and including the role the adults who lead the community might be playing as well)" (Duckworth, et. al., 2012, p. 84). Indeed, students who are consistently and explicitly taught how to understand differences and how to strive for a peaceful community will be more likely to discontinue marginalizing the "other," may become a defender of those that are different, and will certainly learn skills that are contradictory to those of violence and aggression.

There is a wealth of research on the effects of emotional literacy, peace education, and conflict resolution studies on education and teaching; unfortunately, the education community has been slow to embrace and integrate consistent practices to address these areas. In very recent years, social-emotional learning approaches, comprising a strong emphasis on peace education and conflict resolution, are being adopted and incorporated into routine educational programs. This focus, while promising, must be maintained in order for meaningful transformation to occur. Unfortunately, educators often easily fall
prey to the newest published social skills curriculum and behavior programs and are quick to change the course of their resolve. Nevertheless, in order to prepare students for life success, attention must be paid to teaching the understanding and management of emotions, setting personal goals, developing care and concern for others, and handling interpersonal conflict effectively so that they are prepared to become responsible adults (Payton, Weissberg, Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Schellinger, Pachan, 2008).

Contributions to the Conflict Analysis and Resolution Field

Due to the nature of this study, there are contributions to the literature on conflict resolution, education practices, and mental health services for children and families. While the study of Conflict Resolution and Peace Studies is a relatively new academic field, the implications of this study provide insight into education practices that are widely discussed in the field such as providing mediation, conflict resolution, and peace studies to help children learn to resolve conflict peaceably, practices that are seemingly not yet widespread.

The student cases used in this study exhibited a great deal of severe behavior in the classroom, and it is understandable that this behavior overshadowed the apparent conflicts with peers and adults that these children were experiencing. Yet these conflicts must be examined and addressed. The literature on social interaction, conflict resolution and social-emotional learning must be scrutinized and practices developed to provide professional development and opportunity for these programs.

The data examined described behaviors that were aggressive, disruptive, and non-compliant to the academic and/or behavioral demands in the classroom. Children were reported to have made threats against peers as well as the adults interacting with them.
But the question remains as to what the children were attempting to communicate. Was the frustration they experienced too deep for them to communicate effectively and therefore manifested in violence and resistance to interaction? Were the children without the understanding of their own emotions and appropriate words to use to help others understand how to support them?

Educators are consistently engaging in discourse about how to best support children with extreme behaviors but the movement to develop emotionally intelligent, community engaged schools, while emerging, remains secondary to academic achievement. The responses to these children’s behavior, this researcher surmises, was the best response at the time the behavior occurred, but there was little or no recorded intervention that will serve to build the classroom or school understanding of the emotional reactions that these children were exhibiting. Individualized or targeted intervention, addressing the emotional needs of these struggling children, was absent in the records. And while it may have occurred, the level of intervention needed was not apparent from the data.

Furthermore, with the use of punitive discipline—and in particular, suspension or expulsion—children experience increased isolation and missed opportunities to build conflict resolution and self-management skills. According to the Institute of Educational Studies (2012), nationwide data indicates that students with disabilities are more than twice as likely to receive an out-of-school suspension as students without disabilities. As discussed previously in this chapter, this practice not only dismisses students from the academic opportunities afforded other children but removes them from the prospect of correcting behavior and building more socially appropriate skills.
The second consideration when acknowledging contributions to the academic field of Conflict Resolution and Peace Studies is in reference to the student’s disabilities. The data used in this research referenced the student’s behavior in a general education classroom; however, within the education field there is dialogue as to how to intervene with students suspected of having a disability while building tolerance of those with physical, emotional, or psychiatric needs. Persons with disabilities often fall victim to an attitude of “ableism” whereby persons with disabilities are marginalized based on their disability in partiality of those without. Children with disabilities are often left out of activities available to their non-disabled peers, are removed from the mainstream environment, and if placed into a special education setting, can miss the opportunity to interact and learn with students without a disability.

What was not evident in the data were the reactions and tolerance of the sample student’s behavior by peers and adults in the classroom. With the high stakes of testing and emphasis on academics within public education, disruption in the classroom can result in stress and intolerance. What must be taken into consideration, however, is that stress aside, without the establishment of a community aware and understanding of differences, children with disabilities are not accepted or included in learning activities. Additionally, because these students are not building skills to resolve conflict with peers peaceably, behavior can increase if they are not provided the chance to build skills and perhaps even perceive a sense of prejudice.

Limitations of the Study

This study offers positive contributions to the field of Conflict Analysis and Resolution; however, with all due diligence, there are limitations to the study as well. A
primary limitation is that with the archived records used in the study, each of the research questions was not fully answered. With regard to Question 1: Are there relevant trends evidenced in the records that denote a match of need to intervention? It could be surmised that the interventions used in the classroom and frequent management of the behavior with punitive discipline were not sufficiently matched to the true student need. Whether due to the intensity or the lack of tools and skills, the responses to intervention indicated little or no change in the behavior.

With regard to Question 2: What is the nature of etiology of conflict, if any, in interpersonal relationships in the classroom if adult intervention is not matched to student need? and Question 3: If trends are identified, what are common district practices for addressing and teacher pro-social conflict resolution skills? The data were complete with references to conflict; however, the etiology and progression of conflict were indeterminable. It is speculated that with likely increased marginalization of the students due to their behavior conflicts with peers and adults, conflict would become more frequent and penetrating, but the records analyzed were not sufficient to make that determination. Furthermore, the data did not reflect if intolerance or fear of the behavior increased, hence contributing to conflicts that peers or adults may have incited, whether knowingly or unknowingly.

A second limitation was the small number of student cases used in the study. While it is encouraging that the number of students was not higher, indicating more severe behavior in the classroom and more students being identified with an emotional/behavioral disability, more student records in the data set may have provided a broader representation of the interventions used and whether they are truly matched to the
student need. This being said, it must be considered that many interventions and support provided to the student may not have been recorded sufficiently in the records. This is an area for consideration by educators in an effort to ensure that all interventions are documented to determine the full scope of student support.

A third limitation of the study is that the records did not indicate if, perhaps, community behavioral or mental health services were accessed by the family. Having access to mental health and behavioral services is a recommendation for schools to consider as a potential support to their students and families, and it is possible that these students were receiving services but that this was not captured in the reports accessed.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

There are several ways to expand the scope of this research. The decision was made by this researcher not to access the students and teachers via interviews or observations based upon undesired consequences of “opening up old wounds.” Yet through the use of carefully planned research activities, inquiry and observation could help to determine the thinking behind the choice of intervention, the fidelity of the intervention implementation, and most importantly for the field of Conflict Analysis and Resolution studies, the etiology of conflict, how conflict was addressed, if conflict resolution skills were taught to the students and their peers.

A second recommendation would be to widen the study to interview support personnel within the school such as School Psychologists, School Counselors, and School Social Workers. Aside from a few instances and mentioned only once each—*whole class guidance lesson, mediation, conflict resolution* and the *use of Second Step Anger Management curriculum* and *Strong Start curriculum*—which are activities typically
used by school counselors, conflict resolution instruction was not recorded. Support by the School Psychologists and School Social Workers was not mentioned but may have provided instruction or support.

**Conclusion**

This study provided insight into trends in intervention for students that were ultimately placed in SC-E/BD classroom settings. The trends identified indicate that due to the intensity of the behavior, lack of knowledge of function of the behavior, and lack of expertise and skill in providing the level of intervention needed, the interventions used in the general education classroom resulted in minimal or no positive response to the intervention. What was most evident was the trend that punitive discipline, which in many cases resulted in removing the student from instruction, was the most frequently used action taken to address the behaviors of these students.

The students that are placed in special education classrooms often experience marginalization and exclusion just by the nature of their disability. Students with disabilities can be feared and isolated due to a lack of understanding of their physical appearance, intolerance of people with differences, and/or undue pity because of their limitations or challenges. At the same time, students with behavioral or psychiatric disabilities are excluded for reasons similar, their emotional reactions are misunderstood and intolerable to others, they engage in dangerous or unsafe behaviors versus verbalizing their needs, or they are assigned to classrooms that are frequently placed in the back of the school, which naturally become “those classrooms for those students”.

Public schools have long struggled to support students with disabilities and provide them with the most effective and suitable education possible. And with the
increase in severe behaviors and students unprepared, emotionally and socially, to learn, the challenge is greater than ever. With the best intent, educators strive to support behaviorally challenged students, yet often their opportunities to learn in the least restrictive environment is lost because schools are without the structure to support and intervene. Building settings where struggling students can build skills to self-manage their behavior, learn to resolve conflicts with peers peaceably, and obtain mental health and behavioral support is imperative if the trend of losing ED students to dropping out of school, becoming involved with law enforcement, and experiencing persistent and intensifying mental illness is to be halted.

While the intent of public education was to simply educate students and push them to achieve, the intense needs of students today require action. Working to provide them with the supports that truly match their need will encourage student success and achievement despite all challenges. Knowledge, understanding, tolerance, and action will create safer, more accepting and peaceful classrooms for every student.
References


