

Spring 4-28-2018

## Emotional Disorder Guidelines and the Educational Placement of Students with Emotional Disorders

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Linda J. Spencer

*Concordia University - Portland*

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Concordia University–Portland

College of Education

Doctorate of Education Program

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Emotional Disorder Guidelines and the Educational Placement of Students with  
Emotional Disorders

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Concordia University–Portland

College of Education

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the College of Education

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in

Teacher Leadership

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2018

## **Abstract**

Decades of research indicate that students with Emotional Disorders (ED) are often not identified and therefore do not receive the support they require to meet their academic and socio-emotional needs. Federal guidelines and definitions of Emotional Disorders are ambiguous, and this affects the identification and educational placement of students with emotional disorders. This quantitative research study examines the relationships between the clarity of Emotional Disorder guidelines and the educational placement of students with emotional disorders. This study consisted of an anonymous survey of special educators and special education administrators. There were strong, significant, and positive correlations between the clarity of Emotional Disorder guidelines and variables involving the educational placement of students with emotional disorders: role in educational placement, restrictions on educational placement, type of placement, alternative placement considerations, and needs addressed. In order to test these associations, a categorical variable was created from the clarity of guidelines scale score that ranged from lack of clarity to crystal clarity. An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test was conducted for these groups, noting significant differences in the mean scores for groups in clarity of Emotional Disorders and restrictions on educational placement, type of placement, and needs addressed. These results suggest that clarity of Emotional Disorder guidelines is important and that special educators and administrators would benefit from education about Emotional Disorder guidelines. Further empirical research should be conducted to examine the impact of the clarity of Emotional Disorder guidelines on the educational placement of students.

*Keywords:* emotional disorders, educational placement, educational guidelines

## **Dedication**

This doctoral journey is dedicated to my family and friends for their unwavering support and encouragement. It is also dedicated to the special education practitioners who have dedicated their professional lives to meeting the needs of students with emotional disorders.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge the people who helped me to reach this goal. First, I want to acknowledge Dr. Christopher Maddox, Dr. Leslie Loughmiller, and Dr. John Mendes, my committee members who invested in me. Their hours of support, answering questions, and constructive feedback helped me to make it to the finish line! I would also like to thank the staff at Concordia who provided the support and guidance that enabled me to better understand and navigate the dissertation process.

I would also like to acknowledge my family and friends, who encouraged me throughout the process, even on the more difficult days. Without their love and encouragement, this journey would have been impossible. They challenged me to consider other perspectives and pushed me beyond my comfort zone—their words of support and guidance inspired me more than they may ever realize.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Including students with disabilities in general education classrooms remains a contentious topic in education. With the passage of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) in 1975, the federal courts held that students with disabilities must be provided a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (Shanker, 1995). The LRE requirement mandates that students with disabilities are educated with their nondisabled peers to the degree possible; currently, this means that 80% of a disabled student's school day is spent in general education settings (Dudley- Marling & Burns, 2016). As Dudley-Marling and Burns (2016) pointed out, until the passage of EHA or P.L. 94-142, only one in five students with a disability was educated in public schools. Yet, for schools and other stakeholders, the application of the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) mandate is often the most problematic and contentious aspect of inclusion for students with disabilities.

### **Background and History of the Problem**

Historically, students with disabilities have been excluded from participation in general education settings with their non-disabled peers. The Civil Rights movement of the 1960s propelled the rights of students with disabilities to the forefront (Hall, 2002). However, until the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) in 1975, many students with disabilities continued to receive their educations in self-contained classrooms, segregated schools, residential placements, private schools, or at home (Hall, 2002). In 1975, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prohibited any agency that received federal funding from discriminating against people with disabilities. The EHA also required that students with disabilities receive an individualized education

plan (IEP) in the least restrictive environment. The law held that assessments of eligibility for special education services must be conducted in a fair and unbiased manner to ensure the due process rights of parents and students with disabilities (Smith, 2005). The 1991 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) expanded definitions of disabilities to include autism and traumatic brain injury (TBI). It provided access to additional special education as well as services such as therapeutic recreation, assistive technology, transportation, and rehabilitative counseling (Shanker, 1994). IDEA 1997 preserved the concept of LRE as noted in P.L. 94-142, which held that:

To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities in public or private institutions or other care facilities are educated with children who are not disabled, and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in the regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily (EHA, 1975, sec. 1412[5][B]) (cited in McLesksy, Landers, Williamson, & Hoppey, 2010).

IDEA 1997 contained further procedural safeguards, including parent and guardian rights to examine student records; a requirement that schools include parents in the student's educational meetings, evaluations, and decisions; and the right of parents or guardians to seek due process or arbitration hearings (Getty & Summy, 2004). In 2004, IDEA was revised and became known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA). IDEIA included requirements set forth by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), and it offered additional provisions for students with disabilities

such as individual student planning and transition, due process protections, monitoring and enforcement, federal funding, and academic accountability (NCWD, 2004). Several notable court decisions clarified the meaning of LRE placement and the due process of students with disabilities.

### **Legislative History of Least Restrictive Environment**

Three early court cases focused on LRE placement for students with moderate to severe disabilities. In *Roncker v. Walter* (1983), the court decided in favor of inclusion, holding that LRE placement decisions must consider what supplemental aids, modifications, supports, and services would be required in order to support the student with disabilities in a general education classroom before deciding to move the student to a more restrictive setting (Yell & Drasgow, 1997). Because of *Roncker v. Walter*, IEP teams were required to discuss the continuum and portability of special education services before placing a student in a more restrictive educational setting.

In the 1989 case of *Daniel R. R. v. State Board of Education*, the court established a two-prong test for determining a school district's compliance with LRE mandates for students with more severe disabilities. The first prong asks if the student's educational needs could be achieved in the general education setting with the use of supplementary aids and services. If the student's educational needs could not be achieved in the general education setting, the second prong asks whether the school mainstreamed the student to the maximum extent appropriate (SEDL, 2014). The court in *Daniel R. R.* determined that the student's needs would best be met in a special education setting since he required one-to-one assistance in order to participate in the general education setting, he had made

little progress, and his behavior affected the academic success of other students in the classroom (SEDL, 2014).

In 1994, *Rachel H. v. The Sacramento City Unified School District* involved the due process of a student with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities. The *Rachel H.* case used the two prong test established by *Daniel R.R.*, and it employed four additional considerations: the use of supplemental aids and services to support the student in the general education setting, whether there are any nonacademic benefits for the student's participation in the general education setting, the effect of participating in general education on the other students and the classroom environment, and the financial cost of the student's participation in the general education classroom (Yell & Drasgow, 1999). The court determined that the school district did not provide adequate proof that its proposed alternative special education placement would follow LRE mandates, and it decided in favor of the parents who had argued for their daughter to be placed in an inclusive, general education setting

### **Problem Statement**

Students with ED often present a unique and difficult challenge for school districts, special educators, and IEP teams. Landrum, Tankersley, and Kauffman (2003) stated that students with ED typically experience less academic and socio-emotional success in school as compared to their peers without ED. Students with ED are often academically below grade level. They often have difficulty passing courses or standardized tests, and they experience poor socio-emotional skills that affect their success in school and later life (Landrum et al., 2003). Students with ED also experience higher school dropout rates, higher rates of substance abuse and mental health problems,

and higher rates of unemployment than their non-disabled peers (Bullis & Yovanoff, 2006; Walker et al., 2004, Lane et al., 2008).

To determine the most appropriate LRE continuum for students with ED, school districts and special educators must be able to clearly understand the ED guidelines. Clarification of ED guidelines and determining the appropriate LRE continuum are required if school districts and educators are to adequately address the unique academic, socio-emotional, and mental health needs of students with ED. This is especially important at the school level, where special educators and IEP teams are tasked with determining the most appropriate educational placement of students with ED (Yell & Drasgow, 1999).

Divergent interpretations of the LRE continuum have led to contrasting philosophies of inclusion. According to one philosophy of inclusion, the LRE mandate means that all students, regardless of the severity of their disabilities, must be included in settings with their non-disabled peers. In a contrasting interpretation of LRE, educational placement should be based upon the individual academic and socio-emotional needs of the student. Since passage of the EHA in 1975, court cases regarding the placement of students with disabilities have attempted to clarify LRE mandates, but no clear consensus has been achieved to date. Chapter 1 will provide an overview of the controversies and challenges of interpreting and implementing the LRE continuum as it pertains to placing students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. In addition, Chapter 1 contains the statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, and significance of the study, definition of terms, and the delimitations and limitations of the study.



Despite controversies regarding the LRE placement of students with disabilities, it is clear that systemic changes must take place if students with disabilities are to have the same educational and social opportunities as their non-disabled peers. Creswell (2013) proposed the transformative framework as a means for creating systemic changes to address unequal power and social relationships. According to Creswell (2013), the transformative framework is an active change process that works to transform how people come to know and understand unequal structures that oppress and marginalize certain groups, such as people with disabilities. If school systems are to create inclusive school environments for all students, changes must occur within the system itself. To begin the change process, ED guidelines and the LRE continuum must be clarified, or else problems with misinterpretation and improper placement of students with disabilities will continue, and schools will continue to be at risk of violating the civil rights of students with disabilities (Hyatt & Filler, 2011).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this correlational study was to examine the variables of clarity of ED guidelines and the educational placement of students with ED. For students with emotional disorders, determining the most appropriate education placement is difficult, as courts and schools continue to struggle with a clear understanding of ED guidelines lines and appropriate LRE. In *Clyde K. and Sheila K. v. Puyallup School District* (1994), the student was removed from the general education classroom due to aggressive and disruptive behaviors. In making its decision siding with the school district, the court held that the student's behaviors presented safety concerns for students and staff in the classroom (Yell & Drasgow, 1999). Similarly, a 1997 court case involved a student with

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) who engaged in aggressive behaviors toward students and staff. In this case, the school district hired a one-to-one staff person to assist the student in classes and placed the student in a smaller class setting with an experienced ASD teacher. Despite the school's interventions, the student's aggressive behaviors continued, resulting in the school's IEP team proposal for an alternative educational placement for student. The court's decision held that if a student's behavior interferes with his or her own learning or the learning of others, placement in general education classrooms may not be the most appropriate setting for addressing the student's specific needs (Yell & Drasgow, 1999).

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were formulated for this study:

1. What is the relationship between perceived clarity of ED guidelines and the educational placement of students with ED?
2. What are the differences between groups based on guideline clarity scores and the educational placement of students with ED?

### **Significance of the Study**

The findings from this study may provide special education practitioners with the value of clearly understanding of ED guidelines and the educational placement of students with ED. Students with ED often require specific academic interventions and socio-emotional supports. Therefore, the results help to identify the variables that may affect clarity of ED guidelines and determining the most appropriate educational placement of students with ED. The findings include responses from study participants who provide valuable data regarding clarity of ED guidelines and the impact this clarity

may have on identification, eligibility, and determining the correct educational placement for students identified with ED. The research design also provides data that will more clearly identify the relationships and differences between clarity of ED guidelines and the factors related to the educational placement of students with ED.

### **Definition of Terms**

To fully understand the study, certain terms require definition. Some of the following terms and definitions were excerpted from IDEIA 2004.

#### **Alternative Placement Considerations**

Alternative placement educational placements are considered whenever the severity of students' problems suggests the need for a more restrictive educational placement beyond special education classroom placement in a school. Alternative placement considerations include: alternative public school equipped to serve students with ED, alternative private (non-public school equipped to serve students with ED, public residential treatment setting, charter school, computer or web-based academic program, and home bound program (Becker, et al., 2011).

#### **Categories of Disabilities Under IDEIA 2004**

Under IDEA, students are eligible to receive special education services for disabilities that include the following conditions: intellectual disability, hearing impairment, speech or language impairment, visual impairment (including blindness), emotional disturbance, a physical impairment, autism (ASD), traumatic brain injury, other health impairment, specific learning disabilities, or multiple disabilities (IDEIA of 2004, Sec. 300.89).

## **Continuum of Placement**

Continuum of placement requires that there are alternative placements available to meet the specific needs of students with disabilities. These include instruction in regular classes, special classes, special schools, home instruction, and instruction in hospitals and institutions (IDEIA of 2004, Sec. 300.115).

## **Emotional or Behavioral Disorders (ED)**

A student with emotional or behavioral disorders exhibits any of the following characteristics: an inability to learn that is not the result of other factors such as intellectual disabilities or health problems, difficulty establishing and maintaining relationships with peers or others, inappropriate behaviors or reactions to typical situations, or depression or pervasive feelings of unhappiness (IDEIA of 2004, part 300/A/300.8, Sec. 300.8). These characteristics occur over a long period and negatively affect the student's educational performance.

## **Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)**

For students with disabilities, FAPE often includes special education or related services that are provided at public expense and according to a student's individualized education program (IEP). (IDEIA of 2004, Sec. 300.17a).

## **Individual Education Program (IEP)**

An individualized education program is a written educational plan for a student with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised with the IEP team. It includes several elements: the student's present level of academic and functional performance, measurable yearly goals, how progress toward goals will be measured, special education or related services (speech and language, occupational therapy, physical therapy, etc.)

needed, the accommodations provided to the student, and a statement regarding reasons for the student's participation or nonparticipation with typical students (IDEIA of 2004, Sec. 300.320-300.324).

### **Inclusion**

Inclusion requires that for 80 percent or more of the school day, a student with an identified disability participates in a general education setting with nondisabled peers (Baglieri et al., 2011; cited in Marling & Burns, 2014).

### **Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).**

The principle of LRE mandates that, to the maximum extent appropriate, students with disabilities in public or private institutions or other care facilities should be educated with students who are not disabled. Removal from this least restrictive environment is appropriate only when the disability is such that education in general education classrooms cannot be satisfactorily achieved with the use of accommodations, supplementary aids, and services (EHA of 1975, sec. 1412, cited in McLesky, Landers, Williamson, & Hoppey, 2010).

### **Needs Met of Students with Emotional Disorder (ED)**

Educational placement and needs met of students with Emotional Disorder (ED) is understood to include the following areas: academic needs, emotional needs, behavioral needs, vocational readiness needs, and capitalizing on the strengths and talents of students with ED (Becker, et al., 2011).

### **Role in Educational Placement**

Role in educational placement includes those who are typically involved with the educational placement of students with ED: students themselves, parents, special

educators, teachers, school counselors/social workers, administrators, school psychologists, or mental health providers (Becker, et al., 2011).

### **Restrictions in Educational Placement**

For students with ED, educational placements vary in degree of restrictiveness (i.e., special education classroom within the school, district program outside of the school building, private [non-public] program out of the school district, residential treatment, and so forth). Restrictions in education placement are often determined based upon the severity of student academic problems, emotional problems, disruptive behavior, severity of aggression at peers or adults, extent of substance abuse or gang involvement, truancy, violation of school policy, pattern of detentions and suspensions, and the ability of staff to address student concerns (Becker, et al., 2011).

### **Socio-Emotional Disorders**

This term is used to describe those students who display socially maladaptive behaviors (as indicated in the Northeast school district's online special education profile, 2016).

### **Supplementary Aids and Services**

Supplementary aids and services are supports provided in general education classrooms, extracurricular activities, or nonacademic settings that assist students with disabilities to participate as fully as possible with nondisabled students (IDEIA of 2004, sec. 612a).

### **Types of Educational Placement (LRE Continuum)**

The IEP team can consider several placement options for a given student. These include general education classes (including integrated classroom settings), special

classes, public day school, private day school, state operated programs, private residential schools, or home-based instruction (study site profile, 2016).

### **Limitations of the Study**

Limitations are factors that may limit the generalizability of a study. As such, researchers must consider the impact that limitations may have on the results or conclusions of a study (McMillian, 2012). The following limitations are present in the study: (a) the number of respondents obtained for the survey, (b) some study participants may not have adequate knowledge or experience with ED guidelines and educational placement of students with ED, and (c) situations outside the control of the researcher (i.e., such as withdrawal of study participants or lack of participant nonresponse of study participants).

### **Delimitations of the Study**

The delimitations in this study include variables selected by the author of the study. The purpose of the study is to determine what relationships, if any, exist between special educators' clarity of ED guidelines and the determination of educational placement of students identified with emotional and behavioral disabilities. This study's only subject is students with emotional disorders. The study has a quantitative correlational research design to identify and describe the differences between the variables of the study.

The author selected the target population and sampling method of the study. The sample was only drawn from special educators and special education administrators. Only data obtained from special educators and special education administrators were

used in the study. For the study, only U.S. special educators and administrators were eligible to participate in and complete the survey.

The author of this study selected the transformative framework and critical social theory. As Creswell (2013) noted, the transformative framework is an active change process that works to transform how people come to know and understand unequal structures that oppress and marginalize certain groups (such as people with disabilities). Similarly, a signal part of critical social theory is its demand that educators actively engage students in understanding the relationship between social justice and access to an equitable education to transform historically oppressed or marginalized groups (Brown, 2004). Therefore, the author chose the transformative framework and critical social theory as a lens through which to examine the current educational system and possible ways of transforming the educational system to ensure that students with ED receive free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment to address their specific academic and socio-emotional needs.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 1, I introduced the issue of interpreting the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) continuum of educational placement and Emotional Disorder (ED) guidelines when determining the educational placement of students with ED. This chapter contained an overview of court cases and LRE continuum determinations involving students with moderate to severe disabilities as well as students with ED. This chapter also included a brief overview of the federal regulations supporting the concept of least restrictive environment, a statement of the current problem, and the purpose of this study. Finally, the research questions were outlined and key terms were defined.



Chapter 2 contains a review of the relevant literature about the LRE continuum and determining the most appropriate educational placement of students with ED.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Since the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) or P.L. 94-142 in 1975, the concept of least restrictive environment has been an area of contention among school districts, educators, and parents of students with disabilities. The EHA held that all students with disabilities, regardless of the severity of the disability, have a right to a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment (Shanker, 1995). Subsequent amendments to the EHA of 1975—IDEA, 1997; No Child Left Behind, 2001; Every Student Succeeds, 2015—continue to support the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms (Hernandez, Hueck, & Charley, 2016). Yet for most school districts, educators, and parents of students with disabilities, defining and applying the least restrictive environment (LRE) requirement of EHA and subsequent amendments continues to be problematic, especially regarding ED. Indeed, the ED guidelines are often applied inconsistently by stakeholders who disagree about what defines the LRE educational placement for meeting the academic and socio-emotional needs of students with disabilities. As Becker et al. (2014) noted, there are no federal guidelines that consider both behavioral and academic components when determining ED eligibility; the student's behavior is the final determination. The academic component may not be taken into consideration when determining ED eligibility.

This de-emphasizing of academic needs among students with ED may be due in part to the ongoing debate regarding educational placement. On one side of the LRE debate are those who advocate for full inclusion, contending that students with disabilities should be placed with their nondisabled peers in general education settings

regardless of the severity of the student's disability (Kauffman & Hallahan, 2005). For advocates of full inclusion, LRE is a means for addressing the segregation of students with disabilities in public schools by requiring schools to deliver education in a general-education setting wherever possible. Advocates for full inclusion contend that all students with disabilities should receive their educational instruction in general education classes with their non-disabled peers because these settings increase a sense of normalcy in their lives (Obiakor, Harris, Mutua, Rotatori, & Algozzine, 2012).

Full inclusion of students with disabilities is also seen as a civil right and a means for supporting the principles of social justice in school settings. Connor and Ferri (2007) note that special education has historically been constructed from a medical model; in order to receive special education services, a student must receive a label as a person with a disability. Historically, many special education services have been provided primarily in self-contained classroom settings. Thus, instead of providing services to help students with disabilities become involved and productive members of society, special education was often positioned as a disempowering force (Connor & Ferri, 2007). As Aron and Loprest (2012) note, IDEA requires that schools serve students in the least restrictive environment that meets their educational needs. Advocates of full inclusion understand this directive to be a mandate for providing educational programming of all students with disabilities in general education settings.

Advocates of full inclusion have argued that special education services and support such as transportation, speech-language services, audiology, psychological services, physical therapy services, and counseling should be offered in inclusive settings as well (Aron & Loprest, 2012). The mandates of FAPE and LRE indicate that services

and placement of students with disabilities should be based on a continuum related to the specific needs of the student and that placement in general education classrooms with non-disabled peers must first be considered (Blecker & Boakes, 2010). Nonetheless, ED guidelines and the educational placement of students with ED continue to confound school systems, educators, parents, and advocates.

On the other side of the argument are the advocates for educational placement who insist that full inclusion amounts to little more than generic mainstreaming and is therefore not the most appropriate placement for every student with disabilities (Heflin & Bullock, 1999). For many advocates of LRE placement, full inclusion should not be the first consideration when determining educational placement of students with disabilities. Instead, placement should be based upon the specific academic and socio-emotional needs of individual students. Some advocates for LRE placement argue that special education services cannot be integrated into general education classrooms (McCarty, 2006).

Advocates of the LRE continuum argue that students with disabilities often need additional learning time to access the general education curriculum, and this need for extra time may not be available in general education settings. As a consequence, students with disabilities in general education settings may not be receiving the appropriate assistance, which in turn means that these students are not being educated according to the mandates of LRE (Crockett, 2000; Eller, Fisher, Gilchrest, & Shockney, 2016).

Other advocates for the LRE continuum see full inclusion as a cost-cutting measure for school districts to reduce expensive special education services. As Connor and Ferri (2007) noted, advocates of LRE placement are concerned that schools view

inclusion as a cost-cutting device, motivated not by humanistic reform but by bureaucratic fiscal prudence. Lastly, while advocates for full inclusion argue that inclusion in general education classrooms provides opportunities for students with disabilities to build friendships with their non-disabled peers, advocates for the LRE continuum argue that these friendships are at best superficial and that students with disabilities, particularly students with ED, often experience exclusion and isolation due to their below grade level abilities and socio-emotional behaviors (Eller et. al., 2016).

The purpose of this literature review is to examine the current theoretical, philosophical, and empirical research to better understand the gaps in the scholarly literature about clarity of ED guidelines as they apply determining the educational placement of students identified with ED in public schools. It will contain research about the two competing philosophical arguments of inclusion for students with disabilities. LRE is an important legal concept for all students with disabilities, as students with all forms of disabilities have the right to be educated in the least restrictive, most appropriate environment (Hewitt, 2005).

In the next section of this chapter, a conceptual framework will be presented to explain the theoretical perspectives that guide the study; the chapter also contains a review of the literature as it pertains to the focus of the study and the methodological approach that will be used to guide the study. This chapter includes an historical background of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act and its impact on students with disabilities in public school settings. Then the arguments of advocates for full inclusion of students with disabilities and the arguments of those who advocate for least restrictive environment (LRE) placement as the most appropriate placement for students

with disabilities will be examined. The end of this chapter contains a review of methodological issues, a synthesis of research findings, a critique of previous research, and a chapter summary.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study focuses on the theoretical concept of least restrictive environment (LRE), the LRE continuum, and clarification of Emotional Disorder (ED) guidelines. It examines what are the relationships, if any, that exist between the clarification of ED guidelines and student placement. According to the concept of LRE, all students with disabilities have a right to a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment (IDEA, 2004). There are two conflicting philosophies of LRE: the philosophy of full inclusion, whose proponents argue that all students with disabilities should be fully included in general education classrooms, and the philosophy of LRE placement, whose supporters contend that placement should be individualized and based on the most appropriate placement or the full continuum of placement options for students with disabilities (Kauffman, Bantz, & McCullough, 2002). For advocates of full inclusion, the exclusion of students with disabilities from opportunities to fully participate and learn with their non-disabled peers in general education classrooms is contradictory to the goals of inclusion and special education (Obiakor et al., 2012). Advocates for full inclusion maintain that inclusion, based on equitable participation in academic and socio-emotional learning, is a matter of creating ethical schools that incorporate social justice and civil rights for students with disabilities (Obiakor et al., 2012).

However, does creating equitable schools truly mean inclusion of all students or does inclusion create a one-size-fits-all approach to education? For those who advocate for LRE placement of students with disabilities, the individual academic and socio-emotional needs of students should determine where the student is placed, and that placement should incorporate specific special education services to support the student in inclusive settings as well. Tkachyk (2013) pointed out that inclusion should not be one-size-fits-all and instead should be determined by how to best meet the specific academic and socio-emotional needs of each student. Advocates for the LRE continuum placement of students with disabilities argue that inclusion alone does not necessarily create more equitable schools or classroom environments and that many students with disabilities are more excluded and isolated in general education settings. Essentially, these students become segregated within classroom settings that were intended to be inclusive (Hewitt, 2005). Tkachyk (2013) noted that students with disabilities often experience isolation and exclusion in inclusive classrooms as they typically are given a lower social status than their non-disabled peers. Because of these concerns, the study will use the lens of the critical social theory and the transformational learning framework to examine the implementation of LRE mandates and students with disabilities, particularly those students identified with ED.

Critical social theory, along with transformative learning, is the primary basis of this paper because its proponents have long argued that education and knowledge are emancipatory, and it is predicated upon advancing critical thinking and discourse in educational settings (Leonardo, 2004). In critical social theory, quality education is the process of learning through interactive collaboration where both teacher and student are

critics (Leonardo, 2004). In this study, using critical social theory suggests that the independent variable of the study—the differences, if any, which exist between clarifications of ED guidelines—would affect the educational placement of students with emotional disorders. Additionally, the critical social theory is a means for examining the factors used to identify a student with ED and to determine educational placement based upon the LRE continuum. For critical social theory, much like the transformative learning framework, communication is the key to actively creating changes in our assumptions. In both the transformative framework and critical social theory, discourse is required to create changes in the educational system to give all students access to an equitable and quality education. As Leonardo (2004) discussed, language is the basis of quality education; it is through language that the contradictions of social life are exposed. Thus, critical discourse can help educators and students begin to transform their presuppositions, assumptions, and views of others.

Mezirow (1997) held that the transformative framework is a process for creating change in one's understanding of and interaction with the world. As one of the earliest proponents of transformative framework, he held that human beings need to understand the meaning of their experiences or frames of reference in order to understand the world (Mezirow, 1997). Mezirow (1997) proposed that an individual's frames of reference are established through cultural assimilation, and they include the assumptions, associations, concepts, values, and feelings that define one's experiences. It is through these frames of references that the individual comes to understand their place in the world.

Based on Habermas's (1984) communicative theory, Mezirow (1997) argued that transformative learning occurs through two domains: instrumental and communicative



learning. Instrumental learning requires the empirical testing of an assertion in order to establish its truth, while communicative learning requires that people work together to establish a consensus. As Mezirow (1991) noted, transformative learning is a reflective process of adjusting one's assumptions and presuppositions to better understand others. It is an active learning process that requires people to work together to overcome previously learned views and presuppositions that interfere with experiencing and interacting with the world (Mezirow, 1991). Creswell (2013) described the transformative framework as not neutral, but rather a means for exposing the unequal power structures and relationships within society with an aim of using knowledge to better understand marginalized groups.

For special educators, the transformative framework and critical social theory are means for engaging in discourse with others in order to challenge assumptions and presuppositions and to consider how these assumptions may affect their students, parents, and other stakeholders participating in the educational process of ED eligibility and educational placement. Brown (2004) argued that the lens of the transformative framework and critical social theory that can foster educational leadership based upon social justice and equity. Brown (2004) also noted that the transformational framework and critical social theory work to combine elements of critical thought and rational discourse, both of which are required elements for transforming the educational system. Achieving this goal will require special educators to continually endeavor to better understand how their presuppositions and assumptions regarding students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders affect the educational placement of students with ED. Using the lens of transformative framework and critical social theory may provide a better

understanding of the social construction of disability and its impact on the educational placement of students identified with emotional disorders.

Lastly, the results from the study support for the need to clarify and revise the ED guidelines to better inform stakeholders—school districts, educators, parents, and advocates—when determining the most appropriate individualized academic and socio-emotional placements for students with ED. This quantitative study was based upon the current understanding of FAPE and LRE in determining the educational placement of students with ED. A correlational design was used to examine the relationships that exist between identified variables (Adams & Lawrence, 2015). In addition, an analysis of variance of the data was conducted to examine the differences, if any, between clarity of ED guidelines and the educational placement of students with ED. For the quantitative study, data was obtained via an online survey specifically created for special educators and special education administrators. Results obtained from the study may provide stakeholders with a better understanding of ED guidelines and educational placement options (LRE continuum) based on the individualized academic and non-academic or socio-emotional needs of students with ED.

### **Historical Background: Public Law 94-142**

Since its passage in 1975, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA), or P.L.94-142, provided legislation and guidelines that ensured all students with disabilities, regardless of the severity of the disability, have a right to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (Shanker, 1995). The origins of P.L. 94-142 evolved from the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and initially focused on the desegregation of students with as intellectual and physical

disabilities (Hall, 2003). The 1972 court case *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens (PARC) v. the State of Pennsylvania* established procedural rights for students with intellectual disabilities by arguing for their right to a meaningful education and for their right to be educated in general education settings along with their non-disabled peers (Hyatt & Filler, 2011). Hyatt and Filler (2011) further noted that in 1975, Section 504 of The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was amended to prohibit discrimination against people with disabilities by any agency receiving federal funding. However, until the passage of EHA, the majority of students with disabilities, especially those students with severe disabilities, did not attend public schools. Most students with severe disabilities were placed in private schools, residential facilities, or remained at home, reliant on residual care. Students identified with less severe disabilities were able to attend public school and most were placed in segregated, self-contained classrooms within the school setting (Hall, 2002).

EHA or P.L. 94-142 directed school districts to actively locate students with disabilities through a referral process (child find) in order to determine eligibility for special education services. Other major requirements of P.L. 94-142 included providing students identified with disabilities with an Individualized Education Program (IEP), ensuring the student's placement in a least restrictive environment (LRE), providing fair and unbiased assessments to determine a student's eligibility for special education services, determination for related services (speech, transportation, physical therapy, etc.), federal funding for special education services, and ensuring due process rights for parents and students with disabilities (Smith, 2005). Each requirement noted in the P.L. 94-142 legislation provides a foundation for meeting the academic and non-academic

needs of students with disabilities. However, it is the due process requirement of P.L.94-142 that specifically ensures the equal treatment of students with disabilities and provides a process for parents and schools for resolving disagreements regarding identification, evaluation, placement, or provision of a free, appropriate, public education (Katsiyannis, Yell, & Bradley, 2001, in Getty & Summy, 2004). Over time, amendments to EHA and subsequent legislation further addressed the rights of students with disabilities to receive a public education designed to meet their academic and non-academic needs with their non-disabled peers in the least restrictive environment.

In 1991, EHA was revised and renamed as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The definition of disabilities was expanded to include autism and traumatic brain injury and additional related services such as therapeutic recreation, assistive technology, social work, transportation, and rehabilitation counseling were addressed (Shanker, 1994). IDEA was reauthorized in 1997, and with the exception of enhanced due process mandate, most of the initial requirements of EHA and the IDEA of 1991 remained unchanged. IDEA 1997, Part B added procedural safeguards such as the right of parents or guardians to examine student records, defining the school's responsibility for notifying and including parents in their child's educational meetings, evaluations, and decisions, and the right of parents or guardians to seek arbitration or a due process hearing (Getty & Summy, 2004).

In 2004, IDEA was again revised and became known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA). It included provisions of P.L. 107-110, or the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability, 2004). NCLB had additional protections were included to further protect the

rights of children with disabilities. These included individualized student planning, transition, litigation, and due process protections, monitoring and enforcement, and federal funding (NCWD, 2004). To ensure academic accountability, NCLB also mandated that special education students be provided access to the regular education curriculum and participate in standardized testing (NCWD, 2004). The NCLB components in the IDEA reauthorization of 2004 required that all special education teachers be highly qualified in the content areas that they teach. Other additional components included adding student transition plans to IEPs that would be initiated no later than age 14. Student transition plans were intended to identify student post-secondary interests and to develop goals for achieving post-secondary employment, training, or education.

Finally, IDEA 2004 addressed disciplinary procedures for students identified with emotional and behavioral disorders. With the reauthorization of IDEA 2004, school districts had to consider the impact of the student's disability on their behavior. IDEA 2004 further mandated that schools develop and implement behavior plans for students identified with behavioral problems (Smith, 2005). Under the mandates of IDEA 2004, if a student's behavior was determined not to be the result of the disability and the suspension or prior suspensions did not result in more than 10 days, the school could suspend the student as they would any other student (Smith, 2005). However, if a student's suspension or expulsion resulted in more than 10 days, school districts were required to conduct a manifestation determination to find out if there is a relationship between the student's disability and behavior (Smith, 2005).

Moreover, Smith (2005) noted that if a relationship did exist between the disability and behavior, the school would not be able to remove the student from his or her current placement. The school team would then need to conduct a functional behavior assessment and design a behavior plan to address the student's behavior. With its reauthorization, IDEA 2004 provided mandates concerning discipline and students identified with disabilities. However, the mandate for a direct relationship between disability and behavior made it more difficult for school districts to determine if a relationship exists between a student's disability and his or her behaviors (Smith, 2005).

### **Full Inclusion versus Least Restrictive Environment**

Advocates of full inclusion have argued that all students with disabilities should receive more equitable educational and social opportunities to interact with their non-disabled peers than are available in segregated programs or self-contained classes. On the other side of the argument, many advocates and parents questioned the push for full inclusion of all students with disabilities and argued that students who were placed in inclusive settings would not get the services (speech, occupational therapy, behavior support, etc.) they needed for their academic or socio-emotional achievement. Advocates for full inclusion contend that all students with disabilities should be placed in general education classes with their non-disabled peers (Kauffman & Hallahan, 2005). Moreover, advocates for full inclusion contend that any required special education services (speech, occupational therapy, etc.) must be provided within the student's neighborhood school and not in self-contained or segregated settings (Obiakor, Harris, Mutua, Rotatori, & Algozzine, 2012).

In significant contrast to the full inclusion model, those who advocate for the LRE continuum of educational placements for students with disabilities have argued that full inclusion amounts to little more than generic mainstreaming and that full inclusion is not the most appropriate placement for every student with disabilities (Heflin & Bullock, 1999). Furthermore, these advocates contend that the LRE placement should be determined by the setting in which the student's specific academic and socio-emotional needs can best be met (Marx, Hart, Nelson, Love, Baxter, Gartin, & Schafer-Whitby, 2014). Countering this argument, advocates of full inclusion insist that the special education services can be provided to students with disabilities in the general education setting (Shanker, 1995). Nonetheless, many parents fear that full inclusion means the loss of special education services for their children, which may further affect their children's educational, physical, and socio-emotional needs (Shanker, 1995).

Not surprisingly, additional disagreements between the two groups concern how LRE mandates are interpreted and implemented when determining placement of students with disabilities. Getty and Summy (2004) noted that the majority of due process hearings involve disagreements between parents and schools as to the appropriate placement for students with disabilities. Daniel (1997) argued that courts have misinterpreted the IDEA mandates of LRE and have gone too far with their insistence that LRE requires full inclusion as the most appropriate placement for all students with disabilities without first considering the extent or severity of the student's disability. Further confusion exists surrounding how individual school districts interpret the principles of LRE to determine the most appropriate placement for students with disabilities. For example, many school districts consider full inclusion as the best means

for complying with the LRE mandate; however, other school districts offer a continuum of LRE services (Gottlieb, Alter, & Gottlieb, 2016). As the authors noted, the lack of consistency in the interpretation and implementation of LRE mandates affects educational outcomes for students with disabilities. There is no empirical evidence regarding the efficacy of general educational placements versus more restrictive settings (Gottlieb et al., 2016). Unquestionably, legal issues have increased since EHA was established in 1975 as school districts struggle to interpret and implement the principles of LRE. Courts have applied tests such as the *Daniel R. R.* (1989) case as a measure of whether school systems are meeting the letter and spirit of the IDEA's stated preference for mainstreaming students with disabilities (SEDL, 2014).

### **Least Restrictive Environment and Educational Placement of Students with Emotional Disorders**

IDEA required states and school districts to establish procedures that guarantee students with disabilities an education with their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate (Daniel, 1997). Additionally, IDEA mandated that students with disabilities have the right to a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment (SEDL, 2014). Research conducted by the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Disability Statistics and Demographics at the University of New Hampshire indicated that nationally 12.1 percent of students in grades K through 12 were identified with disabilities. Under IDEA, 6,429,431 students ranging from ages 3-21 were found eligible for special education services with 6.3 percent of these students identified with emotional disorders (Data First, 2012). In a large Northeast school district, data indicate that approximately 9,345 students ranging from grades



Kindergarten to Grade 12 have been identified with emotional and behavioral disorders (study site profile, 2016).

Some progress has been achieved in placing students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting (McLeskey, Landers, Williamson, & Hoppey, 2010). The authors noted that the percentage of students with ED educated with nondisabled peers remains significantly lower than the percentage of students with learning disabilities, while the percentage of students with ED in general education settings has increased at a slower rate (McLeskey et al., 2010). Additionally, many students identified with ED continue to receive specialized educational services in self-contained, small group classroom settings (McLeskey et al., 2010). As Cassady (2011) noted, many students with ED remain in self-contained settings due to concerns about behaviors that are regarded as disruptive, such as verbal or physical aggression, oppositional-defiant behaviors, depression, anxiety, and poor impulse control. In addition, students with ED tend to have below grade-level academic skills and often score lower on standardized tests than their nondisabled peers (Cassady, 2011). As a result, many students with ED in general education settings are ignored and isolated by their nondisabled peers (Cassady, 2011).

Along with social rejection by their non-disabled peers, the academic performance of students with ED tends to worsen as they get older, often leading to a higher dropout rate, higher rates of substance abuse, lack of employable skills, and challenging social relationships (Lane, Barton-Arwood, Nelson, & Wehby, 2008). In a two-year study, Siperstein, Wiley, and Forness (2011) followed 86 students identified with ED from high and low-income schools along with students who were at high risk for ED, but who did not receive special education services. Specifically, the study measured

achievement in reading, math, and behavioral progress across the three student groups. Results from the longitudinal study found that students with ED demonstrated little or no improvement in their academic or social emotional behaviors; no significant progress was indicated among the three student groups of the study (Siperstein et al., 2011). IDEA 2004 indicated academic underachievement as part of the identifying criteria for ED (Lane et al., 2008). The lack of early identification and appropriate interventions may also negatively affect the academic achievement of students with ED.

### **Legal Arguments for Full Inclusion**

While progress has been made regarding students with Emotional Disorder (ED) and educational placement, there is still much to be done to ensure that all students have access to an equitable and quality education. A first step would be to ensure that the parameters and ED guidelines are clarified and correctly implemented so that students with disabilities are placed in the LRE according to their specific needs and abilities. A second step would require that school IEP teams and parents work together to determine and implement the services, modifications, supports, and accommodations needed by students to access the curriculum in classroom settings that best meets their specified needs. Courts and school districts must also strive to understand and implement ED guidelines in order to determine the least restrictive educational placements for students with disabilities.

As Hyatt & Filler (2011) argued, determining LRE has and continues to be the most problematic aspect for courts when determining the appropriate educational placement of students with disabilities. For students with ED, is that there are no consistent rules or tests that courts can follow for determining cases involving LRE and

so courts tend to adopt the standards of previous court cases such as the *Roncker* portability test, the *Daniel R.R.* two-part test or the *Hartmann* three-part test (Yell, 2006). Court decisions have often varied from one court jurisdiction to another (Hyatt & filler, 2011). Clearly, clarification of ED guidelines and determining the most appropriate educational placement is required in order to meet the specific academic and socio-emotional needs of students with identified with ED.

In the four decades since P.L. 94-142 was enacted, many school districts and stakeholders have struggled to interpret and implement LRE mandates with fidelity. As a result, many of the court cases between school districts and stakeholders have focused on LRE, due process, and educational placement of students with disabilities. The first of these court cases was the 1983 case of *Roncker v. Walter*, also known as the portability test, which focused on providing services in a general education setting for a student with disabilities (Yell & Drasgow, 1999). In *Roncker v. Walter*, the court determined that the considerations for LRE and placement must include a determination of what supplemental aids modifications, supports, and services have been considered before making a decision to move a student with disabilities to a more restrictive placement (Yell & Drasgow, 1999). In this case, the court decided in favor of the student's placement in an inclusive classroom setting and noted that special education services could be provided to the student in the general education environment.

Because of the *Roncker v. Walter* court case, IEP teams were required to discuss and consider the continuum (and portability) of services before removing a student with disabilities from the general education setting into a more restrictive setting. Likewise, the IEP team must also consider if there are physical, emotional, or social hardships that

can affect the student if the student is removed from a general education setting and placed into a more restrictive self-contained setting (SEDL, 2014). Additionally, the IEP team must determine if the student's IEP goals meet the current level of placement, if there are any benefits for placing the student in a more restrictive environment, as well as what type of instruction and level of support will be required for the student to be successful in school and life (SEDL, 2014). Lastly, in determining LRE in *Roncker v. Walter*, the court also relied on school districts to make placement decisions in good faith and determine LRE placement based upon the individual needs of the student as well as adhere to specified considerations for determining the appropriate placement of students with disabilities (SEDL, 2014).

The 1989 *Daniel R.R. v. State Board of Education* case was the first court case to test LRE and full inclusion for students with more severe disabilities (Daniel, 1997). In *Daniel R. R.*, the student, who was identified as having moderate retardation, received educational services in a pre-school kindergarten setting with typical peers for half a day and special education services for the other half of the day (Daniel, 1997). Alternatively, the court determined that the student should be moved into a full time special education setting as he required almost complete one-to-one attention from the teacher and had made little progress in mastering skills (SEDL, 2014). The school's hearing officer agreed with the assessment of Daniel R. R.'s behavior and lack of progress, finding that his needs would best be met in a special education setting. However, Daniel R. R.'s parents disagreed with the proposed placement and appealed to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals. In deciding the *Daniel R. R.* case, the court developed a two-prong test to determine whether the school district complied with IDEA mandates and the principles of

LRE. The first prong asked if the student's education in the general education setting could be achieved with the use of supplemental aids and services, and if the student's educational needs could not be achieved in a general education setting, the second prong asked if the school mainstreamed the student to the maximum extent appropriate. (SEDL, 2014). Using the two-prong test, the court in *Daniel R. R.* upheld the school district placement of the student in a more restrictive environment stating that under some circumstances, a regular education classroom may not be the least restrictive environment for some students with severe disabilities (Daniel, 1997).

*Sacramento City Unified School District v. Rachel H.* (1994) also focused on LRE and the placement of a student with moderate mental retardation in a general education setting (Yell & Drasgow, 1999). In *Rachel H.*, the parents made a request that she be placed in a general education classroom for a full day. However, the school district argued that she was too severely disabled to benefit from being in a regular class and proposed that Rachel receive instruction for her core classes in a special education setting and participate with non-disabled peers in electives (Yell & Drasgow, 1999). Rachel's parents disagreed with the school's proposal and removed her from the school. After reviewing the information, the officer in the due process hearing agreed with the parents and held that the school had failed to make an adequate effort to educate Rachel in the regular classroom (Yell & Drasgow, 1999).

In determining LRE in the *Rachel H.* case, the authors noted that the court relied on the two-prong test established in the *Daniel R. R.* decision. The court added four additional considerations: the use of supplemental aids to balance the educational benefits in general education settings, whether there would be nonacademic benefits for the

student in general education settings, and the effect on the educational environment and other children in the classroom as well as the cost of including the student in the regular classroom (Yell & Drasgow, 1999). Using the four factors, the court determined that school district did not provide sufficient proof that its proposed alternative placement upheld the principles of LRE (Yell & Drasgow, 1999). Other court cases have focused on the implementing LRE for students with emotional and behavioral disorders.

In the 1994 court case *Clyde K. and Sheila K. v. Puyallup School District*, a student identified with ED was removed from the general education setting due to aggressive, disruptive, and non-compliant behaviors. In its decision, the court held that the student's behaviors significantly compromised the education of other students to the degree that mainstream placement was no longer appropriate for the student (Yell & Drasgow, 2004). The court found that the school had valid concerns regarding the student's behaviors and the safety of the other students in the classroom (Heflin & Bullock, 1999). Consequently, in deciding on the LRE and the educational placement for the student with ED, the court upheld the school's decision to remove the student from the general education setting to a more restrictive environment. The court further noted that school districts have an obligation to ensure the safety of other students (Yell & Drasgow, 2004).

A 1997 court case involved LRE and the inclusion of a student with autism and ED who was placed in a general education setting (Yell & Drasgow, 1999). In this case, the student engaged in self-stimulatory and aggressive behaviors toward classmates and teachers. The school district attempted to accommodate the student's needs by hiring a full-time, one-to-one paraprofessional and placing the student in a smaller class setting

with an experienced ASD teacher who provided curriculum and programming for students with ASD, and provided ASD training for the entire school staff (Yell & Drasgow, 1999). Despite these interventions and accommodations, the student's behaviors became more aggressive and disruptive. The school's IEP team proposed an alternative placement for the student at a nearby school with a program that was designed to meet the needs of students with ASD (Yell & Drasgow, 1999).

The child's parents disagreed with this proposed placement and requested a due process hearing. In the due process hearing, the hearing officer determined that the school had offered an appropriate program in the LRE and agreed with the IEP team's decision for placement at the nearby school that offered a program for students with ASD (Yell & Drasgow, 1999). However, as the authors noted, an appeal by the parents to the federal district court resulted in the hearing officer's decision being overturned. The court held that the school district had not properly accommodated the student in general education settings (Yell & Drasgow). An ensuing court case in the U.S. Court of Appeals in the Fourth Circuit overturned the decision of the federal district court and once again sided with the school district and the appropriateness of the IEP team's placement decision (Yell & Drasgow, 1999). The court subsequently determined that if the student's behaviors interfere with his or her learning or with the learning of others, placement in the general education setting may not be the most appropriate for meeting the student's needs (Yell & Drasgow, 2004).

Despite these court decisions, difficulties in interpreting and implementing LRE persist, with legal disputes between school districts and parents often focused on inclusion and appropriate educational placement. IDEA is intended to provide students

with disabilities access to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive setting (NCWD, 2004). However, some researchers have argued that the push for full inclusion of students with disabilities has gone too far, and court decisions regarding full inclusion have misinterpreted the full extent of the law (Daniel, 1997). Daniel (1997) further argued that confusion resides with the differing opinions of what determines a least restrictive environment and inclusion; neither term is specifically identified within IDEA. Consequently, determining the educational placement for students with disabilities has and continues to be challenging as courts, schools, and stakeholders struggle to interpret and implement LRE principles with fidelity (Daniel, 1997). Finally, implementing LRE mandates often comes at a significant financial cost for school districts. Daniel (1997) pointed out that most of the litigation for placement and educational programming has been initiated by school boards attempting to control costs as school districts struggle to pay for additional services in order to comply with the IDEA requirements of FAPE for students with disabilities. Thus, financial concerns of school districts may also affect FAPE and LRE placement of students with disabilities.

### **School and Home Collaboration: The IEP Process**

Developing positive connections between school and home is essential for building collaborative relationships among school districts, administrators, teachers, and parents. This is an especially important component when schools, Individual Education Plans (IEP) teams, and stakeholders must work together to implement the LRE continuum to choose the most appropriate educational placement for students with ED. IDEIA 2004 mandated that school districts include the parents or guardians of students with disabilities and that they are a part of the shared decision-making process of the IEP



team (Staples & Diliberto, 2010). Nonetheless, disagreements involving LRE and educational placement of students with disabilities persist among schools and stakeholders. In fact, due process hearings are most often the result of disagreement between IEP teams and parents regarding the placement of a student with disabilities in the general education setting (Getty & Summy, 2004). Determining LRE and educational placements for students with emotional and behavioral disorders has been especially problematic for school districts and stakeholders. As Crockett (1999) noted, the placement of students with emotional and behavioral disorders is one of the most complicated and contentious issues in special education (in Hoge, Liaupsin, Umbreit, & Ferro, 2014). Establishing shared decision-making relationships among IEP teams and stakeholders becomes even more of a requirement when interpreting ED guidelines and determining the most appropriate LRE placement for the specific academic and socio-emotional needs of a student with ED.

IDEA 1990 provided guidelines for IEP teams and stakeholders to determine the most appropriate, least restrictive environment for students with disabilities (Hoge et al., 2014). When determining the LRE for students with emotional and behavioral disorders, the IEP team must consider the student's academic and non-academic needs as well as the impact of the student's behaviors on the educational environment of his or her non-disabled peers (Yell & Drasgow, 1999). The school district and IEP team must also consider a range of placement options or settings that would best meet the educational and socio-emotional needs of the student with emotional and behavioral disorders. These continuum of placement options may include placing the student in general education setting with accommodations and special education support, or partial placement in both

general education and special education settings, resource classrooms, self-contained special education classrooms, special education day schools, home-based services, or placement in residential or hospital settings (Hoge et al., 2014).

Regardless of the placement options, school districts, IEP teams, and stakeholders must agree upon the placement setting for the student. Stakeholders such as parents or guardians have the right to disagree with the IEP team's educational placement recommendations. Getty and Summy (2004) noted that disagreements regarding the educational placement of students with ED are often the primary reason for due process hearings. In a situation where the stakeholder disagrees with the IEP team's placement decision, the student must remain in his or her current educational setting until the matter is resolved. Disagreements among IEP teams and stakeholders regarding the placement of students with disabilities can be contentious and often result in emotional ramifications for all parties involved (Getty & Summy, 2004). Therefore, it is essential that school districts, IEP teams, and stakeholders establish relationships that are based on shared decision-making to ensure productive outcomes for determining the LRE continuum and meeting the needs of students with ED.

### **Special Educators' Experiences with Inclusion**

Since the Education for All Handicapped Children Act or P.L. 94-142 in 1975 and its subsequent reauthorizations, the philosophical differences regarding students with disabilities in general education settings have been at the forefront of the debate. The voices of special educators have been conspicuously missing from the discussion on inclusion. Heflin and Bullock (1999) argued that advocates of full inclusion are insisting on and receiving exclusionary decisions by hearing officers and that the impetus for full

inclusion does not come from teachers. The authors also noted that school districts often attempt to avoid conflicts over due process by implementing full inclusion in general education settings regardless of student ability (Heflin & Bullock, 1999).

Such actions are disadvantageous for teachers and students with disabilities, and they create gaps between legal compliance and faithful implementation of LRE principles. Instead, school districts and stakeholders must work with special educators to support the inclusion of students with disabilities into the general education setting. Achieving this goal will require clarifying ED guidelines and the LRE continuum of educational placements, ensuring that the appropriate supports are in place, providing teachers with training about the special education process, and providing sufficient time to collaborate with special educators (Heflin & Bullock, 1999). Insufficient time for collaboration and training as well as providing behavior management for students with ED in general education classrooms continue to be concerns for many educators (Heflin & Bullock, 1999). For the LRE mandates and educational placement continuum to be implemented consistently, school districts and administrators must provide teachers with the necessary support (Cassady, 2011). Finally, it should be noted that little research has been conducted on the relationship between clarity of ED guidelines, determining ED eligibility, and the educational placement of students with ED. Additional research specifically focused on the LRE continuum and determination of educational placements for students with ED is recommended.

## **Methodological Issues**

Researchers have historically identified areas of concern regarding implementation of the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) mandates (Daniel, 1997).

McLeskey, Landers, Williamson, and Hoppey (2010) note that the LRE mandates state,

To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily (EHA of 1975, sec. 1412).

For advocates of full inclusion, the LRE mandates provide support for their argument that all students with disabilities should be fully included in general education settings with their non-disabled peers. Connor and Ferri (2007) held that determining LRE required a continuum of options based upon the individual needs of each student. For advocates of LRE placement, this position supported their argument that placement of students with disabilities should be based upon the individual academic needs and social benefit of each student (Marx et al., 2014).

Regardless of one's position on the LRE for students with disabilities, it is clear that clarifying the interpretation and implementation of LRE mandates must be done if school systems are to meet the individual academic and socio-emotional needs of students with disabilities. The interpretation and implementation of LRE mandates is especially significant for students identified with ED because they are less likely to be

placed in general education settings than are other students with disabilities. In 2006, the U.S. Department of Education indicated that nationally, over 40% of students classified within the federal special education category of emotional disturbance were taught in self-contained classrooms (30.6%) and self-contained schools (12.3%) (Mattison, 2011). To ensure the appropriate LRE placement of students with ED, Simpson (2004) argued that more empirically sound research must be conducted to better understand the efficacy of inclusion for students identified with emotional and behavioral disorders. Additionally, Simpson (2004) held that research must be conducted that identifies the appropriateness of the inclusive settings.

Research indicates that the controversy over the interpretation and implementation of LRE mandates and LRE continuum remain unresolved (McLeskey et al., 2010). The disagreement regarding LRE mandates and student placement is especially problematic for students with ED as they are the most likely of all children with disabilities to be segregated from the general population due to their academic and behavioral deficits (Maggin, Wehby, Moore-Partin, Robertson, & Oliver, 2011). Research conducted by the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Disability Statistics and Demographics at the University of New Hampshire indicated that nationally, 12.1 percent of students in grades K through 12 were identified with disabilities. Under IDEA, 6,429,431 students ranging from ages 3-22 were found eligible for special education services and 6.3 percent of these students were identified with emotional disorders (Data First, 2012). More current data from the U.S. National Center for Educational Statistics indicated that 354,000 students nationwide were identified with emotional disturbance (NCES, 2016). In a large Northeast school district, 2016 data

indicated that approximately 9,345 students in grades K- 12 have been identified with emotional and behavioral disorders (study site profile, 2016). Current data also indicated that 13.84 percent of students in the large Northeast school district receive special education services and of this percentage, 1,572 students, kindergarten to grade 12, within the school district have been identified with emotional disorders (study site profile, 2016). This data supports the need for clarifying ED guidelines to better identify and determine the most appropriate educational placement for students identified with ED.

Identifying students with ED has also been problematic for school districts, special education administrators, special educators, and stakeholders. As Severs (2014) pointed out, there are many definitions of emotional or behavioral disorders (ED). Severs (2014) indicated that a student may qualify as a student with ED under the following criteria: the behavior is chronic and occurs over time, lasting at least 6 months or longer; the behavior is significantly different from those behaviors of the student's peer group; and behavioral issues of the student impeded his or her academic achievement. IDEIA (2004) offered this definition of ED:

Emotional disturbance (ED) means a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period and to a marked degree, that adversely affects a child's educational performance:

- An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.
- An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.

- Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.
- A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.
- A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.
- Emotional disturbance includes schizophrenia. However, the term does not apply to children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance under paragraph (c)(4)(i) of this section. (IDEIA of 2004: part 300/A/300.8, Sec. 300.8)

Both definitions offer similar criteria for eligibility. Severs (2014) argued that after determining that a student has an eligible ED, the school must then determine the best placement for meeting the student's academic and socio-emotional needs, such as inclusive or co-taught settings or in small group/self-contained settings. The argument returns to ways that the LRE mandates can be interpreted and implemented to satisfy IDEA's requirement for FAPE. The determination of FAPE and the LRE continuum of educational placement for students with ED are further affected as none of the previously noted court cases has specifically defined LRE (Hyatt & Filler, 2011). Moreover, determining the most appropriate LRE educational placement continues to be affected by the lack of clarity of ED guidelines used for determining eligibility as a student with ED.

As noted, advocates for full inclusion argue that all students with disabilities should receive special education services in general education settings with their non-disabled peers. However, advocates for LRE educational placement contend that student placement should be based upon the individual academic and socio-emotional needs of each student. IDEA holds that all students must have access to a free and appropriate

public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment based on the students identified needs (Eller, Fisher, Gilchrist, Rozman, & Shockney, 2016). Clearly, the ED guidelines and LRE mandates as they apply to students with disabilities—specifically, students identified with ED—continues to be problematic for courts, researchers, school districts, educators, and parents.

Thus, while research has examined IDEA and the requirements for providing students with disabilities a free appropriate education in a least restrictive environment, future research should focus on clarifying ED guidelines and LRE continuum in order to meet the specific needs of students identified with emotional and behavioral disorders. As Simpson (2004) notes, empirically sound research must be conducted to examine the variables of inclusion that will support and guide the policies and practices for the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education settings. Researchers have noted difficulties in defining LRE mandates and the appropriateness of full inclusion placement versus LRE placement with individualized services to meet the needs of students with ED. As Simpson (2004) argued, there has been little empirically sound research conducted to guide policy and practice regarding the inclusion of students identified with emotional and behavioral disorders in general education settings.

Clearly, the behavioral and social value of inclusion is important for students with ED. However, the academic achievement of students with ED should also be a factor when determining the most appropriate placement. Researchers such as Wehby, Lane, and Falk (2003) argued that research on students with ED has primarily focused on behavioral or social interventions. They recommended that future research instead focus on both behavioral and academic interventions (Mattison & Blader, 2013). Trout,



Nordness, Pierce, and Epstein (2003) noted that little research has been conducted regarding the academic achievement of students with ED who receive instruction across the continuum of academic placement settings.

Academically, many students with ED are at least 1-2 grade levels behind their non-disabled peers in the areas of reading, mathematics, reading comprehension, vocabulary, and written language, and these deficits severely hamper their ability to achieve academically or socio-emotionally (Lane et al., 2008). Researchers (Bullis & Yovanoff, 2006; Walker et al., 2004) note that many students with ED drop out of school, have high rates of unemployment, abuse drugs and/or alcohol, and have mental health issues (cited in Lane et al., 2008). To address these areas of concern, future research should be conducted to examine academic placement, academic achievement, and behavioral progress to meet the specific academic and socio-emotional needs of students with ED. Without additional clarification of ED guidelines and LRE mandates, issues of interpretation and placement of students with disabilities may result in a violation of civil rights and depriving children of a free appropriate public education (Hyatt & Filler, 2011).

### **Synthesis of Research Findings**

Chapter 2 contained an overview of the research regarding the need for clarity of Emotional Disorder (ED) guidelines and determination of the most appropriate Least Restrictive Educational (LRE) educational placement for students with ED. Research indicated that there continues to be disagreement regarding ED guidelines, LRE continuum, and the educational placement of students with disabilities. Differing philosophies of inclusion continue to fuel the debate regarding placement for students

with disabilities. Advocates for full inclusion argue that all students with disabilities should be placed in inclusive settings, while advocates for LRE educational placement of students with disabilities argue that placement should be based upon the individual abilities and needs of the student. Some researchers such as Simpson (2004) contend that there is insufficient empirical research to show the effectiveness of inclusion for students with EBD in general education settings. Other scholars argue that research should focus on both academic achievement and socio-emotional needs when determining the most appropriate placement for students with ED (Marx et al., 2014; Trout, Nordness, Pierce, & Epstein, 2003; Wehby, Lane, & Falk, 2003).

Research presented in Chapter 2 indicated that students with ED are often significantly behind their non-disabled peers in the areas of reading, math, comprehension, and writing (Lane et al., 2008). Additionally, research noted that academic and socio-emotional deficiencies negatively affect the future success of many students with ED as they are more likely to drop out, experience substance abuse and mental health problems, and be unemployed than their non-disabled peers (Bullis & Yovanoff, 2006; Lane et al., 2008; Walker et al., 2004). The research indicated that without additional clarification of LRE mandates, misinterpretation of the LRE continuum may lead to violations of student civil rights and may deprive students of their right to a free, appropriate public education (Hyatt & Filler, 2011).

The literature review highlighted the need for clarification of ED guidelines in order to determine the most appropriate placement for students with ED. It also indicated that little research has been conducted on academic achievement and students with ED. Much of the research focused on whether or not students with ED should be fully

included in general education settings or be educationally placed based on the LRE continuum and on their individual academic and socio-emotional needs. It is evident from the research in the study that future research should focus on providing academic and socio-emotional interventions that are designed for students with ED. It is also evident from the research that ED guidelines and LRE continuum must be further clarified in order to determine the best educational placements for students identified with ED.

Chapter 3 will provide information regarding the methodology for this study, including information about the sample of the study, instrumentation, procedures, and data collection.

### **Summary**

Providing individualized education to students with disabilities is a foundation of IDEA and the legal mandates of Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) and Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) (Heflin & Bullock, 1999). However, interpreting and implementing the LRE principles for students with emotional and behavioral disorders remains difficult for school districts and stakeholders. Since P.L. 94-142 (1975), proponents of two competing philosophies regarding LRE have emerged: those who advocate for the full inclusion of all students with disabilities in general education setting with non-disabled peers, and those who advocate for inclusion based upon the strengths and individual needs of the student.

Advocates for full inclusion have argued that the academic and non-academic needs of all students with disabilities can only be achieved in a general education setting with their non-disabled peers. They further argue that placing students with disabilities in

special programs or self-contained settings is discriminatory and diminishes their self-empowerment and independence (D'Alonzo, Giordano, & Vanleeuwen, 1997).

Advocates of LRE placement insist that there should be degrees of inclusion for students with disabilities who exhibit distinct profiles of strengths and weaknesses (D'Alonzo et al., 1997). Accordingly, LRE advocates maintain that placement should be determined based upon student readiness, the academic and socio-emotional benefits of inclusion, and instructional approaches. Teams should consider a full continuum of placement options based on the individual needs of the student (Etschedt, 2006). Additionally, general education teachers must receive training on special education procedures, disabilities, behavior management, and they must have sufficient time to collaborate with special educators.

The researcher's review of the literature indicated that the successful implementation of the LRE continuum requires a collaborative process among all stakeholders (Heflin & Bullock, 1999). There was a need for more empirical studies to clarify the principles of LRE and the placement of students with ED (Simpson, 2004). Simpson (2004) also recommended that additional research be undertaken to identify the variables of inclusion as promoted by advocates for the full inclusion of students with disabilities. While beyond the scope of this study, future research about full inclusion and academic achievement among students with disabilities may help to further clarify ED guidelines related to the implementation of FAPE and the LRE continuum (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998).

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

Determining the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) educational placement of students with emotional disorders (ED) has proven to be a difficult task (Crockett, 1999; in Hoge, et al., 2014). As Crockett (1999) noted, determining the educational placement of students with ED has been one of the more complicated and contentious issues in special education (in Hoge, et al., 2014). Nonetheless, if students with ED are to receive an equitable and quality education that addresses their specific socio-emotional and academic needs, it is essential that LRE educational placement continuum options are understood and implemented consistently. It is therefore important that school districts, educators, and stake holders receive clarification of ED guidelines in order to determine the most appropriate educational placement of students with ED. Additionally, in order to provide a more equitable educational system, educators and students with ED must be active participants in the process that serves to transform their understanding of how unequal structures in society marginalize and oppress people with disabilities (Creswell, 2013).

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this correlational study was to examine the relationships between the variables regarding a respondents self-reported clarity regarding guidelines on the educational placement of students with ED. The continued controversy and differing opinions regarding the interpretation and implementation of the LRE continuum remains problematic (McLeskey et al., 2010). The divergence of opinion regarding LRE continuum and student placement is especially problematic for students with emotional disorders (ED) because they are the most likely of all children with disabilities to be

segregated from the general population due to their academic and behavioral deficits (Maggin, Wehby, Moore-Partin, Robertson, & Oliver, 2011). Research conducted by the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Disability Statistics and Demographics at the University of New Hampshire indicated that nationally, 12.1 percent of students in grades K -12 were identified with disabilities. Under IDEA (Part B) which governs how special education services are provided to students ranging from ages 3-22, 5, 694, 441 students were found eligible for special education services, and 6.3 percent of these students were identified with emotional disorders (Data First, 2012). Current data from a large Northeast school district indicated that 13.84 percent of students receive special education services and of this percentage, approximately 1,572 K-12 students have been identified with emotional disorders (study site profile, 2016). The school district has two alternative secondary schools and 12 special education centers for students with more severe cognitive and physical needs (study site profile, 2016). Findings from this study may provide a clearer understanding of FAPE and the LRE continuum when determining the educational placement of students identified with emotional disorders.

### **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

The following research questions were formulated for this study:

1. What is the relationship between perceived clarity of Emotional Disorder (ED) guidelines and the educational placement of students with ED?
2. What are the differences between groups based on guideline clarity scores and the educational placement of students with ED?

### **Hypotheses**

The following hypotheses guided this study:

H<sub>0</sub>1: There are no significant relationships between perceived clarity of guidelines and role in educational placement.

H<sub>A</sub>1: There are significant relationships between perceived clarity of guidelines and role in educational placement.

H<sub>0</sub>2: There are no significant differences between groups based on guideline clarity and scores on measures regarding role in educational placement.

H<sub>A</sub>2: There are significant differences between groups based on guideline clarity and scores on measures regarding role in educational placement.

### **Research Design**

I used a quantitative correlational design in this study examining the relationships between the perceived clarity of ED guidelines and the educational placement of students with ED. As Fowler (2014) noted, using a correlational research design provided statistics or numerical descriptions regarding the variables of a study. I used a correlational research design to examine the relationships between perceived clarification of emotional disorder (ED) guidelines and educational placement of students identified with ED. The correlational research design required collecting data in order to obtain statistics that provide a quantitative or numerical description regarding the study population (Fowler, 2014). Quantitative research involves determining the independent and dependent variables of the study, developing a rationale, determining the accurate sampling method, sample size, defining the study participants, and conducting data analysis and presenting an interpretation of the data (Gay et al., 2012). For this study, the independent variable was the clarification of ED guidelines and the dependent variables

were the role in educational placement, restrictions on educational placement, type of placement, alternative placement considerations, and needs met.

I gave a questionnaire to special education teachers and special education administrators to examine the relationships that exist between special educators' clarity of ED guidelines on ED and determining the educational placement of students with ED. Using a correlational research design provided an examination of the differences, if any, between the variables of the study. However, correlational research does not test for causality among the variables (Adams & Lawrence, 2015). Study participants generated data for the study. Convenience sampling was used to obtain a minimum of 100-200 special educators using online special education forums such as the National Association of Special Educators (NASSET) and the Council for Exceptional Education (CEC). Gay et al. (2012) noted that convenience sampling techniques provide a means for researchers to determine the likelihood that every member of a defined population has an equal chance of being selected for the sample. For this study, using convenience sampling of special educators and special education administrators allowed the researcher to collect data specifically from the targeted population.

### **Target Population, Sampling Method and Related Procedures**

An important first step when conducting research is to identify and define the population to which the results will be generalizable (Gay et al., 2012). I sought to use this correlational study to understand the relationships between the perceived clarity of Emotional Disorder (ED) guidelines and the educational placement of students identified with emotional and behavioral disabilities. Consequently, I drew a representative sample from special educators and special education administrators who participate in online



forums such as The National Association of Special Education Teachers or (NASET); this is a national membership organization that was established specifically to provide a national forum for special educators and special education administrators to collaborate and share ideas ([www.NASET.org](http://www.NASET.org), 2018). A sample of general educators was important to ascertain their interpretations of ED guidelines and the determination of ED eligibility when placing students in general education settings or placements that are more restrictive. However, the special educators are typically tasked with writing Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and recommending educational placement of students identified with ED and were therefore the target population for this study.

As indicated on the Northeast school district profile, IEPs are written plans that describe a student's special learning needs and the special education services provided to meet those needs (study site profile, 2016). When developing an IEP, the law requires the participation of the student's special education and general education teachers, school and/or special education administrator, and the student's parents or guardians. The IEP must contain the following: a statement of the student's present level of academic performance; how the student's disability affects participation in the general education setting; measurable annual academic and functional goals; and an explanation of how the student's progress toward meeting these goals will be evaluated (D'Ambrosio & Reese, 2017).

The sample frame for the study was generated from a population of special educators, special education administrators via online line special educator forums such as NASET. This sample was believed to have social, cultural, economic, and political diversity within it. Permission was obtained from Concordia University IRB to move

forward with the study survey. A cover letter explaining the study was added to the beginning of the survey. In it, I explained how respondents' participation and responses would help the study, that responses would remain anonymous and confidential to the degree possible, and it included contact information for the principal investigator of the study should participants wish to ask additional questions.

### **Sampling Method**

I used a convenience sampling method to obtain data from study respondents. Because convenience sampling does not use random selection from a sample and therefore may not provide an accurate representation of the population under study (Adams & Lawrence, 2015). Since the intent of the study was to examine the relationships, if any, between special educators' perceived clarity of ED guidelines and educational placement of students with ED, convenience sampling of the targeted population was deemed appropriate.

### **Survey Instrumentation**

I used a survey previously published in literature (Becker, et al., 2011). Becker et al. (2011) developed the survey instrument to measure special educators' concepts of the importance of academic/cognitive, mental health, and behavioral elements in determining eligibility as a student with ED. The previously published survey instrument consisted of five categories or responses ranging from 0 = never to 5=strongly agree that are related to the educational placement of students with ED (Becker et al., 2011). The content of the previously published survey instrument covered the following topics:

- student outcomes
- clarity of guidelines and criteria for student placement

- types of supports in place for students moving to a least restrictive placement
- monitoring student progress
- transitions to and from restrictive alternative placements
- cost and factors involved for providing educational placements for students with ED
- determinations for placing students in a restrictive placement
- determination of placement for students with ED, identification /intervention for ED
- percentage of students with ED being served in special education placements (Becker et al., 2011).

However, for this study, I created groups, based on clarity score, within the independent variable. In this study, the researcher provided a Likert-type questionnaire to respondents to collect interval data regarding the research questions of the study. Using a Likert scale to measure responses allowed the use of structured questions for more accurate and reliable assessments of where respondents fell within the survey continuum (Fowler, 2014). For this study, I did not modify the content of the original questionnaire

In this study, I based group membership on overall scale scores on the items related to clarity of ED guidelines. Next, I ran a frequency analysis and identified four natural breaks within the distribution of scores on this scale. The four breaks individually accounted for roughly 25% of respondents; hence, the researcher created four groups within this independent variable.

I labeled the first group as “Lack of Clarity.” Respondents in this group accounted for 25% of the sample and their scores ranged from 4 to 11, reflecting that these respondents reported a lack of clarity on guidelines for placement of students with ED. The researcher labeled the second group as “Little Clarity.” Respondents in this group accounted for 25% of the sample and their scores ranged from 12-16, reflecting that these respondents had a little clarity on the guideline for placement of students with ED. The researcher labeled the third group “Some Clarity.” Respondents in this group accounted for 25% of the sample and their scores ranged from 17-21 on the scale, reflecting that these respondents reported having some clarity on guidelines for the placement of students with ED. The researcher labeled the final group as “Crystal Clarity.” Respondents in this group accounted for 25% of the sample and their scores ranged from 22-24 indicated that they had a very clear understanding of the guidelines regarding the placement of students with ED.

For this study, I used the following questions from sections of the original survey to examine the relationship between the perceived clarity of ED guidelines and the educational placement of students with ED. These included questions related to the following aspects: role in educational placement, restrictiveness of educational placement, and types of placement, alternative placement considerations, and needs met of students with ED.

**Role in educational placement.** In this study, I used questions from the first section of the survey instrument that asked special educators how active individuals are in determining the educational placement of students with ED. From the first section of the survey, the researcher used five unique items to measure various aspects of activity regarding the educational placement of students with ED. Respondents rated the role in educational placement and included the items: role of parents, administrators, special educators, and other school support staff played in the placement of these students. The scale used to rate the role played in the placement of these students ranged from 0 = no active role to 5 = very active role (Becker et al., 2011). The ranges of scores on this scale were 0 to 30. The researcher calculated the scores on this scale by summing the scores across the five items. When the term or variable of role of educational placement is referenced in the document or discussion of an analysis, I used the total sum score on these six items as the measure of educational placement.

**Restrictiveness of educational placement.** From the second section of the survey, the researcher used 20 items related to restrictiveness of educational placement of students with ED. Responses were rated on a zero to 5 - point scale and ranged from 0 = never to 5 = always. In this section, respondents were asked to rate such factors as academic issues, emotional and/or behavioral problems, peer or adult-directed aggression, truancy, and suspensions when determining the restrictiveness of educational placement for students with ED (Becker et al., 2011). For this section of the survey, 20 unique items that measured various aspects of activity regarding the restrictiveness of educational placement for students with ED. For example, respondents were asked how the following factors determined the type or degree of restrictiveness of educational placement for students with ED (Becker, et al., 2011). These factors included the following:

- the severity of a student's academic problems, emotional problems
- disruptive behavior
- aggressive behavior at peers
- aggressive behavior at adults
- extent of substance abuse
- extent of gang involvement
- extent of truancy/school absences
- violation of school policy (e.g., drug/alcohol policy)
- pattern of detentions and suspensions
- capacity of staff within the school to address the student's needs
- documented lack of students success in a less restrictive placement
- teacher recommendation
- school counselor recommendation
- mental health provider recommendation
- parent(s) advocacy (or assistance) for a particular placement
- financial cost of the placement for the school district
- financial cost of the placement for the family
- logistical issues for the school (e.g., transportation)
- logistical issues for the family (e.g., transportation) (Becker, et al., 2011).

Respondents rated decisions to place a student with ED in a restrictive placement with a scale of 0 to 5; with 0 = never and 5 = always (Becker, et al., 2011). The ranges of scores on this scale were 0 to 100. The researcher calculated the scale score by summing the scores across the five items. When the term or variable of the restrictiveness of

educational placement is referenced in the document or discussion of analysis, I used the total sum score on these six items as a measure of educational placement.

**Types of educational placements.** The third section contained two additional sets of questions related to the types of placements that were considered when determining alternative educational placements for students with ED. Respondents were asked to provide a percentage [for this question, respondents were asked to provide a percentage in each special education setting with a total of 100%] of students with ED in your school who are being served in each of the following educational placement settings: fully included in regular education classroom with supports, special classroom (either part or full day) within the regular school building, and public school program outside of their school building, private (non-public) school program, residential treatment setting, or homebound instruction. The possible range of responses were 0% to 100% and are dependent upon the percentage of students with ED being served in a particular educational setting within each respondents' school. (Becker et al., 2011).

**Needs addressed of students with ED.** The fourth section of the survey instrument included questions about the effectiveness of services and asked how well each school addressed the needs of students with ED. This section of the survey contained five unique items that measured various aspects of activity regarding the needs addressed for students with ED. For example, items within this section assessed respondents' perspectives on academic needs, emotional needs, behavioral needs, vocational readiness skills, and capitalizing on strengths and talents of students with ED.

Respondents rated each item on a scale ranging from 0 = very poorly to 5 = very well (Becker et al., 2011). The ranges of scores on this scale were 0 to 30. The researcher calculated the scale score by summing the scores across the five items. When the term

student needs is referenced in the document or in the discussion of an analysis, I used the total sum on these five items as a measure of educational placement.

**Alternative Placement Considerations.** For the fifth section of the survey, I used questions about alternative placement considerations for students whose behaviors required a restrictive educational placement. This section of the survey contained 5 unique items that measured various aspects regarding the alternative placement considerations for students with ED. For example, the researcher could use items within this section to assess respondents' perspective on decisions for placing students with ED in more restrictive educational placements. Respondents were asked if the severity of the students' problems indicated the need for a more restrictive placement, how seriously are the following alternative placements considered? Respondents rated possible alternative placements: alternative public school equipped to serve students with ED, alternative private (non-public) school equipped to serve students with ED, public residential treatment facility, charter school, computer and web-based academic program, or home bound program. Items were rated on a scale ranging from 0 - 5; with 0 = not very seriously and 5 = very seriously (Becker et al., 2011). The ranges of scores on this scale were from 0 to 30. I then calculated the scale score by summing the scores across the five items. When the term or variable of alternative placement considerations is referenced in the document or in the discussion of an analysis, I used the total sum score on these five items as a measure of educational placement.

Adams and Lawrence (2015) noted that the cornerstones of good research require reliability and validity. Reliability means that the test consistently measures what it is intended to measure and validity refers to how accurately the instrument measures what it is intended to measure (Adams & Lawrence, 2015). To determine internal consistency



and reliability, Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2006) stated that researchers must calculate and report Cronbach's Alpha coefficient when using Likert scales in research as it measures the extent to which items in the instrument are consistent among themselves and with the overall instrument (cited in Croasmun & Ostrom, 2011). Therefore, determining validity in the study entailed measuring if the items in the Likert questionnaire accurately reflect the construct that the study is attempting to measure and whether or not all aspects of the construct are represented in the items (Adams & Lawrence, 2015). Accordingly, validity for the study may be established if the instrument provides an accurate measurement of the research questions.

### **Data Collection**

Written permission for using and modifying the survey instrument was obtained from the original authors; however, I did not modify the content of the original survey (Becker, et al., 2011). After the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Concordia University gave permission to conduct the survey, the questionnaire was submitted via online media sites specifically targeted to collect data from special education teachers and administrators. The survey included a cover letter, letter of consent, explanation of voluntary participation and confidentiality. Survey respondents were not asked to provide their names or other identification. Respondents submitted their responses for the survey using Qualtrics, an online data collection platform. I encouraged special educators to participate in the survey by informing potential study participants of the purpose of the study and that their participation will provide data that will better inform and guide the LRE continuum placement of students with ED. In addition, survey participants were informed that upon completion of the survey, they would be entered to win an Amazon gift card.

## **Data Analysis**

Once data were collected, I used the SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) software to conduct an analysis of the data. Statistical analysis was conducted using the Pearson correlation coefficient with an alpha level of .05 to measure any relationship that exists between the variables of the study. Gay et al. (2012) noted that the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient, or Pearson's  $r$ , is the measure of correlation that is most often used in educational research because it provides the most accurate estimate of the correlation between all interval or ratio variables within a study. I analyzed the data using a Pearson correlation coefficient to analysis to data and answer the main research question. In addition, I conducted a series of Analyses of Variance (ANOVA) testing for the differences between the clarity groups, established using scale scores from the questions assessing respondent clarity of guidelines, to test for differences on the following measures regarding restrictions on educational placement: role in educational placement, restrictiveness of educational placement, types of educational placements, alternative placement considerations, and needs met of students with ED.

## **Limitations and Delimitations of the Research Design**

Simon and Goes (2013) noted that limitations in research are the incidents, situations, or issues that arise in a study that are outside of the researcher's control. The authors held that every study, no matter how well conducted, has limitations and this is the reason that researchers cannot prove or disprove their research findings (Simon & Goes, 2013). Adams and Lawrence, 2015, noted that correlational research design is a useful design for educational research to examine and describe the relationship between variables of a study. However, the authors caution that correlation does not equal causation (Adams & Lawrence, 2015).

Other noted limitations that may affect or restrict the study include sampling and time constraints for submitting, collecting, and analyzing data obtained from survey participants. As the study was conducted to understand what the relationships are between the perceived clarity of ED guidelines and the determination of educational placement of students identified with ED, the representative sample was drawn from special educators and special education administrators in online special education forums. Data for the study were obtained via a questionnaire posted to various online special education forums. Additionally, study respondents were informed that they would have an opportunity to win an Amazon gift card for completing the questionnaire.

Delimitations in a study arise from the choices made by the researcher. They include determining the problem or purpose of the study, methodology and design of the study, sample frame, theoretical framework, data collection, and instrumentation (Simon & Goes, 2013). Additional variables of the study are related to special educators' determining ED eligibility and the educational placement of students identified with ED, professional development opportunities for special educators regarding best practices when working with students with ED, and collaboration between special and general educators when placing students with ED in general education settings. In the study, I excluded data from general educators regarding their understanding of ED guidelines and the eligibility or educational placement of students with ED in general education classrooms as the criteria will not be directly relevant to the purpose of the study (Simon & Goes, 2013).

The researcher used a convenience sampling technique as a means for selecting a sample from the population of special educators and special education administrators. As Adams and Lawrence (2015) noted, sampling bias is a concern with convenience

sampling because there is no set population size that will represent the population of the study. However, the authors noted that convenience sampling is often used as an alternative in descriptive research if researcher's goal is not to describe a population, but instead, to examine the relationships among variables within the study (Adams & Lawrence, 2015). Therefore, using convenience sampling should not affect the external validity of this study.

### **Internal and External Validity**

Gay et al. (2012) noted that experimental research is the only type of research that can be used to test hypotheses in order to establish cause-effect relationships because the independent variable can be manipulated, changed, or controlled in order to examine an effect that may exist on the dependent variables of the study. For an experiment to be considered valid, internal validity and external validity must be established. Internal validity is the degree to which the independent variable and not some other extraneous variable caused changes in the dependent variable. External validity is the degree to which the study results are generalizable from the sample of the study to the target population (Gay et al., 2012). Correlational research design does not involve manipulating, changing, or controlling the variables of a study and only seeks to describe and examine differences that may exist between the independent and dependent variables and whether or not the results are generalizable beyond a specific sample to the population represented by the sample (Adams & Lawrence, 2015).

There are a number of threats to both internal and external validity in survey research. Internal validity is the degree to which we can state that there is a relationship between the variables of a study and external validity is the degree to which the results are generalized to different groups via different methods (Adams & Lawrence, 2015). For

this study, internal validity would be established if the results from the study identify relationships between perceived clarity of ED guidelines and the educational placement of students with ED. Adams and Lawrence (2015) noted that external validity is the ability to generalize the results of a study to other samples or methods; as such, results that apply only to a specific group would not be generalizable to other groups and is problematic for establishing the external validity of the study. However, I intentionally sought the input special educators and special education administrators to answer the research questions of the study. External validity for the study would be established if data collected from respondents provided a description or noted differences regarding the research questions of the study. As the authors noted, limiting a sample to a specific group does not mean that the study does not have external validity; only that the results may not be generalizable to other groups (Adams & Lawrence, 2015).

The study used a five-section Likert-type survey to obtain data related to special educators' perceived clarity of ED guidelines and educational placement decision making for students with ED (Becker, et al., 2011). As Becker et al. (2011) noted, the survey instrument provided data for their study, but the instrument has not been extensively evaluated for reliability and validity (S. Becker, personal communication, August 9, 2016). In this study, a correlational research design was used as the researcher only sought to examine the differences, if any, that may exist between the independent and dependent variables and whether or not the results are generalizable beyond a specific sample to the population represented by the sample (Adams & Lawrence, 2015).

Finally, as the correlational study was used to examine the relationships between perceived clarity of ED guidelines and determination of educational placement for students with ED, limiting the sample frame to special educators and special education

administrators should not negatively affect the external validity of the study since special educators and special education administrators were the target of the sample. The researcher must also consider the impact of special educators' experience with ED guidelines and educational placement of students with ED, which may affect the results of the survey.

### **Ethical Issues**

The focus of the research was to identify the relationships between perceived clarity of Emotional Disorder (ED) guidelines and student educational placement. To this end, data was collected from special educators and special education administrators who are currently working with students identified with ED. Survey respondents were asked to complete the study questionnaire via Qualtrics, an online data collection survey platform, which allowed respondents to complete the survey anonymously. No measurable risks were involved for participation in the survey.

As the principal investigator in the study, my role was to address any potential ethical concerns by obtaining permission from the school district and the Concordia University Institutional Review Board (IRB) before administering the survey. The study participants were provided information regarding the intent and scope of the study. Each participant was asked to read the consent form prior to his or her participation in the survey. According to the APA Standard 3.10, Section 8.02, researchers must obtain the informed consent of study participants and to provide each participant with information regarding the purpose of the research, expected length of the study, procedures, and right to decline participation or withdraw from the study (Colvin & Lanigan, 2005). Therefore, I informed study participants that their participation in the study is voluntary and that they may withdraw from the study at any time. I also obtained permission to use survey

instruments, procedures, and data belonging to anyone else before implementing the survey. Study participants were informed of any potential conflicts of interest such as the researcher's role as a special educator. Finally, throughout the study, I consulted and adhered to the expectations for maintaining ethical standards set by Concordia University's IRB.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 3, I described the methods and procedures that will be used to provide an examination of the associations, if any, between clarity of Emotional Disorder (ED) guidelines and determining the educational placement of students with ED. The problem, research design, research questions, sample population, ethical considerations, and instrumentation were presented. In addition, I discussed the data collection process and data analysis procedures for the study.

Presentation of the data as they relate to the two research questions will be addressed in Chapter 4, along with the demographic information collected from the questionnaire. Chapter 5 will contain a summary and discussion of the findings. It will also include conclusions, implications for practice, and recommendations for further research.

## **Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results**

### **Introduction**

In this quantitative research study, I examined the relationships between clarity of Emotional Disorder (ED) guidelines and the educational placement of students identified with emotional disorders. Specifically, I conducted a survey of special educators and special education administrators in order to understand the degree to which ED guidelines may affect the educational placement of students with ED. The instrument used in this research study was a quantitative survey developed by Becker et al. (2011) which seeks the input of study participants about determining educational placements for students identified with emotional disorders.

The first section of the survey asked respondents to rate the relevance of 14 mental health, behavioral, academic and/or cognitive factors for determining ED eligibility (Becker et al., 2011). The second section asked respondents to identify what their role was in determining the educational placement of students with ED. The third section asked respondents to rate factors such as academic issues, emotional and/or behavioral problems, peer-adult aggression, truancy, and suspensions when determining more restrictive educational placements with students with ED (Becker et al., 2011).

The fourth section of the survey asked questions relevant to the effectiveness of services for students with ED in addressing their specific socio-emotional, academic strengths and weaknesses, and vocational preparation (Becker et al., 2011). Although the survey instrument was pilot-tested, it has not been extensively evaluated for reliability and validity. However, reliability and validity for the study may be established based upon data obtained from approximately 196 study participants as it relates to research and



hypotheses questions of this study and the determination of the association between the variables identified in the study.

### **Description of the Sample**

An anonymous online survey was conducted that obtained responses from special educators and special education administrators. Data were obtained by posting the Likert survey to online forums that specifically targeted special educators and special education administrators, including the National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASSET) and the Council of Exceptional Education (CEC). Both NASSET and CEC are online forums that provide special educators and special education administrators with opportunities to collaborate with other professional special educators and to disseminate research and other relevant information in the field of special education. Data for the research study were collected and maintained via Qualtrics, an online survey and data collection company. Of the study participants, the majority of respondents identified as special educators (54%), followed by teachers of students with ED (15%), building-level special education department chair (12%), district-level special education coordinator (8%), other building-level administrator (5%), and regular education teacher (6%). All survey responses were anonymous and could not be connected to the respondents in any way. The confidentiality and anonymity of survey respondents were thus maintained throughout their participation in the survey.

### **Summary of the Results**

In the study, I examined the relationships between clarity of Emotional Disorder (ED) guidelines and several factors related to ED placement using the Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient, or Pearson's  $r$ . In order to test the relationships between clarity of ED guidelines and these respective variables, I created a categorical variable

from the clarity of guideline scales and conducted an ANOVA to test for differences between these groups on the measures discussed below. The results indicated that there were several positive and significant associations between the variables in this study with no significant differences found between the means of perceived clarity of ED guidelines and role in educational placement:  $F(3, 50) = 2.455, P = 0.074$ . However, results from the ANOVA indicated significant differences between the means of perceived clarity of ED guidelines and restrictions on educational placement:  $F(3, 43) = 4.288, p < .05$ , perceived clarity of ED guidelines and type of placement:  $F(3, 52) = 7.842, p < .001$ , perceived clarity of ED guidelines and alternative placement considerations,  $F(3, 52) = 7.695, p < .001$ , and perceived clarity of ED guidelines and needs met of students with ED:  $F(3, 52) = 7.695, p < .001$  (See Figs. 1 -4).

For the first variable in this study, I examined the relationship between the perceived clarity of ED guidelines and role in educational placement as measured by the responses of participants based upon their identification as a special educator, teacher of students with ED, regular education teacher, building level special education department chair, district level special education coordinator, or other building level administrator. The results of the correlational analysis indicated a moderate and positive correlation between the variables of clarity of ED guidelines and role in educational placement,  $r = .352, n = 52$ , and  $p < .01$ . The coefficient of determination ( $r^2$ ) indicated that 12% of the variance is shared between the two variables. In the next step, I conducted an ANOVA to examine the differences between the means of the groups of clarity of ED guidelines and role in educational placement. The data indicated no violation of Levene's test of homogeneity of variances. Additionally, the data indicated that there are no significant differences on scores regarding measures clarity of ED guidelines and role in educational

placement:  $F(3, 50) = 2.455, p = 0.074$ . The effect size, calculated using eta squared, was large ( $\eta^2 = .24$ ). A closer examination of the differences in mean scores indicated a significant difference between the “Lack of Clarity” group ( $M = 65.15, SD = 24.79$ ) and the “Crystal Clarity” group ( $M = 90.90, SD = 15.91$ ). This suggests that the lowest group is the group needing most intervention and education regarding clarity of guidelines and the impact the guidelines have on restrictions in educational placement.

For the second variable in this study, I examined the relationship between the clarity of ED guidelines and restrictions on educational placement. For this set of variables, the results indicated a strong, significant positive correlation between clarity of ED guidelines and restrictions on educational placement  $r = .548, n = 47, p < .001$ . The coefficient of determination indicated that 30% of the variance is shared between the two variables, indicating that 30% of the variance can be explained by the clarity of ED guidelines (McMillian, 2012). Data obtained from the ANOVA indicated a violation of Levene’s test of homogeneity of variances,  $p < .05$ . The data also indicated that there were significant differences between the clarity groups on the scale score of measures regarding the restrictions on educational placement,  $F(3, 43) = 4.288, p < .05$  (See Figure 1). The effect size, calculated using eta squared, was large ( $\eta^2 = .24$ ). A closer examination of the differences in mean scores indicated a significant difference between the “Lack of Clarity” group ( $M = 65.15, SD = 24.79$ ) and the “Crystal Clarity” group ( $M = 90.90, SD = 15.91$ ). This suggests that the lowest group needs the most intervention and education regarding clarity of ED guidelines and restrictions in educational placement.

For the third set of variables, clarity of ED guidelines and type of placement, the results indicated a strong, significant, and positive correlation, with  $r = .518, n = 56, p <$

.001. The coefficient of determination indicated that 27% of the variance is shared between these two variables. Data from the ANOVA did not indicate a violation of Levene's test of homogeneity of variances. The data indicated that there were significant differences between the clarity groups on the scale score of measures regarding the restrictions on educational placement,  $F(3, 52) = 7.842, p < .001$  (See Figure 2). The effect size, calculated using eta squared, was large ( $\eta^2 = .31$ ). A closer examination of the differences in mean scores indicated a significant difference between the "Crystal Clarity" group ( $M = 24.67, SD = 6.14$ ) and the groups with "Some Clarity" ( $M = 18.37, SD = 5.35$ ) and "Little Clarity" ( $M = 13.85, SD = 6.32$ ). This suggests that the several groups could benefit from intervention and education regarding clarity of ED guidelines and types of educational placement for students with ED.

For the variables of clarity of ED guidelines and alternative placement considerations, the results indicated a strong, significant, and positive correlation with  $r = .518, n = 56, p < .001$ . The coefficient of determination indicated that 27% of the variance is shared between these two variables. The data obtained from the ANOVA did not indicate a violation of Levene's test of homogeneity of variances. The data indicated that there were significant differences between the clarity groups on the scale score of measures regarding alternative placement considerations:  $F(3, 52) = 7.842, p < .001$  (See Figure 3). This suggests that several groups would benefit from interventions and education regarding clarity of ED guidelines and alternative placement considerations for students with ED.

For the last set of variables, clarity of ED guidelines and needs met, the results indicated a strong, significant, and positive correlation, with  $r = .497, n = 56, p < .001$ . The coefficient of determination indicated that 25% of the variance is shared between

these two variables. The data from the ANOVA did indicate a violation of Levine's test of homogeneity of variances,  $p < .05$ . The data also indicated that there were significant differences between the clarity groups on the scale score of measures regarding needs met,  $F(3, 52) = 7.695, p < .001$  (See Figure 4). The effect size, calculated using eta squared, was large ( $\eta^2 = .31$ ). A closer examination of the differences in mean scores indicated a significant difference between the "Crystal Clarity" group ( $M = 25.25, SD = 3.76$ ) and the groups with "Some Clarity" ( $M = 19.75, SD = 4.45$ ), a "Little Clarity" ( $M = 20.14, SD = 2.65$ ), and a "Lack of Clarity" ( $M = 16.21, SD = 7.08$ ). This suggests that the clearer respondents were on the clarity of guidelines, the stronger their beliefs about addressing the needs of students with ED in the educational system.

## **Research Results**

Based on the results of the ANOVA analyses, I accepted the null hypothesis that there were no significant differences among variables in the areas of role in educational placement and the educational placement of students with ED. This suggests that special education practitioners agreed that all roles [special educators, special education administrators, parents] play a part in the educational placement of students with ED.

I rejected the null hypothesis and accepted the alternative hypothesis for restrictions of educational placement, type of placement, alternative placement considerations, and needs met. For the variables of clarity of ED guidelines and restrictions of educational placement, the data showed significant differences between groups based on guideline clarity and scores on measures regarding restrictions of educational placement of students with ED. This suggested that special education practitioners differed regarding clarity of ED guidelines and restrictions of educational placement for students with ED. The noted difference of data among special education

practitioners suggest that lack of clarity of ED guidelines may affect restrictions of educational placement for students with ED.

For the variables of clarity of ED guidelines and type of placement, data from the ANOVA analysis found significant differences among clarity of ED guidelines and types of placement for students with ED. This suggested that special education practitioners differed regarding clarity of ED guidelines and types of placement for students with ED. The noted difference among the data of special education practitioners suggest that lack of clarity of ED guidelines may affect the types of placements for students with ED.

For the variables of clarity of ED guidelines and alternative placement considerations, data from the ANOVA analysis supported rejecting the null hypothesis and accepting the alternative hypothesis that there are significant differences among clarity of ED guidelines and alternative placement considerations. Again, this suggested that special educators differed regarding clarity of guidelines and alternative placement considerations for students with ED. The difference among the data of special educators suggest that the lack of clarity of ED guidelines may impact decisions regarding alternative placement considerations for students with ED.

Finally, for the variables of clarity of ED guidelines and needs met of students with ED, the data indicated significant differences between clarity of ED guidelines and needs met of students with ED. This suggested that special education practitioners differed regarding clarity of ED guidelines and needs met of students with ED. The difference among the data of special education practitioners suggest that lack of clarity of ED guidelines may impact academic interventions and socio-emotional supports provided to students with ED.

Data obtained for this study indicated that special educators and administrators would benefit from clearly defined ED guidelines. To find students eligible for special education services, clarification of ED guidelines is required for special educators to accurately identify students with ED. Clarification of ED guidelines is also required for special educators and special education administrators to identify academic interventions, socio-emotional supports, and determine the most appropriate educational placement in which to meet the specific needs of students with ED.

### **Detailed Analysis**

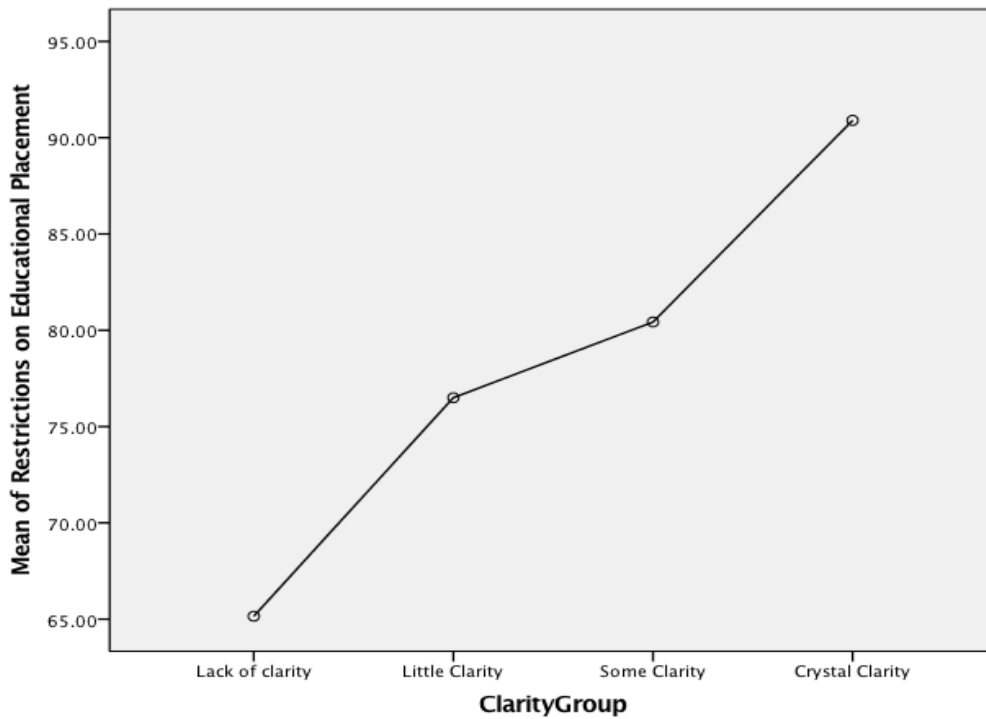
I initially conducted a Pearson's  $r$  correlational analysis to assess the associations between the variable of clarity of ED guidelines and the educational placement of students with ED. These variables included the following: role in educational placement restrictions on educational placement, type of placement, alternative placement considerations, and needs met. The results of the Pearson correlational analysis revealed a strong, significant, and positive association between all of the variables. Based on the results, the researcher rejected the null hypotheses in favor of the alternative hypotheses for the relationships.

I also conducted an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to assess differences between groups based regarding clarity of ED guidelines and the educational placement of students with ED. For the study, clarity of ED guidelines served as the independent variable used to create clarity groups. The following elements were dependent variables: role in educational placement, restrictions on educational placement, types of placement, alternative placement considerations, and needs met of students with ED. The following clarity groups were created: Lack of Clarity, Little Clarity, Some Clarity, and Crystal Clarity. Sum scores were obtained from the clarity items and broken into a range of

scores for four equal groups to create the clarity groups. The means were based on the sum scores on a set of items divided by the number of items. The first research question was focused on clarity of ED guidelines and role in educational placement. An ANOVA was conducted to examine the differences between the means of clarity of ED guidelines and role in educational placement. The results indicated that there are no significant differences on scores regarding measures of the role ED plays in educational placement:  $F(3, 50) = 2.455, p = 0.074$ .

For the variables of clarity of ED guidelines and restrictions on educational placement, results from the ANOVA revealed that there were significant differences between the clarity groups on scale score measures regarding restrictions of educational placement:  $F(3, 43) = 4.288, p < .05$ . A closer examination of differences in mean scores indicted a significant difference between the “Lack of Clarity” group ( $M=65.15$ ) and the “Crystal Clarity” group ( $M=90.90$ ) on scores regarding measures of restrictions on educational placement (See Figure 1.).





*Figure 1.* Means Plot of Clarity of Group and Restrictions on Educational Placement

For the next variables, an ANOVA was conducted to examine the differences between clarity of ED guidelines and type of placement. The results revealed that there were significant differences between the clarity groups on the scale score of measures regarding the restrictions on educational placement  $F(3, 52) = 7.842, p < .001$ . A closer examination of the differences in mean scores indicated a significant difference between the “Crystal Clarity” group ( $M = 24$ ) and the groups with “Some Clarity” ( $M = 18.37$ ) and “Little Clarity” ( $M = 13.85$ ) on scale scores of measures regarding the restrictions on educational placement. (See Figure 2.).

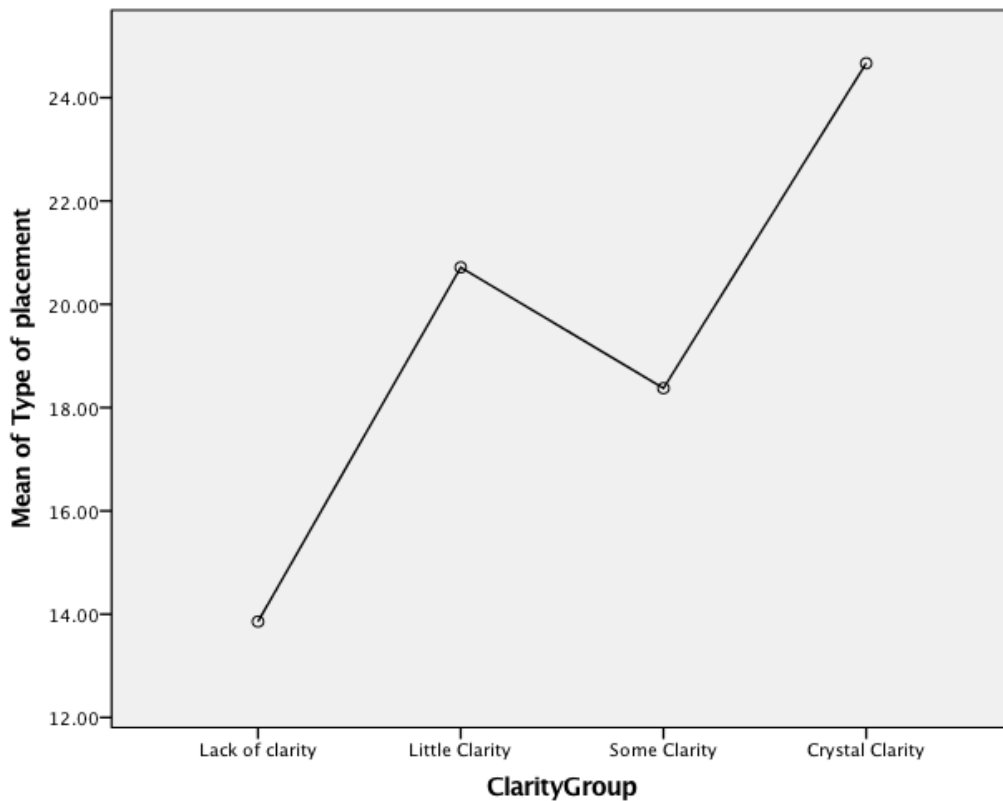
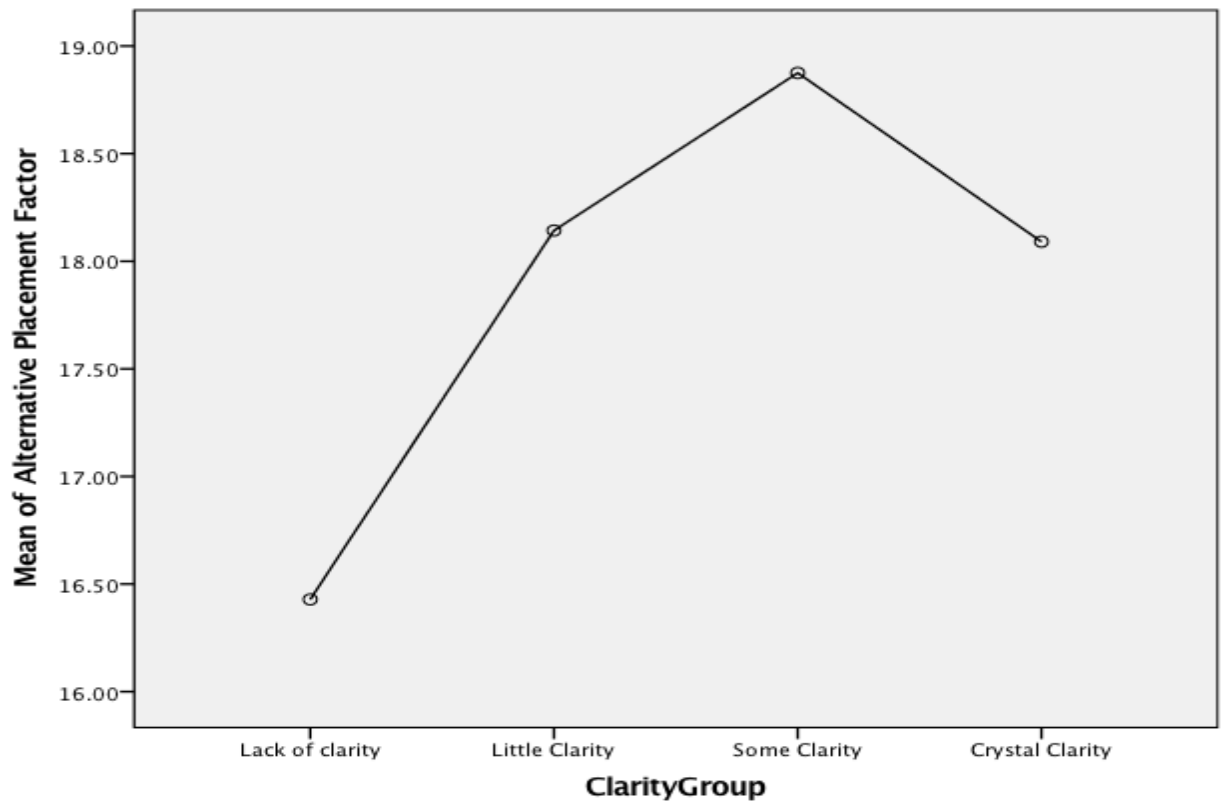


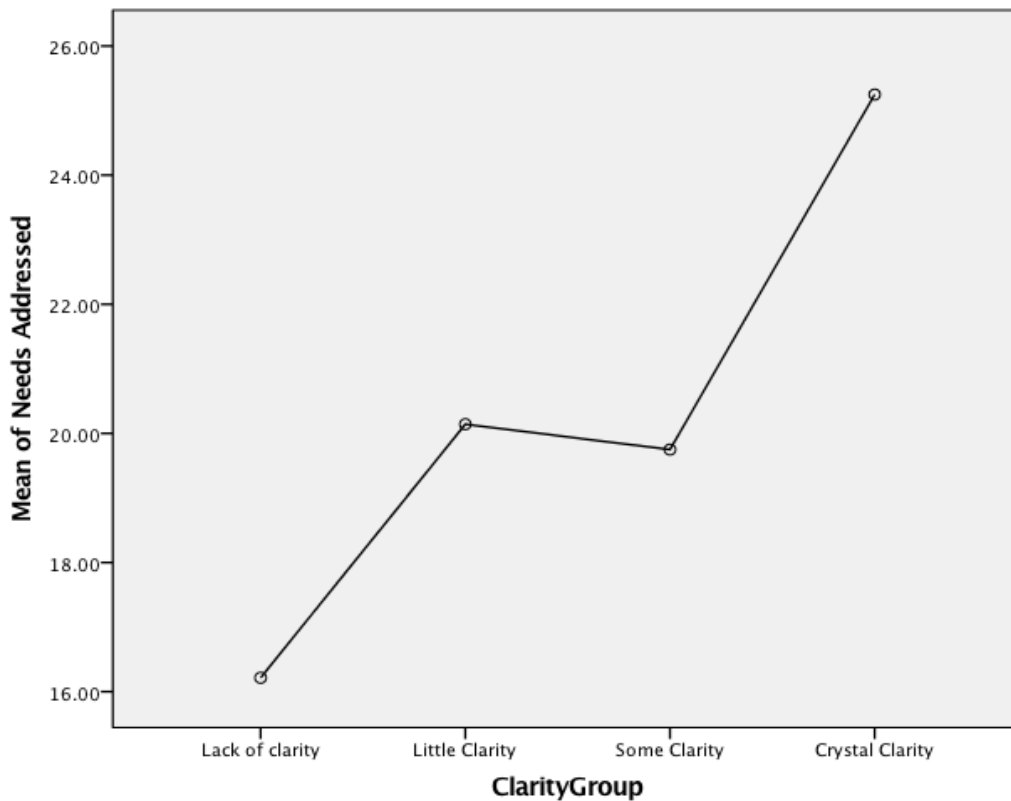
Figure 2. Means Plot of Clarity of Groups and Type of Placement.

The variables of clarity of ED guidelines and alternative placement considerations indicated strong, significant, and positive correlations,  $r = .518$ ,  $n = 56$ , and  $p < .001$ . The coefficient of determination indicated that 27% of the variance is shared by these two variables. An ANOVA was conducted to examine for differences between the variables of clarity of ED guidelines and alternative placement considerations. The data did not indicate a violation of Levene's test of homogeneity of variances,  $p > .05$ . Additionally, data from the ANOVA indicated that there were no significant differences between the clarity groups on the scale score of measures regarding alternative placement considerations:  $F(3, 52) = 7.842$ ,  $p < .001$ . (See Figure 3).



*Figure 3. Means Plot of Clarity Groups and Alternative Placement*

Lastly, an ANOVA was conducted to examine the differences between variables of clarity of ED guidelines and needs met of students with ED. The results indicated that there were significant differences between the clarity groups on the scale score of measures regarding needs met:  $F(3, 52) = 7.695, p < .001$ . A closer examination of the differences in mean scores indicated a significant difference between the “Crystal Clarity” group ( $M = 25.25$ ) and the groups with “Some Clarity” ( $M = 19.75$ ), a “Little Clarity” ( $M = 20.14$ ), and a “Lack of Clarity” ( $M = 16.21$ ) scores of measures regarding the needs met of students with ED (See Figure 4).



*Figure 4. Means Plot of Clarity of Groups and Needs Addressed*

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

This study was undertaken to examine the relationships between clarity of ED guidelines and the educational placement of students with ED. Responses for this study were obtained from special educators and special education administrators from school districts across the United States via an anonymous survey advertised in special educators' online forums. The results indicated that clarity of ED guidelines and educational placement of students with ED are problematic – as all the variables used to measure educational placement in this research – have a noted impact on the educational placement of students with ED. Additionally, data obtained in this study indicated that there are specific areas of concern among special educators regarding the clarity of ED guidelines

and the educational placement of students with ED, which lends further support the dependability and reliability of this research study.

In the literature review, I also noted that among all children with disabilities, students with ED are most likely to be segregated from the general population due to their academic and behavioral deficits (Maggin, Wehby, Moore-Partin, Robertson, & Oliver, 2011). The issue of clarity and determination of ED eligibility creates an untenable situation for an educational system that speaks of educating all students regardless of disability. Thus, this study's main focus was on what steps must be taken by school systems and educators to ensure that the behavioral and academic needs of students with ED are met. More specifically, the researcher focused on the clarity of ED guidelines and educational placement from the perspective of special educators and special education administrators. The results of this study reinforced the need for clarity of ED guidelines. The results of this study also confirm that the clarity of ED guidelines and educational placement are problematic, and this lack of clarity affects equitable access to instruction for students with ED.

### **Summary**

The results of the study indicated that there were no significant differences on the following measures of clarity of ED guidelines and role in educational placement and clarity of ED guidelines. However, the results of the study indicated significant differences on the following measures of clarity of ED guidelines and restrictions on educational placement, clarity of ED guidelines and types of placement, clarity of ED guidelines and alternative placement considerations and clarity of ED guidelines and needs met of students with ED. Thus, the results suggested that clarification of ED guidelines on the measures of restrictions on educational placement, types of placement,

alternative placement considerations, and needs met of students would be beneficial for special educators and administrators when determining the most appropriate educational placement for students with ED.

The data collected in this quantitative study were sufficient to answer the research questions: (1) what is the relationship between perceived clarity of ED guidelines and the educational placement of students with ED? (2) What are the differences between groups based on guideline clarity scores and the educational placement of students with ED? The data collected in this quantitative study was also sufficient to answer the hypotheses:  $H_{01}$ : There are no significant relationships between perceived clarity of guidelines and role in educational placement.  $H_{A1}$ : There are significant relationships between perceived clarity of guidelines and role in educational placement.  $H_{02}$ : There are no significant differences between groups based on guideline clarity and scores on measures regarding role in educational placement.  $H_{A2}$ : There are significant differences between groups based on guideline clarity and scores on measures regarding role in educational placement. This chapter included a description of the sample, a detailed data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and a summary of the results. Chapter 5 will contain a discussion of these findings.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion**

### **Introduction**

Since the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, the rights of students with disabilities have steadily improved. The majority of disabled students have moved from more segregated educational settings into more inclusive educational settings with their nondisabled peers (Kauffman & Landrum, 2009). However, there are two opposing views regarding the educational placement of students with disabilities. On one side of this debate, advocates for full inclusion argue that the general education setting is where students with disabilities can get the best quality education, along with opportunities to interact with their nondisabled peers. Full inclusion supporters view this inclusion as a civil right; therefore, general education is the only setting that provides a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment (Smith, 2005; Obiakor, et al., 2012; Dudley-Marling, C., & Bridget, M., 2014).

On the other side of the debate are those who advocate for an individualized continuum of educational placement for students with disabilities. They maintain that general education settings are not always best for students with disabilities. Advocates for individualized educational placement of students with disabilities contend that separate classrooms are often necessary to meet the academic and socio-emotional needs of the students, and therefore inclusion in general education settings may be considered inappropriate (Kauffman, Bantz, & McCullough, 2002). This perspective is especially important when considering the guidelines for ED eligibility and determining the appropriate educational placement of students with ED. Students with ED may require separate education settings to meet their identified academic and socio-emotional needs (Kauffman, et. al., 2002; Eller, et al., 2015). As Tkachyk (2013) noted, educational

placement should be determined by the best fit for meeting the needs of the student, not by taking a one-size-fits all approach.

The guidelines for identifying emotional disorders are codified by federal law and hold that one or more of the following characteristics must be exhibited over a long period of time and to such a degree that it adversely affects a student's educational performance:

- a. An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors
- b. An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers
- c. Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances
- d. A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression
- e. A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.

Emotional disturbance also includes schizophrenia. However, the term does not apply to children who are socially maladjusted unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance under paragraph (c)(4)(i) of this section (IDEIA of 2004, part 300/A/300.8).

While these guidelines are useful in that they offer a general overview of the characteristics of ED, they need to be much clearer to ensure that special educators can identify and classify students with ED into the appropriate special education category. This is the first step for determining appropriate interventions for students with ED (Becker et al., 2011).



## Summary of the Results

The purpose of this research study was to obtain a convenience sampling of special educators and administrators to examine the relationships between the perceived clarity of ED guidelines and the educational placement of students with ED. To this end, the researcher conducted a Pearson's  $r$  correlation to examine the associations between several factors related to ED placement, and there were several positive and significant associations among the variables of the study. An ANOVA was conducted to further examine the differences between the groups identified in the study and noted significant differences on the scores. Findings from the analysis showed no significant differences between the variables of clarity of ED guidelines and role in educational placement ( $r = .352, p < .01$ ). Four variables in this study indicated significant differences among the variables of clarity of ED guidelines and groups identified in the study. The first, clarity of ED guidelines and restrictions on educational placement, indicated that there were significant differences between the "Lack of Clarity" group ( $M = 65.15$ ) and the "Crystal Clarity" group ( $M = 90.90$ ) on a scale score of measures regarding restrictions in educational placement. (See Figure 1).

The second variable, clarity of ED guidelines and type of placement, revealed significant differences between the means of the clarity groups of "Crystal Clarity" ( $M = 24$ ) and the means of groups with "Some Clarity" ( $M = 18.37$ ) and groups with "Lack of Clarity" ( $M = 13.83$ ) on a scale scores of measures regarding type of placement (See Figure 2). The third variable, clarity of ED guidelines and alternative placement considerations revealed significant differences between the means of the "Crystal Clarity" group ( $M = 24.67$ ) and the groups of "Some Clarity" ( $M = 18.37$ ) and "Lack of Clarity" ( $M = 13.85$ ) (See Figure 3). Finally, there were significant differences between the variables

of clarity of ED guidelines and needs met of students with ED; with mean scores between the “Crystal Clarity” group ( $M = 25.25$ ) and the groups with “Some Clarity” ( $M = 19.75$ ), a “Little Clarity” ( $M = 20.14$ ), and a “Lack of Clarity” ( $M = 16.21$ ) on a scale score of measures regarding the needs met of students with ED (See Figure 4).

There were no significant differences in scale scores noted between the perceived clarity of ED guidelines and role in educational placement. However, the differences in scale scores of these group measures indicated that lack of clarity on ED guidelines may affect restrictions of educational placement and types of placement for students with ED. The scale scores of these group measures also indicated concerns regarding clarity of ED guidelines and meeting the academic and socio-emotional needs of students with ED.

### **Discussion of the Results**

Findings from the Pearson’s  $r$  correlational analysis for this study indicated there were several positive and significant relationships between the associations of ED guidelines and educational placement of students with ED. The results indicated a moderate and positive correlation between the variables of clarity of ED guidelines and role in educational placement,  $r = .352$ ,  $n = 54$ ,  $p < .01$ . The coefficient of determination indicated that 12% of the variance is shared between these two variables. For the variables of clarity of ED guidelines and restrictions on educational placement, the results indicated a strong, significant, and positive correlation,  $r = .548$ ,  $n = 47$ ,  $p < .001$ . The coefficient of determination indicated that 30% of the variance is shared between these two variables. The results for the variables of clarity of guidelines and type of placement indicated a strong, significant, and positive correlation,  $r = .518$ ,  $n = 56$ ,  $p < .001$ . The coefficient of determination indicated that 27% of the variance is shared between these two variables. The results of the variables of clarity of ED guidelines and alternative

placement consideration indicated a strong, significant, and positive correlation,  $r = .518$ ,  $n = 56$ ,  $p < .001$ . The coefficient of determination indicated that 27% of the variance is shared between these two variables. Finally, the results of the correlational coefficient indicated a strong, significant, and positive correlation between clarity of guidelines and needs addressed,  $r = .49$ ,  $n = 56$ ,  $p < .001$ . The coefficient of determination indicated that 25% of the variance is shared between these two variables. Thus, the findings from the Pearson's  $r$  analysis indicated an overall moderate to strong, significant, and positive correlation between all variables of ED guidelines and the educational placement of students with ED.

However, findings from the analysis of variance indicated that there were significant differences between the means for four of the five variables among the groups in this study. As noted, there were no significant differences in means scores among clarity of ED guidelines and role in educational placement ( $r = .352$ ,  $p < .01$ ) However, results for four variables revealed significant differences in mean scores between the groups of this study. The variable of clarity of ED guidelines and restrictions on educational placement revealed significant differences in mean scores between the "Lack of Clarity" group ( $M = 65.15$ ) and the "Crystal Clarity" group ( $M = 90.90$ ) (See Figure 1). The second variable involved the Clarity of ED guidelines and type of placement, and it revealed significant differences in mean scores between the clarity groups of "Crystal clarity" ( $M = 24$ ) and the groups with "Some Clarity" ( $M = 18.37$ ) and "Lack of Clarity" ( $M = 13.83$ ) (See Figure 2). The third variable of clarity of ED guidelines and alternative placement considerations revealed significant differences in mean scores between "Crystal Clarity" group ( $M = 24.67$ ) and the groups with "Some Clarity" ( $M = 18.37$ ), and a "Lack of Clarity" ( $M = 13.85$ ) (See Figure 3). The fourth variable of clarity of ED guidelines

and needs met of students with ED revealed significant differences in means scores between the “Crystal Clarity” group ( $M = 25.25$ ) and the groups with “Some Clarity” (19.73), “Little Clarity” ( $M = 20.14$ ), and “Lack of Clarity” ( $M = 16.21$ ) (See Figure 4). These findings suggest clarity of ED guidelines in these areas are necessary for students with ED to be appropriately placed in educational settings that are designed to meet their specific academic and socio-emotional needs.

Several factors may affect the results of this study. One such factor was the non-random sampling of special educators and administrators. However, as this study was designed to specifically obtain responses from a sample population, participant selection was intentional to obtain a representative sample for the study. A second factor that may have affected the study is the use of online forums to obtain data for the survey for this study. The study may also have been affected by nonresponse to questions in the survey, changes to responses over time, and response bias of the respondents (Creswell, 2014). Additionally, this study used a correlational research design that did not require the manipulation of the variables in the study. It sought only to examine any differences that may exist between the independent and dependent variables (Adams & Lawrence, 2015).

Findings from the correlational analysis revealed a strong, significant, and positive association between all the variables in the study. To further test the relationship between clarity of ED guidelines and the variables of this study, a categorical variable for clarity of guideline scale scores was created, ranging from 4-11 as “Lack of Clarity,” 12-16 as “Little Clarity,” 17-21 as “Some Clarity,” and scores 22-24 as “Crystal Clarity” and an ANOVA was conducted to examine the differences, if any, between means of the groups identified in the study. No significant differences were revealed between groups in the study related to the variables of clarity of ED guidelines and role in educational placement

or the variables of clarity of ED guidelines. However, significant differences between means of the groups in the study were revealed in the clarity of ED guidelines and restrictions on educational placement, clarity of ED guidelines and types of placement, clarity of ED guidelines and alternative placement considerations, and clarity of ED guidelines and needs met of students with ED. Therefore, findings from this study support the notion that clarity of ED guidelines is an area that requires education regarding restrictions in educational placement, types of placement, alternative placement considerations, and meeting the academic and socio-emotional needs of students with ED.

### **Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature**

Since the 1975 passage of Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA), courts, school districts, educators, and stakeholders have struggled to clarify and implement the federal law consistently (Smith, C.R., Katsiyannis, A., Losinski, M.L., & Ryan, J.B, 2015). Determination of eligibility for special education services requires identification and classification as a student with a disability. Policymakers, school administrators, and educators have been concerned about the lack of clarity in the federal definition of ED and the impact this has on the identification, eligibility, and educational placement of students with ED (Becker et al., 2011). Adding to the confusion is the “social maladjustment” clause within the federal definition of ED that excludes students identified as socially maladjusted from receiving special education services under IDEA (Cloth, Evans, Becker, & Paternite, 2013). The apparent reasons for this exclusion in the ED criteria are twofold: to prevent special education from becoming similar to the juvenile justice system and to lower special education costs by limiting the classification of ED (Cloth, et al., 2013).

Certainly, school districts may be concerned that removing the exclusion clause would lead to more students found eligible for ED and increase the cost of providing special education services. However, seven states have removed the social maladjustment clause. While a higher percentage of students were identified with ED were found (10% to 7%) when compared to the other states that did not remove the clause, the increase in ED identification was not due to differences in educational placement (Becker et al., 2011). Consequently, school districts' concerns of substantial special education costs were not supported and the rates of students being identified as having ED did not rise (Becker et al., 2011).

Another concern is that the exclusion of the social maladjustment from the federal ED definition may affect students' access to mental health and special education services (Becker et al., 2011). However, the greatest concern is that students with ED are not being identified (or receive a different classification such as Other Health Impaired (OHI)) and therefore cannot receive the appropriate special education services, interventions, and socio-emotional supports that they may need (Mattison, 2015). Clarification of the federal definition of ED and ED guidelines may improve identification, eligibility, FAPE and LRE for students identified with ED.

Mental health is also a concern as students with ED may experience comorbid disorders such as social phobia, ADHD, externalized behaviors (defiance, aggression and disruptive behaviors) or internalized behaviors (depression, anxiety) (Becker et al., 2011; SAMHSA, 2017). Students with ED often experience mental health problems that exacerbate school-related problems that can lead to life-long consequences such as dropping out of school, incarceration, unemployment, and significant social problems (Kauffman, 2005, Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2004). In addition, as students with ED

are often one or more grade levels below their nondisabled peers in academic abilities, the lack of clarity of ED guidelines affects the ability of special educators to provide effective instructional and socio-emotional supports to affected students (Kauffman & Landrum, 2013). With the noted negative post-secondary outcomes of students with ED, the focus should be on providing interventions, academics, and socio-emotional supports needed to help students succeed in school and life. Moreover, while the debate over full inclusion versus LRE continuum educational placement remains unresolved, it is clear that educational placements of students with ED should be based upon each individual student's specific academic and socio-emotional needs. Unfortunately, until ED guidelines are clarified, students with ED will continue to be under identified and underserved by special education programs (Kauffman, 2005; Mattison, 2014).

The overriding purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between clarity of ED guidelines and educational placement of students with ED. To this end, a data analysis was conducted to explore the relationship between clarity of ED guidelines and several factors related to ED placement using a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient or Pearson's  $r$  among the variables in this study. The results of the Pearson's  $r$  indicated that there were several positive and significant relationships between the variables of the study. The results of the correlation analysis indicated a moderate and positive correlation between clarity of guidelines and role in educational placement,  $r = .352, n = 54, p < .01$ . The results of the data analysis indicated a strong, significant, and positive correlation between clarity of guidelines and restrictions on educational placement,  $r = .548, n = 47, p < .001$ . The results of the data analysis also indicated,  $r = .518, n = 56, p < .001$ , which indicated a strong, significant, and positive correlation between clarity of guidelines and type of placement. Results from the data analysis

indicated a strong, significant, and positive correlation between clarity of guidelines and alternative placement considerations,  $r = .518, n = 56, p < .001$ . Finally, the results of the data analysis indicated a strong, significant, and positive correlation between clarity of guidelines and needs addressed,  $r = .497, n = 56, p < .001$ . Based on the results of the analysis, which indicated that there are strong, significant, and positive relationships between the scales scores, it is clear that special educators and special education administrators would benefit from clarity of ED guidelines in order to determine the most appropriate educational placement to meet the needs of students with ED.

Additional exploration using ANOVA was conducted to explore the differences among the variables and groups of the study, which revealed some important findings about differences among the mean scores of the groups in the study. Special educators and special education administrators differed in clarity of ED guidelines and restrictions in educational placement, types of placement, and meeting the academic and socio-emotional needs of students with ED. Students with ED often require individualized academic and socio-emotional supports that vary in explicitness, pace, classroom size/small group setting, duration in the setting, instruction designed to teach specific skills, and the need for immediacy of feedback and reinforcement (Kauffman & Bader, 2017). Therefore, the differences in clarity of ED guidelines and restrictions in educational placement, types of placement, alternative placement considerations, and needs met are troubling because students with ED may not receive the specialized academic and socio-emotional services in the most appropriate setting. Accordingly, data analysis from this study supported the notion that clarification of ED guidelines would most certainly enable special educators and administrators to better identify ED and determine the setting in which students with



ED will receive the instructional, socio-emotional, and supplemental services required to meet their specific needs.

### **Limitations**

This study had several limitations. First, this study was designed using a quantitative, correlational design to examine the variables of clarity of ED guidelines and educational placement of students with ED. Correlational research does provide a test of the study hypotheses, and it helps to identify relationships between the variables of the study. However, correlational designs do not allow for control of the variables. Therefore, correlational research design cannot indicate causality as it does not involve manipulation of variables and therefore cannot state that the independent variable caused a change in the dependent variable (Adams & Lawrence, 2015). To increase the rigor of this study, face-to-face interviews with the study participants could be conducted, which may further strengthen and support the relationship between the variables in the study. Another means of increasing the rigor of correlational research is to use statistical tests such as an ANOVA to examine the causal effect of the independent variable on multiple levels of the dependent variable (Adams & Lawrence, 2015). For that reason, the researcher conducted an ANOVA to further test the relationship of clarity of ED guidelines and the study's respective variables. The results of the analysis indicated that there are strong, significant, and positive relationships between the scales scores included in the analysis.

An additional limitation of this study was the use of an online anonymous survey for data collection. As the study was designed to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of the study participants, clarification of responses or face-to-face interviews could not be conducted after the initial data collection. Another limitation of the study

involved the use of convenience sampling. While convenience sampling allows for the intentional selection of a sample that is believed to be representative of the population of the study, it may also negatively affect the criteria of the research and subsequent sample selections (Gay et al., 2012). In the study, convenience sampling of special educators and administrators was intentional because this population has a significant role in determining the eligibility and educational placement of students with emotional disorders.

### **Implications of the Results for Practice, Policy, and Theory**

Research for this study indicated that the clarity of ED guidelines at the federal and state levels as well as with school districts, special education administrators, special educators, and other stakeholders is as problematic now as it was over thirty years ago (Becker et al., 2014; Bradley et al., 2008; Kauffman, Mock, & Simpson, 2007; Mattison, 2015; Merrell & Walker, 2004). Certainly, the correct identification of ED is imperative if students are to receive appropriate academic and socio-emotional supports. Correctly identifying students with ED will enable special educators to correctly determine interventions and services (Becker et al., 2011). Conversely, without clarity of ED guidelines, students may not be identified with ED and will therefore not receive the interventions and services needed to address their academic or socio-emotional/behavioral needs.

Research for this study also noted additional concerns with the ED guidelines and the exclusion of socially maladjusted from the federal definition of ED (Becker et al., 2011; Cloth et al., 2013; Merrell & Walker, 2004). According to the federal exclusionary clause, the term socially maladjusted refers to behaviors that include antisocial, destructive, or delinquent behaviors (Cloth et al., 2013; Merrell & Walker, 2004). The

difficulty for many school districts, special education administrators, and special educators lies in differentiating ED symptoms and behaviors from those of the socially maladjusted. Students with ED often display a comorbidity of symptoms and behaviors such as depression, anxiety, aggression, and poor social skills that closely mirror the behaviors associated with socially maladjusted (Becker et al., 2011). Students with emotional disorders struggle academically, and they often experience poor post-secondary outcomes in education, employment, and interpersonal relationships. Accordingly, clarification of the federal ED guidelines must be addressed if students are to be appropriately identified and receive the special education supports and services required to meet their specific academic and socio-emotional needs.

Research on the clarity of ED guidelines and the educational placement of students with ED provides an opportunity for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners to seek ways for improving the identification of students with emotional disorders and meet their educational needs. This quantitative research study was designed to examine the association between clarity of ED guidelines and the educational placement of students with ED. The researcher conducted correlational analysis followed by an ANOVA to determine if any association existed between clarity of ED guidelines and educational placement of students with ED. Data were collected with a convenience sampling of special educators and special education administrators via an online format. The results of the survey demonstrated statistically significant correlations between the variables, which suggest a strong association between clarity of ED guidelines and the educational placement of students with ED. Additionally, an ANOVA was conducted that further revealed the differences among the groups in the study that indicated strong, significant, and positive associations between the scales included in the analysis. Specifically,

differences were noted between the means of the following variables: clarity of ED guidelines and restrictions in educational placement, types of placement, alternative placement considerations, and meeting the academic and socio-emotional needs of students with ED.

The results of this study demonstrated the implications for clarifying ED guidelines and the impact on educational placement of students identified with emotional disorders. The data analysis revealed that there are strong, significant, and positive correlations between clarification the ED guidelines and the educational placement of students with ED. Further data analysis revealed that there are differences among the means of the groups in the study related to the following variables: clarity of ED guidelines and educational placement, clarity of ED guidelines and restrictions in educational placement, clarity of ED guidelines and types of placement, clarity of ED guidelines and alternative placement considerations, and clarity of ED guidelines and meeting the needs of students with ED. The findings of this study confirm the need for clarification of the federal ED guidelines.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The data analysis found several strong, significant, and positive correlations between the variables identified in this study. Further analysis with ANOVA revealed significant differences among the means for the groups of this study. While this online survey was a valuable tool, face-to-face in-depth interviews of special educators and administrators may provide beneficial insights for clarifying ED guidelines and the educational placement of students with ED. Additionally, continued research regarding ED guidelines and educational placement of students with ED is important. More empirical research is needed to examine the relationship between the clarity on ED

guidelines, eligibility, and determining appropriate educational placements to meet the academic and socio-emotional/behavioral needs of students with ED.

In this study, the results indicated that special educators and administrators remain confounded by the current ED guidelines and may therefore have difficulty determining the best educational placement for ED students. The findings from the study suggest ED guidelines at the federal and state levels must be clarified if school districts, special educators, and administrators are to appropriately identify students with ED and determine the most appropriate educational placement to meet their specific academic and socio-emotional needs. Lastly, future research must include more substantive input from special educators and special education administrators, who may be best qualified to provide the necessary alignment between eligibility and the most appropriate educational placements to meet the academic and socio-emotional needs of students with ED.

Findings from this study indicated that unclear ED guidelines often leave students with ED under-identified and underserved (Kauffman, 2005; Mattison, 2014). The results of the survey indicated that there were significant differences among means between groups in the study regarding clarity of ED guidelines on restrictions of educational placement, types of placement, alternative placement considerations, and meeting the needs of students with ED. These mean scores differences are concerning as the literature review indicated that students with ED tend to have below grade level academic abilities, poor social skills, and poor post-secondary educational and employment outcomes. Clarifying ED guidelines will help to identify students with ED. It will enable special education practitioners to more accurately identify and implement special education services and supports required to meet the academic and socio-emotional needs of their students with ED.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this research study was to examine the association between clarity of ED guidelines and educational placement of students with ED. Findings from this research study indicated a strong, significant, and positive correlation between the variables of the study. Because the results of this study were statistically significant, the scale scores of the identified variables were predictors of the relationship between clarity of ED guidelines and educational placement of students with ED. Further analysis of the data indicated that four of the five variables of the study had significant differences between the mean scores. The differences in the mean scores of these variables revealed a connection between the ambiguity of ED guidelines and determination of the most appropriate educational placements for students with ED. Federal law stipulates that a continuum of alternative placements must be considered when determining educational placements. However, under the current ED guidelines, educational placement decisions for students with ED may be made arbitrarily or inappropriately (Becker et al., 2011).

It is clear from the research that ED guidelines must be clarified in order to provide appropriate academic interventions and socio-emotional supports to students identified with ED. It is also clear that simply placing students with ED in inclusive educational settings is not the answer. Students with ED experience academic difficulties, and they often perform below grade level academically. They also tend to have lower graduation rates, poor employment rates, and unsatisfactory post-secondary educational outcomes (Trout et al., 2003). Additionally, students with ED often display aggressive, noncompliant, disruptive, and verbally abusive behaviors (Simpson, 2004). While advocates of full inclusion have argued that access to the general education curriculum and the social value of being with non-disabled peers should be the primary consideration

for educational placement (Obiakor et al., 2012), student academic strengths and weaknesses should also be considered when determining educational placement for students with ED.

Conversely, placing students with ED in settings that are more restrictive is also not the answer because educational placement decisions should be based on FAPE and the LRE continuum of alternative placements for the specific academic and socio-emotional needs of the student. This means careful consideration of the student's strengths and weaknesses. Certainly, educational placement of students with ED should be based on more than just social value. Academic strengths and weakness should also be considered because inclusion at all costs fails to recognize that one size does not fit all (Tkachyk, 2013).

Moving forward, the first step should be to clarify ED guidelines and address the exclusion of social maladjustment in the federal definition of ED. Without clear ED guidelines, students who need support will not be identified, and they will not receive the interventions required to address their academic and socio-emotional needs. In addition, clarification of ED guidelines would provide special education practitioners with a better understanding of what students need in order to provide specific interventions and determine the most appropriate educational placement for these services. Lastly, the exclusionary clause of "socially maladjusted" in the federal definition of ED must be clearly defined. As previously noted, students with ED often exhibit behaviors similar to social maladjustment, and an estimated 5% of students experience serious mental health problems. However, only approximately 20% of these students receive special education services or mental health supports (Kauffman & Landrum, 2009). However, more recent data indicated that 12% of the student population may need mental health services and of

this percentage, an estimated 3% to 6% are students with emotional disorders (Forness, S.R., Freeman, S.F.N., Paparella, T., Kauffman, J.M., & Walker, H.M. 2011; Kauffman & Landrum, 2013). Clarification of ED guidelines and the term social maladjustment may provide special education practitioners with guidance needed to address the comorbidity of symptoms that many students with ED experience.

Data from this study reinforced the notion that confusion regarding ED guidelines and educational placement continues to be a problem among special education practitioners. Undoubtedly, this confusion will continue to negatively affect the ability of special education practitioners to identify and address the needs of students with ED. The literature review also noted that students with ED often experience mental health issues that go untreated when students are not properly identified. Thus, it is imperative that the federal ED guidelines be revisited. Certainly, a truly caring and transformative society would provide the alternative placements necessary to support the educational and socio-emotional needs of all students (Kauffman & Landrum, 2009).



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## **Appendix A: Statement of Original Work**

The Concordia University Doctorate of Education Program is a collaborative community of scholar-practitioners, who seek to transform society by pursuing ethically-informed, rigorously- researched, inquiry-based projects that benefit professional, institutional, and local educational contexts. Each member of the community affirms throughout their program of study, adherence to the principles and standards outlined in the Concordia University Academic Integrity Policy. This policy states the following:

### **Statement of academic integrity.**

As a member of the Concordia University community, I will neither engage in fraudulent or unauthorized behaviors in the presentation and completion of my work, nor will I provide unauthorized assistance to others.

### **Explanations:**

#### ***What does “fraudulent” mean?***

“Fraudulent” work is any material submitted for evaluation that is falsely or improperly presented as one’s own. This includes, but is not limited to texts, graphics and other multi-media files appropriated from any source, including another individual, that are intentionally presented as all or part of a candidate’s final work without full and complete documentation.

#### ***What is “unauthorized” assistance?***

“Unauthorized assistance” refers to any support candidates solicit in the completion of their work, that has not been either explicitly specified as appropriate by the instructor, or any assistance that is understood in the class context as inappropriate. This can include, but is not limited to:

- Use of unauthorized notes or another’s work during an online test
- Use of unauthorized notes or personal assistance in an online exam setting
- Inappropriate collaboration in preparation and/or completion of a project
- Unauthorized solicitation of professional resources for the completion of the work.

### **Appendix A: Statement of Original Work (Continued)**

I attest that: I have read, understood, and complied with all aspects of the Concordia University Portland Academic Integrity Policy during the development and writing of this dissertation.

Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in production of this dissertation all information and/or materials from outside sources has been properly referenced and all permissions required for use of the information and/or materials have been obtained, in accordance with the research standards outlined in the *Publication Manual of The American Psychological Association*.



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Digital Signature

Linda J. Spencer

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February 13, 2018

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