Stakeholders' Voices: Defining Needs of Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders Transitioning between School Settings

Rohanna Buchanan
Oregon Social Learning Center

Rhonda N. T. Nese
University of Oregon

Miriam Clark
Oregon Social Learning Center

ABSTRACT: Students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) too often do not receive adequate services or care in their school settings, particularly during transitions in educational placements. In addition, school support teams often struggle with creating transition plans that honor the needs of students with input from key stakeholders responsible for supporting student success. This article presents findings from the information-gathering phase of an iterative project that aims to develop a support program for students with EBD transitioning from day-treatment schools to district schools. We conducted 5 semistructured, qualitative focus groups with parents and teachers to explore needs during students' transitions between school settings. Five themes emerged from the focus groups: (a) consistent, behavior-specific feedback and positive reinforcement are vital to sustaining learned prosocial skills; (b) students benefit from regular opportunities to learn and practice social skills; (c) transition programming should emphasize communication between school and home; (d) routines at home and school should be coordinated; and (e) parents need support at school meetings. We will use findings from this study to develop a multifaceted intervention that aims to support students, their caregivers, and their teachers during transitions between the aforementioned types of schools.

An estimated 10%–13% of school-age students have emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD; Epstein, Kutash, & Duchnowski, 1999; Forness, Freeman, Paparella, Kauffman, & Walker, 2012; Forness, Kim, & Walker, 2012), and estimates of how many students will have EBD during their lifetime range from 25%–46% (Forness, Freeman et al., 2012; Forness, Kim et al., 2012). Though research shows that students with disabilities now have more school-based opportunities for growth than in past decades, students with EBD have experienced less progress than students from other disability groups (Bradley, Doolittle, & Bartolotta, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Specifically, when compared with other students with disabilities receiving special education services, students with EBD tend to have more teacher-reported externalizing and internalizing behavior problems (Bradley et al., 2008; Lane, Carter, & Glaeser, 2006; Nelson, Benner, Lane, & Smith, 2004) and show lower academic achievement in terms of earning lower grades, failing more courses, and being expelled or dropping out of high school at higher rates (Bradley et al., 2008; Bullock & Gable, 2006; Nelson et al., 2004; Reid, Gonzalez, Nordness, Trout, & Epstein, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Students with EBD are increasingly included in public education settings (U.S. Department of Education, 2007), yet the majority of such students are placed in noninclusive settings at least part of the day. According to the 36th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2014), 43% of students with EBD are served in mainstream classrooms a minimum of 80% of the day, 18% are in mainstream classrooms 40%–79% of the day, about 21% are in mainstream classrooms less than 40% of the day, and 13% attend separate schools. Despite these diverse placements, researchers and practitioners

generally agree that students with EBD need extra treatment and intervention supports that they are not currently receiving (Bullock & Gable, 2006; Forness, Kim et al., 2012; Kern, Hilt-Panahon, & Sokol, 2008; Lane & Carter, 2006; Wagner & Davis, 2006). In fact, Kern et al. (2008) suggested that students with EBD receive worse care than children from any other disability group because they are often placed in large schools even though they would benefit more from small learning environments and individualized services (Wagner & Davis, 2006).

Transitions can be a source of added stress and increased behavioral problems, yet they are commonplace for students with EBD, who make transitions between special education classrooms and inclusive classrooms as well as to and from special placements such as residential or day-treatment schools (DTS). In addition, transitions from elementary to middle school, middle school to high school, and then to adulthood also present challenges (Lane & Carter, 2006; Wagner & Davis, 2006). Very little research is available on transitions from DTS to district schools (DS) for students with EBD. Gagnon and Leone (2006) examined transitions from DTS and residential treatment elementary schools into elementary schools. Among other findings, these authors reported that approximately 50% of treatment schools in their sample had no designated person assigned to follow up with the students after they were discharged, 25% had a part-time person, and the other 25% had a full-time person assigned to that role.

Many have noted the need for more research about students with EBD, along with the challenges to implementing effective supports. For example, in a call for more research on effective intervention programs to support students with EBD, Lane and Carter (2006) highlighted the myriad issues youth with EBD face in school. Specifically, family involvement is lacking in decision making for the youth. On the basis of prior research findings, Wagner and Davis (2006) proposed that interventions for students with EBD should create meaningful relationships, involve both students and their families while planning for transitions, and use a holistic approach to students' well-being. The literature is clear that programs focusing on collaboration between the school and the family are most effective (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004; Greenberg et al., 2003; Kuhn, Lerman, &

Vorndran, 2003; Marshall & Mirenda, 2002; Park, Alber-Morgan, & Fleming, 2011). Given that parents spend the most time with their child, their knowledge would be a great asset to the child's support (Marshall & Mirenda, 2002). Understanding the family's values, struggles, and desires is imperative for effective collaboration with teachers and other school staff members (Park et al., 2011). Unfortunately, implementing such methods and interventions in school settings is challenging. For example, teachers often lack the training or the time to be adequately trained (Elliott & Mihalic, 2004; Ingersoll & Dvortcsak, 2006; Kern et al., 2008). In addition, tensions arise because parents often feel excluded from care (Crawford & Simonoff, 2003; Park et al., 2011). We designed the current study to fill the gaps in the research about the needs and experiences of students transitioning between DTS and DS settings for the purpose of designing an intervention to address transitioning students' needs.

Purpose and Research Questions

In this article, we present findings from the information-gathering phase of an Institution of Education Sciences (IES)-funded intervention development project. Findings from this phase will inform the development of a support program for students with EBD transitioning from DTS settings to DS settings. In the current study, we conducted a series of focus groups to collect data that will help us better understand needs of students with EBD, their parents, and their teachers—as well as the context in which families and educators seek to implement evidence-based practices for students with EBD. According to Marshall and Mirenda (2002), giving key stakeholders the opportunity to inform the intervention process promotes the social validity of the intervention. Using a focus group protocol, we explored issues facing two key stakeholder groups: parents and teachers. The following three research questions guided the development of the focus group protocol:

1. What are the needs of students with EBD during the transition process from DTS to DS settings?
2. What are the needs of parents of students with EBD, and what supports do they want for their children and for themselves during the transition process from DTS to DS settings?

3. What are the needs of teachers of students with EBD, and what supports do they want for their students, for parents, and for themselves during the transition process from DTS to DS settings?

On the basis of a review of the pertinent literature on students with EBD and our own experience working with children and adolescents in special education and treatment settings, we outlined five a priori hypotheses related to transitioning students with EBD: (a) students will need support for emotion regulation and school routines; (b) teachers want greater parent involvement, including regular communication; (c) parents need support to successfully navigate the special education system; (d) parents want teachers to support the unique needs of their children; and (e) teachers need more resources (e.g., time, materials, and training). These hypotheses guided our exploration of the research questions within each focus group.

Method

Participants and Setting

We used purposive sampling to capture a range of perspectives from informants with experience related to the project goals (Berg & Lune, 2012; Padgett, 2008). Of interest were the perspectives of parents and teachers of middle school students with EBD transitioning from DTS to DS settings. In this article, *parent* refers to any caregiver in the home. To establish a range of perspectives, we included (a) parents of middle school age students (grades 6–8) with EBD who had transitioned from the DTS to a DS within the past 6 months, (b) parents of middle school age students with EBD who would transition from the DTS to a DS within the next 6 months, (c) teachers from the DTS, (d) instructional aides from the DTS, and (e) middle school teachers from multiple school districts who were currently working with students from the DTS posttransition to a DS. We recruited participants from one DTS middle school participating in an IES-funded study and from two middle schools serving students who had recently completed the DTS program. The DTS is an urban school in a midsized (approximately 157,000 people) city in the Pacific Northwest. Approximately 75% of students qualified for free or reduced price lunch and students identified as White (95%) or two

or more races (5%). The DTS serves 16 small and midsized school districts. The DS teachers were from two different rural school districts served by the DTS. At school A, 54% of students qualified for free or reduced price lunch and students identified as America Indian/Alaskan (4%), Hispanic (12%), White (81%), or two or more races (3%); at school B, 70% of students qualified for free or reduced price lunch and students identified as American Indian/ Alaskan (3%), Asian/Pacific Islander (1%), African American (< 1%), Hispanic (11%), White (75%), or two or more races (9%).

All 27 participants completed an individual in-person institutional review board-approved informed consent procedure. This study took place in the Pacific Northwest of the United States in an education service district (ESD) implementing positive behavior interventions and supports, a systems-level approach for establishing the social culture and individualized behavior supports needed for schools to be safe and effective learning environments for all students (Horner, Sugai, Todd, & Lewis-Palmer, 2005).

Parents. The DTS principal contacted parents of current or recent DTS students about the focus group study and then provided contact information for 14 interested parents to the first author. Of the 14 eligible parents, 13 consented to participate in two focus groups. Group 1 consisted of parents of students who had already transitioned from the DTS ($n = 5$), and Group 2 consisted of parents of students who were currently attending the DTS and preparing for a transition to a DS ($n = 8$). Of the parents who had already transitioned from the DTS, there were two parents of sixth graders, two parents of seventh graders, and one parent of an eighth grader. Of the parents with students currently attending the DTS, there was one parent of a sixth grader, five parents of seventh graders, and two parents of eighth graders. Relationships to the youth included biological parents ($n = 10$), foster parents ($n = 2$), and a great-grandparent ($n = 1$). Three of the students were represented by two parents. Participants were predominantly women (69%; nine women, four men), identified as White (69%; $n = 9$) or multiple ethnicities (31%; $n = 4$), and between 34 and 92 years old ($M = 47.90$, $SD = 17.49$).

Teachers. We recruited special education teachers and instructional aides (IAs) from the participating ESD ($N = 14$) to participate in three focus groups. All teachers for grades 6–8

from the DTS (Group 3; $n = 6$) and all IAs for grades 6–8 from the DTS (Group 4; $n = 4$) consented to participate. At the time of this study, IAs were not present in DS classrooms of recently transitioned students; therefore, we did not recruit IAs from the DS. The DTS principal provided contact information for all DS teachers who were currently working with students who had recently transitioned from the DTS ($N = 10$) to ensure that DS participants had familiarity with the transition process and four consented to participate (Group 5). Teachers were predominantly women (86%; 12 women, 2 men) and White (86%; 12 White, 1 Native American, 1 Asian/Pacific Islander). Teachers had an average of 13.64 years of teaching experience ($SD = 9.28$ years, range $= 1$–32 years).

Focus Groups

We collected data using a semistructured focus group protocol. This semistructured protocol allowed us to interview multiple participants efficiently and evaluate the degree of confirmation or disagreement among participants (Morgan, 1996; Padgett, 2008). The semistructured format allowed participants to ask questions of one another that elicited greater depth or detail than would researcher-driven questions and resulted in increased credibility (Morgan, 1996). In addition, we utilized multiple focus groups to triangulate the data and enhance the credibility of findings (Patton, 1999).

As noted in the previous section, we grouped participants into five focus groups by role. The use of homogeneous groups allows the exploration of within-group and between-groups consensus and difference (Brotherson & Goldstein, 1992). Focus groups took place for approximately 90 min after school or on weekends and were scheduled at the convenience of the participants. Questions in the focus group guide aimed to elicit feedback on the needs of students with EBD and their parents and teachers during the transition to a new, nontreatment setting. The focus group guide included the following topics: (a) a description of the study, (b) introductions and discussion of prior experiences with interventions and services for students with disabilities, (c) questions about the needs of students with EBD during transitions (e.g., "What types of supports do you think that transitioning students will need?" "How would those types of support

help students?"), (d) questions about the needs of the parents and teachers of students with EBD during transitions (e.g., "What types of support do you think that parents of transitioning students will need?" "How would those types of support help parents?" "What do teachers need to support transitioning students?" "How would those types of support help teachers?"), (e) details about a proposed intervention, and (f) questions about the fit of the proposed intervention (e.g., "Do you have recommendations that would make the proposed intervention more relevant to your needs?").

The first author conducted the focus groups. She is trained in techniques to elicit feedback from the participants, remain neutral to a range of responses to reduce response bias, and move the discussion through the semistructured format. She revised and adapted questions to fit the direction and flow of the discussion and probe for additional detail (e.g., "Can you give an example of that?" or "How would that look?") to give participants the opportunity to fully explain their perspectives. Focus group participants generally provided straightforward responses, and the focus group facilitator probed participants to clarify the meaning of their statements and provide more detailed explanations for brief statements.

Analysis

We audio-recorded all focus group interviews, and two trained individuals transcribed them verbatim; the first author then compared each transcript against the audio for accuracy. The second author conducted the coding for all focus group transcripts by assigning portions of text to one or more codes and developed a codebook throughout the coding process. The coder noted emergent codes as she analyzed the data and then compared all transcripts against the final codebook (Padgett, 2008). The first and third authors reviewed this coded work to triangulate findings. Together, we participated in a peer debriefing process and chose representative quotes for the Results section.

The same themes arose in each of the focus groups, and there was a high level of participant consensus during each of the focus group discussions. In addition, we reached saturation of new codes and patterns and did not recruit additional participants. Using the method of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we grouped codes into themes that mapped

TABLE 1
Representative Quotes Associated with Identified Themes

Identified Themes	Quotes from Participants
Research question 1	
Transition supports	"It was frustrating because we went from being cocooned and having tons of support … to absolutely no support"
Feedback about behavior	"There [at the DTS] they would say, 'That really sounded disrespectful; do you want to try to rephrase that?'"
Social skills training	"How do you do all the little bits and pieces that kids just sometimes haven't had access to so they don't know the etiquette, and that gets them into trouble?"
Research question 2	
Consistency between home and school	"And so, you know, he really did well at the DTS because he gets that at home and he got it at school."
Effective home–school communication	"I definitely have … good communication with some of my parents …and I think communication amongst all … is … important."
Research question 3	
Awareness of the students' individual needs and behavior support plans	"I feel like the public school teachers are not prepared and they're not trained to deal with these kids when they're transferred."

onto questions in the focus group protocol, with 5 to 30 subthemes within each primary theme.

Results

We organized the results from the focus group data by the three research questions: (a) needs of students with EBD during transitions from DTS to DS, (b) needs of their parents during such transitions, and (c) needs of their teachers on either side of the transition. *Table 1* provides an overview of the identified themes and representative quotes for each theme.

Needs of Students with EBD during Transition from DTS to DS

Findings that addressed the needs of students during the transition process fell into three main subthemes: (a) transition supports, (b) feedback about behavior, and (c) social skills training.

Transition supports. Parents and teachers discussed challenges that came up for students specifically when transitioning from a highly structured DTS to a DS with less support. Parents of students who had recently transitioned described their feelings during the transition as "We were like, lost. No support whatsoever." Other parents gave examples of how abrupt the change in support was for their child. One parent said,

It was frustrating because we went from being cocooned [at the DTS] and having tons of

support and him knowing what is expected of him and how things are supposed to go, to absolutely no support [at the DS] and him having to juggle multiple teachers, different classrooms, new students, and having to get to know these teachers at the same time.

An IA echoed the need for transition supports, sharing, "We are so structured here [at the DTS], and they [the students] feel secure. And we understand them. And they can advocate for themselves." She went on to express concern that the necessary structure and support does not always exist at the DS. She said that after the transition, "When they have nobody out there, I mean when they are in the big pond, they don't have that support."

Feedback about behavior. Stakeholders were very clear that the use of positive reinforcement and behavior-specific feedback was critical to student success and should be continued after transition. Families liked how the DTS utilized tangible reinforcements to reward positive behavior or progress. One parent said, "They [the DTS] did have a reward system, but I like the way their reward system worked because it was more [at the DTS] and then following them to … *earning*" than allowing students to get attention via inappropriate behavior. Participants also identified continuous feedback while providing students opportunities to correct their behaviors as important to changing student behavior. One DTS parent shared,

I think one of the things that the DTS does well is second chances. For instance, voice sometimes can be an issue, but your child doesn't

mean it to be disrespectful. There [at the DTS] they would say, "That really sounded disrespectful; do you want to try to rephrase that?"

Teachers at the DS agreed that continuing such feedback is important. One DS teacher stated, "They just need that feedback. They need the positive reinforcement." Another teacher highlighted the importance of acknowledging positive behaviors: "Sometimes we have to look at the little positive things in order to move them [students] forward." An IA suggested that everyone benefited from these supports: "It's just the positive reinforcement to continue that across the line with students, with parents, even with teachers."

Another teacher at the DTS talked about the benefit of having several adults positively reinforce the same behavior across settings both within and between schools. The teacher shared,

> The continuity of a person being here [at the DTS] and then following them to the home school … so it gets told to the student over and over again by … different people. Then the parent says, "Hey, I've heard from your teacher today that you did this, this, and this!" And then the coach says, "Hey, I heard you did this!" … they're reinforcing that positive behavior, and … it's coming from several different adults.

Social skills training. Parents and teachers unanimously agreed on the importance of social skills training for students with EBD as they transition from one school to the next, and many gave suggestions for particular student skills to target. Helping students learn to talk to peers appropriately and have appropriate conduct in the community were key themes that arose when parents and teachers discussed what students needed during transition. For example, a group of DS teachers shared that it was important for students to work on "how to say no to friends," "how to stand up for yourself," and "how to draw your boundaries, even if it's really *subtle* peer pressure." A parent of a student currently attending the DTS also echoed the theme of building healthy friendships, sharing that her daughter "does have skills to make friends but lacks skills to keep friends. She calls 'em names and tells 'em to leave and, you know, stuff like that." The parent identified that her daughter needed coaching to "be more friendly."

Parents and teachers agreed that it was important to provide skill-building opportunities in natural community settings. One parent talked about her child's extensive social skills needs across settings:

> Going to a store or a restaurant and teaching etiquette and complimenting behaviors … or going and doing swimming and how you access the locker room. How do you sign in? How do you do all the little bits and pieces that kids just sometimes haven't had access to so they don't know the etiquette, and *that* gets them into trouble?

A similar example, provided by an IA, included "public venues: libraries, bus stops … oh yeah, just hanging out down at the bus stop. Just, you know, stranger danger, appropriate volume and spatial issues, appropriate interactions, or riding the bus." Many of the suggestions about social skills training focused on teaching appropriate behaviors in public spaces. One IA said, "If there's some sort of a festival where there's a lot of people, it's really easy to get all amped up. To learn to keep yourself at a calm level and interact." Teachers highlighted the importance of conducting social skill-building sessions in natural environments, such as schools or in the community, to help the student "go back and do that when the skills trainer isn't around."

Multiple focus group participants mentioned the importance of getting peers involved in skill-building due to the tendency of students with EBD to get into trouble with peers. To illustrate her concerns about a student's peer group and desire for social skills training, a DS teacher shared that one particular student

> Does tend to go with the group that's going to get him in trouble in the community. You know it would be cool if he had that going on [potential to get into trouble with peers] and something was stirring, the mentor [social skills trainer] could say, "Time to go. Do you see this and this? Those are cues. Let's go."

Parents echoed the importance of including peers in social skills training. For example, one parent of a current DTS student said, "Maybe a part of that skills coaching could be to introduce him to some peers and kinda help them start [making friends]."

Needs of Parents of Students with EBD

Findings that addressed the needs of parents during the school and transition process fell into two main subthemes: (a) consistency between home and school, and (b) effective home-school communication.

Consistency between home and school. Teachers shared an interest in helping to translate effective practices at school to the home so

that students can have the support they need as they transition from the DTS to the DS. One DTS teacher shared that "When they [parents] see kids being successful here, and then they are able to then transition to their home schools, they [parents] want to know what did *we* do. I often have parents say, 'Can we create a home plan?'" Across teacher focus groups, teachers made similar statements or showed agreement verbally and through noting that consistency between home and school is essential.

Parents and teachers generally agreed about the need for maintaining consistency among routines and behavioral expectations across school locations and home to help with the transition process. However, parents and teachers did not always agree about the origin of expectations and routines to ensure consistency across settings. Some parents reported feeling that DS teachers should listen to them and recreate the strategies they were utilizing at home, and the majority of other parents expressed agreement. In addition, not all parents and teachers shared a consistent approach to supporting students. For example, a parent shared an issue they had with the DS where they were made to feel that "'Your son's the problem; we're not the problem,' even though there was lots of things that I was trying to suggest to them and educate *them*."

Several teachers expressed concern for the strategies that families were using at home, as illustrated by one DTS teacher's statement: "They [parents] don't understand giving privileges, earning things, versus consequences, and we don't have time to teach them." Another teacher expressed concern about parent follow-through with home-based systems: "I had a parent that said, 'Can I create a point card at home?' And yet she doesn't know how to follow through with giving rewards and consequences to support the behavior." A DS teacher echoed the concern that parents might not have consistent follow-through at home:

> We're talking about the routines of school but also the routines of "How do you send a child to school?" Routines the parent needs to make for the parent as well as the child at home. Bedtime, getting up on time. How about just holding a rule? If you set a rule you hold it. Boundaries. Follow through. A consistent homework routine.

Comments from several teachers highlighted how student behavior change can occur at different rates at home and school. One teacher talked about how, although it is important to teach parents about "the language of rewards and consequences," it is also vital to help parents understand that behavior change takes time. Another teacher explained, "Parents feel like we have magic wands here, and bang, they [the students] are changing. But really, what we're doing is noticing the very little positive things that are happening and building on that." Similarly, another teacher recognized why it might be difficult for parents to see small changes in their children's behaviors:

> They [parents] need support on seeing that [small positive changes], because they get too frustrated in the day to day. So that's what I think would be the key. Even more frequent check-ins with them [the parents] because they just get burned out so fast.

On the other hand, consistency seemed to occur naturally when parents and teachers had similar approaches. For example, a former DTS parent shared that,

> I already knew what worked for my son, but with the DTS they seemed to have the same kind of philosophy that I have, which is strict boundaries … and being responsible for yourself. And so, you know, he really did well at the DTS because he gets that at home and he got it at school.

Effective home–school communication. Teachers were very clear that having multiple channels for frequent communication between the home and school was vital for improving the school's relationship with transitioning families, helping these families feel confident in their abilities to advocate for their students, and translating information across the home and school settings. One DTS teacher noted, "I definitely have really good communication with some of my parents but not with others, and I think communication amongst all the factors [stakeholders] is really important." Several teachers discussed the importance of having different methods of communication. One DTS teacher shared, "I think it's really important to identify the method of communication that works best for that parent. It's different for different parents." One teacher found that providing written documentation helps parents better understand goals and expectations:

> Like a checklist. What I had to do with some parents that really had little school success themselves is talk about, like, the homework time, setting up the homework time. But also,

like, a parent who wants to support their child in education attends the regular parent meetings. They go to the open houses when their kid is presenting in an evening program, they go and attend that. … Just having it written. If there's no list it's just too overwhelming to a parent that, you know, is already experiencing overload because their child is difficult.

Multiple teachers and IAs also raised the topic of supporting parents to communicate with teachers. For example, one IA stated that she thought it was part of their job to "give the parents the skills to communicate with the teacher and advocate for their child," whereas a DTS teacher stated that teachers needed to teach families "how to develop a regular communication system." Another DTS teacher resonated with this feeling that it was the teachers' job to reach out and coach families on how to communicate with the school. She said communication should occur "regularly, and that you [the teacher] model for them" how to engage with their school contact. The DTS teachers also clarified that communication with the schools allows for families to become much more active and engaged in the transition process. One teacher said, "If you're trying to get a parent to be independent and able to take over the transition process when you leave it, then you need to teach them how to have regular communication with the school."

The tone of teacher and IA comments about promoting home–school communication was largely sympathetic to parents' possible reasons for not having regular communication with teachers. Several teachers noted that attending school meetings might be overwhelming for some families and that it is important that parents have a support person to clarify information and reduce any anxieties they may experience in those moments. One DTS teacher noted that some families might be concerned that "their child's behavior might be a direct representation of them and their parenting skill … and sometimes parents might feel like we're against them. We're *not!* We're trying to work *with* them." Another DTS teacher reiterated the importance of parent support to advocate for students, saying,

> It's not just about their kid; it's about their own anxiety about the environment, and "will I represent my kid well?" Cuz a lot of times they don't have the professional talk, so they feel disadvantaged or put down by the teacher. If there is a parent advocate there for a couple meetings, it has really helped.

A barrier to effective communication that came up during all focus groups was the lack of a point person at the DS. One DTS parent stated, "It would be helpful to have one point person," and another echoed that sentiment, saying, "designate *one* person at the school to contact me, instead of all the teachers contacting me with their various concerns." An IA highlighted that it may be a burden on families to receive so many calls from different school personnel each day and suggested that

> just having one point person that calls the parents and discusses, "This is what the teacher feedback was; this is what the therapist or the skills coach feedback was." Then they're [the parent] not getting inundated with four different opinions of what this kid is doing inappropriately.

One former DTS parent shared that having a point person was helpful for them during the transition process, because it allowed for clear communication with the school. The parent shared:

> There's still one teacher that still contacts me and keeps in touch with the other teachers. And that just works *so* well because the teacher calls me, and then if I have something, I can contact her, and then she'll help find out that situation, or she'll tell me directly who I need to contact to get that.

Needs of Teachers of Students with EBD

Throughout each of the focus groups, participants devoted less discussion time to the needs of teachers relative to the needs of students and their parents. Notably, teacher and IA focus groups included minimal statements identifying specific needs of teachers for supporting transitioning students with EBD. Although we hypothesized that the need for additional resources for teachers and schools would be a theme for the teacher and IA focus groups, these groups mentioned very little about the need for more time or money. However, parents emphasized the need for teacher training and support. Specifically, parents were concerned about teacher training at the DS for supporting students with EBD and focused on the importance of proactive communication with those teachers to ensure a smooth transition to the new environment.

Awareness of the students' individual needs and behavior support plans. Some parents said that they were concerned that DS

teachers were not equipped for their children to begin attending their classes, with one former DTS parent stating, "I feel like the public school teachers are not prepared and they're not trained to deal with these kids when they're transferred." Another former DTS parent shared her concern that "It's at school that he [the student] has behavior problems, so I feel like they're [the teachers] the ones that need the support; they're the ones that need the training." To address the concern that teachers might not be prepared for students with EBD, parents talked about their own role in making sure that teachers had critical information, including effective strategies to communicate with the student, effective incentives, and details about the behavior support plan (BSP). Another former DTS family stressed the importance of advocating proactively for their child with DS teachers, sharing challenges related to getting the BSP details from the DTS to the DS:

> If we don't advocate for that, then they [the teachers] don't know. And that's really what it came down to, was that we really had to push in order to get that information [the BSP] transferred from the DTS over to the DS even though the DS was on top of it.

Similarly, an IA talked about how DS teachers often rely on regular problem solving and support from the DTS teachers to implement the BSP and integrate transitioning students into their classrooms. The IA highlighted that it was important for DS teachers to be prepared when students no longer have the support of the DTS—"when that full transition happens, making sure it's a five day a week support [at the DS] and … the general ed teacher is fully aware that they have no support from the DTS anymore."

Parents also expressed great frustration with the DS teachers' expectations of their students, which further illustrated the importance of ensuring that DS teachers were aware of the students' needs and support plans. Former DTS parents agreed that the DS teachers' expectations for their students' behavior did not match up with their current level of function, with one parent explaining that "their [the DS teachers'] expectations of him being a 'normal' kid versus him actually just being transferred from a behavioral school" needed to be modified. Some parents said that they had taken a proactive approach to clarifying necessary supports for their child. One former DTS parent explained, "I had to call a meeting

of all the teachers and the principal … and explain to them what my expectations were for them and how to handle my child's behavior."

Discussion

Throughout the focus groups, tension was apparent between DS teachers and parents of students with EBD. Parents reported that they often felt frustrated because the DS teachers were not communicating with them appropriately and not supporting their transitioning students' needs. The DS teachers also reported feeling frustrated for similar reasons. Teachers reported feeling that parents were not communicating with them or handling their children's needs appropriately at this critical point. This tension between parents and teachers with opposing ideas creates a difficult context in which to help students progress (Crawford & Simonoff, 2003; Park et al., 2011). However, although both parents and educators identified barriers to doing so successfully, all of the focus group participants advocated strongly for home–school communication and collaboration.

Implications for Practice

In light of these findings, we present five recommendations for educators seeking to address the needs of students with EBD, their parents, and their teachers. These recommendations are intended to inform the development of supports for students with EBD who are transitioning to new school settings or programs, although they could guide services for any student with challenging behavior.

First, parents and educators agreed that consistent behavior-specific feedback and positive reinforcement of appropriate behaviors across settings helped students sustain learned prosocial skills. We recommend that transition programming for students with EBD include training and support for parents and teachers to maintain systems of positive behavior support across settings. Training and support can include problem solving to maintain feedback systems in new settings, adopting home-based incentive systems such as homework charts, and sharing student behavioral data among all stakeholders to increase the likelihood

of consistent student reinforcement (Leve & Chamberlain, 2007).

Second, parents and educators agreed that students benefit from regular opportunities to learn and practice social skills in natural environments with a trained and skilled adult. On the basis of this consensus from focus group participants, we recommend that transition programs for students with EBD include teaching and practicing practical skills in authentic educational and community settings, such as classrooms, school hallways, gyms, or restaurants. This suggestion aligns with prior findings that youth benefit from strategies learned in real-world environments (Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001). Both parents and educators highlighted that student skills coaching should target practical skills, including social skills to make and keep friends, emotion-regulation skills to stay calm when upset or frustrated, and skills to navigate new situations such as riding the bus or navigating a locker room.

Third, our findings suggest that transition programming for students with EBD should emphasize communication between school and home. On the basis of focus group comments and consistent with prior research findings (e.g., Gagnon & Leone, 2006), we recommend identifying a point person for the parent at the school—a primary contact who is in regular communication with the students and other teachers. The strategy of a point person addresses the potential for parents to become overwhelmed by messages from multiple teachers or confused when trying to identify the right teacher for a given concern. In addition to improving communication between home and school, a designated point person is a sound strategy to ensure greater communication within the school, particularly for students with multiple teachers.

Fourth, parents and teachers emphasized the importance of coordinating routines and expectations between home and school. Parents and educators repeatedly highlighted the importance of increasing consistency for students between settings. Communication between stakeholders can promote consistency related to behavioral expectations and routines (as described in previous paragraphs). Consistent with prior literature (e.g., Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Park et al., 2011), our findings indicate that parents and teachers recognize the benefit of cross-setting consistency—and the importance of finding ways to overcome barriers to achieving it—especially during the beginning stages of the transition process.

Finally, teachers discussed the importance of supporting parents at school meetings. Transitions between schools can be a stressful experience for parents, and advocating for children with EBD presents various challenges (Scheuermann & Johns 2002). Therefore, we recommend that parents have an advocate for school meetings to help them understand the process, identify and articulate their concerns and goals, and communicate with teachers and administrators. The Treatment Foster Care Oregon model (TFCO; Leve & Chamberlain, 2007) is an example of an evidence-based program that includes support related to communication with schools. In TFCO, biological and foster parents are provided education and coaching about the structure and purpose of different school meetings, attend school meetings with TFCO staff, are trained in strategies to effectively advocate for their student, and receive coaching on how to effectively communicate with school personnel.

Our recommendations correspond with the broad, research-based principles for supporting the transitions of students with EBD outlined by Wagner and Davis (2006); our recommendations address their specific emphasis on engaging students and parents in the transition planning process by providing concrete examples of strategies practitioners can use to include students and their parents in the transition planning process in a range of settings. Furthermore, we directly solicited stakeholder feedback to inform the future development of an intervention with sufficient social validity (Wolf, 1978) to fit within the local educational context and school districts with similar characteristics. Prior research has clearly shown that evidence-based programs are more likely to be successfully implemented when stakeholders have the opportunity to provide input on intervention content and delivery (Elliott & Mihalic, 2004).

Limitations and Future Directions

We conducted this study in one ESD in the Pacific Northwest with limited racial and socioeconomic diversity using a small sample of 13 parents and 14 teachers recruited through purposive sampling. Consistent with the demographics of the ESD, participants were

predominantly White, and their children qualified for free and reduced-price lunch. In addition, consistent with the population of teachers in the ESD, participants were predominantly women. Future research with additional focus groups in multiple school districts across the United States could illuminate regional differences in needs of students with EBD, their parents, and their teachers, as well as include more diverse perspectives. Although the sample size is small, the sample of eligible candidates was small: parents, teachers, and IAs of students who were attending or had recently attended a local DTS. Future research could extend to students themselves and stakeholders in more diverse areas. Our purposive sampling further limits generalizability of our findings. Study data were gathered from parents and educators of students with EBD transitioning from a treatment school setting back to district school settings. Therefore, findings are specific to our participants and settings. We cannot claim that perspectives expressed by our participants represent perspectives of parents and teachers of students with EBD who receive services in other settings, such as special education classrooms, residential treatment schools, and general education classrooms.

We did not collect outcome data for the purposes of this article or aim to evaluate the effectiveness of these recommendations. Rather, we conducted the focus groups to inform the development of an intervention to support students with EBD transitioning from DTS to DS settings. This intervention program, Students with Involved Families and Teachers, which incorporates the five recommendations outlined above, is currently under development. Fit and feasibility are important considerations when stakeholders are determining which programs to adopt (Glasgow, Lichtenstein, & Marcus, 2003; Merrell & Buchanan, 2006). Understanding the needs of stakeholders is vital to informing whether a given intervention will fit within real-world settings. Evidence-based interventions often fail to be sustained when implemented in real-world environments when they do not take into consideration local perspectives and input (Elliott & Mihalic, 2004; Hurlburt & Knapp, 2003). Collaboration between intervention developers and key stakeholders, as occurred in this study, facilitates the development of comprehensive behavioral interventions to not only improve the contextual fit for students and their families

but also to improve the effectiveness and sustainability of supports over time (Albin et al., 1996).

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AUTHORS' NOTE

Address correspondence to Rohanna Buchanan, Oregon Social Learning Center, 10 Shelton McMurphey Blvd., Eugene, OR 97401; Email: rohannab@oslc.org

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