

# **A Grounded Theory for Identifying Students with Emotional Disturbance: Promising Practices for Assessment, Intervention, and Service Delivery**

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A qualitative grounded theory study examined how practicing professionals involved in the ED identification process reconstructed the category of “emotional disturbance” as it applied to students in an alternative educational setting. A grounded theory integrates six emergent themes and essentially reframes the existing ED criteria in contemporary practice. The new grounded theory reflects a move away from “exclusive” identification practices toward a more collaborative and reflexive problem-solving model with a focus on student need and best interest. Implications of the emergent grounded theory for policy and practice and the changing role of the school psychologist are discussed.

*KEYWORDS:* emotional disturbance, social maladjustment, exclusionary clause, special education, grounded theory

Children and youth with emotional and behavioral disorders are considered the most under-identified and underserved of all the disability groups (Forness & Kavale, 2001; Gresham, 2005, 2007; Merrell & Walker, 2004). Without proper identification and treatment such students pose substantial challenges to their teachers, administrators and peers, including classroom disruptions and school safety issues. Moreover, longitudinal studies indicate that, compared to their non-disabled peers, youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities experience higher rates of delinquency, juvenile incarcerations, school dropout, teen pregnancy, suicide, and substance abuse (Wagner & Cameto, 2004; Wagner, Kutash, Duchnowski, & Epstein, 2005).

Forness and Kavale (2000) stated, “Of several challenges that continue to face special education regarding children with emotional or behavioral disorders, the problem of eligibility is among the most pressing” (p. 267). Epidemiological estimates indicate that approximately 20%, or one in five school age children, exhibit a mental health condition causing at least mild functional impairment (Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, 2004; Department of Health and Human Services, 1999; National Institute of Health, 2001). In contrast, the percentage of students identified for special education supports and services under the classification of emotional disturbance (ED) has remained constant at approximately 1% of the school-age population (Forness & Kavale, 2001; National Center for Education Statistics, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Many of the problems associated with the under identification of students with behavioral and emotional problems for appropriate supports and services are attributed to the federal definition of emotional disturbance found in IDEA (Gresham, 2005, 2007; Hughes & Bray, 2004; Merrell & Walker, 2004). The identification controversy focuses on an “exclusionary clause” that essentially prohibits students with social maladjustment (SM) from receiving special education services under the criteria for emotional disturbance (ED). Critics have referred to the definition of ED as “nebulous and highly subjective” (Gresham, 2005, p. 215), “vague and uncertain” (Olympia, Farley, Christiansen, Petterson, Jenson & Clark, 2004, p. 835) and even “bordering on oxymoronic” (Gresham, 2007, p. 330). Bower (1982) summarizes, “When such definitions limit or prescribe who may or may not receive services, the definitional problem becomes significant for children, their families, and school systems” (p. 55).

## THE DEFINITION OF EMOTIONAL DISTURBANCE

The federal criteria for emotional disturbance found in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997; IDEIA, 2004) specify that a student must exhibit one or more of five characteristics, over a long period of time, and to a marked degree that adversely affects educational performance. The five characteristics are (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; (c) inappropriate types of behaviors or feelings under normal circumstances; (d) a general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; and (e) a tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with school or personal problems.

Additionally, Section 34 CFR 300.8 (c)(4)(ii) of the definition states, “Emotional Disturbance includes schizophrenia. Emotional Disturbance does not apply to children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they are emotionally disturbed.” The latter is referred to as the “exclusionary clause,” because it essentially excludes students considered to be socially maladjusted from receiving special education services under the criteria for ED (Costenbader & Buntaine, 1999).

### Background of the Definition

The etiology of the definition of ED incorporated in the Education of All Handicapped Children’s Act (1975) and subsequently IDEA (1997) and IDEIA (2004) can be traced to psychologist Eli Bower’s landmark study of the characteristics of ED in children (Bower, 1982; Duncan, 2007; Merrell & Walker, 2004). Bower’s defining characteristics of ED are based on a 1957 study of over 6,000 school-age children in 200 classes at the elementary, junior high, and high school level in 75 school districts across the country. Unbeknownst to their teachers, 207 of these children (162 boys and 45 girls) were designated as emotionally disturbed and participated in mental health services. Based on the analysis of approximately 6,000 returns, the major differences in behaviors between the designated and non-designated students resulted in the five characteristics included in the federal definition of ED.

With few exceptions, the federal definition of ED has undergone minor alterations since the initiation of the Education of All Handicapped Children’s Act in 1975. One change was that the original definition included students identified with autism. This term was removed from the category of ED in the early 1980s and placed in the communication disorders group. Autism later became its own disability category. In 1997, with the authorization of IDEA, the term *seriously* was removed from the federal definition; instead of *seriously emotionally disturbed*, the term became *emotionally disturbed* or ED (IDEA, 1997). Despite strong appeals from professional organizations (Forness, 2003; Forness & Knitzer, 1992; National Association of School Psychologists, 2007), there were no significant changes made in the definition of emotionally disturbed in the re-authorization of IDEA in 2004. In summary, students considered to be socially maladjusted have been excluded from coverage under the special education classification of ED since the inception of the Act in 1975.

## OVERVIEW OF THE ARTICLE

This article reviews the results of a qualitative grounded theory dissertation study that examined how practitioners in an alternative and correctional education setting identified students with emotional and behavioral difficulties for special education services, given the criteria for ED. A review of the literature suggested that the problem of eligibility for special education services under the classification of ED is compounded by definitional problems surrounding the terms ED and SM as well as ambiguity associated with the exclusionary clause (Gresham, 2007; Hughes & Bray, 2004; Merrill & Walker, 2004; Olympia et al., 2004). Further, the literature revealed a lack of an underlying theoretical foundation for the definition of emotional disturbance and consistent processes by which practitioners address these criteria. Thus, a qualitative grounded theory research design was implemented to explore a primary and secondary research question posed by the study:

1. How do practitioners identify students with emotional and behavioral difficulties for special education services under the classification of emotional disturbance?
2. How do practitioners distinguish between emotional disturbance and social maladjustment for purposes of special education classification?

### **GROUNDING THEORY METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN**

Grounded theory employs a systematic set of procedures to inductively develop theory that is “grounded” in data collected directly from participants’ on the basis of their lived experiences (Charmaz, 2006, 2008, 2009; Fassinger, 2005; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). The theory produced from grounded theory methodology is based in practitioners’ real-world practice, is sensitive to practitioners in the setting, and represents the complexities found in participants’ experiences. The ultimate aim of a grounded theory study is to generate new theory “from the data that accounts for data” (Charmaz, 2008, p. 157). Glaser (1992) stated, “Grounded theory renders as faithfully as possible a theory discovered in the data which explains the subjects’ main concerns and how they are processed” (p. 14).

Grounded theory methodology was best suited for this study because the research questions and problems indicated the need to develop a sound theoretical foundation for identifying emotional disturbance and because a sound theoretical foundation does not currently exist. Further, the existing ED identification criteria lack clear guidelines for defining social maladjustment and for distinguishing between ED and SM for purposes of special education classification. Skeat and Perry (2008) surmise that grounded theory is considered to be an appropriate choice for a research study “when a phenomenon has not been adequately described, or when there are few theories that explain it” (p. 97).

#### **Context of the Study**

A grounded theory research design was implemented in the context of a county alternative and correctional education program, which serves approximately 8,000 children and youth enrolled in juvenile corrections, social service, and community day school settings in a large suburban county in Southern California. A profile of typical youth enrolled in this setting involves adolescents who are referred by local school districts, or temporarily placed in group homes, or incarcerated in local probation or sheriff operated facilities, on probation, homeless, or who are teen parents (OCDE, 2008). As a high proportion of such students exhibit complex emotional, social, and behavioral needs, this setting was well suited for exploring practitioners’ perceptions of ED and their underlying social and psychological processes for distinguishing between ED and SM for purposes of special education classification.

#### **Participants**

The participants were 27 practicing professionals, and one parent, involved in the ED identification process for students enrolled in the county alternative education programs and who were referred for special education services. The practitioners were eight school psychologists, eight administrators from county and local school districts, three special education and general education teachers, two clinicians, and two designated instructional service providers – a speech and language specialist and a school nurse. Four practitioners were representatives from collaborative county agencies including a psychologist from the County Mental Health Care Agency, the coordinator of Foster Youth Services, and a juvenile court probation officer. One parent of an emotionally disturbed student also participated.

### **METHODS**

Signature characteristics of a grounded theory approach are the processes of constant comparison whereby data are continually compared and contrasted at each level of analysis; theoretical sampling where concepts arising from the data guide the researcher to subsequent data collection; and theoretical sensitivity, which relies on the researcher’s intuitive and interpretive analysis of the data (Charmaz,

2006, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In a grounded theory study, data collection and analysis procedures continue until “saturation” is achieved, where “new data is constantly compared to emerging concepts until no new themes, categories, or relationships are discovered” (Fassinger, 2005, p. 157).

### **Data Collection**

Data collection consisted of the following four methods: (a) semi-structured interviews conducted with each of the 28 participants in the study; (b) five focus group interviews conducted with small groups of participants on topics selected from critical issues that emerged from the data, such as substance abuse and emotional disturbance and trauma-induced emotional disturbance; (c) document reviews collected from over 300 pages of case conference notes, multi-disciplinary assessment reports, parent correspondence, evaluations for county mental health services, and relevant inter-office email correspondence; and (d) five participant observations conducted in classrooms and programs for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities throughout the county. Because the sampling procedures in a grounded theory study are theoretically driven, participants were added and procedures, such as the structured interview questions, were modified based on concepts emerging from the data. For example, the director of Foster Youth Services was added as an interview participant following an emerging line of inquiry about trauma and emotional disturbance. Focus groups were conducted with small groups of practitioners to further develop concepts involving critical topics that emerged from the data, such as substance abuse and emotional trauma. Documents such as mental health evaluations and case notes were reviewed as they emerged through the simultaneous processes of data collection and analysis. Such qualitative data collection methods served to contextualize and “ground” the data in a contemporary practice setting.

### **Data Analysis**

Three distinct but overlapping generic stages of data analysis were implemented including the initial, interim, and theoretical stages. Within the grounded theory approach, these generic stages translated to the processes inherent in open coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding. *Open coding* refers to the first level of coding in grounded theory analysis, “in which data are transcribed and broken down into units of meaning” (Fassinger, 2005, p. 160). During open coding, the researcher labels and assigns units of meaning to incidents, actions, and events derived from the data. *Focused coding* occurs as the researcher begins identifying preliminary themes and concepts emerging from the data. In this stage the researcher “focuses” on the most commonly occurring codes. *Theoretical coding* is the final stage in which the researcher begins merging concepts into groups or thematic categories. The grounded theory emerges from an analysis of the interrelationships among the themes. As recommended in grounded theory methodology, all stages incorporated signature grounded theory processes of constant comparison, theoretical sampling, and theoretical sensitivity.

## **FINDINGS**

Grounded theory is inductively developed through systematic analysis of theoretical building blocks, including codes, concepts, categories, and themes, which are then integrated into an emergent grounded theory. Following the grounded theory research design, the data – which yielded over 500 pages of transcribed interviews, observations, and field notes – were analyzed in stages corresponding to initial, focused, and theoretical coding processes. In the initial stage of data analysis, the researcher engaged in line-by-line open coding to label and assign units of meaning to incidents, actions, and events in the transcribed data. For example, participants offered constructs such as “depression,” “anxiety,” and “mood disorders” as descriptors of emotional disturbance. In the interim stage of data analysis, focused coding involved reconceptualizing the most frequent codes into conceptual categories. Focused codes representing concepts such as “relational difficulties,” “social skills deficits,” and “lacking peer acceptance” were grouped into the larger conceptual category of social functioning. Integration of categorical concepts led to the development of the six emergent themes that formed the grounded theory. In sum, the findings of the study are represented by six emergent themes that reflect the core

social and psychological processes practitioners are implementing to identify students with emotional disturbance.

*Emergent Theme One: Practitioners identified emotional disturbance along three inter-related dimensions – a social, behavioral, and emotional.* Emergent theme 1 concerns ED as having three interrelated dimensions, social, behavioral, and emotional, which practitioners used in identifying students with ED. According to the participants, students with emotional disturbance were identified as (a) struggling socially with interpersonal relationships; (b) demonstrating atypical behaviors and extreme reactions; and (c) having difficulty managing their feelings and emotions. Practitioners emphasized the interrelatedness of the three dimensions of ED. For instance, case notes reflect one practitioner's observation that,

*“Levi’s [a pseudonym] changing mood influences his classroom behavior and his ability to form consistent and lasting relationships.” One psychologist commented, “Oftentimes when we work with our kids we find they don’t necessarily always fit one category, under that criterion. There’s maybe a combination of one, two, or three characteristics.”*

*Emergent Theme 2: Practitioners distinguished between ED and SM with respect to the nature of the student’s social, behavioral, and emotional functioning.* Emergent theme 2 concerns how practitioners distinguished between ED and SM. Essentially, practitioners distinguished between ED and SM with respect to (a) the nature of the student’s interpersonal relationships; (b) the nature of the student’s behavior; and (c) the student’s ability to control and manage his or her emotions. For example, a special education administrator stated:

*So as far as SM criteria, the simplest way I tend to look at those issues is, what degree of control is the student able to operationalize or recognize? How much of it is their own choice versus how much of it is the result of things that they don’t have control over?*

Practitioners discussed their concerns about the subjectivity that is often involved in distinguishing between ED and SM. One psychologist explained:

*I think a lot of times we have to argue whether it’s conduct or emotional issues. That’s when I find it difficult. Sometimes there are cases where you can’t be sure if it’s one or the other. It’s a person’s interpretation of the data.*

*Emergent Theme 3: Practitioners implemented reflexive and collaborative identification processes.* Emergent theme 3 concerns identification processes as reflexive and collaborative. Practitioners implemented key processes that addressed the unique needs and challenges of students in this setting. Specifically, these processes involved (a) adhering to the child find process; (b) collaborating with peers; (c) exploring the etiology of the child’s behavior; and (d) linking students’ needs to available services.

A school psychologist discussed the value of collaborative teamwork:

*And I think that’s what I really value about it being a team, is that you get to hear so many voices. Now a lot of people look to the school psychologist to make that determination, which I think is one flaw that happens too often. But the school psychologist should just share his or her information and ask, “What does the team think?” So it allows for a more complete discussion of what the child needs.*

*Emergent Theme 4: Practitioners recognized new student trends that are complicating the identification process.* Emergent theme 4 concerns student trends that are compounding the identification process. Practitioners recognized new student trends such as co-occurring emotional and behavioral disorders, substance abuse and ED, and trauma induced ED. For example, a special education teacher commented on the recent rise in cases involving substance abuse and mental illness:

*Of the kids that have been referred over the last few years, I’ve seen a lot of kids present as basically psychotic, probably because of drugs. So, that’s a whole different type of kid that I haven’t so much worked with.*

Such issues, which are not specifically addressed in the existing ED criteria, prompted practitioners to engage in pragmatic problem-solving. For instance, one practitioner described her pragmatic problem-solving approach to identifying a student with both substance abuse and ED:

*My feeling, and it's not even in a book, is that if it's been a period of time – say over six months without drug use – and they're still hearing voices and having hallucinations, then it's a drug induced psychosis.*

*Emergent Theme 5: Practitioners' decisions were informed by ethical considerations related to caring.* Emergent theme 5 concerns the importance of ethical considerations in the identification process. The data revealed that practitioners took into account ethical considerations related to caring, focusing on students' best interests, and establishing harmonious professional relationships. In a focus group, a school psychologist described how feelings of compassion might influence his approach to determining eligibility under the classification of emotional disturbance:

*What do you do when you think about it? I have compassion. I'm going to bend this.*

Practitioners expressed professional conflicts associated with the exclusionary clause. Referring to students with socially maladjusted behaviors who did not qualify for special education services, one psychologist stated:

*The problem I have with the exclusionary clause is – that's where it stops. You don't qualify for special education, that's the end... It's like a death sentence!*

In a focus group discussion about ethical conflicts and the exclusionary clause, another practitioner asserted:

*So who's to say that that kid does not qualify for services because he's SM versus an ED, is kind of how I see it. If a kid has needs, they have needs!*

*Emergent Theme 6: Practitioners acknowledged socially unjust practices that impinged upon the identification process.* Emergent theme 6 concerned the need to take into account social justice perspectives. Practitioners acknowledged socially unjust practices that impinged upon the process of identifying students with ED: under-identifying students with ED, delays in providing services to ED students, and shifting the responsibility for identifying ED students from one organization to another. One psychologist working in a traditional high school setting observed how students with behavior and emotional disorders are often marginalized:

*You see these kids who absolutely are unable to sit in a classroom, because their minds are going 100 mph. And they might be filled with agitation or rage, and certainly not feeling that today's history lesson is going to make a difference in their lives ... But our school system is a rigid system. What we ask of kids is to sit in place for 45 minutes and listen to a teacher talk about a subject that you're not really interested.*

## DISCUSSION

The integration of the six emergent themes constitutes the new theory, which reflects practitioners' re-construction of the category of emotional disturbance as it applied to students in an alternative education setting. The emergent grounded theory suggests that practitioners were moving well beyond the narrow confines of the federal definition of ED, resulting in a reframing of the federal criteria in contemporary practice.

The federal definition and criteria for emotional disturbance are based on five discrete and subjective behavioral characteristics. An 'exclusionary clause' distinguishes between students with ED and SM, conceptualizing these as competing entities. Moreover, the existing criteria are based on research conducted over five decades ago, on children that had limited exposure to violence, trauma, substance abuse, and other societal factors that pose challenges to practitioners in contemporary education settings.

A distinction between the outcomes of this study and the federal criteria was that practitioners conceptualized ED more holistically along three interrelated dimensions, rather than limiting their conceptualizations to the identification of five discrete characteristics included in the federal guidelines. The three dimensions of ED described by practitioners in this study integrated the areas of social, behavioral, and emotional functioning together more holistically, taking into consideration “the whole child.” The inter-connectivity between social, behavioral, and emotional functioning is supported by Beck, Beck, Jolly, and Steer (2005), the authors of *Beck's Adolescent Rating Scales*, who describe ED as a “constellation” of symptoms that are often “difficult to distinguish and often do not crystallize into distinctive syndromes until late adolescence” (p. vii).

Another distinction is seen in practitioners' interpretation of the exclusionary clause. Rather than two competing polarities, practitioners examined ED and SM along three fluid continua of social, emotional, and behavioral functioning. Bower's original research, on which the federal ED definition and criteria are based, established a connection between social, behavioral, and emotional functioning by identifying the characteristics of ED as inclusive of “inappropriate types of behaviors” and “an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.” By implementing reflexive processes, such as collaborating with multiple service providers and exploring the etiology of behaviors, practitioners identified relationships between students' maladaptive behavioral functioning and underlying emotional concerns; for instance, externalizing behaviors stemming from a child's emotional trauma, or co-morbid behavioral and emotional conditions, such as ADHD and depression. The inter-connectivity between social, emotional, and behavioral functioning in children and adolescents is demonstrated by an abundance of research in neuroscience and psychiatry (Forness & Kavale, 2001; Perry, 2006; Perry & Azid, 1999; Van der Kolk, 2006).

Emergent themes 5 and 6 reflect practitioners' concerns and tensions regarding the exclusionary clause that impinged upon the identification process. Frick and Faircloth (2007) acknowledged “moral tensions” among administrators involved in special education decisions. Forness (1992) discussed the “professional dilemma” posed by the exclusionary clause:

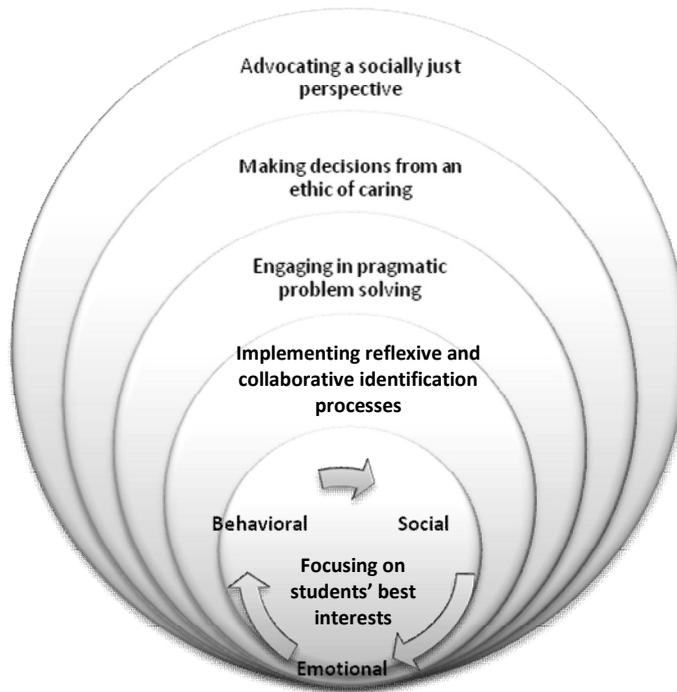
School psychologists, special educators, school counselors, and others concerned with children or youth with emotional or behavioral disorders face a rather profound professional dilemma in regard to social maladjustment. In the majority of states, rendering a judgment about special education eligibility often forces them to make a differential diagnosis between serious emotional disturbance and social maladjustment with rather flimsy procedural guidelines, questionable empirical precedent, and frequently incomplete or one-sided case histories. (p. 4)

Practitioners' resolution of such moral tensions pointed to a decision making process that takes into account a caring ethical perspective (Noddings, 2003). Practitioners' ethical considerations related to caring are consistent with the “Best Interests” model (Stefkovich, 2006), which places “the best interests of the students” at the heart of ethical decision-making. Further, such considerations led to practitioners' advocacy for the rights and needs of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities in alternative education settings.

### THEORETICAL MODEL

Taken together, the six emergent themes constitute a new grounded theory that explains how practitioners identify students with ED and how they interpret ED and SM for purposes of special education classification. Figure 1 illustrates the grounded theory as six concentric circles reflecting the six emergent themes – the core social and psychological processes – that explain how practitioners are identifying students with ED. At the center of the model are students' needs and best interests. The core circle depicts the three inter-related dimensions – the social, behavioral, and emotional – by which practitioners examine ED and SM. The six shaded, concentric circles indicate the interactive and reflexive processes involved in identifying ED and SM. Moreover, the outer two circles suggest that an ethic of caring and a socially just perspective guide the ED identification process.

**Figure 1.** *A theoretical model for identifying students with ED.*



## IMPLICATIONS

The emergent grounded theory has implications for policy and practice regarding the ED identification criteria and procedures for identifying and meeting the needs of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities in contemporary education settings.

### Implications for Policy

Recommendations for special education policy stemming from this study include: (a) the need to update the federal ED definition and criteria to reflect current findings that demonstrate the interrelationship between social, emotional and behavioral functioning in children and adolescents; (b) the need to develop procedural guidelines to address identification problems posed by contemporary student trends, such as substance abuse and ED and co-existing emotional and behavioral conditions; and (c) the need for policy decisions that are informed by ethical considerations and a socially just perspective.

Further, the new grounded theory supports the rationalization for the alternative emotional/behavioral disturbance (E/BD) criteria proposed by Forness and Knitzer (1992) and endorsed by the NASP (2007). Merrell and Walker (2004) stated, "The term *Emotional* or *Behavioral Disorder* itself has the face validity of being more descriptive and less stigmatizing than ED" (p. 907), a perspective echoed by several participants in this study. Moreover, the outcomes of this study point toward a move away from "exclusive" identification practices and toward the establishment of comprehensive school-wide decision-making and intervention systems, such as Response to Intervention (RtI) and School-based Mental Health Models.

### Implications for Practice

The theoretical model resulting from this study envisions a collaborative and consultative role for the school psychologist as an integral member of a comprehensive school-wide intervention team. As stated by Olympia et al., (2004), "The role of the school psychologist as gatekeeper is contrasted to that of the

more positive role as facilitator” (p. 835). The expanded role of the school psychologist may include consultation with teachers, administrators, and other education staff; collaboration with interagency service providers, such as mental health, probation, and social services; and resource person regarding identification and intervention practices for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities.

The emphasis on reflexive identification processes suggests that school psychologists will begin to implement alternative assessment approaches with students who demonstrate emotional and behavioral needs. Contemporary practices may include reflexive processes such as child find, collaboration among multiple service providers, exploring the etiology of behavior, and linking student need to services. Further, the school psychologist, who is trained to facilitate collaborative intervention planning and strength and needs based assessment, is equipped to facilitate other evidenced-based identification and intervention processes such as RtI, Positive Intervention and Supports (PBIS), Wraparound, and Schoolwide Mental Health Models (Adelman & Taylor, 2010; Eber, 2003; Gresham, 2005; 2007; Heathfield & Clark, 2004, Hoagwood & Johnson, 2003).

Finally, the emergent theory envisions that school psychologists will take an active role in leading reform in special education policies. An ethic of caring and a socially just perspective suggest that school psychologists will confront assumptions and practices that currently serve as barriers to identifying students with emotional and behavioral disabilities for special education supports and services. Moreover, school psychologists will take a lead role in advocating for the rights and needs of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities.

### **Future Research Directions**

Merrell and Walker (2004) contend that the current focus on the exclusionary clause may actually hinder the advancement of social maladjustment as a subspecialty in special education. Heathfield and Clark (2004) assert that it is time to move beyond the ED/BD controversy and more efficaciously address the needs of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. Therefore, a recommendation for future research resulting from this study is to focus on identification and intervention models, including RtI and PBIS, that more efficaciously identify and meet the needs of students with emotional and behavior disorders.

### **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

The emergent theory generated by this study is grounded in practitioners’ lived experiences, is sensitive to their concerns, and reflects the complexities of their real world practice. As such, the new grounded theory reflects contemporary perspectives about identifying and meeting the needs of students with emotional and behavioral difficulties: social, emotional and behavioral functioning as fluid and interrelated dimensions; identification processes as collaborative and reflexive; pragmatic problem-solving approaches in response to new student trends; and decision making informed by ethical considerations and a socially just perspective. The emergent theory holds promise for reconstructing the ED identification process from a student centered perspective and for addressing the rights and needs of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities.

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