

Teacher Perceptions of the Middle School to High School Transition of Students with Emotional  
and Behavioral Disabilities

Jared Myers

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Douglas Cheney

Elizabeth West

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Jared Myers

University of Washington

**Abstract**

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Jared Myers

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:  
Douglas Cheney, Ph.D.  
Special Education

Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities (EBD) frequently experience poor social and academic outcomes relative to their non-disabled peers. The middle to high school transition is a critical juncture in the educational process and can influence or impact high school and post-high school outcomes. This study sought to gain an understanding of the ways in which the current middle to high school transition process for students with EBD was being implemented. Additionally, literature was reviewed to reveal possible evidence-based practices which could lend support to the process. Seven teachers of middle school students with EBD were interviewed. Themes emerged related to communication and collaboration. Results revealed several components of the transition process that teachers believed to be of particular importance. These results are discussed and additional considerations to establish a successful transition process are explored.

For students identified with Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities (EBD) the transition between middle and high school may present significant challenges. While this transition represents a major change for most students, those with EBD are particularly vulnerable to many of the pitfalls that consistently result in poor outcomes in high school (Wagner & Davis, 2006). Additionally, students with EBD are more likely to drop out of school than students in any other disability category (Landrum, Tankersley, & Kauffman, 2003). These trends highlight the need to support students with EBD during their middle to high school transition.

Lan and Lanthier (2003) found that students experience a critical mental transformation in their transition between 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade. By surveying a representative sample of students, the researchers observed that, during the middle school to high school transition year, a student's perceptions of school and its value often begin to decline and frequently contribute to the decision to drop out. Furthermore, the researchers suggested that for students who are already experiencing academic difficulties, the increase in stress that accompanies the middle to high school transition can exacerbate that difficulty. Rothenberger (2008) identified that completion of 9<sup>th</sup> grade credits was a critical step toward high school graduation. The study showed a positive correlation between failing more than one 9<sup>th</sup> grade course and leaving school prior to graduation. Further, studies have shown that failure to exit school without a diploma predicts severe social and economic disadvantages (Caspi, Wright, Moffitt, & Silva, 1998). Thus, successful planning for and execution of the middle to high school transition can influence success in high school.

Students with EBD experience more instability and unpredictability in their day to day lives than many of their non-EBD peers (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). These students may also experience reduced social, health, academic, and economic outcomes. Research has shown

that these environmental qualities of instability and unpredictability are often contributing factors to their diagnosis of EBD (Jones, Dohrn, & Dunn, 2004). As a consequence of the amalgam of these characteristics, this group consistently experiences poor academic outcomes (Cheney & Barringer, 1999). In fact, nationwide 44.9 percent of students identified as having EBD drop out of school before receiving their diploma (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Multiple factors have been cited as contributors to the difficulty presented by the middle school to high school transition, many of which are emotionally based. It has been reported that students may have fears associated with the larger school, the increasingly difficult academic requirements, less help from teachers, and the prospect of being bullied (Mizelle, 2005). These are areas that may be best addressed through support and reassurance. Current best practice recommendations for students with EBD suggest that interventions should be positive and consistent, as opposed to the ineffectual approaches of punishment that lead to repeated failure (Lehr & McComas 2005). Mizelle and Irvin (2000) concluded that while many middle schools make attempts at facilitating the transition to high school, the attempts are limited (or fail) as they lack sufficient time and resources. Hertzog and Morgan (1999) add that while there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that the middle school to high school transition is a time of trepidation for many students, there is limited research and programming to support students during this move. A review of current literature confirms that this claim remains true to the present day. Furthermore, it has been proposed that students with disabilities are best served when transition planning begins before high school and includes student specific goals and support (Baer, Daviso, Queen, & Flexer, 2011).

While it is believed that the transition is a critical time for students with EBD, a lack of clear findings in research makes it difficult to conclude if any practices might benefit students

during the middle to high school transition. The field of special education would benefit from a better understanding of student supports for this transition. Such an understanding would serve two important purposes: a) we can more thoroughly investigate the components of transition and evaluate them based on their validity, effectiveness, and appropriateness; and b) we can begin to incorporate the necessary services and supports that are beneficial to students and teachers.

### **Literature Review**

Despite a relatively small research base, several elements were identified within the existing literature to guide this study. These include the role of the sending and receiving teachers, the flow of instruction, and the social implications of peer mentoring. These elements will be discussed below.

#### **Transition Process is Initiated by the Sending Teacher**

In a conceptual paper, Clark (2012) suggests that collaboration between a sending middle school and a receiving high school is a key component in a successful transition. The sending teacher is ostensibly the person who knows the most about the student and has the best understanding of the student's strengths and areas of need. The sending teacher is also in possession of the documentation that is the basis for the type of instruction that the student receives. The communication between the sending and receiving teachers is a powerful tool for providing support to the transitioning student. The sending teacher is also most likely the closest interface between the school district and the parent(s)/guardian(s) of the child.

This parent(s)/guardian(s) relationship is a very valuable and important component of a student's school experience. Maintaining this relationship is a necessary step in promoting a smooth transition and sustained success. Ideally, the sending teacher would facilitate the introduction of the receiving teacher with the parent(s)/guardian(s). Kinney (2006) explained in a

conceptual article that the act of having the special education teacher who a student and his or her Family are familiar with facilitate the introduction to the new special education teacher was productive and well received. Similar meetings take place for the post-high school transition of students with low incidence disabilities and have proven beneficial (Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen, 2009).

### **Sending Teachers Identify and Teach Skills the Students Need in the New Environment.**

In order for the sending teachers to best prepare their students for transitions, they must have a thorough understanding of the environment that they are sending them to. This awareness must go beyond academic placement and social/emotional supports. In a small longitudinal study, Isakson and Jarvis (1999) studied the adjustment of 41 students who were transitioning from junior high to high school. The researchers found that certain factors may be helpful in mitigating the stressors that students experience in their middle to high school transition. The researchers found that students who identified as having a strong sense of school belonging were more likely to develop adaptive coping strategies in relation to the new stressors. Cooper and Liou (2007) conducted a qualitative study in which they interviewed 119 eighth grade students and four high school guidance counselors. The eighth grade students were asked about their perceptions of the high school guidance counselors. The guidance counselors were interviewed regarding what they believed to be important information for students pertaining to the transition to high school. Cooper and Liou found that despite the fact that ninth grade students experience lower academic performance than older peers, these students receive the least amount of interaction and support from high school guidance counselors. In a recent longitudinal study, it was found that students who reported experiencing social support during the middle to high school transition were far more likely to remain in school than students who reported a lack of

social support (Reyes, Gillock, Kobus, & Sanchez, 2000). The researchers conducted a six year longitudinal study of 107 adolescents from urban, minority, low-income backgrounds in which they studied correlations between the middle to high school transition and school completion outcomes. These findings suggest that students can benefit from early instruction and experience designed to help them integrate into the high school environment. In order to provide this instruction, the sending teachers must have a strong concept of these factors.

### **Curriculum Articulation – Providing an Even Flow of Instruction**

Curriculum articulation refers to the degree to which the curriculums of two linked institutions fit together and build off one another. Using a multisite, case study design, Brown, Vincent, Anfara, & Roney (2004) demonstrated that purposeful curriculum articulation was present in the structure of academically high-achieving schools. An even flow of the instructional areas between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade years is one step towards providing/continuing the consistency and structure proven crucial in the success of students with EBD. Though curriculum articulation for students with EBD has not been directly addressed in the literature, related studies have suggested that it is an important consideration. In a conceptual paper, Shielack and Seeley (2010) reported that an important consideration when planning for instruction is the alignment of major ideas in the curriculum for grades 3 - 8.

### **Mentoring**

A system of peer mentoring offers several positive possibilities to support the transition process. Peer mentoring, when implemented properly, has been found to serve as a powerful social and academic tool (Reyes, 2012). Reyes described the implementation and results of a peer mentoring system in a university setting. Implementation in an 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade transition setting could follow similar steps as outlined by Reyes. For example, a student who is

transitioning to a new school could be paired with another student who previously made the same transition 1-2 years prior. The mentoring student can welcome the incoming student to the program and provide some firsthand knowledge about the experience. In a conceptual paper, Lampert (2005) reported that upper class mentors can provide a welcome source of support to their underclass colleagues and that the reported experiences of students support the use of such programs. There would be several important considerations to make when designing a peer support program. The mentoring students would need to be carefully evaluated and selected based on their ability to make appropriate choices when supporting their mentee. The process would require professional supervision to ensure that the guidelines of the mentoring program were being met.

The transition between 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade is a period of significant anxiety for many students (Mizelle, 2005). Mizelle conducted a review of relevant literature and constructed transition guidelines and found that one source of this anxiety relates to the move to an environment of relative unknowns as it pertains to social structure. Additionally, in a longitudinal study of bullying, Pellegrini and Bartini (2000) reported that as students enter middle school and progress toward high school, many begin to report feeling increasingly socially isolated. A peer mentoring model could potentially serve to ease the social aspect of the transition.

This review of literature indicates that the middle to high school transition for students with EBD is a very pertinent issue and one that requires continued exploration. The purpose of this study was therefore to:

- 1) Gain an understanding of how the current middle to high school transition process is occurring in practice

- 2) Determine if evidence based practices are currently being utilized and if so, are they being implemented appropriately
- 3) Identify ways in which the current transition process might be strengthened based on participant feedback.

By addressing these three focal points, this study will provide information for use in future middle to high school transition planning for students with EBD.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Given the focus of this study middle school teachers working with students with EBD were chosen as participants. Inclusion criteria for the participants included: teachers were required to be responsible for middle school students with EBD and familiar with the middle to high school transition process for students with EBD. A purposeful sampling method was used to recruit teachers who met the inclusion criteria. Patton (2002) suggested that purposeful sampling is a highly useful tool, as it allows efficient identification of cases that will yield pertinent information. Potential teachers were identified based on conversations between the researcher and various professionals in the field of special education in the Puget Sound region. Fourteen teachers who met the above criteria were invited through email (see appendix A) to participate in the study. Seven teachers from varying districts consented to participate. Four of the participants were male and three were female. Of the seven participants, six had three or more years of experience working with students with EBD. All of the participants had experience in facilitating the middle to high school transition of students with EBD. All of the participants hold Master's degrees in Special Education with a focus on EBD. The participants in the study were all

provided with informed consent forms (see appendix B) and all signed off indicating their willingness to participate.

### **Setting**

The participants were drawn from four public school districts set within a large metropolitan area in the Pacific Northwest. Five of the participants taught in a self-contained classroom within a comprehensive middle school, and two of the participants taught in an alternative setting. Two of the teachers taught at the same school. School enrollment ranged from forty five to just over one thousand. The rate at which the overall school population was receiving free or reduced lunch ranged from just under thirteen percent to over eighty five percent.

### **Procedure**

This study used qualitative methodology, where face-to-face interviews served as the data collection method. Interviews were chosen primarily due to their ability to generate detailed description of the current middle to high school transition process for students with EBD. Additionally, the interview format allowed the researcher to engage in targeted questioning and to discuss and probe the issue. Each of the teachers in this study participated in a 30 – 45 minute one on one interview. Interviews were conducted at a location convenient for the participant, which included classrooms and coffee shops. An interview protocol was designed based on a theoretical sketch of the components that would likely be present in the middle to high school transition process for students with EBD. The interview protocol was developed based on relevant transition literature as well as conversations with experts in the field of EBD.

The interview questions were open ended allowing the participants to respond descriptively, and the researcher to guide and, where necessary, refocus the questioning.

Additionally, questioning was designed to allow participants to provide thorough responses that would create an accounting of the components found within their transition processes. For triangulation purposes, teachers were encouraged to provide generic documents or artifacts pertaining to the transition process. These documents and artifacts were analyzed for the degree to which they supported the providing teacher's descriptions. For example, if a teacher mentioned a form or document that was part of the transition process, they were encouraged to produce that document. In the event that any of these documents contained indentifying information, the information was redacted. Over the course of the interview, the researcher performed real-time member checks by offering the participants a summary of their responses and asking them to verify that they were as intended. Additionally, the investigator maintained a system of field notes through each interview. The audio of each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim into text format. Information was carefully utilized to insure that the participants and their schools and school districts could not be identified in the final report. The interview protocol is presented in appendix C.

### **Data Analysis**

The interview data were analyzed to attain an understanding of the transition process. The interview responses were threaded by using a system of coding to highlight similarity and difference. Initial codes were developed prior to data collection and sought to identify the presence of transition components that had been previously identified as being potentially beneficial. As research began and progressed, additional codes were developed and implemented as common themes began to emerge from the interviews. For example, if the first three teachers all spoke of communication with families as an important factor of transition, communication with family was then monitored for in subsequent interviews. Indeed, Glesne (2011) suggests

that early data analysis can be done in parallel with data collection, allowing the researcher to adapt and mold the study as it progress. The analysis of the data was designed to serve two purposes.

First, the data were analyzed, using a system of coding, to search for common themes and trends. For example, a code was developed when teacher collaboration was mentioned. Each time this theme emerged in an interview, a corresponding code was applied. Coding was carried out by the researcher and involved reading through each transcript multiple times and attaching codes. Dedoose, a software tool for analysis of qualitative data, was used to assist in the coding process. As codes began occurring with frequency, they evolved into themes and trends. These themes and trends were used to create a broad picture of the current process of the middle to high school transition for students with EBD. Second, the interview data was analyzed, again through a system of coding, to identify areas in, and means by which the participants believed the current transition process could be improved.

## **Results**

The threaded conversations yielded two primary themes. These themes included (a) communication with families, (b) collaboration with the receiving high school teacher, and (c) preparing students for the high school environment. Additionally, teachers suggested possible areas of improvement for the transition process. These findings are discussed below.

### **Communication with Families**

All teachers consistently expressed the importance of communication with the families of their students as a component of the transition process. The means by which communication between teacher and parent took place varied. Several teachers explained that they primarily communicated with parents regarding the middle to high school transition at the student's eighth

grade IEP meeting. Other teachers spoke of regular phone communication with their parent group, within which the transition was a frequent topic. Some teachers spoke of school wide family nights at which parents were engaged in two-way communication that often included discussions about the transition.

When asked about the concerns that families typically raised around the transition, several recurrent sub-themes emerged. Parents want to know what the high school environment would be like for their students. Specifically, if the students will have a similar academic structure and if the social and emotional supports will remain consistent. One teacher shared that:

They want to know what accommodations are still there. For instance, a reader or other accommodations. They are concerned about the upcoming standardized tests and the students passing these tests. There are a lot of things they don't know.

They ask about the high school teacher, the classroom.

It is evident, based on these discussions with educators, that many parents are aware of the potential trials and pitfalls that may accompany the middle to high school transition for their child. They often want to know how their child will be supported during this transition period.

One teacher reflected:

A lot of these kids came into the program in sixth grade really struggling and kind of only got their act together in eighth grade and started doing okay and it seems like most the parents, their biggest fear is that it's going to happen again. That they are going to have to spend another two to three years getting the act together

In fact, several of the teachers offered anecdotes that suggested the above concerns were quite valid, as many of their students have experienced very similar outcomes as they moved to the high school setting. Many parents expressed a belief that the EBD environment is a less than

optimal placement for their children. To this end, some parents also showed interest in understanding the ways in which their student's might, at some point, exit the EBD environment. When speaking of their interactions with parents, one teacher said, "I think their biggest concern is "how do I get them out of this program?"

Teachers frequently provided commentary on the importance of being (or attempting to be) on the same page with the Family of their students. Participant responses suggest a potential for students in EBD settings to provide their parents with inaccurate approximations of the appropriateness of their setting. For example, a student may report to their parents that they are not making any significant progress or accomplishing stated goals, when in fact classroom data indicate that the students are indeed making progress and furthermore that the placement remains appropriate for that student. In these situations, where a chasm forms between the perceptions of the parent and the observations of the teacher, additional difficulty and consternation regarding the middle to high school transition may arise. A teacher explained a common scenario concerning this condition:

Often the kids would go home and say "I'm not learning anything it's too chaotic" when really, that's true, but it's also their own perception of what's happening. Like, their choosing not to work, so they're choosing to make trouble. So trying to get the family to understand what's really happening. They'll be upset, but once we explain and then show them the data, they'll say, "oh, so he's causing a lot of this."

Another teacher explained that consistent teacher-parent communication is "important because the kid knows that we are communicating so they aren't trying to split us." These and other examples were presented as evidence of why frequent, meaningful communication with parents

regarding the middle to high school transition process is of utmost importance, a sentiment echoed by all of the teachers in this study. Teachers also emphasized the importance of having positive communication with parents regarding their children.

The participants in this study shared that parents are often much more open to a collaborative process when they are approached in a way that simultaneously acknowledges and celebrates the positive attributes of their children, while also conveying the reality of the situation and the challenges that lay ahead. Teachers consistently expressed their awareness that parents of children with EBD have very often received far more negative feedback from the school system than positive. This relationship with the system has a tendency to leave certain parents withdrawn from the interaction with school.

A teacher pointed out what he viewed as potential damage that can arise from such a condition in stating that “parents and teachers need to be on the same page. It’s a collaborative approach.” A theme of trust between teacher and parent also arose from the interviews, with most teachers commenting that good communication necessarily underlies this trust. The following is an excerpt from an interview with a teacher:

Trust between the parent and the teacher. I think if there isn't trust between the parent and the teacher, it can undermine any amount of success that you're going to have with the student, so there needs to be trust there.

Expressing similar sentiment, another teacher explained that:

You have to have that relationship of trust before they're going to share. This involves being interested in the parents as people as well and not just their student and only calling about the student, but also inquiring about how things are going. It's kind of a friendly professional relationship.

Despite a broad recognition of the importance of strong parent – teacher communication and relationships, many teachers expressed regrets that accomplishing these goals can often be a challenging process. For various reasons, the teachers acknowledged that they often experience difficulty in establishing the collaboration with parents that they would hope to see. One teacher spoke of disconnect between the school and parents and expressed concern regarding the root cause of less than optimal parent attendance at school transition events:

There is this slight gap in communication, so they don't always get invited to the district nights. So it becomes a question of are they not showing up because they didn't know? Or are they not showing up because traditionally this is a non-active parent group?

### **Collaboration with the Receiving High School teacher**

All of the participants spoke of the importance of collaboration between the sending middle school teacher and the receiving high school teacher. It was pointed out that lack of consistency and structure is a very common area of risk for students with EBD, and transitions to new environments can often result in just such circumstances. Teachers expressed a number of different reasons why strong teacher to teacher collaboration is important. For one, the participants in this study felt it was important that they have a clear understanding of what the expectations will be for their students as they begin in the high school environment. Teachers frequently acknowledged that students with EBD must be adequately prepared to succeed in their new environment. Additionally, teachers emphasized the importance of the need for the transitioning students to understand what the high school expectations will be. This included not only academic requirements, but also the social expectations, procedures and responsibilities.

The teachers in this study also consistently reflected a strong belief that the receiving high school teacher should have as thorough an understanding of the incoming student as possible. Teachers talked about reaching out to the high school EBD teachers, providing as much detail as possible, highlighting strengths, as well as areas of challenge. In describing such interactions, one teacher offered:

I connect with the teachers who will be receiving teachers and they are extremely willing to have the students come to their classrooms. They give the students tours of the buildings; they ask them questions about themselves to begin that relationship building.

Teachers stressed the importance of providing a clear and complete description of each student's learning level, as well as situations or triggering events to which a student might be particularly susceptible. One teacher was thankful that she had fewer students, which afforded her the time to be more detailed as she described each of her students on the documentation that would follow each of them to their new placements. In explaining the degree to which she collaborated with high school teachers, one teacher stated that "I will write the eighth grade IEPs with the high school teacher because I want it to fit her system. We work really close with the high schools."

The teachers reported variation in the extent to which middle and high school EBD teachers collaborate between settings. One teacher offered the following regarding what he saw as recent improvements in the process:

For a while we had no idea what the high schools did. It was probably about five years ago that we started talking about what is it that you guys (high school

teachers) are doing in high school and what is it that you need them (the students) to be able to do.

Another teacher explained that each year, all eighth grade students are assigned riser forms. These riser forms are questionnaires that allow a middle school teacher of students with EBD to provide a variety of specific information for each of his or her students. The information on this riser form ranges from present academic levels to more detailed description of the student. In fact, a riser form was a component of the transition process in all four of the school districts represented in this study. In some cases, these riser forms served as a supplement to direct teacher to teacher interactions regarding transitioning students, in other cases, the riser form seemed to represent the total extent to which sending and receiving teachers communicated.

One teacher explained that there was a file exchange each year and that the building special education chairperson would present all of those buildings special education students at the exchange. Another teacher described a more comprehensive system in which a group of relevant special education personnel (including both the sending and receiving teachers) met in person to both exchange files and to engage in more in depth discussion regarding the characteristics of the incoming students. This same teacher explained that he has the opportunity to meet monthly with the area EBD teachers and that the area of transition is a common subject of conversation. In describing their transition related activities, he offered the following: “We were trying to streamline our hierarchy of consequences so it's a very smooth transition when they go from our program to theirs. It's pretty close.”

This activity further reflected the broader teacher opinion that holding as many variables constant between the middle to high school transition was an important factor in the overall success.

## **Preparing Students for a the High School Environment**

Teachers frequently spoke of the necessity for their students to have a strong grasp of the major differences between the middle and high school environments. These comments often pertained to the increasingly serious nature of consequences resulting from poor choices.

Teachers explained that, in high school, there is far less flexibility when working with students who demonstrate certain types of aggressive or illegal behaviors. Teachers' explanations of this reduced flexibility can be summarized with the statement that in middle school, teachers and administrators are at liberty to utilize a variety of interventions and de-escalations to help modify these types of behavior. In high school, teachers explained that students realize a far harsher reality, with certain types of behaviors being met with suspension, expulsion, contact with the justice system, or some combination thereof. Teachers spoke of explicitly working with their students to try and assist them in preparing for this change. One teacher described the process that she uses in her classroom when speaking of the high school environment:

They'll send you guys home. If you show up with contraband, they're going to arrest you guys. That is probably the biggest switch. The real world switch. There are real world consequences. We try really hard with our students to use real world examples. Make those connections to real world consequences. We try to help them toward independence.

While there was agreement among the teachers that the high school environment does in fact pose new and more challenging conditions, there was not complete consensus among the teachers on how to best prepare the students. Another teacher wasn't sure that aggressively pushing the "real world" concept was necessarily a useful way to assist her students: "What I

always hear people say is "well in high school it gets serious", and this worries me because if we're not meeting students where they're at, then they're almost guaranteed to fail."

Regarding the theme of differences in the high school environment, teachers pointed to increased academic challenge. When discussing the differences that her students with EBD will experience when they get to high school, a teacher said "Well, it's exponentially harder." In addition to the increased academic difficulty, the concept of high school credits came up during the course of the interviews. Teachers expressed that their students needed to understand that credits in high school are earned. One teacher spoke of her efforts to attempt to prepare students for the high school credit system:

I have the students graphing their grade throughout the year so that they know what they look like and I have on it a passing line and if they're below that line I tell them that if you're below this line in high school, you won't get credit. We do visuals regarding credits, semesters and years of high school. We want them to see a visual of how much one semester can affect their four years.

Of the seven teachers that participated in this study, one pointed out that the number one predictor of high school success is ninth grade success. In fact, that teacher provided data and statistics to illustrate this point with discussions about the importance of high school.

Continuing along the theme of changes that occur in the high school environment, several teachers pointed to the increased prevalence of drugs and gang affiliations as significant threats to the success of incoming students with EBD. One teacher shared a concern:

The high school has a lot more trouble with drugs and alcohol and gang affiliations. So I have to admit that I am a little bit worried about my kids going up there that are doing okay.

Another teacher suggested that the gang culture was perhaps the biggest single threat that her students faced. She spoke of her concern that the high school environment that some of her students would be going to would pose a great deal of social pressure to make unhealthy affiliations, a type of pressure that is nearly impossible for ninth grade students to avoid succumbing to. This teacher specifically noted that the gang affiliation problem can, within itself, undermine any progress that a student with EBD might make during their middle school tenure:

This is a huge issue. I wish that I had a way to help them get into a school that would promote their continued participation in that [school's] system. With these students, I'm not sure that we're setting them up for the type of success that they could have in a space that didn't have some of the negative influences that are already part of their life.

Suggestions from teachers regarding strategies to avoid these social pitfalls were far less forthcoming than when asked more specifically about the previous issues.

### **Areas for Improvement**

As part of the interview process, participants were asked to reflect on ways in which they felt the middle to high school transition process could be improved. As a part of this questioning, they were also asked if they could think of any additional resources that, if made available, could have a positive effect on the process.

**Time as a Resource.** Many teachers reported the need for additional time to facilitate a successful transition process. In fact, while reviewing and reflecting upon the interview responses, additional time was the most frequently cited theme. One participant neatly summed up this general finding: "Time is a big resource. Time in the sense of time for everyone in the process to be able to collaborate more than we have time for now."

The priorities for utilizing this time varied between teachers. Two teachers spoke of a desire to have time dedicated to taking their middle school students on high school visits during which a substantial amount of time and planning would be devoted to helping that student become acclimated to the new environment. Another teacher indicated that he would be very open to additional special education training related to transition planning and procedure. One participant talked about a desire to have additional time to communicate with the larger educational community regarding skills and strategies for working with students with EBD. Another teacher spoke about the need to take time and put together a more comprehensive transition framework:

“We don't have an official playbook that we go to for transition support. Or even from school to school. The criteria are there, but it's vague. We often hear "it's different for every student". True, but... We need a little more framework.”

Finally, within the category of time dedicated to transition activities, one teacher placed great emphasis on the need for continued and enhanced collaboration between teachers of students with EBD across the elementary, middle, and high school settings. This participant perceived the possibility to make substantial improvements to the middle to high school transition system by approaching the process both on a case by case basis for individual students, as well as a greater systemic process.

### **Collaboration.**

Beyond the concept of time, the suggestions that teachers provided for improving the process of transition were discrete. In almost all cases, teachers identified one area for improvement and expounded upon their reasoning. In order to provide a general sense of the aggregate formed by the responses, these findings are described below.

One of the teachers in this study was concerned with a smooth flow of academic instruction for his students as they transitioned to high school. He described a computer based mathematics learning program and explained that many of his students had experienced a level of engagement and success with this program that had otherwise eluded them. In fact, on numerous occasions, students had realized full grade level improvements in as short a time as a month. Sharing his concern, this teacher commented that “I’m pretty sure that the high school doesn’t have it. It’s really been successful for our kids and I worry that if you try to put them in a regular math class, it’s not going to work and they’re going to lose all that ground.” In similar respect, another teacher commented on the importance of knowing what high school learners will be expected to do academically in so far as it serves to influence the design of his middle school EBD program. The teacher relayed that he was not as familiar with the high school academic expectations as he would like to be.

### **Discussion**

The interviews led to interesting findings that were both similar to previous studies, yet different in important ways among the participants. This study sought to develop an understanding of what the current middle to high school transition process for students with EBD looks like in practice. To date, research regarding transition of students with EBD has focused almost exclusively on the high school to post-high school transition. This study sought to delineate the middle to high school transition process across a sampling of school districts. This discussion examined the degree to which the practices previously identified as potentially useful in the transition process were found in the teacher interviews. Respondents referenced experiencing potential challenges regarding communication with parents and offered assorted approximations as to the cause of these challenges. These approximations, ranged from a

possible disconnect between the school district to the parent community to the perception of relative disengagement among the EBD parent group.

Interestingly, a divergence is observed in the manner by which the teachers report communication taking place. Several teachers reported the eighth grade IEP meeting as being the primary setting for communication regarding the transition. Some of the teachers spoke of a combination of “open house” nights and ongoing telephone communication as the means by which information regarding the transition is conveyed and discussed. The teachers who described the communication process in this way also tended to emphasize trust between teacher and parent as a key transition component. Noteworthy is the fact that when assertions that communication with parents was (from the perspective of the teacher) often at a less than optimal level, they were always paired with either indirect conjecture about whether or not parent involvement was the primary cause or direct observation of frequent lack of participation on the part of the parents.

Finally, all of the teachers that participated in this study expressed a similar concern about circumstances in which parent to teacher communication was either not present or effective. This concern can be summarized by suggesting that when parents and teachers are not on the same page, it can cause difficulty regarding the transition process and potentially even undermine it. As evidence of this, teachers frequently cited a tendency for students with EBD to attempt to form a split between the parents and the school regarding the best course of action for the student.

With regard to teacher to teacher collaboration, which for the purpose of this study was defined as collaboration between the sending middle school teacher and the receiving high school teacher, the participants all viewed it as a highly important part of the process. Similar to

the responses on parent-teacher communication, this study found variations in the way that teacher to teacher collaboration takes place. All of the participants indicated that they utilize a district based riser form. Each transitioning student is assigned a riser form which contains information about that student ranging from academic levels to social/emotional characteristics. Transition or exchange meetings (frequently referred to as move-up meetings) occur at which teachers exchange riser forms and are encouraged to engage in discussion regarding the students. The riser form was the component that teachers indicated was present in all of their transitions.

Variation across responses was noted related the transition-related processes that occurred beyond the riser form exchange. For some, these components comprised the entirety of the transition collaboration. Others described additional collaboration ranging from having the sending teacher come to the middle school classroom to observe students whose needs required increased consideration to sending and receiving teachers jointly writing eighth grade IEPs. Many of the teachers explained that they regularly engaged in professional learning community meetings at which the topic of transitions (and students who are transitioning) are discussed. Those who did not have such opportunities expressed strong interest in participating in them.

Teachers in this study identified significant changes between the middle and high school environments as potentially problematic for their transitioning students. Of particular concern was the increased presence of drug and gang activity at the high school setting. Teachers readily acknowledged this danger, though it was unclear what can and is being doing to guard against it. Participants expressed concern over the fact that students will experience far more serious consequences to their behavior as they enter high school. Indeed, research shows that students with EBD experience a nearly two fold increase in suspensions and expulsions in high school as they had in previous grades (Wagner et al, 2005). Teachers were particularly adamant that

students must realize that behavior previously dealt with in school may now result in police involvement. Based on the findings of this study, it appears that explicit discussion with students regarding these more serious consequences was the primary means by which teachers were attempted to prepare them. These discussions typically come in the aftermath of a poor behavior choice as a part of the reflection period. Finally, teachers worked to help students understand that high school credits are earned and that unlike previous grades, where students all move up, a lack of credits will prevent a student from advancing. The teachers in this study were utilizing a mixture of strategies to assist students in this preparation. Again, this preparation appears to primarily take the form of one on one discussion, often as a result of insufficient academic progress. For example, one teacher used visual aides to help her students recognize the achievement levels at which they would or would not receive credit.

When asked to consider the ways in which they believed that the transition process could be improved, teachers frequently cited the need for additional time. Adequate time to properly facilitate a transition directly correlates, in the view of most of the teachers, to the smoothness with which a student transitions.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

At the outset of this study, four evidence based components were identified based on their potentially positive impact on the transition from middle to high school for students with EBD. The findings of this study seem to substantiate the existing literature.

Research has shown that sending teachers need to initiate the transition process (Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen, 2009; Kinney, 2006). This suggestion was echoed in the current study. The results of this study indicate that sending teachers do currently initiate the transition process, though significant variations in the design of this initiation were noted between teachers.

Studies have highlighted both the challenging conditions in the high school environment, as well as the possible negative effects that these changes can have on students (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999; Cooper & Liou, 2007; Reyes et al., 2000). The findings of this study indicate that the sending teachers were indeed very cognizant of the need for students to assimilate skills that will help them succeed in the high school environment. The widely varying responses regarding what these skills were would suggest that there are set of skills that students may need in order to realize their full potential (and avoid setbacks) in high school. Furthermore, it is reasonable to conclude that continued investigation to identify best practices for preparing students with EBD for their high school experience would likely be beneficial. Such exploration could seek to understand what preparations may be useful. Additionally, this finding supports the assertion that sending and receiving teachers stand to benefit from additional collaboration time. Time spent indentifying these important skills are and contemplating how best to teach them to their students might be of particular use.

There is evidence that curriculum articulation is an important consideration in effective transition planning (Brown, Vincent, Anfara, & Roney, 2004; Shielack & Seeley, 2010). However, curriculum articulation was not identified as a theme in this study. The findings of this study, coupled with the relative lack of investigation into curriculum articulation as a component of transition, suggest that curriculum articulation is an area that should be examined for its role the planning for middle to high school transitions of students with EBD.

Evidence suggests that peer mentoring may be a useful tool for assisting transitioning students in becoming accustomed to their new environment (Lampert, 2005; Mizelle, 2005; Reyes, 2012). It can be extrapolated that, with proper planning and structure, a system of peer mentoring may be a useful tool in assisting middle school with EBD as they transition to high

school. This study found that, for these participants, mentoring does not currently play a significant role in the middle to high school transition process for students with EBD. Many students report an increasing sense of isolation as they enter secondary school (Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000). Consideration of a peer mentoring system may be a useful tool mitigating these concerns.

Beyond the above considerations, participants noted several areas that appeared to enhance the transition from middle to high school. One such area was the way in which sending and receiving teachers handled the initial exchange of student information. It would seem that interactions that involve exchanging descriptions of a student's characteristics and personality occur in almost all transitions. These forms are designed to give receiving teachers (as well as other school personnel) initial information for supporting an incoming student. Given that the receiving teachers may have no other context or knowledge of the student with which to consider, it should be recognized that these rarer forms bear enormous ramifications for the student that they represent. This is particularly true with regard to the social/emotional and behavioral histories of students with EBD. With this in mind, it may be wise to engage in further exploration as to the best ways to handle this information exchange process. The determinations made from such explorations could inform how teachers are trained to facilitate these exchanges. It could be argued, particularly in the case of students with EBD, that sharing of student history with a teacher that has no previous relationship with that student may increase the likelihood of distracting preconceptions. Given the wide array of considerations that often accompany a student with EBD, it seems as though at least some system of providing receiving teachers with important information pertaining to incoming students is necessary. Therefore, it would be most

appropriate to view this argument as further support for a carefully designed and executed process.

While the findings of this study do not reflect any particular pervasive perception of parents by teachers of students with EBD, it does provide the opportunity to give pause and carefully reflect on potential perceptions. Perceptions of parents of EBD as non- or inactive, it seems, must be acted upon carefully. This may be a useful observation in that it would indicate that additional time and resources in building the parent – teacher relationship could be fruitful. The apparent danger of such assertions is that it creates a risk of viewing efforts to build this relationship as unlikely to succeed and thus of little utility. This thought paradigm potentially gives rise to a state of complacency in which teachers may be reticent to extend sufficient relationship building attempts and thus never realize the full potential of what is widely acknowledged as key component of a smooth transition: strong teacher – parent communication. It should also be recognized that this perceived reluctance on the part of parents of students with EBD may, at least in part, be a result of previous disappointing interactions with the schools system. If it is acknowledged that teacher – parent communication is a key component in transition; it would behoove the field of EBD to explore ways in which to optimize this process.

The findings of this study beg recognition of the considerations and variables that comprise the transition from middle to high school for students with EBD. The complexities that come forward serve as a reminder that any potential system for supporting these transitions would be well served to incorporate sufficient individual flexibility and sensitivity. This study also highlights a lag in research, particularly given current knowledge regarding the importance of a successful (and productive) ninth grade experience for students with EBD. Work and research is being done to support students with EBD as they transition from high school to post-

high school, and this work is certainly commendable and relevant. Unfortunately, given the national dropout rate for students with EBD of 44.9 percent (U.S. Department of Education, 2008), an alarmingly high number of students with EBD are unlikely to enjoy the benefits of this work, as they will have dropped out of school. Thus, additional considerations appear necessary to improve these outcomes. This study aims to serve as encouragement to begin recognizing that the process of helping students with EBD avoid negative post-school outcomes begins well before high school. The middle to high school transition is an important part of this process.

### **Limitations**

This project has generated interesting insight into a variety of participants' views which has implications for the transition process. Clearly, the sample does limit the extent to which the findings can be generalized to other individuals in other settings as all of the teachers in this study work in the same geographic area, and were selected based on a convenience sampling. These factors limit the degree to which the findings can be generalized. The sample size of seven teachers in this study limits the ability of the findings to be interpreted as widespread. Interview data reflected the perceptions of individual teachers. The system of coding for this study was based on researcher perception and did not include a reliability check from another coder. A review of the interview transcripts revealed that course of each conversation was dependent on teacher responses and thus the level of prompting varied to some extent

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## Appendix A: Teacher Recruitment Email

Dear (Insert name),

An individual in the field of High Incidence Disabilities has nominated you as a teacher of students with Emotional Behavioral Disabilities. The purpose of this email is to invite you to participate in my study based on this nomination. The purpose of this study is to better understand the ways in which students with Emotional Behavioral Disabilities are supported in their transition between middle school and high school. This research is a University of Washington research study.

I have attached a consent form to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether or not to be in the study. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, what I am asking you to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called “informed consent” and the form is record of this. I will have a paper copy of it at the face-to-face interview (should you choose to participate) and you can choose to sign it then. I will give you a copy of this form for your records.

The person that nominated you will have no knowledge of whether you choose to participate or not and all of your information will be kept confidential. If you choose to participate I will ask you to complete a face-to-face interview in a location and at a time that is convenient to you. The interviews should take approximately 45 min to 1 hour.

As a token of appreciation for your participation in the study (should you chose to participate), you will be offered a \$10 gift certificate to Starbucks Coffee. You will receive this certificate at the outset of the interview. Should you choose to discontinue the interview or withdraw your participation from the study at any time; the certificate will still be yours to keep.

You can ask questions any time by emailing me at (Insert Investigator Email) or by calling (Insert Investigator Phone). Please note I cannot guarantee the confidentiality of email. You can change your mind about being in the study at any time. Any identifying information will be kept in a secure location.

With best regards,

Jared Myers

(Insert Investigator Email)

(Insert Investigator Phone)

## Appendix B: Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON  
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

Title of Study: Supporting Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders through the Middle School  
to High School Transition

### **Principal Investigator:**

Jared Myers, Graduate Student, College of Education, (Insert Investigator Phone); (Insert Investigator Email)\*

\*Please note that I cannot guarantee the confidentiality of information sent via email.

### **Investigators' Statement:**

I am asking you to be in my research study. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether or not to be in the study. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, what I am asking you to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called “informed consent.” I will give you a copy of this form for your records.

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This study seeks to understand the ways in which the transitions of students with emotional behavioral disabilities are supported in their transition from middle school to high school.

### What I will do:

If you choose to participate, prior to any data collection I will give you a unique pseudonym. I will create a form that has the names of all participants and their unique pseudonym. I will only use the unique pseudonym when analyzing the data. The form with your unique pseudonym and name on it will be stored in a separate secure location and will only be used for incomplete data to identify the participants contact information.

What I will ask you to do:

Provide your consent to participate in a face-to-face interview in a location and at a time that is convenient to you. The interviews should take approximately 45 min to 1 hour. These interviews will be recorded for transcription.

You can choose whether or not you would like to be a part of this study and have your responses from the face-to-face interview to be used in my data collection and analyses. If you agree to participate to be part this study, I will have a paper copy of this consent form at the face-to-face interview and you can choose to sign it then. You will be provided a copy of this form for your records.

**RISK, STRESS, OR DISCOMFORT**

Sometimes people feel uncomfortable about having their responses used in research. I have explained how I will protect the confidentiality of your research data below. If you feel uncomfortable at any time, you may withdraw from the study. You may contact me (see contact info above) if you have any questions or concerns about the study.

**BENEFITS OF THE STUDY**

The hope of this study is to better understand the best ways in which to support the transitions of students with emotional and/or behavioral disabilities in their transition between middle school and high school. With this information, we hope to be able to better support these students. This study may not directly benefit you.

**OTHER INFORMATION**

Your participation is voluntary. I will remove your name and any other identifiable information about you from the study data once collected. I will assign a unique study code to your data, and link this code to your identifiable information. This information will be kept in a secure location. At any time, you can decide not to participate in the study. Your decision to participate or decline will in no way affect your status or relationship with the University of Washington.

Government or university staff sometimes reviews studies such as this one to make sure they are being done safely and legally. If a review of this study takes place, your records may be examined. The reviewers will protect your privacy. The study records will not be used to put you at legal risk of harm.

Jared Myers

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Name of Investigator

Signature of Investigator

Date

**Subject's statement**

“This study has been explained to me. I volunteer to take part in this research. I have had a chance to ask questions. If I have questions later about the research, I can ask one of the researchers listed above. If I have questions about my rights as a research subject, I can call the Human Subjects Division at (206) 543-0098. I will receive a copy of this consent form.”

\_\_\_\_ I agree to allow you to record my interview.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Subject's Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Subject's signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Copies to:

Subject

Investigator

## Appendix C: Interview Protocol

### Interview Protocol

#### Background

- 1) What is your educational background?
- 2) How long have you been teaching students with emotional and/or behavioral disabilities?
- 3) Tell me about your classroom including the learners, the level of inclusion, and your experience teaching in it.

#### Transition Support

- 4) Tell me about the process of supporting an EBD student as they transition from middle school to high school.
- 5) What elements or processes do you feel are supportive of students with EBD as they transition from middle school to high school?
  - (a) To what degree do you feel that these elements or processes are being utilized in current educational practice?
- 6) What resources do you have available to you as you support the transition of the students whose IEPs you manage in their transition to high school? How appropriate are these resources?
  - (a) Are there any additional resources that you believe would be beneficial?
- 7) How, if at all, do you communicate with the families of students regarding support during the middle school to high school transition?

8) Tell me about an interaction you had with a parent/guardian regarding the transition of his/her son or daughter's transition to high school. What information did you share with them? What types of questions did they ask you?