Constructing New Theory for Identifying Students with Emotional Disturbance:
A Constructivist Approach to Grounded Theory

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Abstract

A grounded theory study that examined how practitioners in a county alternative and correctional education setting identify youth with emotional and behavioral difficulties for special education services provides an exemplar for a constructivist approach to grounded theory methodology. Discussion focuses on how a constructivist orientation to grounded theory methodology informed research decisions, shaped the development of the emergent grounded theory, and prompted a way of thinking about data collection and analysis. Implications for future research directions and policy and practice in the field of special and alternative education are discussed.

Introduction

A grounded theory study examined how practitioners in a county alternative and correctional education setting identify youth with emotional and behavioral difficulties for special education services, given the criteria for emotional disturbance (ED) contained in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004. This study serves as an exemplar for a discussion of how a constructivist orientation to grounded theory methodology informed research decisions, shaped the development of the emergent grounded theory, and prompted a way of thinking about data collection and analysis to construct new knowledge for practice.

Children and youth with emotional and behavioral disorders are considered the most under identified and underserved of all the disability groups (Forness & Kavale, 2001; Gresham, 2005, 2007). Problems associated with the identification of students with behavioral and emotional difficulties for special education services are often attributed to the definition and criteria for ED found in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Hughes & Bray, 2004; Merrell & Walker, 2004). For purposes of special education classification, IDEA defines ED as one or more of five characteristics, exhibited to a marked degree, and over a period of time. The five characteristics include (a) depression, (b) school phobia, (c) an inability to build or maintain satisfactory inter-personal relationships, (d) inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal conditions and (e) an inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors. Definitional problems are further compounded by an 'exclusionary clause' in the ED criteria which states, "the term does not apply to children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they are emotionally disturbed" (§34CFR 300.8 (c)(4)(ii)). The exclusionary clause poses a definitional conundrum that is particularly confounding for practitioners working in alternative and correctional education settings, where high numbers of youth exhibit serious emotional and behavioral difficulties.

Critics have referred to the definition of ED as "nebulous and highly subjective" (Gresham, 2005, p. 215), "vague and uncertain" (Olympia, Farley, Christiansen, Pettersson, Jenson & Clark, 2004, p. 835) and even "bordering on oxymoronic" (Gresham, 2007, p. 330). Moreover, a preliminary review of the literature revealed the absence of an existing theory to explain the underlying processes practitioners are using to identify emotional disturbance and to distinguish between ED and social maladjustment (SM) for purposes of special education classification. Thus, a grounded theory methodology was selected to address a primary and secondary research question posed by this study:

1. How do practitioners in an alternative and correctional education setting identify students with emotional disturbance for purposes of special education classification?
2. How do practitioners in an alternative and correctional education setting distinguish between ED and SM for purposes of special education classification?

Methodology

Grounded theory methodology employs a systematic set of procedures to inductively develop theory that is "grounded" in the data from which it was derived (Charmaz, 2000, 2006, 2009; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1994, 1998). The ultimate aim of a grounded theory study is to produce new theory that is grounded in data collected directly from participants on the basis of their lived experiences (Fassinger, 2005). The theory produced from grounded theory methodology is 'grounded' in practitioners' real-world practice, is sensitive to practitioners in the setting, and represents the complexities found in participants' experiences. Glaser (1992) stated, "Grounded theory renders as faithfully as possible a theory discovered in the data which explains the subjects' main concerns and how they are processed" (p. 14). The outcome of a grounded theory study is an emergent theory "from the data that accounts for the data" (Charmaz, 2008a, p. 157).

Signature characteristics of grounded theory methodology include (a) simultaneous processes of data collection and analysis, (b) an inductive approach leading to conceptual understanding of the data, (c) pursuit of core themes early in the data analysis, (d) sampling procedures driven by constant comparative analysis, and (e) the integration of categories into theoretical frameworks (Birks & Mills, 2010; Charmaz, 2003b, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006). "The comparative and interactive nature of grounded theory at every stage of analysis distinguishes grounded theory from other approaches and makes it an explicitly emergent method" (Charmaz, 2008a, p. 163).

Grounded theory methodology was best suited for this study because the research questions and problems indicated the need to develop a sound theoretical foundation for identifying students with emotional disturbance and because a sound theoretical foundation does not currently exist. Grbich (2007) proposed that grounded theory methodology is appropriate "when there is a need for new theoretical explanations built on previous knowledge to explain changes in the field" (p. 70). Further, the existing ED identification criteria lack clear guidelines for defining social maladjustment and for distinguishing between ED and SM for purposes of special education classification. Skeat and Perry (2008) surmise, "Grounded theory is considered to be an appropriate choice for a research study 'when a phenomenon has not been adequately described, or when there are few theories that explain it'" (p. 97).

Moreover, the flexible and creative nature of grounded theory methodology is seen in the array of approaches described in the grounded theory literature. Methodological

variations are linked to the researcher's philosophical position along the methodological spiral, most often distinguishing the positionality of the researcher and the approach to data analysis within a grounded theory research design (Annells, 1996; Birks & Mills, 2010; Mills et al., 2006). This study followed a constructivist grounded theory orientation as described by Bryant (2009); Bryant and Charmaz (2007a, 2007b), Charmaz (2000, 2003a, 2006, 2008a, 2008b, 2009), Clark (2003, 2005, 2009), and Mills et al. (2005, 2006).

Constructivist Grounded Theory

Mills et al. (2006) assert that constructivist grounded theory is distinguished by (a) "the nature of the relationship between the researcher and participants," and (b) "an explication of what can be known" (p. 2). In contrast to classical versions of grounded theory, constructivist grounded theory is described as "epistemologically subjective" and "ontologically relativist" (p. 6). A relativist stance assumes that theoretical analyses derived from the grounded theory process "are interpretive renderings of a reality, not objective reportings of it" (Charmaz, 2008b, p. 206). Meaning is constructed through the qualitative researcher's interpretive understandings, an emic perspective that assumes a relativist and reflexive stance toward the data (Charmaz, 2009).

Charmaz (2009) posited, "Grounded theory in its constructivist version is a profoundly interactive process" (p. 137). Drawing from the epistemological and ontological foundations of social constructivism, meaning is co-constructed with participants through interactive processes of interviewing, communication, and actions in practice (Nagy Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2008). It is through such reflexive processes that new theory emerges from—rather than is discovered in—the data reflecting practitioners' lived experiences (Charmaz, 2009; Fassinger, 2005).

Methods, Participants, and Data Collection

These characteristics of a constructivist grounded theory approach were implemented in the context of a county alternative and correctional education program serving approximately 8,000 children and youth enrolled in juvenile corrections, social service, and community day school settings in a large suburban county in southern California. A profile of typical youth enrolled in this setting involves youth who are referred by local school districts, or temporarily placed in group homes, or incarcerated in local probation or sheriff operated facilities, or who are housed in social service institutions, or who are teen parents (OCDE, 2008). Given the complex emotional, social, and behavioral needs of such students, this setting was particularly well suited for exploring practitioners' perceptions of ED and their underlying social and psychological processes for distinguishing between ED and SM for purposes of special education classification.

The participants were twenty-seven practitioners and one parent involved in the identification of students with emotional disturbance in this practice setting: eight school psychologists, eight administrators from county and local school districts, three special and general education teachers, two clinicians, and two designated instructional service providers—a speech and language specialist and a school nurse. Four practitioners were representatives from collaborative county agencies including a therapist and psychologist from the County Mental Health Care Agency, the coordinator of Foster Youth Services, and a juvenile court probation officer. One parent of an emotionally disturbed student also participated.

Data collection consisted of (a) semi-structured interviews conducted with each of the 28 participants in the study; (b) five focus group interviews conducted with small groups of participants on topics selected from critical issues that emerged from the data, such as substance abuse and emotional disturbance and trauma-induced emotional disturbance; (c) document reviews collected from over 300 pages of case conference notes, multi-disciplinary assessment reports, parent correspondence, evaluations for county mental health services, and relevant inter-office e-mail correspondence; and (d) five participant observations conducted in classrooms and programs for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities throughout the county. Following theoretical sampling procedures—where data from prior interviews guided the researcher about whom to interview or what to observe next—new participants were added and semi-structured interview questions were adapted as new concepts emerged from the data.

Data Analysis

Three distinct but overlapping generic stages of data analysis were implemented including the initial, interim, and theoretical stages. Within the constructivist grounded theory research design, these generic stages translated to the processes inherent in open coding, focused coding and theoretical coding. Open coding refers to the first level of coding in grounded theory analysis, "in which data are transcribed and broken down into units of meaning" (Fassinger, 2005, p. 160). During open coding, the researcher labels and assigns units of meaning to incidents, actions, and events derived from the data. Focused coding occurs as the researcher begins identifying preliminary themes and concepts emerging from the data. In this stage the researcher focuses on the most significant and frequently occurring codes (Charmaz, 2003a). Theoretical coding is the final stage in which the researcher begins merging concepts into thematic categories. The grounded theory is constructed from analysis of the inter-relationships among the themes. As recommended in grounded theory methodology, all stages incorporated signature grounded theory processes of constant comparison, whereby data are continually compared and contrasted at each level of analysis; theoretical sampling, where emergent concepts and concerns arising from the data guide subsequent data collection; and theoretical sensitivity, which relies on the researcher's intuitive and interpretive analysis of the data.

Findings

A constructivist grounded theory research design produced six emergent themes which are integrated into the grounded theory. The integration of six emergent themes constitutes the new grounded theory capturing the core social and psychological processes practitioners are implementing to identify students with emotional disturbance and to distinguish between ED and SM for purposes of special education classification in this practice setting:

(1) Practitioners identified emotional disturbance along three inter-related dimensions— social, behavioral, and emotional. According to the participants, students with emotional disturbance were characterized as (a) struggling socially with interpersonal relationships; (b) demonstrating atypical behaviors and extreme reactions; and (c) having difficulty managing their feelings and emotions.

(2) Practitioners distinguished between ED and SM with respect to the nature of the student's social, behavioral, and emotional functioning. Distinctions between ED and SM were delineated with respect to (a) the nature of the student's interpersonal relationships; (b) the extreme and typical nature of the student's

behaviors; and (c) the student's ability to control and manage his or her emotions.

(3) Practitioners implemented reflexive and collaborative processes to identify students with emotional disturbance. In addition to traditional standardized assessment procedures, practitioners emphasized reflexive and collaborative identification processes such as (a) adhering to the child find process of early intervention and identification of children with disabilities; (b) collaborating with peers; (c) exploring the etiology of the child's behavior; and (d) linking students' needs to available services.

(4) Practitioners are engaging in pragmatic problem-solving in response to new student trends. Practitioners identified new student trends which are complicating the identification process for ED: (a) substance abuse and ED, (b) early exposure to trauma and ED, and (c) co-morbid emotional and behavioral conditions. In the absence of clear procedural guidelines, practitioners are engaging in pragmatic problem-solving to resolve such issues.

(5) Practitioners' decisions were informed by ethical considerations related to caring. Ethical considerations, especially the ethic of care, were instrumental in practitioners' decisions for determining special education eligibility under the classification of ED. Ethical considerations were characterized as (a) focusing on students' best interests, (b) having compassion, and (c) establishing harmonious professional relationships.

(6) Practitioners espoused a socially just perspective toward identifying students with ED. Practitioners identified socially unjust practices that impinged upon the process of identifying students with ED: (a) under-identifying students with ED, (b) delays in providing services to ED students, and (c) shifting the responsibility for identifying ED students from one organization to another. In turn, practitioners advocated for a socially just perspective in identifying students with emotional disturbance.

The emergent grounded theory suggests new theoretical propositions regarding how practitioners are identifying students with emotional disturbance and how they are distinguishing between ED and SM for purposes of special education classification: (a) practitioners are conceptualizing ED and SM as inter-related dimensions of social, emotional and behavioral functioning; (b) practitioners are distinguishing ED and SM along fluid continua, as opposed to the exclusive polarities of ED and SM indicated by the exclusionary clause in the federal definition; (c) practitioners are emphasizing reflexive and collaborative identification processes in addition to traditional standardized assessment measures; (c) practitioners are engaging in pragmatic problem-solving in response to new student trends, such as substance abuse and exposure to trauma, that are complicating the ED identification process; (d) decision-making is informed by ethical considerations related to caring and focusing on students' best interests; and (e) practitioners are advocating for a socially just perspective to overcome barriers to identification. In sum, the emergent grounded theory reflects a student centered approach to identifying emotional disturbance that is guided by an ethical and socially just perspective.

Discussion

"All research is interpretive; it is guided by the researcher's set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 22). This grounded theory research design reflects a postmodern constructivist perspective, and, as such, incorporates postmodern sensibilities, assumes a relativist and reflexive stance toward the data, and takes a pragmatic approach to problem-solving. These theoretical

underpinnings of a constructivist grounded theory approach translate into the following research practices: (a) taking a relativist stance that reflects multiple and diverse perspectives; (b) positioning the researcher as a reflexive participant in data collection and analysis; and (c) exercising a pragmatic approach to problem-solving. This discussion will examine how these essential elements of a constructivist grounded theory approach prompted a way of thinking about data, informed research decisions, and shaped the development of the emergent grounded theory.

A relativist perspective

Clarke (2005) proposed that an epistemological shift toward a constructivist orientation "enhances our capacities to do incisive studies of differences of perspective, of highly complex situations of action and positionality" (p. xxiii). A relativist stance inherent in a constructivist grounded theory approach values the diversity of perspectives and invites the sharing of pluralistic viewpoints. For instance, a juvenile probation officer reinforced the emergent concept of overlapping conduct and emotional issues among adjudicated youth. The school nurse added the perspective of acknowledging early behavioral warning signs of emotional disturbance. The director of foster youth services emphasized the relationship between early childhood trauma and emotional disturbance. Moreover, through comparative analysis and theoretical sampling procedures, practitioners' multiple perspectives of emergent themes contributed to the co-construction of the grounded theory.

Inclusion of multiple perspectives contributed to a "layered" analysis, thus broadening and deepening the scope of the study (Charmaz, 2009). This grounded theory reflects practitioners' diverse and heterogeneous viewpoints of emotional disturbance. For example, emergent themes reflected that practitioners are conceptualizing ED and SM as inter-related dimensions of social, emotional, and behavioral functioning, rather than five discrete characteristics described in the federal definition. Further, this grounded theory demonstrates that practitioners were interpreting ED and SM along fluid behavioral continua, as opposed to two exclusive polarities as indicated by the exclusionary clause, which distinguishes between ED and SM for purposes of special education classification. Taken together, practitioners' multiple perspectives of emergent themes are integrated into the grounded theory that reconstructs the category of emotional disturbance in an alternative and correctional education setting.

Reflexive Role of the Researcher

A constructivist perspective assumes that new knowledge is socially and culturally produced through interactions among participants within a social context (Blumer, 1969; Berger & Luckman, 1966). Taking a constructivist approach means, "The researcher engages in an inquiry process that creates knowledge through interpreted constructions" (Annells, 1996, p. 385). In this study a constructivist approach, which involved the standpoints and interactions of the researcher, translated into activities such as actively engaging with participants during structured interviews, responding reflexively to emergent concepts in the data, and acting upon analytic hunches. For instance, the researcher listened to practitioners' concerns about new student trends, such as substance induced emotional disorders that were complicating the ED identification process, and responded by refining questions to probe more deeply into how they handled such issues in practice. Such reflexive processes allowed the researcher to build rapport, respond to participants' underlying tensions and concerns, and to enter more deeply into their eidetic worlds.

"Constructivist grounded theory aims to position the research relative to the social circumstances impinging on it" (Charmaz, 2009, p. 134). Positioning the researcher directly within the social and cultural context of an alternative education organization, allowed her direct access to practitioners' unique, first-hand experiences determining special education eligibility for students who exhibit complex emotional and behavioral issues and surfaced their unique concerns and tensions within this practice setting. However, constructivist grounded theory goes beyond other qualitative research methodologies, such as ethnography and phenomenology, because through such reflexive and reflective processes, new theory is co-constructed and emerges gradually over time. Charmaz (2009) observed, "By locating participants' meanings and actions in this way, we show the connection between micro and macro levels of analysis, and thus link the subjective and the social" (p. 131). For instance, an emergent theme revealed that practitioners in this alternative education setting were experiencing moral tensions regarding the exclusion of students with social maladjustment from receiving special education services under the classification of ED. The grounded theory also reflects that ethical considerations related to caring—having compassion, establishing harmonious relationships, and focusing on students' best interests—were instrumental in practitioners' eligibility decisions for special education placement. These themes are uniquely woven into the emergent grounded theory that reflects ethical decision making as a core social and psychological process practitioners are using to identify students with emotional disturbance in an alternative and correctional education setting.

Pragmatic problem solving

Bryant (2009) and Charmaz (2009) link the postmodern turn in constructivist grounded theory to the pragmatic roots of the methodology. "Constructivist grounded theory assumes that we produce knowledge by grappling with empirical problems" (Charmaz, 2009, p. 130). The emergent themes revealed practitioners' underlying tensions and concerns about the emotional disturbance identification process as well as how they resolved such issues in a contemporary practice setting. For instance, an emergent theme demonstrated that, in the absence of clear procedural guidelines for resolving complex identification issues, such as co-occurring emotional and behavioral conditions and psychological problems related to trauma and substance abuse, practitioners are engaging in pragmatic problem solving. It was also apparent that practitioners are engaging in collaborative problem-solving with colleagues as a strategy for resolving the increasingly complex issues compounding the identification process. Thus, theory is connected and linked to practice through an analysis of the processes by which practitioners are attempting to resolve practical problems in their everyday world.

Further, pragmatic underpinnings of a constructivist grounded theory approach encouraged the use of inductive and abductive data analysis in the development of the grounded theory. Reichertz (2007) describes abductive analysis as "a cerebral process, an intellectual act, a mental leap, that brings together things which one had never associated with one another: A cognitive logic of discovery" (p. 220). Inductive and abductive analytical processes contributed to the development of emergent themes that went beyond basic descriptions of ED and SM and revealed the underlying social and psychological processes involved in the identification of emotional disturbance in this practice setting, such as taking into account ethical considerations and espousing a socially just perspective.

Limitations of the Study

The application of a constructivist grounded theory approach presents methodological challenges and limitations with respect to (a) researcher bias inherent in a constructivist grounded theory study and (b) limitations on the generalizability of knowledge constructed within a social context. The quality of the reflexive process inherent in a constructivist grounded theory study relies heavily on the researcher's subjective interpretations and value laden perspectives of the data, which can pose limitations on the validity of the emergent grounded theory. Further, the limitations of a constructivist grounded theory approach include the difficulty of conducting research in a setting outside the researcher's area of familiarity and expertise, where an unfamiliar setting may pose restrictions on the researcher's ability to reflexively interact with participants and to anticipate their concerns. Finally, given the multiple variations of grounded theory and the flurry of arguments surrounding the current methodological divide between constructivist and classical grounded theory, a potential limitation may be the reluctance of the novice researcher to embark on such a study.

Implications for Research and Practice

"The content of theorizing cuts to the core of studied life and poses new questions about it" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 135). The emergent grounded theory indicates that practitioners were moving well beyond the confines of the existing ED criteria and reframing the identification process within a contemporary practice setting, raising new questions about the ED identification criteria and procedures. Future research directions suggested by the outcomes of this study include: (a) moving beyond the ED/SM controversy and directing future research toward identification of practices and service delivery models that efficaciously address the needs of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities (Merrill & Walker, 2004); (b) the emergence of new student trends which are complicating the identification process for ED suggest that the existing guidelines are outdated and indicate the need for a new research base to update the ED criteria in contemporary practice; and (c) the findings point to the need to expand this study to a larger group of practitioners representing a wider range of educational settings.

Charmaz (2008a) posits that the critical stance inherent in a postmodern constructivist grounded theory inquiry can advance social policy and contribute to social change by anchoring "agendas for future action, practice, and policy" (p. 210). Because theory and practice are pragmatically linked through a constructivist approach, which emphasizes the utilitarian value of the grounded theory (Annells, 1996; Strübing, 2007), the emergent theory has implications for informing social policy and practice in the fields of alternative and special education. Recommendations for policy and practice stemming from this study include: (a) broadening the ED criteria to address students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs; (b) shifting toward inclusive service delivery practices for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities; (c) developing and implementing collaborative problem-solving identification and intervention models; and (d) adopting ethical guidelines for identifying students with ED.

Moreover, Clarke (2003, 2005) asserts that an epistemological shift toward a more constructivist reframing of grounded theory has the capacity to move the field of qualitative inquiry around the postmodern turn. Thus, an implication is that, rather than focusing on subtleties and differences in approaches, the field may be better served by embracing the possibilities presented by various approaches in grounded theory methodology. Taken together, the various methodological perspectives of grounded theory reflect multiple

systems of beliefs and assumptions, opening "an ongoing array of possibilities" (Clarke, 2005, p. xxiv).

Summary

Morse (2009) stated, "Every application, every time grounded theory is used, it requires adaptation in particular ways as demanded by the research questions, situation, and participants for whom the research is being conducted...Grounded theory is...a particular way of thinking about data" (p. 14). The research questions, the unique social and cultural context of an alternative education setting, and practitioners' diverse viewpoints about identifying emotional disturbance invited a constructivist approach to grounded theory methodology. The emergent grounded theory generated by such an approach reflects practitioners' multiple and diverse perspectives, is co-constructed from practitioners' lived experiences, and is pragmatically linked to practice in an alternative and correctional education setting. The emergent grounded theory holds promise for reconstructing the category of emotional disturbance and for informing educational policy to address the rights and needs of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities.

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