GROUNDED THEORY APPROACH: ITS STEPS AND PROCEDURES IN A SCIENTIFIC STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Grounded Theory approach is most applicable in social issues that have limited data and literature. It is popularly used among social science practitioners since it is responsive to societal concerns. However, given its unique features, it was perceived as complicated and confusing especially for a beginner researcher. The current study was conducted to present the proper steps and procedures of grounded theory approach in qualitative research. The focus of this study is on the systematic application of the components of grounded theory in a scientific study that has limited literature and data. It aimed to determine the trustworthiness of using its method in explaining an existing social concern without bias on preconceived ideas. The combined use of purposive sampling, triangulation method, gap analysis and the elements of grounded theory approach led to theory generation after a rigorous iteration of comparative data analysis. Following the complicated process of its methodology, resulted to a conclusive finding that grounded theory approach has its dimension of difficulty, level of trustworthiness and distinctive features that would qualify as scientific study unique of its quality. Thus, the level of complication and rigor has contributed to the strength of Grounded theory approach.

Keywords: Grounded theory approach, Qualitative study, Scientific study, Comparative data analysis, Theory generation, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

The need to investigate the status of the transition program of Special education classes in the identified setting led to the utilization of Grounded theory in this study. Further, the limitation of literature on transition program in the Philippines becomes the pivotal decision in using grounded theory in the study. Despite the apprehension in using grounded theory brought about by varying perceptions of notable authors which lead to complication in understanding its form (GT), the researcher had taken the courage to use grounded theory with its intention to determine its employability in the given research. The strength in using grounded theory (GT) was based on its nature that everything will be grounded on data that will be collected, analyzed and interpreted (Creswell, 2007). However, having different ways of interpretations from different authors made a grounded theory approach confusing and complicated. The Classical Grounded theory was introduced by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) after having conducted their study on the concept of dying in hospitals. It is described as a consistent set of data collection and analytic procedures aimed to develop theory. Since its creation (Glaser and Strauss 1967), it has evolved and has been reinvented in various ways, resulting in diversifications to Glaser and Strauss's original approach which created an impression that it is inconsistent and not trustworthy. Further, considering the rigor of using the grounded theory approach, many researchers were apprehensive about utilizing grounded theory. These researchers opted to use other qualitative approaches instead (Creswell, 2007). The utilization of grounded theory in various studies had been practiced for a long time, but misconceptions dampened its popularity

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that the method is confusing, complicated and lack the rigor of a scientific study. What made this study unique from the other researches using Grounded Theory is its capacity to simplify what was perceived to be difficult and complicated. It is for this reason that this study was conducted purposely to present the methodology of Grounded theory and its processes in its basic form. If properly done this can produce authentic result customized for the participants of the study since it is grounded on data in itself.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Grounded theory is one of the four qualitative designs used in the human and social sciences. Its purpose is to determine specific issues and concerns in a particular area, where theory generation is the end goal especially for subject or topic that has very limited literature in the local setting (Glaser and Strauss,1967). This study utilized the Classical Grounded Theory that was developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967). Glaser and Strauss believed that theory could emerge through qualitative data analysis. They argued that a new theory could be developed by paying careful attention to the contrast between the daily realities supported by facts and reasons and the interpretations of those daily realities made by those who participated in them. They described this theory to have been built upon two key concepts, such as "constant comparison," and "data analysis" in which the theoretical data are collected and analyzed simultaneously, resulting to "theoretical sampling," in which decisions about which data should be collected next are determined by the theory that is being constructed (Sharon M. Kolb, 2012). The most compelling reason in the utilization of Grounded Theory in the study was to generate valid information through data analysis as the basis of innovation of the transition program. The sample study that was used as a point of reference in this study was the research on Innovation of transition program of Transition Program Philippine Model (Abamonga, 2018). Using Grounded Theory in this study allowed exploring the ideas and views of the participants

on the functional transition program (Suddaby, 2006). In using the Grounded theory method, the researcher used several stages in collecting, refining and categorizing the data as prescribed by the Classical Grounded Theory. Further, with the absence of prior study on transition program in the local setting, the theory and new concept that was generated from this study played a pivotal role in the future study of similar concern. Figure 1 showed the actual flow of how the grounded theory process was conducted (researchgate.net).
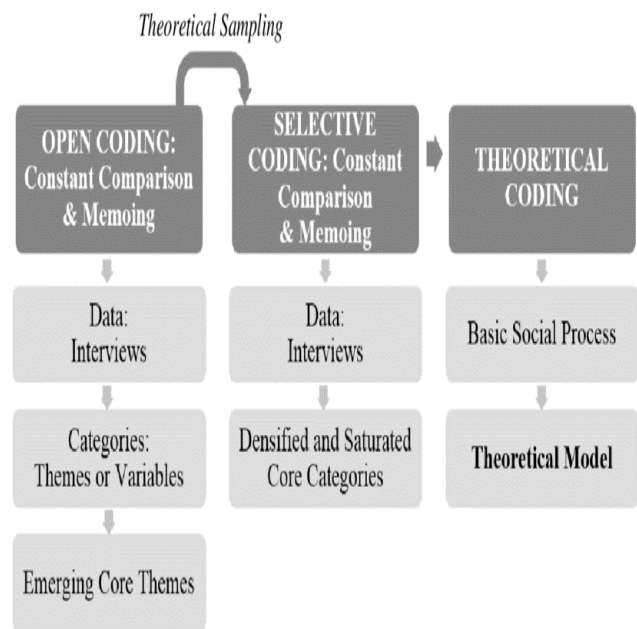

Figure 1. Research Paradigm

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main intention of this study is to share how grounded theory approach is utilized in conducting a scientific study. It also intends to show that following the steps and procedures of GT it can provide substantive results. Thus, this study can be used as an additional insight that as long as it is done correctly and rigorously, grounded theory has its strength comparable to other scientific methods.

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METHODOLOGY

In employing the Grounded theory method in this study, various stages had been undertaken. It initially started with the observance of ethical consideration through the signing of consent forms from the respective participants. Purposive sampling was used in identifying the participants since there were only a few teachers handling transition classes under Special Education. This type of sampling was deemed suitable with Grounded Theory because while participants were minimal but they have extensive experiences concerning transition program (Patton,2002; Suri, 2011; Bernard 2002; Lewis & Sheppard 2006; Tongco, 2011;). Triangulation method in conducting the survey was employed using interview, observation and documentation of records to ensure consistency in gathering the data (Risjord et al. 2001; Bekhet, A. K., & Zauszniewski, J. A., 2012). Towards the end of data collection, a focus group discussion was conducted. This was done to determine the acceptability of the results and to avoid misconceptions on the data that were gathered (Kolb, SM, 2012). The unit of analysis in the study was the transition program of youth with special needs in special education classes as the unit that was analyzed. Included were the components of transition program like the content of module of instructions in terms of functionality towards the beneficiaries of the program, processes in terms of provision of the mobility of students from one level to another and sustainability based on facilities, tools, and equipment. In this study, the researcher identified the gap between knowledge and practice through gap analysis. This refers to the difference between the knowledge of what needs to be done and what was done (Juan, Ou-Yang, 2004). In analyzing the data, the elements of Grounded Theory were strictly observed such as coding which involved initial, focus and theoretical coding. This stage broke qualitative data into similarities and differences, categorizing into themes and integrating them into narrative forms. Constant comparative data analysis was used to ensure that no theme was left out and no new theme came out which led to data saturation. After data saturation has been reached data deduction followed. This involved selection, simplification, abstraction, and transformation of the raw data. The whole process of Grounded Theory resulted in consistency and trustworthiness of the study when data saturation and deduction were achieved. As data were refined and finalized, theoretical sampling came about. This was the result of a series of comparative data analysis through coding and can be determined through data saturation- a condition when no new data came about, or the data seems recurring and redundant. The last stage of Grounded Theory was the arrangement of theoretical themes that came out from the data. These theoretical themes were analyzed that resulted to theory generation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Saldana, 2013). The most significant contribution of Grounded theory in this research study is producing a theory based on the issues and concerns of a given phenomenon according to the context of the participants of the study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). According to Saldana (2015), a social science theory has three main characteristics. It predicts and controls the action through an if-then logic; explains how or why something happens by stating its cause(s); and provides insights and guidance for improving social life. After code weaving of all categories under focus codes, a substantive theory emerged from the conceptual categories but is grounded in the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data that were extracted from the interview proceedings were group together and analyzed using the Grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss's (1967).

1. **Coding for Concepts and Categories on Status of Transition Program of Special Education Classes**

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Table 1. Coding for Concepts and Categories on Status of Transition Program of Special Education Classes

Raw Data	Initial Coding	Focus Coding
a. Practical or functional program ideal but not fully implemented	a. Integrated to non-graded classes like CWA, ID, Global	a. Functional/ Practical
b. Needs improvement		
c. Must be developmental for employment or self-productivity	b. The Philippine Transition Program Model	b. Structured Curriculum
d. Curriculum is only responsive given the right facilities, necessary materials and venue	c. Needs modification	
e. Not yet established	d. Developmental	
f. Still on its baby steps		
g. Based on learner's capability	e. Teacher and facilities dependent	
h. Engaging activities		
i. Need Competent Transition teacher to simplify instructions		
j. Depends on the capacity of transition teacher		
k. Teacher and Facilities dependent		
l. Impractical without facilities		
m. Personalized learning than curriculum guide		
n. The Philippine Transition Program Model		
o. There is but not fully implemented.		

As shown in table1 the interview material went through with constant comparative analysis, (Abamonga, 2017). The raw data were extracted and coded into initial and focused coding, and saturated data were converted into theoretical themes. Constant comparison with existing data in the study was repeatedly done until saturation of data had been reached, this meant that no other theme came out as the process was repeatedly done (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Similarly, according to Brod et al. (2009) when there were no new perspectives that came out on the research question, it was recommended to construct a saturation grid' listing the major topics or research questions against interviews or other sources, and ensuring all bases have been covered. Having completely analyzed and coded the transcripts of participants taking into consideration the richness that conveys the naturalistic account, it also indicates participants' frequencies of drawing attention to incidents and feelings, the emotional weight that it conveyed

(Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This came through under constant data analysis through coding. Coding is the result of raising questions and giving provisional answers about categories and their relations. The data that were extracted were initially classified under raw data. These were analyzed and summarized into four big concepts under initial coding. Following further data analysis, the concepts became two major ideas under focus coding. Creating distinctions between codes produces dimensions and sub-dimensions. The coding paradigm originally articulated by Strauss (1987) and further refined by Strauss and Corbin (1990).

2. Coded themes on needs, issues, and concerns of stakeholders

In table 1 and 2, similar process on coding, categorizing and theoretical themes development were done (Abamonga, 2017).

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Table 2. Coded themes on needs, issues, and concerns of stakeholders

Raw data	Initial Coding	Focus Coding
a. Improved Domains of the Transition program	a. Improvement in terms of domains of: daily living skills personal-social skills occupation, guidance, and preparation	a. Improved transition program
b. Productive activities		
c. This can contribute to society given the right motivation and resources		b. Collaboration of school Admin, teachers & Parents
d. Not ready to implement the curriculum	b. Modification of student's behavior, facilities materials and rooms	c. Performance of transition Program
e. Basic domains were met		
f. Functional curriculum		
g. Significant factors of Transition Program		
h. Initiating Core stakeholders		
i. Sustainability of transition program	c. Learning responsiveness and parental support	
j. Absence of basic components		
k. Surface implementation		
l. Lack of funds but plenty of initiatives	d. Absence of facilities hamper full implementation of transition program	
m. Limited funds affect full implementation		
n. Resourceful in finding means to substantiate lacking facilities		
o. Deterrent of Transition Program	e. Goals not fully realized	
p. Dysfunctional Program		
q. Sound implementation of the transition program		
r. Doomed for failure		
s. Need more teacher training with actual engagement		
t. Substandard implementation		
u. Need facilities for a higher level of competencies.		
v. Not fully implemented accordingly		

The important thing to note was that it was nearly impossible for a researcher to know when they have reached saturation point unless they were analyzing the data as it was collected. Achieving the saturation point required an iterative approach to data collection and analysis. According to Lewis (2015) instead of setting a fixed number of interviews or focus-groups to conduct at the start of the project, the researcher should be continuously going through cycles of collection and analysis until nothing new is being revealed and a theoretical theme was established (Tables 1, 2 and 3). This was the state when "sufficient data has been collected for the researcher to have gained an adequate understanding of the dimensions and properties of the concepts and themes that have emerged." (Watling and Lingard 2012). Further, table 2 showed that from the immense raw data, it became three major ideas under focus coding as

the data went through the iterative coding process.

3. Coded Themes on Proposed Innovation on Transition Program

Following the coding procedures done in the previous tables (1 and 2), out from the large raw data, table 3 showed four themes under focus coding which reflected the ideas of the participants on proposed innovation of transition program. The coding process showed the consistency of results. While concepts differed from table 1, 2 and 3 as coding continued it came up with big ideas resulting from continuous comparative data analysis. What made the process challenging was to maintain focus and consistency in interpreting and analyzing the context from the raw material according to the context of the participants. If properly done this

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Table 3. Coded Themes on Proposed Innovation on Transition Program

Raw Data	Initial Coding	Focus Coding
a. Modified and Practical Curriculum b. Responsive to the needs of children c. Initiate improvement of a transition program for competitive graduate d. Establish Sound Funds Management e. Modify Behavior to qualify for TP f. Provide facilities according to curriculum g. Teacher's training is a must through benchmarking, linkage with other stakeholders h. Facilities are essential in program implementation i. Prioritize facilities for sound implementation of the curriculum j. Prioritize the essential needs k. Initiate activities l. Linkage with other stakeholders in showcasing children's' products outputs m. Modification of behavior must start at home n. Well-documented performance report o. Interested in acquiring skills and competencies in teaching TP and necessary facilities p. Open communication with stakeholders q. Focus on functional skills that promote economic activities; Engage students for instructional materials and initiate linkages with stakeholders r. Open communication for linkages with industry sector s. Control mechanism t. Efficiency u. Faculty Development program v. Need trained teachers on TP or TLE w. Efficient reporting and documentation	a. Modification of the competencies and activities indicated in the model b. Focus first on achieving behavioral goals before focusing in academic goals and transition program c. Strengthen administrative support d. Monitoring Division-wide actual observation of classes by school heads, EPS, PSDS. e. Modification of competencies incorporate immersion and training of skills of teachers	a. Modified Task analysis b. Institutionalized guidelines c. Faculty comprehensive Training

can produce authentic result customized for the participants of the study since it is grounded on data in itself (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Charmaz, 2007).

4. Theory Generation and its Theoretical Framework

In table 4, theory generation was shown based on the themes that were categorized in tables 1, 2 and 3. Theory generation is the ultimate goal of Grounded theory out from the data gathered using data analyses in a given study. Glaser and Strauss (1967) provided some guidance for evaluating the empirical grounding of grounded theory. These can be summarized as

follows: "(1) Fit – does the theory fit the substantive area in which it will be used? (2) Understandability – will non-professionals concerned with the substantive area understand the theory? (3) Generalizability – does the theory apply to a wide range of situations in the substantive area? (4) Control – does the theory allow the user some control over the "structure and process of daily situations as they change through time"? In terms of credibility, validity, and rigor, it should be observed that grounded theory was based on a systematic and formal process of data collection, analysis and theory generation. Inaccuracies and misleading interpretations were guarded against by various means including comparative analysis, investigation of different

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slices of data, and integration of theoretical concepts (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Cooney, 2011).

Table 4. Theory Generation and its Theoretical Framework

Focus Coding	Theory Generation	Theoretical Explanation
Table 4.1 • Practical or functional • Structured Curriculum Table 4.2 • Improved Domains of the Transition program • Collaboration of School Admin, Teachers, Parents Industry and Community sectors • Performance of Transition Program Table 4.3 Modified Curriculum • Task analysis • Institutionalized guidelines • Faculty comprehensive training	"A functional transition program is structured yet, flexible, efficient and attainable through the collaboration of stakeholders and execution of committed proficient teachers following institutionalized guidelines and procedures."	A functional transition program must have a structured framework to make it easy to follow. It must have the capacity to be flexible and can be modified according to the specific needs of the students. Its content shall focus on the improved domains according to the demands of the present time whereby it can be broken into smaller content to suit the capabilities of the students. Its success relies so much on the unified efforts of the school, specialists, and stakeholders who played important roles in the delivery of related services. The performance of the transition program is overly dependent on the ability of the teachers to incorporate the program components to make it doable, deliverable and desirable. To make the transition program sustainable, this shall be institutionalized and form part of the school's policies or the bureaucracy on a bigger scale.

The researcher must have the capacity to synthesize the data according to the contextualization and needs of the participants of the study this is one of the methods and dynamism of grounded theory (Ralph & Chapman,2015). Further, contextual sensitivity must be observed since it is where the structuring of the inductive analytical process occurred through extending the range of theoretically sensitizing concepts that must be addressed and understood to use the context in which participants are situated (MBNunes, et al. 2010). According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), a contextual sensitive researcher has the ability to develop themes from research data through segmenting and reassembling data pertaining to context-depending realities - the unfolding development of organizational processes and activities; the repertoires of action and stakeholders' interactions; the macro-social setting - thus achieving an increased depth of analysis. Out from the group of categories under focus codes, a theoretical theme came out. The theory which came out from the study defined a functional transition program in Table 4 according to the context and needs of the participants of the study (Abamonga, 2017). What makes this theoretical definition unique from the other definition was, it gave so much credence on the total commitment and advocacy

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of proficient teachers. Further, by institutionalizing transition program, it will ensure continuity and sustainability that such program will be carried out consistently and become part of the system under which the study was conducted. The implication of this theoretical definition is that this can be a guide to carry on the program specifically suited to the needs of the participants. The trustworthiness of the theory can be verified by presenting the theory back to the participants in the study for discussion and refinement (Glaser, 2014).

CONCLUSIONS

The main intention of this study is to open an avenue that grounded theory is doable despite its varied interpretations of notable authors which led to the idea that it is complicated and confusing. The data presented on the steps and procedures of conducting grounded theory in an actual study help novice researchers acquire an idea that will guide them on the procedural approach in conducting a scientific study using grounded theory. Despite the perceived complexity of the procedural method of grounded theory, as long that the technique is used correctly, then it will still provide the necessary results born out of it rigorous procedures comparable to other scientific methods. What has been perceived as lacking in consistency due to differing perceptions has been a response on the data that were collected, analyzed and interpreted. What makes grounded theory authentic and trustworthy is its results which are highly applicable and responsive to the needs of the participants of the study.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Grounded theory should be continuously explored in a study that has very limited data. The constancy of using this methodology will lead to increase confidence that this theory has its own merits. Further, given the fact that social concerns have many facets which do not have enough data to start with this methodology provides an opportunity that a study can be doable based on data collection and analysis that leads to theory generation which can be another avenue to study to challenge its consistency and applicability.

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AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Elinesa Eboña-Abamonga is a licensed professional teacher with a specialization in special education. Her advocacy in helping learners with special needs made her focused initially on her research work on the transition program in special education. Having finished her PhD. in Educational Planning and Management made her more engaged in producing materials that would help improve the delivery of services in a special education program. Her interest with Grounded Theory Approach was initiated at the height of writing her dissertation paper and intend to use it in her further studies to establish expertise on the utilization of the theory. At present, she is a faculty of the School of Education, Xavier University-Ateneo de Cagayan.

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