

2010

# The lived school experiences of a select group of female adolescents labeled emotionally/behaviorally disordered

Anna Robic  
*University of South Florida*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd>

 Part of the [American Studies Commons](#)

---

## Scholar Commons Citation

Robic, Anna, "The lived school experiences of a select group of female adolescents labeled emotionally/behaviorally disordered" (2010). *Graduate Theses and Dissertations*.  
<http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/1751>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [scholarcommons@usf.edu](mailto:scholarcommons@usf.edu).

The Lived School Experiences  
of a Select Group of Female Adolescents Labeled  
Emotionally/Behaviorally Disordered

by

Anna Robic

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Special Education  
College of Education  
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Patricia Alvarez McHatton, Ph.D.  
Daphne Thomas, Ph.D.  
David Allsopp, Ph.D.  
William Black, Ph.D.

Date of Approval:  
June 24, 2010

Keywords: Disabilities, special education, gender, phenomenology, behavior disorders

Copyright © 2010, Anna Robic

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the two most important females in my life. To my mom, who taught me to be strong and raised me to believe I could do anything I wanted as long as I put my mind to it. Mom, I miss you every day and would have loved to be able to talk to you about this whole journey. To my daughter, Lily, who has reminded me on a daily basis how important it is to set the example of what it looks like to be a strong, successful woman and also how to handle the curves life throws at you. Without her laughter and spirit, I would not have been able to finish this.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank the girls who volunteered to be a part of this study. Their willingness to talk to me and share intimate events about their lives was so greatly appreciated. I hope that each finds their path in life and uses the determination each has to reach all their goals.

There are many people I would like to thank and without their help, this dissertation would not be possible. First, I would like to thank Dr. Patty Alvarez-McHatton. On so many levels, she has helped me stay on course during my entire doctoral program. There are no words to express how grateful I am for her support; both during my academic career and with the many life struggles I have gone through these past five years. Her faith in my abilities helped me to keep going during the many times I did not have any faith in myself. She was able to provide me a push when I needed it as well as a reminder of how important it is to take care of myself. Without this, I am not sure I would have finished.

Dr. James Paul was with me from the time I was debating about applying to the doctoral program until the writing of this dissertation. For the countless times he listened to me talk and helped me navigate through my life, I am thankful. Dr. Paul encouraged me to be gentle with myself and accept the tears and learn from them. How he is always able to say the right thing at the right time is an amazing talent and one from which I am grateful to have benefitted.

Dr. Daphne Thomas has also been a source of strength for me during my doctoral studies. Her gentle but firm approach was exactly what I needed at so many points in time. Thank you to Dr. David Allsopp and Dr. William Black for providing me feedback and encouraging me to approach this dissertation from angles that I had not previously considered. A special thanks to the many people in the Doctoral program and the Department of Special Education who provided me with so much support and kind words. Knowing that you all were supporting me meant so much.

I want to especially thank the friends and family who would not let me give up and helped me get through some of the darkest days I have ever experienced in my life. Your ability to make me laugh at times when I did not think it was possible to laugh again was amazing. Without you, I would not have been able to say that I have finished.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	v
ABSTRACT	vi
CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION	
Introduction	1
Statement of the Problem	1
Purpose	4
Method	4
Research Questions	4
Analysis	4
Limitations	5
Ethical Considerations	6
Significance of the Study	7
CHAPTER TWO REVIEW OF LITERATURE	8
Introduction and Focus	8
Students with EBD	9
Disability and Gender	11
Adolescence and Identity	17
Disability and Identity	19
Gender and Diagnosis of Disability	23
Student Voice	26

Attribution Theory	29
Phenomenology	32
CHAPTER THREE METHOD	37
Method	37
Purpose	37
Research Questions	37
Epistemological Framework	37
Methodological overview	39
Step one: Preparing to collect the data	40
Step Two: Collecting Data	43
Step Three: Organizing, Analyzing and Synthesizing the Data	45
Attributions	47
Step Four: Summary, Implications and Outcomes	49
Pilot Study	49
Ethics	50
Credibility	50
Conclusion	51
CHAPTER FOUR PRESENTATION OF RESULTS	53
Presentation of Results	53
Destinee	56
Destinee's I Poem	57
Interview One	58
Interview Two	63

Interview Three	65
Ke Ke	71
Ke Ke's I Poem	71
Interview One	74
Interview Two	79
Interview Three	82
Nay Nay	84
Nay Nay's I Poem	84
Interview One	87
Interview Two	91
Interview Three	93
Janie	95
Janie's I Poem	96
Interview One	98
Interview Two	102
Interview Three	105
Mita	107
Mita's I Poem	108
Interview One	111
Interview Two	114
Interview Three	117
Marie	119
Marie's I Poem	120



Interview One	123
Interview Two	125
Interview Three	126
Essential Themes	131
School Disengagement	131
Mother/Daughter Relationships	132
Stigma	134
Awareness of Behavior	135
Change Agents of Behavior	136
Hope and Resiliency	139
Dueling Narratives	140
Post-School Preparation and Planning	142
Attributions	145
Personality Tendencies	144
Demographic Status	145
Causal Schemata	146
Summary	150
CHAPTER FIVE IMPLICATIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND	
RECOMMENDATIONS	151
Implications, Conclusions and Recommendations	152
Identifying Students with Emotional/Behavior Disorder	153
Disability and Gender	154
Impact of Maternal Relationships	158

Transition Planning	158
Student Voice	161
Phenomenology as Method	162
Teacher Behavior	164
Attribution Theory	165
Limitations	166
Implications for Future Research	167
Conclusion	168
REFERENCES	170
APPENDICES	183
Appendix A: Personal Statement: Prior to the Study	184
Appendix B: Personal Statement: After the Study	190
Appendix C: Guiding Questions	194
Appendix D: Icebreaker: Sentence Stems	196
Appendix E: Icebreaker: Kinetic Drawing System for Family and School	197
Appendix F: Icebreaker: Letter to Future Self	199
Appendix G: Letter to Participants' parents	200
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	End Page

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 4.1:	Overview of <i>The Listening Guide</i>	53
Table 4.2:	Demographics of participants	56
Table 4.3:	Essential themes	152

The Lived School Experiences of a Select Group of Adolescent Females Labeled  
Emotionally/Behaviorally Disordered

Anna Robic

ABSTRACT

Being a female and having a disability has been referred to as ‘double jeopardy’ (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001). However research in the area of disabilities has either focused on the specific disability as a whole (i.e. research on learning disabilities or behavior disorders) or on mostly males (i.e. interventions in a classroom made up predominantly of boys). Researchers have pointed out that the school experiences for typical males and females are different as is the development of the two genders (Proctor & Choi, 1994). However in disability studies, the gender issue is seldom addressed (Deschler, 2005; Oswald, Best, Coutinho & Nagle, 2003; Vardill & Calvert, 2000; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001).

Post school outcomes for females with disabilities are poor (Rousso & Wehmeyer, 2001). Compared to boys with disabilities, girls with disabilities earn lower wages, have a lower likelihood of employment as well as work fewer hours a week with less job stability (Doren & Benz, 1998, 2001). Rates of depression and other mental health disorders are higher (Maag & Reid, 2005). The paucity of research in these areas calls for a need of more research in the specific area of females and disabilities.

The issue of gender inequity in education, specifically special education is one that needs closer examination and understanding. Phenomenological method was utilized to

explore the school experiences of females labeled EBD. A combination of life-history interviewing and focused in-depth interviewing, to elicit the perceptions and attributions of six girls as they describe their school experience was employed. The *Listening Guide* approach was applied for analysis in this study (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg & Bertsch, 2004).

The themes that emerged were school disengagement, mother-daughter relationships, stigma, hope and resiliency and the concept of dueling narratives. A discussion of how each theme emerged through the analysis process is provided. These themes are compared with the literature on the identification of students with disability, issues in gender, teacher behaviors, along with a critique of the method. Limitations and recommendations for future research are provided.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### Statement of the Problem

Students with disabilities face many issues as they navigate through their school career. Much attention has been given to the over-representation of males, typically from diverse backgrounds in programs such as specific learning disabilities (SLD), emotional behavior disorders (EBD) and mild intellectual disability (MID). Researchers often refer to children with disabilities as if they were part of homogenous groups. There has been little distinction made between male and female students and how their disability manifests itself in differing ways. While much research has been conducted in the field of special education, there has been a lack of attention to issues of gender and equity for females with disabilities (Wehmeyer, 2001).

The difference in learning styles between typically developing males and females has been an issue that has been examined over time in the literature on school reform and effective instructional methods. Just as there is a difference in the overall development between the two genders, researchers have pointed out that the school experiences for typical males and females are just as diverse (Proctor & Choi, 1994). At times suggestions that there are innate differences between the way boys and girls learned have been viewed as chauvinistic (Sax, 2005). However reports of achievement between the genders have raised issues as to whether there is gender equity in education (AAUW, 2007). While girls tend to outperform boys in certain subject areas, girls have been shown

to be at higher risk for internal distress related to school (Hay & Ashman, 2003). Some research has shown that girls tend to attach more emotion and self-worth to academic achievement than their male counterparts (Pomerantz, Rydell Altermatt & Saxon, 2002). The knowledge gained from this research on gender and education has not been widely applied to effective teaching of females with disabilities. The educational research in the field of disabilities tends to focus on one specific disability category rather than exploring issues and differences in regards to gender.

Being female and disabled has been described as ‘double jeopardy’ (Rousso & Wehmeyer, 2001). While it has been noted that simply being female in school can often be a disadvantage and negatively impact education, being female and disabled leads to even greater risks (Hanson & Smith, 2001). Post school outcomes for females with disabilities are poor. Compared to boys, girls with disabilities earn lower wages, have a lower likelihood of employment as well as work fewer hours a week with less job stability (Doren & Benz, 1998, 2001). Furthermore, rates of depression and other mental health disorders are higher (Maag & Reid, 2005).

From the research that has been done on females with disabilities, much has focused on significant mental or physical disabilities. Searches for research on females and disability often yields work focusing on girls within the framework of self-determination and transition. These studies include females with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities or physical impairments. Additional studies have examined transition goals and outcomes for females with disabilities where the largest part of the sample consisted of females with learning disabilities (Hogansen, Powers, Geenen, Gil-Kashiwabara & Powers, 2008). Findings suggest that gender strongly influences the experiences of

females with disabilities and even more so for females who are culturally or linguistically different.

With the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), there is greater emphasis on students with disabilities gaining access to the general curriculum as well as being in class with their general education peers. In addition, the idea of disability as a deficit is being challenged and educators are encouraged to utilize curriculum to enhance all students' strengths (Wehmeyer & Rousso, 2001). However, in the process of this occurring, the challenges girls, with and without disability, face in the classroom are largely overlooked.

#### Student Voice

It has been argued that young people are often the 'missing voice' in educational research (Cook-Sather, 2002, p.5). The idea of voice being a central tenet in educational research has been long advocated by many critical theorists (Giroux, 2003; McLaren, 1994). Kruse (2000) commented that "students can provide clear messages about what occurs in classrooms" (p.77). On the whole, there has been an exclusion of the voices of females with disabilities, specifically those with high incidence disabilities. Erevelles and Mutua (2005) began to explore the absence of this voice with girls with intellectual disability. They encourage researchers to consider both what females with disabilities say and what they choose to omit when sharing their stories. This study took the idea of student voice and began to apply it to students with significant disabilities who are not typically offered the chance to share their experience. The researchers encourage student voice to be widely applied when examining gender and disability.



## Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to examine the school experiences of females identified with an emotional and/or behavioral disorder (EBD). There is little research examining the school experiences of females with EBD. However, the poor post school outcomes are well documented. In order to better serve this population of students, it is necessary to understand their perceptions of school and the issues surrounding that experience. This study began to explore and assist in making meaning of the school experiences of females identified with this disability. An in-depth understanding of how the selected group of females with EBD experience school was gained.

## Method

### **Research Questions**

The following questions were addressed in this study:

1. What are the lived experiences of a selected group of adolescent girls labeled EBD in schools?
2. What attributions do these girls use to understand their lived experience?

These questions were examined utilizing phenomenological inquiry. Phenomenological method seeks to describe rather than explain a specific experience (Moustakas, 1994), in this case that of being female and labeled EBD. Using Seidman's (2006) 'in-depth phenomenologically based interviewing method' (p.15), I employed a combination of life-history interviewing and focused in-depth interviewing to elicit the perceptions and attributions of the participants as they describe their school experience. These interviews were conducted on three separate occasions.

## **Analysis**

The purpose of the analysis was to find the essences, or themes, that emerge from the stories told (Moustakas, 1994). The *Listening Guide* approach was utilized for analysis in this study (Gillian, Spencer, Weinberg & Bersch, 2004). This analysis called for several different readings of the transcripts and listening to interviews with attention to

1. Stories the participant shares
2. How she describes herself in relation to others and schooling
3. Attention to the research questions

This approach to analysis is ‘a way of analyzing qualitative interviews that is best used when one’s question requires listening to particular aspects of a person’s expression of her or his own complex and multilayered individual experiences and the relational and cultural contexts within which they occur’ (Gillian et al, 2004, p.169). They call for the researcher to follow distinct steps in analyzing the data. The steps are carefully outlined in chapter three where in-depth methodology is described.

Understanding how a researcher’s background influences his or her analysis, reflection of feelings and emotions of the researcher as well as a full explanation how analysis was handled are all forms of reflexivity needed in order to gain a full picture of the study (Olesen, 2007). Reflexivity in phenomenology is essential to the methodology. During this study, a reflective journal was maintained in order to acknowledge how my traits such as gender, age and positionality influence what is written. This journal documented my reactions and thoughts as the school experiences are shared. Additionally, the journal assisted me in recalling these thoughts and acknowledging the impact they had on the analysis.

## Limitations

The study took place at schools, which specifically served students with EBD. As in other phenomenological studies, the number of participants is small. The focus was on understanding the nature and complexity of the experiences of this selected population. The study was limited, therefore, to the insights and understandings that can be gained about the experiences of these participants.

I had no previous history with these schools. Although observations of the school setting occurred during the data collection process, I did not have an established relationship with the students involved. Due to the fact that I was coming into the schools without a prior relationship with the students, there was a challenge with rapport building. This was addressed by using several meetings as well as structured activities in addition to the interviewing process in order to build rapport and create a comfortable environment between myself and the participants. My prior experience working with students with EBD contributed to easier rapport building due to the understanding of the nature of the disability.

## Ethical Considerations

Confidentiality and ethical treatment of participants was a concern that needed to be addressed in a study such as this. In addition to obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board, application was made to the school district for permission to conduct the research. As part of this process the participating girls and families were asked to sign consents and assents with confidentiality being maintained at all times. The participants in the study had the option to stop at any point during the study as well. Additionally, the

girls were given the chance to clarify any points made during the course of the interviews.

Being female, the mother of a daughter, and working in the field of special education, there were biases and beliefs being brought to the study. In order to account for these factors, a reflexive account of my experience was documented. Since these lenses cannot be removed, it was essential they be discussed in a direct manner. A personal statement written prior to the study beginning was written (Appendix A). A journal including a narrative of the interviewer was kept and reviewed as analysis was completed.

#### Potential Significance of Study

Seeking out and understanding the experiences of girls with disabilities such as EBD can inform the research in special education. Having the girls share their recollections and perceptions, past and present, of their school careers can shed light on issues of school completion, school engagement and achieving greater post school outcomes. The information gained from this project has the potential to inform teachers, families and policy makers in order to improve post school outcomes for girls with EBD.

Chapter two reviewed the literature relevant to the study. This included literature on gender and disability, diagnosis of disability and the impact of disability on adolescent identity. Research on student voice as an agent of change was also included. Chapter three outlines the methodology to be utilized and contains an in-depth discussion on how data will be analyzed.

CHAPTER TWO  
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction and Focus

There are many issues at hand that are examined when looking at the school experience of adolescent females labeled EBD. It is essential to have an understanding of the literature involving these intersections. The experience of being a female adolescent labeled EBD requires the examination of several concepts. Included in this literature review is an examination of:

1. Characteristics and outcomes of students with EBD
2. Disability and gender
3. Adolescence and identity
4. Disability and identity
5. Gender and diagnosis of disability
6. Student voice
7. Attribution theory
8. Phenomenology

This chapter will examine the literature in regards to females with disability, better helps understand what research has taken place and where gaps in knowledge occur. In addition to looking at research specific to females with EBD, research on the topic of gender equity and disability as a whole has been examined to assist in determining issues

surrounding this topic. Reports from the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NTLS2) that have been analyzed by gender will be included to give perspective as to how quantitative data has informed this subject.

Another critical piece to this study is the idea of using student voice to gain understanding of the experiences of the lives of adolescent females with disability. This literature review includes writings and studies on this topic in order to underscore the importance of having the students themselves share their lived experience. Additionally, this section also includes some small samples of research in which the voice of females with more significant disabilities have been shared.

#### Students with EBD

IDEA defines Emotional Behavioral Disorders as follows:

"(i) The term means a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance:

- (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 behavior 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.

(ii) The term includes schizophrenia. The term does not apply to children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance" (CFR §300.7 (a) 9).

Just over 8% of students with disabilities are identified with EBD as their primary disability (US Department of Education, 2005). According to the NTLs, 75% of students with EBD are male. This indicates an over-representation of males in the area of EBD. Additionally in 2005, about 55% of students with disabilities overall were being served in regular schools in inclusive setting. However students with EBD are still being served in more restrictive environments with only 35% spending the majority of their day with non-disabled peers. Almost 7% of this population is being served in separate public school facilities (US Department of Education, 2005). Being female and identified with EBD often times means being taught in a more restrictive environment surrounded by mostly males.

Of all disability categories, youth identified with EBD tend to experience less school success and more academic failure than other groups, with or without disabilities (Landrum, Tankersley, & Kauffman, 2003). Academically, students with EBD continue to struggle. In secondary schools, 13.6% of students with EBD receive mostly D's and F's. When compared to all other disability groups, children with EBD make up the highest proportion of failing grades (Wagner, Marder, Blackorby, Cameto, Newman, Levine, et al, 2003). Additionally, these same students struggle with social skills and social adjustment. On a direct social skills assessment, 41% of students with EBD scored in the low range. The only other disability category group to score lower was students with autism (Bradley, Henderson & Monfore, 2004). Students with EBD have been

suspended or expelled at a rate of 72.9% of which is in significant contrast to the 27.6% of secondary youth with other disabilities (Wagner, Kutash, Duchnowski et al, 2005). About 35% of students with EBD at the secondary level have been arrested. This is also the highest percentage of all disability categories (Wagner, Newman, et al, 2003).

When closely examining the research on academic achievement and students with EBD, researchers found that students experienced large academic deficits across content areas (Lane, Carter, Pierson & Glaeser, 2006). While reading deficits remained constant over time between childhood and adolescences, the gap in math deficits widened (Nelson, Benner, Lane and Smith, 2004). Additionally, the behaviors of the students in the studies were largely externalizing behaviors that impacted learning. While it is hard to extract the social from the academic, it is important to acknowledge the deficits that do exist and to explore the additional impact of these deficits on the students labeled EBD.

The combination of placement decisions and both academic and social deficits contributes to the poor outcomes for students with EBD. When looking at the exit patterns from school for students with EBD, dropout is still the most common (Landrum, Katsiyannis, & Archwamety, 2004). Most literature in this area calls for a closer examination in determining how to decrease the rate of dropping out as means of exit and increasing the rate of obtaining a diploma. Additionally, better understanding of the disability group as a whole can assist in this area.

#### Disability and Gender

Disproportionality is often discussed in the field of special education. Typically this topic revolves around the over-representation of males as well as students who are culturally or linguistically diverse (Coutinho & Oswald, 2005). The issue that is seldom



addressed is the under-representation of females in special education and the poor outcomes of girls placed in programs for students with behavior disorders. In the Twenty-Fourth Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2002), data were reported indicating that 67% of youth with disabilities were male. However this was only mentioned in one paragraph with none of the data tables reflecting information regarding gender.

Being a female and having a disability has been referred to as ‘double jeopardy’ (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001). The disproportionality between genders in special education placement can range from 1.5:1 to 3.5:1 (Coutinho & Oswald, 2005). Hayden-McPeak, Gaskin and Gaughan (1993) noted that beginning in preschool, boys are enrolled in special education at a rate of two to one. This trend continues to occur in preschool classrooms today (Manwaring, 2008). The National Longitudinal Transition Study (2003) found that 73% of students identified with EBD are male. However, research in the area of disabilities has either focused on EBD as a whole (i.e. research on learning disabilities or behavior disorders) or on mostly males (i.e. interventions in a classroom made up predominantly of boys). This has led to what some researchers feel is tunnel vision and as a result has prevented families, advocates and teachers from closely examining the issue of not just being a female student but being a female student with a disability (Rousso & Wehmeyer, 2001).

Researchers have pointed out that the school experiences for typical males and females are different as is the development of the two genders (Proctor & Choi, 1994). However, in disability studies, the gender issue is seldom addressed (Deschler, 2005; Oswald, Best, Coutinho & Nagle, 2003; Vardill & Calvert, 2000; Wehmeyer & Schwartz,

2001). Gender has been shown to play an important yet often overlooked part in the learning process. Being male or female can greatly impact learner identity. Girls' brains tend to mature faster than boys resulting in earlier reading skills and increased verbal ability (Brizendine, 2007). This difference in development also can affect the manner with which an adolescent reacts to school success and failure. Boys tend to view lack of achievement as largely due to external factors (Crosne, Riegele-Crumb & Muller, 2007). They perceive that the failure has little to do with them. When a girl experiences success in school, they often attribute it to luck or an easy test. A failure in school is often interpreted as not being good at that subject or the subject being too difficult (Galley, 2003). Students identified with EBD often have a history of failure before identification. The dissimilarity in locus of control highlights one important difference between the boy identified with EBD and the girl with the same label. One may internalize the issue while the other tends to blame his surroundings.

Post-school outcomes for females with disabilities are poor. Compared to boys, girls with disabilities earn lower wages, have a lower likelihood of employment as well as work fewer hours a week with less job stability (Doren & Benz, 1998, 2001). Discrimination among women with disabilities occurs at double the rate of other girls and women in society (Asch, Rousso & Jeffries, 2001). Of the few studies that have been done in this area, several key differences are cited (Hogansen, Powers, Geenen, Gil-Kashiwabara & Powers, 2008). The first being that females are being encouraged to aspire to jobs that are stereotypically female. In general, these jobs earn less than stereotypical male jobs (Lips, 2003). The opportunities for women with disabilities to earn greater wages is compromised by transition goals gearing them towards jobs

involving clerical skills or childcare and home economic skills. Jobs utilizing these tools are less steady as well as lower paying (Wagner et al, 2003).

In addition, women with disabilities tend to graduate with less work experience than their male peers (Doren & Benz, 1998). Females are encouraged to avoid risk and begin a family early in life. Within three years of completing high school, females are more likely than males to have children and they are typically the primary provider (Powers, Hogansen, Geenen, Powers & Gil-Kashiwabara, 2008). These are important factors to consider since the role of caregiver often falls to the mother thus inhibiting possible career choices.

Rates of depression and other mental health disorders are higher for girls with disabilities (Maag & Reid, 2005). Heath and Ross (2000) conducted a study examining gender and depressive symptoms. Findings indicated a significant interaction between gender and learning disability and the report of depressive symptomology. Girls with SLD reported higher scores on the Children's Depression Inventory than their non-disabled peers as well as boys with SLD. Though preliminary in nature, it is important to include since there has been much debate in this area of depression found in higher rates in students with disabilities. While the study focused on SLD, the findings are important in the area of EBD due to the potential impact of school failure and depression in this population.

Data examining gender from National Longitudinal Transition Study (NTLS-2)

The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) began in 2001 and was commissioned by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES). The study is a follow-up of the original NLTS. NLTS2 includes 12,000 youth nationwide who were ages 13 through

16 at the start of the study (2000). The goal of the study was to provide a national picture of the experiences and achievements of young people as they transition into early adulthood. Data were collected from youth, parents and schools. There have been two waves of data reported. When examining the data tables and reports from the NTLS-2, there appears to have been some changes in trends between males and females than were previously noted in the first wave of data collection. However, these differences do not entirely paint a picture of equity between genders. Some key findings are listed below:

- In the general population, youth are split about evenly between boys and girls. Two-thirds of youth with disabilities in the NLTS2 study are boys.
- Boys with disabilities score higher than girls on both mathematics as well as content knowledge subtests. The differences are about 3 or 4 standard score points. National Longitudinal Transition Study (2005)
- Researchers noted in the report that gender must be taken in to consideration as an issue since males account for a much higher proportion of some disability categories (e.g., autism, emotional disturbances) than others (e.g., hearing or visual impairments) (Marder, Levine, & Wagner 2003).
- Although girls with disabilities are significantly less likely than boys to be single, girls who are living independently are significantly more likely than boys to be supporting themselves on less than \$5,000 per year (82 percent vs. 59 percent).
- In the two years between wave one of data collection and wave two of data collection, the average number of hours worked per week and the percentage of youth with disabilities working full-time increased for both boys and girls; however, the gains are significant only for boys.

- Only one fourth of employed girls are working fulltime.
- The change in wage earning is noted within the data but still shows 13% of girls with disabilities earning less than minimum wage while 6% of boys with disabilities are in the same category.

While improvements have been made, there are still large gaps to be accounted for between the genders when dealing with disability. Additionally, it has been noted that outcomes for students with disabilities as a whole are poor. So while the margin of difference between the genders may be closing, the outcomes for both are not what the field of special education or education as a whole is hoping for students with disabilities.

States are not required by the Department of Special Education to collect data that specifically looks at differences in gender. However, in a study done by Tschantz and Markowitz (2003), it was reported that at least 41 states do examine some data in regards to gender. Of all the states, at least forty-five reported overall identification rates, specific category identification rates and disciplinary actions as issues of concern with the intersection of gender and special education.

Additionally, Coutinho and Oswald (2005) examined data collected from the U.S. Civil Rights Office specific to gender and ethnicity among students with SLD, EBD, and mild intellectual disability (MID). The data spanned the years 2000-2001. Their findings across the country indicated that boys are 1.33 times more likely to be identified with MID, 2.03 times more likely to be identified as SLD and 3.43 times more likely to be identified as EBD. Specific to Florida, the odds ratios are 3.92 for identifying boys with EBD, 2.28 for SLD and 1.31 with MID. For EBD and SLD, Florida is a little higher than the national average. The authors discuss the concerns that arise from this data. They feel

the statistics demonstrate an under identification of females and not an over identification of males. Additionally, the authors remind the reader that criteria and measures used to identify students with EBD tend not to fully encompass symptoms of depression and other internalizing behaviors.

The practical implications of the findings in this study are many. Considering how NCLB has called for a greater participation of students with disabilities in the general classroom, Coutinho and Oswald (2005) demonstrate how disabilities manifest themselves differently by gender and reiterate the need for differences in gender to be included in the discussions on school reform. The American Association of University Women made this initial recommendation in 1992 when they published initial findings on the educational inequities between the two genders. Additionally, the suggestion is made that states need to gather meaningful data in respect to special education and gender. When this data is collected, states and districts could use this information to make program improvements. The authors bring to light the dire need for recognition of the differences between sexes and disability label.

#### Adolescence and Identity

There are many human development theorists who have interpreted the stage of adolescence. Piaget considered the ages of 11-15 to be the stage of formal operations where people begin to think more abstractly. Skills such as logic and deductive reasoning are formed during this stage (Piaget,1955). Erikson explained the adolescent stage as a negotiation between identity and role confusion (1950, 1968). Teens need to develop a sense of self and personal identity. A successful negotiation during this stage leads to an ability to stay true to who you are while failure leads to role confusion and a weak sense

of self.

Individual identity and making sense of self often occurs while identifying with different groups and communities. This group identity is considered by some to be critical during adolescent development. Along these lines, research on friendships and belonging during adolescence has been extensive and has been the focus of studies since 1898 (Newman & Newman, 2001). Specifically related to identity comes the work of Mead (1934) suggesting that identity and self-concept are largely formed by social experiences and an accumulation of judgment and opinions. The concept being that the self becomes apparent through the internalization of the standards and norms of the group.

Upon being formed, the self continues to develop as it expands the understanding of the group's outlook towards activities and goals. At this point a self-reflective stance can be taken. The power role of groups is reiterated and needs to be considered when examining adolescent experience. The reconciliation between group identification and alienation becomes another stage of adolescence. This is a negotiation between conforming to the rules of the group with tendencies towards loneliness and feelings of being overburdened (Newman & Newman, 1999). While resolving this crisis, there are instances of connectedness followed by periods of aloneness. Nakkula (2003) argues that identity is created not on a series of events but rather the 'the lived experience of an on-going process- the process of integrating successes, failures, routines, habits, rituals, novelties, thrills, threats, violations, gratifications, and frustrations into a coherent and evolving interpretation of who we are' (p.7). The specific groups adolescents tend to seek out largely take place in the context of school setting (Guarian, 2001; Sadowski, 2003).

Being a student with a disability greatly impacts the settings with which a student is exposed. Examining the school experience of females with EBD and how that impacts identity needs to be considered.

### Disability and Identity

Wehmeyer (2003) begins his chapter on the impact of disability on adolescent identity by clearly stating that there is no such thing as a single disability identity that generalizes to every person labeled as disabled. He goes on to explain that one's identity is created through a variety of lenses. First, a 'metarepresentational' (p. 128) understanding of self comes from understanding personal attributes that comprise identity as well as the perceptions of others. This means that the person is thinking about how others view themselves.

This is of considerable importance when involving persons with disabilities. Stigma that is often attached to disability impacts the formation of identity. Three specific areas have been identified as factors that can either positively or negatively influence identity formation (Wehmeyer, 2003). These are:

1. Self-definition, self-concept and self-image
2. Self-efficacy and perceptions of control
3. Self-determination

Self-definition and self-concept are critical to the development of identity (Hay & Ashman, 2003). Stigma and disability have been discussed in early literature in the field of special education (Jones, 1972). Because of the stigma attached to disability labels, there tends to be a negative self-perception created among adolescents with disabilities. Stigma is often created when a labeled group has attributes that differ from the majority



and that society considers being negative (Goffman, 1963). Five stages of stigma have been identified (Link & Phelan, 2001) and can clearly be linked with the process of being identified with a disability in school:

*1- Differences are identified and labeled*

As early as birth, children can be identified and labeled with a disability. For children with EBD, this typically happens when they are school-aged.

*2- Differences are linked to negative stereotypes*

Whether implicit or explicit, there are preconceived notions about students with disabilities, specifically EBD. These stereotypes may be intimated from teachers, peers or family.

*3. Stereotypes for categorization and placement of stigmatized individuals into distinct groups and are separate from dominant group.*

As previously discussed, students with EBD are most often physically served in a separate classroom or school from their non-disabled peers. This reinforces the distinction from the dominant group not only psychologically but physically as well.

*4. Separation results in loss of status and discrimination*

Educational equity is often called into question for students with EBD. While the definition of EBD includes that the disorder is not a result of intellectual deficits, the academic and post-school outcomes are extremely poor.

*5. Power differential exists between labeler and labeled*

In the instance of disabilities, there is clearly a labeler and the labeled. The power differential exists between the teachers and student as well as the non-disabled peer and the student with a disability.

Among students with high incidence disabilities, the tendency to associate their disability with something negative is higher than students with other types of labels (Crosnoe, Riegle-Crumb, & Muller, 2007). Specifically the category of EBD comes with negative connotations and feelings. Often times it is not the label itself but the behaviors that lead to the label that cause the stigma (Riddick, 2000) Special education is used to categorize people. While some may feel a sense of belonging to a group, others may feel the stigma associated with that label (Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007). Each instance plays a role in the development of identity.

Bandura defined 'perceived self-efficacy' as the influence a person feels they have in the actions that occur in her life (1997). Students with cognitive disabilities often report feeling as though they do not have control of their environment along with the inability to achieve certain outcomes. When students believe that they will not be able to do something, they often stop attempting. Often times this feeling is not based on actual experience but by the anticipation of failure. This contributes to the identity of the student with disabilities. Due to this perception, the self-identity formed takes on a negative nature.

Field and Hoffman (1994) discuss the construct of self-determination as a convergence of youth's identity with action and planning for the future. Self-determination and the effects on students with disabilities have been discussed in-depth in the field of special education (Algozzine, Browder, Karvonen, Test & Wood, 2001; Malian & Nevin, 2002).

Although involvement in self-determination and transition planning are recommended in the literature for girls with learning disabilities and behavior disorders, the post school outcomes remain poor.

One study closely examined the issue of self-determination and females. Researchers interviewed girls with EBD and SLD in order to better understand their role in transition planning (Trainor, 2007). Though the girls responded with specific goals they had for themselves, there seemed to be a disconnect between personal strengths and the traits and skills needed for particular jobs and roles after school. Largely the girls were unfamiliar with the transition planning process. The input they had given in previous IEP meetings went ignored and most felt that would continue in the transition process. Some expressed skepticism that the IEP team would help them achieve the goals they wanted after finishing high school.

Furthermore in the area of developing identity, reading has been examined as a possible contributing factor to the roles and role models to which adolescents are exposed. Richardson and Eccles (2007) suggest that voluntary reading may impact the development of identity. A wider scope of reading material beyond what is assigned in class can impact the exposure and possibilities adolescents have of future career aspirations. Students labeled with EBD often struggle in the area of reading or do not choose reading materials beyond what is required for class. The authors point out that this might limit the opportunity students have to ‘try on an array of possible and impossible selves’ (p.354). A large part of identity formation is being able to do just that.

## Gender and Diagnosis of Disability

The issues of gender and diagnosis have been examined more often in relation to what is known about Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) than any other label. The exploration of the intersection of gender and ADHD is discussed in this section due to the fact that it has been researched to a greater extent than EBD and gender.

Diagnosing, school functioning, and services are the three themes that have been researched in-depth in this area (DuPaul, Jitendra, Tresco, Junod, Volpe & Lutz, 2006; Gratez, Sawyer, Baghurst & Hirte, 2006; Jackson & King, 2004). Boys are typically diagnosed with ADHD two to three times more frequently than girls as well as show a tendency to receive higher ratings on scales measuring hyperactivity and inattentiveness (Achenbach, 1991). In fact, most of what is known about ADHD comes from samples of boys (DuPaul et al, 2006). However what most research reiterates is that girls frequently tend to act out less in school or behave in a disruptive manner leading to a lesser frequency of labeling. Additionally, girls who are diagnosed with ADHD tend to exhibit more symptoms of depression than boys with the same label (Biederman et al, 2002; Gaub & Carlson, 1997).

Jackson and King (2004) replicated a study in which both special education and general education teachers of kindergarten through sixth grade watched videotapes of children displaying behaviors consistent with ADHD and Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) as well as normal behavior. Each teacher watched video of a typically developing boy and then of a boy with ADHD or ODD in the classroom. The same teachers watched a second video, this time of a female displaying normal and disordered behavior. After the tape was over, the teachers were asked to fill out a questionnaire and to specifically

focus on the child's behavior and not the teacher of the classroom. The results of this study replicated that of the previous study from which it was modeled. Male portrayal of ODD received higher ratings on the behavior rating scale than the female exhibiting the same behavior.

The gender appropriateness of the criteria of such disorders as ADHD, ODD and Conduct Disorder (CD) have also been examined in the literature (Lumley, McNeil, Herschell & Bahi, 2002; Ohan & Johnston, 2005). There have been conflicting results when examining issues of gender and disruptive behavior (Breen & Alpeter, 1990; DuPaul & Barkley, 1992). The conclusion seems to change as different instruments are used. Also results differ depending on whether a family member or teacher completed a scale or if the data was collected using a combination of rating scales and observations.

Using a combination of psychiatric history, parent-reports, teacher-reports and structured interviews, Lumley et al (2002) reported that the intensity of the externalizing behavior is significantly higher in boys. Boys were shown to have a greater number of disruptive behaviors at a higher frequency. However, significantly more females were found to have developmental delays. This study, along with the others cited, begs the question of just how accurate is the diagnosis and who might be overlooked because the behavior observed by the female isn't as significant or intense as the male.

Zambo (2008) encourages teachers, parents and physician to be aware of the many different lenses through which ADHD can be viewed. She points out that practitioners utilize the criteria outlined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association, 2000) to determine if a child has ADHD, yet the manual does not allow for the differences between gender in this

category. The author points out that there are potentially three different lenses with which to view ADHD. The first lens most commonly used consists of symptoms described in the DSM-IV-TR. She labels this the low-resolution lens. The second is referred to as high-resolution lens number one, which examines the differences between gender and children labeled ADHD. High-resolution lens number two looks at the differences between girls with ADHD and girls without.

Her argument throughout the paper is that the more lenses used, the clearer a picture we can achieve of girls with ADHD. This framework for examining ADHD could be applied in examining students with EBD. Looking at this disability from a strictly symptomatic lens is the most widely used lens when diagnosing students with EBD thus creating an over-representation of males with this label. Using the ‘high resolution lens’, the differences between genders as well as the contrasts among females with and without EBD might provide more accurate assessment, diagnosis and treatment. The use of multiple lenses can assist with a deeper understanding and in turn help with the identification and education of females with EBD.

The notion of the observer and his or her perceptions of significant behavior are discussed by Kann and Hanna (2000). The authors explore differences in gender as it relates to disruptive behaviors in childhood and adolescence. Parent and peer expectations of boys and girls are notably different with the tendency being that females are expected to be more sensitive or to become more withdrawn during teenage years. This leads to a greater chance in a disorder being overlooked.

Kann and Hanna (2000) then go on to specifically examine the methods of identification of behavioral disorders. These included interviews, behavior rating scales

as well as observations. The recommendation from the study is to utilize all three of the techniques to accurately identify girls with behavior disorders and avoid under identification. In the conclusion, the authors call for the inclusion of girls in studies of behavior disorders as well as equal consideration given to their academic needs.

The issues with gender and EBD are many. Beginning with flaws in identification of students with EBD and the subsequent poor outcomes of those with the label, the concerns for females labeled behavior disordered are many. As a whole this has not been a group largely studied. In order to begin to understand the needs of girls labeled as behavior disordered, their voice needs to be heard.

#### Student Voice

The concept of studying schools is not a new one. Educational researchers have long identified problems in school structures and countless books have been written on school reform. The approach has typically been that of a researcher's or teacher's framework (Shultz & Cook-Slather, 2001). The voice of the students themselves has not been heard until recently. Students with the disabilities are heard even less often. It is a rare occurrence when a female with a disability shares her story.

In recent years, the idea of 'student voice' has taken on new meaning as pupils are becoming more involved in educational reform (Fielding, 2002; Mitra, 2003). Students have often reported that adults in their schools rarely listen to their views resulting in large number of students who felt disengaged and powerless within the school system (Noddings, 1991; Pope, 2001). Though the research is limited in this area, one study reported a correlation between an increase in student voice in school culture and an increase in school attachment (Lee & Zimmerman, 2001).

There is value in gaining the perspective of the students. Mitra (2004) outlines three outcomes that student voice can increase. Identified are agency, belonging and competence. These are three important concepts for helping students with disabilities. The study indicated that when students felt people were listening to their perspectives an increase resulted in their self-worth and in return, agency. In addition, students report that they gained a better understanding from the teacher perspective as well as teachers understanding the experience of students. Belonging increases as this occurs. As part of creating a forum for student voice, Mitra also found that students felt they were better able to communicate with people who were different than them. A sense of social justice developed and acceptance of alternate opinions occurs.

Specific to disabilities, the students in special education have largely had their voice ignored by the literature. As Jones (2007) points out, in order to tell one's story, there is a set of communication skills needed. However, this does not mean that students with disabilities cannot tell their story. The communication might occur in unconventional ways. In her particular study, Jones worked with four females labeled EBD. Her research questions included how sense of identity was formed in reaction to the school culture, which was a segregated school for students with EBD. Additionally how these female participants reacted to this school culture and the experiences they have lived were examined.

The desire was to give voice to a group of students who are traditionally not represented in the literature. While the author does talk about some barriers she faced during this study, she concludes with the important reminder that there is much to be learned from people's stories, especially those often overlooked or muffled. Though the



method employed by this author began as narrative research, it evolved into supportive autobiographical essays, which allowed for the girls to tell their stories and share it in a written form by which others could learn. Three of the four girls mentioned that they were grateful to have an opportunity to be heard in their own words and hoped to make an impact on educators, parents and policy makers.

Four core values to utilizing student voice have been identified (Robinson & Taylor, 2007). These are identified as:

1. A conception of communication as dialogue.
2. The requirement for participation and democratic inclusivity.
3. The recognition that power relations are unequal and problematic.
4. The possibility for change and transformation. (p.8)

When working with students who have been traditionally marginalized, as students with disabilities historically have been, these are important concepts to work from. Key to gaining an understanding of the school experiences of females with EBD is the use of dialogue about those events while the researchers understand that there is a power differential in the relation. As Friere (1997) argues, education needs to promote critical consciousness and empower students to be agents of change. This study aims to encompass gender as a piece of this theory of power, as recommended by feminist theorists (Weiler, 1994).

The fourth concept, which reiterates the possibility of change and transformation, is what makes the argument for using student voice. For students such as the ones proposed to be involved in this study, the insight gained into the school experience offers opportunity for change in order for more positive post school outcomes.

## Attribution Theory

Attribution theory, along with personal construct theory, explores how people arrive at a dispositional explanation for certain behavior (Jones & Davis, 1965). These dispositions are often a result of internal characteristics that reside within a person. An ordinary explanation can be thought of as a process by which people attribute events and experiences to one or more causal factors (Antaki & Brewin, 1982). This cannot only describe present and past but also can have implications for the future decisions. In studying the lived experiences of girls with EBD, it is important to consider what attributes they utilize to make meaning of their experience.

Attribution theory stems from social psychologists searching to understand how people search for the cause of social behavior. Heider (1958) broke it down into the two categories of personal and environmental. The first category, personal, is when the person attributes the cause of the behavior specifically to the person who performed it. When behavior is attributed to an external source, it is considered environmental. Heider also emphasized that one of the first considerations in studying attributions was to identify the terms the ordinary explainer used in analyzing behavior, not the trained professional (1958).

Kelley's work in the area of personal construct theory furthered the ideas of attribution theory as well (1963). Kelly was also concerned with how perceptions of situations and behavior impact the tools a person uses to explain situations. He elaborated on this idea by explaining that the perceiver collected the information that he or she needed to explain behavior from three sources:

1. how often the actor had done that action in similar circumstances elsewhere in the past (consistency information);
2. how often the actor had done that same sort of action in different circumstances (distinctiveness information);
3. how many other people did that sort of thing in those sort of circumstances (consensus information)

Arriving at the reason for behavior may vary depending upon the role of the person making the claim (Jones & Nisbett, 1972). The observers of the actions tend to be dispositional meaning that they explain the cause of behavior due to a person's internal characteristics. However a person will most likely explain their behavior as situational, meaning that they acted according to the demands of the situation. Actors know more about their own history (i.e. attitudes, intentions, motivations) than the observers. This knowledge can also influence the way a person chooses to explain or recall events. Jones and Davis (1965) suggested that the difference in explanation might also have to do with the actor wanting to attribute behavior to someone other than himself.

Weiner (1974, 1985) developed a model regarding perceptions of successes and failures. Suggesting that there are three common attributions of successes and failures, Weiner identified controllability, stability and locus of causality. These were then correlated with affect, motivation, performance and expectations of future outcomes (Weiner, 1985). Controllability refers to whether the cause can be inside or outside an individual's control. Stability refers to the likely permanence associated with the attribute. The stability of the attribution often impacts the expectation of future success. If the attribute assists with success and will exist for the duration, the likelihood of success

occurring again is high. The locus of causality is thought to be whether an individual places the cause on something internal (happening inside themselves) or external (occurring outside the self).

Using Weiner's model (1974, 1985), two general categories of antecedents were developed, along with five subcategories, that may influence pupils' causal perception related to school (Antaki & Brown, 1982). These are:

1- Students' own personal dispositions (internal)

- i. personality tendencies
- ii. demographic status
- iii. causal schemata

2- External information available to students

- i. own performance
- ii. others performance
- iii. constraints and nature of the achievement task
- iv. parents or others influence
- v. teachers influences

Weiner's framework was utilized in a study examining attributions of students with ADHD (Kaidar, Weiner, & Tannock, 2003). Looking at attributions for success and failure, the study found that children with ADHD viewed their behavior as not in their control and also stable over time indicating a feeling of hopelessness at this situation changing. Additionally, the students with ADHD did not largely view their behavior to be problematic to teachers and parents. This indicated that the students self-perception of behavior was inconsistent with observer reports of behavior.

In another study of adolescents with EBD (Maras, Brosnan, Faulkner, Montgomery, & Vital, 2006), the authors looked at the differences between adolescents with and without EBD and their attributional styles. The students with EBD scored significantly lower on scales of self-perceptions, as well scoring significantly higher than students without EBD when measuring negative attributions about self. The students with EBD tended to blame themselves for negative events. There was no difference between the groups when measuring positive attributions. Though the ideas of stability, controllability and locality were not explicitly discussed in this article, it seemed the students placed the locality on themselves with a large degree of stability indicating the behavior was there for a long period time.

The perceived causality and attributions a person utilizes can assist greatly in understanding how they make meaning of specific experiences. Understanding the attributions, as well as specifically examining the two categories and five subcategories outlined above, can provide a framework for examining what a person includes or omits when describing their school experience.

### Phenomenology

Phenomenology is both a philosophy and a method of inquiry. The term ‘phenomenology’ comes from the Greek *phainomenon*, which means the appearance of things or phenomenon (Spinelli, 1989, p. 2). While its origins are in philosophy, phenomenology has evolved over time into also serving as a research method to gain understanding of lived experiences. Phenomenology has been an area that is ever changing and evolving. In order to understand the application of phenomenology to research in education, it is important to understand the philosophy and history behind the

movement.

There is a historical movement behind phenomenology that has been described as having three phases (Speigelberg, 1982). The Preparatory Phase is considered the first phase and encompasses the work of Brentano and Stumpf. It is during this period that the notion of investigating human experience without any causal explanations is explored. Brentano introduces the idea of a distinction between the mental and physical phenomena. It is here that the earliest notion of intentionality is offered with the conscious and reflective thinking being key elements in describing specific phenomena (Moran & Mooney, 2002; Speigelberg, 1982).

The second phase, also called the German Phase of the Movement, contains the crux of much of the philosophy of phenomenology. This part of the history of phenomenology contains the works of Edward Husserl, Max Scheler and Martin Heidegger. Husserl is a central figure in the development of phenomenology (Moran & Mooney, 2002; Natanson, 1973; Speigelberg, 1982). He introduced the idea of intentionality by defining its two parts being the noesis and noema (Husserl, 1931). Noeses is made of the mind and spirit and allows one to make meaning or sense using memory, judgment, thinking and feeling while the noema is the *what* that is actually being experienced (Moustakas, 1994). It is in Husserl's work (1970) where the notion of using pure description of an experience to gain understanding as a philosophy was explored in an in-depth manner. Pulling away from treating linguistics as objects and utilizing the noesis and noema, Husserl advocated for seeking essential concepts of a phenomenon that are illustrative and provide an evidence of meaning.

Heidegger took this notion and expanded on the premise. He suggested

“phenomenology is the science of the manifest, of what shows itself, in all senses of that showing, which includes seeming and dissembling” (Moran & Mooney, 2002, p.248). Heidegger took the notion of exploring how one lives in the world to a more ontological notion of what it means to be a person in the world. It is this shift that helps phenomenology expand from more than an illustrative story. Instead it developed into a philosophy whose purpose is to make meaning and additionally learn from these unique human experiences.

The third phase in the history of phenomenology is also referred to as the French Phase. Within this phase, the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty are a strong influence. Sartre and Merleau-Ponty emphasize the ideas of consciousness and intentionality in their work. For Sartre, the idea of intentionality and consciousness encompassed not just perceptions but thoughts, emotions, desires and impulses (Moran & Mooney, 2002; Spiegelberg, 1982). Merleau-Ponty further expands this idea and describes it as the phenomenology of perception (1962). He defines phenomenology as being concerned with the essences of a perception and consciousness and elaborated by saying that phenomenology is interested in the specific description of human experience.

When following the movement of phenomenology, three key elements present themselves as vital parts of the philosophy. Descriptions, essences, and intentionality are often cited the most important concepts of phenomenology (Natanson, 1973; Spiegelberg, 1975). Ultimately the aim of phenomenology is to provide description of a phenomenon and not an explanation. Descriptions can encompass everything from thoughts and emotions to illustrative examples of the physical (Ehrich, 2003). The starting point of understanding phenomena begins with the idea of descriptions.

Essences are the core meaning of an individual's experience. The search for essences or essential themes involves intuition and reflection (Speigelberg, 1975). The essence of experience is not the final step of phenomenology. It is how the phenomenon is understood (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Essences are qualities that make a phenomenon what it is. To take these essences away would be to change the phenomenon (Van Manen, 1990).

Intentionality refers to consciousness and that individuals are always conscious of something (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) and should not be confused with the more common use of the word meaning planned action (Smith & Fowler, 2008) Combining the idea of noema and noesis, as previously discussed, leads to the interpretation of experience (Husserl, 1970). Intentionality combines the description of experience with individual reflection about that same experience and serves as a frame for developing cognition and understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Van Manen, 1990).

#### Phenomenology and the Researcher

Van Manen states, "the problem with phenomenological inquiry is not that we know too little about the phenomenon we wish to investigate but that we know too much" (1990, p.46). The researcher comes to the study with assumptions and pre-understandings of the phenomenon being studied. Husserl called the freedom from suppositions the Epoche (1970). He advocated that the researcher attempt to 'bracket' their knowledge about the phenomenon and to attempt to suspend these beliefs during research. Moustakas acknowledges the value of this but clarifies the notion to mean that the researcher is transparent and encourages that whatever is being disclosed is seen with "naïve eyes" (1994,86). Adding to the conversation, Van Manen (1990) suggests that the



researcher make explicit their understandings, beliefs and assumptions. Instead of trying to deny their existence, the researcher should be acknowledging these suppositions throughout the study. Three methods have been suggested to attempt to achieve this (Pollio, Henley & Thomspen, 1997):

1. The researcher explicitly acknowledges his or her own reasons for investigating a particular phenomenon. This may take place through bracketing an interview or by writing a personal statement. The personal statement would encompass the researcher's history with the phenomenon as well as current concerns.
2. The researcher provides interpretations in the participants' terms, rather than using language specific to the discipline.
3. The researcher arranges for at least some of the interview to be interpreted by a group that functions in a critical capacity

The written personal statement should be done prior to the beginning of the study (Van Manen, 1990). I chose to write a personal statement that is provided in Appendix A and was written prior to the study taking place as suggested by the literature. Further discussion of phenomenology as research method will be discussed in chapter three.

There are many mitigating factors that stand to impact the school experiences of adolescent girls labeled EBD. The issues addressed in this literature review are important to understand prior to conducting research on this topic. This review is intended to serve as a basis from which to approach the study understanding that other concepts and themes will emerge during analysis. Referral back to the literature will take place during chapters five and six. Chapter three will provide an in-depth examination of the methodology utilized for this research.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHOD

#### Purpose

The purpose of this study was to acquire a better understanding of the lived school experiences of selected adolescent girls labeled emotionally/behaviorally disordered (EBD). This study focused on recognizing common themes among the girls' experiences in order to begin to create a framework of understanding. Understanding the school experience of this group can help determine areas of schooling which have been perceived and experienced as successful and those which need improvement and support.

#### Research Questions

The following questions were addressed in this study:

1. What are the lived experiences of selected adolescent girls labeled EBD in schools?
2. What attributions do these girls use to understand their lived experience?

#### Epistemological Framework

In order to address these research questions, I utilized phenomenological method. According to Van Manen (1990), 'lived experience is the starting and ending point of phenomenological research (p.36)'. Lived experiences gain significance and meaning when they are recollected from memory. The description of the experience helps to get to the core or 'essence' of a specific experience or a certain way of being in the world

(Merleau-Ponty, 1962). The primary concern of phenomenology is with the essential, or ontological, nature of that experience (Kockelmans, 1967).

The use of phenomenology as inquiry has various iterations and frameworks. For the purpose of this study, hermeneutic phenomenology will be utilized. Phenomenology becomes hermeneutical when the argument is made that “every form of human awareness is interpretive” (Nicholson, 1997, p.304). A central principle in hermeneutic phenomenology is that there is a continuous cycle in the interpretation of experience. Often referred to as the hermeneutic circle (Heidegger, 1927), this process consists of constantly relating parts of text back to the whole text (Pollio, Henley & Thompson, 1997). Aspects of the experience are examined within the context of the whole experience. Since this study was not examining one specific point in time of the phenomenon of being an adolescent female with the label EBD, the approach of continuously making sense of parts of the experience in relation to the whole experience was appropriate.

Moustakas (1990) identifies several key elements in constructing a sound phenomenological study. In this type of research, the topic should have both personal significance and social meaning. It is from the personal interest that the curiosity about the phenomenon initially develops. Questions about the experience need to take on certain characteristics. Among them are:

1. Seeks to reveal more fully the essences and meanings of human experiences;
2. Engages the total self of the research participant;
3. Does not seek to predict or to determine causal relationships;

4. Utilizes careful, comprehensive descriptions rather than measurements to understand experiences

(p.105)

The questions that guided this study were phenomenological in nature. What was being researched was the actual lived school experiences of girls with EBD.

Interest in this topic stemmed from my professional experience of being a teacher of students with EBD and witnessed some of the struggle girls in classes for students with disabilities have encountered. Typically while teaching students with EBD, the make up of the class consisted of predominantly boys and one or two girls. The girls would often refer to themselves as stupid and felt that their being the only girls in the “special class” reinforced that.

The review of literature in chapter two emphasized what is already known in the field of EBD as it relates to females. The paucity of research in the area of gender and disabilities, as well as the documented poor outcomes of this population underscore a need to better understand their experiences (Wehmeyer, 2001). The study aimed to explore the phenomena of being a female labeled EBD in-depth and used the description the girls provided to make meaning of this experience.

#### Methodological Overview

Specific steps in phenomenological methodology have been identified (Moustakas, 1990, 181-182). These include:

1. Preparing to collect data
2. Collecting data
3. Organizing, analyzing and synthesizing data

#### 4. Summary, Implications and Outcomes

##### Step One: Preparing to Collect the Data

###### **Conducting Literature Review**

Preparing to collect data involves formulating the research question, conducting a literature review, developing criteria for selecting participants as well as guiding questions for the research interview. Chapter two included an in-depth literature review outlining several issues with adolescents labeled with a disability in school. From this literature, the guiding questions (Appendix B) were formed to include reflections of early school experience, both the academic and social impact of being labeled and future goal planning as perceived by the participants.

###### **Participant Selection and Setting**

This study utilized convenience sampling (Orcher, 2005). The participants in this study attended a school where there was a population of females with EBD. Individuals were selected based on the specific criteria of being female, being at least thirteen years old, and being identified with emotional and/or behavior disorder. The setting of the study were schools that served students identified with EBD. Students selected for this study attended either a center school, which only served students with EBD or in a self-contained classroom for students with EBD within a traditional school setting.

A total of six girls were recruited for this study. The first participant served as a pilot for the research questions. The school where the studies took place had a diverse population with almost 70% of the students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and close to 80% receiving free/reduced lunch. The percentage of

free/reduced lunch indicates a lower socioeconomic make up to the school. There was a large discrepancy between the male and female students within the classrooms of these schools. The males outnumbered the females at a ratio of seven to one. Students were referred to their current placement as a result of the marked severity of their disability.

While IDEA emphasizes least restrictive environment, students requiring smaller classes and more intensive support may be referred to a school or a classroom, which addresses significant behavior.

I attended a principal's meeting at the beginning of the school year with information about the study. The principals who had students who met the criteria provided me with the school's contact information and meeting times were set up to explain the study to the girls. I met with groups of between two and six girls at four different school sites. Letters were sent home to the families of girls who meet the criteria (Appendix F). This letter explained the study's purpose, confidentiality, and data collection procedures. Since the girls being asked to participate in the study were not of the age of consent, a consent and assent was procured before the study begins. If the student was interested and the family gave permission, they were asked to sign the consent and assent and return it to the school by an agreed upon date. The student committed to three interviews of approximately forty-five minutes each spanning over the course of three weeks. The interviews took place at the school site in a private area.

### **Guiding Questions**

According to Vygotsky (1986), the very process of putting experience into language is a meaning-making process. Knowledge can be structured encounters organized around

telling about experience (DeVault & Gross, 2007). An in-depth interviewing process needed to take place in order to explore this phenomenon.

Qualitative interviewing has been described as a conversation that is conducted in such a way that meaning is heard (Kavale,1996). This study used Seidman's (2006) 'in-depth phenomenologically based interviewing method' (p.15). Combining life-history interviewing and focused in-depth interviewing, I utilized open-ended questions and built on the responses to construct their experience. Rubin and Rubin (2005) identify three kinds of questions are essential to qualitative interviewing:

1. Main questions that begin and guide the conversation;
2. Probes to clarify and answer questions or request further examples;
3. Follow- up questions that pursue the implications of answers to main questions (p.145-146)

Phenomenological data collection involves an informal, interactive interviewing process. While the researcher may develop a series of questions in advance, these may be altered, varied, or not used at all as the participant shares her experience (Moustakas, 1990). The guiding questions can be found in Appendix B.

Following Seidman's method, interview one consisted of a focused life history. Within this framework, participants were asked to reconstruct their school experiences from their earliest memory of school. This was considered a path to understanding how the participant came to the place she is today.

The second interview focused on the present lived experience of being female, identified with EBD and in high school. Details were gathered about their current school setting. Concrete details were requested as well as specific teacher and student behaviors.

Finally, the third interview reflected on the meaning of the experience. The combination of the first two interviews, exploring the past and the concrete details of the present, set the stage for reflection of school experiences. While participants were making meaning through all three interviews, it was in the third interview that has meaning as the center of its focus.

### Step Two: Collecting Data

This study followed Seidman's protocol while also taking into consideration the developmental stage of the participants as well as the research questions of the study. For the purposes of this study, there were three interviews including activities to help facilitate conversations. Due to the fact that there was no previous relationship between the participants and researcher, the three meetings with the students in this study included activities beyond the scope of the traditional life-history interviewing technique outlined above (Gumbiner, 2003).

During each meeting, an activity was introduced designed to act as both an icebreaker and an additional means of data gathering. Additionally, meetings two and three began with a review of the previous interview. This provided a way to reconnect as well provided the participant opportunity to clarify any information shared during the prior meeting.

During the first meeting, a modified version of the *Rotter Incomplete Sentences Blank (RISB)* (Rotter, Lah & Rafferty, 1992) was used to facilitate discussion. While the RISB is designed to assess personality adjustment, the sentence stems also can initiate conversation around perceptions of self, school and others. The responses were not scored in a traditional manner, instead was recorded as part of the interview. These



activities helped alleviate some the pressure that interviews may cause. (Sentence stems are outlined in Appendix C)

During the second interview, I utilized the *Kinetic Drawing System for Family and School* (Knoff & Proutt, 1993). The history of using drawings to investigate adolescent feelings and experience has been extensive (Klepsch & Logie, 1982; Malchiodi, 1998). There are many purposes for using such a method, including an icebreaker technique to facilitate rapport (Knoff & Proutt, 1993). There were two phases to this activity. The first was the performance phase, which involved the student completing the drawing as instructed by the researcher. The second was the inquiry phase during which the researcher asked questions pertaining to the picture in order to elicit discussion about school. (Specific directions and questions are outlined in Appendix D) This activity was chosen for the second interview in order to open up dialogue about school in a non-threatening way. This data was analyzed to help support or revise themes.

Interview three began by asking the girls to draft a letter to themselves in the future. They were asked to think specifically about what goals and accomplishments they wish to achieve in the next ten years. (Directions are outlined in Appendix D). The objective of interview three was largely to reflect and make meaning of the school experience. By introducing the ideas of goal setting and aspirations, the discussion surrounding post-school outcomes was easier to facilitate.

Upon completion of the ice-breaker activity at each meeting, the more formal interviewing process took place. The main questions were addressed with the use of probing for examples, better understanding and clarification when needed. Additional

follow up questions were asked for further implications of the main questions (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

### Step Three: Organizing, Analyzing and Synthesizing the Data

After the interviews were conducted and transcribed, initial coding was conducted. While conducting the coding process, the Listening Guide approach was utilized. Outlined by several feminist qualitative researchers (Gilligan, 1993), the Listening Guide approach calls for several different readings of the transcripts and listening of interviews with attention to

1. Stories the participant share
2. How she describes herself in relation to others and schooling
3. Attention to the research questions

According to Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg and Bersch (2004), the *Listening Guide* method is ‘a way of analyzing qualitative interviews that is best used when one’s question requires listening to particular aspects of a person’s expression of her or his own complex and multilayered individual experiences and the relational and cultural contexts within which they occur (p.169). They call for the researcher to follow distinct steps in analyzing the data.

Step one is spent listening for what the authors call ‘the plot’. The researcher reads and listens for what stories are being told by the participant and within what context. Repeated images or metaphors are noted in this step. Since the questions asked are intended to elicit stories from the participant, the listener is paying close attention to what is happening, where, with whom and why. Repeated images and metaphors are noted and can provide information such as contradictions or absences or demonstrate what is

not expressed. Attention was paid to listener's responses to also examine subjectivity. Essential to this step was "identifying, exploring and making explicit our own thoughts and feelings about, and associations with, the narrative being analyzed" (p.160). The interviewer's responses and comments during the interview were also noted in an attempt to explore and make explicit thoughts and biases.

During the second listening, key 'I' statements and verbs were marked to highlight any changes or themes as they begin to emerge from the participants' words during the interview. The researcher listens to the stories a second time and constructs "I poems" (DeBold, 1990). There are two purposes to this step. The first is that it forces the researcher to listen to the participants' first person voice and second it emphasizes how the person speaks about herself. Two rules govern this process. The first is that the researcher underlines every first person 'I' within the passage chosen along with the verb and any seemingly important accompanying words and second the researcher must maintain the sequence as they appear in the text. 'I poems' can capture things not directly stated or help make meaning of what is or is not being said.

The third step identified and sorted out themes or pieces of conversation that specifically spoke to the research questions of the study. The researcher reads through the data two more times for the purpose of fine tuning ideas and themes brought out and by attending to any differences that appear among the different participants. This is referred to as 'listening for contrapuntal voices' (p.161). Contrapuntal defined is a complementing or contrasting item (Merriam Webster, 2005). While the first two steps in the process establish a plot line and develop a first person voice, the third steps really identified and sorted out specific strands that answer research question.

In the first reading, the voice that comes through in relation to one research question is highlighted in a specific color. Every subsequent reading is highlighted in a different color meaning that some text might address more than one research question. This also visually demonstrates how these voices are intertwined.

The researcher begins with an idea of a possible voice, creates a definition or description, listens for it, assesses if the definition makes sense and whether it ‘illuminates’ some aspect of the text (Gilligan et al, 2004). This may be fine-tuned and require another listening. In the instance of multiple interviews, this voice may emerge out of several interviews in which a new voice was defined or previous voice redefined based on the collective listenings.

Finally a fourth reading is used to compose an analysis. This is an iterative process where the researcher reads the work listening for the same themes again and deciding what, if anything, might have been left out or overlooked. Additionally, while reading the researcher asks these specific questions:

- 1) What have you learned about this question through this process and how have you come to know this?
- 2) What is the evidence on which you are basing your interpretations? ( p.168)

#### Attributions

After utilizing the listening guide, the themes that emerge were compared with Weiner’s model of attribution (1986) outlined in chapter two. Two main categories and five subcategories of attributions as it relates to education were identified:

- 1- Students’ own personal dispositions (internal)
  - i. personality tendencies

- ii. demographic status
- iii. causal schemata

2- External information available to students

- i. own performance
- ii. others performance
- iii. constraints and nature of the achievement task
- iv. parents or others influence
- v. teachers influences

After analyzing the transcripts from the interviews with the participants, the researcher compared the themes and ideas that emerged back to this outline. Determining if these ideas fall into one of these categories can provide information as to what type of attributions the participants used to make meaning of their school experience. Just as importantly, what is omitted informs the areas participants chose not to use to relate their experiences. Using these constructs provided insight as to what factors (internal, external or both) were employed and how the girls viewed their role in the experiences they described. For example, many references to external forces that seem stable over a period of time would indicate that the participant felt the events that occurred during their school experience was largely out of their control and would very likely remain that way. This can inform the themes that emerged from the Listening Guide analysis by providing insight to how the perceptions of the participants were formed.

Step Four: Summary, Implications and Outcomes

The utilization of the Listening Guide provided the researcher a systematic way of reviewing the interviews with specific attention paid to various nuances of the

descriptions of this experience. Following the analysis using the steps outlined above, the researcher was able to provide a summary of key themes, or essences, that emerge. 'In determining the universal or essential quality of a theme our concern is to discover aspects of qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is' (Van Manen, 1990, 107). A composite description of the recurring themes (Moustakas, 1994) can begin to formulate in effort to capture the experiences of the group as a whole. These themes and/or composite description were related back to the literature to determine any similarities or differences from the findings regarding gender, disability and EBD. This will be provided in chapter four upon completion of the data collection.

#### Pilot Study

The questions and ice-breaker activities were piloted prior to the study taking place with a female student labeled EBD who was not participating in the main study. This assisted eliminating confusing language and precisely crafted the questions so they are clear in their intended meaning. The feedback from the piloted questions did not result in changes to the questions but instead gave the researcher opportunity to feel more comfortable with the interviewing process and rapport building.

#### Ethics

As with any research, there were ethical considerations to be acknowledged. First, the girls participating in the study are under eighteen and can be considered a vulnerable population. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was procured before any part of the study began. Additionally, the IRB approved both the consent and assent forms prior to participants signing. The information gained through this study remained

anonymous and the data remained secure at all times. As previously mentioned in this chapter, responses and notes from the previous interview were shared to determine the accuracy of responses. If the participants became uncomfortable at any time during the interview, they had the option of terminating participation in the study. This did not occur. Due to the personal nature of the questions, both the school social worker and behavior specialist were available if the participant felt she needs any emotional support or more time to process beyond the scope of the interview.

### Credibility

This type of inquiry is concerned with “the compatibility of the constructed realities that exist in the minds of the inquiry’s respondents with those that are attributed to them” (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p.30.) This is referred to as credibility. Credibility has also been described as the “truth value” of a study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). There have been several ways outlined to ensure that a study of this nature is credible.

Researcher reflexivity was utilized. An essential element to the Listening Guide is noting researcher reactions and making them transparent during the analysis. Additionally, I added a personal statement identifying potential issues such as the source of interest in the topic professional background working with students with EBD as well as my position as female and the mother of a young daughter (Appendix A). This statement was written prior to the study beginning to ensure that any bias that might be brought into the study are announced upfront. A journal was maintained through out the study carefully noting my feelings and thoughts as the research process was navigated. Along with analysis of the data gathered through the interviews, analysis of the journal

also took place. Just as themes emerged from the data and informed the research, themes were noted from the personal researcher account.

Second, member checking took form in several ways. The first is the data and interpretations were taken back to the participants to confirm the information and account. Finally, the use of rich narrative was also used to assist the reader in understanding the accounts as explained by the participants. The reader can take these detailed accounts into consideration for plausibility (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These three methods together can be considered ‘triangulation’ which is defined as ‘a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study’ (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p.126). In this case the three means of convergence are researcher, participants and thick description.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the phenomena of being a female adolescent labeled as EBD while attending school. In order to understand this experience, phenomenological research method needed to be used to capture the essences of the stories as told by the selected group of girls. An in-depth interviewing technique was used to elicit rich stories from which readers can gain an understanding of the perceptions and attributions used by these girls to explain their school experience.

As the researcher, I maintained a journal of my experience prior to and during the research process. While the research method indicates that this reflexivity is necessary, I believed personally for acknowledging biases and beliefs to be a vital part in understanding the meaning being made from this study. Understanding the experiences



of adolescent girls with EBD can assist families, teachers and researchers in how to improve the post school outcomes of this population. The subsequent chapters include the data analysis, as well as the results and findings.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

The purpose of this chapter is to present the results of this research study. This study utilized qualitative data to study the lived school experience of female adolescents identified with an emotional and behavioral disorder (EBD). The research questions for this study were:

1. What are the lived experiences of selected adolescent girls labeled EBD in schools?
2. What attributions do these girls use to understand their lived experience?

Six girls labeled EBD participated in this study. The girls ranged in age from thirteen to nineteen. Three girls attended a center school specifically for students labeled EBD. Three girls attended traditional schools but were in a self-contained class for students labeled EBD. Each girl came from a culturally and linguistically diverse background. Additionally, the participants chose a pseudonym to be used in this study. All interviews were held in a private location and anonymity was emphasized at the beginning of each interview. Notes from previous interviews were shared at the beginning of interview two and three. The girls were given the opportunity to clarify any information that they felt was misinterpreted or change any answers they felt were not accurate. None of the participants in this study opted to change any of their responses and felt the notes and answers initially given were accurately recorded.

In order to address the research questions, interview questions were prepared to elicit in-depth responses from the girls in the study. Each session began with an ice-breaker

activity. During interview one, the participant was asked to complete a series of sentence stems. Session two involved drawing a picture of her classroom and including students and a teacher in the picture. Part of that interview included questions about what was drawn. Students described what they drew and answered specific questions about the drawing. Finally, interview three required the girls to write a letter to themselves in ten years from now. These icebreaker activities were analyzed as part of the transcription of the interview and were treated as part of the data.

The data collected was analyzed using the Listening Guide (Gilligan et al, 2003). The Listening Guide is a four-step process requiring the reader to attend to different nuances of the transcript with each read. While step one is read with the intention of finding the plot, step two focuses on the ‘I’ statements made throughout the interviews allowing the researcher to focus on the first-person voice and emphasizes how the girls speak about themselves. Thirdly, themes are identified, as well as pieces of conversation that speak specifically to the research questions. Finally, a fourth reading is completed to compose an analysis.

Table 4.1

*Overview of The Listening Guide (Adapted from Gilligan et al., 2003)*

<b>Steps in listening guide</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
1) Reading for plot	Initial reading identifying the various plots of the stories told by participants
2) Developing ‘I’ poem	Focuses on first person voice and verbs utilized to describe self
3) Listening for consistent/contrapuntal voices	Reading for consistencies and contrasts in stories paying attention to both what was said and what was not said
4) Composing analysis	Final reading tuning into the specific research questions

The presentation of the analysis examines each girl individually as the Listening Guide analysis is applied to the readings of the transcripts. I began by utilizing the ‘I’ poem to

introduce the individual girls, as this was the way I came to best understand the initial plots during analysis. One of the rules of the 'I' poem is to "maintain the sequence in which these phrases appear in the text." (Gilligan et al, 2003, p.162) Through the 'I' poems, contrapuntal voices emerged and statements in direct contrast to each other appear.

Using the Listening Guide, I identified the themes that emerged from each interview. The Listening Guide emphasizes "the voice of the researcher is explicitly brought into the process, making clear who is listening and who is speaking in this analysis."(Gilligan et al, 2003, p. 159) The italicized text in this chapter indicates my voice as the researcher and the notes and observations I made before, during and after each interview occurred. Specifically addressed in this presentation are issues of gender. The girl's responses to gender in schools were noted as questions dealing with gender were asked during each interview session.

The purpose of interview one was to gain perspective of the girl's school history. Interview two dealt with current school placement and interview three was aimed at the future and goal setting of the girls in the study. Each interview asked questions about teacher behaviors and gender in the classroom. Some girl's spoke more in-depth than others and the length of that section was dependent on the information each girl shared.

Table 4.2

*Demographics of participants*

<i>Name</i>	<i>age</i>	<i>ethnicity</i>	<i>School setting</i>
Destinee	16	African American	Self-contained classroom within traditional high school
Ke Ke	15	African American	Center school for students with behavior disorders
Nay Nay	17	Racially mixed	Center school for students with behavior disorders
Janie	19	African American	Center school for students with behavior disorders
Mita	13	Racially mixed	Self-contained classroom within traditional middle school
Marie	15	Racially mixed	Self-contained classroom within traditional middle school

The second part of this chapter identifies the common themes from the stories of the participants. A matrix is included in this section to clearly outline the similarities and differences in these stories. Application of these themes to the attribution theory at the end of this chapter. Further discussion and implication of these themes will be discussed in Chapter Five.

**Destinee**

Destinee is a sixteen-year old girl who stands about a 5'6". She is an attractive, heavy-set girl who carried herself with an air of confidence. Destinee had long hair that was braided in different styles every time I came to visit. She spoke in a deep voice and seemed to choose her words carefully. When Destinee smiled and laughed, it was contagious. People around her smiled as well.

*Destinee's 'I' poem*

I want to know

I have my days

I am still working

I am very talkative

I have a good personality

I am able to control myself

I can achieve my goals

I am working

I didn't know

I don't have anybody that much

I can't say that it is easy

I am not stupid

I wasn't ready

I want to get back

I started isolating myself

I am quiet

I was so bad they took me out of the class

I wish I did

I was depressed

I failed

I'm human

I was tired of failing

I'm doing very well

I'm not good at certain subjects

I know these things

I miss my old school

I don't have friends

I don't look forward to friends

I'm not racist

I'm very outspoken

I don't hold back

I can't speak for them

I feel that I'm like very gregarious

I'm very independent

I didn't cuss

I am a respectful child

I wish they knew that I'm a sweet-hearted kind person

I look rough around the edges

I really don't like people

I just want to be normal

***Interview One.** As I explained the study, I heard my voice sounding high-pitched and I was speaking quickly as if she might refuse at any moment. She could tell I was nervous and told me that I could calm down because she was willing to answer anything I asked. I talked about the three-step process and the confidentiality of the interviews, Destinee just nodded as if she had participated in studies like this many times before,*

*although I knew she had not. She did not seem intimidated at all by the recording of sessions and leaned forward as we spoke as if she wanted to be sure the recorder got her every word.*

*Destinee went to a traditional high school but was placed in a self-contained class for students with emotional and behavioral disorders. During my observation of the classroom, I noticed that she was one of two girls in the classroom. There were a total of three girls assigned to this classroom. On each of my visits, only one other girl was ever in attendance and it was a different girl each time.*

*The classroom was set at the end of the hall and the overhead lights in the hallway seemed to be constantly broken making it darker than the hallways I walked through to get to her room. Upon each visit, I spent some time watching how the class was conducted and the behaviors of the students in the room. These behaviors varied. Some students slept while others were engaged in the assignment that was to be completed. I was reminded of my own classroom when I taught dropout prevention. Despite all my best efforts, some students would come to school unable to keep their eyes open and informed me they had been up racing cars until 4am. I wondered if this was the situation with these students.*

*Destinee was always on task and was always among the first students done with whatever was being asked. She would quietly get out a book when she was finished and did not interact much with the other students, if at all. I found myself questioning her placement but reminded myself of my role as researcher and the fact that she knew I was watching her and that might have impacted her behavior.*



Destinee's responses to the sentence completion provided me with more information than I had anticipated. In the brief time we spent on the sentence completion activity, I learned that her father had died two years ago and that she had a laundry list of goals she wanted to accomplish including getting back into honors classes, finishing high school, going to college on a scholarship, and becoming a doctor. The death of her father was revisited in each interview and it was evident that her loss impacted every aspect of her life including school and her ability to perform in her classes.

While the first interview focused on early memories of school, including questions regarding gender, two plot lines emerged that dealt mostly with issues outside of school. One was that of loss and the other of feeling misunderstood. When asked about school, one of the first statements Destinee made was, "I have anger management problems sometimes and I am glad that I know that." She spoke of often being mistaken as angry by adults when in fact she was just being quiet. Immediately she explained that she no longer wants to be in the classes she is attending now and was able to list the behaviors she needed to display to go back to regular classes. These included doing her work, not getting into conflicts with other students and controlling her anger in general.

Destinee has an older brother with a physical disability. She described how other students pick on him and she feels it is her job as his sister to defend him. However, the adults in her life often interpret this as unprovoked aggression. She explained that teachers don't often see what precipitates her outbursts towards those bullying her brother. In one instance, she talked about "being jumped by three girls in the middle school". Destinee felt an obligation to her brother to keep this from her mom. She mentioned if her father had been alive, she would have shared this with him.

It was at this point that Destinee spoke of how the loss of her father impacted her in school. She revealed that her mother did not understand her the way her father did since it was her father who had raised her the majority of her life. When asked to recall memories of school, Destinee put these memories into two categories. Those before her father died and those after her father died. Prior to the loss of her parent, she was doing well in school and even attended an honor's class. She repeatedly told me, "I am not stupid." After the loss of her father, Destinee tried to tell the adults around her that she was not ready for more advance classes. Here the theme of being misunderstood arose again. Despite her protests, Destinee was placed in more difficult classes and failed these subjects. She reiterated several times that she knew she wasn't emotionally capable of focusing on school, but her teachers and mother felt it was the best placement at the time.

While the questions probed more into how these feelings manifested into the classroom, Destinee continued to speak of the loss of those she loved in her life. She had formed a bond with friend's mother who died a year after her father. "I started isolating myself from them and everybody and as of right now I am isolated because I don't want to get close to people because they just pass away." This powerful statement came after my question of placement decisions and to whom she had voiced her thoughts to on that subject. Destinee had more on her mind than academics and whether gender was an issue in the classroom.

In thinking about a time she was successful in school, Destinee only briefly spoke about the advanced classes she was in before recalling how she became sick with physical problems that caused her to miss a large chunk of school time. She reported missing over 100 days of school. "They kicked me out like it was nothing," she recalled.

After discussing a move to two other schools, Destinee came back to the issues she had with her mother. She shared that charges had been pressed against her for domestic violence against her mother but denied that this event occurred the way reported.

Destinee put her head down as spoke.

And then my mom and my brother are close and I don't have no one really and I feel that. Right now, it feels like I am alone and my mom's like, well, when you are 18, you are getting out.

The themes of isolation and feeling misunderstood by the adults in her life repeated in her response to every question, including when directly asked about school. When she said, "Everything is on me," it was clear that Destinee felt she could only depend on herself to meet the goals she had set for herself.

When initially asked about gender, Destinee thought I meant students bullying each other in class. After the question was clarified, Destinee discussed that boys "do the dumbest stuff and expect to get away with it." When asked about girls, she felt that girls have more of an advantage. Destinee mentioned how girls tend to be quieter and so teachers tend not to make a "big deal" if the girls come to class late. When probed further, Destinee couldn't expand on this idea. After contemplating whether boys and girls are treated differently, her response was that she didn't think so.

*The expression on her face was not the same as when she answered questions about herself. She looked as if she had never considered gender as an issue and was not sure how to answer. The responses to these questions were much shorter and less involved than previous questions regarding her personal school experience. I walked Destinee back to her classroom and felt empathy for her. Her father died around the same time*

*that my mother died. As an adult, I had a rough time focusing on school and work. I cannot imagine at the age of 14 trying to cope and being placed in advanced classes despite my protests.*

**Interview Two.** The plot of the second interview was that of stigma. Destinee focused much more on issues related specifically school and being labeled as emotionally or behaviorally disordered. She spoke of the judgments she felt people made as a result of being in separate classes. The interview began with Destinee drawing a picture of her classroom. This initiated a discussion of teachers she has liked, as well as a transformation in her behavior as a student.

Destinee recalled teachers who encouraged her and she chose to include them in her picture. When asked how she knew they wanted her to succeed, she replied, “Because they tell me that I’m a bright student and they encourage me to do my best at all times, even if I don’t know what it is.” She identified two students in the picture. One was what she called, “the old me that used to hide up in the classroom, don’t really say much or try to answer questions or ask questions or learn anything.” The other student was the way Destinee sees herself now which was raising her hand eagerly and wanting to learn.

When asked what she attributed this change to, Destinee spoke more of how she was deterred from her goals when her father died and referred to her Exceptional Student Education (ESE) classes as “them retarded classes”. Upon clarification, Destinee answered that she was not challenged in these classes and never learned anything new. This discussion led her to speaking about how she did not like labels.

I want to be normal. They labeled me, and I don't like being labeled, as most kids don't. So like when people call me like, oh you're crazy. I'm like, no I'm not.

Don't label me. I'm just myself. I don't like labels. I don't label other people.

She went on to say that even being in a regular class with two teachers let her know that she was different from other students. Most other classes only had one teacher and she immediately knew that one of the two teachers was for students who were labeled. The stigma was there whether verbally expressed or not.

After further probing, Destinee revealed that she was responsible for the change in her behavior.

Just like I was tired of failing. I really wanted to succeed in what I want to do in life, and I actually sat here this summer thinking about ways I can actually achieve my goals. I think about the classes I have and it is not possible with those classes. And so I changed myself in order to get different results. So I changed myself and now I'm more eager in class and I ask questions.

She attributed her perceived present success to herself and felt that her inability to reach her goals were external issues such as the death of her father, her brother's disability and being in classes she felt were below her ability.

When asked if anyone helped her with this change, Destinee replied by saying,

I actually came up on my own because like I was tired of the results I was getting.

I wasn't getting anywhere. If I would have done what I was supposed to do, I would be much farther than I am right now.

She had approached the guidance counselor on her own to switch classes and expressed her desire to be challenged in school.

Destinee spoke of how there was only other one girl in her self-contained class but she rarely attended classes. When asked to compare that to regular classes, she mentioned that the ratio was much different. She had no answer as to why there were so many boys in her self-contained classes but did state that she did not like hanging out with girls and preferred hanging out with boys. I probed her further on this issue but Destinee came back to the idea that no matter what gender, people judge students who are in ESE classes. The idea of being labeled bothered her more than that ratio of boys to girls in any classroom. The perceived stigma attached from either being in a separate class or a class with two teachers weighed more heavily on Destinee than any gender differences within the classroom.

*Interview Three.* The focus of interview three was on the future and making meaning of the entire school experience. The interview began with Destinee writing a letter to herself in ten years. She was asked to consider what she wants to be doing and who she envisions being in her life at that point. Destinee did not hesitate in beginning this letter and proceeded to write two pages front and back. The words seemed to flow out of her with ease. I gave her the option to either read me the letter or summarize what she wrote. With a sparkle in her eye, Destinee began to speak of the bright future she sees for herself.

The plotline that emerged from this interview was one of hope and determination. Destinee expressed the desire to get a scholarship to go to college and then become an Ob/Gyn. She mentioned the possibility of being married and having three children. This was not stated with as much determination as the goal of being a doctor. Destinee did express that if she had children she would want to do whatever it took to support them

and provide for them financially and emotionally. She included the desire to have her family around and in good health, particularly her brother.

I questioned her further about her desire to become a doctor. I posed questions to her as to whether she likes science or has taken any classes that would be similar to anatomy. Destinee indicated that she hates science but she quickly followed up by saying,

I love babies. Their smile lights up the room. It's like a thousand angels. They are so pure and innocent. And to me when I'm delivering babies, I'm doing God's work because that is his passageway for his angels to get here on Earth. So to me it is a great thing.

Destinee often referred to her special love for babies throughout the third interview. She made mention that she can learn so much from them and enjoys to see how 'pure' they are. Destinee reiterated a sense of hope in her speaking of this profession but in this instance the hope was for the babies.

The theme of hope continued as she spoke of her own future.

When I do my homework, I feel good about myself. I look at the paper and it's all full up. So I feel like every step that I take is getting me closer and closer to my goal. Basically, I just keep moving on and do what I'm supposed to do and I'll get there eventually.

This statement largely reflects the essence of the third interview, as well as the interviews as a whole. Destinee looks forward to moving past the hard parts of her life and feels confident that as long as she worked towards her goals, she would be successful.

The regret she has about her school experience is evident in the words she chose to tell her younger self.

Don't pay attention to people's dramas. Don't have all drama filled people around you because you're gonna get wrapped up into it. To listen to your friends and family about certain people, you know, and buckle down. Don't play around at school because it is hard to recover when you're halfway through high school and trying to figure out what you want to do in your life. Like if I was in elementary school, find my interest and my weaknesses and strengthen those, you know, and basically pay attention in school and stop playing around with people and do your homework and class work. If you need help, don't be scared to raise your hand.

When I asked if she heard those words as a younger child. She thought for a while and said that she was sure her dad had said some of these things to her. When asked if she thought a child would listen to those words, she laughed and responded by saying, "Oh, Lord. That would have helped". Destinee clarified by saying she wished she had paid attention to this advice as a young child.

As I focused in more on who specifically was helping to reach her goal, Destinee mentioned her family first but said that often times she didn't listen to them. When asked about teachers or guidance counselors, Destinee mentioned that there were teachers who gave her 'A's when she did not earn them. I pressed further as to actual steps of taking the appropriate courses and the application process for college. Destinee hesitated. She mentioned that her mom encouraged her to talk to people in school. Destinee recalled these thoughts.

So I pulled myself aside, basically, everybody was telling me the same thing, you know, you've got to do this, you've got to do that. But it takes yourself. Nobody



else can do it for you. So this summer I figured I'm not getting anywhere if I play around.

Again, she attributes the change in her attitude towards school and her life to herself only. While acknowledging that other people may have said these words to her, it was ultimately she who decided to make these changes.

For the second half of the interview, we spoke of how school might be different had she not been in ESE classes. Destinee felt that her goals and the path to meet those goals would absolutely be completely different if she was not in this program.

They try to put us into groups and they try to stereotype us in what we did and the past follows us. Like, if I'm trying to change, you're seeing that I'm trying to change, there is no need to bring up the past.

Destinee's tone and words reiterated the feeling that the stigma of being labeled as EBD followed her and that she was unable to escape her actions from as far back elementary school. She repeatedly asked the rhetorical question, "How about you judge what is going on right *now* [emphasis added]?" Destinee went on to explain that she was aware that her record could impact her ability to get into college. However, hope still came through in her words. Her insistence that she be judged on how she was doing now kept her believing that she will be accepted into a good college and fulfill her dreams.

In terms of being judged for being in an ESE program, Destinee likens it to racism but believes it is because some teachers refuse to see students for who they are now.

Some people can't help it [judging others], you know, that's the way they were raised and it's what programs you put them in school and basically it's kind of like somebody hating somebody because of their race. They learn that."

I specifically asked her if she felt that boys were given different advice than girls when planning for life after school. While Destinee said she hadn't noticed any difference, she acknowledged that there are different mentalities between males and females. "I don't want to be sexist but girls are different from boys because we think differently. They think with their small head instead of their big head," she said with a laugh. Destinee went on to say that girls are advised to not get pregnant young while boys spend all their time trying to "get with girls". She spoke of the fact that many of the boys focus on sports and not school and she wondered how they would ever take care of a family with no education. Beyond these issues, Destinee did not feel boys were encouraged any differently from the girls.

During the interviews, I attempted to elicit teacher behaviors that Destinee thought helped her throughout her school career. Consistently, she returned to stories of her family or citing incidents in which she was not heard by the teachers or faculty in her school. I closed by asking if she could tell teachers something that they could have done that would help throughout her school career, what would she tell them. Her rich response was as follows:

Encourage me. You know, don't look at my past. Look at what's coming in the future. See my potential. Use that to encourage me to do my work. Don't let me just sit there in your class. You know, if you need to, call a parent, call a grandmother. Do what you need to do to get that student up there....Help them understand. I mean, that's your job. You're a teacher. You're supposed to be able to teach all your children, even if they learn differently. So if you can't teach your student the way they need to be treated, I don't think you should be a teacher. I

mean, if you see they're struggling, if you see that their grades are Fs, talk to them, pull them aside. I understand if they don't care, then that's the point of, you know, still trying to encourage them constantly. They don't have to run around the streets at night. They can be home doing their homework, reading, being adventurous in books. Because I had to learn that. You know, I didn't like to read. Over the summer, I found the book *Twilight* and I've been a reading fanatic. You know, find something that interests them. Find their interests, their weaknesses, build up their strengths, and then build their weaknesses. Don't just sit there, okay, class, today we're going to do this and such and such. Tell them why they're doing it. Tell them what's gonna help them.

When we closed out final session, I ended the way I had the previous two interviews by asking if there was anything she wanted to add or ask. Destinee had a plea for students.

Don't quit school, please. Please all kids, don't quit school. That's not the way to go. Work hard. If you work hard, you're gonna see results. I see them already. I've got a 3.5 GPA, baby.

*As I said good-bye to Destinee, I had the feeling that she was going to meet her goal of graduating and going to college. Her strong sense of self came through in our conversations. I watched her speak to the ESE specialist at the end of our third interview and Destinee was reminding her that she wanted to change classes and how she was supposed to hear about taking night classes. This was not a girl who was going to sit and wait for someone to do something for her. I thought of all that Destinee had shared about her life and how easy it might have been to give up. I felt a sense of pride for Destinee in*

*deciding what she wanted for her life and going after those goals. I know a lot of adults still trying to do exactly that.*

## **Ke Ke**

Ke Ke was sixteen at the time of our interviews. She told me that technically she should be in high school but due to failing classes and a large number of absences, she was placed in the middle school section of the center school. The first thing I noticed about Ke Ke was how tall she was. Being that I stand at five feet tall myself, I am used to being shorter than most people. However, Ke Ke loomed in stature. I got the sense that Ke Ke wished she could dwarf her size. Her shoulders were stooped and she kept her head down. I asked her questions about the school as we walked the halls and Ke Ke often mumbled her responses. When we sat down in the conference room, Ke Ke slumped in her seat and I resisted the urge to tell her to sit up straight.

### ***Ke Ke's I Poem.***

I wasn't like switching classes

I was already in the same class

I was leaving elementary school

I thought I was going to be switching classes

I thought I was really successful

I was still in ESE classes

I completely changed

I want to go to regular schools

I can do regular things

I just thought about it

I was trying

I just look at them

I used to cuss at teachers

I'd just stay suspended

I wanted to do it

I'd be like, so what

I'd leave the classroom

I'd just cuss at everyone else

I don't want to be at school

I did work

I stayed suspended in ISS all last year

I didn't want to do that anymore

I'm tired of being here

I just was talking to myself

I'm already on regular diploma

I really want to learn how to do hair

I'm really the only girl who comes to school

I always wonder why, too

I'm really not used to being in a class with all girls

I probably wouldn't have been able to get along with some of the girls

I like school

I would get sick

I would just cry

I would change probably  
I eat my breakfast in the class  
I don't have a problem with it  
I don't pay it no attention  
I'm different from last year  
I changed completely  
I can explode when I want to  
I was always really quiet in school  
I talk to them  
I tolerate them  
I am really scared to go back to a new school  
I believe I am ready  
I was fighting a boy  
I didn't prove a point  
I'll start off in ESE classes  
I'll probably be married  
I want to be a lawyer or a doctor  
I'll be going to college  
I wouldn't be in this type of school  
I think it would be different  
I wouldn't be here  
I talk to my momma sometimes  
I don't really got a favorite teacher

I like them all the same

*Interview one. Ke Ke's school is situated on an incredibly busy street with a heavy volume of traffic during the day. Strip malls and fast food restaurants surrounded the building. If you were not looking for the school, you would not notice it as you drive. One of the county's technical career centers is located within walking distance. I wondered if any of the students at this school attend classes there. The building looked new and as I pulled into the parking lot, I notice how tiny it is compared to a typical middle school. There are about six spaces to park and most are empty. I notice a police car parked off to the side.*

*As I approached the building, I saw several staff clustered around the desk. I reached to open the door expecting it to open. The door was locked and an intercom asked me to identify myself. Seconds later, a buzzer sounded and I was allowed access to the school. I stood for several minutes not wanting to interrupt the conversation. The conversation did sound like it was about a crisis situation at the school but also did not sound social in nature. As more time passed, I realized that if I didn't speak up, no one was going to ask what I needed. I wondered if parents received the same treatment when they came to the front office. I felt confident to speak up but I knew there were families who would have been intimidated by this large group of school personnel. I explained who I was and the secretary nodded indicating she knew why I was there. A student led me to the Ke Ke's class where I would do an observation.*

*The class was an automotive class. I never got clarification if this was a class that Ke Ke chose to take or if this was part of the curriculum for all students. The fact that automotive repair is typically a male-oriented career, I wondered if this was a gendered*

*choice for subjects. Since the school is made up of a predominantly male population, was automotives chosen for all students in hopes to engage the males? Or was this an elective that Ke Ke chose?*

*The teacher was a former mechanic on the racing circuit and the students were rebuilding a car. When I entered, I saw six males and one female. The group was mixed ethnically but none were Caucasian. I stood off to the side and was not quite sure where to position myself. I chose a corner to sit. The teacher still had not noticed I entered but the girl I would be interviewing waves. One of the boys asked her who I was and she responded by saying, "That lady".*

*The boys in class behaved as if each had consumed a large amount of caffeine that morning. They were jumping around and yelling insults at each other in typical middle school fashion. Ke Ke was sitting in the car appearing to be cleaning the dashboard. She yelled to the boys to "stop their foolishness" once or twice but there was not much interaction beyond that. She stood taller than most of the boys and her appearance are stronger in stature. Ke Ke looked much older than the other students in the classroom.*

*The teacher came over to introduce himself. I explained that I was just there to observe the classroom in general. He made a joke about trying to get the students to listen and moved on to provide instruction to two of the boys. The students got quiet as he explained what he is doing and seemed anxious to try their hand at the task. However, Ke Ke continued to sit in the car and appeared to be playing with the radio. The teacher did not attempt to engage her in his demonstration and instead peered in the front windshield from time to time. The bell rang and indicated the class is over. Ke Ke finally got out of the car. She walked over to me and told me that she really liked this class.*



The themes emerging interview one were those of decisions to change behavior and hope for completing goals such as graduating. The initial icebreaker activity gave me some insight into Ke Ke. The way she completed the sentences emphasized themes of doing well in school. Ke Ke also mentioned that she was best when she was by herself and she was often by herself in school and at home.

I began by asking her how she ended up coming to the center school. She launched into a long story involving an incident that happened in elementary school. Ke Ke described four different fights she has gotten in with four students, two boys and two girls. During the final incident, she told me that she choked a boy with a broomstick. It was at that point she was placed at her current school. Upon finishing the story, she said, "But I really think I got here because of my anger." She informed me the boy she choked also attends this school but she does not talk to him because he is older and not in her classes.

After asking Ke Ke to talk about a time she felt really successful in school, Ke Ke jumped to the present school year. When I asked her what had changed to make this year better, she replied by saying,

Because over the summer I completely changed. I don't like being here. You know, it's no use me being here because it is not the same as regular schools. I want to go to regular schools so I can do regular things like go to games that they have and stuff like that, go on regular field trips and all that kinds of stuff. I just thought about it and just do it. I changed control of my anger and follow the right trends.

I probed her more for how this change in behavior came about and Ke Ke talked about walking away from people who made her angry. I questioned whether this was advice given to her by someone and she said she had just thought about it over the summer and decided to do this. Now when someone calls her names openly, she smiles and keeps going. The name-calling stops when the other person realizes she is not going to fight them. Once Ke Ke saw this working, she decided to continue this new behavior.

We moved on to a time when she did not feel successful in school and immediately Ke Ke responded that last school year was the worst. She told me, “I used to cuss out the teachers and stuff and I’d just stay suspended, just did what I wanted to do.” I asked her what the consequences for her actions were and she replied that she “stayed suspended in ISS all last year.” She is now repeating a grade as a result. In the same breathe, Ke Ke said, “I didn’t want to do that anymore. I mean, I’m tired of being here. I really want to get out of here. I was just talking to myself and trying to do something about ISS.” Ke Ke attributed her desire to change and get out of the center school to herself. Once she decided she did not want to behave that way anymore, Ke Ke changed and is on a standard diploma track and has every intention of remaining that way and graduating. When she speaks of this, there is determination in her voice.

When the question of gender in the classroom was presented, Ke Ke admitted that she had wondered why there were more boys than girls in the classroom. She spoke of how she is the only girl who comes to school and thought maybe they do what they want and “their mom don’t mind”. I asked her if she felt school would be different if there was an equal amount of boys and girls in the classroom. For this, Ke Ke had definite opinions.

Maybe because really I'm not really not used to being in class with all girls, with more boys than girls. Really it's more boys than girls in most of my classes I've been in. So it would have been different. A lot different...I probably wouldn't have been able to get along with some of the girls or like socialize with them or anything...Because girls are different. They just- they want everything to contain around them. It depends on what kind of girl it is. They like to start trouble for no apparent reason. They like to have drama around them all the time. That doesn't make sense because it doesn't get you anywhere.

The theme of girls starting drama was discussed and Ke Ke affirmed that she preferred being in class with mostly boys. Her reasons were that she was used to that environment and didn't have to be concerned with drama. Ke Ke did not seem to feel she had missed out on anything positive having been in classrooms with mostly boys.

Upon reflection of her past school experiences, the themes of safety and change emerged. Ke Ke expressed that she wished she had taken her education more seriously prior to this year. She felt that school has been good for her and recalled the times when she was really sick as an elementary-aged student and would cry if she could not go to school. Ke Ke switched schools a lot as child due to moving and she noticed great disparity between schools. At some schools, there was a lot of fighting and Ke Ke didn't feel safe. Ke Ke felt a sense of inequality among schools since she also noticed that the school where a lot a fighting occurred also did not have the same resources such as computers and new textbooks. However, at others, students were expected to get good grades and at these schools she felt the teachers and administration cared more. An important change for her would be to have all school be equal. Ke Ke expressed

disappointment that every school did not provide the same environment and expectations for their students.

Reflecting on her current school setting, Ke Ke wanted both more security and more time to be social. She felt having an additional resource officer was needed but also felt the students' should be able to have lunch together and not eat breakfast in the classroom. If the school let the students be more social, Ke Ke thought it would improve student's attitudes. I questioned Ke Ke if she thought past incidents of students fighting or misbehaving may be the reason for a lack of current social opportunity. She thought about this and repeated the need for a second resource officer.

*Interview two. Ke Ke greeted me with a friendly hello. We walked casually to the conference room and made some small talk about the weekend. I commented that she was still the only girl in the room. She mentioned that it was Monday and girls rarely came on Monday. I began the interview with asking her to draw a picture of a classroom. While she drew, I reviewed the notes from the previous week. I reminded myself that this interview was to focus on the present time in school and was wondering if she had given any more thought to the issues of gender in the classroom.*

We reviewed her picture together and some ideas emerged from this discussion. Ke Ke drew two adults outside of the room talking with one adult at the board smiling. She explained that the adults were discussing the school but the person at the board was her mother teaching her. Ke Ke had placed herself at the board as well and indicated that she was doing her work at the board. The other student she drew was a boy who was not happy and was not doing work. She explained that most of the people in her classroom were angry and did not want to do work. When I asked Ke Ke what she wished she could

change about the class, she replied, “These two.” She was pointing to the two adults. I asked Ke Ke what the teachers might be talking about outside of the classroom. She replied that they were probably discussing students or an incident that occurred before school. Since she didn’t know for sure, I had trouble telling if the staff really was discussing students or if it was an adolescent assumption that conversations involved them. I asked Ke Ke what about that she would change. Ke Ke said she wished they weren’t talking and was in the room.

Me: Why would you want the teacher in the room?

Ke Ke: To teach us.

*Her answer seemed so powerful to me. So many students just want someone who will teach them. The fact she drew her mom at the board while the teacher was outside talking seemed to indicate that she saw her mom as more of a teacher than the person hired to have that role. I found a part of me feeling sad when I recalled my own feeling of dread to walk into my classroom to face the students who did not want to learn. Many times I felt defeated and I wondered how often the students picked up on that feeling as well. I felt guilty.*

The next question addressed the typical school day; Ke Ke began to give me just a schedule of her day. I had to reframe the question several times before Ke Ke began discussing what her class dynamics were actually like. Ke Ke spoke about the boys in her class who do not want to do work and how the teacher spends most of the time telling them to sit down and get to work. While there are supposed to be nine students in the classroom, there are typically only seven who come at one time. These are not the same

seven every day. I asked her if she got along with other girls in the class and she replied, “Well, can’t really say because they don’t really come to school.”

Ke Ke began talking about her change in behavior. She felt her teachers would describe her as “changed completely”. “They [her teachers] would say I’m different from last year. Sometimes I can explode when I want to. I can get off track, but I know how to get back on track and that they are probably [more] proud of me now than last year because I’m leaving in December.” At the time of the interviews, Ke Ke was preparing to transition back to a traditional high school. The meeting to discuss this change of placement was scheduled for after this study ended.

She spoke of how some teachers might begin by saying she used to have a short temper but that has changed since she decided she no longer wanted to be at the school anymore. Again, Ke Ke attributes this change to her own decision-making.

Ke Ke had not been in a traditional school since sixth grade and when she would return to high school she would be placed in the ninth grade. The idea of going to a traditional high school for the first time frightened her. When I asked her what her fear was, Ke Ke said,

Because I think if I go back, the first day there I might end up getting in trouble and coming right back and that means I’ve got to stay here and I really won’t be able to get out of here then.

I asked if she had discussed this fear with anyone and she began to speak of her mom’s supportive attitude of her.

But my mom said once I go back to regular school, just ignore, stay quiet, be to myself and if someone bother me, just tell the teacher. If the teacher doesn’t do

nothing, tell the principal. If they can't do nothing, just call and go home or she'll come up there and talk to the teacher or something.

Ke Ke shared that her mom spoke to her a lot about how her fighting proved nothing and only got her trouble. She mentioned she wrote essays for her mom about how she felt and her mom gave her encouragement. This was the first girl I met with who spoke of support from her mother. She was also the one who look forward to return to a regular school.

*Interview three. When I arrived at the school, the secretary told me Ke Ke had not arrived to school yet. I sighed because this was a situation I had run into with so many girls who had agreed to the study but then never came to school on the days we were supposed to meet. This was to be my last interview with Ke Ke and I was hoping we would finish today and with too much more time passing we might lose any stamina that had built up with the two previous interviews. After ten minutes of waiting, Ke Ke walked in with a scowl on her face. She saw me and gave me a half wave and signed in for school. I asked if she felt up to completing the interview. She nodded yes but walked several steps behind me as we walked to the conference room. I was hoping she might warm up to talking once we got in the room but her body language indicated otherwise as she slouched in the chair. The ice- breaker activity for this interview was to write a letter to herself in ten years. She quickly wrote down about seven sentences and then looked at me to get started. This was a far different reception than the previous two interviews. Her previously in-depth responses were replaced with one-word answers. I felt like I was pulling teeth to get any substance from this interview. This had been one of my fears*

*about this study before I started. I am not sure if my nervousness about trying different tactics to get Ke Ke to speak could be noticed.*

Ke Ke had repeatedly spoken of going to college in the previous interviews. She indicated again that in ten years she would either be finishing or finished with her degree in something. I asked her specifically what she was interested in doing and she replied that maybe she would be a doctor or a lawyer. This led to inquiring as to whether she had participated in her transition planning at her IEP meeting. Her one-word answer to all my questions about transition was no. Ke Ke said that no one talked to her about the courses she would need to graduate or asked her what she wanted to be after she was done school. Anyway I phrased the question, Ke Ke returned with a version of no.

I finally asked Ke Ke if she just didn't feel like talking today and she replied that she did not feel like talking but wanted to finish the interview today. Ke Ke went on to say that her mom was the only one who talked to her about life after school. "She says it's good that I want to do that, but I've gotta just learn how to control my anger and stuff like that. Cause I want to be a lawyer and if I lose a case I can't get mad and stuff like that, cause that's not gonna change anything, just make it worsen. She said if I keep doing good how I am, it's possible that I can be a lawyer or whatever I want to be."

Ke Ke did not perceive her label as having any stigma attached. She felt she would have been treated the same regardless of having an IEP or not. What was difficult to determine was if she was already being treated different due to race or gender and if the addition of a label did not matter. I shared some notes from previous interviews and asked Ke Ke if I had misinterpreted any ideas or items she said. Ke Ke replied no and began to get up to signal the interview was over. I offered to come back another time but



Ke Ke shook her head no so I thanked her for participating and we walked quietly back to class.

*As I left, I thought about what had just transpired. My first instinct was to blame myself. I did not ask the questions the right way or perhaps I did not make her feel comfortable enough. My brain went to the place where I tell myself that I am not doing this right and I picked a topic that was too hard to discuss. Then, I stopped. I realized that the previous two interviews with Ke Ke went smoothly and she was able to discuss the topic and questions. Today could have been a bad day for her. Everyone has days they do not feel like talking. Most days I am in that category. Ke Ke made it clear that she did not feel like continuing this another day and I wanted to respect that but I also thought another day might have produced different, more in-depth answers. However, I realized that I needed to take what was given to me and learn from those words.*

### **Nay Nay**

Nay Nay was seventeen at the time of our interview. She had a tough exterior with a look on her face that I read as saying, “I may have agreed to do this but I am not going to be happy about it”. Her long hair was in a ponytail revealing earrings all around the outer part of her ear and a streak of red that stood in stark contrast to her black hair. She kept her hands in her jacket as we walked to a place where no one would overhear our conversation. Once we sat down and I thanked her for participating, her expression softened a little.

#### ***Nay Nay’s ‘I’ Poem.***

I am very sweet, nice, loud, and outgoing

I could get real aggravated

I get real pissy quick  
I want to know how to be an adult  
I don't think I am best anything  
I'm good at things  
I decided to misbehave  
I got in more trouble the next day  
I was trying to get discipline  
I was arrested  
I'm not going to do it again  
I was on regular diploma  
I was in regular classes  
I decided  
I didn't like the teachers  
I didn't like the students  
I don't bother  
I never really talked to anybody  
I never hung out with a female  
I hung out with guys only  
I was confused  
I believe boys get away with everything  
I am a tomboy  
I had to lie  
I'm a Christian

I wouldn't change anything  
I got in his face  
I wasn't playing  
It was hard for me  
I don't read like I used to  
I'm not who I thought I was  
I want to get done in school  
I like working with children  
I believe we need more help  
I overwhelm myself  
I'm bipolar  
I got molested  
I feel safer here  
I used to cut myself all the time  
I started crying  
I cut myself  
I'm not a drug dealer  
I'm not a crackhead  
I realized maybe I could change my life  
I enjoy actually coming here  
I can remember  
I need to stop hiding from others  
I wouldn't even have a life

I have nothing else to say

I am just praying

***Interview one.** I had difficulty finding the school. I drove around in circles for a while and noticed a building surrounded by barbed wire with a playground for small children. I couldn't imagine children playing carefree while surrounded by barbed wire. After my third time around, I saw the small building set back from the street. It could easily be mistaken for an office complex or a doctor's building. As I walked to the door, I noticed it was locked and required visitor's to show identification before being allowed entrance. A police officer sat at the front of the building where typically a secretary sat in other school settings. I explained who I was and was asked to sit in the hallway while my contact person at the school was found. The hallways had some framed pictures but were otherwise very sterile. The doors to the classrooms had small windows and it appeared everyone was on task or at least very quiet in what they were doing.*

During our icebreaker activity, Nay Nay revealed she loved children, hoped to graduate and go to college. At first her answers were short and one-worded but as soon as I asked my first open-ended question about how she came to be at this school, Nay Nay began talking as if the floodgates had opened. The plotlines of the first interview emerged as anger, safety and change in her belief system.

When speaking about her behavior, Nay Nay used phrases such as "I decided to misbehave" and "I decided to skip everyday" and "I decided to get suspended". When asked why she would consciously make those decisions, Nay Nay explained she preferred in-school suspension (ISS). This struck me as a self-preservation tactic.

I'd just go in there because I don't like my teachers. I don't like the students. I don't even like the school at all...The school I didn't like because there's too many people who's up for drama or people asking me to have sex with them and I didn't like that. So I decided I'd try to kick my own self out.

She spoke of how she didn't get into fights because she knew she could be arrested for that. After explaining that she was arrested for domestic violence against her mother, Nay Nay said that she didn't want that to happen again and instead just walked into ISS whether she had been sent there or not. No one questioned her as to why she was there.

Nay Nay spoke of how she had attended "special" classes when she was four, indicating that she had been in a pre-kindergarten program for students with behavior problems. After that program, she entered a regular elementary, middle and high school program. She reported receiving some supports from teachers for her behavior but did not say she was in any self-contained classes at those schools. Her earliest school memories were attending classes for students labeled EBD at the age of four. "I didn't like the teachers and I didn't like the student. I didn't like nobody because it was a small school and it made me feel weird. It makes me feel like I am stupid". There was anger in her voice at being placed in a classroom that she perceived to be different from typical classroom even at the age of four.

When talking about elementary school, Nay Nay discussed how she was not very social and never hung out with females. "I thought I was a boy because my hair was short. I hung out with boys and usually I liked dinosaurs and all that when I was younger." I asked her why she thought that was and she replied saying, "Cause guys, I understand where guys are." This led to a discussion on gender in the classroom. Whether

Nay Nay understood male behavior better due to her personality type or if this was a result of being a classroom with mostly boys so early in her school career was difficult to determine.

I believe boys get away with everything and I could say that because a lot of things, but if a boy says cussing or ‘F’ you, this and that, you know, they just get yelled at. But if a girl say it, they end up getting into more trouble. I had that problem before.”

Nay Nay was very open to discussing perceived issues of gender in the classroom and voiced many ideas as to why boys and girls may be treated differently.

I think guys can get away more easier than girls, but I believe why people think cause guys are intimidating and they think like the guys could do anything to another person and be more powerful and girls they think we’re weak and all that. And I don’t think that is true.

This evidences a double standard occurring the classrooms. Teachers and school staff are essentially letting the girls know that cursing and aggressive behavior is more acceptable when it done by a boy. There is anger behind her voice as she talks about wanting everyone to be treated equally. She attributes her ability to get along better with boys to the fact that she was the only girl in her pre-kindergarten class.

Nay Nay describes her middle school classes as having mostly “young, black males”. She referred to her SLD class as special learning disability and the class was mostly made up of African American boys. Even if there were girls in the classes, Nay Nay still hung around with the boys. She spoke of lying to the girls and telling them she couldn’t fight because she was afraid of the consequences otherwise. When asked if she felt the teacher

in middle school treated the two genders differently, Nay Nay said she did not but spoke at great length of how the teacher would tell them about God. “She [the teacher] would always preach about God wouldn’t like that and it’s not right for a person to do that even though Jesus gave up our life because of that. He got beaten. How would you feel if you were in Jesus’ position? And that actually got to us, you know. People listened.” Nay Nay felt strongly about her belief in Jesus and that often referred to the bible or made statement about behaving, as God would want her to behave. She spoke fondly of this teacher and mentioned feeling very comforted in her class. “She [the teacher] makes me feel more comfortable. She’s like a mother and grandmother that I want and have.”

The theme of safety emerged when I posed the question to Nay Nay about what she would change about school. Her immediate answer was that there need to be more officers in schools along with teachers patrolling the halls and checking in on students. Nay Nay indicated that she felt safe at her current school placement largely due to the fact the doors are locked and a security officer sits at the front of the building. I asked her specifically about her own school experience and she stammered for a minute. Initially she responded by saying, “I don’t know what to change because everything happened so fast.” I asked her to pick something specific and waited while she thought. Her answer reflected her need to feel safe. “Well, there’s a lot of things I really wish I could change. Like hitting a student across the face was one of the things I won’t do, ” recalled Nay Nay.

I asked her more about the incident and if there were other times she would alter. Nay Nay came up with a long list including cutting herself, skipping school and wanting to get pregnant and drop out of school. When asked what changed her mind, Nay Nay said that

she had a lot of friends who got pregnant and talked to many who dropped out. None of them encouraged her to follow their path and she saw first hand how difficult their lives had become as a result of those decisions. Nay Nay attributes a shift in her behavior and her desire to do well in school to the examples of her friends as well as the one-on-one attention she received at the school she was attending.

*Interview two. I spent time prior to the second interview observing Nay Nay's classroom. It was a large room with about ten students total. Of those students, Nay Nay was the only girl. Each student appeared to be working on something individually with two teachers in the room instructing as needed. Nay Nay was sitting close to the front with her head bent over her book the entire time I was in there. I wondered if she was doing this since I was sitting in the room or if she was just consumed with the subject she was studying. Periodically, two students would be called to the front of the class and one of the teachers would demonstrate some math problems on the board. The boys watched and then went back to their table in the back and worked together. The room was very quiet and orderly. The teachers spoke softly to the students and everyone remained on task. I wondered how these teachers were able to maintain such a calm environment and I had strong memories of wild Monday mornings when I was a teacher since my students did not handle the transition back to school well.*

*No one asked me who I was or why I was there which was also quite different from any classroom I had observed. Usually students thought I was there to observe them. I stayed in the room for about forty-five minutes and when Nay Nay was done with her work, she got up and walked towards the door. I followed her lead and walked out as well. It was if she didn't want to draw attention to the fact that I was there to see her. She*



*didn't make eye contact until we were outside in the area where we were conducting the interviews. I asked her if the classroom was always like that. She seemed confused. So I asked if the class was always calm and controlled the way it was this morning. Nay Nay shook her head and said it was only that way because none of the really bad kids came on Monday.*

In interview two, the theme of safety resurfaced as well as change for Nay Nay. We began with Nay Nay drawing a picture of her classroom in which she had herself doing work quietly while a teacher helped another student with math. When I asked her how the picture might be different if she was at a typical high school, Nay Nay said she would not be in the picture. She felt that if she hadn't come to this school, she would have dropped out of school.

During this interview, Nay Nay spoke of how she had been molested. Her sense of fear at school seemed to stem largely from this incident. Police at school interviewed her and she admitted she initially lied to the police to protect her mother's boyfriend.

The first time I didn't want to say it because I was scared I was gonna get killed either way by this guy. I don't know how he is....And it was my mom's ex-boyfriend and I still try to not relive that day and it has been really hard for me. I can't imagine me going back at a regular school for a while because something could happen like that again. Maybe it's just not this guy. It could be any other guy from school.

Nay Nay also discussed that she had processed the situation with her social worker but still felt safer in a place where she was secure with police nearby.

During the course of the same interview, Nay Nay spoke of how she used to deal with her emotions by cutting herself as well as doing drugs and drinking. Initially, she might yell and scream but eventually the events that caused her to be upset led to cutting. Now she reports that has changed. In the last two years, she has only done this once after a fight with her boyfriend. I asked her what she attributed the change to and without hesitation she said it was her mom and God. Nay Nay referred to the domestic violence charges her mom brought against her. While she regrets that ever happening, this event did lead her to anger management classes and completing community service. During anger management, Nay Nay learned some coping skills for when she feels her emotions getting out of control. She completed her community service at a church. She finished her story by saying “And then I realized maybe I could change my life.”

*Interview three. On our final visit, Nay Nay greeted me like an old friend and led the way to our usual spot. Her tough exterior seemed to have softened but I wasn't sure if it was due to my knowing her better or if she was more comfortable with me. I knew that if she had been a student of mine, I would have enjoyed having her in my class. When I was teaching, I usually had lunch with the few girls who were in my class at the time. I always enjoyed hearing about their lives and just observing how they interacted with each other. A thought that went through my head when with Nay Nay was that she might have enjoyed these lunches as well.*

*I noticed she had a large hole at the top of her left ear that was red and somewhat bruised. When I asked her about that, she told me to never pierce the top of my ear with a large earring. She said she couldn't sleep because every time she rolled over it hurt and*

*woke her up. I chuckled and assured her I would not pierce my ear like that. I showed her just the two holes I had in each ear and said that was plenty.*

The themes that emerged during the third interview were those of hope and determination. Nay Nay's letter to herself was brief but her words were filled with ambition and hope for happiness. Her focus was on having a career in which she helped people, specifically children. She discussed wanting to become a social worker and helping people with their life and not do drugs. Nay Nay mentioned that her therapist had helped her to plan for her future by suggesting she become a counselor or therapist. Nay Nay spoke of going to college to become a social worker or counselor and she was able to list the courses she needed to pass in order to graduate high school. When she spoke of her ability to do what she needed to graduate, her voice was full of confidence. Nay Nay seemed to determined to graduate and had a checklist memorized of what she needed to do.

After asking Nay Nay who at school assists her with her career decision-making, I asked if she felt that boys received different advice from girls. She interpreted the question to mean if she received advice from males and spoke about a close friend who is a guy who helps her with her problems. I reframed the question to ask if she thought a boy would be given the advice to be a social worker. She considered it for a second before responding yes. However, she said she hoped that she would get hired before another person. Nay Nay did not see this as a matter of gender but just her personal goal.

I moved on to ask her if she thinks her goals might be different if she went to school in a 'regular' high school. Nay Nay replied, "I wouldn't even have a life." She attributed her determination to being at a school where she felt safe and could work towards her

personal goals of graduating and going to college. When I asked about her goals for the future on a personal level, she mentioned that she hoped she would have a family someday and would take care of her children and help them with school. In clarifying her answer, I inadvertently said, “So you hope to get married maybe and have a family?” Nay Nay shook her head no and said she would rather just have kids and no marriage since marriage did not work in her opinion. She mentioned the divorce she witnessed between her parents and did not see the value in getting married.

I closed our time together asking her if she had advice for teachers. Nay Nay shrugged her shoulders and said she couldn’t think of anything. So I asked if she had anything she wanted to add about her school experience or in general. Nay Nay replied, “I have nothing else to say. I’m praying right now this year I’m graduating. That’s all I am praying for.” I commented that she seemed like she was on the right track. “Yeah, I did good this year. I’m so glad.”

### **Janie**

Janie was nineteen at the time of our meetings. The first thing that struck me about her appearance was her kind face. When she smiled, the word ‘sweet’ came to my mind. I would guess that Janie was about 5’9” and she had a large, round body type. Her shirts stretched over body in a way that made me think that these clothes were not bought for her and were simply what she had available to her. Janie’s primary label was EBD but from her story and information shared by the ESE specialist at the school, I knew that Janie also qualified for mild intellectual disabilities. The ESE specialist had also shared that her foster mother had discussed the study with Janie beyond what I had explained to be certain that this was something Janie wanted to be a part of. Janie’s demeanor made

we worry about her from the start. I felt like Janie might be someone who people tried to take advantage of and I repeated to her that she did not have to answer any questions she did not want and she would also have the chance to clarify or change any answers she felt were not accurate.

*Janie's I Poem.*

I feel good.

I am very stubborn

I cry

I try

I'd get raped

I didn't know if I was safe in my home

I still passed all my grades

I went to regular school in the fourth grade

I'm good at math and science

I was eight-years old

I live in a foster home

I changed a lot of houses

I don't know

I would like to go to college

I learned that it's like not turning your back on your friends

I heard that when I was ten years old

I lived in like a homeless shelter when I was little

I stayed at (homeless shelter) when I was nine years old

I went back to the foster home  
I don't have time for no friends  
I just like to go to school  
I clean around the house  
I will fight  
I had a fight with my brother  
I hit him first  
I was bleeding so hard  
I blanked out  
I went to court for that  
I don't get to see my brother  
I've been not like running away from school  
I realized that it wasn't doing good for me  
I was little and didn't even go to school  
I was homeschooled  
I was helping them stay out of drugs  
I was eight years old  
It's a permanent scar  
I enjoy to stay and math and science  
I'm not good at reading  
I don't know  
I don't know  
I want to work in the hospital

I was going to, but it was too late

I'd be still on the streets

I'd be suicidal

I want to help homeless people

I want to like build like a shelter for them

**Interview one.** *Janie attends the same school as Nay Nay. I visited the school once a week and interviewed Nay Nay first and then Janie. While they both attended the same small center school, their classrooms looked quite different. While Nay Nay was in a class with eight to ten students, I only ever observed Janie in a small group of two or three students. Their personalities could not have been more different. Where Nay Nay was tough on the exterior, Janie was perpetually smiling. Janie seemed to have more difficulty understanding the questions and I rephrased them many more times for her than any other participant. This could be attributed to the fact that Janie qualified for mild intellectual disabilities under IDEA. I found myself feeling very protective of Janie as the interview started because I was concerned about her answering these questions. I had discussed this with the ESE specialist and her teacher but they both felt that Janie was much more capable than people initially think. Within ten minutes of the first interview, I discovered what they meant.*

Two themes emerged from the first interview with Janie. The first was safety and the second was the desire to learn. Janie was very contemplative during the interview. She would take her time to respond or ask me to clarify what I was asking, almost as if she was afraid she would give a wrong answer. I assured her there was no wrong answer and

for her to just share what she felt comfortable with telling. When I inquired how she came to be at the center school, Janie launched into a story filled with fear.

“I kept running away from school...Because I didn’t know what. I didn’t know if I was safe from school.” Janie muttered the word ‘rape’ and when I asked her what she said she just repeated she ran away. “I started doing it [running away] at home, too. Cause I didn’t know if it was safe in my home. They wanted me to be more safe at school, so they sent me to a private school [referring to her current school placement]. They put a special alarm on my house from the internet.” I tried to probe more to figure out what this alarm did but Janie would only respond with utterances and clearly did not seem comfortable with this line of questioning. She let me know that she had attended this school for two years and was happy with her placement.

We moved on to her early school experience and Janie informed me that she was homeschooled by her mother until she was eight-years old. Janie went on to say that she and her sister were homeschooled until her mom “gave them up.” The conversation switched from school to Janie’s living in a foster home and had many different homes since she was eight. She is nineteen now. Stability came for her two years ago when she found a permanent foster placement and a school she will remain at until graduation. Most of the memories Janie mentioned revolved around the year she went from homeschooling to public school. This appeared to be a source of sadness since she did not feel academically prepared, citing not knowing her multiplication tables as an example. However, she expressed that she enjoyed the social aspect of school since it was only she and her sister at her mother’s house.



Janie had the most difficulty with the questions regarding gender. Her first response to my question was, “What I think is the boys, they like, get out of school earlier. Then the girls they have to stay in school longer. Why is that?” When clarifying what she meant by “getting out of school earlier”, Janie said that boys drop out of school but the girls stay. Her feeling was that boys do not consider their future the way girls do. Getting a direct answer from Janie proved difficult since she often stopped in the middle of a thought or flowed from one thought to the next without closure to anyone particular idea. Since she used the term ‘successful’ a lot, I asked her what that meant to her. Janie replied, “Like doing more stuff and learning what to do and what’s good and not bad.”

In between home school and public school, Janie attended school at a homeless shelter where she lived briefly. She shared this after I asked about her earliest school memory.

Well, where I lived like in [a homeless shelter] when I was little. When we went to regular school, we have to go to this small school. Like there’s not too many kids. It’s like ten people and some people didn’t get treated very well. So the only ones that got attention was me and my sister because me and my sister needed more help than anybody else...The other kids they went to other classes and separate each one and then they pick one captain who’s the smartest to teach the class for the other kids.

Like many of the stories Janie shared, I found this one to be confusing and tried to clarify what she meant. I came to understand that there was a teacher for all the students but she and her sister received extra help and small group instruction due to the fact they were missing some key academic skills. Janie switched schools many times based on her foster placement. The only constant was that she remained with her sister.

I posed the question to Janie asking what she would change about her school experience. Initially she replied by saying nothing. After offering the question in three other ways, Janie replied that she enjoyed home-schooling the best.

Because at home we have to, at home you have much like you get to go outside all you want. And then my mom says y'all come inside and I'll teach you some things, what to do in the future. Like she taught me how to clean, cook and she also taught me how to clean my room constantly. And I clean around the house like all day. And when I feel tired, I still do the bathroom. I know it hurts my back but I still do it.

While Janie initially spoke of how she liked math and science, she continually returned to the time when she was homeschooled by her mother. She spoke fondly of this period of time but it was not clear as to whether it was because she longed to be with her mother again or if she preferred that environment to her school environment. In some responses, she spoke of enjoying the social aspect of school and in others she mentioned not wanting to bother with anyone and to just learn and be successful.

*There was a stark contrast between my time with Nay Nay and then with Janie. I attributed some of this to level of functioning and the fact she qualified for a mild intellectual disabilities program. Her stories were difficult to follow. It reminded me of when someone tells you about a dream they have and the transition between topics were abrupt. However, I did notice that her stories were consistent and even though she jumped around to different points in her life, she repeated the same details. I found it hard to imagine Janie fighting anyone or even getting angry but I could see her running*

and hiding. The part of her that was frightened surfaced as she spoke about various parts of her life.

*Interview two.* I spent time observing Janie prior to our interview. She was in a group of three students situated around a small circular table. There were two boys and Janie. The room seemed to serve multiple purposes. In one corner, miniature version of library at traditional school there was a library of books and in the other a full-service kitchen. The tables set up seemed designed to accommodate groups of no more than five students. Janie gave me a shy smile when she saw me and sat down with the rest of the students. They were reviewing vocabulary and were then expected to complete work independently with the teacher providing individual help. The room was quiet and the students appeared to be used to the routine and knew what to do next without the teacher's instructions. During this time, the two boys asked for assistance from the teacher but Janie did not. She completed her assignment, showed it to her teacher and then walked up to me to indicate she was ready. Her classroom was unlike Nay Nay's, the other student participating in the study at this school. Where Nay Nay's class was set up like a traditional class with a wipe-board and overhead projector and students completing class work on topics such as algebra and world history, Janie's class reminded me of a resource room for students working on life skills and functional vocabulary. While each received individual attention, Janie's class appeared to have more intense supports built into instruction.

Janie drew a picture of her classroom. She included her foster mom in this picture and indicated they were playing bingo in the class prior to a meeting with her teacher. Janie said she was in the meeting where they discussed her progress in school. She had been

doing well and was passing all of her grades. It was at this point that Janie mentioned her caseworker and the plan they had developed for her to work at a hospital. “They asked me what job I want to work in, and I told them in a hospital, you know working with people, take care of people,” described Janie. She said the caseworker planned on taking her on a tour of the hospital and showing her options for work. Janie also mentioned “independent living” but seemed unsure of exactly what that meant. The career path she was following was that of caregiver which is a gendered role most often associated with females.

*This was the first instance I had of someone telling me about concrete plans of transition or attending an IEP meeting. Janie used terminology such as “caseworker” and “independent living” which led me to believe these plans had been discussed. When Janie and I had passed the ESE specialist in the hall, she reminded Janie about her visiting the hospital and to be sure to tell me about the plans. However, Janie still did not seem clear as to what she would be doing exactly. While transition planning is supposed to be student-centered, Janie seemed to still have adults telling her which path she would take rather than her having an active role in her future. While she did use terminology I was familiar with due to my background in special education, I did not think Janie really understood the words “caseworker” and “independent living.”*

The theme of compliance emerged during the second interview. Janie felt her teachers would describe her as “nice, lovable and hard-working.” She emphasized “if they ask me to do it, I do it.” Janie equated doing what she was told by adults as doing well in school. She seemed very proud of the fact that she no longer ran away from school but her reasoning reminded me of that of a young child. I asked her why she stopped and she

responded by saying, “Because I realized it wasn’t doing good for me, and it’s really a bad thing because people can kill you.”

During the course of this interview, Janie revealed that her mother had died. “My mom died for doing lung cancer disease because she was like smoking pot and weed and she died from that.” Janie wished her teachers knew this along with the fact that her step-dad had left her a scar on her eye that occurred when she was eight-years old. She was reluctant to say why she would want them to know and seemed confused by the question.

*Many of Janie’s stories reminded of those that a younger child would tell. I recalled having a conversation with my young daughter about strangers and her understanding was similar. Much of my interview time with Janie was spent reframing questions in a way that she might better understand. The issues of gender proved to be particularly hard.*

I approached the issues of gender by commenting to Janie that she was the only girl in the class. When I asked if this discrepancy bothered her at all, Janie replied that she liked it that way because “girls is like girlish”. I asked to her to what she meant by girlish and she wasn’t able to expand. Most of the questions surrounding gender were answered with “I don’t know”. Finally, Janie shared that she felt boys “probably did bad things.” When asked if she felt girls do more bad things than boys, she simply responded with, “yeah.”

As with the previous interviews, I asked Janie what she would tell new teachers who would be teaching at a school like the center school. Janie felt that teacher’s yelling at students made them listen and if it didn’t they should just get the resource officer. I asked in many different ways if she really felt that yelling worked and she consistently answered yes. Janie also suggested that the teacher talk to the student one-on-one and

say, “That was not nice not to listen. It’s like very rude.” She felt both these ideas would help new teachers. Janie saw people outside the classroom being the ones who could enforce rules and control in the classroom.

*I found myself walking away from the interviews with Janie feeling very overwhelmed. She clearly wanted to participate and would try to answer the questions the best she could but I could not seem to get a lot of substance out of her answers. Then I stood back and realized that the answers she gave spoke a lot to the issues she faced in her school experience. To Janie, the key to school success was compliance and once she became compliant, school was a better place to be. Janie also saw security and safety coming from external forces, whether this be more security staff or a secured entrance and exit. Her transition planning was very gendered and she was encouraged to enter a job where she served others.*

**Interview three.** The focus of interview three is future. Janie wrote a brief letter to herself in ten years when she would be 29. I gave her the option to read it to me or just tell me about it. Janie responded by saying:

I live by myself with other two roommates and we’ll make the money by ourselves having a trained job. And like I wasn’t to work in the hospital. So after that I’ll meet my brother in a while and live with him and he could live with me and then if it’s okay with my mom he would have like a social relationship with me like go out skating and have some fun.

When asking some clarifying questions, Janie mentioned that she would like to have two kids of her own along with foster children. She felt she would get her own place, get a job, have children and then get married in that order. Again Janie spoke of her

caseworker and independent living and cited the caseworker as the person who is helping prepare her for life post-school. Janie had a look of satisfaction on her face as she spoke of her future and I got the sense she was looking forward to life after school.

The reference to her brother proved very difficult to understand. The best I could piece together was that Janie had been involved in an incident where a boy assaulted her at either the homeless shelter or foster home. When the police became involved, Janie discovered she and the boy had the same father and that he was her half-brother. Due to the nature of the incident, Janie was not allowed to see this boy but it was something that weighed on her mind. From the content of her letter, it was clear that Janie had hopes of having this person in her life again at some point.

In reflecting on the past, Janie expressed that she was happy with the way everything had gone in her school career. There was not anything she would change and she only wished she had listened to her mom more. I could not determine if this was her birth mother or her foster mother. As the questions were coming to an end and I took one last try at asking Janie about her school experience overall.

“Do you think that your goals for yourself would be any different if you weren’t at this school?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Janie responded.

“How do you think it would be different?” I asked aware that I was becoming frustrated.

“Because it would affect my life.”

“How so?” I continued.

“I’d be still on the streets, like on drugs and that wouldn’t be good.” This was the longest sentence she had said in awhile.

“So you think it’s a good thing that you’re here?” I asked just to be sure I understood.

“Yeah.”

“So the goals that you have you wouldn’t have had if you weren’t here?” I asked this awaiting an one-word response.

“Yeah,” Janie paused. “I’d be suicidal.”

*It was responses like this that took me aback. I had come to expect Janie to not say much more than one or two words and then she would share something like this and it let me know that one of two things was happening. Either she didn’t want to share or was not able to verbalize her ideas to these questions. I asked Janie if she currently had thoughts of hurting herself and she said she did not. I also asked if she had shared these thoughts with any other adult. Janie said she had talked to her foster mom and her caseworker about feeling this way. I felt reassured that this was a feeling she was recalling and not a current state of mind.*

*When I asked Janie if she had anything she wanted to ask me or add, she shook her head no. I shared my notes from the previous interviews and there was nothing that she wanted to change or correct. After this, it was time for me to walk her to class. I wished her a lot of luck with getting a job at a hospital and I had this strong instinct to hug or protect her but I knew that this was not my role. I made sure she made her way safely back to class and headed out of the building.*

## **Mita**

Mita was the youngest participant in the study at age 13. When I first met her, the expression that came to mind was “all legs”. Her long strides made it difficult for me to keep up as we walked down the hall and I am someone who moves quickly. Mita wore



her long dark hair slicked back in a ponytail at every meeting. The school had a dress code and Mita was always in a white t-shirt and jeans. Energy seemed to bounce off of Mita and she never seemed to sit still even when she was sitting.

At this middle school, the program for students with EBD utilized a level system. This meant that the students needed to demonstrate certain behaviors for specific lengths of time in order to progress through the level system. As a consequence for their behavior, students may move back a level or be placed on a ‘probationary’ level. The levels were numbered from one to six with one being the lowest and six being the highest. Once a student reached level six, they began to transition to classes outside the self-contained setting.

***Mita’s ‘I’ Poem.***

I don’t like it all

I don’t do my work sometimes

I don’t like to be rushed

I’m mad

I don’t remember

I got suspended

I have no idea

I think it would be funner and easier

I think it is boring

I like to listen to music and be on my cell phone

I’m always reading

I like to read

I forgot what it's called  
I would change the bookshelf  
I curse a lot  
I always get out of my seat  
I have an attitude  
I try not to but it just comes out  
I bully a lot of people  
I just like to play around with them  
I don't be like bullying like for real  
I just be like  
I don't know  
I be like I want to fight you  
I'd just be laughing  
I'm just playing  
I don't do my schoolwork  
I just don't feel like it  
I play volleyball  
I would have more people in my class  
I'd have more people in my class  
I wouldn't be as bad as I am in the other class  
I've been in these classes like forever and haven't got out of them  
I think if I was to get out then I'd be better  
I won't act like that

I don't know

I try but then people just get me mad

I just lose my control

I yell

I like curse and everything

I don't hang out with a lot of girls

I walked out of class

I felt good

I felt bad because I knew I could have done it but then I didn't do it

I kept walking out of class

I kept cursing

I just be getting mad

I think [my teacher] is unfair

I just walk out because I'm getting mad

I don't want to argue with him

I want to be a singer

I just want to be a lot of stuff

I would hope to be a singer and get a lot of money

I would want to have my own car

I would want to have all my friends

I would be able to have a good time without my mom.

I don't know

I don't know

I'd tell myself to be like- to like stop my attitude and stuff

I feel like I am gonna get in trouble

I would tell my mom I want to be a singer

I think I would change my attitude if I go out to other classes

I wouldn't be as mean

I'd be getting mad

I'd be like no and I would call him cuss words

I have no idea

I don't know

I just have to make better choices

***Interview one.** I pulled up to Mita's school. This was a traditional middle school and the office was busy as I entered. The ESE specialist met me in the front and expressed how excited she was for this project. We walked to the back of the campus and down the hallway where Mita's class was located. As we approached, the ESE specialist began to tell me about the two girls in the classroom who had agreed to participate. She spoke about how the classroom can sometimes be disorderly since the teacher was not a certified ESE teacher but an out-of-field teacher who had taken this as her first teaching position. I nodded and was unsure if I should tell her not to tell me too much about the girls since I wanted to hear their story in their words or if I should just continue. She stopped before we reached the room and told me about a student who she felt would have been great for the project but had just been placed at a center school. I was relieved the conversation had changed. I heard some yelling as we got to the door. When I peaked in, I noticed some students were sitting on top of their desks while others were clustered in a*

*corner. Mita was called to meet with me and before she reached the door, she turned and smiled at her classmates as if to say, "Ha ha. I am getting out here for awhile." Other students yelled out to me asking if they could participate. The teacher told them to get quiet and that I only needed to talk to the girls. Mita followed me to the conference room. Her manner had changed from being boisterous to becoming very quiet. When we sat down, she kept her eyes darting around the room and rocked back and forth in the rolling chair.*

The theme that emerged from interview one was that of being caught in a paradoxical situation. More often than not, Mita responded to my questions with the phrase "I don't know." I revisited and reworded most questions until Mita shared more than these three words. She initially began the interview by saying that she does not like her current school setting. "I don't like it because I've got to stay in class all day and I don't like staying in class all day," Mita shared. Mita had been in self-contained classrooms since she can remember but she could not explain why she was in these classes. The paradox showed through in her explanation of what she needs to do to go back to the general-education classroom. Mita was able to articulate the behavior she needed to exhibit to go to these classes but she felt she would not be able to demonstrate these skills unless she was in the general-education classroom. Mita explained that she was on level one and she had to get to level five on her class's level system. She felt she could only keep her behavior together for a limited period of time and then would slip up and curse resulting in a move back on her level. A look of sadness came over her face when she spoke of this struggle.

When asked about her successes and failures in school, Mita had trouble recalling any event that would provide an example of one or the other. Finally, she gave an example of a bad memory of school as one when she was involved in a fight with a girl and ended up suspended. Even though I came back to the question regarding success and pleasant memories of school, Mita either responded that she didn't know or couldn't remember. She never answered that question.

As far as what she liked and didn't like about school, Mita had difficulty identifying an aspect of school she really enjoyed. While she repeatedly said that school is boring, Mita could not think of something that could change to make school more interesting. Her answers largely centered around the social aspects of school and wished she could "play around" more during the day.

I asked Mita about the fact that there was only one other girl in her class and how she felt about that. She gave a mixed answer. At first, she responded that she did not like having boys in her class because they were "annoying". Mita also felt that if there were more girls in her class, "it would be funner and easier". However, when the question was posed later about the disproportionality in her class, Mita replied differently. She said she didn't mind this "because girls they start too much drama and stuff." Mita did not feel the boys get treated differently yet she cited an example of how she gets moved down a level for cursing and walking out of the room but if a boy in the class does it, the consequence is not the same. This double standard seemed to bother her more than the actual make-up of the classroom.

*The interview with Mita was tough. It seemed like once I accepted 'I don't know' as an answer; she tried to see if that was the response she could give throughout. I asked*

her in the middle if this was what she really wanted to do and reminded her that she could change her mind and it would be perfectly fine. She shook her no and said would like to be part of the project. Mita never stopped moving. During the course of the entire interview, she rolled back and forth in her chair or repositioned herself repeatedly. She reminded me of a former student who amazed me with her constant movement. Mita also seemed a lot more interested in the social aspect of school than anything else and while she mentioned she liked to read, she could not name any titles of books she liked. I debated about not using Mita for the study since she outwardly seemed that she didn't want to be there. Since I did give her an option to not participate and she denied, I decided to meet with Mita for a second time.

**Interview two.** I spent some time in Mita's classroom before the second interview. There were two adults in the room for the ten students. I had difficulty determining which was the teacher and which was the paraprofessional. After recalling my conversation with the ESE specialist, I remembered she referred to the female teacher in the class. The male adult in the room sat with a newspaper at his desk and barked out some commands now and then. The students seemed to comply a little quicker to his demands than to the female adult in the room. Mita was one of two girls. The second girl was also participating in the study. Mita was sitting on top of a desk when I walked in and was laughing loudly with another student. She didn't have any school materials in or near her area. I didn't even notice a pencil. One of the boys walked past her as he was on his way to sharpen his pencil and she swatted at him and laughed. The male teacher looked at me and then gave Mita a look that indicated to her that she was being observed. Mita gave a shrug as if to say she didn't care and just looked around the room as if to determine who

*she could bother next. The female teacher in the class asked me if I was ready for Mita and I got the sense she wanted a break from her disruptive behavior. I held up my hand to say that I needed a couple minutes. The teacher attempted to get control of the room but judging from the constant glances from the students in my direction, I could tell they were not about to settle down when they had a new audience. I observed for a while longer and then Mita and I went to the conference room.*

The theme of a dueling narrative emerged again in the second interview. Mita was able to identify physical items and rules about schools that she would like to change but she never answered with an idea that was specific to her feelings and thoughts. When asked what she would change about her classroom, Mita spoke about the bookshelf and how it was too large and she wishes they would move it to a different location. She mentioned this bookshelf when drew a picture of her classroom. Mita sat next to the bookshelf so perhaps the location made her feel isolated from other students in the classroom.

During this time, Mita informed that she did like to read and when I asked her more she responded that she liked “like big books like long books and stuff.” No titles came to her mind. She spoke of wishing she could laugh and have fun more in class. I asked her what kinds of activities the teachers could do that might be more interesting, Mita looked at me with a blank expression. She couldn’t come up with an idea.

Mita did speak about her behavior and her desire not to be in a self-contained class any longer. While she had mentioned this in the previous interview, she spoke of it even more this time. Mita acknowledged that she had a poor attitude towards school and cursed a lot. She said she does try to stop but then it just comes out. This made it difficult



for her to move up in the level system because she felt she could only hold it together for a limited period of time. “I try but then people get me mad and I just lose my control,” Mita explained. Taking this statement, I tried to ask her to expand on this idea. I asked Mita how long she was able to maintain appropriate school behavior and how she felt during that time. “I felt good but then I felt bad because I knew I could have done it but then I didn’t do it,” Mita looked sad as she said this. I wanted to know what she felt the adults in the classroom could do to help her and she replied with her stand-by answer of “I don’t know.”

Mita seemed caught because she expressed the desire to go out into general-education classrooms. She could tell me what she needed to do and at times had displayed this behavior. Mita seemed to feel that she would be able to hold her behavior together in a general classroom but would never be given the chance since she had what felt like the impossible task of moving up to the level five. From what she shared in the interview, Mita had not made it past level two. She had expressed this desire to her teachers but was met with the answer that she needed to show that she could handle her behavior in the self-contained room first and then she would be given the opportunity to try another classroom.

*I was somewhat surprised by Mita’s responses with the second interview. She shared a little more than the previously but I was also struck by the fact that she spoke so little about academics at all. I thought back to my own students and their desire to be in a general-education classroom. Part of the way they demonstrated this desire was to emphasize to me whatever academic area in which they excelled. For example, I had one female student who was very good in math. She had a short fuse and always regretted*

*when she blew up. However, she would constantly keep it together during math because she knew she did well in that area and would show me that she wanted to be with her peers during math instruction. This student spoke about how school was boring and she hated school but due to her dedication to math, she was eventually able to back to classroom for that instruction. That was the first step for her to successfully transitioning back to the class full-time. Even my students who were also significantly behind their peers would acknowledge at times their desire to improve their reading or learn their math facts. Mita never spoke of any of these things. In our conversations, I also got the sense that she never considered school to be anything but a place where her presence was required as well as a way to see friends. As long as she was going to be in a self-contained class, Mita didn't seem to see a reason to try. However, the more she didn't try the less chance she had of ever leaving that classroom.*

***Interview three.** Mita and I took our usual places at the conference table. She was still continually moving and looked very reluctant to write a letter to herself in ten years. Mita spent about three minutes writing and the entire focus of her letter was social in nature. I asked Mita if she wanted more time to think about goals for herself and she shook her head no. I mentally reminded myself that it was great she wrote something since I had a fear that she would just write the words 'I don't know.'*

Mita's goals consisted of getting a license and a car so that she could have fun with her friends without her mom around all the time. She seldom spoke of her mother except to say that she looked forward to a time when she could have fun without her mother's supervision. She was the first girl to not mention her mother in any other context. My attempts at having her answer what she hoped to do when she finished school resulted

mostly in her saying, “I don’t know.” I decided to pointedly ask if she planned to stay in school because this thought had crossed my mind after her consistent responses of disliking school. Mita indicated she planned to finish but when I pressed her about what she would be doing when she was done, she repeated the idea of riding in a car with her friends. Finally, I asked her about a job and Mita mentioned she wanted to be a singer. She had not shared that desire with anyone but her mother who responded to her by saying, “That sounds cool.” Mita had no idea how to become a singer and said if she went to college she would study “a lot of stuff” but there was nothing she was interested in except volleyball and singing. No one at school talks to her about her plans and she chooses not to attend her IEP meetings. When asked why, Mita says, “Because I feel like I’m gonna get in trouble. Like if the teacher tells my mom something.” However, no one asks her for her input before the meeting.

Mita reiterated that if she was not in the self-contained class, she would be different. I asked her to expand and she replied, “Like because my attitude and stuff, I think I would be better with my attitude if I go out to other classes and stuff, and I wouldn’t be as mean.” Since this was an in-depth answer for Mita, I tried to keep her going on this thought. She reverted to her answer of ‘I don’t know’ and ‘I have no idea’ for the remainder of the interview. Mita acknowledged that she gets mad at the male teacher in particular because ‘he’d tell me to do a lot of stuff and I’d be getting mad’. I questioned whether she found her work too difficult or too easy as this is the case with many students who avoid class work. Mita just felt it was boring.

*As the interview came to a close, it took everything in my power to not lecture Mita as I would have my own students who had this attitude towards school. I don’t mean lecture*

*in an intimidating way but in a conversation encouraging them to think about what THEY wanted to do with their lives and how their time in school could help them accomplish these things. If one of my students had wanted to be a singer, I would have contacted the music teacher at my school and made attempts for the two to have a conversation of what it takes to prepare for such a career. I wanted to say to her that goals need to be more than driving a car with your friends. I also wanted to say that if the work is not too hard and you want to get out of the class, then do the work. My students knew that they had to show proof of what they knew and the proof was in their school work. I worried for Mita. She was the youngest girl to participate in the project and perhaps she will have the epiphanies the other girls spoke of having but I was concerned that Mita never even seemed to consider the importance of school and had just accepted she would sit in a class all day, play with whoever was around her and if she got mad she knew the door was always there. I could not do any of these things because that was not my role in this situation. I thanked her for participating and wished her a lot of success with everything she does. We walked quietly back to her classroom and said good-bye. This was the first interview I completed with someone who I thought might easily become one of the poor statistics of girls labeled EBD.*

### **Marie**

Marie was fifteen at the time of this study. While Marie was short in stature, she walked with a swagger that reminded me of the ‘tough’ girls in my high school in Philadelphia; the ones I was fearful of if I ran into them in the bathroom. Marie also had long dark hair slicked back in the same manner as Mita. The dress code also resulted in their dressing with the same white t-shirt and jeans. Marie’s facial expressions did not

match the manner in which she walked. She looked younger than anyone else I had interviewed even though she was two years older than Mita. She seemed apprehensive at first but once the questions began, I was somewhat surprised at how quickly she shared stories from her personal life.

*Marie's 'I' Poem.*

I get really mad

I walk out

I start cussing at them

I was in regular classes

I got really mad

I got up

I hit her

I don't want to talk about that one

I don't know

I had a teacher that I really liked

I'd get to choose for that week

I get to go outside

I had her for reading

I'm still not that good

I know more than what I used to

I don't like being around boys

I don't think it's funny

I didn't know how to read and stuff

I learned how to calm myself down now  
I would just ignore them  
I talk to her  
I like to squish something very tight  
I'm already on level three  
I'm gonna be out of one class  
I was in reading class  
I'd just get mad  
I'll walk out of school  
I only know my friends from last year from the regular classes  
I like to play a lot  
I get really mad and stuff  
I have good grades  
I act one way  
I act another way  
I do bad things out there with my friends  
I don't do it no more  
I used to do drugs and stuff  
I used to be in classes  
I have to go to court  
I turned myself in  
I think they're going to arrest me  
I think it's like a year or something

I had to do hours  
I had to go to some classes with my mom  
I don't know  
I just want to hurry up and go  
I just want to stay home  
I didn't come here for two months  
I ran away for exactly two months  
I don't even remember  
I know me and my mom had gotten into an argument  
I don't remember what it was  
I have friends and stuff  
I never had all those kinds of friends I have now  
I always had an attitude and stuff  
I'm just gonna stop  
I did  
I do my work and then we play  
I just keep walking  
I just don't want to start problems with nobody  
I just don't like it because the boys they like to pick on us  
I get along with her  
I'm working on my way out  
I just like it when I was before out there  
I don't like science

I like everything else but science

I really love math

I don't know

I want to be a nurse

I see my sister

I want to go to college

I was really bad and stuff

I used to bite my teachers and stuff

I see now that I'm bigger what they go through, the teachers and stuff

I don't want to go through that

I might hear something I might not like

I might get mad

**Interview one.** *Marie attended the same school as Mita. They were the only two girls in the classroom and sat next to each other in the classroom. Where Mita was tall, Marie was about my height at five feet tall. She had her hair slicked down and pulled back in a long ponytail. She wore a plain white t-shirt and jeans and walked with her head down, not in a way that indicated shyness but as if it was a habit. There was no one else in the hallway but Marie still kept her eyes focused on the floor. I asked her how she was as we walked to the conference room and she mumbled that she was fine. Where Mita had a nervous energy about her, Marie appeared calm and deliberate in her movements*

Marie responded to the opening activity in a way that made it seem she was telling me what she thought I wanted to hear. Statements such as “school is good for you” and “I am very good in reading” sounded forced when she spoke them. While her manner was



serene, Marie talked a lot about her anger and her attitude. Immediately she began by talking about how the teachers in her class are helping her learn how to calm her anger. When she described this, Marie says, “They’re helping me learn how to calm my anger down because when somebody tells me something I don’t like or like they start talking about me, I get really mad and I walk out. Or if not I start cussing at them or something.” The theme of anger and escape emerged throughout Marie’s interviews.

Marie shares that she was in regular classes with support from ESE teachers until last year when her placement was changed to a full-time setting. After an incident that involved Marie beating up another girl, the IEP team felt that a self-contained class would be a better fit. Marie talks fondly of a teacher who helped her with reading which she now says she struggles with. This is opposite of the way she completed her sentence by saying she was very good at reading. Marie’s lack of confidence in the area of reading appears in all of her interviews. During the first interview, she let me know that the reason she fought the other student in her class was because that student made fun of her inability to read. Interested in teacher behaviors, I asked Marie what specifically she liked. Marie responded,

That she was really nice to me and like she’s not like the teachers now, that every wrong thing I do they look at me wrong. They don’t talk to me. She used to talk to me and tell me, no that’s not good, you shouldn’t do that stuff.

Marie spoke of the fact that she was only one of two girls in her classroom. As opposed to feeling comfortable in the environment, Marie expressed a desire to have more girls in her class. Her feeling was the boys tended to be louder and make fun of the

girls in the class. The notion of a double standard for behavior was noted again. She stated,

Well, really I don't like being around boys because boys like making fun of the girls and stuff. It's just I don't think it's funny but they like making fun of the girls just because there's less of them. Then all the boys they go in a group and start making fun of us and stuff.

Marie had also been in a self-contained class for the shortest amount of time. This may explain her perception of gender in the classroom. Other than the social aspect, Marie did not feel that there were any differences in the way the two genders were treated in the classroom.

*Interview two. I spent time observing Marie in her classroom prior to our second meeting. She was in the same class as Mita, so I watched some of the same events and issues take place. Marie reacted differently to her environment than her other female peer. Where Mita sat on top of her desk and instigated some of the antics that took place in the class, Marie sat quietly at her desk and appeared to be attempting the task at hand. Once in awhile she would look up and smile or just the opposite. She would lift her head and have an expression of annoyance on her face. Mita would lean over and whisper to her from time-to-time and Marie would nod and acknowledge her in some way but went back to her work.*

*Of all the students in the classroom, both boys and Mita, Marie seemed to be the only one intent on learning. Again, I wondered if this was a result of me being the room to observe or if this was how Marie approached school on a daily basis. Judging from some of her responses during interview one, I thought that for the most part Marie wanted to*

*learn. I thought of her talking about her deficit in reading and that being the impetus of the final fight that resulted in her full-time placement.*

*The more time I spent in this classroom, the more I had to fight the urge to stand up and get the students on task. It took everything I had not to tell the boy who had gotten up four times to sharpen his already sharp pencil to sit down and get to work or ask a question if he didn't understand. With some of the other classrooms I had observed, I found myself in awe of how orderly and productive the classroom seemed. In this room, I felt the overwhelming desire to take Marie with me and put her in a class where the teacher expected her to increase her reading and did not tolerate any students putting down other student's skills.*

**Interview two.** During our second time together, Marie revealed more of herself and her life outside of school. She felt she was two different people; one in school and one outside of school. In school, Marie described herself as quiet and only when she got angered by other people's behavior toward her did she act out. While she reiterated that this has improved, interview two was spent largely discussing the issues going on in her life outside of school.

At first, Marie just alluded to the "really bad stuff" she did. After asking her what was "really bad stuff", Marie stated, "I do bad things out there with my friends. Like I don't do it no more. Like I used to do drugs and stuff." I wondered how she stopped and Marie told a story of how she turned herself in to the police for possession of drugs. She did so because her mom was going to be held responsible if she didn't. She spoke of classes she had to take as well as an upcoming court date.

I think they're gonna arrest me. They already told me and if they arrest me, I think it's like a year or something or six months. Something like that because of I had to do hours and plus I had to go to some classes with my mom.

She clarified that the six months or a year was not of probation but time in jail. This was a place specifically for teenage girls and Marie described it as being "almost like a boot camp place."

Her feelings about having to go away depended on her situation at home. When Marie perceived her mother and brother "messaging with" her, she felt ready to leave. When there was peace at home, Marie did not want to go. The court also mandated that she and her mother attend parenting classes. Each time they were scheduled to go, Marie ran away. When Marie ran away, she would sometimes be gone from anywhere to a month up to two months. During this time, her mother didn't know where she was. She missed two months of school this school year due to her running away. I asked Marie what made her decide to go home and return to school. Marie replied by saying, "Things out there ain't better than home. Like if you're not doing nothing at home, it's better if you just come to school." While Marie was speaking of this hard period of time, she had a sad look on her face that made her appear younger than before. She attributed her change in behavior at school and at home to her own decision. Marie talked of how during her two months away from home and school, she realized her behavior was not getting her out of the self-contained class or making her situation at home better so she decided to change this. However, her past choices still resulted in her having to face the consequences of her actions and go to court to hear where she would need to go.

*I worried for Marie. I knew she was fifteen and was still in middle school indicating that she had repeated previous grades. I feared for her going to a program for adjudicated girls and what she might learn there. While she didn't go into great detail about her issues with her mother, Marie clearly struggled with that relationship. On one hand she wanted to run away but she also turned herself in as the owner of the drugs in her house to protect her mother. It was almost as though by the time Marie figured out that she should go to school and try to work on her situation at home, it was too late. She faced going to court where her future would be decided.*

**Interview three.** With the focus of interview three being the future, Marie wrote to her future self about academic and personal goals. She saw herself finishing high school and continuing on to be a doctor or a nurse. However, Marie expressed that she didn't enjoy science and had not discussed these goals with her teachers at any length. The issue of lack of preparation for post-school life surfaced during this interview and the theme of insecurity emerged.

Marie answered the majority of the questions in this interview with "I don't know." The difference between her using this as an answer in comparison with others who did this was that Marie gave the questions about her future thought and sincerely did not seem to know the answers. For example, when I asked her what type of preparation and schooling she might need to become a nurse or a doctor, Marie answered she didn't know. This was a result of really not being aware of what the requirements of these occupations were. To the majority of questions I asked Marie about her future and future planning, Marie responded with one word. A look of concern crossed her face when she was unable to come with answers about where she might go to school or who talks to her about her

future. She seemed relieved to be able to finally answer where she might attend high school.

Marie did not see herself married but she did want to have at least one child and maybe two. She was hesitant about having two children because she saw how children can behave and knew based on her own behavior that kids can get into a lot of trouble. Marie remembered herself in elementary school and recalled biting teachers and running away from class. "I don't want to go through that," she said about having her own children. As an afterthought, Marie added that she hoped she had lots of friends in the future because she missed her friends from her other school and other classes.

*The third interview went rather quickly. Marie did not want to discuss the fact she was going to court that Friday although I did ask if she was nervous. I felt her lack of response to the questions was not an issue of wanting to avoid the interview but rather that she had not given a lot of thought to her future and had not received much guidance in planning. For the topics Marie had given thought to, she readily answered and relayed as much information as she had in the previous interviews. As I walked Marie back to her class, I found myself wanting to say a lot of things along the lines of good luck on Friday and keep focused on her goals but I still was not sure of my role and what to say being that this was the last time we would see each other. Instead, I thanked her again for talking to me and gave her one last chance to ask me anything or add anything. Marie shook her head no and I finally decided to say, " I wish you the best of luck with everything that you do." She responded with thanks and went into her classroom. I peeked inside and saw the same student sharpening his pencil again. As with some of the other girls, I found myself worried for Marie. Not because I thought she was not a*

*capable but student but just the opposite. Marie was a student I thought had struggled quietly for a long time in school until she hit a point where she needed attention and help. Unfortunately, that call came out in the form of leaving the classroom and fighting with peers. Her actions outside of school will greatly impact her future and I also worried for her in that aspect. She spoke so fondly of the teacher that helped her with reading and I hoped that she had another adult like that in her life again.*

### **Essential themes**

This section examines the essential themes that emerged over all the participants interviews. Table 4.1 outlines these themes and indicates the commonalities between the girls.

Table 4.3

*Essential Themes*

	<i>School disengagement</i>	<i>Mother-daughter relationships</i>	<i>stigma</i>	<i>Awareness of behavior</i>	<i>Change agents of behavior</i>	<i>Hope and resiliency</i>	<i>Dueling narratives</i>
Destinee	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Ke Ke	X		X	X	X	X	X
Nay Nay	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Janie	X	X		X	X	X	X
Mita	X			X			X
Marie	X	X	X	X			X

**School Disengagement**

The theme of ‘school disengagement’ was present in each of the interviews. The girl’s spoke of either feeling disconnected from school in the past or currently experiencing boredom or lack of interest in the classroom. Mita described school as “boring” and could not come up with one idea as to how she could feel more engaged in academics or school in general. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Destinee, Ke Ke, Janie, Nay Nay and Marie spoke of previously feeling disengaged from the classroom but had a shift in which each realized the importance of school.

For Destinee, Ke Ke, and Janie, this shift was attributed to self. Destinee and Ke Ke spoke of the summer prior to this current academic school year where they ‘realized’ that they needed to change their behavior and complete high school. Repeatedly, I inquired whether an adult had influenced this desire to alter their attitude towards school. Consistently, both replied that it was a conscious choice made on their behalf. Destinee, Ke Ke and Nay Nay each described a time when they did not want to come to school and acted in deliberate ways that would result in suspension. The common behaviors included walking out of the room, cursing at a teacher or provoking a classmate to encourage a



fight. At times, each girl had simply walked into the in-school suspension room without having done anything to be there. They had made up an excuse and no one questioned their presence.

School disengagement often increases the likelihood of student's dropping out of school. None of the girl's considered dropping out as an option for them. For Destinee and Ke Ke this was attributed to witnessing peers or siblings who had left school and expressed regret at their decision. Janie, Marie and Nay Nay attributed this to a change in school placement. For Janie and Nay Nay, they felt motivated by their new school to graduate and move on to work or further schooling. Each spoke of feeling safe in their school and having a sense of being able to meet the academic expectations of the school. Marie saw her placement in a self-contained classroom more as a punishment and was applying herself in order to return to the general education classes with which she was more familiar. Mita was the only participant who never spoke of a time when she was engaged in school but she also did not consider dropping out as an option. She was the only one who replied that she did not know anyone who dropped out and she was the youngest of the group at age thirteen.

### **Mother-Daughter Relationships**

Destinee, Nay Nay and Marie each had incidents with their mothers that required police intervention. Both Destinee and Nay Nay were charged with domestic violence against their mothers and were required to do community service and/or take anger management classes as a result. Each denied that the scene their mothers described to the police occurred the way their mothers said. However, both had peers who had also had the same charges pressed against them and they spoke of how that helped them to recover from the

incident. Marie's story did not involve violence. She admitted to using drugs and when the evidence was found in the home, she feared her mother would be the one charged. Marie turned herself in and was now facing time at a correctional facility. The court had ordered her to attend parenting classes with her mother but Marie ran away each time the course was about to start. Her conflicts with her mother ebbed and flowed. Marie recalled times when living in her home was pleasant and she enjoyed being there. Destinee and Nay Nay never recalled any memories of pleasant experiences in their home. Both spoke of being told they were to move out when they were eighteen.

Janie's relationship with her mother stood in stark contrast with the other participants. Until the age of eight, Janie and her sister lived with her mother and were 'home-schooled'. This term is put in quotations because this was how Janie recalled her schooling. However, when she spoke of the instruction that took place it largely surrounded domestic skills such as cooking and cleaning. Janie's family became homeless when she turned eight. Her mother became sick and eventually died leaving Janie and her sister in the foster care system. Running away from home became a common occurrence for Janie to the point where her current foster placement installed a special alarm in the home to be instantly alerted when Janie left the house. For Janie, the relationship with her mother was cut short at a very young age. She speaks fondly of her mother and spoke of missing her during one interview. However, Janie referred to her foster parent with whom she had lived with for two consecutive years as 'Mom'. There was no mention of arguments or violence in this home.

Again, Mita was the only participant who did not discuss conflict with her mother to any marked degree. She mentioned looking forward to a time when she could be

independent and “have fun” without her mother “in the way”. Mita never mentioned running away from home or feeling dissatisfied at home. Both she and Ke Ke mentioned discussing their futures with their mothers. This was spoken of briefly and only when pointedly asked with whom they shared their goals for their future.

None of the girls in this study specifically mentioned their mother’s telling them negative or positive messages. The questions in the study were geared towards school and school memories. However during our meetings, the incidents described above were shared. It seems impossible to tease out just how being labeled EBD impacted their identity when so much of what has shaped these girls occurred outside of the classroom walls.

### **Stigma**

The theme of stigma emerged from three of the six girls in the study. Because of the stigma attached to disability labels, there tends to be a negative self-perception created among adolescents with disabilities. Stigma is often created when a labeled group has attributes that differ from the majority and that society considers being negative. While only Destinee spoke specifically of the stigma she felt being placed in classes for students with EBD, the theme was heard in the stories of other girls as well.

Destinee discussed how she felt she was judged by her past behaviors and repeatedly spoke of her desire to be judged on who she was presently. She felt that walking into a classroom, the teacher had a pre-conceived notion of who she is based on what that had read about her school history.

While not as explicit as Destinee, Marie and Ke Ke’s desire to return to regular classes spoke to their dislike of being in a self-contained setting. For Ke Ke, it was a complete

school placement she desired. She resented having to eat breakfast in her classroom and longed for the time when she could participate in the extracurricular activities offered at a traditional high school. Marie recalled how different the academics and social make-up were in her classes that were not self-contained in the past. While neither specifically said they felt they were treated differently due to their label, each perceived being in their current school placement as something negative with which they needed to overcome to get to where they wanted to be.

Mita expressed the same desire to attend classes in a general education setting, yet seemed much more focused on her perception of what those class environments were like. Having spent the majority of school career in self-contained classes, Mita did not perceive having a label as being treated negatively. She maintained the belief that if she was given the change to be in the general education setting, her behavior would improve. Since Mita did not share any specific goals she had for herself, determining if these would be different in another environment without the stigma of a label was difficult.

Janie and Nay Nay never expressed concern about the impact of their school placement on the perceptions of others. Each expressed the opposite sentiment. Both Janie and Nay Nay felt that had they not come to their current school, they would have dropped out or met a worse fate, death. Both Janie and Nay Nay discussed the success and safety they felt at their school. In past school placements, running away had been the norm for each of these girls. Currently, both had stopped running away from school and instead remained focused on graduating and moving on to productive post-school placements.

### **Awareness of behavior**

Each girl discussed their behavior and cited examples of ways they currently acted in the classroom, as well as their behavior in previous years. When discussing their past school experiences, all the girls shared a time when they behaved inappropriately at school. Destinee recalled cursing and yelling in class as early as kindergarten. She would stand in tables and do dances until the school personnel allowed her to pick which teacher's class she wanted to attend in attempts to try and curb this behavior.

Ke Ke relayed the same story on two separate occasions in which she used a broom to choke another classmate. This was the impetus of her being placed at a center school. Ke Ke spoke of leaving the classroom repeatedly or voluntarily putting herself in ISS as a means to avoid further conflicts with peers who provoked her. Nay Nay engaged in the same type of avoidance activity and spoke of deliberately trying to be dismissed from class or placing herself in ISS.

Janie, Mita and Marie also acknowledged times when they behaved in a way that was not suitable for school. For Janie, this mainly consisted of running away. She reported not feeling safe in many of her classrooms but could not specifically state why. Marie and Mita had a long history of cursing and leaving the classroom that each could recall from as early as elementary school. Additionally, Marie remembers fighting with classmates and biting teachers when she was younger. The biting stopped as she aged but the last fight she was involved in resulted in a change of placement and she was now in the self-contained classroom.

### **Change agents in behavior**

Every girl was able to identify the behaviors they needed to display in order to either return to general education settings or to be productive and graduate in their current

school placement. None of the participants held anyone but themselves responsible for their behavior. While some spoke of being provoked, none ever voiced that the instigator was to blame for how they reacted. Some of the behaviors the girls identified as positive for the school setting would fall under the category of compliance. Janie repeatedly spoke of “being good” and “doing what adults told” her to do. In listening to her story, Janie equivocated being a successful student with being compliant. For Janie, the shift in her behavior occurred when she realized how dangerous running away from both home and school could be. She also attributed this change to her new school and home environment in which she felt very safe and protected.

Destinee, Nay Nay and Ke Ke also shared stories about a shift in their behavior. These three girls attributed this change to themselves. All three spoke of having conversations with themselves about their current behavior in school as well as what they wished to achieve. Realizing that nothing would get accomplished if they continued acting the way they had, each girl recalled “deciding to change” and “acting right”. While further questions were posed as to who might have influenced this change, each girl held steadfast that this was completely their own decision and no one helped them reach this idea. Nay Nay spoke of having conversations with herself in which she told herself to count to ten if someone bothered her. Ke Ke reported that now when classmates say things to her that cause her anger, she smiles at them to diffuse the situation. Destinee did a combination of both these strategies.

Once the decision had been made by these girls to stop running out of class, cursing and fighting, positive events occurred in their school career. For Destinee, she was exiting self-contained classes gradually and was investigating any opportunities to take

night classes in order to make up for the courses she had missed or failed. She wanted to graduate with a regular diploma. Nay Nay felt successful in her current school placement and kept her eye on the goal of graduation which was to take place in the spring. She knew exactly what courses and what grades she needed to maintain in order to receive a high school diploma. Her shift happened while she was attending a center school but her focus was not to go back to general education classes but instead finish school where she was. Ke Ke's shift in her behavior led to the possibility of her going to back to a typical high school. This was where she wanted to be when she graduated high school. While she expressed a lot of anxiety about returning to a 'normal school,' Ke Ke repeatedly reminded herself of how she had changed her behavior and mentally encouraged herself to maintain control of her anger.

For Marie, any change in her behavior seemed to occur as sheer desire to leave the self-contained class. While all the participants had major life issues happening outside of the class, Marie was facing a change of placement imminently. She was about to be sentenced to a correctional facility for adolescent girls. So while Marie was able to articulate how she needed to behave in school and repeatedly expressed the desire to return to general education classes, her plans were about to be disrupted due to her involvement with drugs and the court system. It is difficult to determine if Marie would have tried harder to display more positive behaviors or worked harder at moving up on the class level system since she knew that she would be leaving this school for anywhere from six months to a year.

While Mita did not outwardly attribute her negative behavior to others, she also did not seem to internalize any responsibility over her behavior either. She spoke about

classmates “starting with” her but had yet to display the same shift in behavior as four of the other girls had. Mita consistently spoke of how she felt her behavior would improve if she were in a general education class. She felt she would not “play around” as much. However in order to attend general education classes, Mita needed to display improved behavior in her current classroom. She explained that she was able to keep her behavior contained for about a week at the most and then she would “lose it” meaning that she cursed or walked out of the room. Mita expressed feeling proud of herself during the times she was able to move up on the class level system but this did not last for any length of time. She attributed her classroom environment rather than herself to initiate any real, permanent change.

### **Hope and resiliency**

None of the girls in this study would have what is considered a typical school career. Even though none of the questions in the study were directed towards their lives outside of school, five of the six girls shared intimate details of what they experienced in their home or outside of the classroom. These scenarios included being raped, physical abuse from parents, loss of a parent, drug use and involvement with the police. Any of these events in and of themselves would impact a person in a significant way. Many of the girls had multiple traumatic events occur in their young lives. One was facing time in a juvenile correction facility as a result. However, none of the girls spoke of quitting school or giving up on their future in any sense. While the thought of never returning to school had occurred to some, none followed through on this idea.

Destinee, Ke Ke, Nay Nay and Janie all spoke of their future with specific ideas in mind. All of them wanted to finish school and pursue a line of work in which they would



be helping others. In their stories were flashes of hope and a theme of resiliency. While none had been excelling in their academic career, each had come to a point where they wanted to successfully finish school. These girls saw themselves in ten years with degrees, productive jobs and children of their own. None thought the path to achieving these goals would be easy but based on what they had already overcome in their lives, each felt these goals could realistically be achieved if they continued to apply themselves and fuel the positive changes in their behavior that had already begun to take place.

Marie and Mita were facing different situations. While Mita did not speak much of her life outside school, she had clearly not given a lot of consideration to her future. She also did not express much hope in returning to the general education classes as she wished but Mita did seem to truly believe that she could be successful in these classes if given a chance. Marie's story might have contained a stronger theme of hope and resiliency had we met at a different point in time. She knew that she could be successful outside of the self-contained room and saw being there largely as a punishment for her attack on a classmate. Since she knew that she was facing charges in court, Marie did not communicate the same sense of hope as the other four. Marie still had much more to endure before any determination of resiliency could be heard.

### **Dueling narratives**

As part of this the analysis of this study, "I" poems were created using the transcripts from the interviews with the participants. The construction of "I" poems emphasizes that the text be written in the sequence of which the statements were made. While the stories that the girls shared remained consistent over the period of the three meetings, the 'I'

poems show dueling narrative occurring. This may be as a result of what the girl's tell themselves and what they chose to share.

For instance, many of the girls completed sentences during the ice-breaker activity indicating they liked school or that they were good in a particular academic area. During the course of our meetings, statements were made that contradicted what was previously shared. The reason for this may be that the sentence completion occurred at the beginning of the first meeting and completing sentences that portrayed school in a positive light was something the girl's felt obligated to do or felt that was expected. Two of the girls initially made statements about being "good in reading" and later described situations recalling how they were lacking in this area and this led to conflict with peers who teased them about their skills.

Additionally, the 'I' poems show dueling narratives in describing behavior. Destinee first described herself as loud and later in the poem, she says she can be very quiet. Nay Nay refers to herself as angry and happy while Ke Ke talks about being calm and being quick-tempered. At times these statements occurred within minutes of each other and others during different sessions. This could be attributed to the fact that people behave in certain ways depending on the situation. Within the construction of the 'I' poems, the girls used words contrasting ideas such as describing themselves as 'loud' and then 'quiet' or 'enjoying school' and 'thinks school is boring'. Part of the purpose of creating the 'I' poems is to capture the words of the participant in the moment. As with personal narratives, the view 'I' is fluid and changing. The girls may be and feel all these things at different points in time.

### **Post-school preparation and planning**

Interview three focused on the future. Destinee, Ke Ke, Janie, Marie and Nay Nay all wrote letters to themselves involving academic, professional and personal goals for themselves. Mita was the only participant who did not discuss concrete goals for herself that went beyond socializing with her friends. The lack of preparation and support in achieving these goals was evident for each participant.

Destinee and Ke Ke had specific hopes of becoming a doctor who delivered babies. However, neither of these girls had a particular interest in science and were barely maintaining a grade point average to graduate high school. I asked them if they had shared these goals with anyone. Both mentioned that they had let their teachers know. Destinee had even indicated bringing this up at an IEP meeting. Encouragement or discouragement had not been given towards this idea. Instead, it was merely documented. I asked whether they had taken any science courses in anatomy or knew anyone who was a doctor who they might ask for assistance. Both responded that they did not know anyone and were unsure of what anatomy courses were. To them, science was about Earth and plants.

Nay Nay mentioned once that she might want to be a doctor but this shifted in one interview to becoming a social worker. She felt that she might be better suited at helping people who have problems like herself. Nay Nay shared that “it wouldn’t be for just the money.” This indicated that salary and the cost of living were not high priorities in decision-making for her career. Nay Nay, as with the girls who desired to deliver babies, was focused on helping others. Janie initially shared her goal of being a doctor or just working at a hospital. During our second meeting, Janie spoke of having a caseworker

who had come to meet with her to schedule some visits for potential jobs at a hospital. She described a program she could attend at a local hospital that would train her for a future job, as well as future residence at an independent-living facility or group home. Of all the girls participating in this study, Janie had the most well established plan. While she struggles articulating the details of how this program worked, Janie seemed please with the possibility of having a job where she could help people in a hospital and also live with a little more independence. She knew how to navigate the transit system and expressed comfort in working in a hospital environment.

Marie wrote a letter to herself in which she described being a nurse, having children and possibly a husband. The idea of becoming a nurse came from her older sister who currently worked at a local hospital on the children's unit. Marie knew she had to go to college to become a nurse but she had not shared this goal with anyone at school and had only mentioned it to her mother briefly. There are programs in the county that help students who want to be nurses while they are in high school but Marie was not aware of these programs. She knew of the cosmetology school but nothing to do with the job she hoped to have.

Mita did not have any academic goals that she shared in her letter or in the interviews. She did mention wanting to be a singer and that she had shared this idea with her mother who thought it would be 'cool.' Mita currently was not enrolled in music courses nor did she have any ideas of the training required to be a singer. Since there are many venues in which a person could perform, I asked Mita which she preferred. She didn't know and it did not seem to occur to her that there were options. Repeatedly Mita expressed the desire

to hang out with her friends in the future and be able to drive. She never spoke of graduating high school or continuing with any post-secondary schooling or training.

With the exception of Janie, none of these girls seemed to have an adult who was involved in their transition planning. Since Mita was thirteen, it seems plausible that the IEP team was waiting until she was fourteen to officially look at transition. However effective transition, specifically for students with disabilities, needs to occur as early as possible. The other four girls were at the age where IDEA required transition planning to take place. None had attended their IEP meetings. For some this was by choice since they feared hearing negative comments. For others, no invitation to an IEP meeting had been extended and they were not aware that they were allowed to attend.

### **Attribution Theory**

In studying the lived experiences of girls with EBD, it is important to consider what attributes they utilize to make meaning of their experience. In this section, internal and external attributes are applied to the themes and stories told by the girls.

Internal attributes are those ideas and concepts the girls have developed and have the potential to change. Internal dispositions can be broken down into several subcategories. Personality tendencies, demographic status, and causal schemata are three areas that students utilize when describing personal dispositions.

### **Personality tendencies**

Each girl in this study spoke openly about her behavior. They were able to verbalize both the behavior they displayed that had resulted in their school placement, as well as the behavior they needed to show to be successful. For some of the girl's this meant a

return to the general education classroom and for others this meant graduating from their current school and receiving a high school diploma.

Destinee, Ke Ke , Nay Nay and Janie likened their behavior, both positive and negative, as a decision each made at different points in time. Through each interview, the girls spoke about deciding to act a certain way. At times, this was to avoid the classroom or the school itself. Currently, these four girls attributed their change in behavior to a conscious choice each made in-between school years. Additionally, Destinee, Ke Ke and Nay Nay described themselves as quick-tempered and angry but also sweet and outgoing. There was a point in time that they could not control their tempers but each spoke of being ‘completely changed.’

Mita and Marie also described themselves as bring angry and mad. Mita’s anger stemmed from her frustration at her school placement whereas Marie’s anger came more from the incidents that led her to be in a self-contained classroom. This will be further discussed during external attributions.

### **Demographic status**

While participants were adolescent females who were labeled EBD, their ages and races varied. Destinee, Ke Ke and Janie are African-American and were among the older participants in the study. Destinee and Ke Ke were 17 and Janie was 19 at the times of the interview. Nay Nay, Mita and Marie are ethnically mixed. Nay Nay was 18 and Marie was 15 at the time of the interviews. Mita was the youngest at 13.

Race and ethnicity plays a critical role in how a person develops their identity and the attributes used to tell their experience. In this study, age and maturity played a role in the story told. The girls who were on the older end of the spectrum attributed change more to

themselves and their choices. Their focus on the future and the hope of graduating high school was evident in their stories. This may be due to the fact they had been in school longer and were able to see an end to their school career in sight. While none verbalized this, the idea of not graduating and aging out of school instead was more possible at this point of their school careers than ever before.

Mita's age also played a role in the story she told. While legally transition planning is not required to occur until 14, Mita had not considered what her life would be like after school. While singing may be a serious interest of hers, it is a goal reminiscent of a younger person who hopes to be a basketball star or a dancer. The majority of people grows out of these ideas and begin to set goals that match their interests and talents in a realistic way.

### **Causal schemata**

In this instance, I am looking at causal schemata as part of an internal attribute and meaning maker. The girls in this study largely attributed their behavior to a decision they made to act in a manner not suitable for school and not usually seen by females. Fighting, cursing and walking out of class are behaviors not seen by the typical adolescent female. The schemata or the way they make sense of this behavior is by explaining that they did not like school, their class or their peers. This caused them to react in the ways previously mentioned. For the girls who felt their behavior had changed since being placed in their classrooms or center schools, they attributed this to the way they reacted to this structured and safe environment. The school, classroom or peer behavior had not changed but instead their way of handling the situation had. The causal schemata were internal as the

manner of reaction came from the self-dialogue advising them to walk away or smile instead of cursing and running away.

There is also external information available to students. These forces are often beyond their control. This may consist of their own performance, others performance, constraints and nature of the achievement task, parents or others influence, and teachers' influences. Each girl had a set of external influences to which they attributed certain events in their school careers.

Marie spoke often of her reading skills. This was an area where she struggled and her peers often mocked her for this. As result of being made fun of, Marie physically fought a girl and this was the last incident that occurred prior to her change of placement to a self-contained classroom. The other girl's spoke of struggling academically at times. However, none shared a story that outwardly recalled academic performance resulting in extreme behavior. Mita shared her feelings of school being boring and this sometimes made her mad. However when specifically asked if she felt the work was too hard or too easy, Mita replied it was not the difficulty of the work and she felt she was capable.

Destinee was the only participant who discussed constraints of the achievement task. She remembered being placed in advanced classes shortly after her father died. Destinee repeatedly asked the adults in her life not to place her in these courses but no one listened. Emotionally, Destinee was not ready for the challenge. She felt that now she could have handled the academic work since she felt more stable emotionally.

The nature of the tasks was often described as boring. Many of the girls used their behavior to avoid assignments or lectures because the topic did not interest them. None, except Marie, expressed that the tasks were too difficult or that they did not feel capable



of completing their assignments. Judging from the large amount of school each missed, there were bound to be large deficits in their academic skills. However, this was not an area the participants discussed when discussing their school experience.

Comparing themselves to others academically was also not part of the stories the girls shared with the exception of Marie. When discussing behavior, however, there was an implied sense of comparison to others. Making statements such as “I was bad” or “I didn’t act the way I supposed to” all came from the girls comparing themselves to other classmates. Each knew by judging from the way the other girls in their class acted that their behavior was not typical.

Parent and teacher influences were heavily discussed as attributes contributing to how the girls viewed their school experience. All but two girls shared major conflicts regarding their relationship with their mothers. Two of the participants had had domestic violence charges pressed against them by their mothers and both expressed how the events did not occur the way their mother described. Janie had two versions of a mother she described. One was her natural mother who had ‘homeschooled’ her until the age of eight but died around the time she was nine. Janie felt her mother taught her important skills such as cleaning the house and cooking. The second mother she spoke of was her foster mother. This was the person who came to her school and IEP meetings. She encouraged Janie in completing what she needed to graduate high school and move on to a post-school placement.

Ke Ke and Mita briefly spoke of their mother encouraging them. Ke Ke’s mother reinforced reminders of what Ke Ke needed to do to be successful in her new school

placement. Mita only mentioned her mother when saying she told her she wanted to be a singer and her mother responded by saying, “Cool.”

The influences their parents had on their school careers could be heard in more of what they did not say. With the exception of Destinee, none of the girls made mention of their fathers. Destinee’s father had died and when she lost him, she lost a lot of confidence in herself and her schoolwork suffered as a result. She failed classes and was set back a year and a half in her schooling. It was not clear with the other girls as to what had happened to their fathers and why they were never mentioned. Since the research question was examining the lived school experiences, there were not questions directed specifically towards families. The issues related to their mothers arose from the stories the girls decided to tell.

Teacher influences, both positive and negative, were heard from every participant. Each had an example of the way a teacher had acted that impacted them on some level. In Destinee’s plea to teachers, she begged them to just teach students what they had to learn. Ke Ke and Nay Nay recalled instances of teachers not being inside the classroom and directing their attention towards behaviors rather than towards academic lessons. With the exception of Mita, these girls seemed to crave the desire to have someone to support them in learning. Marie recalled a teacher who greatly helped her with her reading. In her classroom, Marie felt she made progress and got the attention she needed to improve these skills.

One area of attribution that was consistently seen in the stories the girl’s told was that of their classroom placement. This environment played an integral role in how they behaved. Within the walls of certain schools, the girl’s felt more successful and safe. This

resulted in feeling capable of achieving academically. On the opposite end, the classroom walls could also reinforce negative behavior. Mita repeatedly referred to her ability to behave in a general classroom. For reasons she could not verbalize, Mita insisted that she would not act the way she did in her self-contained classroom in a general education setting. However, she would not get the opportunity until she demonstrated this behavior in the self-contained room.

Ke Ke was able to show her improved behavior in her center school. However, she expressed great concern that her old behavior would resurface once she transitioned to a traditional high school. Part of her attributed her change in behavior to her environment and when that environment changed, Ke Ke feared that her resolve to maintain her composure would alter as well.

Nay Nay and Janie felt safe in their school placement. Both spoke of how they felt appreciated having more security officers by the door. The routine and control in the classroom could also have helped them feel safe. While they did not outwardly express this, the fact they spoke of not wanting to leave this school for a traditional school. Both felt if they were not at the center school, their fate would be much worse such as being dead.

### **Summary**

Each person in this study had a unique story to tell. Out of these stories arose common themes and attributes. These commonalities can help us to begin to understand and make meaning of what that school experience is for adolescent females labeled EBD. In addition, these stories also demonstrated how much more there is to the school experience than what occurs within the classroom walls.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### INTERPRETATIONS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research study focused on two questions: 1) What are the lived school experiences of selected adolescent girls labeled EBD 2) What attributes do these girls use to understand their lived experience? Literature regarding gender, disability and adolescent identity formation informed these overarching questions and subsequently the interview protocol employed in this study. Going into this study, I expected to hear stories about the struggles these girls faced being one of the only females in the classroom of ideas of how teachers could have supported them more in the classroom. What I found was a plethora of issues that are not largely controlled by teachers and peers.

Disproportionality in special education refers to over or under-representation of a group of individuals in a specific disability category. The topic of disproportionality is well-documented in the field of special education. Typically this topic revolves around the over-representation of males as well as students who are culturally or linguistically diverse (Coutinho & Oswald, 2005). Examination of gender and disability, specifically gender and students with emotional and behavioral disorders, is lacking. The disproportionality between genders in special education placement can range from 1.5:1 to 3.5:1 (Coutinho & Oswald, 2005). In this study, the average classroom make up was 7:1 of boys to girls meaning that often times a girl labeled EBD was one of two females in the classroom, if not the only girl in the room. This influenced the questions

specifically regarding gender and the girls' perceptions and opinions regarding difference in the treatment between males and females in their classroom, as well as how this classroom environment may have impacted them socially and/or academically.

The participants in this study ranged in age from 13 to 19. A critical stage during this stage is the formation of identity. One theorist describes the adolescent stage as a negotiation between identity and role confusion (Erikson 1950, 1968). Teens need to develop a sense of self and personal identity. Failure to successfully negotiate this stage can lead to an inability to stay true to who you are. This may result in role confusion and a weak sense of self. Questions asking the participants to reflect on early memories of schools and describing their current school placement and perceptions of school were designed to initiate conversation regarding identity formation.

Critical to this study was to hear the girl's own words. "Students can provide clear messages about what occurs in classrooms" (Kruse, 2000, p.77). One of the goals of this study was to provide a voice for girls labeled with EBD, a group that traditionally is not heard. Four core values regarding student voice were used in this study (Robinson & Taylor, 2007):

1. A conception of communication as dialogue.
2. The requirement for participation and democratic inclusivity.
3. The recognition that power relations are unequal and problematic.
4. The possibility for change and transformation. (p.8)

These ideals helped inform the research questions, interview protocol and dialogue with the participants. While each interview contained a set of questions, the format took shape as dialogue. The girls were participating by choice with the option to stop at any time or

refrain from answering any questions asked without explaining why. Inherent in a study with participants under the age of consent taking place in an environment in which their attendance is required are unequal power relations. As the researcher, I assured the girl's of the confidentiality and anonymity of the information disclosed at the beginning of every interview with the exception being if they were planning to do harm to themselves or someone else. By doing this, I alleviated most fears they may have had of my using their words to "get them in trouble with their teachers" or share this information with their parents and teacher. By choosing their own pseudonym and reviewing notes from the interviews, I provided them with a greater feeling of equity in how they were portrayed and what information I was using.

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research approach to address the guiding question, "What are the lived school experiences of adolescent females labeled as emotionally and/or behaviorally disordered?" This research study relied heavily on method of phenomenological analysis following the *Listening Guide*, which strongly emphasizes on the use of narrative descriptions as the objective for portraying the experiences.

The rest of this chapter will provide an interpretation of the results of the study with examination of the emergent themes as they relate to the literature. The emergent themes and interpretations are compared to Weiner's model of attribution (1987). A series of conclusions are offered based on what is now known as a result of considering both the research outcomes and prior literature. Recommendations are made in connection with theory and practice. Finally, considerations for future research are made.

### **Identifying students with EBD**

While the definition of EBD is widely argued among professionals in the field, the students in this study met the criteria for services under this program. Having served on

many child study and intervention teams, I can say that I would have recommended each of these girls receive services for students with EBD. With the current shift to inclusion, the majority of students who currently qualify for EBD programs are served in the general education setting. At the time when these girls were considered for initial placement, this was not a traditional consideration. While each may have been appropriately labeled, their subsequent placement decisions may or may not have been made with the idea so prevalent today that reinforces the of greater access to the general education curriculum. Part of the selection criteria for this study was to look at girls in self-contained settings.

The academic deficits among students with EBD are well documented (US Department of Education, 2005). These participants in this study were performing below-grade level or had failed enough courses to be considered below grade level. Most self-disclosed a weakness in reading or math, as well as, failure in one or more courses during their school career. This followed the trend of students with EBD as a whole.

### **Disability and Gender**

Issues of disability and gender have been largely ignored in the literature. While the gap in literature indicates a need to examine this issue, my understanding of what it is like to be female and navigating through my own school career, coupled with my experience as a teacher of students with EBD led to a series of questions focusing on the girl's perceptions of gender equity in the classroom. Every participant in this study admitted that they had wondered why there were more males than females in their classroom. Some even posed the question back to me. While there was discussion that the boys themselves behaved differently in the classroom by playing around more and

generally being louder than the girls, not all the girls in this study verbalized gender as an issue specifically.

When reading the transcripts with a gendered lens, the stories the girls shared were replete with references to what is considered stereotypical behavior by the adults in their lives. Expectations of what female behavior should look like in the school setting were repeatedly referred to throughout the study. Specifically, the girls in this study felt that boys acted loud and cursed but expected and often did “get away with it,” whereas the girl’s in this study often acted in the same manner as their male peers and would receive consequences such as in-school suspension. Additionally, four of the participants felt that the teacher viewed the boys in their class as intimidating and the girls as weak. This perception might explain why teachers were quicker to enforce consequences with the students they perceive will not retaliate and whose reaction will not be as severe.

Repeatedly, the idea of boys dropping out at a higher rate than girls was brought up in the discussion of gender and is consistent with the research on students with disabilities. The girls shared that the boys did not seem to be concerned for their future and were more interested in sports and girls. Boys may have been socialized towards this interest rather than received this gendered treatment in school. Each of these girls felt that they valued school and learning more than the boys in her classroom.

There was a general feeling of the boys sometimes “ganging up” on the girls in the class. For so many of these girls, safety was a critical issue to being successful in school. Feeling outnumbered by males threatened this security. This creates a potential serious issue if teachers do not intervene. Girls could perceive what an adult might interpret as students joking with one another; specifically girls labeled EBD, as a safety threat and



could lead to classroom avoidance and purposeful behavior to be removed from the classroom.

Safety in our schools, as well as bullying, has been a hotly discussed topic both in school districts and in the media. Cyber-bullying has taken front stage among adolescent girls. However, the threats perceived by the girls in this study are very different from the 'typical' safety issues school-age students face. Most of these girls have been violated in some way, emotionally, physically or sexually, by people in their lives who they had reason to trust. Some of these girls reported being approached sexually in their classrooms or having the police come to their school to question them about an incident that took place home. They do not feel even the most basic of safety in their homes or schools. When they use the term bullying, they are not referring to being called names by other girls in their classes. They are referring to a fear of being sexually assaulted by one or more boys in their school or bearing the brunt of an angry classmates rage. For Nay Nay and Janie, it took being at a school with locks on the doors and a security officer sitting by this same door to feel safe enough to begin to learn. The suggestions these girls had for making school a better place included responses that would make their environment feel safer (i.e. more security on campus).

With school shootings taken headlines in the news, I do think that safety is on the mind of teachers to some extent. However, I do not feel that the basic feeling of safety is one taken into consideration. We remind young children in our lives that we are adults and are here to protect them. Just because these girls are in bigger bodies and have tough exteriors does not mean we need to stop reassuring them that as adults in the school, our

job is to create an environment in which they feel protected and safe. Without meeting this basic need, learning can never be expected to take place.

The preference of being in classes with mostly boys was expressed by all of the girls except the two who attended a traditional middle school but were in a self-contained classroom. The girls felt that there was less drama in classrooms with mostly boys. There was a level of comfort for them in not having to worry about what they perceived as needless excitement concerning topics of dress or hair.

Whether this came from the fact that this was the only type of environment they had been in or from a genuine preference for male company was hard to tease out. Additionally, it was difficult to determine if the girls in this study acted in a specific way to adapt to the environment or if the preference would always have been to be in a classroom with mostly boys. The attendance of the girls who were placed in these classrooms was sporadic and seemed to provide little opportunity for friendships to be formed inside the school. However, each girl reported having female friends outside of school. There is more freedom to choose the people you want to spend time with outside of the classroom. It is possible that the girls with whom these adolescents formed friendships with were not dramatic or behave in a “typical female” manner.

The participants who did have career goals were all interested in helping professions. This follows with the literature, which indicates that females with disabilities are typically guided towards jobs such as child-care worker. Repeatedly, the idea of being of service to others came through when speaking of future plans. These goals ranged from becoming an Ob/Gyn and delivering babies to being a social worker who works with teens to working with the homeless. There is a strong sense from the girls in this study to

try to help people avoid some of the issues they themselves have experienced. The idea of bringing babies into the world could speak to the notion of helping someone with a ‘blank slate.’ This may represent an opportunity to bring someone into the world that has not been harmed or influenced in any way yet.

### **Impact of maternal relationships**

Parenting has been discussed in literature from many different disciplines as making an extremely important contribution to the “development of competencies and problem behaviors among children and adolescents” (Bynum & Kotchick, 2006, p.529). Many studies have examined parent-adolescent relationship quality (Brody, Murray, Kim & Brown, 2003; Dorsey & Forehand, 2003; Scholte, van Lieshout & van Aken, 2001). The findings suggest that the more positive the quality of this relationship, the less externalizing and internalizing behaviors the adolescents exhibit. Additionally, parent-adolescent conflict has been associated with more depressive symptoms, specifically so with African American youth (Sagrestano, Paikoff, Holmbeck & Fendrich, 2003). Five of the six girls in this study specifically spoke of instances where there was major conflict in the home with their mothers.

### **Transition Planning**

Planning for transition for students with disabilities from K-12 settings to the community, workplace or post-secondary setting is required by IDEA. Self-determination has also been advocated for students with disabilities in which they play an integral part of the transition planning process. Student-centered planning has been identified as critical for effective transition. Largely, research has been done in this area on students with more significant disabilities. One study interviewed girls with EBD and SLD in

order to better understand their role in transition planning (Trainor, 2007). In the Trainor study, there was a large disconnect between the strengths of the girls and their career or post-school goals. This matched closely with the findings in this study.

Each time one of the girls mentioned that she had hopes of being a doctor or nurse, I would ask them if they enjoyed science. Time and again, the response was no. To follow on this thought, I inquired whether they were taking any science course currently. Again, the girls would reply no or talked about the Earth science course they had taken. There was no connection between science and becoming a doctor or nurse. For Destinee, she repeatedly mentioned that she would like to be a doctor and had also indicated this to her ESE teacher who recorded this goal as part of her transition IEP. While Destinee was finally on course to graduate, her strengths and skills did not match those needed to complete medical school.

There is a fine line to walk between encouraging students to follow their dreams and setting them up for failure. While we want to encourage self-determination and set high expectations for our students, helping them learn their strengths and weaknesses is equally as important. It may be true that just because a person is good at something does not mean that is what they should be professionally, the same is true for leading students to believe that they will be successful in a field that does play on their strengths. I would never advise teachers to dissuade a student from pursuing a line of work they feel passionate about but I think it is important that we, as professionals, help our students to look realistically at what options they may have in a certain field and what concrete steps they need to take to get there.

While the participants in the Trainor (2007) study expressed skepticism that the IEP team would help them achieve the goals they wanted after finishing high school, the girls in this study did not identify any person at their school that was helping them with transition planning. Repeatedly when asked who spoke to them about their goals and the future, the response was “no one” or “my mom”. Additionally, the girls who knew they could attend their IEP meetings chose not to for fear of hearing something negative about them or that an incident would be revealed that would get them in trouble. Best practice for transition planning dictates that the meetings should be student-centered and strengths-based. While it was not clear as to whether the girls had previously attended an IEP meeting where they did hear negativity or which resulted in consequences at home from past incidents, the notion of student-centered, strength-based planning was not introduced to the girls in this study and as a result they were missing the opportunity to exercise self-determination and provide real input in their transition planning.

Specifically for students labeled EBD, training in self-determination is critical (Zigmond, 2006). A critical aspect of self-determination is the ability for students to articulate their strengths, interests and goals. However these are some the behaviors that are most difficult for students labeled EBD (Van Gelder, Sitlington & Pugh, 2008). The participants in this study were able to articulate some individual strengths but these were often contradictory in nature citing being a good reader and then discussing how reading is difficult. The goals set for themselves were largely abstract and none could discuss specific steps to assist them in systematically reaching those goals. While best practice dictates that students with disabilities need to be explicitly taught skills to move toward

self-determination, none of the participants in the study reported receiving any practical or direct instruction.

### **Student voice**

The literature demonstrated that the voices of female adolescents labeled EBD were not well represented. While I had no previous relationship with the girls in this study, each were willing to share with me events in their past and hopes for their future. Some shared intimate details. The fact they all considered my questions carefully and provided answers as well as they could led me to think that they had a desire to be heard. Even the students who did not share in-depth responses seem to do so not because they did not want to talk but instead seemed to struggle to think of answers for these ideas.

The question that surfaced for me time and again was whether these girls had ever been asked to think critically about any subject. The field of special education has been heavily criticized for its “skill and drill” approach to remediating student deficits. Largely, the teachers who are in classrooms for students with EBD are not certified teachers and are receiving on-the-job training. For even the most veteran teacher, classroom management can be challenging, as can teaching student higher order thinking skills. An inexperienced, uncertified teacher most often is operating in survival mode; a mode that is not conducive for class discussions and critical examination of life events. Even for the participants who were preparing to graduate were focused solely on completing the academic credits needed not on critical thinking skills.

When I explained the study to the girls prior to their agreement to participate, one way I framed the study was to say that I was interested in their ideas in order to help other girls be successful in schools. The girls seemed to connect with this idea. This made

more sense when the theme of helping others repeatedly surfaced during the interviews. While most of the students in this study portrayed a tough exterior, their voice and stories revealed a part of themselves that wanted to do well and do good in their lives. Each wanted to do well by finishing school and living independently but they also wanted to do good in their community by being of service to others.

### **Phenomenology as method**

This study utilized phenomenology as a method to explore the lived school experiences of adolescent girls labeled EBD. While the intention of this research study was to aim specifically about the school experience, the participants' responses yielded more content about the lives they have led outside of the classroom. Van Manen states, "the problem with phenomenological inquiry is not that we know too little about the phenomenon we wish to investigate but that we know too much" (1990, p.46). The researcher comes to the study with assumptions and pre-understandings of the phenomenon being studied. However in this study, my assumptions and pre-understandings stood in direct opposition to what was learned through this study.

While the interview protocol consisted of questions regarding teacher behaviors and specific school experiences, the girls responded by telling intimate stories of their personal lives and specific incidents that impacted their academics but were not directly related to teachers or classroom experience. The stories they did tell revealed specific teacher behavior that was problematic and areas that need to be addressed with the training of teachers of girls labeled EBD.

Since the phenomenon being studied was the *school experiences* of these girls, many of the interview questions directly asked what teachers could do to better support girls

labeled EBD in the classroom. Even the girls who responded in-depth to most questions struggled to directly answer this. However in the process of sharing stories during the course of the interviews, several key ideas emerged. In addition to not feeling heard, many of the girls felt they were not being taught. Teachers spent time addressing behavior or assigning tasks that consisted of regurgitating information. The lack of demand of critical thinking or higher-ordered thinking was evident not only by the schoolwork given but also by the fact that the girls in the study had difficulty responding to questions that required critically thinking about school experiences.

While not able to articulate suggestions of what teachers could do to make school more engaging, the girls were able to engage in dialogue about the fact they felt bored in class. For the girls who desired to be in the general education setting, the feeling was that the academics would be more interesting and with a larger group of students, there would be a wider variety of activities to do in class. The participants who were content with their placement spoke of appreciating the fact that they knew the class work they were assigned was specifically helping them finish school. They finally felt connected to what they were asked to do and felt the work was helping them reach their goal.

Beyond that they also felt that teacher's made assumptions about them based on their label. Again, the interview protocol asked if they felt their school experience would be different if they were not placed in a more restrictive setting. I went in to the study with the assumption the girls would discuss social aspects of school increasing or feeling more a part of the school culture. Instead, they spoke of walking into previous classrooms that were not self-contained and feeling judged by the teacher who knew their label and had read their history in the cumulative file. Some of the girls felt that it was as if the teachers



were waiting for them to lose control of their temper and were on-guard for such an incident.

Using phenomenology for this study also led to issues for me personally as a researcher. I had explained the purpose of the study to the girls as I had seen it. The study was aiming to help teachers, faculty and parents better understand how to help girls labeled EBD in a school setting. When the girls shared such personal and intimate details of their life, I had a feeling of guilt. Following the method, I did not adhere to a rigid protocol but let the conversation and stories emerge as dialogue. However, I had not anticipated those leading to stories of abuse, drug use, and involvement with the police. It was the participant's choice to answer the questions based on their school experience. As a researcher, I could not shake the feeling that this was not the same study the girls had agreed to and had to constantly remind myself that for them recalling and making meaning of their school experience could not happen without explaining other aspects of their life.

### **Teacher behavior**

One of the hardest challenges teachers report facing in the classroom are working with students with difficult behaviors (MacDonald & Speece, 2001). Working with students labeled EBD often means working with students who have been highly exposed to poverty and violence and are at an increased risk for academic problems (US Department of Education, 2002). Despite research-based interventions, positive behavior support, success with students with EBD has not largely occurred (Saffron & Oswald, 2003). In this study, the girls did not explicitly indicate what behaviors they would like to see

demonstrated in order to support them through their academic career. However, the stories they shared indicated that their needs were not being met.

While the girls largely attributed their behavior to themselves, research has shown that the teachers' perceptions are that the non-compliant behavior is an attribute of the disability and/or the family. Along with that belief is the belief that behaviors can change (Westling, 2010). Even teachers of students with EBD report elevated levels of stress in dealing with challenges. The girls in this study felt that the teachers and faculty in their school often did not hear them. One specifically spoke of repeated requests to postpone placement in advanced classes and instead was denied. She eventually failed these classes. Other participants relayed stories about wanting the teachers to teach and to not give up explaining ideas and concepts. The research aligns with the girls' perceptions that a large amount of instructional time is spent addressing specific student behaviors (Abidin & Robinson, 2002).

### **Attribution Theory**

There are many attributes used when a person tells a story. How they make sense of events that occurred come from internal and external information available to the person at that specific point in time. Students with EBD often attribute their school success or failures to external factors. This may be placing blame for one's own behavior on a teacher or another student. Academic failings may be explained by the fact that the teacher never taught that information, whether it was covered in class or not. Identification of students with EBD also is largely based on externalizing behaviors. Students who become angry and pose a physical threat to himself or herself or someone else are typically the ones referred and subsequently placed for services. This was true of

each of the girls in this study. Their placement in a more restrictive environment was due to incidents involving physical attacks on peers.

In this study, internal factors as explanation for behavior and learning were the attributions cited the most often. The external factors influencing the stories of the girl's school careers were heard in the examples and stories told. These underlying ideas came through examples or incidents the girl's shared in their narratives. While directly saying that any change the girls' saw in their behavior and academic performance was as a result of their personal choice, there were external factors affecting their school experience as well. This was seen in the participants' discussion of classroom placement as a means to control behavior.

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations to this study. The first was that the small sample size. There were many girls who were willing to participate but the inconsistency of their attendance, as well as changes in placement, prohibited them from participating in the study. Since this study involved only six girls, the information cannot be generalized to the entire population of adolescent females labeled EBD.

The participants in this study ranged in age from 13 to 19. Many struggled with verbalizing their thoughts to questions that required some critical thought. This may have been due to the fact they had not previously been asked to consider their lives in this manner. Had the participants been older, there would have been more time for reflection and meaning making to occur as part of the process of maturing. On the other hand had the participants been pre-adolescent or elementary aged, the stories told might not have

involved a point where change occurred or may have been more hopeful since they would not have been in a more restrictive environment for as long a period of time.

Due to a shift to serving students with EBD in less restrictive environments, interviewing girls labeled EBD served in a general education classroom is also an important group to examine. This could help begin to determine how much of the acceptance of being in a male-dominated class was socialized or maybe an indicator of personality type. Additionally, themes of safety could be evaluated, as girls served in a general education setting would most likely be in an environment lacking the security the girls in the center school received.

The goal of this study was to listen to the words of the girls participating in the study. A more contextualized picture may have been painted if other adults involved in the student's lives had been interviewed. This may have also led to some clarification in the stories such as Janie's that at times was difficult to follow. Interviewing teachers and parents may have helped me to make different meaning their experience based on how other's viewed them. Often times as a teacher, I came to understand my students better after hearing their parent's describe them and their behavior. However I was not examining the adult's perceptions of school experience so for this study, the only voice heard was that of the participating girls.

### **Implications for future research and practice**

This study was exploratory in nature. Due to the lack of literature on this population, the research was intended as a way to begin to make meaning of the lived school experiences of female adolescents labeled EBD. Emerging from this study is the need for more research in this area. The situations that influenced the girls in this study extended

far beyond the classroom setting. While the issue of preparation for teachers of students with EBD remains a huge concern for the success of these students in school, it is evident that supports beyond teacher preparation need to be addressed.

Further research needs to take place with girls of all ages labeled EBD. Understanding their school experience at a younger developmental age, as well as hearing from adults who have moved beyond the K-12 setting would provide more insight about school careers as whole. Additionally, interviewing more girls in adolescence is necessary to continuously compare the stories told with these emerging themes.

Examination of wrap-around services specifically for girls with EBD is needed. Part of these services need to involve mental health professionals and transition agencies. The needs of the girls in this study extend far beyond what even the best-trained teacher could meet. This along with research on student-centered and strength-based future planning for girls with EBD should occur. Close examination of this type of planning and post-school outcomes should take place, as well as best practices in teaching females labeled EBD how to self-advocate.

Focus groups should also occur with female adolescents labeled EBD. Through focus groups, themes may emerge that were not identified through individual interviews. There also may be a greater level of comfort for girls to talk about shared experiences. This could also provide the student's with a lesser feeling of isolation after hearing that others had similar experiences.

## **Conclusion**

Understanding the lived school experiences of a group such as adolescent females labeled EBD is not something that can occur from one study. The issues the girls in this

study faced are complex and multi-layered. Their willingness to share their personal stories demonstrated a desire to be heard along with the hope that by sharing their stories, others may receive help they had not received. Adolescence is a difficult period of time to navigate for people under the best circumstances.

## REFERENCES

- Achenbach, T.M. (1991). *Manual for the child behavior checklist: 4-18 and 1991 profile*. Burlington: University of Vermont, Department of Psychiatry.
- Algozzine, R., Browder, D., Karvonen, M., Test, D. & Wood, W. (2001). Effects of interventions to promote self-determination for individuals with disabilities, *Review of Educational Research*, 71(2), 219-277.
- American Association of University Women (1992). *How schools shortchange girls: a Study of major findings on girls and education*. Washington, D.C.: American Association of University Women.
- American Psychiatric Association (2000). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (4th ed., Text Revision). Washington, DC.
- Antaki, C. & Brewin, C. (1982). *Attributions and psychological change: Applications of attributional theories to clinical and educational practice*. New York, NY: Academic Press, Inc.
- Asch, A., Rousso, H. & Jefferies, T. (2001). Beyond pedestals: The lives of girls and Women with disabilities. In H. Rousso & M. Wehymeyer (Ed.) *Double Jeopardy: Addressing gender equity in special education* (pp.13-48). New York: SUNY Press.

- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy of control*. New York: Freeman.
- Biederman, J., Faraone, S. & Monuteaux, M. (2002). Differential effect of environmental adversity by gender: Rutter's index of adversity in a group of boys and girls with and without ADHD, *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 159, 1556-1562.
- Bradley, R., Henderson, K., & Monfore, D. A. (2004). A national perspective on children with emotional disorders, *Behavioral Disorders*, 29, 211 – 223.
- Breen, M. J., & Altepeter, T. S. (1990). *Disruptive behavior disorders in children: Treatment-focused assessment*, New York: Guilford Press.
- Brizendine, L. (2007). *The female brain*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.
- Cook-Sather, A. (2002a). Authorizing students' perspectives: Toward trust, dialogue, and change in education, *Educational Researcher*, 31(4), 3-14.
- Coutinho, M.J. & Oswald, D.P. (2005). State variation in gender disproportionally in special education, *Remedial and Special Education*, 26(1), 7-15.
- Crosne, R., Riegele-Crumb, C. & Muller, C. (2007). Gender, self-perception, and academic problems in high school, *Social Problems*, 54(1), 118-138.
- Denzin, N. & Lincoln, Y. (1994). *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Deschler, D. (2005). Adolescents with learning disabilities: Unique challenges and Reasons for hope, *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 28, 122-124.



- DeVault, M. & Gross, G. (2007). Feminist interviewing: Experiences, talk and Knowledge. In Hesse-Biber, S. N. (Ed.) *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis*.
- Doren, B. & Benz, M.(1998). Crossing the great divide: Predicting productive engagement for young women with disabilities, *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 21(1), 3-16.
- Doren, B. & Benz, M. (2001). Gender equity issues in vocational and transition services and employment outcomes by women with disabilities. . In H. Rousso & M. Wehmeyer (Ed.) *Double Jeopardy: Addressing gender equity in special education* (pp. 289-308). New York: SUNY Press.
- DuPaul,G.J., Jitendra,A.K., Tresco,K.E., Junod,R.E., Volpe,R.J. & Lutz,G.L. (2006). Children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: Are there gender differences in school functioning? *School Psychology Review*, 35(2), 292-308.
- Erevelles,N. & Mutua,K. (2005). "I am woman now!": Rewriting cartographies of girlhood from the critical standpoint of disability. In P.J. Bettis and N.G. Adams *Geographies of girlhood: Identities in-between*. New York: Routledge.
- Ehrich, L.C. (2003). Phenomenology: The Quest for meaning` in O`Donoghue, T. & Punch, K. (eds), *Qualitative Educational Research in Action: Doing and Reflection*. London: Routledge/Falmer, pp. 42-69.
- Erikson, E. (1950). *Childhood and society*. Harmondworth, England: Pelican Books
- Erikson, E. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. New York: Horton.
- Erlanson, D.A., Harris, E.L., Skipper, B.L., & Allen, S.D. (1993). *Doing naturalistic inquiry: A guide to methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

- Field, S. & Hoffman, A. (1994). Development of a model for self-determination, *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 17 (2), 159-169.
- Fielding, M. (2002). Beyond the rhetoric of student voice: new departures or new constraints in the transformation of 21st century schooling, *Forum*, 43(2), 100-10.
- Freire, P. (1997). *Pedagogy of the heart*. New York: Continuum.
- Gaub, M. & Carlson, C.L. (1997). Gender differences in ADHD: a meta-analysis and critical review, *Journal of American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*. 36(8):1036-45.
- Gilligan, C. (1993). Letter to readers. *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development* (pp. ix–xxvii). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gilligan, C., Spencer, R., Weinberg, M. K., & Bertsch, T. (2003). On the Listening Guide: A voice-centered relational method. In P. M. Camic, J. E. Rhodes and L. Yardley (Eds.), *Qualitative research in psychology: Expanding perspectives in methodology and design* (pp. 1-31).
- Giroux, H. (2003). Public Pedagogy and the Politics of Resistance: Notes on a critical theory of educational struggle, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 35 (1), 5 – 16.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Gumbiner, J. (2003). *Adolescent Assessment*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Hanson, K. & Smith, S. (2001). Gender equity in education: Change and challenge. In H. Rousso & M. Wehmeyer (Eds.) *Double Jeopardy: Addressing the gender equity in special education*. pp. 59- Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

- Hay, I. & Ashman, A. (2003). The development of adolescents' emotional stability and General self-concept: the interplay of parents, peers, and gender, *International Journal Of Disability, Development and Education*, 50(1), 77-91.
- Hayden-McPeak, C., Gaskin, S. & Gaughan, L. (1993). Bad Boys, Good Girls: A review of the research on gender differences in preschoolers and a reexamination of assessment, child rearing, and educational practices. Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Council for Exceptional Children, San Antonio, TX, April 5-9.
- Heath, N.L. & Ross, S. (2000). Prevalence and expression of depressive symptomatology in students with and without learning disabilities. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 23(1), 24-36.
- Heidegger, M. (1927) *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and William Richardson. New York: Harper.
- Heider, F. (1958). Heider, F. (1958). *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*. New York: Wiley.
- Hogansen, J., Powers, K.M., Geenen, S., Gil-Kashiwabara, E. & Powers, L. (2008). Transition goals and experiences of females with disabilities: Youth, parents and Professionals. *Exceptional Children*, 74(2), 215-234.
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004). PL 108-446.
- Jackson, D.A. & King, A.R. (2004). Gender differences in the effects of oppositional Behavior on teacher ratings of ADHD symptoms. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 32(2), 215-224.
- Jones, R. (1972). Labels and stigma in special education. *Exceptional Children*, 38(7), 553-564.

- Jones, M.M. (2007). An ethnographic exploration of narrative methodologies to promote the voice of students with disabilities, *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research*, 2(1), 32-40.
- Jones, E.E. & Davis, K.E. (1965). From acts to dispositions: the attribution process in person perception. In L. Berkowitz (ed.) *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 2. New York: Academic Press.
- Jones, E. E. & Nisbett, R.E. (1972). The actor and the observer. In E.E. Jones, D. E. Kanouse, H.H. Kelley, R.E. Nisbett, S. Valins and B. Weiner (Eds.) *Attribution: Perceiving the causes of behavior*. New Jersey: General Learning Press.
- Kaidar, I., Weiner, J. & Tannock, R. (2003). The attributions of children with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder for their problem behaviors, *Journal of Attention Disorders*, 6(3), 99-109.
- Kann, R. & Hanna, F.J. (2000). Disruptive behavior disorders in children and Adolescents: How do girls differ from boy? *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 78, 267-274.
- Kelley, G. (1963) *A theory of personality: The psychology of personal constructs*. Ontario, Canada: Norton & Company.
- Klepsch, M. & Logie, L. (1982). *Children draw and tell*. New York, NY: Psychology Press.
- Knoff, H. & Proutt, H.T (1993) *Kinetic drawing system for family and school: A Handbook*. Los Angeles, CA: Western Psychological Services.
- Kockelmans, J.J. (1967). *Phenomenology: the philosophy of Edmund Husserl and its interpretation*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.

- Kruse, S. (2000). Student voices: A report from focus group data. *National Association of Secondary School Principals*, 84, 77-85.
- Landrum, T., Katsiyannis, A., & Archwamety, T. (2004). An analysis of placement and Exit patterns of students with emotional or behavioral disorders. *Behavioral Disorders*, 29(2), 140-153.
- Landrum, T., Tankersley, M. & Kauffman, J. (2003). What is special about special education for students with emotional or behavioral disorders? *Journal of Special Education*, 37(3), 148-156.
- Lane, K.L., Carter, E.W., Pierson, M.R. & Glaeser, B.C. (2006). Academic, social and Behavioral characteristics of high school students with emotional disturbances or learning disabilities. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 14(2), 108-117.
- Lauchlan, F. & Boyle, C. (2007). Is the use of labels in special education helpful? *Support For learning*, 22(1), 36-42.
- Lee, L., & Zimmerman, M. (N.D.). *Passion, action and a new vision for student voice: Learnings from the Manitoba School Improvement Program*. Winnipeg, Canada: The Manitoba School Improvement Program, Inc.
- Link, B.G & Phelan, J.C. (2001). Conceptualizing stigma. In K.S. Cook & J.Hagan (Eds.), *Annual review of sociology* (pp.363-385). Palo Alto, CA: Annual Reviews
- Lips, H. M. (2003). The gender pay gap: Concrete indicator of women's progress toward equality. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 3, 87-109.
- Lumley, V.A., McNeil, C.B., Herschell, A.D. & Bahi, A.B. (2002). An examination of gender differences with disruptive behavior disorders. *Child Study Journal*,

12(2), 89-100.

Maag, J.W. & Reid, R. (2005). Depression among students with learning disabilities:

Assessing the risk. *Learning Disabilities Quarterly*, 28(2), 3-10.

Malchiodi, C.A. (1998) *Understanding children's drawings*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Malian, I. & Nevin, A. (2002). A Review of Self-Determination Literature: Implications for Practitioners. *Remedial and Special Education*, 23(2), 68-74.

Manwaring, J. (2008). Wendy or Tinkerbell? How the underrepresentation of girls impacts gender roles in preschool education. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 40(5), 60-65.

Maras, P., Brosnan, M., Faulkner, N., Montgomery, T. & Vital, P. (2006). 'They are out of control': Self-perceptions, risk-taking and attributional style of adolescents with SEBDs. *Emotional and Behavioral Difficulties*, 11(4), 281-298.

Marder, C., Levine, P., & Wagner, M. (2003). Demographic characteristics of youth with disabilities. In M. Wagner, C. Marder, P. Levine, R. Cameto, T. W. Cadwallader, & J. Blackorby (with D. Cardoso & N. Newman), *The individual and household characteristics of youth with disabilities. A report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2)*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.

Mead, G.H. (1934). *Mind, Self and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *Phenomenology of perception*. Translated H. Dreyfus. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

McLaren, P. (1994). *Life in schools : an introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. New York: Longman.

- Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary (11th ed.). (2005). Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster.
- Miles, M. B. & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Mitra, D. (2003). The significance of students: Can increasing 'student voice' in schools Lead to gains in youth development. *Teachers College Record*, 106 (4), 651-688.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Moran, D. & Mooney, T. (2002). *The Phenomenology Reader*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Nakkula, M. (2003). Identity and possibility. In M. Sadowski (Ed.) *Adolescents at School* (pp. 7-18). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Natanson, M. (1973). *Phenomenology and the Social Sciences*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Nelson, J.R., Benner, G.J., Lane, K. & Smith, B.W. (2004). Academic achievement of K-12 Students with emotional and behavioral disorders. *Exceptional Children*, 71(1), 59-73.
- Newman, B. & Newman, P.R. (2001). Group identity: Giving the we its due. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 30(5), 515-538.
- Nicholson, G. (1997). Hermeneutical phenomenology. In L. Embree (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Phenomenology*, pp. 157-162. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Noddings, N. (1991). *The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

- Ohan, J. & Johnston, C. (2005). Gender appropriateness of symptom criteria for attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, oppositional defiant disorder and conduct disorder. *Child psychiatry and human development*, 35(4), 359-381.
- Olesen, V. (2007). Feminist Qualitative Research and Grounded Theory: Complexities, Criticisms, and Opportunities. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*
- Orcher, L. (2005). *Conducting research: Social and behavioral science methods*  
Glendale, CA: Pyrczak Publishing.
- Oswald, D., Coutinho, M.J., Best, A.M., & Nagle, H. (2003). Trends in special education Identification rates of boys and girls: A call for research and change. *Exceptionality*, 11, 223-237.
- Piaget, J. (1955). *The Child's Construction of Reality*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Pollio, H., Henley, T. & Thompsom, C. (1997). *The phenomenology of everyday life*  
London, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Pomerantz, E., Rydell, E., Altermatt & Saxon, J. (2002). Making the grade but feeling distressed: Gender differences in academic performance and internal distress. *Journal of Educational Psychology*. 94(2), 396-404.
- Pope, D. C. (2001). "Doing school": How we are creating a generation of stressed out, materialistic, and miseducated students. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Powers, K., Hogansen, J., Geenen, S., Powers, L. & Gil-Kashiwabara, E. (2008). Gender matters in transition to adulthood: A survey study of adolescents with disabilities and their families. *Psychology in Schools*, 45(4), 349-364.



- Proctor, T.B. & Choi, H. (1994). Effects of transition from elementary school to junior high school on early adolescents' self-esteem and perceived competence. *Psychology in Schools, 31*(4), 319-327.
- Richardson, P. & Eccles, W. (2007). Rewards of reading: Toward the development of possible selves and identities. *International Journal of Educational Research, 46*(6), 341-356.
- Riddick, B. (2000). An examination of the relationship between labeling and stigmatization with special reference to dyslexia. *Disability & Society, 15* (4) 653 – 667.
- Robinson, C. & Taylor, C. (2007). Theorizing student voice: values and perspectives. *Improving Schools, 10*(1), 5-17.
- Rotter, J., Lah, M. & Rafferty, J. (1992). Rotter Incomplete Sentences Blank manual Psychological Corp.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Rousso, H. & Wehmeyer, M.L. (2001). *Double Jeopardy: Addressing gender equity in special education*. Albany, NY: State University Press of New York.
- Rubin, H. & Rubin, I. (1995). Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage publications.
- Sadowski, M. (2003). Adolescents at School: Perspectives on Youth, Identity, and Education. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sax, L. (2006). Why gender matters. New York, NY: Broadway Books.
- Seidman, I. (2006). Interviewing as qualitative research.: A guide for researchers in Education and the social sciences. New York: Teachers College Press.

- Shultz, J., & Cook-Sather, A. (Eds.). (2001). *In our own words: Students' perspectives on school*. Latham, UK: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Smith, M. & Fowler, K. (2008). Phenomenological Research. In J. Paul, J. Kleinhammer-Tramill & K. Fowler (Eds.) *Qualitative Research Methods in Special Education*. Denver, CO: Love Publishing Company, pp.161-194.
- Speigelberg, H. (1982). *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction*. The Hague: Nijhof.
- Trainor, A. (2007). Perceptions of adolescent girls with LD regarding self-determination and transition planning. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 30, 31-45.
- Tschantz, J. & Markowitz, J. (2003). *Gender and special education: Current state data collection*. Alexandria, VA: National Association of State Directors of Special Education.
- Twenty-Fourth Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2002)
- Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Vardill, R. & Calvert, S. (2000). Gender imbalance in referrals to an educational psychology service. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 16(2), 214-223.
- Vygotsky, L. (1986) *Thought and Language*. Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Wagner, M. Kutash, K., Duchnowski, A., Epstein, M.H. & Sumi, W.C. (2005). The children and youth we serve: A national picture of students with emotional Disturbance receiving special education, *Journal of Emotional and Behavior Disorders*, 13(2), 79-96.

- Wagner, M., Newman, L., Cameto, R., and Levine, P. (2005). Changes Over Time in the Early Postschool Outcomes of Youth with Disabilities. A Report of Findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) and the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2). Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.
- Wagner, M., Marder, C., Blackorby, J., Cameto, R., Newman, L., Levine, P., et al. (2003). *The achievements of youth with disabilities during secondary school*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.
- Wehmeyer, M.L. & Schwartz, M. (2001). Disproportionate representation of males in Special education services: Biology, behavior or bias? *Education and Treatment of Children*, 24(1), 28-45.
- Wehmeyer, M.L. (2003). The impact of the disability on adolescent identity. In M.Sadowski (Ed.), *Adolescents at School: Perspectives on Youth, Identity, and Education* (pp. 127 – 139). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press
- Weiner, B. (1974). *Achievement motivation and attribution theory*. Morristown, NJ: General Learning Press.
- Weiner, B. (1986). *An attributional theory of motivation and emotion*. New York, NY: Springer Verlag.
- Zambo, D. (2008). Looking at ADHD through multiple lenses: Identifying girls with the Inattentive type. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 44(1), 34-40.

## APPENDICES

## Appendix A

### Personal Statement

#### Prior to the study

My original personal statement read more as a cover letter attempting to prove that I was capable in conducting this type of research than my true personal feelings. Even my committee commented how so little of my passion about this topic came through. For these reasons, I am revamping my statement prior to the study beginning. I still feel compelled to write about my professional background and my education. As an undergraduate, I had no clue what I wanted to major in. I took various courses and waited until the last minute to declare a major. By nature, I find how people learn and why they behave in certain ways to be fascinating. Human development ended up being my major and I still love reading about how people act at certain stages of life. The span of birth to death and everything in between was the core of my coursework. This didn't prepare me for a specific career and at that time in the program it was up to the student to find an internship placement. Somehow, I landed at a children's psychiatric hospital working in the classroom setting with a wonderful teacher who truly believed all kids could learn. At the time, I didn't know that this was something many people just said. This woman believed this and it was evident in every word she said to the students in the class.

During those six months, we had one girl in the class. She had arrived shortly before my internship was over. She was had a tough exterior and interacted with the boys with no problem. This girl could give as good as she got. I knew I wanted to continue working with students with behavioral and/or emotional disorders. My first job was at a residential treatment center. Here, I encountered a group of children with issues so far from the ones

I had experienced that it was unfathomable to me the struggles any of these children had seen. In this classroom, I had five to six girls at a time. Each had labels due to their behavior and only one or two at a time were identified with any type of learning problem. The main concern at this center was behavior and finding a placement for the children.

I worried about these girls. When I left every day and watched them walk to their group home, I wondered what their young lives must be like. They fought with each other like sisters, which made sense since many of them had lived together for over a year. They shared bedrooms and bathrooms and spent the entire school day together. All of them had been sexually or physically abused. Some acted out in a sexual manner when adult males came into the classroom. This shocked and frightened me. It was as if they had been exposed to too much too young and I was constantly concerned about how they would act when they hit puberty. I would talk at length with the social workers and therapists who worked with the girls and with my mom, who was a social worker herself. There were no answers and there was no assurance that these girls would be “okay.” At 22, this was what I wanted to hear.

I moved to a different state and began teaching in the public schools. No matter what exceptionality label they put in front of the word teacher, I always had a caseload of students labeled EBD. Most of the time I had all boys and once in awhile a single girl would come through the doors. At one point, my solo female student commented that she thought girls must be smarter than boys. When I asked her why she replied that she was the only girl in the ‘slow learning dummy’ class, the nickname for the class for students with SLD, behavior being secondary and something seldom talked about by the students themselves. Most were not even aware that they had the label EBD. At the time I was

more focused on dispelling the myth about what SLD meant but in hindsight I wished I had focused more on her issues about gender.

In the middle school setting, the number of girls increased but was usually at a ratio of 10 to 3. The girls tended to be friendly to each other and from the way they spoke, it was obvious they had been in classes together since the early grades. I would often eat lunch with the girls in my room and the boys would filter through now and then. I never specifically asked just girls to stay. They were usually the ones who asked. We would talk about school and I would hear about boys, fights with other friends and issues in other classes. It hadn't occurred to me at the time how different school is when you are surrounded mostly by boys who are not high achievers themselves. I was aware of stigma and did my best to combat that but assumed that their issues were typical of any thirteen-year-old girl. I had been a thirteen-year-old girl and remembered a lot of what they were talking about. However, I was a girl in classes for the gifted dating the boy who was in remedial classes. This was a stark contrast in experience from the girls I taught and those that will be involved in the study.

As I am reading literature for this study, I find myself wondering how much the girls in the study will want to share about their school experience. When I was 14, I was horribly shy and would have veered away from this type of project. I also find myself recalling how many of my students did not even know that they had a disability and had assumed they were dumb or just slow learners. During the times I taught self-advocacy and explained disability to my students, many expressed the feeling that there was no such thing as a learning disability and truly felt they were just not smart. Whether these

ideas came from other teachers or parents, I am not sure. I am concerned that the girls in this study will have these same notions.

The longer I have been in the field of education, the more I am shocked by the words and actions of people who are responsible for teaching children. More times than I care to recall, I have heard teachers write off students by saying things like, “Oh she will probably just get pregnant like her mom at 14 and then I will end up teaching her kid too.” Often accompanied with an eye-roll or a look to other people in the room for approval. I never, ever heard anyone talk about a future for the girls I taught with a positive ending. They spoke of the “cycle” of teen moms having children who then become teen moms followed by the sentiment, “At least I will always have a job.”

I found this heartbreaking. To me, the girls I taught had so much ahead of them. I could never understand how people who had daughters themselves could view someone else’s daughter so harshly. Why weren’t we working harder to end this “cycle” or do what we could in the 6.5 hours a day that we had these students in our class to prepare them for a future we would want for our own children? This ate at me and was largely part of the reason I ate lunch with any students who wanted to come back to my class. I couldn’t take the negativity from the other teachers. Spending that time with the students I taught helped me know them better and see them as so much more than a reading level or the girl who choked a boy in second grade.

Since the focus of this study is on gender, I realize I have to be careful not to push the stories the girls share toward only issues of gender. There is a fine line between having them reflect and reveal issues of power and gender and another to be encouraged to go down that direction. Being the mother of a 3-year-old girl, I find myself even more



focused on issues surrounding girls and how they are socialized, raised and taught. I detest anything to do with princesses and try very hard to temper my distaste in the messages the whole princess ideal sends with the fact that my daughter is three and should be able to play with toys she likes. I imagine I will struggle in similar ways while interviewing the girls. Just as with my daughter, I don't want to force my views on them but I cringe to think of what I might hear and how often I will need to bite my tongue as my role as researcher. I need to remember that the focus of this story is only that of the girl I am interviewing. I am not her mother or her teacher.

Being raised by a strong Jewish woman who always told me I could do anything I wanted was something I took for granted until I had conversations with women as an adult. Many were advised to fall in love with men who could support them financially. Some were told that school was not important because when you have children you won't need it. Currently, I am the only one of my friends with young children who work; let alone work and go to school. While not working was not an option for me financially, I never thought I would be the only mom I know who works. Sometimes I feel like I missed out on some meeting that took place where all women who were having kids decided to marry men who would make enough money to support them. It just never occurred to me.

I expect that the stories I hear from the participants in this study will include philosophies of education different from the one with which I was raised and teaching practices that contrast mine. My background and culture was tied heavily in Jewish traditions. Not only did I attend public school, I also attended Hebrew school three days a

week until I was 13. In my family, education about the history of your culture was essential. As I have grown up, I have veered away towards most all of the beliefs taught. What has remained a critical part to who I am is the idea that people should be constantly learning and growing through education. When faced with a problem, I immediately seek all the knowledge I can about it to try and resolve them. I realize that this is not the case with all people. I recognize my cultural upbringing is not the only one and also had its share of flaws along with the positive aspects.

It is my goal to record these instances and acknowledge them but to not let them interfere with the participants' opportunity to tell their story. I have a natural tendency to want to fix a situation and it is not my position as researcher to engage in that process. While the results of the study are aimed to help girls with emotional and behavioral disorders, it is not my goal here to rescue any students. This is another issue I will need to keep in check as I progress through the three meetings with the girls in the study.

## Appendix B

### Personal reflection

#### After the study

The direction in which this study took was very different from what I had anticipated. The nervousness I felt approaching these girls seemed as evident to them as if I was holding a sign. I hadn't anticipated feeling the apprehension that I did during the initial request for participation. In my mind, I imagined some of them getting up and walking out of the room or just flat out refusing entirely. Instead, I got the opposite reaction. None of the girls said no and the only reason more did not participate was due to their sporadic attendance.

There is no such thing as a normal childhood. People often compare their lives to this mythical life that as far as I can tell does not exist. I have yet to meet anyone who has had the perfect upbringing. I also liked to think that I had heard so many horror stories from my time working with physically and sexually abused girls that not much would shock me. However, spending times with these girls and speaking to them one-on-one often left me speechless and startled. I often left these meetings feeling depressed and hopeless as if I had personalized the things that happened to these girls. I had to constantly remind myself that my job was not to rescue these girls. I found myself on several occasions asking the girls questions like, "You do know that you can go to your IEP meetings and tell the team what you want to do?" I had to stop myself from going to their teachers and advocating for these girls. I hated feeling so powerless. I had spent the last three years before going back to school full-time helping families advocate for their children. I knew

the law and I knew their rights but my role was to listen to their story. The feeling was more than uncomfortable at many times.

I am a private person. I hate asking for help. I hate when I appear vulnerable. I like to be able to rely only on myself. The phrase I have uttered from the age of two is “I can do it myself.” Humor has been my saving grace whenever I have had to write something personal. I can tell a story about difficult moments in my life in a way that is thinly veiled with humor. It is the way I cope and a way of not making people uncomfortable if I was actually sharing something from my personal life.

While I have grown to realize that human beings cannot do everything by themselves, I still cringe when I in a situation where I need to rely on someone else. I see these attributes in my writing. I found it uncomfortable when I needed to write in a way that would reveal my true thoughts and feelings and there was no opportunity to insert humor. I wanted very much to write in a way that honored the girl’s stories. I did not want to be perceived as putting words in their mouth or making inaccurate assumptions. At times I felt that adding my personal thoughts and feelings somehow betrayed the girls. I did not want to come across as judgmental but at the same time the nature of making meaning of other people’s stories comes along with predispositions and perceptions from the researcher.

During the course of my doctoral program, I have had a lot of major life events take place. When I started, I was married with no kids and a mother who was my best friend and biggest supporter in life. As I am writing this reflection, I have a daughter who is almost four, I have signed the final papers for my divorce and my mom has been gone for two and half years. While listening to the audiotapes of the interviews, I hear the sadness

in my own voice. At times, I didn't even recognize my own voice. On certain dates, I had been crying the entire drive to the interview and needed to take time in the bathroom before I met with the girls to try to make myself look presentable.

As the girls shared their stories of intense issues with their mothers, I missed mine even more. I knew I was one of the lucky ones before this study started. I had a person in my life as I was growing up who believed in me. Our relationship was not perfect. The dynamics often shifted where I took more of the mother role and tried to help her through times of depression and sadness. Even so, it was because of the way that she raised me that I knew I could accomplish anything. None of these girls had someone like that in their life. As a 36 year-old woman, I am constantly struggling with the loss of my mother. I cannot even begin to imagine what my life would have been like had I not had a figure like that in my life.

While our lives were so different, I often shared in their despair and loss of hope. I felt lost in my own life. I wondered how I would make meaning of their stories without the tinge of bitterness I felt in my own. I knew that I was not supposed to set aside my thoughts and beliefs but I also knew that I was not experiencing happiness myself. My theme was loss and I hoped that I could view their stories without my grief and sadness overshadowing what they were truly saying.

I felt very touched by each of the girl's in this study; each in a very different way. I looked forward to the time I would spend with them. This experience made me miss being a teacher. I missed knowing my students. At the same time, I also felt a sense of relief on our last meeting because the sheer enormity of the obstacles these girls faced was overwhelming to me at times.

I hope I did justice to the stories the girls shared. I worry that I did not convey all they had to say or that I overlooked something important they mentioned. I worry for these girls. I worried prior to the study because of the statements I had heard while teaching. I worry more now because there is so much more to the story than just the classroom. Teachers are only one of the many adults in their lives who have not met their needs. At the same time, I have hope for each of them. I have hope that they will graduate. I have hope that they use their strong personality to advocate for themselves and for the people they want to help. Most importantly, I have hope because I see the determination and skills they have developed as a result of all that has happened in their lives.

## Appendix C

### Guiding questions

How do adolescent girls with EBD make meaning of their school experience?

#### Meeting one (history)

Icebreaker activity

Rotter sentence completion

Tell me about how you came to be at this school.

Tell me a story about a time you felt successful in school

Tell me a story about a time you did not feel successful in school

Do you think it means something different if you are a boy or a girl?

When you think back about school from your earliest memory until now, what words would you use to describe your experience? (further probing of these words)

What, if anything do wish, was different about your school experiences?

#### Meeting two (present)

Revisit stories from last meeting for clarification and meaning

Kinetic School Drawing

Would this drawing have looked different if you did not go to this school? Why?

What do you think you would draw differently if you were in classes at a regular public school?

If one of your current teachers were to describe you to someone, what types of things would he or she say? Would they include words about behavior or emotions?

What are some things that your teachers don't know about you that you wish they did?

What do you enjoy most about school currently? What do you enjoy least?

From my observation, it looks like there are a lot more boys than girls in your classes. How do you feel about that? Why do you think that is?

### Meeting Three (future)

Revisit stories from previous meaning for clarification and meaning

Adapted questions from the Strong Interest Inventory

If you could talk to yourself as an elementary school student knowing what you know now, what kinds of things would you tell your younger self?

Describe to me what your life will look like after you finish school.

How are you prepared to do this? How are you helped with meeting these goals?

Do you see your male classmates receiving different advice than you do? Why?

Do you think these goals would be different if you were not in a program for students with EBD? Why?

What types of things (i.e. work, higher ed, personally) do you see yourself doing once you leave school?



Appendix D

Icebreaker

Sentence Stems

Adapted from

The Rotter Incomplete Sentences Blank (1992)

Directions: I am going to start a sentence for you. You complete the sentence with whatever comes to mind. There is no right or wrong answer. It is completely up to you how to end the sentence.

1. I like
2. I want to know
3. The happiest time
4. At school
5. I feel
6. I am very
7. School is
8. Sometimes
9. I am best when
10. I wish

## Appendix E

### Icebreaker

Adapted from the

Kinetic Drawing System for Family and School (1993)

#### Directions:

“I’d like you to draw a school picture. Put yourself, your teacher and another student or two in the picture. Make everyone doing something. Try to draw whole people and make the best drawing you can. Remember to draw yourself, your teacher and another student or two and make everyone doing something”

The student will be given from five to ten minutes to complete the drawing. Once it is complete, the interviewer will ask some clarifying questions.

- 1) For each figure in the drawing, ask the student that person’s name, relationship to the child, age, and other meaningful characteristics or data.
- 2) Questions about the figures in the drawing:
  - a. What is this person doing?
  - b. What is this person thinking?
  - c. What happened to this person immediately before this picture?
  - d. What happened immediately after this picture?
  - e. What were you thinking about while you were drawing?

- f. If you could change anything at all about this school picture what would it be?

## Appendix F

### Icebreaker

### Letter to Future Self

### Directions

Think about where you hope to see yourself in ten years. Write a letter to yourself as that person in the future. Talk about your goals and what you hope to accomplish. Don't forget to let your future self know what you had expected to achieve when you were in high school.

## Appendix G

### Letter to participant's parents



Dear Parent:

This letter provides information about a research study that will be conducted at your daughter's school by the University of South Florida. The goal in conducting the study is to learn about the school experiences of girls who have received special education services with the label emotionally/behaviorally disordered (EBD).

✓ **Who We Are:** Anna Robic, M.Ed., graduate student at the University of South Florida. Anna has

Worked with students as a special education teacher and is currently conducting research on girls labeled EBD.

✓ **Why We are Requesting Your Child's Participation:** This study is being conducted as part of study

Specifically looking at females with disabilities in order to help teachers and researchers better understand the experiences of girls in school setting.

- ✓ Why Your Child Should Participate: We are asking your child to take part in this research study because we  
  
Want to better serve girls with disabilities in school settings. Understanding their school experiences can assist with teaching and meeting their needs.
  
- ✓ What Participation Requires: Your child, along with other students from Hillsborough County Schools, whose parents have also consented to their participation will spend approximately one hour per week for three weeks being interviewed by Anna Robic . The focus of each interview will be about the school experience of the individual student as well as their future goals for themselves. The interviews will remain completely confidential and will only be accessed by the researcher.  
  
Each interview will be recorded and transcribe. Once the transcription has occurred, the tapes will be held in Anna Robic's office in a secure location for the duration of the study. The tapes and transcripts will be destroyed three years after the study ends. Your child will most likely not benefit directly as a result of participating in this research study; however, she will possibly improve the experiences for other girls in school settings.
  
- ✓ Please Note: Your decision to allow your child to participate in this research study is completely voluntary. You are free to allow your child to participate in this research study or to withdraw her at any time. If you choose for your child not to participate, or if you withdraw her at any point during the study, this will in no way affect your relationship with your child's school, USF, or any other party. Your decision to you're your child participate, not participate, or withdraw at any time will in no way affect your child's grade.
  
- ✓ Confidentiality of Your Responses: There is minimal risk to you for participating in this research. Your child's name will not be listed on any material. The audiotapes will

maintained for a period of three years after the study is closed at which time the tapes will be destroyed. Your child's privacy and research records will be kept confidential to the extent of the law. Authorized research personnel, employees of the Department of Health and Human Services, and the USF Institutional Review Board and its staff, and any other individuals acting on behalf of USF, may inspect the records from this research project.

- ✓ Questions? If you have any questions about this research study, please contact Anna Robic at (813) 974-4596. If you have questions about your rights as a person who is taking part in a research study, you may contact a member of the Division of Research Compliance of the University of South Florida at 813-974-5638.
  
- ✓ Want to Participate? To agree to participate in this study, complete the attached consent form and turn it in to the front office.

Sincerely,

Anna Robic, M.Ed

Doctoral Candidate

Department of Special Education

**The Lived School Experiences of a select group of female adolescents labeled emotionally/behaviorally disordered**

**University of South Florida**

**Research Study**

---

**Consent to Take Part in this Research Study**

It is up to you to decide whether you want to take part in this study. If you want to take part, please sign the form, if the following statements are true.

**I freely give my consent to take part in this study.** I understand that by signing this form I am agreeing to take part in research. I have received a copy of this form to take with me.

---

Signature of Person Taking Part in Study

Date

---

Printed Name of Person Taking Part in Study

---

---

**Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent**

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect.

I hereby certify that when this person signs this form, to the best of my knowledge, he or she understands:

- What the study is about.
- What procedures/interventions/investigational drugs or devices will be used.



- What the potential benefits might be.
- What the known risks might be.

I also certify that he or she does not have any problems that could make it hard to understand what it means to take part in this research. This person speaks the language that was used to explain this research.

This person reads well enough to understand this form or, if not, this person is able to hear and understand when the form is read to him or her.

This person does not have a medical/psychological problem that would compromise comprehension and therefore makes it hard to understand what is being explained and can, therefore, give informed consent.

This person is not taking drugs that may cloud their judgment or make it hard to understand what is being explained and can, therefore, give informed consent.

---

---

Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

Date

---

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anna Robic was born in the Philadelphia area and received a B.S. in Human Development from the University of Rhode Island. After working with children identified with emotional and behavioral disorders, Anna returned to school to earn her M.Ed. in Special Education from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. She taught in various school settings with students ages pre-K to 22. While pursuing her Ph.D. at the University of South Florida, Anna taught at the undergraduate level and worked with pre-service and in-services teachers to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. During this time, she received the Richardson scholarship for doctoral students in the field of Special Education. Additionally, she has co-authored a book chapter and was awarded several grants, both focusing on participatory action research, during her doctoral program.