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# Influences Impacting Child Study Team School Social Workers Decision-Making in a New Jersey Urban District on Placement of Students Classified Emotionally Disturbed

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Influences Impacting Child Study Team School Social Workers Decision-Making in a New

Jersey Urban District on Placement of Students Classified Emotionally Disturbed

By

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# COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SERVICES
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### APPROVAL FOR SUCCESSFUL DEFENSE

**Pia D. Moore** has successfully defended and made the required modifications to the text

of the doctoral dissertation for the Ed.D. during this **Summer Semester 2020**.

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iii

**Abstract**

Research on students classified as Emotionally Disturbed (ED) shows that a disproportionate number of ED students are educated outside of the general education setting. In New Jersey a little more than half of students classified as ED are not educated in general education classrooms for most of their school day. The academic performance of ED students is often lower in self-contained environments than in the general education setting (Oelrich, 2012). ED students overall have poor academic and life experiences. The educational program and setting in which an ED student is primarily educated might have an impact on their current and future academic and life outcomes. There are limited studies on the educational placement decision-making process for students with disabilities, including ED students. Studies continue to conclude that inclusive education is more beneficial (academically and socially) for students with disabilities

This study explored how one member of the child study team (CST), the school social worker, considers various points of information when considering placing ED students outside of the general education setting. A qualitative case study was utilized to collect and analyze information. The researcher conducted one-to-one in-depth semi-structured interviews via a virtual video call with 10 CST school social workers in one urban New Jersey school district. The participants met the criteria of being tenured in the school district and had experience with placement of ED students. The digitally audio recorded semi-structured interviews ranged in length from 32 minutes to 1 hour and 10 minutes.

The study revealed a multitude of factors that can influence the CST school social worker recommendations for placement of ED students. The most prominent factors included teacher qualities, school culture and climate, availability and appropriateness of resources, and special education programs. Although student academics and behavior were also factors, many

participants indicated that with welcoming environments, resources, and staff trainings, many

ED students could find success in regular education classes.

## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents. The two of you have always loved, encouraged, and supported me in any endeavor, small or large. You are an inspiration to me and are always there when I need you. I love you.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my mother-in-law, who was my guardian angel pushing me to the finish line. I love you and miss you.

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**Table of Contents**

## List of Tables

**Chapter I: Introduction**

As of September 2019, there are approximately 50 million public school students (pre-kindergarten to high school) in the United States, and 6.6 million of these students are special education students (U.S. Department of Education [NECS], 2019). If students have a documented disability in the United States, they might meet eligibility requirements to receive additional and unique services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA was enacted to ensure that students from ages 3 to 21 with disabilities receive a free and appropriate education (FAPE). Prior to being known as IDEA, it was known as the Education for All Handicapped Act (EAHCA), enacted in 1975. In 1997, IDEA shifted its focus beyond access to educational programs. The new concern became the level of educational opportunity. The latest revision of IDEA occurred in 2004. With this reauthorization, Congress focused on accountability, improved outcomes such as peer-reviewed research-based instruction, and a requirement that special education teachers be highly qualified. The identification and evaluative processes were revised to ensure that the rights of children with disabilities and parents of such children are protected. In 2015, Congress amended IDEA to include the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). ESSA further strengthens the rights of students with disabilities, stating that students with disabilities do not have a diminished right to opportunities to succeed and prosper in life as students, and that the government has the obligation to put national policies in place to promote positive life outcomes for students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, https://sites.ed.gov/idea/about-idea/).

Overall, to be identified as requiring special education services, the student's disability must severely impact his/her educational performance. There are 13 federal disability categories for which a student can be considered eligible. In New Jersey, students can be eligible under 14 disability categories including: Auditorily Impaired, Autistic, Intellectually Disabled,

Communication Impaired, Deaf/Blindness, Emotionally Disturbed (ED), Multiply Disabled,

Orthopedically Impaired, Other Health Impaired, Preschool Child with a Disability, Specific

Learning Disability, Social Maladjustment, Traumatic Brain Injury, and Visually Impaired. New

Jersey's categories align with the federal categories except for the addition of social

maladjustment.

With regard to the category of emotionally disturbed, there is no definitive assessment to

diagnose a student as emotionally disturbed (Wiley et al., 2014). There are assessments that

indicate the possible presence of mental health disorders, but the mere presence of a mental

illness or lack of a diagnosis does not dictate ED eligibility. "ED identification requires a series

of judgments from parents, teachers, and other school personnel that a student's emotional and

behavioral problems are caused by a disability and that special education treatment is warranted"

(Wiley et al., 2014, p. 239).

Each state decides how it will adopt the federal guidelines for eligibility for the

"Emotionally Disturbed" (ED) classification. According to federal law:

> Emotional disturbance means a condition exhibiting one or more of the following
> characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a
> child's educational performance: an inability to learn that cannot be explained by
> intellectual, sensory or health factors; an inability to build or maintain satisfactory
> interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers; inappropriate types of behavior or
> feelings under normal circumstances; a general pervasive mood of unhappiness or
> depression; or a tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal
> or school problems. The term includes schizophrenia. The term does not apply to socially
> maladjusted children unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance (ED)
> (Individuals with Disabilities Act, https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/a/300.8/c/4).

Special Education Law under the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 2004 (IDEA)

indicates that a student identified as having a disability should be educated in the least restrictive

environment (LRE) with their own Individualized Education Program (IEP) (Kirkland & Bauer,

2016). Therefore, the general education setting must be considered before looking at alternative

settings that limit exposure to general education peers. The law also requires that students not merely be educated, but the education must be appropriate to the student's needs. In the 1975 Education of All Handicapped Children's Act (EHA), the courts decided that students with disabilities were entitled to a free and appropriate education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (SEDL, 2014). In order for this to occur, the Individualized Education Program (IEP) Team, which must include special education teachers, general education teachers, a case manager, a district representative, and parents, is required by IDEA to be involved in the decision-making process of provision of services and educational placement.

Despite the protective laws, it is not clear if students classified as ED are receiving FAPE. The multitude of challenges presented by special education students who receive services for Emotional Disturbance (ED) leads to bleak short-term and long-term results (Gage, 2013). Students identified with ED typically have poor school and life results or consequences (Lambert et al., 2014). "They tend to get poor grades, many course failures, and high levels of disciplinary referrals, absenteeism, suspensions, and expulsions" (Lambert et al., 2014, p. 52). Typical reactions to "discipline problems include suspension, expulsion, and other forms of punishment" (Thompson & Webber, 2010, p. 71). Behaviors such as "task avoidance, inattention, hyperactivity and aggression" (Thompson & Webber, 2010, p. 71) often lead to student failure. These behaviors interfere with the student's ability to receive information accurately and learn.

### Background of the Problem

Despite research that reveals that special education students want to be educated with their general education peers (Obiakor et al., 2012), ED students are often not afforded that opportunity. According to the New Jersey Department of Education, 54% of the students with the ED classification were educated less than 80% of the day in the general education setting, and 22% were educated less than 40% of the day in the general education setting (NJDOE

Special Education Data, 2014). Moreover, of the 7,633 ED students in New Jersey, 2,145 or 39% were educated in separate settings outside of the presence of any general education students as they attended all special education schools or residential facilities, or were on home instruction (NJDOE Special Education Data, 2016). These students only comprise 3.5% of the special education population, but make up 7% of all special education students educated at least partially outside of the general education class (NJDOE Special Education Data, 2016).

Presently, there are no existing federal or New Jersey state regulations that provide a road map on what academic, physical, or behavioral impairments predict the inability of a student to be educated in a general education setting. Federal and state regulations merely state that the IEP shall stipulate what supplemental aids and services have been considered and why the student requires removal from the general education setting even with the multiple supports. A 2007 lawsuit against the state of New Jersey alleged that some school districts disproportionately educated students in certain disability categories in restrictive settings (Disability Rights NJ vs. NJDOE, 2014).

Behaviors must not be the sole criteria for removing a student from a general education setting (Becker et al., 2014). Special consideration must be taken when deciding about the services and educational placement of students identified as ED. The academic, mental health, and behavioral needs must be considered along with plausible effective interventions and services (Becker et al., 2014). The presence or lack of research-based interventions is part of special consideration. Becker et al. (2014) purport that there is a big emphasis on a student's mental health and behaviors rather than academic performance when considering classification and educational placement of ED students. Externalizing behaviors such as aggression and

disruptive behaviors can play a large part in the removal to a restrictive environment due to potential safety issues (Becker et al., 2014).

How a child study team perceives the underlying reason for the student's behaviors dictates how they interact with and assist them (Wiley et al., 2014). "Judgements related to which students need intensive interventions and supports, what those interventions will be, and whether they are delivered effectively could play a large role in schools' adoption of multi-tiered support systems" (Wiley et al., 2014, p. 240). In New Jersey, social workers are an integral part of the child study team and IEP team. They are charged with addressing the social-emotional and behavioral needs of at-risk and special education students in an educational setting to help students reach their full educational potential. Moreover, CST social workers often serve as case managers and related service providers (counselors) on IEP teams that determine educational placement.

## Statement of the Problem

Students classified with Emotional Disturbance are educated outside of the general education environment at a higher rate than any other disability category (McLeskey et al., 2011; Skerbertz & Kostewicz, 2015). However, federal law under IDEA mandates that IEP teams heavily consider educating special education students 80% or more in general education prior to placing them outside of the presence of general education students (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014). Conversely, as of October 2016, 39% of ED students in New Jersey were not being afforded the opportunity to learn with non-special education students (NJDOE Special Education Data, 2016). In addition, there is limited research on what influences placement decisions by IEP team members (especially social workers) regarding students classified with ED. These ED students could be inappropriately placed in restrictive environments as a result of limited information on placement decisions.

CST school social workers serve as case managers. They are often the professionals on the team most familiar with the students' behavioral and social-emotional needs, how those needs impact their educational performance, and what resources are required to support the students. More precisely, school social workers' day-to-day responsibilities include developing relationships, assessing, collaborating with multidisciplinary teams, and assisting students in identifying and tackling the struggles that keep them from achieving academic gains in school (Openshaw, 2008). Social workers are charged with the distinctive contribution of meshing home, school, and community viewpoints with the interdisciplinary team process (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2003, Standard 10).

There is a scarce amount of research on the influences on CST school social workers' recommendations about educational placement for ED students. During the search for peer-reviewed studies and articles about the placement of ED students, no studies were uncovered that speak to how social workers are operating in the schools regarding special education placement, in particular for students identified as emotionally disturbed. School psychologists and teachers were the focus of numerous articles and studies, with little to no mention of school social workers. This study looked at factors that may influence a CST school social worker's decision on placement of the emotionally disturbed student. If a researcher was interested in studying placement for learning disabled students, then the object of the study would more likely be teachers or Learning Disability Teacher Consultants (LDTC). This is plausible because teachers and LDTCs have in-depth knowledge of academic instruction and pedagogy. ED students differ from students who are classified as having a Specific Learning Disability (SLD). Students with SLDs have significant gaps between their cognitive functioning and educational achievement or have not made academic progress despite being provided with tiered interventions via the

response to intervention process (RTI). For ED students, their lack of prolonged learning must not result from a learning disability (NJAC 14:6A, 2016).

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to explore the decision-making process of New Jersey CST school social workers in an urban school district as it relates to the placement of Emotionally Disturbed (ED) students. Specifically, it investigated how and what influences (if any) on the social worker might contribute to ED students' not being placed in the least Restrictive Environment (LRE). This qualitative study also sought to contribute to the literature gap on decision-making in relation to ED students' educational placements.

## Research Questions

The following research questions drove this study:

Research Question 1: What perceived factors influence child study team social workers' decisions to recommend an educational setting other than the general education classroom?

Research Question 2: How, if at all, does the academic history of ED students influence the social worker's placement recommendations?

Research Question 3: How, if at all, does the behavioral history of ED students influence the social worker's placement recommendations?

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for investigating the problem of practice is grounded in social learning theory. External influences and a person's cognitive makeup play major parts in behavior (Bandura, 1971). "Bandura's Social Learning Theory postulates that people learn through observation, imitation, and modeling. The theory has often been called a bridge between behaviorist and cognitive learning theories because it encompasses attention, memory, and motivation" (David, 2015, p. 1). One of the tenets of the theory claims that informative feedback

leads a person to make a hypothesis on behaviors likely to succeed, which guides future behavioral actions. Hypotheses that are erroneous can lead to negative outcomes, and the correct hypothesis can lead to a positive outcome (Bandura, 1977). Our predictions are based on what we think of ourselves, others, available information, and the environment that impacts our decisions and actions. Predictions, whether positive or negative, have consequences for the predictor or others.

Members of multidisciplinary teams such as school social workers are charged with gathering information from observation, prior experiences, and input from others. According to social learning theory, team members' actions are driven by their formulated hypothesis and will drive subsequent actions. Understanding the influences on said hypothesis can assist with understanding the ultimate recommendations of the CST social worker. As required by special education law, the placement recommendation must involve a multitude of factors. Those factors include the student's strengths and weaknesses; input and concerns expressed by parents/ guardians, teachers, and related service providers; student performance in their current educational setting; assessment results; and any other relevant factors. These informational sources can be biased and can provide either accurate or inaccurate information. Social workers are often the team member sifting through varied sources, and it is plausible to suggest that these factors have varied influences on the social worker's decision-making.

### Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design with 45- to 60-minute interviews of child study team social workers who participated in at least five IEP meetings for students classified as ED. The qualitative design allowed for a deeper look at the influences on CST school social workers surrounding placement recommendations for students classified as ED. To get to the *how* and *why* answers to the questions using a qualitative method was key. This study did not

8

seek to find out how many ED students are educated outside of the general education setting in the district of study, but rather why is this occurring. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) purport that qualitative research is an anthology, exploration, and interpretation of comprehensive narrative with the purpose of gaining more clarity about a phenomenon of interest. The phenomenon of interest that this study focused on was CST social worker decision making in considering an ED student's educational placement. The goal of this qualitative research was to analyze what a set group of social workers' experiences mean for larger processes and phenomena. Because this study attempted to obtain a deeper understanding of the social workers' decision making, a case study was the methodology used to investigate the influences that impact CST social workers when considering educational placement within an urban school district for students classified as emotionally disturbed (ED).

## Significance of the Study

This study is significant in several ways. Among students classified as ED and their peers (disabled and non-disabled), there are life outcome inequities/gaps in the areas of academic progress, high school graduation rates, lifetime earnings, and positive peer relationships. In order to begin to address these outcome gaps there needs to be more research on what might influence child study team members when recommending educational placement for ED students. One of the reasons this study focused on the child study team school social worker was because they focus on the social and emotional needs of the students and family systems and on community resources. Additionally, they understand the tiered intervention system of behavioral supports. Social workers in many instances are intermittent or permanent members of the intervention committees (Peckover et al., 2012). Therefore, when evaluating the needs of students in the placement process they understand what strategies were or should have been employed prior to classification and educational placement.

9

Gaining more insight into what influences social worker recommendations for more restrictive environments for ED students could be a starting point for the district in discussing the issue of a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) and least restrictive environments (LRE) for students classified as ED. The school district can review the findings of the study to decide if there are areas that they want to investigate further. There is also a gap in the literature regarding special education placement recommendations/decisions for ED students. This study adds to the literature.

## Delimitations

The primary delimitation of the study was the choice to examine New Jersey child study team social workers from one district as opposed to additional CST members such as the school psychologist, the learning disabilities teacher consultant (LDTC), or other members of the IEP team. Social workers were selected because of their specialized training. The social worker is the team member who is trained to identify and address the social-emotional, community, and cultural issues of individuals and families (Webber, 2018).

The second delimitation was the decision to look only at educational placement and not decisions about identification or eligibility of students for ED. Examining the factors that influence educational placement assists in providing insight as to why the general education setting is frequently determined not to be the best educational environment for ED students. Examining classification would not address the problem of low LRE for ED students.

## Limitations

A study limitation was the small number of participants, meaning the qualitative results cannot be generalized. A second limitation was the inclusion of only one urban New Jersey school district. Therefore, this study was not intended in any way to represent or reflect other school districts. A third limitation was the potential response bias of the voluntary participants.

**Definitions of Related Terms**

*Case manager*: A case manager is assigned to a student when it is determined that an initial evaluation is to be conducted. The case manager coordinates the development, monitoring, and evaluation of the effectiveness of the IEP. The case manager facilitates communication between home and school and coordinates the annual review and reevaluation process. (NJAC 6A:14-3.2(a,b), 2016).

*Child study teams*: Members include a school psychologist, a learning disabilities teacher consultant, and a school social worker. In the case of pre-school referrals, a speech-language specialist is consulted. CST members along with other specialists and school personnel are responsible for the identification, evaluation, determination of eligibility, development of the individualized education program and placement development, review of the individualized education program, and placement. (NJAC 6A:14-3.1(a), 2016)

*Disproportionality*: "Defined as the 'overrepresentation' and 'under-representation' of a particular population or demographic group in special or gifted education programs relative to the presence of this group in the overall student population." (Truth in labeling: disproportionality in special education, p. 6, http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/EW-TruthInLabeling.pdf)

*Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)*: This applies to students with disabilities. Students with disabilities from ages 3 to 21 are entitled to a free and appropriate education at the public's expense. The education must be individualized as outlined in the student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP). (IDEA of 2004, Sec. 300.17a-d)

*Individualized Education Plan (IEP)*: This is a plan developed for a student found to be eligible for special education services due to a federal or state recognized disability category. Components of the IEP include the present level of academic achievement and functional

11

performance (PLAAFP), and annual measurable goals that are measured at least for academic and related services. (NJAC 6A:14, 2016)

*IEP team*: "Individualized Educational Program Team" means a group of individuals responsible for the development, review, and revision of a student's individualized education program (IEP). The members of the Individualized Educational Program team are listed at NJAC 6A:14-2.3(k)2.

*Emotional Disturbed*: "Include emotional and behavioral disorders existing over an extended period of time to a marked degree that significantly affects educational performance" (Gold & Richards, 2012, p. 147). The term can be used synonymously with Emotional Disturbance.

*General education environment/setting*: Classroom that has non-special education students enrolled and attending. Special education students can also be in the class, but the majority must be general education students.

*Least restrictive environment (LRE)*: "A key provision of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), intended to ensure that states and school districts make every effort to educate students with disabilities in classrooms alongside their non-disabled peers." (Education Law Center, 2019, https://edlawcenter.org/news/archives/special-education/education-in-the-least-restrictive-environment-how-are-nj-school-districts-doing.html)

*Separate class*: A class that is only attended by special education students; this can be in the same school, school district, or a different public school district. (NJAC 6A:14, 2016)

*Separate school*: A school outside of a student's regular school district that services only special education students. (NJAC 6A:14, 2016).

**Organization of the Study**

Chapter I discusses the background of the problem, the purpose of the study, the statement of the problem, research questions, theoretical framework, research designs, and the significance of the study.

Chapter II provides an overview of the laws governing the child study teams, the school social worker's roles, ED classification, least restrictive environments, and disproportionality. Chapter II also reviews the literature on the history of placements in special education and research on related studies that are significant to this study.

Chapter III frames the methodology and procedures for this study to evaluate the participants' responses.

Chapter IV is inclusive of the analysis of the data collected.

Chapter V summarizes the findings and discusses implications for theory, practices, and policies. Furthermore, this chapter provides detailed recommendations and suggestions for future research based on the research findings.

## Chapter II: Review of the Literature

### Introduction

Nationally, the number of ED students educated outside of the general education setting is on the rise despite the slow decline in ED classification rates (McFarland et al., 2018). As of October 15, 2016, the percentage of ED students educated outside of the general education setting in New Jersey was 67% (NJDOE, 2016). Of that percentage, 28% were educated in separate settings. It is essential to determine if the trend is based on individual students' needs or other factors. This chapter focuses on the review of the literature pertaining to special education placement decisions recommended by child study team (CST) school social workers on behalf of students classified as emotionally disturbed, and the theoretical framework for doing so.

The review of the literature focused on the issues of underrepresentation of ED students in general education classes and influences on placement by various stakeholders. The review included federal and state guidelines for special education, statistics on placement of ED students, the role of the child study team, the role of the school social worker, the role of the child study team school social workers, disproportionality, least restrictive environments, program options, and related research on placement decision making. The review of the literature also included online keyword searches via ERIC, Google Scholar, Google, and ProQuest for research related to emotionally disturbed students, child study teams, school district options, least restrictive environments, restrictive environments, assessments to identify emotionally disturbed students, and teacher and parental inputs.

### Theoretical Framework: Bandura's Social Learning Theory

Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1971) argues that there are various avenues to learning and subsequent behaviors. "Bandura's Social Learning Theory postulates that people learn through observation, imitation, and modeling. The theory has often been called a bridge

between behaviorist and cognitive learning theories because it encompasses attention, memory, and motivation" (David, 2015, p. 1). One of the tenets of the theory claims that informative feedback leads a person to make a hypothesis about behaviors that are likely to succeed, which guides future behavioral actions. Hypotheses that are erroneous can lead to adverse outcomes, and an on-target hypothesis can lead to a positive outcome (Bandura, 1971).

**Basic Principles of Social Learning Theory**

The following describes five basic principles of Social Learning Theory.

1. Learning by response consequences and learning through modeling: A person can learn how to perform or not repeat a behavior based on the consequences that occur based on the behavior. Human anticipatory abilities to predict consequences guide their motivation to perform a behavior. People learn to understand based on experience within an environment—what actions will bring positive, negative, or neutral effects to them (Bandura, 1977). In reference to modeling, a person often learns behaviors by observing the actions of others. To replicate the modeled behavior, the person must have the cognitive and physical ability to perform the behavior.

2. Antecedent determinants: Humans have a vast capacity to interpret their surroundings via deciphering and analyzing signs and symbols representing their conscious experiences. This capacity also affords humans the unique ability to communicate with others, plan, organize, imagine, and engage in action with foresight (Bandura, 1977). People do not have to possess firsthand knowledge of something or someone to form an opinion or stereotype. "Such tendencies are frequently developed through cognitive processes wherein positive and negative symbols of primary experiences serve as the basis for further learning" (Bandura, 1977, p. 64). The same behaviors can bear out different results depending on the antecedent factors such as

person, place, and time. "Human thought, affect and behavior can be markedly influenced by observation as well as by direct experience, fostered development of observational paradigms for studying the power of socially mediated experience" (Bandura, 1977, p. vii.).

3. Consequence determinants: Having foresight of environmental signs is not enough for a person to survive; he/she must also be aware of the possible end results. The continuation or the extinction of a behavior is contingent on the response consequence, according to Bandura (1977). This occurs based on repeated or frequent exposure to patterns of events, and behaviors are not typically learned by a one-time encounter or exposure. External or internal reinforcement of behaviors increases the likelihood that the behavior will continue, increase, decrease, or cease.

4. Cognitive control: According to Bandura (1977), a person's analysis of their thoughts contributes to his or her actions. A person's belief about what the response consequence will be can affect their behavior. This can be regardless of what the actual response consequence turns out to be. Cognitive control also entails the ability to cope and problem-solve through thinking out issues in thought before acting/behaving. Cognitively, the person will pull from a variety of sources of experiences and information to accomplish this.

5. Reciprocal determinism: Humans can exact some control over their behaviors and are not merely dependent on external factors or forces. Behavior, according to Bandura (1977), is a "continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioral, and environmental determinants which he calls the process of reciprocal determination" (p. vii). In this process, a person will have an influence over their thoughts and behaviors. However, external factors place limits on those self-directed thoughts and behaviors. The same can be said for external factors; they have an influence on a person's actions, but by no means leave the person shackled or

helpless. External forces and people have an interdependent relationship in that a behavior requires both the person/human and the environmental factors.

The decision making of CST social workers can be viewed through the lens of Social Learning Theory. Regarding decision making, there are an enormous number of factors that can contribute to a person's behavior. Members of multidisciplinary teams including school social workers are charged with gathering information from observation, prior experiences, and input from others. According to Social Learning Theory, the team member's actions will be driven by his or her formulated hypothesis and will drive subsequent actions. Understanding the influences on said hypothesis can assist with understanding the ultimate recommendations of the CST social worker. As required by special education law, the recommendation for placement must involve a multitude of factors. Those factors include the student's strengths and weaknesses; input and concerns expressed by parents/guardians, teachers, administrators, and related service providers; student performance in their current educational setting; assessment results; and any other relevant factors. These informational sources can be biased, and can provide either accurate or inaccurate information. Social workers are often the team member who sifts through the varied sources and environmental factors, and it is plausible to suggest that factors will have a varied influence on the social worker's decision making.

Looking through the lens of Social Learning Theory helped frame the interview questions in this study. Many of the questions focused on the individuals' thoughts and actions and any external determinants that played a role in the ultimate decisions made. Furthermore, there is limited to no published research on applying this framework in special education decision making, which is worth exploring.

**Role of the Child Study Team (CST) in New Jersey**

In New Jersey, the child study team (CST) is an interdisciplinary team responsible for identifying, determining eligibility, and placement of students (if deemed eligible for special education and related services). The child study team is composed of a school social worker, school psychologist, learning disabilities teacher consultant, and speech pathologist (in certain situations). Each team member must possess an advanced degree in their respective field, and all must be certified by the NJDOE to be employed by a New Jersey school district.

Each member of the team can serve as the case manager for a student's case. Once it is determined that the student will be evaluated, the student is referred for evaluation and a case manager is assigned to the student's case (NJAC 6A:14-3.2, 2016). The case manager is responsible for sending out meeting notices to parents, teachers, and specialists. They are charged with ensuring that state-mandated timelines are met regarding the initial/re-evaluation identification meeting, eligibility meeting, and the IEP meeting (if warranted). The three main types of assessment reports compiled to determine an identified student's eligibility are the educational assessment, psychological assessment, and social assessment. Each assessor is bound by law to assess only in the area in which they are licensed and/or certified (NJAC 6A:14-3.1, 2016). Also, when making IEP placement recommendations, the professional must rely on their expertise based on their certifications and license.

The purpose of this study was to focus on one member of the child study team, the school social worker, and how influences on the social worker contribute to the educational placement of the ED student. This study also sought to contribute to the literature on decision making in relation to ED students' educational placements.

**Roles of a School Social Worker in a School District**

As the informants of this study are child study team social workers, it was imperative that the background roles and skills of school social workers were explored. In New Jersey, there must be a social worker on the CST. However, there are school social workers who work in schools that are not part of a CST. To be employed as a school social worker, most states require a master's degree in social work and possession of a school social work certificate issued by the state's department of education (Sweifach & Laporte, 2013). Although a particular school social worker might not be part of a CST, they play an important part in providing proactive and preventative services for general education and special education students. In general, the school social worker serves many purposes that are guided by the needs of the educational system and the current state and federal policies (Peckover et al., 2012). Overall, school social workers act to assist students in attaining their highest aptitude within an educational environment (Sweifach & Laporte, 2013). In the early 20th century, school social workers' tasks were related to addressing students' behavioral issues and attendance, and linkage of families to available community resources (Sherman, 2016).

In recent years school social workers have been employed by school districts to address individuals' deficits rather than a macro approach at the school and community level (Sherman, 2016). "Contemporary school social workers' time and energies are primarily devoted to individual or small group work, often focusing on students' mental health needs of students receiving special educations services" (Webber, 2018, p. 83). This shift was fueled by school districts' efforts to meet the federal and state requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 and IDEA (Avant, 2014). As per NCLB, school social workers are required to utilize scientifically researched-based interventions (Peckover et al., 2012). It is not sufficient to

embark on an intervention for a student because it is advertised by the inventors/creators to be effective.

In response to NCLB, the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA added Response to Intervention (RTI) as an option to use to determine if a student has a learning disability. RTI consists of a two-part framework (academic and behavioral) designed as a three-tier system in each framework to administer academic or behavioral interventions to students based on progress monitoring and data analysis. Traditionally school social workers were integral in addressing behavioral framework in all three tiers. Tier 1 of the behavioral framework would target 80%–90% of the school population (Peckover et al., 2012). "An example of a Tier 1 behavioral intervention would be social-emotional expectations, which would include ways to teach students these expectations and the implementation of a system of acknowledgment of positive behavior and consequences for negative behavior" (Peckover et al., 2012, p. 11). School social workers along with other school stakeholders play a part in administering the schoolwide teaching of expectations and administration of positive supports. Targeted group interventions of approximately 10% of students would be considered to land in the realm of tier 2 behavioral interventions. A targeted adoption of research-based behavioral intervention for a group of students is an example of a tier 2 behavioral intervention. Social workers are charged with providing small groups to address issues such as anger management, social skills, peer mediation, self-esteem, and awareness (Sweifach & Laporte, 2013).

Tier 3 focuses on the students who did not respond well to the interventions provided in the first two tiers. In this vein, school social workers would be expected to complete functional behavioral assessments, individual progress monitoring, and evaluating utilizing normed or standardized instruments (Peckover et al., 2012). Due to the various roles the school social

worker plays, he or she would have knowledge of ED students and could provide pertinent information to the child study team.

The child study team social worker performs many of the duties of a traditional school social worker. Child study team school social workers can be members of the Intervention and Referral Team (IR&S), which is charged with implementing RTI interventions. However, CST social workers have additional legally mandated duties. More specifically, in the role of a member of the child study team, the social worker serves as an evaluator, advocate, and case manager for students with a disability or suspected of having a disability. The school social worker on the team conducts the social assessment as part of the evaluation plan. The social assessment includes family background history, present history, student observations, parent and student interviews, review of current and prior academic and behavioral data, and evaluation of the student's social-emotional and adaptive skills through various methods. (NJAC 6A:14, 2016). Furthermore, the IEP related service of counseling is often performed by the child study team social worker.

<center>**The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**</center>

As we know it today, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was enacted to ensure that students with disabilities from ages 3 to 21 receive a free and appropriate education (FAPE). Prior to being known as IDEA, it was known as the Education for All Handicapped Act (EAHCA), which was enacted in 1975. In 1997, IDEA shifted its focus beyond access to educational programs. The new concern became the level of educational opportunity. The latest revision of IDEA occurred in 2004. With this reauthorization, Congress focused on accountability and improved outcomes, such as peer-reviewed research-based instruction, and required special education teachers to be highly qualified. The identification and evaluative processes were revised to protect the rights of children with disabilities and their parents.

It is not evident that students classified with ED are receiving FAPE. Schools deny students classified with ED full access to the general education classrooms (Oelrich, 2012). Despite the need for evidence-based instruction, studies indicate that teachers do not consistently provide it even in self-contained settings (Lewis et al., 2010). Moreover, national research has indicated that students classified as ED are not making educational strides on par with other special education students (Lewis et al., 2010). There is an achievement gap between students with ED and students classified with a learning disability despite categories not revered as having below-average cognitive abilities. Students with a learning disability and students who exhibited emotional and behavioral issues are not typically found to have low cognitive abilities (Goran & Gage, 2011). However, academic achievement among ED students is poor, and decreases when students are educated in self-contained settings and as the student ages (Lane et al., 2008). Studies have found that students with ED exhibit not only internalizing and externalizing behaviors, but the majority were testing well below their grade level for reading and math (Goran & Gage, 2011). It is not clear if this is due to a learning disability or to factors with limited student learning opportunities in their general education setting or curriculum. Although this study focused on students classified as emotionally disturbed, there are other disability categories. There are 13 federal classifications for which a student could be found eligible. Below is a table of the New Jersey classification categories. It should be noted that New Jersey added the classification of Socially Maladjusted.

Table 1.

*New Jersey Disability Categories*

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. Auditory Impaired | 8. Orthopedically Impaired |
| 2. Autistic | 9. Other Health Impaired |
| 3. Intellectually Disabled | 10. Preschool Child with a Disability |
| 4. Communication Impaired | 11. Social Maladjustment |
| 5. Emotionally Disturbed | 12. Specific Learning Disability |
| 6. Multiply Disabled | 13. Traumatic Brain Injury |
| 7. Deaf/blindness | 14. Visually Impaired |

(NJAC 2016, pp. 68-75)

## ED Classification

There is no definitive assessment to diagnose a student as emotionally disturbed (Wiley

et al., 2014). There are assessments that indicate the possible presence of mental health disorders,

but the mere presence of a mental illness or lack of a diagnosis does not dictate ED eligibility.

"ED identification requires a series of judgments from parents, teachers, and other school

personnel that a student's emotional and behavioral problems are caused by a disability and that

special education treatment is warranted" (Wiley et al., 2014, p. 239).

Each state decides how it will adopt the federal guidelines for eligibility for the

"Emotionally Disturbance" (ED) classification. According to federal law:

> Emotional disturbance means a condition exhibiting one or more of the following
> characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a
> child's educational performance: an inability to learn that cannot be explained by
> intellectual, sensory or health factors; an inability to build or maintain satisfactory
> interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers; inappropriate types of behavior or
> feelings under normal circumstances; a general pervasive mood of unhappiness or
> depression; or a tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal
> or school problems. The term includes schizophrenia. The term does not apply to children

who are socially maladjusted unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance (ED). (https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/a/300.8/c/4)

Some states adopt the federal statute verbatim while other states choose to add or delete elements of the regulation. New Jersey, with three exceptions, adopts the federal law. The first difference is that New Jersey named the classification "Emotionally Disturbed," not Emotional Disturbance. Secondly, New Jersey regulations do not mention schizophrenia in the ED classification category. Lastly, in New Jersey "Socially maladjusted is not mentioned under ED and is in a separate category. "Social maladjustment" means a consistent inability to conform to the standards for behavior established by the school. Such behavior is seriously disruptive to the education of the student or other students and is not due to emotional disturbance (NJAC 6A:14-3.5(c)11, 2016, p. 57). Overall, it is argued that the definition for ED is broad and left to a wide range of interpretations (Villarreal, 2015). Therefore, decisions about whether or not a student is eligible for ED vary across states and within the same states and school districts.

Gold and Richards (2012) claim that teacher or school personnel bias can play a part in referral. They argue that if a teacher is of a different culture than the student, this can interfere with the teacher's perception. Deciding whether or not a student is behaving appropriately is often based on the cultural experiences of the teacher or staff member (Oelrich, 2012). What are normal expectations or behaviors might not be the norm for the student. This could lead to "misidentification, mis-assessment, misclassification, misplacement and mis-instruction" (Gold & Richards, 2012, p. 147).

The law requires that when an assessment is deemed warranted, the assessment utilized must be based on valid measurements and absent from cultural bias as much as possible. In schools, the testing instrument is often biased (Gold & Richards, 2012). Additionally, because the examiner is human, he or she has to be mindful not to bring in their own biases (Gold &

Richards, 2012; Sadeh & Sullivan, 2017). After the assessments have been completed, this is the process to compile all assessment data to determine if a student meets an eligibility category. How a team views the data depends on the team members individually and as a unit. Team member biases may influence the special education classification a student receives (Gold & Richards, 2012; Sadeh & Sullivan, 2017).

National data reveals that African American (AA) students are more likely to be classified as emotionally disturbed, and Caucasians are more often classified with a learning disability (Gold & Richards, 2012). According to a white paper written by Matthew Korobkin and Jennifer Meller (2017), students are classified inappropriately based on race and ethnicity, especially in the category of ED or intellectually impaired. National data indicated that African Americans are 1.6 times more likely to have ED classification than Caucasians (Korobkin & Meller, 2017). AA makeup 17% of the student population but make up 26.4% of those found eligible under the classification of emotional disturbance (Korobkin & Meller, 2017). According to Ahram et al. (2011) this misrepresentation in the classification and placement of AA and Hispanic students is due to two main reasons: "Assumptions of cultural deficit that result in unclear or misguided conceptualizations of disability, and the subsequent labeling of students in special education through a pseudoscientific placement process." This can lead to professional judgments that are erroneous despite the underlying good intentions of school personnel (Korobkin & Meller, 2017). New Jersey data on ED classification mirrors the national data. "Like before, 18.3 percent of students with disabilities in New Jersey are Black/African American, yet over 31 percent are categorized as emotionally disturbed (Korobkin & Meller, 2017, p. 3).

Since the federal guidelines for ED are so vague, it is suggested that school districts come up with their own criteria for ED eligibility (Epler & Ross, 2015). State laws base their criteria on the federal law, but the interpretation of the law varies based on the district's own protocols and procedures (Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice, 2011). In reviewing the guidelines, they do not specify how much weight should be provided to one criterion versus another. Therefore, ED classification is ultimately a judgment call. The factors that impact ED classifications might also overlap with the placement decisions.

## Role of the Functional Behavior Assessment

To assist with the decision making a functional behavior assessment (FBA) can be conducted to provide concrete objective behavioral data. Collins and Zirkel (2017) argue that FBAs should be utilized more often in the pre-referral/RTI process because the longer the behaviors persist, the more difficult it will be for the student to function adequately in the classroom. The use after referral indicates that the behaviors have escalated. "For students with challenging behaviors and especially for students with ED, it is imperative to provide behavior change interventions to maintain placement in classroom settings and to receive high-quality instruction" (Collins & Zirkel, 2017).

As indicated previously, ED students demonstrate behaviors that negatively impact their academic achievement; for example, not completing schoolwork, truancy, verbal and physical aggression toward peers and staff, and self-imposed isolation from peers. To better address the individual behaviors, it is best practice for a member of the IEP team or RTI to conduct a Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA). The FBA can be completed by the school social worker and or psychologist with input from the student's teachers, structured observations, and review of student social and educational history. The primary purpose of the FBA is to identify the targeted problematic behaviors and to formulate an educated guess on the function of the

26

student's behavior based on the aforementioned data collected. "It is a process of identifying functional relationships between environmental events and the nonoccurrence of a target behavior" (Dunlap et al., 2018). One of the essential elements of an FBA is taking Antecedent Behavior Consequence (ABC) data (Collins et al., 2017). This data will assist with the formulation of the behavioral function hypothesis.

Finding out the function of the behavior is only beneficial if the information is utilized to effect behavioral change. The Behavioral Intervention plan should be created following the completion of the FBA. "Lewis et al. (1994) indicated interventions that are beneficial to emotionally disturbed students are peer tutoring, phonological awareness, academic strategy training, time delay, self-monitoring, increased opportunities to respond, and praise/positive feedback" (Epler & Ross, 2015, p. 155). These strategies /interventions must be tailored to individual strengths and needs. Getting to know the student is integral to the intervention process. It is incumbent upon the IEP team to explore all student facets that can assist or hinder academic and behavioral progress.

<div align="center">**Least Restrictive Environment**</div>

Special Education Law under the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 2004 (IDEA) indicates that a student identified as having a disability should be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE) with their individualized education program (IEP) (Kirkland & Bauer, 2016). The general education setting must be considered before looking at alternative settings that limit exposure to general education peers. The law also requires that students not merely be educated, but that the education be appropriate to the student's needs. For this to occur, professionally trained personnel such as special education teachers, school psychologists, school social workers, and administrators are required by IDEA to be involved in the decision-making process and provision of services. When a student is thought to have a disability, the student is

referred to a multidisciplinary team for decision making around the need for special education. The members of the team vary by individual states. By federal law, the team members must rely on a multitude of information from various sources to make decisions and judgments about eligibility criteria and IEP, including program and educational placement (NJAC 6A:14, 2016).

Decisions to place a student outside of the general education setting must not be based on inability to provide modifications and services in the general education setting (Individuals with Disabilities Act, https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/b/300.116). Another component of LRE is if the IEP team determines that the IEP cannot be implemented adequately in the general education setting most of the school day despite adding supports, then a more restrictive environment might be the LRE for that particular student. However, the supplemental supports and aids considered have to be documented in the IEP. If a student is educated outside of the general setting, the school district via the IEP is obligated to stipulate the extent to which the student will interact with their general education peers. " IDEA requires that the IEP of each disabled student must contain, among other components, a statement of the specific special education and related services to be provided to the child and the extent that the child will be able to participate in regular educational programs" (34 CFR 300.346(a)(3)). School districts must also educate the student as near to his/her home as possible (NJAC 6A:14, 2016). Again, these decisions come down to professional judgment calls. What constitutes the factors for these decisions may vary based on the professional training and background of the professional.

Statistics indicate that overall, students with disabilities in the United States spend 95% of their day in the general education setting (Skerbertz & Kostewicz, 2015). Skerbertz and Kostewicz (2015) stated:

> According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2011), less than half of the students with emotional disturbance spend 75% or more of their school day in inclusive

settings as compared to 60% of students with specific learning disabilities or other health impairments. (p. 14)

These researchers also cited Wagner and Newman (2012), who found that "only 70% of students with ED receive education within their neighborhood schools, 13% less than students within other disability categories" (Skerbertz & Kostewicz, 2015, p. 10).

Further research in 2010 indicated that as many as 18% of students identified as ED were educated in segregated settings, while only 5% of non-ED students with other disabilities were in segregated settings (Skerbertz & Kostewicz, 2015, p. 15). Of the students placed in self-contained settings, AA students constituted the majority of the students even in a district with few non-whites (Oelrich, 2012). Allman and Slate (2012) found that "students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders received more disciplinary consequences that removed them from their general educational environment than did students with learning disabilities" (p. 83). When students are removed from academic settings, it decreases their chances of gaining the knowledge expected to be gained in class. It limits the opportunity for the students to ask clarifying questions "and be exposed to the views of their classmates. Student opportunities to learn have been clearly linked to student academic achievement" (Allman & Slate, 2013, p. 84). Removal for disciplinary issues or to more restrictive educational placements robs the students of chances to learn (Allman & Slate, 2013).

Allman and Slate (2012) argued that in every instance in which "students are removed from their regular educational placement, they receive one less opportunity for learning to occur in the classroom environment" (p. 370). Additionally, a study conducted by Lane et al. (2008) revealed that ED students who struggle behaviorally, academically, and socially experience multiple placement and school changes. As a result, they are required to adapt to many different

behavioral expectations. Multiple placements set the students up for failure, as many have

difficulty adjusting to change and expected social norms.

<div align="center">**Educational Placement Options of All Students with Disabilities**</div>

IDEA does allow for a variety of program placement options in and outside of the general

education environment. Although IEP teams are charged with seeking options that do not involve

removal from general education, the federal law mandates that school districts offer a continuum

of educational program placement options (Villarreal, 2015). These options range from least

restrictive to most restrictive, and there are variations of what is offered in each state. In each

state, school districts can choose from the list of options and are not obligated to offer all of the

programs. As this study focuses on the state of New Jersey, the programs discussed are limited to

what is offered in New Jersey.

Supplemental aids and services are provided in the general education setting by general

education teachers who are appropriately certified to teach in a particular subject and grade level.

Students who might receive these services would be afforded assistance in prompting,

reinforcing academic goals, and addressing executive functioning (NJAC, 2016).

Supplemental instruction and resource programs encompass in-class and out-of-class

instruction, as indicated below:

> In-class resource programs can be "provided up to the student's entire instructional day"
> (NJAC 16A:14, 2016, p. 102). The responsibility for instruction falls on the general
> education teacher's shoulders unless there are some other stipulations in the student's
> IEP. A properly certified teacher to teach students with disabilities (SWD) is charged
> with providing specialized supplemental instruction in the general education classroom.
> The general education teacher and special education teacher who provide the in-class
> support must also be allowed regular time to consult. There are maximum limits on how
> many students with disabilities can be enrolled in an in-class support class to guard
> against segregating students in an in-class support setting. In an elementary school, there
> can be eight students, and in a secondary setting (subjects departmentalized), there is a
> maximum of 10 students. (NJAC 6A:14, 2016)

According to the New Jersey Administrative Code 6A:14, special education pull-out resource programs are designed to provide specialized instruction to SWD outside of the general education setting by an appropriately certified special education teacher. The general education curriculum must be employed, but the supplemental curriculum can be implemented based on the students' needs in accordance with the IEP. Pull-out resource classes can only comprise up to three subject areas per day of a student's day at the elementary level, and can be provided at the secondary level the whole instructional day. Additionally, class size limits are imposed that depend on students' grade level (NJAC 6A:14, 2016).

Special class programs, secondary, and vocational rehabilitations (NJAC 6A:14, 2016) are self-contained programs that are provided in the respective school district, in another local school district, in vocational/technical schools, in hospitals or medical institutions, or in out-of-district schools that are approved by the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE). Special class programs are centered on educating SWD with similar educational and/or behavioral needs. These programs include: "auditory impairments, autism, behavioral disabilities, cognitive (mild, moderate, severe), learning and/or language disabilities (mild to moderate, severe), multiple disabilities, preschool disabilities, and visual impairments" (NJAC 6A:14, 2016, pp. 106-107). Each program has class size limits and can only be extended if the NJDOE provides prior written approval.

The last program in the continuum of programs is home instruction. This option is to be chosen only "when it can be documented that all other less restrictive program options have been considered and have been determined inappropriate" (NJAC 6A:14, 2016, p. 109). Districts must receive written permission from the NJDOE to place a student on home instruction. Also, if home instruction is expected to last more than 60 days, the school districts must apply for

renewal approval every 60 days. Home instruction is provided most often in the home of a student and by a special education teacher. The instruction can also be provided at a location mutually agreed upon by the guardian and teacher. Home instruction is designed to be one-on-one instruction that addresses the goals of the IEP to produce academic progress.

Students classified as ED make up a small percentage of students with disabilities in the United States, but they are perceived to be the hardest to address regarding academics, social-emotional needs, and educational placement (Epler & Ross, 2015). In the continuum of educational programs, students with the ED classification can be educated in the general education setting, resource room, self-contained classroom, separate school, home instruction, and residential settings. Despite this, for students classified with ED to find success, there needs to be structure, positive supports, mental health services, and wraparound services based on evidence-based practices (Epler & Ross, 2015). Cook and Odom (2013) explain that evidence-based practices (EBP) have been tested and proven to improve students' academic and social-emotional outcomes. Interventions, services, and programs within schools that have proven beneficial to increasing academic achievement and decreased internal and external behaviors have particular characteristics. These characteristics include trained staff with in-depth knowledge of mental health and childhood trauma issues, integration and acceptance of students who present with atypical behaviors, social skills training, high levels of student engagement, and access to mental health services within the school (Epler & Ross, 2015). Evidence-based interventions must be implemented with fidelity for students with ED to positively impact their school and life outcomes.

A behavioral disabilities program is a self-contained program for students who are deemed to have emotional disturbance or severe behavioral challenges and cannot be educated

with general education peers. These students are often classified with an emotional disturbance or as emotionally disturbed. In New Jersey the student-to-teacher ratio cannot exceed 12 to 1, and once there are ten students in the class, a classroom aide needs to be assigned to the class in accordance with New Jersey Special Education Code (NJAC 6A:14, 2016). The special education teacher must have the appropriate state-endorsed certification to teach special education students. Conversely, the state of New Jersey does not require that the special education teacher or aide be specifically trained to instruct students with emotional and behavioral problems. It is the school district's responsibility to provide professional development to address the needs of ED students. The program is designed to provide intense tailored academic and social/emotional interventions to increase students' functioning (Lewis et al., 2010).

If an IEP team decides that a student cannot make progress in a traditional public school, other options are explored. One option is to educate the student in an all special class program in an out-of-district school. There are out-of-district schools that purport to specialize in dealing with students with severe emotional and behavioral problems. There are behavioral level systems in place throughout the school in the classrooms that serve to increase positive student behaviors. These schools have a small overall student population and trained therapeutic staff (Mattison, 2011). The schools often have a psychiatrist whom they can consult with regularly.

## Disproportionality

There are no existing federal or New Jersey state regulations that provide a road map for what impairments constitute the inability of a student to be educated in a general education setting with non-disabled students. The regulation merely states that the IEP shall stipulate what supplemental aids and services have been considered and why the student requires removal from the general education setting even with the multiple supports. A 2007 lawsuit against the state of

New Jersey alleged that some school districts disproportionately educated minorities in separate settings (Disability Rights NJ vs. NJDOE, 2014). Out of the 14 New Jersey classification categories, students classified as emotionally disturbed were among those most often segregated from their general education peers (Hoge & Rubinstein-Avila, 2014).

According to Epler and Ross (2015), "ED students' intelligent quotient is typically within the average range" (p. 151). Therefore, students who are classified as Emotionally Disturbed typically do not have cognitive deficits. Nonetheless, as of October 2016, more than 54% of students in New Jersey classified as ED received a portion of their education outside of the general education setting. "Data from 2010 indicates that approximately 18% of students with ED obtained their education full time in segregated settings, in comparison to 5% of all students with disabilities" (Skerbetz & Kostewicz, 2015, p. 10). Research overwhelmingly indicates that students educated in the general education setting perform better academically and socially (Skerbetz & Kostewicz, 2015).

Numerous school districts throughout the United States, including New Jersey, have been found to have a disproportionate number of students in a particular category being educated outside of the presence of non-disabled students. In 2007, several special education advocacy groups brought a lawsuit against the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) and identified school districts, alleging that New Jersey disproportionately educated students with disabilities outside of the general education setting. NJDOE was named in the suit because the plaintiffs argued that the state was negligent in their oversight of school districts.

The lawsuit also alleged that some districts disproportionally educated minorities in separate settings. Out of all the 14 classifications, students classified as Emotionally Disturbed are the most segregated from their general education peers. This is problematic because school

and life outcomes for students identified as ED are often bleak. The fact that students classified as ED make up only 3% of the special education population in New Jersey, yet 54% of them are educated less than 80% of the day (and 22% less than 40% of the day) in the general education setting, is of concern (NJDOE, 2016). Furthermore, two school years' worth of data compiled from districts (2011-2012 and 2012-2013) revealed that 75% of students placed in separate private or public settings were male students with behavioral challenges (Disability Rights NJ et al. vs. NJDOE, 2014). A settlement agreement between the parties that called for identified school districts to take corrective action was reached in February 2014 (Disability Rights NJ et al. vs. NJDOE, 2014). Identified school districts were mandated to participate in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) training workshops for a three-year period (NJ et al. vs. NJDOE, 2014). Outcome data has yet to be published to evaluate whether there were significant changes in districts' LRE practices.

### Long-Term Impacts of Restrictive Environment Placements

Opportunities to move to a post-secondary institution are more likely if a person graduated from high school (Strompolis et al., 2012). Increased income, better health, and lower unemployment are associated with high school graduation (Strompolis et al., 2012). Conversely, a student who does not graduate from high school is associated with poorer life outcomes such as lower income potential, higher incarceration rates, and increased unemployment (Strompolis et al., 2012). The majority of students with disabilities who drop out of high school are classified as emotionally disturbed (Sullivan & Sadeh, 2016; Wagner & Newman, 2012).

The rate of ED classification and restrictive environment varies by state. Despite classification rate differences, the majority of ED students were educated less than 80% in the general education setting (Villarreal, 2015). "In 2010, 37% of all students classified as ED exited school by dropping out, 9.7% graduated with a certificate of completion, and 52.3% graduated

35

with a regular diploma" (Villarreal 2015, p. 6). By 2018, 90% of jobs will require at least high school completion (Sullivan & Sadeh, 2016). Furthermore, close to 70% will require some post-high school education (Sullivan & Sadeh, 2016). If a person does not graduate from high school, they are twice as likely to be unemployed and 63 more times likely to be incarcerated (Sullivan, & Sadeh, 2016). "Females were 9 times as likely to be single mothers" (Sullivan & Sadeh, 2016, p. 252).

### Relevant Studies on Educational Placement of ED students

A quantitative study conducted by Hendrickson et al. (1998) examined the school files of 99 ED students in Iowa. According to randomly selected records, half of the students attended a traditional school and the other half attended a separate public or private school (Hendrickson et al., 1998). Additionally, one participating member of the IEP team for students placed in a segregated school was interviewed by telephone. In total, 48 staff members participated including 3 social workers, 11 special education consultants, 26 administrators, and 8 special education teachers. The study procedures included creating a student records checklist with student demographic information, information on IEP decisions including placement, and justification for the current placement in accordance with the IEP. All identifiable student information was removed, and a unique number was assigned to each record. Interviewees were asked a series of questions that touched on influences on decisions, LRE considerations, the main reason for placement, what barriers interfered with participation in general education, and what supplemental aids and supports were needed (Hendrickson et al., 1998).

Some of the study's major findings revealed that many placements were tried prior to placing an ED student in a self-contained class. Additionally, a limited number of IEPs (less than 30%) reflected documentation of curricular modifications or instructional interventions/ adaptations. Disagreements about placement were rarely documented in the records. However,

50% of the interviewees indicated that they thought students could have been successfully educated in general education settings with proper/extra supports (Hendrickson et al., 1998).

Student demographic data indicated that African American males were overrepresented. Also, age 7 was the average age when students were first identified as having emotional problems. This information could be beneficial in addressing student needs early in their lives. On the other hand, early identification might label the child and create a negative stigma for the student (Oelrich, 2012).

This study was not a national study and was limited to a small sample in one state, which means it cannot be generalized to other settings. However, the findings do add to the literature on the topic of ED student and placement. The authors reported data in percentages and attempted to discover some of the reasons for decision-making by reviewing the student records.

A more recent national quantitative study conducted by Becker et al. (2014) examined special educators' thoughts on what contributes to the educational placement of students classified with Emotional Disturbance. The purpose of the study was three-pronged. The first purpose was to examine middle school and high school educators' perspectives.

> [The study sought] perspectives on the relative importance of the academic, mental health, and behavioral elements of the emotional disturbance (ED) special education classification in relation to determining eligibility for students with suspected ED. Secondly, it examined factors that are relevant to education placement decision making for students classified with ED. Lastly, the study looked at the decision making regarding the "degree of restrictiveness of educational placements, including highly restrictive and alternative placements." (p. 163)

This study revealed factors that influenced educators' decisions on ED classification and placement. Educators are part of the IEP team, as is the school social worker (in New Jersey). Educators and CST social workers often collaborate during and before IEP meetings. The results of the study are important to my study, as they provide a framework of possible influencing factors.

The study by Becker et al. (2014) was conducted during the 2009-2010 academic school year and included participants from 47 states and various geographic environments. A marketing firm was recruited to gather the names and contact information of special education educators' email or mail addresses to locate the potential participants. Ultimately there were 1,025 participants in the study.

Significant findings were revealed; for example, if a student had a psychiatric disorder, it was considered moderately relevant in determining ED eligibility. Grades, achievement scores, and IQ mattered least in consideration for ED eligibility (Becker et al., 2014). It was found that middle school teachers perceived themselves as having great influence in educational placement. In contrast, high school teachers did not think they played an active role in placement decisions. Moreover, participants indicated that others played integral roles in the decision of educational placement in both middle school and high school. These titles included school psychologists, parents/guardians, and school administrators. Counselors and other mental health professionals were also deemed to play a role, but not as prominent as the formerly mentioned titles (Becker et al., 2014).

Findings indicated that aggression was the top reason for determining the degree of restrictiveness of the placement. However, progress or lack of progress in a less restrictive environment was considered a significant factor as well. In considering restrictiveness of placements, alternative public schools that service ED students were the most seriously considered by middle school special education teachers. Conversely, high school special education educators leaned more toward home instruction or web-based instruction for ED students (Becker et al., 2014). Since the study was a quantitative study, the researcher could not delve into the *why* questions. Knowing why teachers sought ED classification and restrictive

educational environments might have revealed what needs within the school system could be addressed (for example, teacher training or school resources). Also, the study did not indicate whether or not there were significant differences in responses based on educators' geographic origin or type of school district. Schools within a district, within states, and across states service varied populations with varied needs. Therefore, knowing the type of school district and geographic origin could have measured whether or not there was a significant difference in the reasons for the decisions.

An additional study conducted by Hoge et al. (2014) examined the placement considerations for students with emotional disturbance across three alternative schools. "The purpose of the study was to examine the decision making at the points of entry and exit by identifying factors considered by staff in three alternative schools determining the placement of students with ED" (p. 219). Their study was similar to this study in that it looked at placement decisions concerning ED students and the factors that influenced the decisions to place. In contrast, it also looked at factors that lead to decisions about returning students to a less restrictive environment. The students in this reviewed study were placed in separate school settings with no contact with general education students.

This study utilized a mixed-method approach, collecting qualitative and quantitative data from school staff about ED students enrolled in their respective schools. The researchers collected the qualitative data by "conducting interviews by using the narrative inquiry process" (p. 221). Narrative inquiry allowed the participants to tell a story about each student and why he or she was placed at one of the schools involved in the stud. Additionally, participants were able to respond to open-ended questions about how staff determined when a particular student was prepared to exit the school and or be involved with general education peers (Hoge et al., 2014).

"Five factors identified as reasons students were placed in self-contained schools were aggression, defiance, running from class or school grounds, concerns about student's mental health and student performance of behaviors resulting in self-harm" (p. 221). Findings revealed that aggression was the top reason a student was placed in the alternative school. Conversely, more than double the reasons (12) students were deemed not ready to return to less restrictive environments. " Reasons cited were (a) failure to meet program goals as determined by a school-wide level system, (b) parent resistance to transition, (c) behavior regression, (d) aggression, (e) more evaluation time needed, (f) program determined to be the least restrictive environment (LRE), (g) student resistance to transition, (h) concerns about the mental health of the student, (i) no available options for transition, (k) defiance, and (j) running from class or school grounds" (p. 222). Failure to meet the school-wide behavioral level system was the major reason students were not recommended to return to less restrictive settings (Hoge et al., 2014).

From the narrative interviews conducted by Hoge et al. (2014), the researcher created a 12-item checklist that incorporated the reasons participants cited as factors for keeping students in their current placement. The respondents were interviewed again and asked to answer the question "Why did the student not transition during the previous school year?" utilizing the provided checklist. Transforming the information into a checklist allowed for the data to be analyzed quantitatively.

The data from the closed-ended questions (first interview and the responses generated by participants using the factor list (second interview) were analyzed and communicated using descriptive statistics. The categories include student demographics, degree of placement change, and factors considered in a students' change in placement. All data were reported as a percentage in relation to the total student population (p. 222).

Hoge et al. (2014) revealed trends that developed from all three schools where limited

transitioning occurred for students from alternative schools to less restrictive settings, as only

14% transitioned to less restrictive environments. Secondly, the factors that lead to a student

being placed originally expanded when decisions needed to be made about a possible change in

placement. Lastly, often the reasons for a student being placed originally were not the same

factors considered in the decision to return the student to a less restrictive environment. The

mixed method utilized by the study allowed for more insight from educators in alternative

schools. Because the study did not review student documents or records, the researcher was

dependent on the recollection of the respondent, which could have been inaccurate.

In this chapter, the literature related to special education, least restrictive environment,

and students classified as emotionally disturbance was reviewed. In addition, the theory of social

learning was examined in relation to decision making by specific individuals. The current study

highlights what influences New Jersey CST social workers' decisions about placement of

emotionally disturbed students. The next chapter discusses the methodology for this study.

## Chapter III: Methodology

The purpose of the study was to explore the decision-making process of New Jersey CST school social workers in an urban school district as it relates to the placement of Emotionally Disturbed (ED) students. Specifically, it investigated how and what influences (if any) on the social worker might contribute to ED students' not being placed in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). This study also sought to contribute to the literature gap on decision-making concerning ED students' educational placements. Research in education has heavily tackled the educational classification of emotionally disturbed students (ED). Yet the literature has only scratched the surface regarding the educational placement of the ED student. While there is much literature about special education students overall and educational placement in the least restrictive settings, literature that specifically addresses how those decisions are made by the IEP team members is scant. More specifically, there is limited literature on the influences that contribute to educational placement decisions. Due to the high percentage of ED students being educated outside of the presence of their general education peers, identifying factors that influence CST school social workers' decisions on placement of ED students could be beneficial to school districts that seek to decrease the number of ED students being educated in restrictive settings. This case study also sought to contribute to the literature on decision making about ED students' educational placements.

This chapter includes discussions on the research design, methods, participant selection, and research setting. It also presents discussions on data collection, data analysis, the study's trustworthiness, my role as the researcher, and the study's limitations.

### Methodological Approach

The researcher utilized a qualitative method with purposive sampling (criterion) practices. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2008), one of the advantages of selecting

42

qualitative methods is the ability to choose participants or actions depending on the research questions and the purpose of the study. The researcher's goal was to explore the decision-making process of CST school social workers in an urban school district related to the placement of ED students. "Qualitative research lives and breathes through setting the context; it is the particularities that produce the generalities, not the reverse" (Miles et al., 2014, pp. 38-39). Qualitative research provides the opportunity to observe in the natural environment and allows the theories to be developed as the data becomes available.

## Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What perceived factors influence child study team social workers' decisions to recommend an educational setting other than the general education classroom?

2: How, if at all, does the academic history of ED students influence the social worker's placement recommendations?

3: How, if at all, does the behavioral history of ED students influence the social worker's placement recommendations?

## Research Design

A case study design was utilized for this study. "Case study is the study of a particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" (Stake, 1995, p. xi). There are three types of case studies: collective, intrinsic, and instrumental. A collective case study is more concerned with representation and will include multiple cases to make a case for wider generalization. In the second type of case study, an intrinsic case study seeks to achieve a greater understanding of a case because there is an intrinsic interest in the case (Stake, 1995). The third type, instrumental case study, is concerned with understanding a certain concept, problem, or issue (Schwandt, 2001). This study utilized an

instrumental case study approach, as it aimed to understand the influences on child study team social workers when making decisions about educational placement for ED students. Case studies allow for a more in-depth look into the phenomena being studied (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Despite the benefits of utilizing case studies, there are some weaknesses. These include the fact that results are not easily replicated or cross-checked, proneness to researcher bias, and the limited generalizability of results (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

## Participant Selection and Research Site

The researcher recruited the study's participants from the population of approximately 50 CST social workers employed by one urban New Jersey K-12 school district. According to the district's website, the district has a total student population of 29,634. That total includes 3,075 limited English proficient (LEP) and 4,173 special education students. According to New Jersey Department of Education 2018 special education data, 68% of ED students are educated less than 40% of the day in the general education setting. Of that 68%, 14% are educated solely with other special education students in separate school settings. The student population consists of 21% white, 22% African American, 29% Hispanic, 25% Asian, <1 % Native American, < 1 % Other Races, and < 1 % 2 or more races. These students attend one of the 39 traditional schools in the district. Based on family income, 56.6% of students receive free lunch and 15.5% receive reduced price lunch. The school district recently regained local control after decades of state control. Over the last 10 years, varying levels of control were returned to the elected school, including Governance and Operations. Over the past 2 years, a series of agreements and improvement plans were developed to turn over complete local control to the district's Board of Education (district website).

A criterion sample method was chosen (Miles et al., 2014) because participants were required to meet a specific set of criteria; therefore, it was the most appropriate. All participants

had to meet the following three characteristics to take part in the study: 1) be currently employed as full-time tenured CST school social worker in the district of study, 2) have a history of participating in at least five IEPs that involved making placement decisions for students classified as ED, and 3) have more experience than working only with pre-k students. Although the district services preschool students, in special education pre-k students cannot have an ED classification until kindergarten (NJAC 6A:14, 2016).

Upon receiving the Seton Hall University Internal Review Board (IRB) approval, the recruitment process of participants began. First the names and email addresses of potential participants were gathered from the district's public website. The researcher sent a solicitation email to the CST school social workers in the school district with an attached formal letter requesting their participation in the study. The letter gave an overview of the study and indicated that one-on-one in-depth semi-structured interviews (via virtual video call) were part of the study. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and state quarantine restrictions, the preferred option of in-person interviews was not available. The letter also indicated that participation in the study was voluntary and explained the process established to keep all data confidential and secure. To increase participation, the original email was sent out a second time to everyone who did not respond to the first email within 10 calendar days. CST school social workers who agreed to participate responded yes to the email and included their telephone contact information. The researcher contacted potential participants via telephone to complete a demographic questionnaire. Ten of the 12 volunteers met all of the inclusionary criteria and thus comprised the 10 participants in the study.

The 10 participants consisted of nine women and one man. Four of the 10 self-identified their ethnicity as African American, three identified as Caucasian, and three identified as

Hispanic. Their ages ranged from 36 to 62, with an average age of 48. This study's participants had between 5 and 20 years of experience as a child study team social worker. All participants worked at some point with students in grades K-8, and five participants also worked in high schools. At the time of the interviews, all 10 participants were assigned to schools with grades ranging from pre-k to 8th grade, with no one assigned to a high school. Nine participants had at least seven years of CST social work experience. Seven of the participants had only worked as a CST social worker in the district of study, with an average employment length of 13 years. Two of the 10 participants were employed as social workers in the district in another capacity before switching to the CST social worker position.

Table 2.

*Participant Demographics*

| Pseudonym | Gender | Experience of Grades Serviced | Years as CST SW in District | Total Years as CST Social Worker |
|-----------|--------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Alicia | Female | K-12 | 6.5 | 12 |
| Angie | Female | K-8 | 3 | 3 |
| Dennis | Male | K-8 | 12 | 12 |
| Elizabeth | Female | K-12 | 19 | 19 |
| Ericka | Female | K-8 | 8 | 8 |
| Gizelle | Female | K-12 | 16 | 18 |
| Johanna | Female | K-8 | 16 | 16 |
| Kelly | Female | K-8 | 17 | 17 |
| Michelle | Female | K-12 | 20 | 20 |
| Vanessa | Female | K-12 | 4 | 13 |

For data purposes, participants' ethnicity and age were recorded. However, the data was not linked to the pseudonym names as it could have increased the odds of revealing the participants' identities. The ethnicity breakdown consisted of 4 African Americans, 3 Caucasians, and 3 Hispanics. The participants' ages ranged from 36 to 62, with the average age being 48.

## Data Collection

The participants were recruited from a population of approximately 50 CST social workers employed by one urban New Jersey K-12 school district. Prior to participation in the study, participants were asked to read, review, and sign and date an approved IRB informed written consent form. Information contained in the informed consent included the study's purpose, the structure of the study (semi-structured interviews), the estimated amount of time requested from participants, an explanation of voluntary consent and the ability to withdraw at any time, potential benefits and harm to participants, the personnel involved in the research, directions on how to access a copy of the research results, and the researcher's contact information (Connelly, 2014). After reading the consent form and indicating a complete understanding of rights, the potential participants were asked to sign the form electronically. The participants then sent an electronically signed copy to the researcher at least two days before the start of the interview. All participants were advised to keep a copy of the signed consent, and they agreed. The researcher securely stored all signed consents.

The instruments utilized in this study were a demographic questionnaire, field notes, and a series of interview questions that guided the in-depth semi-structured interviews. The demographic questionnaire included questions such as the highest degree obtained and years of experience as a CST school social worker, approximate number of IEP meetings for ED students

participated in, grade levels serviced, and participant's age, sex, and ethnicity. The demographic information also assisted with determining participants' eligibility for the study.

The handwritten field notes included information such as the time and location of the interview, surroundings, people who could be seen via video, and participant's nonverbal gestures and demeanor. Additionally, handwritten field notes were utilized to describe the encounters with the participants and data that might be useful in gaining insight into the participants' responses. The field notes were later typed after each interview so that the information was easily recalled and did not become overwhelming. Rewriting the notes also gave the researcher an opportunity to elaborate on abbreviations and add details remembered later that were not in the raw notes (Miles et al., 2014). Also, the field notes were kept as a separate document associated with the interview data using the date and/pseudonym names.

The open-ended interview questions were related to what participants thought factored into their decision-making process. The interviews were confidential, and pseudonyms were employed when naming names and school districts. The interview protocol created included the questions to be asked and a series of follow-up probes to assist participants in elaborating on their responses and reviewing voluntary consent (Bolderston, 2012).

Data collection in qualitative research is flexible, where decisions are made as the work progresses (Creswell, 2009). There was only one researcher for data collection, and the primary data for this study was provided through an in-depth semi-structured interview. The advantage of the semi-structured interview method was that it allowed additional questions to be added if the researcher recognized that additional questions were warranted based on a participant's previous response to a question. Utilizing the interview method provided insight into the participant's thoughts, actions, and/or behaviors when making educational placement decisions for ED

students. Before implementing the interview tool, the researcher pre-tested questions on three experienced CST social workers who were not part of the study and not employees of the district of study. Revisions to the interview questions were made based on their feedback.

Interview times were arranged based on participants' availability, and the researcher was flexible with times and dates. Prior to the start of the interview, each participant was assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. All video interviews were conducted via Google meet, and only a person with the link and passcode could enter the scheduled interview. Participants interviewed with the researcher virtual via video call in an area of their home.

All interviews were recorded on a digital audio recorder without any video recording, and the interview times varied in length from 35 minutes to 75 minutes. During the interviews, the probing technique was utilized when the researcher needed elaboration or a deeper understanding of the participant's experiences or thoughts. Overall, the video and audio were clear except for one or two incidents where the participant's or researcher's video/audio screen froze for a few seconds. Once the video/audio was restored, the researcher reminded the participant where they left off in the conversation and repeated the question if needed. Three of the 10 participants experienced distractions during the interview. These included telephones ringing, family members seeking their attention, and noises from the street, which prompted the researcher to pause the interview and audio for a few seconds. At the end of each interview, the recorded audiotape was sent to a professional transcriptionist to transcribe. Every audio file sent to the transcriptionist was password-protected, and the password was sent in a separate email. Transcripts were returned to the researcher between 12 and 24 hours after submission. For reliability purposes, participants were able to review the transcripts and approve or make edits.

To effectively store the data, the researcher developed a data management system that included securely collecting, recording, storing, presenting, and transferring the data. The typed field notes and uploaded audio recordings were kept on a password-protected flash drive. The raw notes, flash drives, and digital audio recorder were kept in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home office. The audio files were uploaded to a password-protected flash drive on a laptop. Each audio file was emailed separately to the transcriptionist in a password-protected file. The password was sent electronically in a separate email. The raw data continue to be stored in a locked cabinet and will be destroyed/shredded after 3 years. The electronic data will remain stored on a password-protected flash drive in the locked cabinet, and will be erased after 3 years.

## Data Analysis

"Qualitative research is designed to explore the human elements of a given topic, where specific methods are used to examine how individuals see and experience the world" (Given 2008, p. xxix). So that the data did not become overwhelming, the researcher embarked concurrently on data collection and analysis (Miles et al., 2014). Transcripts and field notes went through several coding cycles during the data analysis process. Transcripts from all audiotaped interviews and field notes were read at least four times (Creswell, 2009). The first read was to correct typographical errors and edit confidential names (if applicable). The second time was to reflect on what was said and the meaning behind the responses. During the third read, the researcher made comments in the margins of each transcript and field note. Notes were written in margins of the transcripts and field notes, and sections on key issues highlighted to give a sense of the researcher's preliminary thoughts on the data. The fourth read began the coding of the transcripts. The researcher assigned codes utilizing In-Vivo coding (Miles et al., 2014), based on the answers provided to each question. The coding highlighted short words and phrases to capture the participants' voices (Miles et al., 2014). To indicate the actual vernacular of

participants, the researcher enclosed those codes in quotation marks. Similar responses received the same codes. Process coding and attribute coding also were employed to extract participants' actions and interactions as well as characteristics of the demographics and essential information about the data (Miles et al., 2014).

Once the first round of hand-coding cycles was completed, the second cycle of coding was generated as a derivative of the first codes. This second round of coded data was grouped based on the same codes, and sorted together to reveal patterns. To determine similar emerging themes, the researcher incorporated content analysis. The researcher created, revised, and maintained a codebook for accuracy, with a corresponding memo explaining the codes. Production and coding of transcripts occurred within 12 to 24 hours each interview. It should be noted that field note transcripts were only compared to field note transcripts, and the same was true for interview transcripts.

After the coding cycles the researcher completed a cross-participant analysis for all 10 participants, examining common themes and outliers to gain a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Next a summary table with columns and rows was created and designed for reading data across rows.

**Trustworthiness**

Various tactics were used to safeguard the trustworthiness of results. At least 30 minutes before the interview, the researcher tested the audio quality of the audio and video associated with the video call website. The researcher also tested the audio recorder to ensure clear audio recording. The investigator spoke in a clear and appropriate tone for the interview environment, and questions were repeated if a participant did not answer or asked for clarification. Prior to the start of the study, the interview questions were tested on three CST school social workers who met the inclusion criteria but were not employed in the district of study. Questions were added,

removed, and revised based on test participants' responses. Preceding the study implementation, two peers reviewed the instruments for their validity. The researcher wrote reflective memos daily to acknowledge any personal bias that might influence the findings. Peer reviewers examined samples of coded transcripts to ensure consistency and reliability.

The researcher consulted with the participants to check for agreement with their interview responses based on the transcripts. A robust data collection process and triangulation were utilized to create a sound foundation for reliable and valid data and findings. Furthermore, all facets of the research including any revisions or unexpected events/experiences to further explain the findings were documented.

## Role of the Researcher

I began my career in the field of mental health in 1995 as a mental health professional. In 2001, I transitioned to the field of education as a school social worker in an urban school district. I worked mainly with at-risk general education students, mainly those who displayed negative behaviors in school. These negative behaviors included fighting, cursing at others, bullying peers, and class and homework refusal.

Most of my days were spent counseling students, providing the students with effective tools for behavioral and academic success in school, and crisis management. As part of my responsibilities, I chaired a Pupil Resource Committee (PRC), now commonly known as Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS). Teachers referred students to the PRC for academic and behavioral concerns. I was charged along with other staff with monitoring the planned academic and behavior interventions. If interventions were deemed successful by the committee members based on student response to interventions, then the interventions would continue. If the interventions were not successful over a 4- to 6-week period, the plan was revised and/or the student was referred to the child study team for evaluation for a disability.

In 2003, I became employed as a social worker on the child study team in a working-class/blue-collar, euro-centric school district. This was a change from my previous position because I now dealt primarily with students with disabilities or students suspected of having a disability. In this role I witnessed teachers, administrators, and parents becoming frustrated with the students who had emotional and behavioral difficulties. Students were often ousted from the classroom, suspended, placed in self-contained classes, or sent to out-of-district schools. In this district, the majority of students with behavioral and emotional problems were placed in an out-of-district setting.

During my time in this role, the district did create a self-contained behavioral disabilities (BD) program for high school students. The special teacher of the class was flexible and patient. However, when specific content area teachers taught the students, there was often disruption and chaos in the classes. I provided daily counseling to the students assigned to the class, and soon learned that all of them were academically capable of learning and yearning for meaningful relationships with the school staff and peers. When the students found those meaningful relationships, their behaviors and academic performance improved. As a result of counseling that high school BD class, I struggled with deciding to recommend a restrictive setting for some of the students. Was it in their best interest? Was it in the best interest of the other students? Did the students placed outside of general education settings get a free and appropriate education (FAPE)?

Currently I work as a special education administrator in an urban district. The special education population represents approximately 17% of the total student population. The district places ED students across the entire educational continuum, from least restrictive to most restrictive. Over the last three years, there has been an increase in the number of students with

behavioral disorders placed in separate classrooms or separate settings. The reason behind the increase is of great interest to me.

Avoiding bias completely is impossible, but being aware of said biases and keeping to researched-based protocols can guard against bias. Since I have worked as a CST school social worker and an administrator, I undoubtedly have my own unconscious bias about the educational placement of students. To guard against researcher bias, I used triangulation of data, reviewed my findings with peers, and consulted with peers and an academic mentor to discuss the coding process. The participants were able to review their transcribed responses for accuracy. Additionally, to control my subjectivity I created personal memos to reflect on continuously and to monitor my thoughts and feelings (Peshkin, 1988).

## Limitations

A study limitation was the small number of participants, and the qualitative results cannot be generalized. A second limitation was the inclusion of only one urban New Jersey school district. Therefore, this study was not intended in any way to represent or reflect other school districts. A third limitation was the potential response bias of the voluntary participants.

## Summary

Interviews of 10 CST school social workers in an urban New Jersey school district provided data for a qualitative analysis of the influences on CST school social workers in decision making decisions for educational placement of ED students. The research design and purposive sampling provided a comparative analysis of the factors that contribute to the placement of ED students, and which factors have a greater impact on the placement. Finally, this study discussed how the data can be utilized to better understand placement decisions for ED students and how to address findings.

## Chapter IV: Research Findings

### Introduction

This chapter discusses and highlights the themes and patterns discovered during the analysis of the interviews conducted with 10 child study team social workers in a New Jersey K-12 urban district concerning educational placement recommendations for ED students. The participants' told experiences painted a clear picture of what factors they felt influenced their recommendations and the final placement of ED students. Participants in this study shared elements of their personal and work backgrounds leading up to their employment as a child study team social worker. They also recounted their overall experiences as a member of the child study team, specifically when working with or benefiting students classified as ED in an urban district. The salient themes that emerged from the analysis of the interviews were: Internal influences on CST Social Worker, CST Social Worker Role, Teacher Qualities, School Culture and Climate, Student Progress, Accessibility, Appropriateness and Availability of Resources, Parental Involvement, and ED Classification Category.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the decision-making process of CST school social workers in a New Jersey urban school district pertaining to the placement of Emotionally Disturbed (ED) students. Specifically, it investigated how and what influences (if any) on the social worker might contribute to ED students' not being placed in the least Restrictive Environment (LRE). This study also sought to contribute to the literature gap on decision-making in relation to ED students' educational placement.

### Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

Research Question 1: What perceived factors influence child study team social workers' decisions to recommend an educational setting other than the general education classroom?

Research Question 2: How, if at all, does the academic history of ED students influence the social worker's placement recommendations?

Research Question 3: How, if at all, does the behavioral history of ED students influence the social worker's placement recommendations?

## Participant Profiles

Ten tenured child study team social workers from a large and racially diverse New Jersey urban K-12 school district participated in this study. Nine of 10 participants were female and one male. Four of the 10 self-identified their ethnicity as African American, three identified as Caucasian, and three identified as Hispanic. Participant ages ranged from 36 to 62 years old, with an average age of 48. The study's participants had between 5 and 20 years of experience as a child study team social worker. All participants worked at some point with students in grades K-8, and five participants also worked in high schools. At the time of the interviews, all 10 participants were assigned to schools with grades ranging from pre-k to 8th grade; none were assigned to a high school. Nine participants had at least 7 years of CST social work experience and seven worked as a CST social worker in the district of study only, with the average employment length of 13 years. Two of the 10 participants were employed as social workers in another capacity in the district before switching to the CST social worker position. They had varied experiences in the field of social work prior to becoming CST social workers, which speaks to their varied skill sets. Before working in the school system, eight of the 10 worked in hospital settings in various positions such as renal social worker, medical social worker, and HIV/AIDS education. Four participants reported experience working on inpatient or emergency psychiatric units. Additionally, four participants worked for child protective or family preservation organizations (including in-home therapy) designed to help keep children and families intact.

Eight of the 10 participants hold a professional social work license issued by the state of New Jersey, as either a Licensed Social Worker (LSW) or Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW). There is a social worker exam to pass, and the renewal requires 30 to 40 hours of continuing education every 2 years to receive the licensing credential. These trainings are intended to improve clinical skills and keep abreast of current best practices to work with their targeted populations.

### Data

Prior to implementing the interview tool and demographic questionnaire (Appendices B and C), the researcher pre-tested the questions on three experienced CST social workers who were not part of the study and not employees of the district of study. Revisions to the interview and demographic questions were made based on their feedback. The approval to conduct this study was received from Seton Hall University Internal Board (IRB) on May 4, 2020, and the process of recruiting participants began soon afterward. The data collection process began on May 9, 2020 and ended with the last interview on June 2, 2020. Participant solicitations were sent to their publicly available school district email addresses. The solicitation email was sent out twice over a 10-day period, with a total of 12 respondents.

A purposive (criterion) method of sampling was utilized. Thereby, if the potential participant met the three criteria (tenured child study social worker, experienced making at least five placement decisions about ED students, not working solely with preschool-age children), they were selected. After completing a short demographic survey, a total of 10 respondents were found to meet the criteria. Due to the Corona Virus pandemic, all communication with participants was via email, phone, or video call. Before participation in the study, participants were asked to read, review, and sign and date an approved IRB informed written consent form. In-depth semi-structured interviews lasting 35 to 70 minutes were conducted via video call with

each participant separately. The researcher held confidential interviews from her home, and all participants called in from their respective homes. Participants agreed via email to a date and time for the interview. At least two days before the scheduled interview time, the researcher sent participants a copy of the informed consent to review and sign, and the login information for the telephone conference. All video interviews were held via Google meet, and only a person with the link and passcode could enter the scheduled interview.

Prior to the start of the interview, each participant was assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. Although the interviews were conducted via video, the video was not recorded. The audio of the interviews was recorded with a digital recorder. During the interviews, the probing technique was utilized when the researcher needed elaboration or a deeper understanding of the participant's experiences or thoughts. Furthermore, the researcher created handwritten field notes that captured the participants' reflections, environmental and nonverbal observations, and verbal inflections. The field notes were later typed after each interview so that the information was easily recalled and did not become overwhelming. At the end of each interview, the recorded audiotape was sent to a professional transcriptionist to transcribe. Every audio file sent to the transcriptionist was password-protected, and the password was sent in a separate email. Each transcript was returned between 12 and 24 hours after submission. For reliability purposes, participants were asked to review the transcripts and approve or make edits. All data were stored on a password-protected flash drive in a locked file cabinet to which only the researcher has access, and will remain stored for the next three years. At the end of 3 years, the researcher will dispose of the data.

To thoroughly examine the data, the researcher read the transcripts a minimum of four times to begin the analytical process by immersion in the data. To allow the information to flow

naturally, no predetermined codes were created. As the researcher read the transcripts line by line, codes were handwritten into a codebook with definitions that were reflected upon and updated continuously. Definitions were later typed into an Excel spreadsheet for better organization. Information obtained from the participants' interview responses were hand-coded while reading the transcripts line by line, coding for short phrases and verbatim words of participants. On a daily basis the researcher typed the handwritten codes attributed to each participant into an Excel spreadsheet to organize information and better discover emerging patterns and themes visually. For the first cycle of coding the researcher used in vivo coding, process coding, and attribute coding to extract each participants' actions and interactions and characteristics of the demographics. The second cycle of coding included fine-tuning the first cycle of codes and grouping similar codes. The second cycle allowed recognition of similarities that resulted in the emergence of themes and patterns. After completion of coding cycles the researcher conducted a cross-participant analysis for all 10 participants, examining common themes amongst participants and outliers to gain a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Next a summary table was created with columns and rows, and designed to read data across rows. The data was interpreted to provide an organized and comprehensive overview.

**Internal Influences on CST Social Worker**

The theme of internal motivators for the CST social worker emerged. One of the internal motivators was a desire to work in an urban school district. Six of the participants expressed a sense of belonging in an urban district because they grew up in the district of study or a similar city. Two of the participants continue to live and work in the city where the school district of study is located. Two participants who identified as African American discussed wanting to work with students who resembled them. They felt as though working in a suburban school district

59

was not their calling. Michelle, with 20 years of experience as a CST, stated, "this is where I belong."

All 10 participants spoke of their love of working with children and wanting to make a positive mark in children's lives. Four participants also described experiencing enjoyment from counseling students who suffered from trauma and emotional and behavioral issues. Their love of working with children ultimately led them to become a school social worker.

The internal motivation to advocate for all students surfaced often during the interviews, although there was no specific question pertaining to advocacy. Nine participants spoke candidly about advocating for what they "think is right for the students." Five of the 10 participants specifically mentioned advocacy as being vital for them in their daily functioning and when recommending educational placement for ED students. With 13 years of CST experience, Vanessa stated, "you have to be the students' voices and make known what they want and need."

Seven participants acknowledged that the situation can be contentious when advocating with teachers, school administration, and at times parents. Michelle gave multiple examples of how she had to advocate with the building staff about students' needs. In one particular case, the student had an IQ above 120 and was reading at least two grades above his age level. However, because he had emotional problems, the principal did not want to entertain how the student could be supported in the general education classroom. In this instance, Michelle laid out a comprehensive plan for the student, and she convinced the classroom teacher to "work" with the student. She verbalized, "I'm annoying, and people think so. I am opinionated, and I fight all the time … I felt like kids really needed an advocate who cared, and I felt like I was that person." She says she stayed more than a decade in one school building to be that voice for the students.

With 16 years as a CST social worker in the district, Johanna explained that she tries to be politically correct in her advocacy to avoid being seen as disobedient or disgruntled. She clarified that she will do or recommend what is right by the students, based on the data she compiles. The fact that her choices might please or anger others is not of concern to her.

In contrast, three participants ruminated about their experiences in their early years as a CST social worker, and the fact that they were less vocal and dependent on their more seasoned or experienced team members. Angie, with more than 8 years of experience in the district as a social worker but only 3 years on the child study team, explained that she sometimes questioned her advocacy role as a new CST member. Angie recalled,

> I had an assistant administrator that would basically say they don't belong here. They belong, out. They just don't belong in the building. And my question is like, "Well, there are kids where do they belong?" I had a supervisor once that said it's our job to advocate for kids. Like that's our job! So that makes me feel better in terms of being able to push back when we hear that they don't belong here, that it is my job to, to keep pushing and say no, they do.

**Role of the CST Social Worker**

The theme of the CST social worker role emerged regarding their educational placement recommendations. The social worker can be the case manager, counselor, or evaluator and play the roles simultaneously. Five participants conveyed feeling confident that they had enough information to make appropriate placement recommendations as the case manager. Kelly, with 17 years of CST experience, said, "as the case manager, you are the captain of the team, which gives you more influence on the placement outcome." Four participants reported that being a counselor gave the social worker more intimate knowledge of the student and family. They acknowledged that these facts and relationships with the student could cause the social worker to view the student in a different light than others did. He or she might see potential that others did not. With 19 years of CST experience, Elizabeth communicated that as a counselor she could

have discussions with the case manager about things that might be affecting the student's academics and behavior that no amount of document analysis could reveal. Three participants verbalized that the case manager and counselor's combined role was the greatest influencer on recommendations. For the case manager, information is provided by teachers, administrators, parents, resource providers, document analysis, and maybe brief interactions with the student. For the counselor, the information received comes from the student. A different relationship evolves when you counsel a child than if you view them on the periphery. Kelly stated,

> I feel like when I'm seeing the child regularly, you do get to know the child, and with larger caseload as a case manager, you don't get necessarily get to know every child, as well as if you are counseling them on a regular basis. But the teacher usually goes to the case manager with issues. So, from the students as a case manager, you get more information from the teachers. As the counselor, you get more information from the students and more information about the student from the student and how the student is feeling.

No participants reported that the role of evaluator alone provided them with enough information about the student to make a well-informed placement recommendation.

All 10 participants acknowledged that the ultimate decision of programming and placement is an IEP team decision. Eight participants reported that making a team decision can be smooth or rough, depending on the relationships amongst team members. Three participants likened it to any group process. Michelle said there is always a dynamic that comes into play. She added that everyone has their perceptions and opinions that may or may not co-mingle with those of other team members. Two participants claimed to be lucky because they have only worked on teams that collaborated well together. Even if there are disagreements about program/ placement recommendations, each member will argue their case and a consensus will be reached. Four participants acknowledged that their seat at the table might be bigger or smaller depending on their role with the student.

**Teachers' Qualities**

The theme of teachers' qualities emerged—precisely, their attitude and instructional effectiveness—as factors that could impact a social worker's recommended educational placement for ED students. All 10 participants pointed to the teacher's attitudes as a gateway or barrier to ED students being educated in the general education setting. All participants observed that if general education and special education teachers are open-minded about teaching a student with behavioral difficulties, the student typically makes progress in the general education class or transitions well into a resource or self-contained class. Participants defined open-mindedness as the willingness to build a positive relationship with the students, implement behavioral intervention plans with fidelity, and focus more on students' strengths than on their deficits. When a teacher's attitude about teaching an ED student is negative, all participants agreed that no matter how hard the student tries, they will not succeed in that teacher's class. Five participants recalled incidents when an ED student was deemed not successful in one teacher's class but was a star in another's. When they reflected on that phenomenon, accounting for students' abilities in a different subject area, it came down to the teacher's attitude and approach taken with the student. Dennis, a CST social worker with 12 years' experience as a CST social worker in the district, shared recollections of two teachers. He remarked that one particular teacher was very structured and "did not take no mess," but she was nurturing and patient with all students and especially those who struggled with behavior. So, when Dennis had opportunities to recommend a student for placement in that teacher's class, there was no hesitation. On the other hand, he mentioned another teacher who held the attitude in her class that it was her way or no way. He explained that he did agree with holding students accountable

for their actions, "but there is a way to do it that works for our ED students." So Dennis avoided recommending that any of the ED students attend that teacher's class.

Moreover, if a teacher demonstrated willingness to work with the CST social worker or case manager to maintain a student in his or her class, all 10 participants implied that they had more confidence that a program was appropriate and beneficial for ED students.

The instructional effectiveness of a teacher was reported to be a factor in placing ED students as well. Five of the 10 participants spoke about the teacher's ability to effectively teach the content area to all students. Four participants recognized the enormous mandates imposed on teachers, which infringe on teaching time and could hinder their ability to teach effectively. Five participants alluded to the lack of adequate and meaningful training for teachers on social and emotional learning and managing challenging behaviors and teaching effectively. Dennis recounted how some of the general education teachers struggle with managing students without IEPs, so he does not have much confidence that they could handle an ED student who needs a consistent stream of individualized daily support. Dennis elaborated, "if the teacher has multiple students that require individualized attention, he can see how that can be overwhelming for most teachers."

Ericka, with eight years in the district as a CST social worker, spoke candidly about two special education teachers who teach in two separate behavioral disabilities classes at her assigned school. One she described as a novice teacher assigned to the class despite her abilities or desire to teach students with emotional and behavioral difficulties. Appearing visibly frustrated, Ericka talked about how the students' academic expectations are low, and not much learning is going on. She pointed out the students are not learning academically nor learning how to manage their behaviors. She asked the rhetorical question, "How are they ever going to get a

chance to be mainstreamed into the general education setting?" In describing the second teacher,

Ericka stated that the teacher's classroom aesthetics are dark, dirty, and not welcoming to

children. Although a seasoned special education teacher, she did not want to be assigned to teach

the BD class. Consequently, besides providing minimal evidence-based classroom instruction her

attitude toward the students is aloof.

Alicia, with 12 years of CST experience, shared observations about the issue of teacher

quality with an elevated tone,

> As a child study team member, I'm not really sure what I can do anymore. Case
> managers we are like mediators between the parent and the teacher and administration.
> But we're not the ones that implement. I guess you would say whatever is recommended,
> we're not the implementers. We could just manage it. But what do you do when the
> people that are supposed to implement it are not doing what they're supposed to do?

## School Culture and Climate

School culture and climate emerged as a theme when discussing influences on social

workers' educational placement recommendations of ED students. Culture is defined as shared

norms and climate as shared perceptions (Hoy, 1990). Ten of the 10 participants spoke about

school culture and climate in their recommendations. All reported feeling that the building's

culture and climate rested on the school principal and other school administrators' shoulders.

They contended that teachers and other staff take their lead from the head of the school building.

If the principal's actions personify acceptance of all persons in their building, students classified

as ED fare better academically and behaviorally in the building in any educational program.

Gizelle, a participant with 16 years' experience as a CST in the district and 18 years

overall, communicated that in the building she is currently assigned to, the culture and climate

are incredibly positive. "We have a principal who really does not leave the door open for

bullying or any mistreatment of students from children or adults." This positive environment is

advantageous to the ED students in self-contained settings and whom she is considering

mainstreaming. She added that the principal is supportive of inclusiveness. Therefore, when she addresses the teachers to talk about mainstreaming opportunities, there is support and little to no pushback. Conversely, Gizelle also says that, unfortunately, in her 16 years in the district, positivity and openness are not always the case. She recalled, "I have been in a building where there is no room for conversation; the kid had to go."

Nine participants reported that teachers and administrators advocated frequently for the students to be removed from the general education classroom and into a pull-out resource class or a full-time self-contained program. Michelle remembers that in early October one teacher came to her and remarked that the student would not work out in his class. Michelle said to the teacher, "But it is only October!" Eventually, as the case manager Michelle had to recommend a more restrictive program because the student was suspended from school regularly and sent out of the class frequently, which resulted in a great loss of instructional time. "The teachers already had their minds made up," reported Michelle.

Seven participants mentioned that the school staff put pressure on the child study team to place regardless of laws, including timelines that have to be followed. Two participants described their interactions as an "Us versus Them," meaning the CST against all the other staff in the building, especially if the team recommends something others do not agree with. Friction is reportedly evident in some buildings, and it erodes the relationships with the CST and school staff. School administrators have asserted that the CST is not following their directive when it comes to IEP program and placement. Johanna highlighted this issue,

> It is hard to work to place a kid in the least restrictive and have administration or teachers and the school setting keep asking you what is he doing here? I have been told, what are you waiting for? Are you waiting for someone to get hurt for him to move?

Three of the 10 participants spoke of school climate issues caused by the negative behaviors of general education students who are viewed as worse than those classified as ED.

The students roam the buildings, cut class, get into fights, or destroy school property. These environments are factors that three participants consider when deciding to recommend an ED student's transition into a general education class. Seven participants voiced the opinion that putting ED students in a chaotic or extremely distracting environment is not viewed as beneficial for the ED student. So, although the ED student has demonstrated readiness to be educated in a general education class, the settings might not be favorable for positive student outcomes. The same seven participants reported that they grapple with putting students in any class situation that will only highlight their weaknesses and not support building around their strengths.

**Accessibility, Appropriateness, and Availability of Resources**

Another theme that emerged was the accessibility, appropriateness, and availability of resources that participants have at their disposal to offer to the ED student in the school and the community. Decreased school funding was viewed by six participants as the culprit for the lack of school resources. Six of the 10 participants conveyed their concerns about a steady decrease or flatness in public school funding. They perceive the funding issues as harming general education and special education services, including the availability and quality of programming services.

Nine of the participants spoke about shrinking school resources in the school buildings and suggesting that if more resources were in place that ED students might be more successful in their academic programs, including general education. Seven participants communicated that there is a lack of sufficient staffing in the school. That fact makes it difficult to decide to recommend a program when adequate services are not there. Michelle stated, "If I don't have someone to come in and help implement that plan and whose job it is just to do that, then we're not going to be able to maintain a lot of these kids in those settings without the financial support."

Six participants became nostalgic when reminiscing about an LCSW program that the district dismantled approximately nine years ago. The Licensed Clinical Social Workers (LCSW) employed by the district would go to the schools and provide therapeutic counseling and intervention to the emotional and behavioral students, including students impacted by trauma and loss. These social workers did not have CST responsibilities; they were solely devoted to providing direct counseling services and seeking community resources for special education and at-risk students. Three of the participants used the word "wonderful" to describe the program. Gizelle conveyed the lack of resources in the forms of staff and programs,

> That programs being taken out, I think, really has had a huge impact on some of the kids and their needs. Things that they required or that they really benefited from art therapy, like different types of therapies that music therapy that was provided. A lot of it has been taken out.

Another resource that five participants mentioned was the Crisis Intervention Teacher (CIT) if one was assigned to a building (not all buildings have them). The CIT is a teacher with special training in how to deescalate students in crises. Additionally, they can be proactive and extinguish a volatile situation before it occurs.

Four participants reported the dwindling presence of guidance/school counselors over the years. Although each school has at least one guidance/school counselor, they typically have to service the entire building student population. Kelly mentioned that one of the schools she is assigned to has almost 700 students and one guidance counselor. One of the participants explained that there were more counselors assigned to school buildings in the past years. Therefore, counselors had more time to counsel students, provide guidance to families in need, and collaborate with the child study team members.

Two participants noted the reduction of supplemental academic resources. Two mentioned an academic program called Mission Read that provided intense reading instruction

for struggling readers or nonreaders. Now an ED student functioning in a general education setting with pull-out reading intervention no longer has that resource. Kelly remarked, "It is only a matter of time before acting out behaviors appear." She expanded on her thought by observing that if a student did not get the pull-out reading intervention, the only other option would be to get the reading intervention in a self-contained class.

The availability and appropriateness of district special education programs was also a concern for the majority of participants. Seven participants expressed superior knowledge of district programs and how to access programs, and three participants revealed that they have adequate knowledge. Angie mentioned that she has knowledge of her school's programs but would like to learn more about other programs in the district. Elizabeth stated, "I am very familiar with the district programs and how to access them." Dennis said that if he does not know, he makes it his business to know who knows. All participants reported that they had made recommendations to the following programs for ED students: Inclusion (In-Class Resource Support), Pull-Out Resource Support, Learning Disabilities Mild/Moderate (LLDM), Behavioral Disabilities Program (BD) or an intensive Behavioral Disabilities Program called Choices.

Participants reported that the issue of program availability comes to light when the program recommended is not in the current school building. If the program is not in the building, the case manager has to decide to ask for the program and hope that the student transitions well at the new school. Four participants pointed out that parents sometimes disagree with the recommended school, although they might agree with the program recommendation. Gizelle reported, "We have had challenges with parents in terms of that, and we explain to them that a program can be in any building and that they need to go and see it and take a look."

There are times when a recommended program is not feasible or available. Seven participants reported that placement can be affected by class size limits, as there are special education laws on class size capacity. Limited space availability is typically realized toward the end of the school year. Michelle states, "Like right now it's May and the kid needs a certain type of placement and those classes are closed, or there's no teacher; you have to maintain them until you know, those things can come about." To keep in compliance with the IEP, she might recommend a program available in the building that might possibly meet the student's needs and start the recommended initial program in September. Gizelle echoed that same sentiment: "Depending on the time of year, depending on how many kids have come before this student, sometimes the placements are few and far between."

Five participants recalled that until recently, the district did not have behavioral disability classes. Therefore, if an ED student required a self-contained setting, they would be recommended for an LLDM class. In recent years, Johanna reported that "teachers throughout the district complained that ED students were being dumped into LLDM classes." In response, last year the district opened Behavioral Disability classes throughout the city. Five of the participants stated that they were happy with the return of BD classes. Although the BD program is now available, six of the 10 participants expressed concerns about the services not being sufficient to meet the students' daily needs. When discussing special education programs such as a behavioral disabilities program, Dennis conveyed his thoughts about the program,

> Many of the students' behaviors are ignored, and then they go out into the world where the police don't ignore your behaviors. The courts don't minimize your behaviors. Your boss is not going to ignore your behavior. So, have we really prepared them in terms of their education because our educational goal is not just academics, which quite honestly, we're not doing too good at that either? But it's also social. So if we're not doing the academics that great, at least we could work on having them socially functional so they can be productive in society as opposed to expecting people to accept them because you know they have a disability.

70

Alicia also highlighted the issue of inappropriate resources,

> [With] the amount of support that a behavioral disabilities class needs, there should be a team of readily available people. When things don't go so great in some of these classrooms, unfortunately, there's not enough support. I feel like defeated sometimes, you know, that we're placing children that are emotionally disturbed and these behavioral disability classrooms or intensive behavioral classrooms, without the appropriate support or if it's support is not enough support that if we're actually damaging these children even more because now you have, it's almost like being in prison, when you're putting a bunch of kids that act the same way behavioral-wise with all this craziness that they come in with baggage and they don't have the positive peers. Like is it beneficial?

If the CST social worker wants to recommend the in-district intensive behavioral disabilities program called Choices, there is an application process and a review committee that determines if the student is appropriate. The student must have a psychiatric diagnosis, updated child study team testing, and a record of failing in other placements. Elizabeth reflected that it is difficult to get a student accepted. Nine participants mentioned that Choices has a student-to-staff ratio of 3 to 1. Participants agreed that the Choices program has more resources to address ED students than other district programs. The program offers counseling by an LCSW or school psychologist, art or music therapy is offered, and they have scheduled recreational and community events. Ericka said,

> [In] Choices you have a lot more resources because you have someone who's working with the class collecting that data on a regular basis, and it's a smaller class. The teacher is more trained and skilled, well not necessarily trained, but experienced in dealing with the children. The Choices class goes up to six, and there's a special ed teacher and a classroom assistant. In a regular BD class, it could go up to 12, and inclusion class could go double or even more than that.

One participant, Johanna, was an outlier and claimed that the district does have enough resources for teachers and students. However, she thinks that the resources are underutilized. She spoke of a program where expert teacher-coaches assist the special education and or general education teacher with academic and behavioral support. The caveat is that the teachers and staff

must ask for assistance. Johanna said, "The board has plenty of resources ... It's just a matter of really getting motivated to reach out and put those resources in place."

All ten participants view themselves and their fellow CST members as valuable resources to the students, teachers, and other staff. Nonetheless, they all echoed the opinion that there is not enough time to devote to their daily special education compliance timelines and follow up on all the students whose cases they manage and counsel due to their caseloads. Seven of the participants mentioned being split between two school buildings (currently or in the past) during the week, which makes continuity of service difficult. Alicia discussed the struggle of being assigned to more than one building. She stated that when "I am [in] one building, something inevitably happens with one of my ED students in the other building." When she returns to a building, she is playing detective and trying to follow up on an incident involving a student or students. Alicia reported,

> The caseload that the child study team has and all these other requirements that they want us to do. It's very hard to play two roles. You know, you are trying to stay in compliance with your cases, but at the same token, you have to support a child's social-emotional being and also support the teachers' social-emotional and everybody in the school pulls you in all different directions that it becomes very overwhelming cause sometimes it feels like you're in different roles, but you can never do something really well because you are getting pulled here, you're getting pulled here, you getting pulled here so they just getting a little bit of you.

The importance of community resources was a topic that all 10 participants discussed. The community resources are required to provide needed services for ED students that school districts cannot provide. The participants identified a plethora of community resources beneficial to students but not always readily available. Students are often waitlisted to be enrolled in mental health outpatient/partial care programs. Partial care programs are programs that students can attend for part of the school day or after school, where they participate in groups and one-to-one counseling to address mental health issues such as depression, anger management, trauma, and

acquisition of practical coping skills. Dennis exclaimed, "I have found that community resources are more difficult to access than I would think they should be!" According to five participants, students who are afforded the opportunities to attend and complete these programs can better manage their behaviors. As a result, the improvements can often lead to their transition into general education classes or the ability to stay in general education settings instead of being recommended for a special education classroom that services only special education students. However, Vanessa pointed out that there are times when community organizations advocate for an ED student to be educated in a school that is not in the district (out-of-district school), which is one of the most restrictive placement options.

Two participants spoke about the lack of extracurricular activities. They pointed out that areas such as sports and the arts are where many ED students find success. Ericka explained that budget cuts in district and community sports programs are a hard pill to swallow. She said, "we have limited resources for the kids; sports when they're cut, that takes away from their activities in and out of school. So that makes it difficult for kids, especially ED kids."

**Parental Involvement**

The theme of parental involvement emerged. Eight participants contended that parents/ guardians are essential partners in the IEP process, including placement recommendations. Participants talked about how it provides valuable information to the team when an ED student's parent communicates openly with the team about the student's challenges and strengths. The information is valuable because it can influence decision making around interventions and placement recommendations. Five participants reported that if they know from the parent that something troubling has happened in the child's life recently, they can be proactive with helping the child cope.

On the other hand, if left in the dark, the child often displays negative school behaviors as a way to cope. Additionally, the social worker can work with the family and child on immediate and long-term solutions. Alicia talked about one of her students who came to school the day after witnessing his father being arrested. No family member informed the school, and later in the day when the student had a violent episode, the mobile crisis team was called. Alicia said, "It was something important to know before the student arrived at school, as the crisis could have been averted." When the student does something well at home, Vanessa said, "I need to know so that it can be celebrated, and the behavior can be reinforced in school with the student."

Although the school needs to communicate positive and negative behaviors to the parent or guardian, three participants mentioned situations when parents stopped answering the telephone and/or returning calls if they know that it is the school calling. The ability to effectively engage and communicate with parents factors into the social worker's decision making. Elizabeth responded, "If I can't get a parent to participate in an IEP meeting, it is difficult to get the entire picture of the student's needs, which leaves me partially blind during the IEP decision-making process."

In-home services were mentioned by eight participants as a resource to stabilize students academically and behaviorally at home and school. Barriers to accessing services were reported, as the parent must initiate the referral. If the parent does not make the agency's call, the school staff including the CST social worker cannot serve as the parent's proxy. Making the referral is often tricky for parents for various reasons, such as denial that their child has emotional or behavioral issues that require professional assistance. Many do not want outsiders coming into their homes due to fear of airing dirty laundry or trust issues. Kelly stated, "Parents do not want strangers in their homes and in their business."

**Student's School Progress**

Student behavioral and academic progress in school emerged as a theme when participants discussed what influences their placement recommendations. Interviews revealed that five participants thought that students who can manage their behaviors are more likely to be recommended to transition into or stay in a general education setting with support. Six participants reported being more likely to recommend a pull-out resource setting or self-contained setting if the student was highly distractible or frequently displayed aggressive behaviors toward self or others, and documented interventions proved unsuccessful. Behavior such as frequent profanity, low motivation, sleeping in class, and overall non-compliance with teacher directives are easily addressable behaviors according to all 10 participants. However, all participants admitted that students exhibit out-of-control behaviors such as overturning chairs, assaulting peers and teachers, or running out of the class or building. These behaviors can become so volatile that removing the student to a more restrictive educational setting becomes necessary. Alicia responded that if she recommends a behavioral disabilities class for a student, it is because of his or her out-of-control behavior. She also made it a point to acknowledge that most of the ED students in BD classes are boys. Two other participants pointed out the same observation.

Information on the student's behavior is gathered from various data sources. Seven participants spoke of gathering behavioral information by performing classroom observations, reviewing available documents (including but not limited to discipline/suspension reports, current and past social assessments, psychiatric and neurological assessment reports from teachers), and information from the student during counseling. Participants also spoke about completing social assessments including formal adaptive and behavioral inventories called the Achenbach and Vineland. When participants were asked about the importance of the behavioral

75

information gathered, the responses were varied. Three participants responded that reports from the teachers held more weight than the other information. However, two participants disagreed and said they do not place much importance on the teacher reports, because they think that teachers have a negative bias and ulterior motive toward ED students. In contrast, five participants relayed that they must look at the totality of the information and put all the pieces together to make an informed recommendation. Johanna commented that it is crucial to analyze all the information gathered in order to feel as confident as possible when making decisions. "You have to make an educated guess," she remarked.

With regard to academic history, six out of the 10 participants mentioned the word *bright* to describe ED students. They relayed numerous stories of students who were academically capable of being educated in the general education setting. Elizabeth remembered a student who could have been educated in a gifted and talented class, but no classes were offered in the district. She did not think placing the student in a regular general education class would be stimulating enough. "The teacher will teach the other 1st grade students to add and subtract, and he is working on multiplication problems." In this instance, Elizabeth and the other IEP team members decided to place the student in a behavioral disabilities class with a small student to staff ratio. The team's thinking was that the teacher would individualize the academic lessons while still addressing the student's behavior. According to Elizabeth, the plan worked well for the student.

Alicia iterated that she tries to place students in inclusion classes if they are not too far behind academically (no more than 3 years from their grade level or average peer). If inclusion does not work, she will try a resource pull-out class before recommending a self-contained setting because she thinks it is hard for students to get out of a self-contained classroom and back

to a general education class. Angie said that she tries to offer as much academic support as possible to the teacher and student before recommending a self-contained in-district or out-of-district class. That support can come from recommending an individual or shared paraprofessional for the student or setting up extra tutoring. She stated, "Many of the students have great academic abilities, but the students have little confidence in their academic abilities." She thinks that because ED students are often recognized for their negative qualities it is difficult for them to see themselves as anything but "bad."

There are various measures used by participants to get a picture of a student's academic abilities, functioning, and progress. All 10 participants mentioned that they examine the students' past and present report cards, New Jersey state assessments (if the grade is tested), work samples provided by the teacher, psychological assessments, and educational assessments. Six participants reported that they also review district assessments, interview the student, and conduct classroom observations to understand the student's academic functioning. No single academic factor was given more consideration than another. Like behavioral information, the totality of academic information gave them a clearer image of the student's academic progress. Two participants did mention that although they consider the CST educational assessment, they think the scores are inflated since the testing is conducted in a 1:1 optimal situation.

**The Category of Emotionally Disturbed**

When participants had a chance to ask questions or make comments, six participants spontaneously began talking about the actual label *emotionally disturbed* and the response it invokes from parents, teachers, school administrators, and sometimes child study team members. They contended that it comes with many misunderstood connotations and stigma, and that it is time for a name change. Johanna compared others' visceral reactions to the reversed phrase "guilty until proven innocent." Three participants discussed how they might seek other options

even though they might feel the student meets criteria specified in the New Jersey administrative code to be classified ED. At times that option has been Other Health Impaired (OHI) if the student has a diagnosis of ADHD or another medical condition. Angie reported, "I'm guilty of saying, can we make them OHI instead? I'll be honest, just to avoid the ED classification because I've seen the stigma, and I don't want to do that to kids."

Four participants shared experiences in which the ED student was educated in a self-contained class with all special education students and did well academically and behaviorally. However, when the social worker recommended an in-class support program, the student's progress was not of concern to the teachers. Angie spoke about an ED student who made marked academic and behavioral progress. In her quest to prepare for him transitioning into a general education class for the upcoming school year, she was met with resistance from the potential teacher. Reportedly the teacher had no prior interaction with the student, and remarked that the student could not be in her class because the student had an ED classification.

Three participants explained that the label is scary and ominous sounding to parents. As a result, sometimes parents will opt out of classifying a student if they cannot be found eligible under another disability category. Alicia described the ED label as inevitably putting the student on a track "to a behavioral disabilities class, which is hard to transition from or get out of." Ericka highlighted the point of the name change,

> We don't use the term mentally retarded anymore. So now is a time to maybe change it for students who are classified as ED. We don't like calling people mentally retarded, that changed so many years ago. So now perhaps it should be of great importance to change that name.

All participants contended that students classified as other health impaired (OHI) with similar behavioral and academic profiles as the ED are treated more positively by teachers and school administration, at least when it comes to getting pushback about placement in the general

education setting. Students classified as OHI might receive more positive feedback or praise from teachers, whereas the ED student is often noticed only for the negative behaviors. Toward the OHI student, there is typically no automatic default on the part of the teacher or administrator to remove a student from class or suspend them for breaking school rules. Dennis reported that he thinks that children classified as ED receive the less desirable placements. Michelle agreed and relayed a story about an ED student for whom she is the counselor. She was newly assigned to her current school this school year, so she was not involved in the student's classification or current program placement. Michelle explained that the student in written documents was not the same student she saw in the classroom and during counseling sessions. His behaviors and characteristics in his file did not match him, yet he was in a self-contained classroom. She conveyed her dismay and confusion:

> I counsel a kid I just started working with this year, and I'm like trying to get to know him. So, I look up his stuff, and I'm like the record that I was seeing did not match the kid anymore! The kid did something in kindergarten, and that warranted his ED … he has an individual aide. Whatever, the kid is an honor student now. He is in the honor society and all of the other stuff. Placement just can't be fixed. It needs to be fluid!

## Summary

This chapter presented data from a qualitative case study utilizing a demographic questionnaire and in-depth interviews of 10 tenured child study team social workers in an urban school district. Salient themes and patterns emerged during data collection and analysis. These themes and patterns revealed the multitude of factors that influence the participants' educational placement recommendations for emotionally disturbed students.

Answers to the interview questions highlight what social workers see as their roles and how social workers tackle internal and external challenges when deciding the most appropriate educational settings for ED students. The research questions were addressed adequately via the data collection and analysis process. The following chapter addresses the implications for theory,

79

practice, policy on ED students and educational placement, and suggested areas for future

research.

## Chapter V: Discussion of Findings and Recommendations

### Introduction

Over the past 45 years, the United States government and individual states have enacted laws to provide or expand educational rights for special education students and their parents. The foundation of all the laws rests upon how special education students are entitled to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) with their nonspecial education peers to the greatest extent possible. In this study, the researcher's goal was to explore whether child study team social workers in an urban district making educational placement recommendations for ED students were influenced not to recommend placement in the general education classroom.

This final chapter provides an interpretation of the findings and discusses the study's implications for theory, practice, and policy. Lastly, the chapter offers recommendations for next steps and for future research to expand on this study's findings.

### Interpretation of Findings

The following section discusses how this study's findings relate to and expand the existing literature on the educational placement of emotionally disturbed students, and how child study team social workers are influenced in their decision making. The findings suggest that both internal and external factors influence CST social worker recommendations regarding whether or not an ED student is educated in the general education setting.

### Internal Influences and the Role of the CST Social Worker

All participants held master's degrees in social work as required in New Jersey to qualify as a school social worker. Graduate social work programs methodically attempt to ingrain in their students the duty to advocate for their clients and encourage client self-advocacy (Reamer, 2018). This study found that participants routinely advocated for ED students' receiving appropriate services in their classrooms and the community. The participants' innate need to

advocate for the marginalized and stigmatized was also evident in their varied work histories. They were employed as social workers in HIV/AIDS, family preservation, child welfare, and mental health. Furthermore, the foundation of IDEA is built on advocating and protecting the rights of special education students. The fact that the participants gravitated toward working in the field of special education was not surprising.

Students who live in urban districts are more likely to be marginalized due to systemic racism, poverty, violence, and various forms of trauma. Historically, social workers are concerned with providing aid or assistance to underserved or marginalized groups and individuals (Reamer, 2018). This study's findings aligned with existing research on social workers, in that participants felt compelled to work in urban districts as opposed to suburban school settings where the needs of students are less obvious. One participant remarked that when she worked in a suburban district she did not think she was fulfilling her purpose, which led her to seek employment in an urban school district. This study also suggests that social workers' internal urge to positively affect the outcomes of students' lives influenced how they viewed ED students' potential. The participants spoke about being able to see positive attributes in ED students when most others could not. They were able to identify ED students' strengths and hidden potential that could flourish in the general education setting. These findings are supported by recent research indicating that social workers and psychologists project significantly less negative bias toward students with emotional issues than teachers project (Hirsch, 2013). Less bias could be attributed to the educational training that social workers and psychologists receive, which might better prepare them to understand ED students.

This study also highlighted the participants' desire to counsel children experiencing trauma, emotional, and behavioral issues. Participants believed that the ED students are in great

need of counseling and mental health support. The study aligned with Webber's (2018) study indicating that school social workers often focus on special education students' needs by providing group and individual counseling to address their mental health needs. Some participants indicated that counseling the ED student provided them the opportunity to get to know the student more closely. Therefore, social workers were able to make their educational placement recommendations for ED students based on the whole picture of the child, considering their in-depth family background, mental health needs or supports, strengths, and weaknesses.

On the IEP team, the social worker can be the case manager, counselor, educator, or a combination of all three roles. This study's findings suggest that although social workers might have varying degrees of insight about a student depending on their role(s), they believed that the ultimate educational placement decisions should be an IEP team decision. Their beliefs mirror the guidance from current special education regulations emphasizing that multiple members of an IEP are responsible for deciding what services and educational placement a student receives (NJAC 6A:14-2.3(k)2, 2016). However, literature regarding how collaborative decisions are made is scarce. This study found that no cohesive or uniform process leads to final IEP decisions. The finding suggests that the weight of the social workers' recommendations depended on their confidence in their own decision-making abilities and the group dynamics of the child study team.

**Teacher Qualities**

Teachers are the primary individuals responsible for direct instruction of school-age children. How their students perform academically and socially is often a reflection on how effectively they deliver their instruction. Participants spoke about teacher attitudes plus effectiveness as keys to unlocking or stifling emotionally disturbed students' potential. This study's findings suggest that teachers who had a positive reaction to ED students could build

relationships with the student. Students typically made academic and social-emotional progress in that teacher's class. Recent literature supports these findings, suggesting that special education students with behavioral difficulties adjust better emotionally and behaviorally in the school environment if they have a close teacher relationship (Breeman et al., 2014).

Conversely, this study found the opposite if the teacher and student relationship was poor. The student often did not make academic or social progress with that teacher. Breeman et al.'s (2014) study also aligned with this finding. If there was a negative teacher attitude toward an ED student, the student did not respond well to the teacher academically or behaviorally. Having multiple poor teacher relationships was associated with students' overall poor school behavior. As a result, poor student performance was a factor when the social worker made a more restrictive placement recommendation.

This study's findings suggest that teachers had difficulty implementing positive behavioral supports. The absence of positive feedback and behavioral supports or interventions including positive feedback given to ED students was viewed by participants as an important factor when they considered educational placement in the general education setting. Participants spoke of positive behavioral interventions absent from the classrooms, despite guidance provided to the teacher. This finding is consistent with a study by Sprouls et al. (2015) that found teachers responded negatively to ED students at a higher rate than to same-aged peers, and provided less positive feedback. Additionally, Lewis et al. (2010) concluded that despite the need for evidence-based interventions, teachers do not offer them consistently, even in a self-contained setting. Some participants recognized that teachers' resistance to ED students could be rooted in concerns about students disrupting their instruction, lack of supports, and teacher training. These

concerns were also revealed in a study about teachers' attitudes toward behaviorally challenged students and inclusion (Hind et al., 2018).

**School Leadership and School Culture and Climate**

Based on participants' collective responses, this study found that school leaders can lead in shaping their schools' culture and climate if they aim to do so. This study adds to the literature from Lakomski (2001), which purports that organizational culture changes, whether positive or negative, affect the organization's learning, and the school leader is the key. Even if administrators do not intentionally seek to influence the culture and climate of their school, their actions or lack thereof do so by default. This study suggests that CST social workers believe that they can work collaboratively with school administrators and school staff to keep an ED student in the general education setting if a school leader sets the example. Existing literature supports these findings: Soodak et al. (1998) stated that teachers are more likely to be flexible and welcome behavioral students when the school administration promotes a supportive climate and culture that promote collaboration. Moreover, a study conducted by Ross-Hill (2009) bolsters this study's findings by concluding that the likelihood that general education teachers would collaborate with special education teachers to foster more inclusive practices for all students (including students with behaviors) hinges on adequate backing from school administrators. The school leadership, culture, and climate go hand-in-hand when the CST social worker has to contemplate placing an ED student in a program at a particular school.

**Challenges with Resources and District Programming**

Communities have the responsibility to offer services that benefit the people who live in that community and others. Additionally, school districts are responsible for providing all students with access to appropriate and quality educational programs. This study reveals that there is great difficulty accessing the ED student's required educational, mental health, and/or

community services. The fact that services can or cannot be accessed becomes a factor in the social worker's educational placement recommendation in the general education setting. This study's findings also reveal that if an ED student could have supplemental support from outside agencies to work collaboratively with the school, recommending or keeping the general education class was more likely. Participants reported that shortages of emotional and educational programs for at-risk and special education students have increased steadily over the past 10 years. These factors are in play when the social worker is recommending placement. If emotional supports were consistently and readily available, participants revealed that most of their ED students could attend an inclusion classroom and make progress. However, they reported that more often than not, the resources are not in place. Study results from research by Hendrickson et al. (1998) support the beliefs of the participants in this study; 50% of participants in the aforementioned study indicated that students could have been successfully educated in general education settings with proper/extra supports (Hendrickson et al., 1998).

In this study, resources in the self-contained settings needed were described as not enough to address the needs of ED students. However, the resources available in the general education setting were viewed as even less suitable. These findings are aligned with a study purporting that special education services for ED students are exceptional at times, but most often woefully inadequate (Kauffman & Badar, 2013). Furthermore, this study suggests that ED students rarely return to a general education setting. Findings in a recent study conducted by Hoge et al. (2014) revealed that only 14% of students in a self-contained environment transitioned to a less restrictive environment.

Participants agreed with the least restrictive environment mandates but acknowledged the reality of lack of resources, and they have minimal control over the resources. As of October 15,

2016, the percentage of ED students educated outside of the general education setting in New Jersey was 67% (NJDOE, 2016). Of that percentage, 28% were educated in separate settings. In the school district of study, 68% of ED students are educated less than 40% of the day in the general education setting (NJDOE Special Education Data, 2018). The lack of resources and supports appears to be one of the contributing factors. However, this revelation goes against special education laws dictating that the lack of supports in general education must not be a factor in decision making.

**Parental Involvement**

An abundance of research studies argue that parental involvement in children's education is important to their success. Gangolu (2019) found that parents' participation in their middle school children's schooling benefited the child, parent, and schools. Barger et al. (2019) talked about the positive correlation between parent involvement and students' emotional well-being. However, the literature has not scratched the surface of this theme of parental participation in educational placement decisions for ED students. This study adds to the literature on ED students and parental involvement.

ED students are a group of students who require involvement on the part of numerous individuals. The parent is instrumental in ensuring that all the intricate pieces fit together for their child's benefit. Participants explained that some parents are overwhelmed with daily responsibilities and challenges in their urban environment, such as poverty, crime, and violence. Furthermore, parents raising a child with an emotional disability have additional stressors, such as navigating educational and community resources. The more involved parents can see improvement in their children in school compared to parents who do not follow through or are non-responsive to school outreach. This study's findings suggest that positive or negative

parental involvement was a factor for some participants in making their placement recommendations.

**Student Academic and Behavioral Progress**

Knowledge and insights about a student's school progress are often obtained by gathering that student's academic and behavioral information. The way in which the CST social worker reviews and analyzes the information influences their decisions about the appropriate educational programming. This study suggests that participants considered the students' academic and behavioral functioning when considering their placement recommendations. This academic and behavioral information is gathered from various sources including past and current report cards, district and state assessments, social assessments, psychological assessments, educational assessments, medical documentation, teacher and parent reports, and classroom observations. The findings suggest that no one data source outweighed another. However, if participants thought one data point was more reliable, that information was given more consideration. Participants used their professional judgment to decide what information was reliable. If they thought the information provided in teacher or parent reports did not "ring true," it was viewed cautiously. Additionally, some participants did not believe that CST testing results always accurately revealed a student's cognitive, academic, adaptive, or emotional ability. Research indicates that in schools, the testing instrument is often biased (Gold & Richards, 2012).

Findings revealed that participants also considered the severity of academic and behavioral deficits when contemplating placement recommendations. If a student was reading more than three grade levels from their grade, the general education classroom was often deemed inappropriate to address the academic deficits. This study's findings suggest that many ED students are bright and have academic capabilities. Epler and Ross (2015) agree with these findings, as he argued that ED students typically have an IQ in the average range.

Participants reported that behaviors typically resulting in a recommendation for a setting outside the general education environment included physical aggression toward self and others, frequent elopement from the classroom, consistently not following classroom rules, and ongoing disruption of teacher instruction. Research by Hoge et al. (2014) mirrored this study's findings because it revealed that physical aggression was the top reason IEP team members recommended a self-contained setting for ED students. The CST social workers struggled with balancing the student's rights to be educated in the least restrictive environment with the student's academic progress and well-being. These findings are consistent with findings by Becker et al. (2014) that progress or lack of progress in a less restrictive environment was a significant factor considered in deciding placement for ED students.

**The Category of ED Classification**

A student's academic future can be guided all in a name. The term *emotionally disturbed* has a stigma with a life of its own, and the student gets lost in the weeds. A participant expressed the thought that the reactions of others toward *ED* were a visceral response that in time has become the norm in some school environments. Bandura's social learning theory (1971) revealed that people do not have to possess firsthand knowledge of something or someone to form an option or stereotype. Social workers are trained to focus on the whole child and disregard labels. Participants reported that it is difficult to promote inclusion efforts in the school environment when most staff cannot let go of the stigma associated with the ED classification.

Along with school staff, parents struggle with accepting the disability name. Parents have voiced concern about the term *emotionally disturbed* even when they acknowledge their child has mental health challenges. This study's findings revealed that the CST social worker must carefully explain the special education code guidelines and how their child meets the eligibility criteria. The stigma, real or perceived, has caused some parents to deny consent to implement

special education services. Therefore, a decision about services and educational placement cannot be made by the CST social worker or any CST member.

## Implications for Theory

Educational institutions are run by persons from varied backgrounds and experiences to come together for a common goal to educate children effectively. CST social workers painted a picture of their personal experiences and relationships with other school staff related to the ED student. This study explored the social learning theory. Bandura's (1971) theory implies that external influences and a person's cognitive makeup play major parts in their behavior. Our predictions are based on what we think of ourselves, others, available information, and the environment which impacts our decisions and actions. Predictions, whether positive or negative, have consequences for the predictor or others.

The findings from this study found that CST social workers' thoughts on how other staff would behave within the school influenced the social workers' subsequent actions on behalf of the ED student. If the social worker perceived the teacher or class environment as positive, the social worker might be more likely to recommend that teacher's class. Conversely, if the teacher's competency or class environment was in question, the social worker might look for another class or program for the student. The response consequence (Bandura, 1977) was already decided before the actual outcome was known. Response consequences can also be attributed to the teachers and administrators who reportedly verbalize concerns about students without knowing the students. Their predictions could be due to another social learning theory component which says that behavior is learned only after repeated exposure to the environment and the consequences associated with the behavior.

Social workers report depending on various sources and data points when gathering information about an ED student. They spoke about how they have to determine the sources'

trustworthiness when gathering the information, which they describe as a tricky and daunting task. Relying on multiple data points assists with discovering the sources' commonalities and the outliers. Data is key in a social worker's hypothesis about a student's needs when making a recommendation. One of the theory's tenets claims that informative feedback leads a person to hypothesize behaviors likely to succeed, guiding future behavioral actions. However, positive outcomes that stem from the social worker's behavior depend on the accuracy of the hypothesis and environmental factors. Additionally, participants' graduate school training undoubtedly shaped their thoughts and behaviors. The way in which a person perceives the underlying reason for the student's behaviors dictates how they interact with and assist them (Wiley et al., 2014).

## Implications for Practice

The findings of this study might offer school districts the opportunity to address the factors influencing ED students being educated in the general education classroom. The school district could partner with local community agencies to provide more support to students with emotional needs. To combat the shortage of placement options during the year, the district department should seek to improve their placement forecast system and hire more teaching staff to reduce or eliminate the space capacity issue. For professional development to be effective, it cannot be presented in a once-a-year training. As a practice, CST social workers can provide monthly professional development to school staff around creating positive and supportive environments and strategies that work well for students with behavioral and emotional issues. The social worker and other CST members can have monthly collaborative meetings with school administration and teachers on best practices to educate students classified as emotionally disturbed.

To engage more parents, the district should put parent involvement initiatives into practice. The initiatives should include soliciting parents of ED students to be parent volunteers

in the building to keep them from feeling that the only time they engage with the school is when their child misbehaves. At the beginning of the year, the principal and teachers should have a "get to know you" orientation with parents of students with emotional issues. The meeting will go a long way in establishing positive relationships among administration, teachers, parents, and students. Fenton et al. (2017) suggest that schools need to learn from parents/guardians to understand their children better. Also, the IEP team could schedule more frequent IEP meetings instead of conducting only the mandated once-a-year meeting. This will allow more reflection by all IEP members to discern what is working and what areas need to be revisited in the IEP and classroom.

As a practice, teachers should send home daily positive messages (via Google Classroom, Class Dojo, or other platforms) to parents about their students. Every ED student should be linked for the year with a general education buddy with similar interests and positive social skills. Additionally, CST members should only recommend removing an ED student from a general education setting in the case of a recent functional behavioral assessment (FBA) and an implemented behavior intervention plan with documented interventions. Finally, social work and teacher education programs can provide content in their courses to address factors that impact ED student placement, especially for their students interested in urban education.

## Implications for Policy

ED students are disproportionately educated in self-contained classes across the country, including New Jersey. Based on this study's findings, the district should create a policy that requires all teachers, administrators, and other school staff to attend at least a series of annual professional development training. The topics should include the benefits of inclusion and emotional and behavioral disorders, including misconceptions and effective and supportive teaching strategies. The training should also be a part of new hire training for all school staff.

When matching teachers to instruct behavioral disability classes, there should be a policy that requires ongoing intensive professional development on how to challenge ED students academically, behavioral management techniques, and building teacher-student relationships. There can be training for school administrators, child study team members, and teachers on the purpose of LRE and how to implement practices that promote LRE for all students, but especially ED students.

To further assist in including more ED students in general education, when yearly school budgets are created, there must be monies allotted to provide adequate resources in the general education classrooms to support students with emotional issues. Additionally, legislation should be introduced pertaining to the Emotionally Disturbed classification and calling for new legislation revising or eliminating the category at the state and federal levels.

### Recommendations

A district-wide task force should be created to survey teachers and staff on what supports they feel they need to service ED students in the least restrictive environment. The district can also survey teachers and school administrators to reveal their thoughts about educating ED students in the general education setting. The school district can review the effectiveness of prior programs such as the LCSW program to decide whether or not its reinstatement or a similar program is warranted. Additionally, the Office of Special Education can evaluate special program services for effectiveness and implement change according to findings.

Although this study was limited to CST social workers in an urban district, the issue of ED students being educated outside of the general education setting is a national issue, and is not exclusive to urban districts. Thus, it would be beneficial to explore influences on CST social workers in suburban districts and rural districts. Factors such as an ED student's age, grade, and race could be incorporated in a future mixed-method study. Future research could also focus on

93

interviewing all three CST team members (LDTC, psychologist, and social worker). Furthermore, teachers, parents, and sometimes students are members of the IEP team making the IEP educational placement decisions. Therefore, a study could be conducted that includes interviews with teachers, parents, and teachers in urban and suburban districts regarding their thoughts about factors that influence where students classified as emotionally disturbed are educated.

A quantitative study could be conducted, as it allows for a larger sample size and can focus on all IEP team members in multiple urban districts. The study could focus on how placement decisions are made for ED students. Moreover, a study on what factors influence CST social workers and other CST members to determine student eligibility under the ED category would be useful. Research indicates that decisions about whether a student is behaving appropriately are often based on the teacher's or staff member's cultural experiences (Oelrich, 2012). The cultural background of staff versus the ED student should be studied to see if this is a factor. This study did not address race or cultural differences. Finally, a document analysis of IEPs for ED students should be conducted so that all data do not originate from participant reporting. Future research must be used to expand the literature to discuss the educational opportunities afforded to students classified as emotionally disturbed.

### Conclusion

Child study team social workers are influenced by multiple factors when recommending an educational placement for ED students. Some of the factors are related to the social workers' backgrounds and values. Other factors are external and related to other staff members, resources, and parents. Additionally, bias on the part of the social worker, teachers, school administrators, and other staff can be factors in what type of program the ED student is educated in. The

literature supports this study's findings. Moreover, this study expands on the research

surrounding educational placement decision making through the eyes of CST social workers.

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**Informed Consent Form**

<u>Researcher's Affiliation</u>

Pia Moore is a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Education Leadership, Management and Policy at Seton Hall University in South Orange, New Jersey.

<u>Purpose of the Study</u>

Research is being conducted on, "Influences Impacting Child Study Team School Social Workers Decision-Making in a New Jersey Urban District on Placement of Students Classified Emotionally Disturbed." The purpose of the study is to explore the decision-making process of NJ CST school social workers in an urban school district as it relates to placement of Emotionally Disturbed (ED) students. Specifically, how and what influences (if any) on the social worker might contribute to ED students' educational placement not in Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).

<u>Description of Procedure</u>

Research procedures include the following: research participant's completion of a demographic questionnaire and participation in one digital recorded, in depth semi-structured interview that will be approximately 45-60 minutes in duration.

<u>Demographic Profile Questionnaire</u>
These demographics include such as highest degree obtained and years of experience as a CST social worker.

<u>Interview Guide Protocol</u>

Sample questions that will be asked of each participant will include:

- Can you tell me what led you to become a CST Social Worker?
- What information sources (formal and informal) do you consider when considering your recommendation for educational placement for a student classified as Emotionally Disturbed?
- Describe what factors at the school and or district level influence your educational placement recommendations?
- What challenges have you experienced with recommending a general education setting for students classified as ED?

Statement of Voluntary Participation:

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Participants are not being forced to participate in this study by anyone, for any reason. Refusal to participate in this study will not result in any consequences or any loss. It is the participant's right to "withdraw" or "opt out" of the study or the interview at any time.

Anonymity Preservation

Anonymity is not possible because the researcher will know the participants as part of the interview process.

Confidentiality

All interview responses will remain confidential and pseudonyms (aliases) will be assigned to each participant. Participant's identities will not be revealed in preliminary or published material. During the study, the dissertation mentor and committee members will have access to the coded information through the researcher.

Audio Recordings of Individual Interviews

In order to document the statements made by the participants accurately, audio recordings of the individual video call interviews will be conducted. Each participant will be asked verbally for their permission to audio record their respective interviews. The video will not be recorded. Participants will also be asked to sign the Informed Consent Form acknowledging that they have given permission to be interviewed and for the interview to be audio recorded. In an effort to protect participants' identities, those individuals that have agreed to be interviewed will be identified on the recordings and in the written findings by their assigned pseudonyms.

Data Storage

The audio recordings will be made via a personal digital audio recorder. Participants will be identified by a pseudonym (alias). Audio files will be kept on a separate, password protected USB memory device. The recordings will be uploaded to the investigator's lab top, saved to a USB memory device and then deleted from the investigator's lab top. The password protected USB memory key will be locked in a file cabinet in the office of the researcher. Only the researcher will have direct access however, the dissertation committee members will have the right to access the data files upon request. The audio recording will be transcribed by a professional transcription company. All electronic and raw data will be kept for 3 years and then will be erased and/ or destroyed.

## Confidentiality of Records

All information obtained as a part of this study will be kept confidential. The only individuals that will have access to the data is the investigator and the three-member dissertation committee members.

## Description of Reasonably Foreseeable Risk or Discomfort

There is little to no foreseen risks or discomfort involved in the completion of this study. There is a risk that information shared via the internet, email and/or online material can be in danger of being hacked.

## Description of Direct Benefits

There are no direct benefits for participating in this study. Your participation in this study will provide valuable information in further understanding the factors that may contribute to the educational placement recommendations for ED students.

## Participant Compensation

There is no payment, or any other remuneration provided to participate in this study.

## Alternative Procedures

The are no alternative procedures.

## Contact Information

Investigator/Researcher Contact Information:

Pia Moore

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Department of Education Leadership, Management and Policy

400 South Orange Avenue

Jubilee Hall, Room 418

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Institutional Review Board

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## Letter of Solicitation

Dear Social Worker,


My name is Pia Moore. I am a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Education Leadership, Management and Policy at Seton Hall University in South Orange, New Jersey conducting my doctoral research on "Influences Impacting Child Study Team School Social Workers Decision-Making in a New Jersey Urban District on Placement of Students Classified Emotionally Disturbed." I am reaching out to you because I am seeking participants to be interviewed for my study on the research topic communicated above.

The purpose of my study is to The purpose of this study is to focus on child study team school social workers in an urban school district and will attempt to determine how and what influences on the social worker contribute to the educational placement of the ED student. Additional, if students are placed outside of general education, what determines the student's opportunity to be educated with non-disabled peers. This study is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Michael Kuchar, a professor in the Department of Education Leadership, Management and Policy at Seton Hall University located in South Orange, New Jersey.

Child study team social workers who are currently employed full time in your district are eligible to participate in this study by completing a short demographic questionnaire and will participate in a 45 to 60-minute interview.

The interview will be conducted at a place and time that is convenient for you between April 1, 2020 and June 1, 2020. During the interview, I will ask you questions about your professional experiences and practices as a Child Study team and how those may play a part in your education placement recommendations for students that have an Emotional Disturbed Classification.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you grant permission, the interview will be recorded with a digital voice recorder. Information from this research will be used solely for the purpose of this study and any publications that may result from this study.

All interview responses will remain confidential and pseudonyms (aliases) will be assigned to each participant. Participant's identities or other identifying characteristics will not be revealed in preliminary or published material. During the study, the dissertation mentor and committee members will have access to the coded information through the researcher.

The audio recordings of one on one interviews will be made via a personal digital audio recorder. Participants will be identified by a pseudonym (alias). Audio files will be kept on a separate, password protected USB memory device. The recordings will be uploaded to the investigator's lab top, saved to a USB memory device and then deleted from the investigator's lab top. The password protected USB memory key will be locked in a file cabinet in the office of

the researcher. Only the researcher will have direct access however, the dissertation committee members will have the right to access the data files upon request.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this study. If you have any questions or would like to participate, please contact me as soon as possible at pia.moore@student.shu.edu.

Sincerely,

Pia Moore
Doctoral Candidate
K-12 Education Leadership, Management and Policy
Seton Hall University College of Education and Human Services

## Appendix C

## Demographic Information Questionnaire

Thank you for your participation in this study, *Influences Impacting Child Study Team School Social Workers Decision-Making in a New Jersey Urban District on Placement of Students Classified Emotionally Disturbed*

In order to facilitate the interview, please fill out the following demographic questionnaire. **Please note: Any identifiable information will be kept confidential.**

1. **Name (a pseudonym name will be assigned for interview) _____**

2. **Email Address_____**

3. **Gender_____**

4. **Age_____**

5. **Ethnicity: _____**

6. **Highest degree earned:  Bachelors_____, Masters_____ Doctorate_____**

7. **License(s) held in NJ:  Licensed Social Worker (LSW) _____   Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW)_____   Other _____**

8. **How many total years of experience do you have working as a social worker?_____**

9. **How many total years of experience do you have working as a CST social worker?_____**

10. **How many years of experience do you have working as a CST social worker for your current district?**

11. **Have you made at least 5 educational placement recommendations for students classified as Emotionally Disturbed (ED)? ___ Yes ____No**

12. **What grade levels have you worked with as a CST SW?  Elementary (K-5) _____ Middle (6-8)_____ High School (9-12)_____**

13. **Are you assigned to complete CST duties daily? ___Yes  ____No**


**Thank you for filling out this questionnaire.**

**Interview Guide Protocol**

**Pseudonym (alias)**_____

**Institution Pseudonym:** _____

**Date of Interview**_____ **Start Time:** _____ **Location**_____

| Research Questions Addressed | Interview Questions | Sub-Questions |
|---|---|---|
| Background questions to establish background, rapport and supplement Demographic Questionnaire. | What led you to become a Child Study Team (CST) Social Worker? | Describe your experiences as a CST SW in your current district. Describe any other professional work social work experiences you have. |
| What factors influence child study team social workers' decisions to recommend an educational setting other than the general education classroom? | What factors at the school and or district level influence your educational placement recommendations? | Describe what formal or informal resources are currently available to you to assist you with your placement recommendations Probe: academic resources? behavioral resources? community resources? school climate? |
| | What is your level of understanding of the NJ administrative code in regards to educational programs and services for special education | Describe your familiarity with the educational programs your district provides a special education student |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | students? | classified as ED?<br><br>Describe your familiarity with Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) mandate?<br><br>What are your thoughts on the LRE mandate?<br><br>What challenges if any, have you experienced with recommending a general education setting for students classified as ED? |
| How if at all, does the academic history of ED students influence the social worker's placement recommendations? | How do you gather and analyze academic information on the student? | Describe the academic information/data sources (formal and informal) you consider when recommending educational placement for ED students<br><br>Of the sources mentioned, which would you say are the most influential in your recommendations and why?<br><br>How often do you consider the data sources (you mentioned prior) in making a placement recommendation?<br><br>Does your process differ depending on your role with the student?<br><br>Probe: case manager, |

| | | evaluator or counselor |
|---|---|---|
| How if at all, does the behavioral history of ED students influence the social worker's placement recommendations | How do you gather and analyze behavior information on the student? | Describe the behavior information/data sources (formal and informal) you consider when recommending educational placement for ED students<br><br>Of the sources mentioned, which would you say are the most influential in your recommendations and why?<br><br>How often do you consider the data sources (you mentioned prior) in making a placement recommendation?<br><br>Does your process differ depending on your role with the student?<br><br>Probe: case manager, evaluator or counselor |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Interview Wrap- Up**<br><br><br>**Opportunity to share additional comments or elaborate on anything already shared** | **Do you have any questions for me regarding this interview or is there something you would have wanted me to ask regarding your experience as CST social worker and educational placement of students classified as ED?** | |
| **Opportunity to correct any misinterpretations.** | **If I need to clarify any of your responses, may I contact you?** | |

May 1, 2020

Pia Moore

████████

██████████

Re: Study ID# 2020-066
Dear Ms. Moore,

The Research Ethics Committee of the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved your research proposal entitled "Influences Impacting Child Study Team Social Workers Decision Making in a New Jersey Urban District on Placements of Students Classified Emotionally Disturbed" as resubmitted. This memo serves as official notice of the aforementioned study's approval as exempt. Enclosed for your records are the stamped original Consent Form and recruitment flyer. You can make copies of these forms for your use.

The Institutional Review Board approval of your research is valid for a one-year period from the date of this letter. During this time, any changes to the research protocol, informed consent form or study team must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to their implementation.

You will receive a communication from the Institutional Review Board at least 1 month prior to your expiration date requesting that you submit an Annual Progress Report to keep the study active, or a Final Review of Human Subjects Research form to close the study. In all future correspondence with the Institutional Review Board, please reference the ID# listed above.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

*Mara Podvey*

Mara C. Podvey, PhD, OTR
Associate Professor
Co-Chair, Institutional Review Board