FACTORS CONSIDERED IN DETERMINING EDUCATIONAL SETTING
FOR STUDENTS WITH EMOTIONAL DISTURBANCE

by
Matthew Hoge

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As members of the Dissertation Committee, we certify that we have read the dissertation prepared by Matthew Hoge entitled: “Factors Considered in Determining Educational Setting for Students with Emotional Disturbance”

and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

_________________________________________________________ Date: 5/17/13
Carl J. Liaupsin

_________________________________________________________ Date: 5/17/13
John Umbreit

_________________________________________________________ Date: 5/17/13
Jolenea Ferro

_________________________________________________________ Date: 5/17/13
Eliane Rubinstein-Avila

Final approval and acceptance of this dissertation is contingent upon the candidate's submission of the final copies of the dissertation to the Graduate College. I hereby certify that I have read this dissertation prepared under my direction and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement.

_________________________________________________________ Date: 5/17/13
Dissertation Director: Carl J. Liaupsin
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SIGNED: Matthew Hoge
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This work honors the many families who opened their doors and let me share in their lives. Working with you and your children has been the most gratifying part of my work.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Frameworks</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude Theory</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholder Theory</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal Law: Emotional Disturbance and Educational Setting</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional disturbance</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational setting</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal Guidance for Determining FAPE and LRE</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAPE</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placement</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Court Decisions Related to LRE</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Roncker v. Walter</em> (1983)</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sacramento City School District v. Rachel H</em> (1994)</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Clyde K. v. Puyallup School District</em> (1994)</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Hartmann v. Loudoun County Board of Education</em> (1997)</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuum of Educational Placements</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research on Placement Factors ................................................................. 37

Differences in students with ED across settings .................................... 38

Factors considered in placement decisions ...................................... 46

Conclusion ............................................................................................... 51

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY ............................................................... 52

Research Design .................................................................................... 52

Participants ............................................................................................ 53

Focus group participants ..................................................................... 53

Recruitment procedures ...................................................................... 54

Participant protections ......................................................................... 55

Participant compensation .................................................................... 55

School districts ..................................................................................... 56

Schools .................................................................................................... 56

Data Collection ....................................................................................... 59

Focus groups ......................................................................................... 59

Semi-structured interviews ................................................................. 60

Document requests ............................................................................... 63

Analysis .................................................................................................. 63

Organization of and immersion in data ............................................... 63

Coding and writing analytic memos .................................................... 64

Trustworthiness .................................................................................. 65

Credibility ......................................................................................... 66

Transferability ..................................................................................... 67
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS .................................................................68

Theme 1: Personal beliefs, knowledge, and attitudes influenced the factors IEP teams considered when determining educational setting.68

Understanding and beliefs towards ED influenced placement ......................69

Lack of knowledge of procedures led to violation of legal intent ...............70

Personal interactions trumped data for decision-making .....................71

Non-school based student factors impacted placement decisions ..........73

Family and home life as a non-school based factor ............................74

Gender and ethnicity as non-school based factors .............................76

Academic goals and internalizing behavior issues carried little weight ....78

Theme 2: Teacher and resource-based factors were as critical as student-based
decisions to the decision-making process ..........................................79

Teachers’ skills, willingness and personality traits influenced placement
decisions .........................................................................................80

The influence of teacher skill set .....................................................80

The influence of teacher willingness .................................................83

The influence of teacher personality traits .......................................85

District and school resources influenced team decisions ....................87

Lack of a full continuum of placements limited options ....................87

Limited staffing and resources led to restrictive placement choices ....88
Theme 3: The needs of a variety of stakeholders influenced IEP team placement decisions

General education teachers exerted significant influence

Principals considered impact of placement on staff and students

Psychologists felt pressure from school and district-based stakeholders

District and state level voices influenced placement decisions

Parents and outside resources held little authority in placement decisions

Summary

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

What ED Services Reveal About Special Education Practices

What We Think Affects What We Do

It is as Much About Resources as it is the Student

Placement Decisions as an Interpretive Process

The Peculiar Influences of Family and Academic Factors

Limitations

Recommendations for Practice

Recommendations for Research

APPENDIX A: STATEMENT OF POSITIONALITY

APPENDIX B: EMOTIONAL DISABILITY PRIVATE PLACEMENT (EDP)

APPENDIX C: SAMPLE QUESTIONS FROM FOCUS GROUPS

REFERENCES
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Focus group participants .................................................................55
Table 2. School district demographics .........................................................57
Table 3. School districts’ settings offered for students with ED ..................58
Table 4. ED population served at participating schools ..............................61
ABSTRACT

The present study identified factors influencing determination of educational setting for students with Emotional Disturbance (ED). Determination of most appropriate educational setting, a key provision of students’ individualized education programs (IEP) continues to be one of the most contentious issues in special education. Focus group interviews were conducted to identify and understand factors contributing to placement decisions for IEP teams. Qualitative analysis of interviews produced three themes. First, IEP team members’ beliefs, knowledge, and attitudes of ED influenced their recommendations for placement decisions. Second, teacher and resource-based factors played as critical a role as student-based factors in where students were placed. Third, needs of school-based stakeholders (i.e. teachers, principals, district officials) competed with those of the student with ED. Previous interview-based research on factors related to the determination of educational setting for students with ED relied predominantly on a single population: teachers. This study extends the research literature by including psychologists and principals as participants. The findings, provided by a cross section of school districts and personnel, highlight challenges related to the provision of high quality educational services for students with ED.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Two facts stand with little dispute regarding the education of children with emotional disturbance (ED). First, students with ED experience tremendous difficulties in domains critical to success in school and life that include behavior, social skills and academic achievement (Kauffman & Landrum, 2009; Wagner et al., 1991; Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2004). Second, to improve outcomes for students with ED, educators must provide effective and individualized educational programs (Kennedy & Jolivette, 2008; Shriner & Wehby, 2004; Simpson, 2004).

Yet where students with ED (or any other disability) should be educated continues to be a contentious issue in special education among principals, teachers and school staff (Bateman, 1994; Bradley, Doolittle, & Bartolotta, 2008; Crockett and Kauffman, 1999; Heflin & Bullock, 1999; Palley, 2006; Yell, 1995). Passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975 served to increase educational access for students with disabilities (Katsiyannis, Yell, & Bradley, 2001; Yell, Drasgow, Bradley, & Justesen, 2004). Amended and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 (and subsequently amended in 1997 and 2004), the law provides that students with disabilities will be educated alongside their nondisabled peers to the greatest extent possible, otherwise known as educating students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (IDEA, 20 U.S.C.§ 1412). LRE must be determined for each student; it does not represent one specific setting (Yell, 2012). This LRE or placement decision is made by a school-based team (IEP team) that typically consists of a school administrator, school psychologist, special education teacher, general education teacher, the child’s parent or guardian, and (where appropriate) the child.
Unfortunately, the ability of the IEP team to make good educational placement decisions is hampered by the fact that IDEA fails to provide explicit guidelines regarding how to make such decisions (Becker et al., 2011; Crockett, 1999; Yell, 2012). This lack of guidance leaves IEP teams to make decisions based on a range of factors that may or may not be directly related to providing the child with the most appropriate educational placement (Becker et al., 2011; Telzrow & Tankersley, 2000). Researchers have identified a varied and often conflicting assortment of factors predicting educational setting for students with ED. These include factors related to the student’s IQ (Kauffman, Cullinan, & Epstein, 1987; Mattison, 2011), academic skills (Lane, Wehby, Little, & Cooley, 2005a; Mattison, 2011; Stoutjesdijk, Scholte, & Swaab, 2012), behaviors (Bullock, Zagar, Donahue, & Pelton, 1985; Hoge, Liaupsin, Umbreit, & Ferro, 2012; Lane et al., 2005a; Mattison, 2011), and demographics (Frey, 2002; Glassberg, 1994; Stoutjesdijk, 2012). Other localized factors include teacher perceptions (Bullock, 1985; Lane et al., 2005a; Martin, Lloyd, Kauffman, & Coyne, 1995), training of staff (Carran, Rock, & Rosenberg, 1994; Frey, 2002; Martin et al., 1995), and program qualities (Becker et al., 2011; Carran et al., 1994; Coutinho & Oswald, 1996; Hoge et al., 2012; Landrum, Katsiyannis, & Archwamety, 2004).

Several key case law rulings have brought some guidance to the table for IEP teams. According to case law, some of the key determining factors IEP teams must question when determining a student’s LRE include:

1. Does the segregated setting provide services that could not reasonably be provided in the non-segregated setting? *(Roncker v. Walter, 1983)*

2. Can supplemental services be used to provide educational services in the general education setting? *(Daniel R.R. v. Board of Education, 1989)*


Despite some guidance under case law, researchers have also found that the attitudes and beliefs of IEP team members (Cook, Cameron, & Tankersley, 2007; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996) and other staff (Klinger & Harry, 2006) can play a critical role the provision of special education services. As a result, IEP teams often rely upon localized and personalized criteria with which to make their determinations (Becker et al., 2011; Telzrow & Tankersley, 2000). In the case of students with ED, IEP team placement decisions may be impacted by the characteristics of students or the impact of these students on the environment. Epstein, Cullinan, Quinn, & Cumblad (1994) acknowledged that in many situations, teachers and students are unaccepting of the behaviors associated with students with ED. Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) reported general education teachers were less tolerant of students with ED compared to other disabilities. Both Fletcher (2010) and Lazear (2001) reported students with ED negatively impact the learning of classroom peers, resulting in lower scores in the areas of math and reading for non-disabled students. While researchers have identified that attitudes and beliefs can impact placement decisions, there have not been studies exploring the broad range of factors considered by IEP teams in making placement decisions for students with ED.

**Statement of the Problem**
The determination of educational setting for students with ED remains a critical domain for examination in special education (Glassberg, 1994; Kauffman et al., 1987; Landrum et al., 2004, McColl, 1992; Simpson, 2004). As IEP teams consider an assortment of variables when making decisions on educational setting, a need exists for researchers to continue the identification of these factors and further explore their appropriateness. By conducting focus group interviews with teachers, school psychologists, and principals, this study offers a novel and necessary vantage point of the factors influencing educators making determinations of educational setting for students with ED.

**Research Question**

1. What factors do IEP team members consider when determining the most appropriate educational setting for a student with emotional disturbance?

**Theoretical Frameworks**

Theoretical frameworks provide specific lenses to look at this problem. Two main theories inform the design and analysis of this study: Allport’s Attitude Theory (1935) and Freeman’s Stakeholder Theory (1984).

**Attitude theory.** This study relies upon Allport’s Attitude Theory (1935) to explore how IEP team members’ attitudes impact their recommendations for the setting where a student with ED should receive their education. Allport defines attitudes as “a mental and neutral state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon an individual’s response to all objects and situations with which it is related” (p. 810). Attitudes develop over time and are formulated by a wide assortment of factors that include our experiences, environment, and social influences (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; McGuire, 1969; Oskamp, 1977). Attitudes are a mixture of three primary domains: cognitive, affective, and
behavioral (Oskamp, 1977; Zanna & Rempel, 1988). The cognitive component relates to our perceptions, beliefs and thoughts; the affective element explains our emotional response or feelings towards something; and the behavioral factor encompasses the totality of our previous experiences or actions related to something or someone. Oskamp (1977) described attitudes as our disposition to respond positively or negatively to something or someone. Those things that we believe will impact us positively, we will have a more favorable attitude towards. The inverse is true as well; we will have negative attitudes towards those things that we believe will produce undesirable outcomes. Attitudes are not simply based on facts; individuals’ perceptions of the benefits (or downfalls) shape their attitudes as much as reality. Therefore, the development of attitudes is complex and multifaceted and can incorporate both positive and negative components (Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994).

The consideration of attitudes is a necessary component of this study as they inspire the perceptions and beliefs of IEP members, influencing factors they may choose to include in their decision-making processes (Pratkanis & Greenwald, 1989). How attitudes impact behavior is not a direct cause and effect relationship. Factors within attitudes dictate their influence on our actions. Such factors include: attitude strength, support for attitude, attitude specificity, and situational attitudes (Baron & Byrne, 1991; Brehm & Kassin, 2007). Attitude strength explains how when we have competing attitudes on a subject, the one we feel strongest about will impart greater influence on our actions. Attitude support notes that the more often we encounter or experience something, the more likely we are to have stronger attitudes about it. Attitude specificity states that the more precisely we define that which we have an attitude about, the more closely it is tied to our behaviors. And finally, situational factors tell us that the greater the proximity (time or place) of influential entities, be it people or environment, the more likely they
are to influence our attitudes.

Attitudes have an extensive history in research pertaining to students with ED. Most recently, this includes investigations of teacher attitudes (Evans, Weiss, & Cullinan, 2012; Schwartz, Wolfe, & Cassar, 1997; Wiley, Siperstein, Bountress, Forness, & Brigham, 2008), administrator attitudes (Oluwole, 2009), and student attitudes (McDaniel, Duchaine, & Jolivette, 2010; Nind, Boorman, & Clark, 2012).

Attitude Theory (1935) is one framework through which data will be analyzed. Attitudes impact behavior and have been shown to be significant in the study of issues related to students with ED. Since many researchers argue that latent, non-academic factors influence how IEP team members determine the appropriate setting for a student with ED, the relationship between attitude and behavior in Attitude Theory (1935) serves to make these visible.

Awareness that personal experiences and participants’ beliefs directly influence their own actions is a crux in the examination of the data. This makes Attitude Theory (1935) an appropriate and fitting lens with which to view this study. By conducting focus group interviews and relying on open-ended questions, participants will be required to share their perceptions and opinions on topics that reflect on their prior experiences, illuminating their individual attitudes.

**Stakeholder theory.** Freeman’s Stakeholder Theory (1984) pertains to organizational management and ethics and attends to the concerns and welfare of those who enhance or compromise the objectives of an organization (Phillips, Freeman, & Wicks, 2003). Freeman never intended nor expected Stakeholder Theory’s (1984) application to reach beyond the boardroom of business and into the meeting rooms of a school’s IEP team. Yet Stakeholder Theory (1984) has been used to explain and interpret educational practices before (Kirkland, 2012; Stone & Gruba, 2012). Freeman defines stakeholders as "any group or individual who can
affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" (Freeman, 1984, pg. 46). Given its wide interpretation, the terms ‘stakeholder’ and ‘organization’ have been used to mean different things within different contexts (Phillips et al., 2003).

Fortunately, the principles and concepts that encompass Stakeholder Theory (1984) blend perfectly into matters related to practice and management within schools. Stakeholders’ comprise the individuals that influence and are affected by the outcome of decisions related to an organization. All individuals impacted by decisions school personnel make therefore can be considered stakeholders. Several school-based stakeholders serve on IEP teams for students with ED: general education teachers, special education teachers, school psychologists, principals, and often district representatives (Yell, 2012). Stakeholder Theory (1984) serves to explain how these ‘stakeholders’ consider the most appropriate educational setting for the student with ED in the context of the needs of the school and other stakeholders.

Stakeholder Theory (1984) informs my study in its exploration of organizational processes. In my analysis, I utilize it to gain a better understanding of the following issues: What do IEP team members understand (or perceive) to be the effect of their placement decision on others (e.g. co-workers, students and parents)? Should decisions include moral and ethical domains or should they simply be about the optimal outcome for the school and district? Can decision-makers do the “best thing” for all parties involved? (Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Parmar, & de Colle, 2010). These questions, usually contemplated in the corporate boardroom, also pertain to IEP teams. In each decision they make, IEP teams must make determinations on these very issues.

The goal of any organization is to maximize value. A school’s value may be assessed by its efficiency using resources (budget), academic performance of its students, attitudes of
teachers regarding job satisfaction, or perception by families and members of the community.

Stakeholder Theory (1984) explores both how value is created in organizations as well as how the needs of others influence stakeholder decision-making (Freeman et al., 2010). Freeman asserts a central function of Stakeholder Theory (1984) is to help organizations answer the following questions:

1. For whom is value created and destroyed?
2. Who is harmed and/or benefited?
3. Whose rights are enabled and whose values are realized (and whose are not?) (Freeman et al., 2010)

IEP teams must address these very questions. IEP teams create an individualized special education program (IEP) for students with ED through the efforts of stakeholders that represent different entities inside and outside of the school. One component of a student’s IEP is the setting where they receive their education. The ultimate goal of the IEP team is to create the most optimal educational plan for the student and the school. Stakeholder Theory (1984) states that organizations must balance stakeholders’ interests through assessing and attending to competing view-points of individuals with direct interests in outcomes (Reynolds, Schultz, & Hekman, 2006). This balancing act occurs at both the individual (stakeholder) and organizational (school / district) level.

While not always the same person for each IEP team, one individual commonly is seen as the authority figure. It is this person’s role to balance the interests and motivations of the stakeholders involved (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). To this end, four practices commonly occur: proaction, accommodation, defense, and reaction (Carroll, 1979, Clarkson, 1991; Jawahar & McLaughlin, 2001; Wartick & Cochran, 1985). Proaction requires foreseeing and
aggressively addressing specific worries of stakeholders. Accommodation is similar, but is addressed in a more restrained approach. Defense refers to organizations doing only the minimum required to appease a stakeholder’s concerns. Finally, reaction occurs when the organization ignores or fights against the concerns of a singular stakeholder.

A critical aspect of Stakeholder Theory (1984) is that it recognizes the imbalances of power within organizations (Frooman, 1999). Stakeholder Theory (1984) recognizes that (1) certain stakeholders, based on their ability to assist an organization reach its desired outcome, will be treated differently than others; (2) these stakeholders are not constant and change over time; (3) and how these individuals function is dependent upon their importance to the organization relative to other stakeholders (Jawahar & McLaughlin, 2001). Those stakeholders who wield the most influence and control over resources often control disproportionate influence, or power in decision-making. Power is never equally disturbed amongst stakeholders. Dependency upon one or two stakeholders shifts the dynamic of power within groups and organizations (Frooman, 1999; Phillips et al., 2003). Stakeholder importance is directly related to need, relative to the other stakeholders (Phillips et al., 2003). Organizations do not exist to meet all of the needs of each individual stakeholder; rather, it is the interaction of these needs and the ensuing power shift that ultimately determines the actions of organizations (Rowley, 1997).
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

The determination of the most appropriate educational setting is a key component of students’ individualized education programs, IEP (Yell, 2012). Unfortunately, IEP teams lack clear criteria for determining the most appropriate educational setting (Becker et al., 2011; Crockett & Kauffman, 1999; Huefner, 1994). As a result, great variability exists in where schools place students and provide their education (Coutinho & Oswald, 1996; Landrum et al., 2004). Educational setting for students with emotional disturbance (ED) is of particular concern as they are educated in settings outside of the general education classroom at higher rates than most students with disabilities (Becker et al., 2011; Bullock & Gable, 2006; Coutinho & Oswald, 1996; Gagnon & Leone, 2005; Harris-Murri, King & Rostenberg, 2006; Slade et al., 2009). This occurs despite little evidence these placements meet their specific educational and behavioral needs (Greenbaum et al., 1996; Lane et al., 2005a).

Limited research presently exists on issues related to the determination of educational setting for students with ED. This review of the literature will share prior research on factors predicting placement as well as variables influencing where students with ED receive their education. This review is divided into three primary sections, 1) federal law’s determination of ED and appropriate educational setting, 2) the court’s role in clarifying how IEP teams may make their determinations, and 3) the research literature on factors predicting or influencing where students with ED receive their education.

The most influential factor impacting educational settings for students with ED is federal law. It both defines ED and outlines the rights and services afforded students. The first section of this chapter provides a brief history of special education law, the varying interpretations of
federal law, the federal definition for ED, and issues related to this definition. Finally, the legal provisions known as free and appropriate public education (FAPE), individualized educational program (IEP) and least restrictive environment (LRE) are discussed in detail.

The second section focuses on five cases that provide guidance to IEP teams in determining LRE for students with disabilities. As summarized by Yell (1995), the court findings direct IEP teams to answer the following questions: Did the school take the appropriate steps to educate the student in the general education classroom? What are the benefits of the general education classroom versus a more restrictive setting? How does the student with disabilities impact the education of peers? Does the student have opportunities to interact with non-disabled peers to maximum extent possible? Is a continuum of placements provided by the school district?

The final section reviews previous research related to the setting in which students with ED receive their education. The review is organized along two lines of inquiry: (1) research on differences found for students with ED or behavioral disorders across settings and (2) determinations of factors that impact where students with ED receive their education.

**Federal Law: Emotional Disturbance and Educational Setting**

Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975 ensures the rights of students with disabilities and provides federal funds to states towards their education. Currently known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (enacted in 1990 and amended in 1997 and 2004), the present law guarantees students with disabilities have their educational rights protected. These rights include (a) a free and appropriate public education, (b) procedural safeguards, (c) child identification and location activities, (d) an individual evaluation and determination of eligibility for a categorical disability, (e) development of an individual education program (IEP), and (f) placement in the least restrictive environment.

**Emotional disturbance.** IDEA names 13 categories (including ED) under which children and youth may receive disability services and provides language describing each category’s definition and services (20 U.S.C. § 1401(a) and 34 C.F.R. § 300.7(a) (1)-(b)(13)). IDEA defines a student with ED as an individual exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over an extended period of time and to a marked degree which adversely affects their school performance: (a) an inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory or health factors; (b) an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers; (c) inappropriate types of behaviors or feelings under normal circumstances; (d) a general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; (e) a tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems (34 C.F.R. § 300.8(c)(4)(i)). The definition further states the disability will include those with schizophrenia, but not students deemed to be socially maladjusted (34 C.F.R. § 300.8(c)(4)(ii)).

School teams and professionals not only have difficulty deciding where to educate students with ED; they also appear to have difficulty in determining which children and youth qualify as ED. In fact, ED continues to be one of the most highly disputed disability categories.
with regard to definition and appropriate determination of disability (Bower, 1982; Forness & Kavale, 2000; Neel & Rutherford, 1981; Nelson, Rutherford, Center, & Walker, 1991; Skiba & Grizzle, 1991; Stephens & Lakin, 1995). The definition has been criticized for (a) being vague; (b) containing contradictory and redundant components; (c) lacking a scientific research base; and (d) for its inclusion of the ambiguous term “socially maladjusted” (Center, 1990; Forness & Kavale, 2000; Olympia et al., 2004; Reddy & Richardson, 2006).

**Educational setting.** Prior to the passage of the EAHCA, many students with disabilities, especially those with severe behavioral problems, were excluded from public schools. The Office of Special Education Programs (2000) estimated that in 1970, only 20% of students with disabilities were educated in public schools with an additional 3 million students with disabilities not receiving appropriate services to meet their specific educational needs (Yell, 2012; Yell, 2004). Thus, a key provision of the EAHCA was the declaration that all children, regardless of the nature or severity of their disability, were entitled to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). Carried through IDEA and subsequent amendments, Congress protected the rights of children with disabilities by mandating schools to provide FAPE to all students. FAPE ensures that special education and related services (a) are provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without charge; (b) meet standards of the State educational agency; (c) include an appropriate preschool, elementary, or secondary school education in the state involved; and (d) are provided in conformity with the individualized education program (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. § 1401 [a][181].

A critical, and often disputed component of FAPE, is the phrase *appropriate education* (Yell, 2012). To ensure students receive an appropriate education, schools must develop and implement an *individualized education program* (IEP). The IEP outlines the specific special
educational and related services that will be provided and is developed in collaboration with the student, their family, and the school staff involved in delivering educational programs (Bateman & Linden, 2006). The written document must include: (a) a statement of the student’s present level of academic achievement and functional performance; (b) measurable annual goals (which may also include short-term objectives); (c) a statement of how a student’s progress toward the annual goals will be measured; (d) a statement of the specific special education, related services, and supplementary services based on peer-reviewed research; (e) the date the special education services will begin and the anticipated frequency, duration, and location of these services; (f) progress on state- and district-wide assessments; (g) appropriate objective procedures for monitoring student progress; and (h) a statement of how a student’s parents (or guardian) will be informed of his or her progress (Yell, 2012).

As noted above, FAPE requires the special education team to determine the educational setting in which the IEP will be provided. IDEA mandates, to the maximum extent possible, students with disabilities are to be educated with their non-disabled peers, hereby referred to as providing educational services in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (IDEA Regulations, 34 C.F.R. § 300.550[b][1]). More specifically, the law states:

…to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. § 1412).
Supplementary aids and services are defined as "aids, services, and other supports that are provided in regular education classes or other education-related settings to enable children with disabilities to be educated with nondisabled children to the maximum extent appropriate" (IDEA Regulations, 34 C.F.R. § 300.42). This may include, but is not limited to, specialized equipment for a student (e.g. wheelchair, augmentative communication devices, computers), environmental supports (e.g. preferential seating), school professional support (e.g. behavior specialist, one-on-one support), and instructional adaptions (e.g. pacing, modifications to assignment length, methods of presenting material). Schools must demonstrate they attempted to provide these aids and services prior to determining the general education classroom is not appropriate (Huefner, 1994).

Legal Guidance for Determining FAPE and LRE

Ambiguity inherent within the federal definitions of both FAPE and LRE has consistently contributed to disagreements among schools, families, and caregivers regarding the provision of an appropriate education. A review of the litigation history on these two provisions provides some guidance of the court’s interpretations.

FAPE. One of the first court cases to provide an interpretation of FAPE was Board of Education of the Hendrick Hudson School District v. Rowley (1982) (Yell, 2012). The case addressed the provision of related services to accommodate the education of a young student who was deaf and attending a public school. When the school deemed that one of the related services, the provision of a sign language interpreter, was no longer necessary upon the student entering the 1st grade, the parents requested a due process hearing. The lower courts initially found that while the student was doing better than the average student, her disability prevented her from reaching her full academic potential and thus she was being denied FAPE when not
provided a sign language interpreter. The Supreme Court, siding with the school, dissented from this ruling, but noted that specifically what was meant by appropriate education was not clearly defined in special education law. They further went to state that IDEA was not designed to provide an “equal” education. On this matter, Chief Justice Rehnquist wrote:

…the educational opportunities provided by our public school systems undoubtedly differ from student to student, depending upon a myriad of factors that might affect a particular student’s ability to assimilate information presented in the classroom. The requirement that states provide “equal” educational opportunities would thus seem to present an entirely unworkable standard requiring impossible measurements and comparisons. (Rowley, pp. 198-199)

The Supreme Court overturned the earlier courts’ opinions that the school was not meeting FAPE under special education law. They ruled that school districts are required to provide students with disabilities services “sufficient to confer educational benefit upon the handicapped child,” not necessarily the best education to students with disabilities (Rowley, p. 200; Wenkart, 2000). The recommended role of the courts following the Rowley ruling was to (a) determine if the IEP team followed procedural requirements of IDEA and (b) assess if the special education program provided educational benefit by reviewing the IEP and student progress (Yell, 2012). Courts were advised to exercise caution and not replace the decisions of educators with their own as they did not possess the “specialized knowledge and experience necessary to resolve persistent and difficult questions of educational policy” (San Antonio ISD v. Rodríguez, 1973, p. 42; Yell, 2012).

Following this decision, courts used the newly formulated Rowley standard to determine if a student was receiving FAPE. The two-part test consisted of the following questions:
1. Has the [school] complied with the procedures of the Act [EAHCA]?

2. Is the individualized education program developed through the Act’s [EAHCA] procedures reasonably calculated to enable the child to receive educational benefit?

(Rowley, pp. 206-207)

If the courts determine that a school has met these two standards, then the IEP is in compliance with FAPE (Yell, 2012). Violations of FAPE, following the Rowley decision, include (a) failing to include a classroom teacher or representative of a private school in developing a student’s IEP; (b) waiting longer than 6 months to evaluate a student and develop their IEP (Tice v. Botetourt County School Board, 1990); (c) changing a student’s educational setting without an IEP in place (Spielberg v. Henrico County Public Schools, 1988), and (d) failing to inform a student’s parents of their rights afforded through IDEA (Hall v. Vance County Board of Education, 1985; Yell, 2012).

There have been few cases in which the Rowley standard has been used to determine whether a student with ED was being provided FAPE. Cases involving students with disabilities other than ED do provide some guidance to its application. In Polk v. Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit 16 (1988), the parents of a 14-year-old boy with severe mental and physical disabilities sued contending the school did not provide FAPE. While the boy needed physical therapy services, his IEP only included consultative services from a physical therapist. Though the federal court sided with the school, contending the student did receive some educational benefit, this finding was later reversed by the appellate court, stating:

Congress did not write a blank check, neither did it anticipate that states would engage in the idle gesture of providing special education designed to confer only trivial
benefit…Congress intended to afford children with special needs an education that would confer meaningful benefit. (Polk, p. 184).

Schools and the courts did not easily determine what comprised a meaningful education. Initially the courts deemed IEPs appropriate if the student received minimal benefit (Osborne, 1992). Later rulings found this standard insufficient. Hall v. Vance County Board of Education (1985) required future courts, on a case-by-case basis, to determine the adequacy of the IEP and ensure it provides the student more than trivial benefit. In Carter v. Florence County School District Four (1991), the courts ruled FAPE had not been met as the goals written into the student’s IEP did not project for meaningful growth. The courts ruled that FAPE was denied in the case of J.C. v. Central Regional School District (1996) as the IEP did not include vital educational goals (Yell, 2012).

A substantial limitation of the previous rulings is their subjective nature. In Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District v. Michael F. (1997), regarding parents who believed their son was denied FAPE, the district court implemented a more objective approach. They asked:

1. Was the program individualized on the basis of the student’s assessment and performance?

2. Was the program delivered in the least restrictive environment?

3. Were the services provided in a coordinated and collaborative manner by key stakeholders?

4. Were positive academic and nonacademic benefits demonstrated? (Yell, 2012)

This four-part test was later used in Houston Independent School District v. Bobby R. (2000) where the court ruled a student with learning disabilities was receiving FAPE based on
school data that demonstrated the student had received academic and non-academic benefit (Yell, 2012). The court deemed that while the student was not progressing at the same rate as his non-disabled peers, based on his IEP goals, he was receiving a meaningful educational benefit. From this point, the courts were instructed to judge a “meaningful education” on a case-by-case basis.

**Placement.** A significant portion of disputes related to a student’s IEP pertain to placement (Bateman & Linden, 2006). Court rulings regarding FAPE are significantly important in how they help determine placement, that is, a student’s educational setting. Placement though can be interpreted more broadly to include the components of the setting, including (a) facilities; (b) equipment; (c) location; and (d) the personnel required to deliver the special education and related services (Weil v. Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, 1991; Yell, 2012).

Placement decisions require multiple sources of information that can include aptitude and achievement tests, teacher recommendations, physical condition, social or cultural background, and adaptive behaviors (IDEA Regulations, 34 C.F.R. § 300.533[a][1]).

IEP teams must consider three factors when determining a student’s placement. First, placement decisions must be based on the student’s IEP. Inherent in this provision is that a change of placement cannot occur unless a student has an IEP in place (Lake, 2007; Norlin, 2009). Second, a student’s educational placement must be reviewed and determined annually (IDEA Regulations, 34 C.F.R. § 300.552 [a][1]). The educational placement is to be included as part of the yearly evaluation of the IEP. Finally, the placement must meet the criteria of LRE (IDEA Regulations, 34 C.F.R. § 300.533 [a][4]). Aligned with the LRE requirement is the provision by school districts of a continuum of educational placements (IEDA Regulations, 34 C.F.R § 300.551). The continuum of educational placements includes (a) full-time placement in regular classes with consultation from special educators or other specialists; (b) special classes
with part-time placement in regular classes; (c) resource rooms or classes; (d) special classes in regular schools; (e) special day schools; (f) homebound schooling; and (g) hospital or residential schooling (Gliona, Gonzales, & Jacobson, 2005).

**Court Decisions Related to LRE**

As IDEA does not clearly outline how schools are to determine where students with disabilities are to be educated, schools and parents have relied upon the courts to provide clarity and decision models for making this determination. The following section summarizes five noteworthy court cases that provide standards for determining if a student is receiving their education in their LRE.

**Roncker v. Walter (1983).** In *Roncker v. Walter* (1983), the parents of a 9-year-old child with moderate mental retardation requested their child be educated in the general education setting to have access to non-disabled peers. The school contended the best setting for their son was a special school for children with disabilities. While both sides agreed the student would need services in a special education setting, the issue at hand was whether or not those services could be provided at the student’s present school to allow greater integration with non-disabled peers. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit overturned an earlier decision and ruled in favor of the family. The court stated the intended preference of the law was that “mainstreaming be provided to the maximum extent when appropriate” (*Roncker*, 1983, p. 1063).

The long term impact of this hearing was the two-part Roncker Portability Test which would be used by future courts to determine if services provided in a segregated setting could be implemented in a general education setting (*Huefner*, 1994). The Roncker Portability Test included the following provisions:
1. Can the educational services that make a segregated placement superior be feasibly provided in an unsegregated setting?

2. If so, the placement in the segregated setting is inappropriate. (Roncker, 1983, p.1063)

**Daniel R. R. v. State Board of Education (1989).** In determining the most appropriate educational environment for students with disabilities, the courts permit schools to consider how the behavior of a student with a disability impacts the learning of peers. In *Daniel R. R. v. State Board of Education* (1989), the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit found the student to have a negative and harmful effect on the learning environment and ruled the school was justified in moving the student into a more restrictive setting. The court took into account the amount of time the teacher had to spend working with Daniel, which in turn took away time from other students. The ruling in *Daniel* (1989) made one critical distinction. In situations where FAPE and mainstreaming (educating the student in the general education classroom) are in conflict, the mandate to provide an appropriate education takes priority (Yell, 2012).

This ruling diverged slightly from the Roncker (1983) ruling. In the opinion of the court, Congress left the selection of educational methods and policies to the schools (Yell, 2012). The role of the court was solely to determine if these methods and policies complied with IDEA. The court asked two questions, known as the *Daniel* two-part, to make their determinations:

1. Can education in the general education classroom with supplementary aides and services be achieved satisfactorily?

2. If a student is placed in a more restrictive setting, is the student integrated to the maximum extent possible? (Yell, 2012)
Sacramento City School District v. Rachel H. (1994). On the heels of the Daniel (1989) ruling, the courts again addressed the topic of educational placement in Sacramento City School District v. Rachel H (1994). The parents of Rachel, an 11-year old girl with moderate mental retardation, advocated for more inclusive schooling to be offered by her school. They argued their daughter benefited socially and academically in the regular education classroom. The school district contended Rachel was too disabled to benefit from a fully inclusive placement. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit found Rachel’s inclusion did not negatively impact the teacher’s ability to teach or the other student's ability to learn. Resulting from this decision, a four-factor standard helped guide future decisions on educational placement. Future school teams and courts were asked to consider the following:

1. The educational benefits of the regular education classroom versus the special education classroom.

2. The non-academic benefits of the regular education classroom versus the special education classroom.

3. The effect of the disabled student on education of other students in the classroom.


Clyde K. v. Puyallup School District (1994). One of the most notable applications of the Rachel H. Four-Factor Test was in a case examining the appropriate placement for a student with behavioral disorders. In Clyde K. v. Puyallup School District (1994), the school district and parents of a child with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and Tourette’s syndrome disagreed over where he should be educated. The school contended that due to the student’s aggressive and disruptive behavior, (i.e., swearing, verbally harassing female students, physical assaults of classmates, and overall noncompliance), he should be educated in a segregated special education
program. The parents felt the placement was excessively restrictive. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit agreed with the school that the segregated setting was the most appropriate for the student, citing the third factor in the Rachel H. Test (1994) as the most important in their decision. They asserted:

*Disruptive behavior that significantly impairs the education of other students strongly suggests a mainstream placement is no longer appropriate. While school officials have a statutory duty to ensure that disabled students receive and appropriate education, they are not required to sit on their hands when a disabled student’s behavioral problems prevent him and those around him from learning.* (p. 1402)

**Hartmann v. Loudoun County Board of Education (1997).** Hartmann v. Loudoun County Board of Education (1997) provided guidance on IDEA’s mandate to include students with disabilities in the general education classroom to the greatest extent possible. This case addressed the inclusion of an 11-year-old boy with Autism. The student received part of his education in the regular education classroom, but engaged in physically aggressive behaviors so dangerous that five families removed their children from the classroom. The school recommended a change of setting to an Autism program. The parents contended this setting was too restrictive and violated the rights provided their child under IDEA. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit ruled in favor of the school, citing mainstreaming is not required if the following conditions are present:

1. The student with the disability would not experience educational benefits in the general education classroom even with the provision of supplementary aides and services.
2. The educational benefits obtained in a segregated setting would outweigh those in the general education classroom.
3. The student with the disability is a disruptive force in the general education classroom. 

(Hartmann, 1997).

Continuum of Educational Placements

In no category of special education is the continuum of educational placements more relevant than ED (Bateman & Chard, 1995). LRE was written into federal law to allow for alternative placements to be provided. Specifically in the Rowley (1982) ruling, it recognizes that the regular education classroom is not the optimal setting for all students. IDEA requires that school districts offer a continuum of educational settings to meet the varied needs of students with disabilities (Bartlett, 1992; Gliona et al., 2005; Norlin, 2009). Regulations require the following:

A. Each [school district] shall ensure that a continuum of alternative placements is available to meet the needs of children with disabilities for special education and related services

B. The continuum required…must:

1.) Include the alternative placements…(instruction in regular classes, special classes, special schools, home instruction, and instruction in hospitals and institutions); and

2.) Make provision for supplementary services (such as a resource room or itinerant instruction) to be provided in conjunction with regular class placement (IDEA Regulations, 34 C.F.R. § 300.551).

Few rulings apply specifically to the continuum of placements. The law does not require school districts to provide the full continuum. In coordination with the state, local districts must provide appropriate placement when a need is determined (Cordero v. Pennsylvania, 1993). A
school district cannot deny LRE simply as a result of not having the specific placement option (Tucker & Goldstein, 1992). Districts may send students to another school (public or private) if necessary to fulfill the student’s IEP (Yell, 2012). The IEP team is responsible for making these decisions.

One important area of debate is how IEP teams interpret movement into and out of the continuum of placements. Gliona et al. (2005) decreed that the two most damaging practices in special education were (a) the misinterpretation of LRE by presenting alternative placements along a continuum of levels and (b) the reference to alternative settings as “segregated” environments. Special education law provides little guidance regarding movement through the continuum. Disagreement most often focuses on if the continuum of educational settings is to be viewed as a hierarchy or cascade of settings.

The Education Act shows that Congress preferred the regular classroom placement. It is not apparent that once beyond a regular classroom, that Congress had a preference. Both PARC and Mills set up a hierarchy: regular classroom, special classroom, separate school. It is not clear from the Act that Congress also adopted this hierarchy. Section 1412 merely lumps special classes, separate schooling, and other settings together. (St. Louis Developmental Disability Treatment Center Parents Association v. Mallory, 1984)

Finally, the federal Office of Special Education provided clarity as to the provision of separate placements for students with disabilities. The development of a separate school for students with ED does not violate the laws as long as placement of the student into such facility is based on the IEP, not administrative convenience (Crockett, 1999; Sachais, 1986).

**Research on Placement Factors**
Researchers have sporadically addressed the issue of identifying the factors that determine where a student with ED will receive their education. As a result, a disjointed collection of isolated pieces of research paint a confusing picture as to what is truly happening relative to placement decisions. A journal search using the combinations of the following keywords was conducted: emotional disturbance, behavioral disorder, serious emotional disturbance, educational environment, setting, placement, and least restrictive environment.

Research included in this review of placement factors was required to meet the following criteria. First, studies primarily included students with emotional disturbance (ED), emotional or behavioral disorder (E/BD), or serious emotional disturbance (SED). Second, studies explored factors contributing to educational placement decisions or characteristics distinguishing populations across settings. Finally, studies were published in a peer review journal. Eleven studies met qualifications for inclusion.

In the following review of this literature, findings are organized into two categories: (1) research on differences in students across populations and (2) factors that impact where students with ED receive their education. Throughout these two sections, students with ED may be referred to as seriously emotionally disturbed (SED) as well as emotional and/or behavioral disordered (E/BD) depending on the language used by the authors. In other words, the terms used may vary among studies based on the year the study was published or state in which the study was conducted.

**Differences in students with ED across settings.** Bullock, Zagar, Donahue, and Pelton (1985) conducted one of the initial inquiries to identify differences amongst students with behavioral disorders across settings. Bullock et al. recognized that there was a paucity of research examining and comparing the behavioral characteristics of these students. The students
included in the study were not necessarily labeled ED. Rather, Bullock and colleagues used the following definition in selecting students in his study: “students...identified as those who demonstrate excessive and/or chronic behaviors that are asynchronous to the expectations of the dominant society whether in school or within spheres of the child’s life” (p.124).

To compare teacher perceptions of students with behavioral disorders, 184 teachers completed the Behavioral Dimensions Rating Scale (BDRS) (Brown & Bullock, 1970; Bullock, 1979) for 1078 students receiving educational or therapeutic services in facilities for emotionally disturbed or adjudicated students. Teachers recruited for the study worked in one of five settings: (a) resource room classrooms; (b) self-contained classrooms; (c) psychiatric hospital settings, (d) residential treatment centers, or (e) state training schools for adjudicated children/youth. The BDRS consists of 30 pairs of adjectives describing behavior. On a 7-point scale, raters identify which adjective in a pair best identifies the behavior typically performed by the student.

Factor analysis produced four perceived student behavior clusters, or factors that varied across educational settings. They were (a) aggressive / acting out, (b) socially assertive, (c) irresponsible / inattentive, and (d) tranquil / confident. Bullock et al. found teachers’ perceptions and ratings of the students varied across settings. Those working in residential treatment centers perceived their students to have fewer aggressive and disruptive behavior issues than those students in other settings. For teachers working in psychiatric hospitals, students were perceived to be less defiant and more attentive compared to students scored in other settings. Teachers of students in public school resource classrooms commonly reported their students as more irresponsible, inattentive and immature than staff from other settings. Finally, teachers working at both the state training schools for adjudicated youth and in residential treatment centers
reported their students to be more confident, less anxious, and calmer when compared with other settings. The authors recommended further evaluation into the appropriateness of settings for students with ED, calling into question the differential skill level of educators across environments.

Kauffman, Cullinan, and Epstein (1987) conducted one of the first studies that suggested a relationship between the characteristics of students classified as seriously emotionally disturbed (SED) and their educational placement. Special education teachers provided information on 249 students (204 male and 45 female) classified as SED educated who were educated across a variety of school placements in rural, suburban, and urban districts in Illinois and Wisconsin. Teacher’s completed questionnaires regarding student information related to: (a) age; (b) gender; (c) placement / educational setting; (d) intellectual functioning; and (e) academic performance (teacher estimate). Intellectual functioning scores were reported for 189 of the students either from the WISC-R (Weschler, 1974) or SIT (Slosson, 1971). In addition, teachers completed the Behavior Problem Checklist (BPC) (Quay & Peterson, 1975) for each student. The data were used to conduct an analysis of the interrelationship amongst the variables that may help predict educational setting. The authors concluded that students with SED with higher aptitude scores (IQ) were more commonly placed into mainstream settings. Despite expectations to the contrary, academic achievement and behavioral problems were not clear determinants of placement. This study was one of the first to raise an alarm regarding how students with SED are placed, with the authors noting:

“One possibility is that placement decision were made on the basis of non-subjective data that were not reported in this study. These findings might also be interpreted, however, as consistent with suggestions (McGinnis, Kiraly, & Smith, 1984) that placement
decisions are often made on the basis of subjective and inadequate information (Kauffman et al., pg. 182).

Intrigued by the findings of Bullock et al. (1985) and Kauffman et al. (1987) regarding factors that affect the placement of students with ED, Glassberg (1994) conducted an analysis of the relationship between the characteristics of students with ED and their placements. At the time of this study, students with ED were classified as mildly, moderately, and severely behaviorally disordered. This classification system often influenced a student’s educational setting. Glassberg aimed to identify variables with stronger links than those that had been found to only weakly influence educational placement (i.e., intellectual, academic, and behavioral factors).

The study reviewed school data for 252 students identified as behaviorally disordered (BD) placed in various special education settings in Saint Louis County, MO. Settings included mainstream and resource services (n=181), self-contained public school or local educational authority (n = 39) and self-contained buildings (n = 32). Researchers collected the following student data: (a) verbal, performance and full scale IQ scores for the Wechsler Scales of Intelligence for Children and Adults; (b) standard age scores (SS) of reading, mathematics, and written expression clusters from the Woodcock-Johnson Psychoeducational Battery Tests of Achievement; (c) student age (in months) at time of diagnosis; (d) length of presenting problems; (e) student race; and (f) gender. Glassberg found that age at time of diagnosis of disability was a strong discriminant variable in predicting placement outcomes when comparing students across three progressively intensive placements (resource rooms, separate classes, or separate public schools). Younger students more commonly were mainstreamed, while older students tended to
be placed in more restrictive settings. Despite some speculation, it was concluded that cognitive, academic, and behavioral factors did not contribute strongly to placement decisions.

Glassberg pointed out that her findings agreed in many regards with those of Kauffman et al. (1987); while one would expect intellectual, academic, and behavioral characteristics to correlate with placement decisions, this actually was not the case. In fact, some cognitive and academic factors, specifically the Performance IQ and Reading Achievement scores, were among the least powerful variables. In addition, demographic variables (i.e. race and socioeconomic status) were found to play a minimal part in placement decisions. An emerging theme at this point in placement literature was that variables outside those prescribed by IDEA regulations are often responsible for determining educational setting. Glassberg (1987) commented, “…cognitive, academic, and behavioral functioning correlate with ideal or recommended placement only. In the real world, clinical judgment and other nonacademic factors enter into placement decisions.” (p. 190).

Coutinho and Oswald (1996) conducted an extensive analysis of placement patterns nationwide for students identified with ED. The authors analyzed data available through the national federal IDEA database (U.S. Department of Education, 1994) for the years 1988 through 1991 containing child count, placement, and exiting information with a second database containing economic and demographic variables (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1992). The authors’ analysis focused on four education settings: regular class, separate class, resource room, and separate facility. Several important findings came from this study. First, placement into separate facilities was more common for students with SED than students with a speech and language disorder, mental retardation, or all other disabilities combined. Second, two
factors emerged as strong predictors of educational placement: (1) student ethnicity and (2) state and local public school educational revenues.

Finally, differences were found in the state-by-state placement percentages across environments. Sizeable variations were found for all four placement settings. This finding indicates that either (a) states use settings within their continuums differently or, as suggested by Coutinho and Oswald (1996), (b) national reporting systems do not accurately capture the specific services provided within settings for the education of students with ED. Based on the authors’ conclusions, it is likely large national studies of placement patterns will be ineffective in providing generalizable information. They noted:

Traditionally, increasing intensity of service has been associated with progressively more segregated settings, but this assumption may not be valid. Therefore, despite dissimilar profiles with respect to the percentages served in different settings, variation across states with respect to the services provided may be more apparent than real (pg. 49).

Landrum, Katsiyannis, and Archwamety (2004) also examined national trends in the educational placement of students with E/BD. The authors used data for all 50 states (and the District of Columbia) from the Annual Reports to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (U.S. Department of Education 1991-2000) and analyzed this data for students with ED in three settings: (a) general education; (b) resource; and (c) separate class. Over the 10-year period of the study, the placement of students with E/BD into separate classes and resource rooms declined slightly. An associated increase in placement into the general education classroom was found for this period. No data were reported on students educated in separate schools.
The most compelling finding of the study, in accordance with Coutinho and Oswald’s (1996) study, was that regional differences exist in the placement of students with ED across educational settings. For example, in 1998 the national percentage of students with ED educated in the general education classroom was 28%. In contrast, the Southern region (AL, AR, DC, DE, FL, GA, KY, LA, MD, MS, NC, OK, SC, TN, TX, VA, WV) placed only 21% of students with ED in the general education classroom. While regional factors obviously contribute to placement trends for students with ED, it is unclear from this study what the specific regional factors may be. Landrum et al. (2004) recommended future researchers examine local factors that influence programming decisions for students with E/BD.

Lane, Wehby, Little, and Cooley (2005a) continued the line of research of Kauffman et al. (1987) and Glassberg (1994) by exploring differences in academic, social and behavioral characteristics of students with ED in self-contained classrooms and self-contained schools. Participants included 37 teachers (9 from a self-contained school and 28 from self-contained classrooms) and 72 students, classified with a high incidence disability (primarily ED), (43 from a self-contained school and 29 from self-contained classrooms). At the outset of the school year, students were evaluated using the *Woodcock-Johnson III Test of Achievement* (WJ-III; Woodcock, McGrew, & Mather, 2001), curriculum-based measures (Boning, 1998) of oral reading fluency and reading comprehension and the block design and vocabulary subtests of the *Wechsler Intelligence Test-III* (WISC-III, 1991). Teachers completed two scales: *Social Skills Rating System* (SSRS; Gresham & Elliott, 1990) and *Walker-McConnell Scale of Teacher and Peer Preferred Social Behavior and School Adjustment* (Walker & McConnell, 1995). Finally, research assistants gathered background and archival information using the *School Archival Record Search* (SARS; Walker, Block-Pedago, Todis, & Severson, 1991).
Lane et al. (2005a) found that students educated in self-contained classrooms score higher in academic skills, including reading comprehension, oral reading, fluency, oral language, written language, broad math, and broad reading compared to those educated in the self-contained school. No significant difference was found in the social skills of students in either setting. Students in the self-contained school were more likely to receive disciplinary contacts and have negative narrative comments in their cumulative folders. Finally, students in the self-contained classroom scored higher on measures of internalizing behaviors. The findings from this study suggest individual student factors may influence educational setting. As this study did not examine how placement decisions were made, the findings simply inform researchers and practitioners about differences in students with high incidence disabilities who are assigned to two types of settings. In other words, this study confirms that students with high incidence disabilities in different educational settings do differ in terms of characteristics, but it does not explore how these student characteristics may lead to differences in placement.

The following study did not occur in the United States and thus is not bound by the guidelines of IDEA. However, it has been included in this literature review as it identifies two previously unidentified factors contributing to placement decisions for students with ED. Stoutjesdijk, Scholte, and Swaab (2012) studied the educational placement of 346 children with EBD in the Netherlands. Students were grouped into two categories based on their present educational setting: separate schools (n = 235) and regular classroom with special education support (n = 111). Four factors were assessed to evaluate their reliability in predicting educational placement for children with EBD; (1) problem behavior, measured with the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Verhulst, Van der Ende, & Koot, 1998) and the Teacher’s Report Form (TRF; Verhulst, Van der Ende, & Koot, 1997), (2) cognitive functioning (measured in
terms of academic performance and IQ via the *Weschler Intelligence Scale-Revised*), (3) child and family risk factors (contained within assessment reports compiled by school psychologists), and (4) family functioning, measured by the *Dutch Family Home Environment Scale* (Van der Ploeg & Scholte, 2008).

Three variables were identified as strong predictors of placement into separate facilities for special education. They included: (a) relational problems between child and caregiver, (b) academic performance, and (c) the age at which the child received youth care for the first time. Relational problems were found to be the strongest predictor of placement, supporting findings elsewhere in the literature that non-academic factors influence where students with ED are educated.

**Factors considered in placement decisions.** Researchers have explored differing approaches to better understand which factors predict where students with ED are educated. One approach is the study of school staff and IEP team members. The following studies examined factors considered by staff and team members when reintegrating students with ED back into less restrictive settings.

Carran, Rock, and Rosenberg (1994) collected data through survey questionnaires from 162 teachers and 31 administrators who worked in restrictive placements for students identified as SED across 6 nonpublic and 25 public schools in Maryland. Program and teacher variables collected included: (a) program reintegration orientation, (b) program demographics, (c) teacher experience and training, and (d) teacher opinion factors. The authors analyzed the data through a forced-order, hierarchical, set multiple regression analysis (Cohen & Cohen, 1983).

The authors identified three factors leading to higher rates of reintegration for students with SED back into general education settings. First, programs with a more positive
reintegration orientation had greater success returning students to less restrictive settings. These traits included (a) multiple reintegration options, which included part-day trials, (b) opportunities for special program teachers to become familiar with class expectations in the setting a student would be reintegrated), (c) site selection for reintegration based on recommendation of special program teacher, (d) incorporation of reintegration goals for all students, planned for at IEP meetings, (e) written and documented procedures for reintegration, and (f) reintegration training for special program teachers.

Second, characteristics of the program mattered. Those SED programs located in a wing of the school, as opposed to a separate building, reintegrated students at higher rates. For programs housed in a separate building, a location less than one mile from the reintegration site was most desirable. Public programs were found to be more successful than nonpublic programs at reintegrating students. In addition, programs with older student populations, smaller class sizes, and those that employed rotation class structures (as opposed to self-contained) also were found to be more successful at reintegrating students identified with SED into general education settings.

Third, teacher experience and training had an effect on a special program’s ability to reintegrate students into less restrictive settings. Those teachers with more reintegration training (i.e. schooling, in-services, and readings of professional literature), experience reintegrating students, experience working with SED students, higher levels of teacher education, and a specialization in special education were more likely to be successful in reintegrating students. This study supports the collective finding that non-student based factors impact where students with ED are educated.
Martin, Lloyd, Kauffman, and Coyne (1995) also explored the issue of teacher and team factors in placement decisions, but their work distinguishes itself on three fronts; (1) it addresses the issue of educational setting for students with BD, (2) it relies upon focus groups as its methods, and (3) it emphasizes the role of teacher perception. Martin et al. (1995) conducted group interviews with special and general education teachers to understand how teachers viewed different placement options, viewed their own role in placement decisions, integrated context into placement decisions, and (4) finalized their placement decisions. Two groups of teachers participated in the study, one from Arizona and one Nevada. The study group consisted of a total of 11 special and 3 general education teachers.

Five themes were found to be associated with the research questions. First, opinions varied regarding the benefits and drawbacks of the placement options available to students with ED. Second, teachers in the study believed schools were dealing with challenges they did not have the capacity to handle. Third, administrative procedures were seen as an impediment to providing appropriate services. Fourth, a lack of collaboration on placement decisions existed. Finally, teachers perceived their influence to be very minimal. Martin et al. (1995) noted, “Teacher comments on these themes indicate that there may be serious problems in the way placement decisions are typically made and that much additional research is needed to understand and improve the placement process” (p. 114).

Recognizing discrepancies in placement rates nationally, Frey (2002) focused on factors influencing the decision-making process regarding educational placement. The study examined factors impacting special education teachers’ recommendations for placing a student with ED into a more restrictive setting. The study specifically explored the factors of teacher efficacy, socioeconomic status (SES) of student, and child ethnicity. Sampling from 10 school districts
across the Denver metropolitan area, 350 special education teachers were selected for participation. Teachers completed the *Expanded Teacher Efficacy Scale* (Gibson & Dembo, 1984) and responded to an educational placement vignette. The educational placement vignette consisted of a case study of a student that required the teacher participants to make a recommendation regarding student placement (i.e., no change in placement, intensify services in the general education classroom and provide more pullout services, relocate the student to a specialized classroom or school for students with ED).

The study identified several variables that influence special educators’ decisions regarding the placement of a student with ED and the services that student may need in that placement. Teachers scoring high on the factor *classroom management / discipline* (their perception of their own skills) were more likely than their colleagues to recommend less restrictive settings. By randomly changing student traits identified within the vignettes, Frey (2002) was able to explore the impact of ethnicity and SES. Ethnicity, suggested by prior research to play a role in decision-making, did not impact teacher placement recommendations (Cohen et al., 1990; Hindman, 1989; Pope & Feyerherm, 1990; Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Gallini, Simmons, & Feggins-Azziz, 2006). Regarding SES, Frey (2002) found students described as lower SES were more frequently recommended for more restrictive placements. Despite the guidance provided by IDEA, Frey (2002) reported based on his findings that, “Educators need a framework for making effective placement recommendations that is currently absent in education” (p. 135).

Hoge, Liaupsin, Umbreit and Ferro (2012) explored factors used by teachers and teams in making placement decisions by interviewing key stakeholders from three alternative schools for students with ED. Participants, all working in alternative schools for students with ED, included
a school psychologist, a lead classroom teacher, and two school administrators. Participants recounted factors considered during placement decisions for students (N = 50) served at their school sites for the previous school year, whether the students had transitioned during that time period, and the reasons transitions had or had not occurred. A primary finding of the study was that few students, 14%, were transitioned from the alternative school to a less restrictive setting. However, the study also produced a broad array of factors that school personnel considered during the determination of placement and transition. Factors (reported as percentage of occurrence across all three schools) for placing the student with ED into the alternative setting included: aggression (86%), defiance (24%), running from classroom/school (20%), danger to self (14%), transfer from another setting (14%), and mental health concerns (10%). When making determinations to return students (N = 43) to less restrictive settings, participants cited the following factors as reasons not to change placement: failure to meet program wide goals (77%), aggression (42%), defiance (42%), parent concern (19%), home instability (19%), current placement determined to be LRE (16%), more evaluation of student needed (14%), behavior regression (12%), student resistance to transition (12%), mental health concerns (9%), running from classroom/school (7%), and no placement openings available for transition (2%).

The Hoge et al. (2012) study produced factors previously unidentified or explored in research on placement decisions. By allowing respondents to produce unique responses that later were used to create a menu of choices, Hoge and colleagues (2012) identified factors not easily found in a student’s special education cumulative file or through teacher and team member surveys. Furthermore, Hoge and colleagues (2012) highlighted a discrepancy between factors considered when placing students into restrictive settings and those considered when exiting and returning students to less restrictive settings. In agreement with Frey (2002), Hoge et al. (2012)
noted, “Determining where students fit best along the continuum of placements presents considerable challenges to special educators…no clear rationale exists as to how these students should move from setting to setting” (p. 8).

**Conclusion**

This review of the literature supports both the research question and the methodology presented in this study. The review demonstrates that a broad array of factors contribute to where students with ED are educated, including the student’s IQ (Kauffman et al., 1987; Mattison, 2011), academic performance (Mattison, 2011; Stoutjesdkijk et al., 2012); demographics (Frey, 2002; Glassberg, 1994; Stoutjesdkijk et al., 2012); reading and language skills (Lane et al., 2005a); levels of internalizing behavior (Bullock et al., 1985; Mattison, 2011); levels of externalizing behavior (Bullock et al., 1985; Hoge et al., 2012; Lane et al., 2005a; Mattison, 2011); relationship with primary caregiver (Stoutjesdkijk et al., 2012); and home life (Hoge et al., 2012). Additional factors have been described that exist outside the student, including teacher perceptions (Bullock et al., 1985; Lane et al., 2005a; Martin et al., 1995); teacher training and skills (Carran et al., 1994; Frey, 2002; Martin et al., 1995); and program characteristics (Becker et al., 2011; Carran et al., 1994; Coutinho & Oswald, 1996; Hoge et al., 2012; Landrum et al., 2004).

In addition, given the discrepancy with how regions of the country utilize settings along the continuum, national studies appear ineffective in understanding this special education practice, especially at the local level. Despite the prominent role of school psychologists as members of IEP teams, they have not previously been part of placement research. Finally, interviews have been shown to be an effective method for examining this topic.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research aims to bring clarity to complex questions not easily answered by statistical measures and relies upon the perspectives of those most directly involved in and affected by the practice in question (Rumrill, 2011). The practice examined in this study is the determination of educational setting. Focus group interviews including homogenously grouped participants (teachers, school psychologists, and principals) served as the primary method for collecting the data to be interpreted. The following sections present the research design, data collection methods, analysis procedures, and measures taken to address for trustworthiness. The researcher’s statement of positionality is included in Appendix A.

Research Design

A qualitative research approach that employed focus groups was selected because the research question involved developing a deeper understanding of the academic and non-academic factors considered by participants when choosing an educational setting for students with ED (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Seidman, 2006). As recommended by Becker et al. (2011), the assessment of perceptions held by IEP team members allows for a better understanding of how teams determine appropriate educational setting. Focus groups have been found to be an effective method to expose individual’s beliefs. Krueger (1994) notes:

The focus group interview works because it taps into human tendencies. Attitudes and perceptions relating to concepts, products, services, or programs are developed in part by interaction with other people. We are a product of our environment and are influenced by people around us (pg. 10-11).
Focus groups have previously been used to explore placement decisions. Martin et al. (1995) conducted focus groups to explore teachers’ perceptions related to educational placement decisions for students with ED. I employed a similar methodology to Martin et al. (1995), but expanded the participant pool in the focus groups to include school psychologists and principals. Finally, my decision to recruit participants from three distinct professional positions, across a diversity of schools and school districts allowed for richness in the data set, increasing the likelihood of unique responses and creating a more reflective picture of the practice at hand (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Participants

**Focus group participants.** A total of 17 participants were recruited to participate in one of three homogenous focus groups based on the following categories: teachers, psychologists and principals (Krueger, 1994). Each participant met the following criteria for participation:

A. Participant must have experience working on an IEP team for a student with the disability category ED.

B. Participant must have experience working on an IEP team responsible for determining a student with ED’s educational setting. (It was not necessary the individual had participated on a team that had changed a student’s educational setting.)

C. Participant must have knowledge about their school’s policy for determining a student’s educational setting.

Table 1 provides information regarding the composition of individual focus groups. The Principals’ group included five principals and one vice-principal involved in the day-to-day operations and decision making for their schools. The experience level of members from the
The group ranged from 2 to 23 years. The group consisted of three males and three females. Most principals had more than 10 years experience. The age of participants ranged from 30 – 55 years old.

Psychologists included individuals responsible for conducting assessments of students referred for special education. Many of these participants oversaw the administration of a student’s IEP at their school site. A total of six psychologists participated; all were female. The experience level of members ranged from 1 to 34 years and they ranged in age from 25 – 55 years old. One psychologist worked at two school sites, one being the districts self-contained school for students with ED.

The teachers group included individuals working either as general education teachers or special education teachers. As a result of a cancelation, this group had a total of five participants; all were female. Two teachers worked exclusively in classrooms for students with ED. Participants ranged in age from 30 - 60 years old and had an experience range of 5 – 30 years.

**Recruitment procedures.** I conducted a four-step process to recruit participants. First, I emailed all schools identified during conversations with representatives from the office of special education for each district. Second, I scheduled a meeting with the school principal for each school that expressed interest in participating in the study. Third, I presented the study to each principal, explaining who would need to be involved and what their participation entailed. Upon receiving approval from the principal, the principal and I identified staff at the school site that met the qualifications for participation. This method, snowball sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994), relied on an individual (school principals) who had familiarity with the population to identify participants that had knowledge of the topic to be explored. Finally, individuals
identified were contacted by email to set up a meeting and recruitment for participation in the study.

Table 1  
Focus group participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of participants</th>
<th>Age Range (years)</th>
<th>Experience (years)</th>
<th>Male / Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>30 – 55</td>
<td>5 – 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychologists</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25 – 55</td>
<td>1 – 34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principals</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30 – 50</td>
<td>2 – 24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Participant protections.** Each participant was provided a form explaining the research study to be conducted, their role, and advised of any possible issues related to their participation. The researcher answered questions and concerns participants had regarding their involvement in the study. Steps were taken to protect the privacy of all participants. All documents (transcripts, consent forms) were kept in a locked location. All recordings were stored on the researcher’s computer and password locked. In addition, no names of subjects or schools that were associated were used in the reporting of this data.

**Participant compensation.** Each participant received $100 following the completion of his or her focus group session. Individuals were made aware of compensation during the recruitment phase, the requirements to obtain compensation, and their requirements to report compensation.
School districts. This study aimed to capture a diversity of viewpoints across school districts. Three school districts in Arizona were selected for participant recruitment. These districts represent differing levels of urbanization, ethnic diversity, and composition of settings for educating students with ED. The researcher identified three districts that (a) were geographically close in proximity (within 50 miles of each other) to allow for inter-district participation in focus group; (b) represented differing levels of urbanization; and (c) offered different educational setting options within their continuum of placements. Table 2 presents demographic data and Table 3 identifies settings offered to students with ED within each school district included in this study.

Schools. Following review board approval by each school district, I contacted representatives from each district’s office of special education to identify schools for participation. I conducted stratified purposeful sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to include schools that comprised different grade levels and offered varied placement options across the continuum of educational settings for students with ED. Participants were recruited from a total of nine schools. One school included in the study was designated as an Emotional Disability Private Placement (EDP) by the state of Arizona. Criteria for EDPs and services delivered are provided in Appendix B. Each school district included in the study had access to EDP’s as placement options for students with ED.
Table 2

*School district demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Size *</th>
<th>Urbanization</th>
<th>Total Schools</th>
<th>% Non-white</th>
<th>Students w/ disabilities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>20,000</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>50,000</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Rounded to nearest ten thousand
Table 3

*School districts’ settings offered for students with ED*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>General Ed Classroom</th>
<th>Resource</th>
<th>Self-contained ED classroom</th>
<th>On-site ED-P</th>
<th>Off-site ED-P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ED-P: Emotional Disability Private Placement
Data Collection

**Focus groups.** The primary method to collect data was to conduct focus groups (Krueger, 1994). Focus groups were chosen not to reach consensus among participants, but to uncover their individual perceptions, attitudes, and opinions regarding factors that impact where IEP teams place students with ED (Krueger, 1994). Three individual focus groups were conducted: principals, psychologists and teachers. Each focus group consisted of 5-6 participants with at least one individual representing each of the three school districts. Marshall and Rossman (2010) recommended members of focus groups share a certain characteristic relevant to the study. In this case, members of focus groups occupied the same position in their schools (principal, psychologist, teacher). The interaction amongst peers who share the same professional position produced more thoughtful responses than had interviews been conducted individually. A semi-structured interview format was followed to allow for flexibility in groups’ discussions (Creswell, 2006). A central meeting site was selected to abate travel related issues for participants. A total of three focus groups were conducted over a 6-day period. Each focus group occurred at the same time of day and at the same location. Participants were provided snacks and drinks at each session.

My role as moderator of the focus groups was to teach participants the process of participation, pose questions that promoted dialogue, supervise participation in the group to allow equal involvement, and monitor time to ensure all questions were addressed (Krueger, 1994). Krueger’s (1994) recommendations for the types and order of questions were followed. This included (a) an opening question to establish a sense of community; (b) introductory questions to introduce the topic broadly; (c) transition questions to move the discussion towards the participants’ relationship with the study; (d) key questions tied directly to the research
question; and (e) ending questions to allow participants to summarize their thoughts on the subject.

My goal as moderator was to allow for flexibility within discussions and ask follow-up questions when necessary. As a result, the same questions were not necessarily asked in each focus group. A list of questions asked in the focus groups is provided in Appendix C.

Semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured interview was conducted with the school psychologist from each school. One interview, lasting between 5-10 minutes per site, was conducted to collect data on students with ED enrolled at the site for the previous school year (2011-2012). This interview served to provide context as to schools involved in the study. The following data regarding students with ED was collected: total number of students served, gender, ethnicity, and current educational environment. No individualized student data was collected (e.g. “We have 4 male and 3 female students, 2 of which who are Caucasian”). This information is presented in Table 4.
Table 4

**ED population served at participating schools**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Total ED Population</th>
<th>Grade levels served *</th>
<th>M / F</th>
<th>Caucasian</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Native American</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>2 / 1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>8 / 1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>11 / 2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>10 / 4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>16 / 2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>8 / 0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>2 / 0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>6 / 2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 **</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>E, M, H</td>
<td>63 / 7</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* E (Elementary school); M (Middle school); H (High school)

** School 9 was an ED-P, or self-contained school for students with Emotional Disturbance.
### Table 4
*(continued)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Total ED Population</th>
<th>Grade levels served</th>
<th>Gen Ed Classroom</th>
<th>Resource</th>
<th>Self-contained classroom</th>
<th>Self-contained School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9*</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>E, M, H</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* E (Elementary school); M (Middle school); H (High school)

** School 9 was an ED-P, or self-contained school for students with Emotional Disturbance.
**Document requests.** The final method to collect data was a request for documents from each school. Schools were asked to provide documents that specifically outlined how setting determinations were made for students with ED. As students with ED have a specialized setting in the state, ED-Ps, the researcher requested documents that outlined a model for making determinations for this setting. No school had documents outlining specific procedures for determining the educational environment specifically for students with ED.

**Analysis**

Focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed. The researcher reviewed and coded the transcripts to answer the research question. Marshall and Rossman (2010) recommendations were followed to process and analyze the data: (a) organize the data; (b) immerse in the data; (c) generate categories and themes; (d) code the data; (e) offer interpretations through analytic memos; (f) search for alternative understandings, and (g) report findings (pg. 209). Each phase included reduction, the removal of unnecessary data to maintain manageable amounts and interpretation and the bringing of meaning to words of the participants.

**Organization of and immersion in data.** Focus group interviews served as the primary form of data to be analyzed and interpreted by the researcher. Semi-structured interviews with school psychologists and documents requests helped to provide context to the research. To organize the data, the researcher kept notes as to the time and place the data was collected, the individuals who participated in providing the data, and where it was to be stored. All final pieces of data were stored on the researchers computer and password protected.

Prior to conducting analysis of the interviews, the researcher read through the transcripts from each focus group twice as well as listened to the focus group recordings. This method allowed me as the research to approach the data inductively. In addition, I reflected on the prior
research literature as to factors impacting where students with ED are educated and looked to find its relationship to the data. This approach allowed me to both recognize agreement with previous findings in the transcripts as well as take note of new emerging factors.

Coding and writing analytic memos. My coding of the data was guided by three primary elements. First, my personal beliefs and experiences from working with schools and students with ED informed my interpretation of the data. Secondly, my reading of the research literature on the topic made me aware of factors (1) previously identified and (2) requiring further attention. Finally, Attitude Theory (1935) and Stakeholder Theory (1984) provided a critical lens to sort through the data. By searching for developing themes and patterns, I was able to build conceptual ideas to help understand factors related to placement decisions that quantitative analysis alone could not provide.

Following the process of immersing myself in the data, I began to code the transcripts. A line-by-line coding of the transcripts for each focus group was conducted. Codes consisted of phrases and words. At this stage, codes were unique to each line of the transcript. For some lines of text, more than one word or phrase was used for coding. For example, one school psychologist’s statement, “It is pretty much my call and if I say that the student needs a certain placement, then I don’t know if there is ever any objection to it,” was coded as “defining personal role” and “power balances in decision-making.” The focus group format produced discussions by participants that often centered on a single subject or concept for periods of time. As a result, I wrote analytic memos during the coding process to track thoughts that were developing throughout my reading of the data. This follows the recommendations of Wolcott (1994) who encouraged writing notes as part of the research and coding process.
A review of codes and analytic memos followed. I identified and organized codes that related to one of the three influences of the analysis: my personal beliefs and experiences, the research literature, and the frameworks for analysis. To organize the codes, I performed clustering (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). Clustering entailed identifying unifying relationships within codes and constructing the more central concept that they encompassed.

I went back and recoded the transcripts with the new clustered codes. As patterns began to emerge, I continued to make analytic memos to reflect and chronicle my interpretations of the data. From this I created categories that would later become the findings of this study. The first category was “Participants’ attitudes towards ED” which included comments related to the perception of ED, what data should be used in placement decisions, and how that data was reported. The second category was “Teacher and resource-based factors” that contained comments related to the teachers working with students with ED, school settings and their descriptive qualities, and the role of non-school based resources. The final category, “Stakeholders’ considerations,” covered comments associated with how members perceived their role in the IEP meeting, what impact they saw for others based on their placement recommendation, and how they balanced the needs of the student with ED with other members of the school. Using these categories I began to organize and construct my findings. My presentation of the findings, when appropriate, provides the words of the participants to allow the reader opportunity to view the connections between the analytic findings and they data from which they were derived (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002; Jones, 2002).

Trustworthiness
Guba (1981) propose four criteria for establishing the trustworthiness of findings in qualitative research. These include (a) credibility; (b) transferability; (c) dependability; and (d) confirmability. The follows sections discuss how I addressed each criterion in this study.

**Credibility.** Credibility refers to the internal validity of a study. The research must demonstrate how congruent the findings are with reality (Merriam, 1998). To provide credibility, this study relied upon methods (i.e. focus group interviews) well established in qualitative research. As recommended by Yin (2009), the study relied upon a method previously employed by Martin et al. (1995) to answer a related research question.

An additional measure of credibility is the researcher’s relationship with the topic under examination. Lincoln & Guba (1985) note that interviews with participants are enriched when the researcher has engaged for a period of time with the subject under examination. As demonstrated in my positionality statement found in Appendix A, my having worked extensively in Arizona as an insider (teacher) and outsider (consultant) to programs serving students with ED provided me a familiarity with the culture of participants and programs included in this investigation.

Finally, approaches were taken to encourage honest responses from participants. I relied on five practices to increase participants’ willingness to provide candid answers. First, I informed each participant of their rights to leave the study at any point they felt uncomfortable or unable to participate. Second, I allowed participants to spontaneously respond during focus group discussions in lieu of calling on individuals. Third, I reminded participants of the confidentiality expectations for myself and others participating in each focus group. I provided detailed explanations for how data would be stored and protected. Fourth, I explained my role as an independent researcher and my separation from their schools and districts in which they work.
Finally, I took measures to increase my personal credibility, an important aspect in qualitative researcher, by informing participants of my background working with students with ED as well as my training as a researcher (Alkin, Dailak, & White, 1979; Patton, 1990).

**Transferability.** Transferability concerns the external validity or generalizability of a study. Stake (1995) argues that while qualitative research commonly focuses on unique cases, it presents important examples within a broader group. The transferability of findings is the determination of the reader. I have provided thick description of the (a) rationale for the study conducted, (b) individuals who participated, (c) methodological procedures for collecting and interpreting data, and (d) the context within which it occurred to allow the reader to determine the generalizability of the findings within their own personal context.

**Dependability.** Dependability accounts for the reliability of the study. I met bi-weekly with advisors to discuss the progress of my study. Specifically, I sought input from members of dissertation committee regarding design, implementation, and reporting of findings for the study. To this end, I have reported the research design and implementation of the study and provided details outlining how data was collected and analyzed.

**Confirmability.** Confirmability addresses the researchers relationship to objectivity within the study. One essential criterion to confirmability is the researcher’s recognition of possible predispositions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The reporting of my positionality as it relates to the study serves as a reflection of influences that may shape my beliefs and assumptions.
Chapter 4

Findings

In this chapter I provide findings from an examination of transcripts for three occupationally homogenous focus groups: teachers, school psychologists, and principals. Findings integrate the discussions of the three groups and are presented as three themes. My analysis focused on how placement decisions were influenced by (1) individualized education program (IEP) members’ attitudes towards students with ED, (2) non-school based factors, and (3) IEP members’ considerations of the impact of their decision on staff, peers, and the school district as a whole. While participants reported trying to adhere to the guidelines outlined in special education law and court rulings, there were strong factors influencing the perspective they brought to IEP meetings. A summary of the findings is provided at the conclusion of this chapter.

Theme 1: Personal beliefs, knowledge and attitudes influenced the factors IEP teams considered when determining educational setting.

The following section highlights how the beliefs and experiences of IEP team members informed their attitudes regarding the most appropriate educational setting for students with ED. The purpose of this theme is to highlight examples. While singular incidents do not convey the actions or beliefs of all members, they do provide a valuable glimpse into a central problem for determining setting: bias. Individuals’ perspectives, shaped by their knowledge and experiences, combined with highly interpretive federal guidelines, allowed subjective factors to be included in the decision-making process. The following sections showcase how attitudes affected educational settings for students with ED.
Understanding and beliefs towards ED influenced placement. IEP team members’ understandings and beliefs about the disability category ED influenced their recommendations of setting. The participants described ED as a disability still not well understood by most educational staff members. This led to extreme descriptions of students identified as ED that portrayed students as too challenging to be served by general education teachers. One characterization of students with ED commonly expressed by participants was the belief that these students were a population of children deeply scarred from either abuse or deprivation in their lives.

**Principal:** These kids come from some time of traumatic experience. Whether it is loss of parents. Abuse. When we first get them at our school, we shower them with attention. We build trust with them. We make them feel a part of the school.

On the other end, this population was perceived as a constant threat to school safety and security.

**Teacher:** I think that, in society today, in light of recent horrible events. There is still a lot of fear. The term emotional disability puts fear in some people. Even when you are talking about a child. And people are people. We work with these kids and know them and love them. But I think some people. They might not have the skill set. It is not their fault. But they are afraid.

In many cases, the simple labeling of a student as ED invoked a strong desire for the school to “do something”. The “do something” most commonly voiced was for a change of placement to a setting more fit for the needs of a student with ED. The reputation surrounding the disability played a significant role in shaping the beliefs and perceptions of those asked to work with these students. All three groups described general educators as significantly ill-prepared to work with students with ED.
Most participants reflected that students with ED evoked strong emotions from staff. The average teacher did not have a background in ED, an understanding of the disability’s relationship to the student’s behavior, or the skill set to enable students with ED to be successful in the classroom. Participants reported that this fueled an underlying belief for many teachers that the general education classroom was not capable of supporting the needs of students with the most challenging behaviors. With little to no first-hand knowledge of alternative environments themselves, most staff members still believed an ED-dedicated setting must be better suited for students with this disability than their own classroom. The following quote, which represents a common sentiment expressed by participants, reflects how attitudes and perceptions of the efficacy of a setting supported a teacher’s justification for a more restrictive setting.

**Teacher:** Usually you see a child who is in crisis. Who needs the structure of the smaller class. And structure is the key word there. Who needs to be able to bond with the adults. Because they can’t handle all of the transitions in their life that a general education classroom usually has with it.

**Lack of knowledge of procedures led to violation of legal intent.** Participants universally recognized a process was required to be followed in making a change of placement. Despite this, IDEA guidelines contributed in a limited manner to the determination of a student’s educational setting. School psychologists demonstrated the strongest working knowledge of IDEA guidelines and adherence to the steps schools must follow for making changes to a student’s IEP. Members of the teacher and principal’s groups had familiarity with special education law but deferred to the decisions of the school psychologists. One principal reflected, “The only thing I really recall is just studying some law in special education. But nothing in formal training. As far as what you need to provide.”
Despite having awareness that processes were in place for making a change of placement, participants expressed several ways schools have adapted procedures that likely violate the intention of special education law. One example reported within each group was loosely organized discussions by staff on the subject of student placement that did not include parents. Teachers, in the break room or when passing in the hall, would state to one another that a student’s setting needed to be changed. These discussions served to develop a unified plan prior to meeting with families and the strategies to sell the recommendation. Discussions of changing student placement were common and casually mentioned in schools. As one teacher working in a self-contained class said with frustration, “I will walk the hallways and I’ll have a teacher say. That one is yours. And that one is yours. I was already up to 18 [students] in my self-contained class.” A psychologist shared a similar scenario highlighting how many school staff members have their minds already made up, “They will say you need to evaluate him. He needs to go to self-contained program. So, placement is almost decided before I have conducted an evaluation.” Changes of placements were casually described as intervention probes; decisions that could be adjusted later on if they did not work out.

**Personal interactions trumped data for decision-making.** Determinations of educational setting are made based on data. A revealing finding of this study was not if teams collected data. They clearly did. It was what data they chose to base their decisions on that was most revealing. Both quantitative data and qualitative assessments by school professionals played a part in determining educational setting. Schools did rely upon quantitative tools like functional behavioral assessments (FBAs) to evaluate students. But they were further influenced by anecdotal comments collected in a student’s file or shared by staff members during meetings. Participants reported relying upon their own eyes more often than data to inform their opinion:
**Principal:** You can get a good picture of what kind of student you have by looking at a lot of that data. But until you get that student right in front of you on a day to day basis. That’s when you can put your own pieces with that information you have.

Participants within each group voiced similar statements. Teachers commented broadly about bringing data (student tests, examples of work) to IEP meetings. But they felt their most valuable contributions were what they saw going on in the classroom and their interactions with parents. Participants did not question the subjectivity of these forms of data. Most participants described the student’s cumulative file and IEP as insufficient to providing the information necessary to work with the student. Meeting with the student one-on-one and talking with the family shaped their points of view about the student. In addition, the school psychologists relied upon an assortment of data outside of academic performance to guide their understanding of a student’s needs. One shared, “My eyes go straight to that background information. The clinical interview stuff from the families. How the pregnancy went. The birth process. All of that. The health of the family. Mental health.” Participants did not report choosing qualitative data based upon the influence of any specific IDEA guideline. More so, qualitative data allowed for their personal beliefs to contribute to the placement decision process.

Participants reflected that the reporting and collection of numeric data was problematic. This contributed to its devaluation by many IEP team members. This occurred for two primary reasons: perceptions of reliability and validity. Two examples serve to highlight these issues. First, psychologists expressed little confidence in the ability of general education teachers to collect and report data in a reliable fashion. As one lamented:

I am finding in the general ed population it is hard for [teachers] to know what we mean by ‘collecting data’. I am finding [they] are not as well trained on how to do that. Or at
least they don’t feel like they have the time. Which goes back to the other concern. So I don’t often get a lot of really good information about a kid. I get a lot of impressions and feelings.

Another psychologist described the use office discipline referrals (ODRs) to highlight issues related to reliability. Teachers’ use of ODRs was shaped by their experiences and beliefs in their own ability to modify student behavior. Some teachers used ODRs as a method to punish inappropriate behavior. Others perceived that students with ED could not be suspended and thus completing ODRs was a waste of time. Third, teachers in more restrictive settings rarely used ODRs and relied on alternative methods to record student behaviors.

Several participants also reported that other staff members consider common measures in schools invalid for assessment and evaluation of students with ED. One participant discussed conducting an FBA but having it thrown out because members of the team did not value its contribution to determining appropriate educational setting. Participants contended individuals’ lack of knowledge of measures used for students with ED, as well as their personal beliefs and experiences, influenced their perception of the validity of these tools.

**Non-school based student factors impacted placement decisions.** Issues with perceived reliability and validity of the collected quantitative data also permitted more qualitative points of view to influence where students with ED were educated. Participants framed goals for students with ED in broad, subjective language, using phrases like, “no major blow ups”, “academic progress”, “ability to effectively voice concerns”, “pro-social behavior with other students” and “ability to manage own behavior”. Evaluations of these goals commonly were left to the perceptions of individuals within the IEP team, not measurement systems. As one psychologist admitted, decisions resulted from, “…the convergence of
subjective data. You are trying to have this convergence. And so, there are all kinds of pieces. Not all of it observable and measurable.”

Decisions of educational placement may have followed procedural steps, but were highly influenced by IEP members’ biases and interpretations. Several districts relied on a change-of-placement committee to oversee decisions into the most restrictive educational environments. One participant discussed the types of questions the committee commonly asks:

“What are the diagnoses? What are the community agencies involved? How have the parents been involved? Are they easy to work with? …Who is the teacher in there? Are they going to get along?

As a result, the individual attitudes of members within IEP teams dictated what factors ultimately decided where a student would be educated. The following sections highlight some of the factors commonly cited by IEP team members as influencing their decisions. The section also describes some factors that were noticeably absent from the IEP team members’ decision-making process.

**Family and home life as a non-school based factor.** Participants reported considerable attention given to “non-school based” factors. These factors often were evaluated based on a team member’s assessment of student’s family life, including the quality of parental involvement and the frequency with which a student’s living situation changed. Participants indicated IEP team members held strong beliefs about the role families and family life play in the manifestation of emotional disturbance as well as its treatment. As one teacher described, “Sometimes when I work with some parents who I feel are really limited or have so many issues themselves at home, you see how you can help. You are hoping you are going to be some kind of stable influence for that child.”
Participants’ perceptions of insufficiencies in a student’s life, coupled with their own personal beliefs as to the role the school served in addressing those deficits, contributed to their points of view of most appropriate setting. IEP team members actively worked to collect knowledge about families to inform their thoughts and beliefs. Likely unbeknownst to families, their interactions with school staff did not simply serve to provide information about a child. IEP team members looked to glean information as to whether issues at home were contributing to the child’s behavior. Members of the teachers’ group shared information IEP team members sought to uncover in meetings:

**Teacher 1:** And another big issue in our district is, what is going on with the whole family? I really like to question what is going on in that whole family. Because it affects that child. In so many different ways.

**Teacher 2:** And what is the stability of the family? Is the family all in upheaval?

**Teacher 3:** And we might not say this in an IEP meeting. We certainly wouldn’t. But we might say it to each other afterwards. Well the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.

While issues related to a student’s personal life were never brought up directly by the moderator, concern about home and family life permeated all three discussions. It is important to note that while groups were specifically asked about the role of bias in their decision-making, no participant connected it to perceptions of family. As one teacher expressed, “Because sometimes you see that the parent, their inability to cope is so severe, that you realize you are the help for that child.” Bias even worked to maintain a student’s placement:

**Teacher:** I have a student who has a stay at home dad and a working mother. And it is like, wow, two parents. They are really positive about the school and so we decided to keep that child at our school.
Self-contained classrooms and schools for students with ED were portrayed as therapeutic environments. In describing the function of these settings, participants used words like “nurturing” and “family feel” to explain how they fulfilled the needs of a student with ED. It was unclear why these same qualities would be present in a self-contained classroom or school, but not in the general education classroom for these students. Descriptions of these settings focused significantly on serving a student’s ‘emotional needs’. Rarely did participants express how they specifically addressed student’s educational and academic needs.

Concern regarding quality of family life varied across groups. Psychologists rarely commented on or mentioned the quality of family as a factor in the decision process. Their comments centered on the level of involvement by parents, assessed by attendance at school meetings for the student, and how easy or difficult they were to work with. The principal and teacher groups more often expressed comments of valuation towards parents, making several remarks as to the quality of the student’s family life. These sentiments were coupled with confrontational experiences working with parents and produced statements of frustration, highlighting what they viewed as one of the complications involved in serving some students with ED.

**Gender and ethnicity as non-school based factors.** Many previous studies examining where students with ED receive their education have focused on specific student demographics and their relationship to placement. Responses from participants revealed how sensitive issues related to student demographics may be influenced by the attitudes of IEP team members. Two demographic topics were explored: *gender* and *ethnicity*. Each demographic factor was addressed specifically during focus group discussions.
Gender was injected into the focus group discussions when participants were asked to provide insight as to why boys represent a larger population than girls in more restrictive settings for ED. One principal suggested IEP teams worry about gender issues that may arise from placing a female student in a primarily male environment. Participants expressed concern over classroom dynamics and the opportunity for inappropriate comments towards the female student. One principal recalled a decision they had been a part of where the IEP team maintained a female student’s placement in the general education classroom with gender playing a prominent role in the decision-making process.

Teachers’ interpretations of behavior, which differed for boys and girls, presented itself as an additional reason the groups believed boys were more commonly placed into restrictive settings. The teachers’ group explained the heightened attention on boys’ behavior in the classroom, calling it “more disruptive,” “scarier…cause they are usually bigger,” and “more aggressive.” Girls’ inappropriate behavior appeared to be understood and more accepted by classroom teachers. Many felt female students were equipped to deal with “emotional issues” without the need for a more restrictive setting. It’s important to note for the psychologists, gender did not present itself to be a factor in their decision-making.

The issue of ethnicity produced little discussion amongst the groups. The lack of ethnic diversity amongst the participants may have been a factor; they may not have been comfortable discussing the issue. Two teachers who had worked in self-contained programs expressed surprise that race was considered a factor influencing placement decisions. These teachers considered their programs diverse and that no specific cultures were overrepresented. The teachers did not provide comments as to whether or not their classroom was representative of their school, district or community. Overall, participants did not view ethnicity as a factor
influencing placement decisions. Given the sparse commentary on the topic by participants, discussions on the roll of race and culture may have gone uncultivated at their school sites as it relates to determination of educational setting. Following repeated probes by the moderator, one teacher did provide insight into the role race might have played in a former district. This teacher attributed teachers’ lack of understanding of cultural and socio-economic differences to their interpretations of students’ behaviors. The teacher presumed that this had ultimately led to one student of different ethnic background being placed in a more restrictive setting.

**Academic goals and internalizing behavior issues carried little weight.** Two notable factors absent from the discussions with participants were concerns over student academic success and the treatment of internalizing behaviors as reasons to change a student’s setting. Referred to briefly by focus group members, these two factors did not produce the same emotional and exhaustive response as either aggressive / disruptive behavior or family / home life qualities. The role of academics as a factor used to determine setting remained unclear following a review of the transcripts. For all three focus groups, the moderator had to specifically ask about the role academics played in the participants’ decision-making logic to generate discussion on the topic. In comparison, no such prompting was required to garner responses related to student’s family and home life. In most cases, academics were an afterthought and often only an addendum to further justify the utility of more restrictive settings. The impetus to change a placement was often spurred by the student’s behavior, only later to be supported by the poor academic outcomes of the student.

Failure in academics did not produce as intense an emotional response as externalizing behavior did by participants. Emotional connection is a strong indicator of the intensity of one’s attitude towards an issue. Students with ED doing poorly in the classroom do not necessarily
impact the learning of others or take time away from instruction. When participants described aggressive and disruptive behavior, a greater urgency was expressed towards changing a student’s placement. That urgency was lessened during discussions of academic failure. Though participants frequently expressed their desire for students with ED to be successful, success was most commonly defined in terms of decreasing disruptive or inappropriate behavior.

Several participants did address the minimal attention given students with internalizing behaviors in regards to changes of educational setting. Internalizing behaviors, much like difficulty with academics, had a limited effect on selection of appropriate classroom environment. Despite probes by the moderator, discussions of ED placement largely ignored factors related to internalizing behaviors such as withdrawal, anxiety and depression, and somatic issues. One teacher admitted, “I have to say some of those kids get lost. And they don’t get placed.” A psychologist shared a similar sentiment.

And that is something I have difficulty with. Because some of the really more severely disturbed students will never get referred because they are not at all aggressive. But they will be failing everything. They don’t have any friends. And they can just sit there and vegetate and nobody will pay any [attention].

Theme 2: Teacher and resource-based factors were as critical as student-based factors to the decision-making process.

This study revealed that IEP teams heavily regarded two non-student based factors: Who the teachers were and what settings (and resources) were available. These two factors consistently were discussed by participants in all three focus groups and contributed significantly to their placement logic. The following sections discuss these two factors in greater detail. The first section reports on the influence of teacher-based factors. An analysis of the interviews
revealed that teacher qualities (i.e. skill set, desire to work with students with ED, personality traits) directly influenced educational setting for students with ED. The second section reflects how IEP teams faced limitations in terms of resources (settings and staff). Both of these factors forced IEP teams to often provide less than ideal settings for students with ED.

**Teachers’ skills, willingness and personality traits influenced team placement decisions.** Teacher qualities played a significant role in placement decisions. Participants identified the following teacher qualities as factors considered in the determination of educational setting for students with ED: skill set, willingness, and personality traits. When describing the qualities of the most appropriate educational setting, participants spoke specifically about the concept of “pairing,” or matching the student with ED with the most fitting teacher.

**The influence of teacher skill set.** A prominent theme for all participants included the crucial role a teachers’ perceived skill set contributed to the selection of setting. IEP teams looked to place students with ED in settings with teachers who were perceived to be more skilled in working with students with challenging behavior. In almost all cases, this setting was not the general education classroom. Participants described teacher skill set as the effective management of educational and behavioral issues. Most participants found this to be a sensitive topic to discuss, sympathizing with the challenges general education teachers routinely face. Participants made sure to pair any critical comments with acknowledgments of the high expectations teachers needed to meet for all students.

Participants expressed that general education teachers working with students with ED require constant support. The challenges associated with meeting all of the needs for these students left many teachers feeling emotions of self-doubt and frustration. Most participants
admitted many teachers at their sites did not have the skills to work with the more challenging behavioral issues in their classrooms. As one principal shared, “Ideally it would be nice if all of our teachers had the full bag of tricks. But they don’t. And when I am doing class placements…I am looking at that.”

Principals were keenly aware as to the strengths and limitations of their staff as it pertained to working with students with disabilities. They defined their role as matchmaker: pairing students with teachers who could effectively instruct and manage behavior. “You know the strengths of your people. And you know the right ingredients of people that are going to make it work for that child.” It was clear that principals were dependent upon having a highly skilled teacher at each grade level if a student with ED was to be included in the general education classroom.

Prior research on changes of placement have focused on transitions into and out of restrictive environments. Participants reported changes of placement across general education classrooms within grade level as another way schools could support teachers struggling with behavior. Several principals admitted they failed to recognize the present level of teachers’ behavior management skills until they had a student with ED in their classroom. In lieu of holding an IEP meeting and placing the student in a more restrictive setting, principals relied upon the practice of “lateral transition” to support both the teacher and the student with ED. Lateral transition involved moving the student with ED to another teacher within that grade level. This practice aimed to mutually support both the less skilled teacher and the student with ED.

Teachers agreed skill set, especially in working with students with disabilities, considerably influenced placement decisions. Several shared that the lack of preparation they had received to appropriately deal with the challenges of working with students with ED did
directly impact their recommendations towards placement. One teacher reflected on the frustrations of working with a student with ED early in their career:

**Teacher:** I had a student who was oppositional defiant. It was bad. And I was ill-prepared. Our behavioral specialist...did everything in her power to help. She had a great plan and I just didn’t have the wherewithal to follow through with it. Or be honest about it. At some point, I was just giving him his checkmarks. So I could be. Be gone child. I was part of the problem. I am definitely not equipped. I was like, ‘Get him out of my room. I want him out.’

A constant theme across all three groups, limitations in general education teachers’ skill sets resonated as a prominent factor resulting in students with ED being placed in more restrictive settings. School psychologists also identified this as a key factor in their placement decisions. For many, the perception was that general education teachers lacked the necessary behavioral management skills to allow for the inclusion of students with more challenging behavior. Psychologists perceived teachers working in more restrictive ED settings as possessing the greatest aptitude to work with challenging behavior. It is necessary to note that teacher skill level was rarely measured in terms of actual practices. Participants supported their beliefs by stating the effect of personality qualities more commonly than actual practices. Staff members deemed to have desirable skill sets to work with students with ED were often described as parental and caring and having a high tolerance for disruptive and aggressive behavior.

It is important to emphasize a distinction made above: While teacher skill set was a crucial factor in placement decisions, participants did not acknowledge the instructional skill sets of teachers and focused primarily on a teacher’s ability to both manage and tolerate difficult
behaviors. Rarely did participants discuss a teacher’s skill set in relation to how it might lead to academic gains for the student with ED.

**The influence of teacher willingness.** Placement decisions often reflected teachers’ willingness to work with students with ED. Participants reported that with challenging behaviors, low academic scores, and frequent disruptions, some teachers were reluctant to have students with ED in their classrooms. Willingness was characterized as a teacher’s acceptance of a student with ED assigned to their classroom and their disposition towards adapting the classroom to accommodate for the student’s disability. Participants acknowledged that while a teacher could not refuse to work with a student with ED, an unwillingness to have them in the classroom might impact the fidelity with which they implemented behavioral strategies, provided academic accommodations, and voiced their perceptions of the student in IEP meetings.

The psychologists identified teacher willingness as a central issue in educational placement. They expressed frustration that some general education teachers would not adequately adapt their classrooms for students with ED. One reflected, “In my experience, it has been very difficult to get teachers to change.” Another noted that unwilling teachers benefit from their rigid disposition. “[T]here are some teachers who therefore end up with no kids with disabilities of any kind. Because they are inflexible.” This practice appeared to have additional rewarding benefits for the teacher. The removal of a student with challenging behavior increased the time a teacher could spend on other students. Even the provision of supports in the form of specialized staff dedicated to working with challenging behaviors did not affect willingness for some teachers. The psychologists viewed some teachers as adamantly resistant to having students with ED in their classroom. “Are the behavior specialists successful in getting
teachers to modify what they do? [Our] behavior specialist got very frustrated. She said ‘I can’t get these teachers to change their behaviors’, which is impacting what the students are doing.”

Teacher willingness was also influenced by their awareness of alternative settings for students with ED. Teachers would use these settings to support their belief that the student with ED should not be in their classroom. One teacher reported how colleagues would immediately advocate for the removal of a student when behavioral issues arose. They went on to assert, “[The general education teacher] immediately goes to wanting to have the most restrictive environment for this child. Because they are hard to work with.” Since teachers struggled with the lack of success they had with students with ED, they were more apt to consider the challenges associated with the disability than the specific needs of the student in their decision-making.

Psychologist: They [general education teachers] are not looking at it in terms of what emotional factors are leading me to this decision. It is more. It is more of a gut feeling. I can’t help this kid or I am not helping this kid like I want to. And I have seen kids be successful in here [more restrictive setting] so why can’t this one go in here as well?

All three groups acknowledged a relationship between teacher skill set and willingness. Participants recognized limitations many general education teachers had when working with students with challenging behavior and felt an obligation to support them. Support served as a method to increase teacher willingness. A teacher’s unwillingness to have students with ED in the classroom presented a significant problem for IEP teams: How do schools meet the needs of the disabled student as well as the impacted teacher? A teacher deemed unwilling to work with challenging behavior may be manifesting the frustration and anxiety associated with not knowing how. Speaking to this very point, one teacher from the group admitted a feeling of resentment
that others recognized as a common sentiment held by many general education teachers tasked to educate students with ED:

It is just that so much energy is spent on maintaining the educational process for other students. I can’t teach these [non-disabled] kids because so much energy is spent here [with a student who has ED]. I think that has been the biggest factor for me. I am not skilled enough to work with ED students in the classroom when I am trying to teach a whole general population of students. There are kids that have to learn and their education shouldn’t come at the expense of trying to mainstream a student that has much higher needs.

One key variable that impacted teacher willingness appeared to be the level of support they received from the school. Support was identified as a key strategy in increasing a teacher’s willingness to have challenging behaviors in the classroom. Support addressed critical concerns held by teachers and increased their overall feeling of preparedness.

**The influence of teacher personality traits.** IEP teams considered particular personality traits of a teacher essential for a placement to be effective for a student with ED. Participants frequently commented on specific personality qualities of teachers that aligned with the disposition of students with ED. IEP teams gave considerable attention to this aspect; many participants reported a primary objective in placement decisions was to pair a student with ED with a specific teacher personality more so than the specific features of a classroom setting. Desirable personality traits included attentiveness to student need, personal concern for well-being, and open-mindedness. Unlike general education teachers, most participants believed teachers working in self-contained classrooms and schools possessed the necessary personality traits required to work with students with ED.
An integral deciding-factor for the principals was a teacher that embraced fostering and maintaining positive relationships with the student’s family. Most participants described the families of students with ED as ‘difficult to work with’. Referencing a teacher working in a self-contained program, one principal shared, “They have almost daily conversations with every parent. They are on the phone all the time. So that parent trusts that teacher.” Participants recognized that teachers are asked to dedicate a tremendous amount of time to each individual student with ED. Principals reported needing a staff member upon whom they could rely on to make the best decisions for students. To do this, the teacher had to be fully invested in the student’s success. One principal reflected on a teacher working in a self-contained program, “I trust our teacher so much. I know that she has all of those students’ best interests. And the kids know it too.”

Participants noted that teacher personality traits impacted the overall atmosphere of a classroom. A positive classroom atmosphere built on caring and trusting relationships between teachers and students was something IEP teams considered in placement decisions. Positive settings were created by teachers who “[were] really into developing relationships with kids. Instead of ‘I am the teacher. I’m up here and the kids are out there’. ” Dynamics, the interaction between the teacher and the student with ED, played a central role for the school psychologists. Several participants working closely with more restrictive settings emphasized how a simple change in teacher – student dynamics often resulted in an improvement in behavior. Poor dynamics were commonly cited as a reason why a student with ED was not successful in the general education classroom. When poor dynamics existed between the general education teacher and student with ED, the most common solution appeared to be to move the student to a more accepting environment than to improve the relationship between student and teacher.
District and school resources influenced team decisions. Participants reported IEP teams faced strict limitations in the settings they could offer as placements for students with ED. Settings considered for students depended heavily upon the resources available, which differed across districts. Resource restrictions included physical settings as well as staff to provide special education services.

Lack of a full continuum of placements limited options. Participants acknowledged IEP teams commonly made compromised decisions on placement; many times they could not provide a student with ED the most ideal educational setting for their specific educational needs due to limitations within their continuum of placements. Participants identified that a robust continuum of placements includes a diversity of settings: the general education classroom, resource classrooms, self-contained classrooms, self-contained schools, residential schooling, home-based and hospital-based schooling, and/or combinations of these environments. They lamented their districts lacked a full continuum of settings from which to make choices. They often chose a setting that most closely met the needs of the student with disabilities. Participants across all three focus groups identified availability and access to settings as central challenges IEP teams face when determining setting for students with ED.

District officials constantly work with schools to address this very issue, yet each school dealt with this challenge in their own way. One principal admitted that despite adding a self-contained program on their campus it still was not enough to cover the full spectrum of settings needed. “There is a missing middle piece in our continuum. You [student with ED] are in the Gen Ed classroom with supports or you are in the [self-contained school] and there are not a lot of in-between [options].” Psychologists, who played a larger role in placement decisions when they extended beyond the regular school setting, also felt the pinch of limited placements. The
limited options they had within their continuums resulted in a great deal of frustration and many reported placing students in less than optimal settings as a result of limited options.

In addition to gaps in their continuum of placements, IEP teams also had to deal with limited availability within certain settings. Unlike the general education classroom, most restrictive settings had caps for the number of students they accepted. Once these settings reached their maximum occupancy, they no longer could take in new students. This presented a unique dilemma for IEP teams. What do they do when settings have reached capacity: Withhold placement into a more appropriate environment? Create an additional setting? Or place a student into the setting and raise the student capacity level for the class? Participants’ accounts reflected differing ways their school districts dealt with this problem. As one teacher complained, “What is horrible is that the district really isn’t providing the services. There should be more classes [for students with ED]. The school is over a 1000 kids. And I have 18 students in a self-contained. It’s a big class.” Others in the group questioned the effectiveness of a class so large, with so many challenging students all in the same setting. Many cite this as an argument for why they believed placement decisions were more commonly for the benefit of others in the schools than the students with ED themselves.

**Limited staffing and resources led to restrictive placement choices.** IEP teams commonly looked to place students with ED in settings that provided increased staffing and support. Two significant benefits of the continuum of placements as identified by participants were the specialization of staff provided and their ability to offer improved student-teacher ratios. For IEP teams, local staff and resources played a prominent role in decisions. One principal shared that the provision of a behavior specialist, a dedicated staff position to support classroom
teachers and facilitate the inclusion of students with behavioral challenges, increased the likelihood of maintaining a student’s placement in the general education setting.

In contrast, other principals stated that district budget cuts restricted their ability to provide similar support in the classroom. This impact influenced the options available to IEP teams for placing students. “But just like has been mentioned, the resources are not available to have that one-on-one aide at my site and I have a phenomenal ED teacher right now. It is where your resources are.” Many principals stated that with more funding students currently placed in restrictive settings would be considered for placement into general education classrooms with supports. Presently however, students who may have been included with paraprofessional support could no longer be offered that option. Limitations in school resources prohibited many ‘fringe’ students from being educated in less restrictive settings.

The school psychologists also identified supports as a key factor in making placement decisions but discussed them only from the perspective of facilitating the transition to less restrictive settings. Several schools did not offer intermediate placement settings (i.e. self-contained class) to ease the transition of a student with ED from a self-contained school back to the general education classroom. As such, supports, including paraprofessionals and behavior specialists, were deemed necessary to make those transitions successful. The lack of those supports predisposed their decision-making. One pivotal question most psychologists based their decisions upon was, Where do I think this student can be successful? One psychologist lamented, “I have found in my district, we don’t have that luxury [of support staff]…. somebody to go into the classroom…and to help modify behavior…the child, the teacher, and the class as a whole.” Without supports for the student, many believed success in the general education setting was unlikely.
Theme 3: The needs of a variety of stakeholders influenced IEP team placement decisions.

Participants identified several key entities that influenced the decisions of educational setting for students with ED. Those ‘stakeholder’s with the most influence included general education teachers, psychologists, principals, and district officials. Notably, participant responses did not present or recognize the contribution of parent and outside agencies’ voices in determining appropriate educational setting. The role stakeholders’ played in optimizing the best outcome for classrooms, schools, and the district as a whole in relation to the needs of the student with ED is discussed in the following sections.

General education teachers exerted significant influence. Despite a self-reported perception of limited influence, general education teachers played a central role in the final determination of educational setting. In addition to providing information, often qualitative assessments of the student with ED’s performance in the classroom, they acted to protect the learning environment for other students. An analysis of the transcripts found a clear distinction in how teachers self-identified themselves within the IEP team. While teachers did see themselves as members of the IEP team, this was not the ‘organization’ for which they looked to create the most optimal outcome. Teachers’ primary loyalties belonged to their classroom and all their students. For teachers, the best decision involved providing benefit to the most students possible.

Participants believed general education classroom teachers and their students were directly impacted by a change of placement involving a student with ED. Due to the disruptive behaviors of students with ED, participants within each group cited the necessity for general education teachers to account for the needs of all of their students. Explaining the teacher’s point of view, one principal shared, “That situation then becomes necessary, almost crisis, for
some general education teachers when they are trying to manage instruction for a whole class and you have got one child that is taking 90% of their time.”

As a result, teachers were powerful voices in recommending an educational setting. If a general education teacher contended they could not conduct their class properly due to one student’s behaviors, IEP team members were inclined to support that teacher and the students in their class. For many teachers there was great benefit to not having students with ED in the classroom. The psychologist group discussed how a teacher’s unwillingness to serve students with ED influenced their opinion of appropriate placement:

**Psychologist 1:** In my experience it has been very difficult to get teachers to change [attitudes towards students with ED].

**Psychologist 2:** They say, “Get the kid out.”

**Psychologist 1:** What is unfortunate actually is that there are some teachers who therefore end up with no kids with disabilities of any kind. It is a real problem.

**Psychologist 3:** And they [end up with] the highest test scores.

The teachers’ response to placement decisions demonstrates the loyalty they had to their self and students. At the individual level, a change of placement serves to ensure students with ED are educated in the most appropriate setting. Many general education teachers saw the change of placement in terms of its localized effect, considering the student with ED’s impact on their ability to teach, the education of other students, and the general safety of the classroom.

The most desirable setting for the student with ED, in regards to meeting their educational needs, often conflicted with the best situation for the general education teacher, the students in that class, and the school as a whole. This point was very clear to teachers and played a major role in the point of view they voiced in IEP meetings.
Teacher: I think, from our perspective, from the general education perspective. It is not even so much about that kid’s [with ED] educational process. Though it should be. It is just that so much energy is spent on maintaining the educational process for other students. When the disruption to the whole general education process is so over the top that I cannot teach. And that is the bottom line. There are kids that have to learn and their education shouldn’t come at the expense of trying to mainstream a student that has much higher needs.

Teachers practiced educational triage. They did want the student with ED to be successful, however they were not willing to compromise the learning and safety of all their students to achieve this end. IEP meetings served to establish an appropriate educational program for a student with ED that did not take away from the majority of other students.

Principals considered impact of placement on staff and students. Like the teachers, principals also worked for a larger ‘organization’ than simply the IEP team. They were tasked with balancing the needs of the student with ED with those of their school’s staff and other students. This often compromised their ability to make decisions that reflected simply the needs of the student with disabilities. Principals considered resources, teacher abilities, and overall benefit to all students in their personal decision-making model.

Recommendations for placement involved considerations of school safety and the intensity of disruption in the classroom environment. For these reasons, principals were forced to make judgments of the school wide impact of placement decisions. A principal’s prior history with and personal beliefs regarding working with students with ED influenced their outlook. Participants noted that several schools included in the study housed alternative classrooms and schools for students with ED on their campus. They believed these principals were more willing
to enroll and work with students with challenging behavior. In contrast, other participants specifically noted principals that preferred not having to deal with liability issues associated with students with ED on their campus and the influence this had on their IEP teams’ decisions.

Principals were responsible for the learning of all students in the general education classroom and this factor weighed heavily into what they considered to be the most appropriate setting. This represented an area of frustration for school psychologists, as several suspected school leadership allowed a student with challenging behavior to be moved to a more restrictive setting solely for the benefit of the teacher and other students in the classroom.

Psychologist 1: It is not about the child’s [student with ED] benefit. It is about the teacher’s and the other students’. It is too negative for this class for that child to be in there.

Psychologist 2: I feel like a lot of it is more about removing the negative from the classroom than it is to put that child in a more positive setting.

Most principals professed to having little to no background in special education and needing to rely heavily upon their school psychologists and district supports. Several shared stories of rising to their position with no professional preparation for making placement decisions for students with ED. With other IEP team members focusing on the assessment and legal aspects of placement, principals could then consider more closely the needs of staff and other students affected by the decision. As the heads of their school, principals were left to deal with any fallout that may arise including frustrated teachers, upset students or disgruntled parents. Principals actively described the necessity of supporting their teachers and its influence deciding setting. This support often came in the form of removing a student with challenging behavior to support the needs of others in the school.
**Principal:** If I think I can help the teacher and help the student, I go that route. But I really feel a need to stick up for my teachers. That teacher is with all of those other students in that classroom too. And they have to benefit too. Sometimes I just need to support the teacher to the max.

**Psychologists felt pressure from school and district-based stakeholders.** As the perceived authority figure in placement decisions, school psychologists commonly felt pressure from entities within their schools and districts to support a change of placement for a student with ED, most commonly out of the general education classroom. Despite shifting district policies, most members of IEP teams still saw psychologists as the person with the final say-so. By being perceived as gatekeepers, psychologists reported feeling pressure from entities throughout the district to make placement decisions that placated the desires of individuals other than the student with ED. Several shared they felt compromised because members of IEP teams frequently made decisions before they become involved in the process which led to strong pressure to agree with the committee’s recommendations. This occurred most often when the placement resulted in the student being transferred from a school to a different site or campus. The more restrictive settings (i.e. self-contained classroom or school) were limited in number across the districts and thus a change of placement often required students changing schools. Psychologists agreed they were aware of the preferences of school officials when making their recommendations. Several collaborated across multiple sites and felt pressure from schools, noting, “[many] administrators don’t always want those kids on their campus.” Changing a student’s placement in many cases removed the unwanted burden upon these schools.

The school psychologists, more than any other group, expressed an evolving view of their role in the decision making process. Initially, most identified themselves as the primary
authority at their school sites to make recommendations of educational setting, but changes in district policies had slowly taken away their authority. Several participants shared that in previous years, their recommendations were the ones followed by the IEP team. Now, they felt district-based officials outside of the individual school sites made the final decisions. “They are saying we have to go through the ‘change of placement committee’. It is no longer going to just be at my discretion.” The loss of authority was a significant area of disappointment and frustration; many expressed uncertainty as to what their role truly was in the process.

The psychologist group struggled with conceptualizing the ‘organization’ in which they belonged. They expressed camaraderie among one another and identified with the goals outlined in special education law. The group professed stringent loyalties to the rights of the student with ED and shared their experiences advocating for certain placements. However individuals described their role as changing and now saw it primarily as presenting and interpreting data and acquiescing to the decisions of the district. These attitudes were largely formed based on their experiences and the support the psychologists felt from their schools and district. As a result, the security a psychologist felt both within their own decision-making abilities as well as the relationships they had within the district played a definitive role in the decisions they made.

**District and state level voices influenced placement decisions.** Concerns expressed by stakeholders at the state and district level played a role in placement decisions. IEP teams took into account broad factors that related to disproportionality and budgetary restraints when making determinations of setting. These factors in some cases prohibited students requiring a more restrictive placement access to that setting. Discussed primarily by the psychologists’ group, an unexpected revelation was the evolving role district personnel played in making decisions regarding educational setting for students with ED. Most districts required that
educational setting changes receive approval from a district representative. The district representatives who oversaw these decisions served as a unique ‘organization’ of their own with a distinct perspective on the implications related to placing a student with ED in a more restrictive setting. Unlike previous ‘stakeholders’, district personnel paid particularly close attention to issues related to disproportionality and budgetary restraints.

Many psychologists reported having to present their recommendations to ‘change of placement’ committees consisting of district personnel independent of their school site to receive approval in adjusting a student’s setting. They questioned this practice and believed decisions included factors outside of student need. Two psychologists from the group expressed the confusion and irritation felt at the site level regarding how placement decisions were made:

**Psychologist 1**: We as a team get to make the determination [educational setting] from our standpoint. The frustration is having someone who doesn’t know the student, who doesn’t know the school, who doesn’t know any of the history.

**Psychologist 2**: And they get to have the final say whether or not it [placement change] is allowed. So it is not even a team. It is one individual. And depending which individual is assigned to your building there are different criteria they are looking for.

The district representatives considered factors beyond simply student need. Participants identified student population data (i.e. percentage of students served across settings) and availability of settings as factors influencing district officials’ decisions. Specific areas of concern for district officials appeared to be the prevention of disproportionality across the more restrictive settings and managing the special education budget. Several participants recounted examples where district officials denied a placement, citing, “It is because of space. It is because
of numbers.” The implication from the psychologists’ group was that student need for a setting was marginalized.

**Psychologist 1:** Everybody is on board. It [change of placement] is going to happen. Or it is not going to happen. The team decision [is] presented to the parent. And then the district says no.

**Psychologist 2:** Sometimes despite a preponderance of evidence we are still told no. And sometimes it is because [the state department of education] just came by and did a monitoring and told them they had too many kids. And so, they are just kind of categorically saying no to anybody.

District officials’ influence permeated placement decisions, especially regarding options that required additional funding. Schools no longer could offer one-on-one aides to facilitate the inclusion of students in the general education classroom. Budget restraints forced schools to abandon this practice even if it was the best option for a student. In addition to limiting services, district personnel extended their influence over the use of the number of alternative settings provided in the district. Participants reported cases where district officials refused to approve a placement due to capacity having being reached in a self-contained classroom or school.

**Parents and outside resources held little authority in placement decisions.** IDEA law provides parents and guardians a voice in the process to determine where their child is educated. Upon looking at how the voices of parents were perceived and ultimately valued by members of IEP teams, it appears they did not carry the same weight as other members. As noted previously in this chapter, the level of influence an individual holds depends upon their knowledge of special education processes, their perception of their own value in relation to other members, and
their previous experiences working as part of a IEP team. Sadly parents did not appear to command much authority.

Participants described parents in largely negative ways: Biased. Misinformed. Easily manipulated. Difficult. Distrusting. Uninvolved. Part of the problem. While participants recognized the legal requirement of parent involvement, it was not always welcomed. Parents were not portrayed as equal and valued stakeholders in the IEP process. One principal described parents in the following manner:

The parents are members of the team. They are definitely biased. And usually want their child into inclusion. If you are thinking alternative placement, there is a lot of politics and handholding. Very subtle bringing them along to that necessity, if that is the way you are going.

Psychologists described the practice of IEP team members strategizing prior to meetings on how to convince parents to agree with the school recommendation. Teachers agreed that frequently IEP team members informally discussed placement without including the parent. Characterized as unofficial discussions, these practices were widely accepted in schools. Several participants portrayed the general perception of parents of students with ED as challenges to be subverted. They described parents as unaware of school policies and accepting of the limitations schools faced when expressed by districts. Many felt they had unrealistic expectations for the services to be provided to their child and described their role as a mentor to guide parents through the decision-making process.

This study did not interview parents. Furthermore, the researcher did not specifically ask questions related to parents, yet within each focus group, parent participation infiltrated discussions of educational placement. In addition to disqualifying statements regarding parent
voice, participants expressed distrust and frustration of the family resources (i.e. community counselors) parents may rely upon. One principal shared:

A lot of these kids have outside resources. A lot of those team members come into the meetings and become part of that team. I find out then that they sometimes have some real distinct biases. Not to say this is wrong. They try to shoot for the moon and ask for a lot of things. They don’t see what the school has to offer. Maybe they don’t know what the school can offer. They put a lot of things out there that may not be needed.

Summary

This analysis of focus group interviews identified several factors influencing the settings in which students with ED receive their education. These findings have been presented as three themes. First, the personal beliefs, knowledge, and attitudes of IEP members towards ED influenced which factors were considered when making determinations of educational setting. Second, teacher and resource-based factors were as influential as student-based factors to the decision-making process. Third, the needs of school and district-based stakeholders influenced decisions.

The beliefs and experiences of IEP team members informed their attitudes towards the most appropriate educational setting for students with ED. Individuals’ perspectives, combined with highly interpretive federal guidelines, permitted subjective factors to be included in the decision-making process. Perceptions of a students’ home and family life influenced IEP members’ perception of student need. Comments by participants regarding changes of placement focused primarily on the performance of externalizing behaviors (i.e. aggression and disruption) and less often on students with ED experiencing academic failure or exhibiting internalizing behaviors (i.e. depression).
This study finds two non-student-based factors influencing IEP members’ setting recommendations: teacher qualities and availability of resources. Teacher qualities included their skill sets (educational and behavioral), willingness to work with students with ED, and personality traits. Participants identified the need to pair students with ED not just with a physical setting but also with a specific teacher. Limitations in districts’ continuums of placements further influenced where students with ED received their education. IEP teams were frequently left to place students in environments that may not adequately meet their educational and behavioral needs. The findings indicate teacher- and resource-based factors were as critical as student-based factors to the decision-making process.

School-based stakeholders considered their responsibilities to other students, staff, and district entities as well as the student with ED when determining setting. This proved to be influential in their interpretation of the most appropriate educational setting. When members made placement decisions, the needs of others competed with those of the student with ED. How the individual defined their ‘organization,’ (the individuals to whom they were responsible), affected the placement recommendation. Despite not having a direct role in IEP meetings, district officials were influential in placement decisions as well. Parents and outside agencies possessed little authority and influence in the decision-making process.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Kauffman et al. (1987) acknowledged nearly 25 years ago that the variables associated with the educational placement of students with emotional disturbance (ED) were “particularly puzzling.” What likely was intended as an aside of exasperation should be interpreted by future researchers and current special education professionals as a cautionary reminder. As this study demonstrates, the complexity of placement decisions extends far beyond a simple examination of student performance variables. Those of us working in the field of ED appreciate the significant challenges schools face to meet the academic, emotional, social, and behavioral needs of students. This study attempted to bring greater clarity to the “puzzle;” exploring why IEP members consider the factors they do when determining educational setting for a student with ED. The findings reveal an answer far more intricate than a simple isolation of discrete factors.

Individuals’ thought processes are complicated, suggesting that each time an IEP team makes a decision regarding the educational setting of a student with ED, it is completely unique.

The purpose of my study was to identify factors influencing IEP team members’ recommendations of setting for students with ED. In this chapter I discuss the three major themes of the study. First, IEP team member’s beliefs, knowledge, and attitudes influenced their recommendations for placement decisions. Second, teacher and resource-based factors played a critical role in where students were placed. Third, needs of stakeholders competed with those of the student with ED. Previous interview-based research on factors related to the determination of educational setting for students with ED relied predominantly on a single population: teachers (Bullock et al., 1985; Frey, 2002; Kauffman et al., 1987; Martin et al., 1995). Following Krueger’s (1994) recommendation to consider the diversity of people involved in a process or
program under examination, this study improved upon that approach by including psychologists and principals as participants. The findings, provided by a cross section of school districts and personnel, expose critical issues related to the service of students with ED. This approach produced a deeper understanding of factors influencing placement recommendations. The focus group methodology chosen stimulated personal and unique conversations amongst educational peers, forcing participants to confront their present knowledge of the issue and express opinions encouraged through discourse with colleagues.

What ED Services Reveal About Special Education Practices

Why study special education practices within the domain of students with ED? As has been well documented, this population continues to be one of the most challenging to serve in special education; they receive complex and intensive services yet still have a long history of poor outcomes. One cannot discuss the disability ED without recognition of the tremendous shortcomings these students continue to experience. Students with ED frequently demonstrate deficiencies across academic domains (i.e. grades, retention, graduation) and developmental outcomes (i.e. relationship problems, drug and alcohol abuse, involvement with the criminal justice, unemployment, and mental health problems as adults) (Bradley, Henderson, & Monroe, 2004; Bullis & Cheney, 1999; Carson, Sitlington, & Frank, 1995; Carter & Wehby 2003; Fergusson & Horwood, 1995; Frank, Sitlington, & Carson, 1995; Greenbaum et al., 1996; Kauffman & Hallahan, 2005; Kortering & Blackorby, 1992; Wagner, 1995; Walker & Schutte, 2004). As lamented by Siperstein, Wiley, & Forness (2011), “Perhaps no other findings from special education research are more disheartening than those concerning the success of students with emotional disturbance (ED) in special education.”
Given these facts, it is easy to view ED as the single most challenging group for schools to effectively serve, making them the ideal population in which to study the effectiveness of a special education practice. From this perspective, one can say they function as a special education “stress test.” Stress tests uncover faults that lie dormant in our everyday practices and help to reveal problems inherent in a system. This study uncovered a flawed system for determining educational setting. IEP teams relied heavily upon personal beliefs and experiences to inform their decisions in lieu of systematic procedures that paired students with ED with services specific to their disability. By studying this practice in relation to students with ED, the findings help identify areas of potential failure in the often subjective process of determining educational setting for other students who receive special education services.

**What We Think Affects What We Do**

One of the most interesting findings from this study was that IEP team members took into consideration how placement decisions directly affected *themselves and others (staff and students)* and measured these factors against the needs of the student with ED. This finding was unexpected and as far as the researcher can tell, novel to discussions of placement decisions. Several court decisions (*Clyde K. v. Florence County School District*, 1994; *Hartmann v. Loudon County Board of Education*, 1997; *Sacramento City USD District Board of Education v. Rachel H.*, 1994) allow schools to consider the impact on other students when determining appropriate placement for students with disabilities. While IEP team members may not overtly seek to serve their own interests in placement decisions, their consideration of the decision’s direct impact to themselves (or others) must be recognized as a significant factor that bears influence on the educational placements of students with ED. Of critical importance though is how schools are to quantify this impact, which remains unclear.
Placement decisions are partisan decisions that comprise the points of view of a myriad of stakeholders who commonly hold divergent positions (Kauffman & Hallahan, 2005; Verstegen & Martin, 1995). These stakeholders include general education teachers, special education teachers, principals, superintendents, special programs, and students (Cohen, 1993). Freeman’s Stakeholder Theory (1984) provided the framework to answer two critical questions related to IEP teams’ determination of placement: (1) To what extent do IEP team members understand the effects of their placement decision on others (e.g. staff, students and parents)? and (2) Can decision-makers do the “best thing” for all parties involved? These questions are complicated and the answers are unique to each individual, based on his or her professional beliefs and the ‘organization’ with which they most clearly identify. In IEP meetings, members must decide for whom they most want to maximize benefit. Surprisingly, most participants did not identify the student with ED’s IEP team as their primary ‘organization’. IEP members identified with more personal ‘organizations’: their classroom, the school, and the district as a whole. It is these ‘organizations’ to which participants sought to produce the optimal outcome, not necessarily the student with ED.

The degree to which non-student based factors embedded themselves into the decision-making was likely imperceptible to the participants themselves. Teacher attitudes towards students with ED played a central role in where these students were placed. It is unlikely IEP teams would openly admit this to be the case. Attitudes, more often than evidence-based research, informed beliefs about the students with ED, their specific needs, and the best way to address them. Attitudes were surely impacted by the minimal training regular classroom teachers received on behavior management and the inclusion of students with disabilities in their training. As mentioned before, students with ED serve as stress tests to our educational system


and reveal fissures that may not be present when all is calm in the classroom. When behavioral problems arise in the classroom and teachers do not have the skill set to address them, the problem centers on the student with disabilities and the most common solution appears to be to remove them from that environment.

The findings suggest IEP team members were aware that maintaining the placement of a student with ED in a classroom with a frustrated teacher may result in several possible negative outcomes: (a) conflict with that staff member, (b) disruption of the learning environment, or (c) safety concerns for the school campus. This finding suggests that as researchers we may have been taking the wrong approach in examining placement decisions. Future research might better inform the topic by examining the motivations of IEP team members themselves and exploring how they are influenced by conditions prior to and following a placement decision. This study makes the case that a closer examination of the process and the individuals involved in decision-making is critical to improving our understanding of why students with ED are placed where they are. The examination of special education practices at the individual team level, not large national trend based studies, provides a greater opportunity to understand the complexities that exist within IEP teams’ decision-making processes.

This study suggests an IEP teams’ decision-making process is driven by localized factors more than global factors (i.e. gender, ethnicity) indicated by research relying on national databases. While the present study supports Coutinho and Oswald’s (1996) and Landrum et al.’s (2004) assertions that where IEP teams place students with ED differs nationally based on regions, it furthers these conclusions by demonstrating differences occur at an even more basic level: the individual IEP team. For a small geographic region in Arizona, this study found IEP team members struggling to define their own personal methodologies and practices for
placement determinations at their school site. In relation to the lack of guidance provided to IEP teams in how to make placement decisions, this finding is critical. These findings support further examinations that look at placement decisions based on the motivating influences of the participants involved and respects the unique circumstances each individual IEP team is under.

**It is as Much About Resources as it is the Student**

While not necessarily novel, the finding that IEP teams’ placement decisions were highly influenced by local resources, is important. Carran et al. (1994) and Frey (2002) previously found that teacher characteristics and resources contributed to placements decisions. In this study, where participants were allowed to introduce their personal points of view, local resources dominated the discussion across groups. To summarize the perspectives of participants, a student’s educational setting was far more dependent upon the resources available to IEP teams than characteristics of the student themselves. Given disparities in resources available to individual schools, this helps provide clarity as to why variations exist nationally for where students with ED are placed (Coutinho & Oswald, 1996; Landrum et al., 2004).

This study concludes that students with ED, who frequently test the capacities of school systems, receive different services based on the resources available to their district. Presently, no tools are available to assess the sufficiency of educational placements made available to students with disabilities. Is it sufficient for a school district to provide only a general education classroom with support and a self-contained school as placement options? How many settings within the continuum must school districts provide? How should district leaders make these determinations?

This underscores a central problem in the determination of educational placement. More often than not, the question is not “how do we create an environment that best meets the specific
educational needs of the student with ED as identified in their IEP?” The question more accurately is “how do we determine which setting we have available best fits the needs of the student with ED?” Placement determinations start with resources, not the student. It appears “Where can we put this student?” often comes before “What does this student need?”

There was no indication that IEP teams placed students with ED into more restrictive settings based on evidence these classrooms produced better outcomes. Previous research suggests the provision of a more restrictive settings does not equate to better results for students with ED (Lane, Wehby, Little, & Cooley, 2005b). A reading of the transcripts simply imparts a sentiment of hope by principals, school psychologists, and teachers that something different will lead to something better. This unfortunately seems to be the present day approach to serving our most challenging students.

These findings support Martin et al.’s (1995) assertion, “To the extent that our findings are reflective of placement practices, it is clear that the intent of the placement provisions of federal special education law (IDEA) has not yet been realized” (p. 115). Schools then, and still today, continue to struggle to meet the specific needs of students with ED within their available resources. Many general education classroom teachers do not have the skills to support the needs of students with challenging behavior; districts lack a full-continuum of placements that allows for an educational environment to fully address a student’s needs; and a lack of agreement among personnel (principals, teachers) exists over how placement decisions should be made.

Issues with resource-based decision-making are numerous. In this study, participants held beliefs about more restrictive settings that contradict the research literature. The most common was the notion that teachers in self-contained settings were more qualified and capable to meet the needs of students with ED than regular classroom teachers. In regards to providing
highly qualified educators, this could not be farther from the truth. Teachers of students with ED continue to be one of the least highly qualified groups and commonly lack basic certification for their primary assignment (Billingsley, Fall, & Williams, 2006). Students with ED continue to be placed in more restrictive settings despite the fact that districts face shortages in teachers qualified to work with this population (Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, Barkanic, & Maislin, 1998; Boe & Cook, 2006; Brownell & Smith, 1992; Darling-Hammond & Ball, 1997; Van Acker, 2004). Martin et al. (1995) addressed the very issue of how these misconceptions occur:

The fact that teachers had no common understanding of the benefits and disadvantages of placement alternatives suggests that placement decisions may often be made capriciously, that the reasons for placement decisions may be communicated poorly, and/or that programming may be largely unrelated to placement (p. 114).

As previously noted, students with ED experience widespread difficulties in school: behaviorally, academically, and socially. To address these difficulties, we apply interventions. A change of placement is one such intervention that is commonly used. But the application of an intervention comes with requirements, including that (a) it is regularly evaluated; (b) it is student-centered, and based upon the strengths and needs of the student; and (c) addresses not just behavioral deficits but the student’s academic needs (Bullock & Gable, 2006; Gardner & Frazier-Trotman, 2001; Van Acker, 2003). The present findings fail to suggest changes of placement meet these requirements.

A change of educational setting places the focus on the student with a disability. But a change of placement should also communicate that something is not working in our general education classrooms. The comments from the participants suggest this often is teacher-related. This highlights the critical need for intensified classroom and behavior management instruction
in teacher preparation programs and in-service trainings. Without follow-up and evaluation by school staffs, it is unclear if a removed student could have been included if the teacher had more skill in behavioral management techniques. Investigations into general education classrooms following the removal of a student with ED should assess if improvements are necessary at the staff level. If so, are schools providing training to staff following the removal of a student based on behavioral problems? It is the opinion of this researcher this presently is not the case. Most likely, once the problem [the student with ED] is removed it appears the status quo is restored and concern over teacher classroom management wanes.

Teachers’ awareness and application of fundamental classroom management skills is of significant importance given the prominent role student behavior plays in the determination of most appropriate educational setting. This was reported from the teacher’s own perspective and that of the other participants who ultimately were placement determiners in schools. As mentioned previously, perceptions existed amongst decision-makers as to which teachers were and were not equipped to work with students with ED. The overall view was that most classroom teachers do not have the skill sets to manage challenging behaviors while teachers in more restrictive settings do. As a result, students with difficult behaviors are commonly placed in more restrictive settings based on the perception they provide teachers with greater aptitude in behavior management.

This underlying narrative of setting specific skill sets led classroom teachers to discount their capability to work with challenging behaviors and those working in more restrictive settings to have elevated beliefs of their abilities. Teachers working in self-contained settings projected more confidence than general education teachers in their capacity to help the student. The findings suggest that IEP teams were influenced to place students in classrooms with teachers
who perceived they were best equipped to handle the challenging behavior. This is in accord with Frey’s (2002) findings as to how a teachers’ perception of their own ability is instrumental in placement decisions.

Teachers’ perception of their skills concerning classroom management and discipline and their belief that they can influence student performance despite factors beyond their control have been shown to be significant factors contributing to educational placement recommendations (p. 134).

As bias is a central concern of any special education practice, the prevalence of teacher perception in decision-making is an important finding of this study. There appears to be no active quantitative evaluation of teacher’s ability to manage challenging behavior, thus leaving this determination solely to the interpretation of individual perception. Ability level may be influenced directly by something a teacher communicates to the team or through observation. If matching students with teachers who have the skill sets to work with challenging behavior is the goal of a placement change, it is necessary for behavioral management standards to be in place in which teachers are evaluated.

My findings support the concern of other researchers that schools do not following a systemized approach in decision making due in large part to their dependence on addressing resource issues first and student disability second (Carran et al., 1994; Coutinho & Oswald, 1996; Glassberg, 1994; Landrum et al., 2004; Mattison, 2011.)

**Placement Decisions as an Interpretive Process**

Participants in this study corroborated what many researchers have previously found: IEP members lack a thorough knowledge base and experience in delivering effective practices to students with behavioral challenges (Gable, Tonelson, Sheth, Wilson, & Park, 2012; Martinussen,
As a result, IEP members commonly offered recommendations based on beliefs, not evidence-based methodologies. As a result, participants identified a varied, disjointed list of factors considered during placement decisions.

The research literature has accounted for numerous factors predicting the educational placement of students with ED. Why have examinations of a specific special education practice produced such disparate findings? Perhaps part of the problem lies within IEP members’ individual understandings and interpretations of ED as a disability itself. Since its inclusion in special education law, the definition and determination processes of ED have been criticized for being highly subjective to interpretation (Bower, 1982; Kauffman, Mock, & Simpson, 2007; Wiley et al., 2008). This is due in large part to the fact that ED exists as much through the eyes of the individuals reporting on it as it does within the students themselves (Caseau, Luckasson, & Kroth, 1994; Coutinho, Oswald, Best, & Forness, 2002; Cullinan & Kauffman, 2005). School context then becomes a critical variable to how IEP members perceive student behavior. Interpretations and understandings of ED are shaped by local norms (Gerber & Semmel, 1984; VanDerHeyden & Witt, 2005), school’s overall level of academic performance (Wiley, Siperstein, Forness, & Brigham, 2010) and perceptions of accessibility and quality of outside resources (Safran & Safran, 1987). Most individuals working in schools lack the necessary training and skills to work with or make decisions regarding students with ED (Forness, Freeman, Paparella, Kauffman, & Walker, 2012; Gable et al., 2012).

Allport’s Attitude Theory (1935) asserts that when individuals lack a knowledge base with which to make decisions, they rely upon their experiences, environment, and social influences to inform their beliefs. Admittedly, IEP teams find placement decisions to be an imprecise process (Huefner, 1994). Despite guidelines provided by special education law,
schools are still allowed a tremendous amount of latitude in terms of how they choose to interpret critical terms as it relates to placement. Within the placement process, IEP must address the following:

1. What defines an appropriate education for this student?
2. What are the specific needs for this student (academic, behavioral, social, emotional) the school should provide for?
3. Can the school reasonably deliver these services in the general education classroom?
4. What is the student’s impact on the learning of others?

Even with guidance from case law, the answers to these questions are not black and white. They are myriad shades of grey left to be interpreted specifically through the points of view of the members of the IEP team. The result is an array of student-based factors, beyond academics, that come under evaluation and consideration by IEP team members with little regard to their validity or legality for making placement decisions.

A multitude of factors come under consideration in determining educational placement because ambiguity permeates the wording of special education law. Despite a litany of court rulings providing questions for IEP teams to ask themselves, the vagueness in the language of these rulings coupled with an equally abstruse condition as ED leaves IEP teams a tremendous degree of latitude to make decisions. The most informative studies supporting this argument are Countihno and Oswald’s (1996) and Landrum et al.’s (2004) that show placement rates vary wildly from state to state. Federal law provides guidance, but states, districts, individual schools, and individual IEP teams ultimately have great leeway in their interpretation.

Given the extensive history of the court system’s involvement in parsing what regulators intended by “appropriate education” and “least restrictive setting,” a major assumption of this
research was that IEP teams followed a specific, systematic approach to making their placement decisions. These findings reflect the complete opposite. Individual interpretation, a problem inherent with the ED disability as whole, characterized the decision-making process allowing participants tremendous flexibility in justifying placements (Gerber & Semmel, 1984; MacMillian & Siperstein, 2002; VanDerHeyden & Witt, 2005). As Wiley et al. (2010) noted, despite legal guidance, “in the real world, schools must balance the requirements of state and federal guidelines with a multitude of practical concerns and local pressures” (p. 452). These findings suggest that case law has done very little to impact how placement decision are made for students with ED.

To be fair, court rulings put IEP teams in a difficult position. Ambiguity in the language of special education law forces interpretation by individuals. The Rowley (1982) decision highlights this very problem, with the Supreme Court ruling that school districts are required to provide students with disabilities services “sufficient to confer educational benefit upon the handicapped child,” which may not necessarily be the best education to students with disabilities (Rowley, p. 200). How schools interpret “confer educational benefit” is the central problem at hand.

Participants acknowledged the environments from which they choose may not represent the ideal setting for a particular student with ED. The assumption is that for a student that is disruptive and unsuccessful in a mainstream classroom, these settings must be better. We have little evidence supporting that. Siperstein et al. (2011) found for students with ED in low income schools, they were more likely to be placed in restrictive settings and receive less related services than similar peers in higher income settings. Referring back to the work of Lane et al. (2005a), those students placed into self-contained school did not experience success on par with students
placed in self-contained classrooms. To date, no national data supports that restrictive settings as a whole produce greater benefit for students with ED.

Individual interpretation of “educational benefit” allows IEP teams to justify more restrictive placements based on performance areas outside of academics. Cypress-Fairbanks Intendment School District v. Michael F. (1997) ruled that a key component of FAPE is the student receiving non-academic benefits. Educational benefit must account for academics, but the social and behavioral development for students with ED are necessary as well. Unfortunately, schools (and IEP teams) are allowed to apply their personal interpretations of “educational benefit” in their placement decisions. Here again we find opportunity for IEP members’ individual attitudes and beliefs to play a role in determinations of educational setting.

Several court decisions do not provide clear distinctions as to the measurements used for making determinations. Hartman v. Loudnoun County Board of Education (1997) notes that schools must consider if the educational benefits obtained in a segregated setting would outweigh those in the general education classroom. For IEP teams that may consider factors like “inadequate family life” as a reason for placing a student in a more restrictive setting, they could easily argue that a more restrictive setting better fits the needs of the disabled student without demonstrating the benefit in any measureable way.

Two measurements of student performance commonly cited for students with ED are office discipline referrals (ODR) and out of school suspensions (OSS). Yet, there is sufficient reason to question the appropriateness of these tools for comparing students with ED across settings. There is no evidence that ODR and OSS are consistently applied in the same manner across classrooms, schools, districts, or regions, never mind levels of restrictive setting. Issues with validity of ODRs have been identified related to school discipline and referral practices
(Morrison, Redding, Fisher, & Peterson, 2006), subjectivity (Irvin, Tobin, Sprague, Sugai, & Vincent, 2004), and bias towards a student’s history of behavior problems or demographics (Skiba et al, 2008). It is possible, and highly likely, a classroom teacher would complete an office referral for a behavior performed by a student with ED that a teacher in a more restrictive setting would not (i.e. swearing). While classroom teachers generally follow universal school guidelines for dealing with behavioral issues, teachers in more restrictive settings are commonly given greater authority to deal with classroom issues themselves. Therefore, a student may be viewed as receiving “educational benefit” by being placed in a more restrictive setting simply because they receive fewer ODR or OSS in that setting. This measurement is neither a reliable nor valid tool to assess “educational benefit.”

It appears school budgetary restraints render the Roncker Portability Test moot in many placement decisions. This test requires IEP teams to assess if the same services could be provided to the student in a less restrictive setting. Many participants noted that students who presently are educated in more restrictive settings might be able to be included in the general education classroom if budgets allowed for classroom aides. Paraprofessionals, specifically one-to-one aides, have been one of the areas cut in most school budgets.

The pivotal court case that influenced the decision making of most participants, whether they were aware of the specific case itself or not, is Daniel R.R. v. State Board of Education (1989). It is this case that allows for a disabled student to be placed into a more restrictive setting if they have a negative or harmful effect on the learning environment. The inherent problem with the Daniel R.R. ruling is the central focus on the student with disabilities. The court finding does not require schools to demonstrate that the most effective practices were occurring in the classroom. This allows for educational triage. To produce the greatest gains for
all, schools can simply remove the most challenging student and cite the negative impact they have on other students. The Daniel ruling does not require the student to experience greater academic or nonacademic benefit in their next environment. *Sacramento City School District v. Rachel H.* further cemented the responsibility IEP teams have to those affected by the inclusion of a student with disruptive behaviors:

Disruptive behavior that significantly impairs the education of other students strongly suggests a mainstream placement is no longer appropriate. While school officials have a statutory duty to ensure that disabled students receive and appropriate education, they are not required to sit on their hands when a disabled student’s behavioral problems prevent him and those around him from learning.

(p. 1402)

While the courts have failed to provide clarity for the inclusion of students with ED in less restrictive settings, they clearly have set precedents for having them removed.

**The Peculiar Influences of Family and Academic Factors**

Two factors played surprisingly different and perplexing roles in the determination of educational setting. Despite little direct questioning from the researcher, comments regarding family characteristics and qualities permeated discussions across all three focus groups. These factors clearly play a significant role in setting determinations. In contrast, the academic needs of a student with ED produced little insight from the groups despite frequent probing from the researcher. Participants did not clearly express how a change of environment addressed academic skill deficits for students with ED, merely behavioral deficits. This finding brings into question methodological approaches presently used by schools for making placement decisions.
The most glaring and questionable factor used in determining educational setting was the perceived quality of a student’s family life and its relationship to a student’s special education needs. This is not to imply that the factor does not contribute to a student’s academic, behavioral, social or emotional needs, but it does question how we make the determination if it does. Specifically from a research community perspective, we still know very little about the parents of students with emotional and behavioral disorders. As noted by Brighman, Bakken, and Rotatori (2012):

As an example, consider the 2004 Handbook of Research in Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (Rutherford, Quinn, & Mathur, 2004). Across more than 600 pages, this clearly authoritative volume lacks a stand-alone chapter regarding families of individuals with EBD and contains only ten index citations to either parents or families. This represents a dearth of systematic treatment of the topic in special education literature rather than an omission on the part of the editors (p. 208).

Many students come to school from inadequate home lives but still receive their education in the general education classroom. Yet for students with ED, home life frequently provided IEP teams justification for changing a student’s educational setting. The findings of this study raise concern about the “hyper-focus” on family factors and the schools responsibility in supporting the needs of a student with ED. This concern is further elevated by the subjective way family factors were assessed, recognizing the significant role bias and personal beliefs play in IEP members’ perspectives.

Attitude Theory (1935) provides an appropriate vantage point to identify issues related to belief formation. Two specific aspects (Baron, 1991; Brehm & Kassin, 2007) of attitudes (attitude strength and situational attitudes) help explain the way IEP team members may develop
strong beliefs (bias) towards parents of students with ED. The first, attitude strength, states that when we have competing attitudes on a subject, the one we feel strongest about will impart greater influence on our actions. IEP members may be accepting of parents’ circumstances and points of view, but members who have strong opinions about issues related to family involvement may be compelled to create accommodations that provide for student needs they infer to be necessary.

Situational attitudes refer to the proximity (time or place) of influential entities, be it people or environment. IEP decisions occur in schools, consisting primarily of school personnel. If schools have a perception or belief of an approach for a student with ED that is different than the parent, an IEP member may be influenced by their immediate surroundings to support the attitudes of the school. As a research community, we presently know shockingly little about the influence of IEP members’ perspective of parents as it pertains to the care and service of their children with ED. This study suggests that attitudes towards parents do play a significant role in the delivery of educational services.

In contrast to the bountiful attention given to family-based factors, little regard was paid to the academic needs of students with ED during placement determinations. Academic needs refers to the specific accommodations to be provided in the classroom. Though considerable attention by previous researchers to identify academic- or intelligence- based variables for predicting a student’s educational setting, these factors garnered limited discussion by participants. Kauffman et al. (1987), and later Glassberg (1994), were surprised to discover the limited role academic factors served in placement outcomes. The findings of this study provide some explanation for this occurrence. Kauffman et al.’s (1987) reliance on teachers’ estimates of academic performance for students with ED may have been a contributing factor. This study
suggests that teachers may have limited awareness of ED students’ academic ability and place a more intense focus on the student’s behaviors. Members of the focus group rarely cited the student’s academic needs as a central factor in recommending a placement change. Members focused primarily on the student’s performance of externalizing behaviors and the direct impact to the learning environment. This study corroborates previous findings that interventions for students with ED focus primarily on improving behavior as it has the most overt impact on the classroom environment (Lane, 2004; Sabornie, Cullinan, Osborne, & Brock, 2005). This is to say, factors that directly impacted staff or other students necessitated a change of setting more readily than those that affected the student with disabilities.

Why is educational benefit an afterthought for students with ED? It is likely due to more dominant factors bringing about the urgency for a change of placement: the ED student’s negative impact on the learning of others, teacher frustration, or possible danger posed to others. IEP teams may view these variables as producing a greater impact due to how they affect others. This observed phenomenon illustrates how individual members’ of IEP teams identified their ‘organizations’ and further substantiates Stakeholder Theory (1984), which indicates that individuals operate to maximize value for their organization. An assumption prior to conducting this study was that IEP members prioritized the needs of the student with disabilities above others (i.e. staff, students). This clearly was not the case.

The findings of this study suggest that IEP teams may consider the needs of others (students and staff) affected by the student’s disability to be more valid than the needs of the student with the disability. Furthermore, based in part on the long history of school failure experienced by students with ED, schools may believe resources (teacher’s time, acceptance by other students) will long be exhausted (and maybe wasted) before the student with ED
experiences success. Thus, the decision is often to remove the student with ED so others can use those classroom resources to maximize their success. Better stated, schools perform *educational triage*. Triage here refers to the assignment of priority order to students and staff on the basis of where need exists and resources can be best used to achieve the most ideal outcome for the school as a whole. Rarely, if ever, was the greatest benefit provided to the student with ED. The practice of educational triage demonstrates how IEP members serve to maximize the value of the organization, the school.

One might contend that IEP believe a student’s behavioral needs require attention first before academic gains can be achieved, supporting their recommendation to change placements based on behavioral and/or emotional factors. This study does not agree with this argument. Few comments were directed that positioned the impetus of a placement change on addressing the behavioral and/or emotional needs of the disabled student. This finding matches that of Glassberg (1994):

*Intellectual, academic, and behavioral characteristics, which are supposed to correlate with placement decisions, did not decisively determine placement outcomes when these (and other) variables were analyzed collectively. In the real world, clinical judgment and other nonacademic factors enter into placement decisions (p. 190).*

This study suggests IEP teams did not follow a systematic approach that took measures to eliminate bias when making placement decisions for students with ED. The findings support just the contrary. Participants’ personal beliefs and their desire to maximize outcomes for the school played a considerable role in where a student with ED received their education. The following
section discusses case law’s attempt, and failure, to mitigate inappropriate determinations of educational setting.

**Limitations**

Several limitations need consideration in the application of the findings from this study. Focus group interviews served as the primary method for data collection; as a process, focus group research includes the following limitations. First, the findings are drawn from a small population of participants and are not generalizable. Second, the nature of focus groups influences the way people share information and the dynamics of group interaction affects results. Individuals may speak in a manner to obtain favorable attention from peers and withhold comments viewed as contrarian or incorrect. Focus groups can be influenced by location, time, and other factors not immediately obvious to the researcher. Follow-up sessions would have been beneficial to allow a check in the consistency of participant responses. Finally, this study included three focus groups. To check validity of findings it would have been beneficial to conduct multiple focus groups with additional teacher, principal and psychologist groups to see if findings were consistent.

Limitations should also be acknowledged concerning the composition of focus groups. Despite participants coming from different occupational positions within schools, they lacked demographic diversity. In general, participants were Caucasian, female, and all from Arizona. Inclusion of more males and participants of differing ethnicities would have likely provided a broader perspective of issues considered in placement decisions. In addition, the study included only representatives from schools. The inclusion of other key parties involved in the IEP process (i.e. parents, students, and outside resources) would also have provided a more robust understanding of factors considered in placement decisions.
**Recommendations for Practice**

This study highlights the significant challenge IEP teams face in determining the educational setting for a student with ED. The following are recommendations for schools and districts to consider in light of the findings of this study and previous studies.

In this study, IEP teams were reluctant to place ED students with inexperienced, poorly prepared teachers. In essence, the lack of preparation most teachers had in working with students with ED severely limited placement options. Districts should continue to offer trainings that emphasize classroom management and behavior principles as well as teach characteristics, assessment and interventions specific to emotional disability and behavioral disorders.

This study also identified that IEP teams struggle to balance student needs with those of their staff, students, and district; schools and districts should redouble their efforts to ensure that IEPs and placement decisions serve to benefit the student with disabilities. This suggests that districts and schools may benefit by adopting student and community focused methodologies such as person-centered-planning and wraparound services into IEP team planning (Kincaid, 1996; Walker & Schutte, 2004).

**Recommendations for Research**

In this section I provide recommendations for how the research community can further our understanding of placement decisions. This study identifies several issues related to the placement decisions of IEP teams with respect to students with ED. Most importantly, it underscores the need for more dedicated research specifically on the practice of determining appropriate educational setting for students with ED.

One finding from this study suggests IEP team members lack a formalized methodology for making determinations of most appropriate educational setting for students with ED. This
likely occurs due to the absence of a more explicit protocol for special education teams to follow. Rozalski et al. (2010) provide a decision-model for determining the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities. This model though fails to recognize necessary considerations related to placement decisions for students with ED (i.e. student with ED’s impact on the learning of peers). To address issues related to the influence of members’ beliefs, knowledge, and attitudes towards ED in the decision-making process, researchers must 1) extend Rozalski et al.’s (2010) model to include factors related to ED and 2) examine IEP teams adherence to it.

This study identified school-based resources, both in terms of staff and physical settings, as crucial variables in IEP teams’ decision-making. An extensive research base exists highlighting issues related to preparation and provision of teachers to work with students with ED (Billingsley et al., 2006; Boe et al., 1998; Boe & Cook, 2006; Brownell & Smith, 1992). However, we know little about the specific educational settings provided by individual school districts for these students. This study found differences across three districts in the settings they offered as options for placement. Research identifying both the various settings offered by school districts and the factors related to why school districts offer particular settings would help improve our understanding of how placement decisions are made.
APPENDIX A

STATEMENT OF POSITIONALITY

My work with students with ED dates back 13 years from when I first worked in a self-contained classroom for students with ED in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. With an undergraduate degree in Economics, I had zero training in general or special education prior to working across settings to support students with ED. My initial education on the issues related to this population came from direct interaction with these students and their teachers and support staff. By constantly reflecting on the work of my fellow co-workers and myself, I formed early opinions and beliefs regarding effective practices for students with ED. These were further informed by interactions outside of the school, working in the homes and communities of students with ED. In addition to teaching, my professional background included serving as a behavioral consultant for a rural school district in southern Arizona. This position required me to wear multiple hats: a coordinator of special education services, a family advocate for students with ED, and a community support organizer. In addition, I worked extensively with rural and urban school districts to develop specialized programs for students with ED as well as advocate for student’s rights when they were denied a more appropriate and inclusive educational setting. Extensive time and effort was spent in IEP meetings, working with the various individuals associated with developing educational programs. This study is inspired and informed by my work with schools and my experiences sitting in on numerous IEP meetings where determinations of educational setting were made.
APPENDIX B

EMOTIONAL DISABILITY PRIVATE PLACEMENT (EDP)

The Arizona Department of Education (ADE) permits school districts to develop in-house programs in public schools to meet the needs of students identified as ED. ADE classifies these programs as Emotional Disability Private Placements (ED-P). Traditionally, similar students might be served in private day school settings. Unlike self-contained settings, the state requires these programs to incorporate a therapeutic component.

To qualify as an ED-P, ADE requires programs provide:

a) A continuum of service delivery options available within the local education agency (LEA).

b) A separate public program which may be housed in a separate classroom or building on a regular school campus or in a separate site in the LEA.

c) A curriculum that is aligned to/with the Arizona Academic Standards.

d) A setting with a maximum of 12 students, a teacher, a full-time paraprofessional and the addition of a third staff member for crisis intervention and behavior management.

e) A mental health component on a regular basis by mental health professional.

f) A case management component which defines how individual students will be managed and by whom. (Arizona Department of Education, 2009).

For schools to place a student into an ED-P, the student must meet the following four criteria:

a) Students must have a special education category of ED.

b) There must be an indication of possible mental illness with a need for mental health services.
c) Student must exhibit behaviors with intensity and duration that exceeds that of students served in self-contained settings.

d) Student must require a setting that provides additional supervision and environmental safety (Arizona Department of Education, 2009).
APPENDIX C

SAMPLE QUESTIONS FROM FOCUS GROUPS

• What are your procedures for determining appropriate educational placement for students?

• When is it necessary to change the educational setting for a student with ED?

• What factors are considered in determining the most appropriate educational setting for a student with ED?

• What role do demographic factors (age, gender, ethnicity) play in where a student with ED is educated?

• What is your role in the determining the most appropriate educational setting for a student with ED?

• What differentiates a student with ED educated in the general education classroom from one educated in a self-contained classroom? From one educated in a self-contained school?

• What factors do your peers cite when recommending a change of placement for a student with ED?

• What would I find in a student with ED’s file that would help me predict their educational placement?

• How is the process of determining appropriate educational setting objective? Subjective?

• How do biases and perceptions towards students with ED affect where they are educated?

• How do the settings available to you impact decision-making?

• What role do “non-academic” factors play in making this determination?
• How have your experiences with previous students impacted your current decision-making?
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