

A Case for Using Grounded Theory: A Qualitative Research Process

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Determining a suitable methodology for any given research is paramount. This article advocates for the adoption of grounded theory by presenting a qualitative research process employed to make sense of data. The rationale behind choosing grounded theory is discussed. It aims to provide an understanding of grounded theory, uncover the intricacies of data collection and analysis within this framework, delve into the coding process, and share insights through a grounded theory organizer to compare coding strategies and a coding cycle. The paper explores a comprehensive understanding of grounded theory as a valuable approach in research.

Keywords: grounded theory methodology, qualitative research, data collection, coding, analysis

INTRODUCTION

Like any researcher, many hours can go into the contemplation of appropriate methodology. I am no exception. As a researcher delving into the intricacies of educational processes, the question of methodology commanded attention. My thought process went to the following:

In any field of study, including education, there are highly complex writers and some can write very abstractly and theoretically because they are theoreticians. I believe these writers challenge us as readers and push us to a higher level of understanding. Nevertheless, while challenging the audience to ponder certain ideas, we, as educational researchers, have to be somewhat straightforward in our delivery of research, understanding that using highly abstract and obscure language may be a tool that excludes. Not that educators cannot understand complex language, but the language used in the writing should be clear enough so that the message does not get lost. (Matthews, 2019, p. 3)

My research was toward the importance of decision-making in education, and I knew I needed a methodology suited to me as an educator so that when it came time to share the results, the message would not get lost. My research quest was designed to gather insights into the experiences and perspectives of educators in formal positions of leadership involved in decision-making processes in an education system. My aim, within the discipline of education, was to use findings from my research to offer insights and identify pitfalls regarding what is currently occurring at each level in education and inform efforts to ensure that future decisions that are made will be implemented. This article is not focused on the results of my study, but to share the journey of arriving at methodology, particularly qualitative research. Through my investigation of methodologies, grounded theory came to the forefront.

When investigating qualitative research in education, I learned that the majority of research studies conducted by colleagues and students in the education faculty use qualitative methodologies. I learned that qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning that people ascribe to social or human problems (Creswell, 2009) and that qualitative research designs are particularly suitable for complex, ill-defined, dynamic, and emerging conditions frequent in education. Understanding that specific research methods include interviews, observations, document analysis, reflective journals, and transcript coding, I needed to determine what was the best fit for my study. My investigation led me to grounded theory. While the study's core is not the focus here, the aim is to shed light on the thought process that led to choosing grounded theory methodology. This article advocates for grounded theory in educational research, demonstrating its application in understanding decision-making among educators.

In the subsequent sections of this paper, I will embark on a comprehensive exploration of the chosen grounded theory methodology. The journey will encompass a detailed understanding of grounded theory and shed some light on data collection and analysis within this framework. Furthermore, I will delve into the coding process, offering insights into the methodology's coding techniques. The paper will conclude with a discussion on the prepared grounded theory organizer to compare coding strategies and a looping coding cycle, providing a holistic view of the methodological approach adopted in my study. These explorations aim to offer readers a nuanced understanding of the applied grounded theory methodology, ensuring transparency and clarity in the research process.

UNDERSTANDING GROUNDED THEORY

Grounded theory, distinctive in its approach, refrains from starting with predefined hypotheses. Instead, it centers on discovering and developing theory from the data, making it particularly suitable for exploring dynamic and complex phenomena. This methodology encourages researchers to remain open-minded, avoiding preconceived notions and biases. I appreciated that grounded theory does not start with a hypothesis, that there is a focus on process related to a topic, that data are collected and analyzed both sequentially and simultaneously, and that data are constantly compared to an emergent core theory. I learned, "Two primary characteristics of this design are the constant comparison of data with emerging categories and theoretical sampling of different groups to maximize the similarities and the differences of information" (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). Further data collection cannot be planned in advance of analysis and the emergence of theory. Subsequent sampling decisions should be purposeful and relevant (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Furthermore, grounded theory aims to generate a "grounded theory" that explains some process related to the topic. Theory is "grounded" instead of being "posed in advance and subjected to hypothesis testing for verification" (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009, p. 235). Grounded theory challenges researchers to avoid having predetermined thoughts in order to "remain sensitive to the data by being able to record events and detect happenings without first having them filtered through and squared with pre-existing hypothesis and biases" (Glaser, 1978, p. 3). It requires the researcher to be open minded, and able to look at the data through many lenses, entering into the participants' lives and taking into account personal worldviews (Charmaz, 2006).

Understanding that grounded theory methodology does not start with a hypothesis, but expects theory to be discovered, developed, and emerge by constantly comparing data about the phenomenon being studied, I determined that it was the best methodology fit for my study. Besides developing a theory through a coding process, with being in education it allowed me to acknowledge my biases and hypothesis as it accounts for them only if they emerge in the data extracted from the methods used; it allowed for my voice.

With the characteristics of constant comparison and theoretical sampling, further data collection was not planned until after the analysis and the emergence of theory from initial data collection. My methods included individual and focus group interviews, notes, and document analysis. Through Strauss and Corbin's (1990, 1998) process of generating categories of information (open coding), selecting one of the categories and positioning it within a theoretical model (axial coding), and explicating a story from the interconnection of these categories (selective coding), eventually, the codes were analyzed and all codes that related to a common theme were grouped together that led to the emergence of a theory. An integral

aspect of grounded theory is its emphasis on simultaneous data collection and analysis, facilitating the constant comparison of emerging categories. The methodology's focus on process and theoretical sampling adds depth to the exploration. Further details of this process are explained later.

In my study, through a constant comparison of codes, 22 themes emerged, then to 10 then five; a grounded theory emerged. However, to get to that point, for grounded theory to be helpful in my research, I recognized that I needed to first understand data collection and analysis.

UNDERSTANDING DATA COLLECTION AND DATA ANALYSIS

“An effective qualitative research plan includes a comprehensive description of the types of data to be collected and the data-collection process envisioned” (Tilley, 2016, p. 46). Numerous data collection methods include interviews, observations, questionnaires, focus groups, case studies, document analysis, and narratives. As Marshall and Rossman (1989) explained, “Data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the mass of collected data. It is a messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative, and fascinating process. It does not proceed in a linear fashion; it is not neat” (p. 112). Effective qualitative research demands meticulous planning of the data collection process. In my study, a combination of individual and focus group interviews, document analysis, and personal notes formed the basis of data collection. Triangulation, involving multiple methods such as participant observation, added layers of credibility. For this to happen, it was important to me to map out clearly the data collection and data analysis procedures and techniques.

Data Collection

According to Tilley (2016), “methodology and methods are intricately tied together with choices about what data to collect and what collection processes to use in relation to the methodology chosen for the study” (p. 29). She goes on to say,

Regardless of specific methodology or choice of methods, an important first step for student researchers conducting critical qualitative research is to reflect on the ways in which who they are (their multiple shifting and intersecting identities) and how they are positioned in relation to the research influence the project they have in mind and ultimately the research conducted. (p. 29)

Thus, when considering an intended method, I first had to look at myself in relation to the area I wanted to research, ensuring sufficient detail of the process for my data collection and analysis so that the eventual findings and conclusions were justified.

Denzin (1978) and later Gray (2014) described data triangulation. Denzin (1978) included participant observation in his strategies of multiple triangulation: “Participant observation is seen as combining survey interviewing, document analysis, direct observation, and observer participation” (p. 297). Gray (2014) also suggested “person triangulation, where data are collected at three levels in an organization” (p. 185). It was understood that it is important to have a number of methods to maintain the credibility within the research. Establishing a process that utilizes multiple methods and includes triangulation of data increases the likelihood that the consumer will accept the study's results (Vaterlaus & Higginbotham, 2011). Similarly, Berg (2009) stated, “By combining several lines of sight, researchers obtain a better, more substantive picture of reality; a richer, more complete array of symbols and theoretical concepts; and a means of verifying many of these elements” (p. 5).

For my study, interviews were done individually, face-to-face, and were structured. “Structured interviews are the most effective method for asking open questions and for eliciting more detailed responses” (Gray, 2014, p. 249). The interview questions were provided to the participants ahead of time, prior to the interview. The individual interview questions included three background questions and two sets of six questions based on experiences and perspectives to inform the study. An open-ended question was

provided at the end of each interview. Even with this triangulation of data, concerns about validity needed to be addressed.

Addressing concerns about validity as a limitation of grounded theory methodology (Choy, 2014), the initial interview served as a test, ensuring logical soundness in the interview questions. Subsequent interviews and focus groups were conducted in response to emerging patterns, reflecting the methodology's iterative nature. The quality of being logically sound was satisfied in developing a conclusion to the research question so the interview questions were used for the remainder of the participants and started the coding process. Within this data collection was the analysis of the data.

Data Analysis

While constantly comparing the data from individual interviews, I looked for the patterns or codes in that data. At that point, as expected, specific questions arose that were reflective of the patterns being formed. After, on the way to saturation, a second set of interviews were conducted as focus group interviews. These focus groups included most of the same individual interview participants plus additional participants. This return to participants was to ask follow-up questions based on the patterns that emerged in the data collected from individual interviews, keeping in mind that "an advantage of focus groups is that they allow for a variety of views to emerge, while group dynamics can often allow for the stimulations of new perspectives" (Gray, 2014, p. 250). Also, focus groups allow you to observe how the group resonates with what is being discussed. Focus group interviews were held after individual interviews so that questions would be based on a reflection of patterns formed from the results of individual interview responses.

To gather evidence of participant trustworthiness of answers to questions, the next form of data collection was gained from the notes gathered regarding thoughts on participants' demeanour when answering interview questions. Since I wanted to give eye contact and be more present when asking interview questions, my observations were written immediately after each interview. I recorded the following thoughts that were noted on a reoccurring basis from individual interviews and focus group interviews: 1) Collegiality with each other; 2) A comfort with each other and with me in sharing thoughts and answering questions; 3) A high level of participation and involvement from all; 4) An appreciation of the opportunity to offer strengths and weaknesses in the education system; 5) A vulnerability in sharing suggestions on what should be done and changed; and 6) A focus on wanting the education system to operate better. All participants appeared open and honest and were comfortable sharing experiences and perspectives based on their role as educational leaders.

Besides interviews, a collection of documents was analyzed. Throughout, it was kept in mind that grounded theory challenges researchers to avoid having predetermined thoughts in order to "remain sensitive to the data by being able to record events and detect happenings without first having them filtered through and squared with pre-existing hypothesis and biases" (Glaser, 1978, p. 3). Upon completion of each interview, there was an immediate debriefing session. Any questions or clarifications were addressed at that time.

Interviews were recorded using Audio Memos and stored password-protected on a personal iPad and recorded using Sound Recorder and stored password-protected on a personal laptop. Notes were also taken manually during the interviews. The audio from the iPad was listened to and transcribed into a Word document on the password-protected laptop. Participants received a copy of the transcription to ensure that the data reflected what they intended to provide.

I capitalized on the great strengths of grounded theory, that is, to learn from the early data collection so that I could refine subsequent data collection in response and to begin to narrow down the data collected to a grounded theory. As Charmaz (1995, as cited by Gray, 2014) explained, layers could include:

- The participant's stated explanations of her or his actions.
- The participant's unstated assumptions about these actions.
- The participant's intentions and motivation for engaging in the actions.
- The effects of the actions on others.

- The consequences of these actions for interpersonal relations and for further individual actions. (p. 611)

In keeping with the integrity of grounded theory, a third meeting was held when it came time for refining my theory from the patterns that were emerging from the data. This selective coding stage was the final stage of my data collection. This required a full analysis. That is, the end result of a full analysis in grounded theory is a well-developed theory that is grounded in the data, and that can be used to explain and predict the phenomenon being studied. Specific techniques were followed to conclude. That is, coding was of the utmost importance.

CODING FOR GROUNDED THEORY

Breaking down simply the grounded theory methodology, according to Allan's (2003) and Berg's (2009) explanation of grounded theory codes, concepts, and categories, my study content was analyzed through coding to determine the underlying issues. Words and phrases immediately emerged that highlighted an issue of importance or of interest to the research. Those words or phrases were noted using a short descriptor phrase (code). As the same or similar words were mentioned again to describe an issue, it was noted again.

The coding started initially on the printed paper copy of the Word transcription. Eventually, with the large amount of data, a computer program was purchased to determine its assistance. The transcriptions were uploaded to a computer program, developed by QSR International (n.d.), NVivo 12: "NVivo gives you a place to organize, store and retrieve your data so you can work more efficiently, save time and rigorously back up findings with evidence." This qualitative data analysis computer software package was initially used for coding and data analysis. Even though I was able to quickly adapt and use the program, I understood the caution from Glaser's (2014) statement that "a computer program cannot accomplish sorting. . . only the original researcher knows enough of all the conceptual meaning to properly sort memos" (p. 90). In agreement, since I found that using printed copies of data allowed more flexibility in sorting information, delving into meanings, and doing constant comparisons, printouts from NVivo were also used.

More specifically for the coding, open coding, axial coding, and selective coding were used to identify the emerging patterns, categories, and themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Creswell (2009) explained, "These involve generating categories of information (open coding), selecting one of the categories and positioning it within a theoretical model (axial coding), and then explicating a story from the interconnection of these categories (selective coding)" (p. 184). Eventually the codes were analyzed and all codes related to a common theme were grouped. Comparatively, as described by Allan (2003) and Berg (2009), as more codes relate to a common theme, they become concepts, and as more concepts relate to a common theme they become categories. "It is these concepts and categories that lead to the emergence of a *theory* [emphasis added]. If the data have been analyzed without a preconceived theory or hypothesis, that theory is truly *grounded* [emphasis added] in the data because it came from nowhere else" (Allan, 2003, p. 3). All the data were gathered, analyzed, and reached a point of theoretical saturation. Thus, grounded theory methodology unfolded in three key coding stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The iterative process involved identifying emerging patterns, synthesizing categories, and refining the theory. While computer software (NVivo 12) facilitated coding, my active involvement as a researcher was paramount to maintaining the process's integrity.

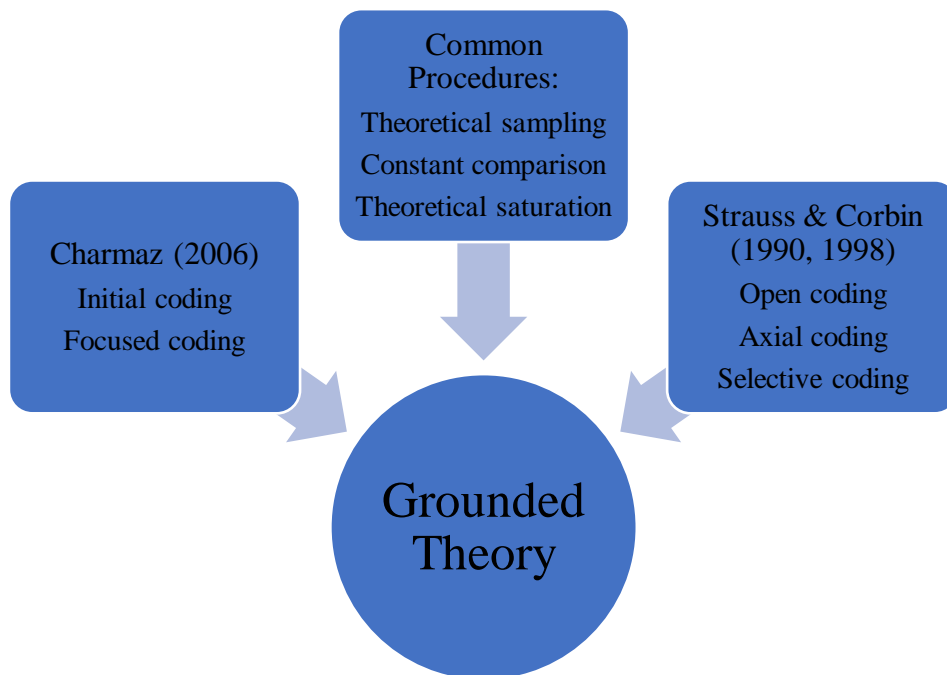
With the findings analyzed according to the qualitative research methodology of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the grounded theory approach offered an inductive methodology with a clear and practical purpose. Using triangulation of the data collection methods, which included interviews with individuals and focus groups, document analysis, and personal notes, inductive reasoning was used to look for patterns, construct some provisional categories, and then develop a theory. But there was a process.

The Coding Process

As explained earlier, with grounded theory codes, concepts, and categories, the content of all data was first analyzed through coding to determine the underlying issues. The procedure was determined based on

comparing strategies identified by Charmaz (2006) and Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998). A grounded theory organizer was created, as shown in Figure 1, for clear comparison of coding strategies and shared processes. In comparison, it was understood that axial coding is the cornerstone of Strauss and Corbin’s (1990, 1998) approach to grounded theory, whereas Charmaz (2006) considers axial coding as optional.

**FIGURE 1
GROUNDED THEORY ORGANIZER**



Charmaz (2006) also looked at open coding as the initial step, connecting data to categories using words that reflect action or incident-to-incident coding where each separate incident is coded, noting emerging properties using context and behaviouristic descriptions. Comparatively, Glaser (1998) suggested constantly asking these questions:

1. What category does this incident indicate?
2. What property of what category does this incident indicate?
3. What is the participant’s main concern?

These questions were kept top of mind when going through the analysis. Glaser also explained that the goal of grounded theory is to generate a conceptual, grounded in data that produce patterns of behavior, with that pattern of behavior being relevant and addressing issues and problems for the sample group (p. 93). This was also considered throughout.

As stated earlier, the process of coding used three levels of analysis: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998), understanding that “regardless of what terms are used to classify coding categories or how many are included in the analysis process, coding is a necessary aspect to organizing data and interpreting what the data says” (Berg, 2009, p. 356). Additionally, as explained by Creswell (2009), the steps involved “generating categories of information (open coding), selecting one of the categories and positioning it within a theoretical model (axial coding), and then explicating a story from the interconnection of these categories (selective coding)” (p. 184).

Looking at it from the coding process perspective, the first step, open coding, began with listening to the audio recording of interviews and transcribing verbatim the answers to the questions shortly after each interview completion. Each recording was listened to multiple times and each interview transcript read multiple times, identifying specific words and phrases. From printed transcriptions, words and phrases that

immediately emerged were highlighted that reflected an issue of importance or of interest to the research. Considering the three questions suggested by Glaser (1998), significant words, phrases, and thought patterns were noted using a short descriptor phrase (code) and written in margins. As the same or similar words were mentioned again to describe an issue, this was noted again, understanding that patterns within data can only be named or identified after multiple indicators of the pattern are seen (Glaser, 2011, p. 54).

According to Berg (2009),

Analysis starts as the data begins to indicate the necessary categories and codes to use and as these elements begin to form patterns and conceptual realities each time the researcher reads and rereads a transcript, undertakes another day of fieldwork, or reviews some document. (p. 356)

Again, from the coding process perspective and understanding that qualitative analysis does not begin after collecting all the data, the first code comparison to attempt to identify any patterns was done after conducting three individual interviews. Two more interviews were done and identified as the second code comparison set with open coding done and comparisons made; two more for the third set; two more for the fourth set; and three more individual interviews for the fifth set. Open coding and comparing were done throughout.

All the transcript documents uploaded to NVivo were reread on the computer screen. Within NVivo, a node was created for each category generated and a node for each research sub-question. Selected data from each interview transcript were moved to the appropriate category and sub-question identified as a node in NVivo in preparation for the next level of coding. Clear patterns emerged through the open code comparison sets.

This first set of data collection and analysis came from individual interviews. After listening to the audio of interviews with the process of open coding in mind, I gained overall perspective of the data. At this open coding phase, 22 provisional categories emerged from the data. This initial phase of data analysis from individual interviews helped with moving to the focus group interviews. This theoretical sampling within individual interviews served as “the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyses his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, to develop his theory as it emerges” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 45). Thus, the questions included in the focus group interviews were examined to ensure that the decisions on what further to collect from the inquiry were satisfied. That is, questions reflected the patterns formed to pursue in focus groups. The focus group data allowed for deeper understanding of participants’ experiences and perspectives.

The second level of coding implemented was axial coding, with the understanding of its purpose of sorting, synthesizing, and organizing large amounts of data and reassembling them in new ways after open coding (Creswell, 2009). At this point, the interaction with my data sources through questions asked was for confirmation, validation, and explanation of the patterns forming. This purpose was maintained, considering the caution from Glaser (1992): “If you torture the data enough it will give up!” (p. 123). As well, at that point, there was some hesitation in using a computer program for sorting the data, keeping in mind the thoughts of Glaser (2005):

Computer sorting is not for GT . . . all it does is retrieve all data or memos on a category, with the result of full conceptual description on the category with no theoretical coding and with overload in ideas or data on the category. There is no delimiting for saturation or relevance of memos based on maturity of memos. All are retrieved equally, as if equal. And interrelations become preconceived or forced. (p. 47)

With that in mind, this also added to why data sections were printed out from NVivo. From the printout, overall categories and themes that were emerging were identified.

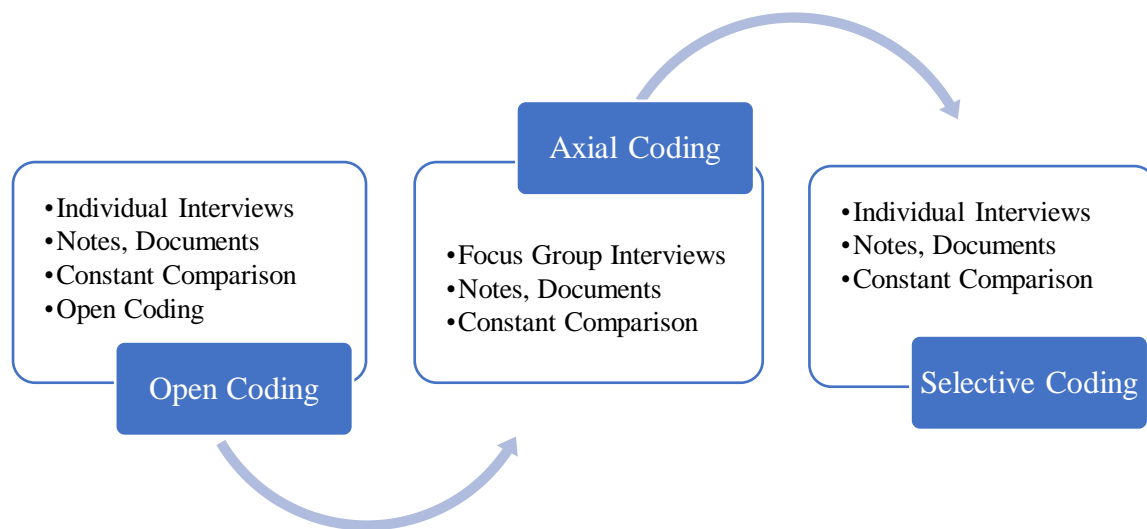
Categories were formed with sub-categories identified based on the properties that emerged from the data through specific words, phrases, and ideas found in participant interview responses, documents, and

notes. Through a continued constant comparison analysis approach, examining the similarities and differences in the data, specific data were merged under the appropriate categories and themes, producing 10 categories with sub-categories. Following the investigation of this data set, open coding continued for any other emerging categories that may not have come up earlier during analysis.

After identifying themes, all the data were reread for the selective coding phase where further investigation of the categories allowed concepts of the categories to be clearer and more concentrated to create common themes. Selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), the third level of coding, was initiated by identifying dominant themes and categories, as well as sub-categories. All data collected from the different methods were merged and separated, then placed under the corresponding category. These merged categories and sub-categories developed into five common theme headings.

This selective coding was the final stage of my data analysis and it was completed after the core concepts emerged from the coded data categories and sub-categories identified through open coding and axial coding. Understanding the guidance of Rose et al. (2015), “the cycles of data collection and analysis continue until no new insights or new dimensions to categories are being identified” (p. 4), no new insights or dimensions to categories were identified; thus, theoretical saturation was met. Figure 2 shows the coding cycle up to theoretical saturation, with the curved arrows indicating the cycle of coding analysis being constant and looping from the initial data collection to the end of all the data collection.

**FIGURE 2
CODING CYCLE**



At this point in selective coding, categories were unified into concepts and a clear theory was being generated, a story was being explicated, and questions for themes for implication on education were being drafted. But I continued to engage with data sources, consistent with this claim by Glaser and Strauss (1967):

When generation of theory is the aim, one is constantly alert to emergent perspectives, what will change and help develop the theory. These perspectives can easily occur on the final day of the study or when the manuscript is reviewed in page proof: so the published word is not the final one, but only a pause in the never-ending process of generating theory. (p. 40)

I met individually with the original interview participants for the third time to verify and validate the themes, my grounded theory statement, and my questions for implication. These meetings were more directed and

deliberate, looking for any additional detail, clarification, or any final questions from participants. No changes were required by my participants. A grounded theory had emerged.

CONCLUSION

Two things come to mind when considering research: “The research potential may be lost if it does not relate to the practitioner” (Matthews, 2019, p. 2) and if the research does not address a priority issue, deal with an action, or answer a question; if the writing is too academic for the audience, or if there is not a relationship between the researcher and practitioner, then the research may fail (Yates, 2005). I needed a methodology that was suited to qualitative research in a way that could be shared in an effective way. I aimed to keep the research message simple, while pushing to a higher level of understanding, which is recommended when doing any study. With that in mind, determining the most suitable methodology for educational research was a critical and thoughtful process.

The process involved careful consideration of various tenets and recognizing the need for clarity in communication within the educational research community. I could do that after going through a study framework and looking further into the appropriate methodology for my study. For me, it was grounded theory methodology, looking at its strengths and weaknesses, determining that it was the best fit, and having a data collection and coding strategy to keep the process clean and manageable.

The exploration of this methodology, encompassing meticulous data collection, rigorous analysis, and nuanced coding processes, underscores its suitability for capturing the multifaceted nature of educational processes. The emphasis on the prepared grounded theory organizer and coding cycle was intended to add a layer of practicality, offering researchers a roadmap for applying grounded theory in their own studies.

Beyond sharing a mere exploration of decision-making in education, this paper sought to contribute to the broader conversation on qualitative research methodologies, providing a nuanced understanding of the benefits of grounded theory. The intent was to emphasize the importance of aligning the chosen methodology with the research goals and the subject matter’s nature. The journey of methodology selection serves as a valuable reflection on the researcher’s path. In advocating for grounded theory methodology, the hope is that this article articulates the thought process behind its selection.

Delving into the methodology’s strengths, such as its inductive approach, simultaneous data collection, and constant comparison, the aim was to highlight its robust framework for qualitative research. It asserts that grounded theory is not just a theoretical framework but a practical and insightful tool for researchers navigating the complexities of educational research. This paper advocates for the continued utilization and appreciation of grounded theory as a valuable approach for exploring and interpreting multifaceted complex phenomena.

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