

All We Have Is Each Other: A Grounded Theory Exploration Into the Impact of Relationship Building in a Self-Contained School Setting Following COVID-19

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Abstract

The landscape of public education has felt a severe impact from the COVID-19 global pandemic. As schools and educators move into this new normal, educators and students will have to come together to reverse the damage caused over the past 3 or 4 years. To complete this goal, educators must understand the perception of students regarding building and maintaining relationships, and vice versa. The purpose of my multiple-methods grounded theory study is to explore and explain how emphasizing student-teacher relationships (STR) can support rebuilding school community in self-contained settings following the COVID-19 global pandemic through focusing on the perspectives and perceptions of the stakeholders in the learning environment. I conducted this study in a small self-contained high school during the 2022–2023 school year with nine students identified with special education needs, mainly with emotional and behavioral disabilities (EBD), and ten educator participants. Results for my study are currently in the preliminary stages, however, early analysis shows a consensus from participant interviews that emphasizing STR shows a moderate to high positive impact on student-teacher relationships, student engagement, academic success, social-emotional growth, decrease of teacher burnout, and more positive teacher attitudes about their students and schools. Key contributors to this shift include, but are not limited to, mutual respect, humanness, humor, relatability, support, and

communications as major aspects of the building and maintaining the quality of student-teacher relationships.

Keywords: student-teacher relationships (STR), building relationships, self-contained setting, special education, emotional and behavioral disabilities (EBD), burnout, COVID-19.

For special education students with emotional and behavioral disabilities (EBD), researchers have uncovered that this marginalized group's secondary and post-secondary reality, specifically dropping out or not earning a standard diploma (Hoffman et al., 2015), are some of the worst among all public education students (Garwood, 2022; Garwood et al., 2021; Garwood & Van Loan, 2019; Marlowe et al., 2017; Van Loan & Garwood, 2018). Likewise, the educators responsible for guiding these students have the highest rate of burnout among all teachers across all school settings (Bettini et al., 2020). The relationships forged between these two groups can be significantly impacted by the foundational strategies utilized schoolwide and how they are implemented classroom to classroom. The two main approaches I examined are Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports [Center on PBIS, 2023) and the relationship-driven classroom model (Marlowe, 2011; 2012).

Students with EBD are intelligent, charismatic, gifted, and often misunderstood. Teachers of students with behavioral and emotional barriers are, on average, the least experienced, carry the lowest accepted credentials, and are professionally certified at higher rates through alternative routes compared to their colleagues (Gage et al., 2017; Prather-Jones, 2011; State et al., 2019). When receiving instruction in general education settings, students with EBD are often supported by teachers unprepared to support their needs, frequently resulting in removal from the classroom. Students with EBD are often supported by PBIS (Center on PBIS, 2023) to promote positive behavioral change. However, utilizing this complex multi-tiered hierarchical approach to behavioral support, with a fatal flaw of difficulty in implementation (Tyre

et al. 2018) as designed due to a lack of knowledge and coaching, can potentially hinder educators without the proper training or experience. To make matters worse, since the outbreak of the COVID-19 global pandemic, secondary and post-secondary-aged students have reported a 25% increase in mental health concerns, like depression and anxiety (World Health Organization, 2022).

As reform and consultation became the “it” strategies to address school inadequacies, somewhere along the way, I have found that school reform initiators have forgotten the importance of interpersonal human relationships. When a member of my family or a friend is struggling, I do not use a hard-to-implement strategy to support them. Like in most relationships, I ask how I can help support them, then follow through with basic human functions like communication, humor, respect, and reliability. Simply, this study will consider alternatives to tiered behavioral support structures by examining how focusing on relationships, as the foundational behavioral support strategy, can lead to prosperity in the learning environment.

Literature Review

This literature review presents a synthesis of current research regarding pedagogies of support for students with EBD and their teachers. I examined the state of the field by analyzing the history, rationale, and outcomes of nationally supported tiered behavioral support systems. Alternatively, I explore a relationship-building pedagogical approach as a possible substitute for supporting the needs of students with EBD and their staff moving into a post-COVID-19 environment. Lastly, I review the contributing factors that affect the fidelity and efficacy of implementing formal behavioral support approaches and how school-wide pedagogies must evolve during this unprecedented time in history.

Hayden’s Relationship Driven Classroom Approach

The Torey Hayden relationship driven classroom approach (as cited in Marlowe, 2011; 2012) is the driving force behind the conceptual framework I used for this study. This framework

was created by Dr. Michael Marlowe by using classroom techniques described in Hayden's book series (as cited in Marlowe, 2012). Hayden believed initiating and sustaining relationships is the only way to enact change with students (as cited in Marlowe, 2011). To build relationships, Hayden emphasized commitment, modeling, and communication as the three most important aspects of working with students (as cited in Marlowe, 2011). Hayden believed that misbehavior is a learning opportunity for both students and teachers. For teachers to have that mindset, they will need characteristics like acceptance, affection, flexibility, fairness, commitment, seeing from the other's point of view, joy, enthusiasm, trustworthiness, respectfulness, and tolerance (Marlowe et al., 2017). By considering all these impactful components and aspects of interpersonal relationship characteristics during learning environment observations, and through analyzing the data, I found important and positive impacts on students and their teachers.

Bronfenbrenner and Bowlby

To situate the importance of student-teacher relationships (STR), I used Bronfenbrenner's (1976) ecological systems theory, which posited that the environment where a child grows up is an essential aspect of the development of a child. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory detailed the correlation between child development and the quality of relationship with caretakers within five the layers of the systems model: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. In the microsystem, Bronfenbrenner described that children's teachers are equally important to parents and family in any child's development. Bronfenbrenner (2005) went on to explain, for a child to reach their full potential, they need at least one adult that is an unconditional cheerleader of their development.

Additionally, I chose to pair Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory with Bronfenbrenner's (1976) ecological systems theory because Bowlby described that a child's biological nature needs a nurturing relationship with their caregiver. Understanding the critical importance of the

STR in supporting a student as they move from detachment, due to COVID-19, to connectedness to combat student trauma (Subramaniam & Wuest, 2022), is a critical component of this study. As previously mentioned, parents and teachers are on the same level of importance in the child's microsystem according to Bronfenbrenner's ecological system which means the attachment theory can be applied to the STR.

Disability Interpretive Lens

When designing research tools and interacting with students, I maintained a disability interpretive lens (Mertens, 2003). This theory explained that behaviors manifest a disability and neither the behavior, nor the disability, directly reflect the student as a person. Mertens's (2003) disability interpretive lens is a theoretical framework that emphasized the importance of understanding disabilities as a social and cultural construct, rather than solely as an individual impairment. This lens recognized that disabilities are not solely a medical condition, but are shaped by societal attitudes, norms, and structures. Mertens's approach encourages the examination of how social and cultural factors influence the experiences, identities, and opportunities of individuals with disabilities. By using this interpretive lens, I aimed to promote inclusivity, equity, and social change for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. Additionally, viewing this research through a disability interpretive lens assisted me in mitigating bias and allowed me to dig deeper into content by separating the disability and student.

Conclusions

Simply, there are several evidenced strategies for educators to utilize when supporting students with EBD. The approaches discussed in this literature review are additionally applicable to general education classrooms and other special education settings. Hayden's relationship driven classroom approach (as cited in Marlowe, 2011; 2012), or other relationship-based approaches, should be the foundational cornerstone for all educators across all settings. My review of the literature has shown, in order to properly implement a relationship-based

classroom pedagogy, educators need the following mindsets: understanding their place in Bronfenbrenner's (2005) ecological system, the importance of their roles in a child's life according to Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory, and separating a disability from an individual (Mertens, 2003).

Methodology

In this grounded theory study (see Appendix A), using sequential multiple-methods, that included a student-teacher relationship (STR) inventory, an open-ended questionnaire, a researcher's journal, interviews, observations, and analytic memoing, I explored how and to what extent focusing on relationship-building between teachers and students with EBD helped rebuild community in a self-contained school setting following the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Purpose

The purpose of my multiple-methods grounded theory study is to explore and explain how emphasizing student-teacher relationships (STR) can support rebuilding school community in self-contained settings following the COVID-19 global pandemic through focusing on the perspectives and perceptions of the stakeholders in the learning environment. Upon completion of this study, I intend to create a narrative-based training guide for educators to use as a supplementary resource with the intention of enhancing community in the school environment through increasing student-teacher relationships and decreasing student trauma reactions and educator burnout.

Research Design

In designing this sequential multiple-method grounded theory study (see Appendix A), I chose to use a constructivist paradigm to make sense of the environment being studied. Guba and Lincoln (1989) described constructivism as a research paradigm that does not believe in objective reality. They explained "realities are social constructions of the mind, and that there exist as many such constructions as there are individuals (although clearly many constructions

will be shared)" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 43). I chose a constructivist epistemology because I believe knowledge and answers are built collaboratively between researchers and participants. I believe that individuals are a product of their circumstances, experiences, and interactions with the world. Additionally, I believe community and relationships play a significant role in the construction of how individuals make sense of the world. The combination of these two perspectives makes up the foundation for constructivism; people understand their realities and truths differently. Through this research, I wanted to understand the participants' realities and truths and will bring the participants' words back to them to ensure I have captured them correctly. My emphasis was to retell their story, from their perspective, while analyzing the data for the research question about the effects of building and maintaining STR between students with EBD and the educators in their learning environment.

Participants and Setting

Participants in this study consisted of students and teachers from the school environment where I am currently employed. Taking this perspective is also referred to as the emic position which is the "analysis of cultural phenomena from the perspective of one who participates in the culture being studied" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Initial convenience sampling for this study consisted of recruiting all 27 students and 11 educators who make up the settings' school community. The final participant group consisted of nine students and 10 staff members. Individual characteristics for the students included, but were not limited to, age, gender, medical diagnosis, disability category, academic achievement levels, cognitive performance levels, and both emotional and behavioral regulation functional levels.

Ten educators agreed to participate and this sample comprised one administrator, three lead teachers, three educational technicians, one social-emotional coordinator, and one social worker; all with different certification paths into their current profession. Due to the small number

of participants available and willing to participate, multiple data collection tools were utilized to supplement human participants and reach saturation.

I conducted the study in a small alternative school on the east coast of the United States where the educators work in unison with a population of students identified with one or more learning disabilities, cognitive disabilities, or EBD. Total enrollment ranges from 25 to 40 students at any one time. The student body consists of approximately 80% in-district and 20% out-of-district students. Each student's educational background provided evidence of an inability to adhere to the school's behavioral conduct policy of following classroom and schoolwide behavioral expectations (e.g., attendance, substance abuse, appropriate language, eloping, threatening language and actions, inappropriate language) due to a manifestation of their disability in the lesser restrictive environments. Students who have difficulties conforming to the general education environment oftentimes require support from a more restrictive environment, like this one.

I chose to conduct my study in this familiar environment because I believed the relationships, I had with my students would be a significant benefit for two main reasons. First, I believed the students trusted I had their best interest in mind after years of working together. However, to ensure they knew this, I articulated the sentiment throughout the entire recruitment and participation process. Secondly, as their teacher and special education case manager, I was already conscious of their mental and emotional well-being. Therefore, the questions I asked were carefully constructed to only investigate positive experiences to mitigate instances of emotional labor and triggering. Simply, the relationships I had built with the student participants, through providing them daily support, was an asset in conducting this study. This familiarity was crucial to obtaining the most accurate information possible because I was familiar with their body language and physiological signs which would have signaled to me when the

student, for example, did not understand the question being asked or needed additional context to grasp what they were being asked.

Methods

I selected the following tools, that are widely used in grounded theory research (see Appendix B), to assist in collecting the data needed to reach saturation to properly ground the theory in evidence of what participants are experiencing in this specific learning environment. To complete this task, I used the following: (a) Educator-Student Relationship Survey, (b) Student Free Response Open-Ended Questionnaire (Panorama, 2015b), (c) Educator Free Response Open-Ended Questionnaire, (d) Student Semi-Structured Interview, (e) Educator Semi-Structured Interview, (f) learning environment observations, and (g) post-observation interviews. I chose an explanatory design instead of exploratory because the individual components included in my study have been researched thoroughly; yet, like individual strands of yarn, they have not been crocheted to explain the importance of relationships as we move past the COVID-19 global pandemic.

First, I administered the Educator-Student Relationship Survey with the student participants in order to gain their perspective on the impact of the following categories: (a) respect between students and teachers, (b) students' excitement to engage with their teachers, (c) students' perception on excitement received from their teachers, (d) teachers' concern towards students' emotions, and (e) teachers' interest in the students' life. The purpose of the educator-student relationship survey was to receive initial feedback from the students regarding each of the ten educators in the building. By implementing this educator-student relationship survey, I gained an understanding of each student's perspective on how interactions are supported by each staff member. I used a five question Likert-style survey to gauge student perception on the five categories. During analysis, each staff member received a cumulative score for each individual category to assist in the observation stage of the study.

Second, following the completion of the survey, I administered the Student Free Response Open-Ended Questionnaire, adapted from the Panorama (2015b) classroom student-teacher relationship free response suggestions, based on the categories in the survey. This tool consisted of five open-ended questions to provide students the opportunity to add perspective and insight to the five categories in the Educator-Student Relationship Survey and identify themes to assist in developing questions for semi-structured student interviews. The Panorama (Panorama, 2015a) School Teacher-Student Relationship Survey has been altered by me to be inclusive of all educators as opposed to lead classroom teachers. Next, I asked educator participants five open-ended questions which were analyzed to generate the first round of semi-structured interview questions with all participating educators.

Third, I conducted semi-structured student interviews to gain further insight from students regarding personal qualities of teachers who support them. This interview included questions such as “How does your teacher show concern for your emotional well-being?” followed by, “Can you provide an example of a time a teacher showed concern for your emotional well-being?” I analyzed the student responses to the semi-structured interviews to continue thematic development and lead to question development for semi-structured educator interviews. Next, I conducted educator semi-structured interviews to understand the importance of relationship building skills, their pedagogy, and strategies they rely on to navigate their daily interactions with students. Additionally, I looked to gain understanding on whether the nature of the support was predominantly behavior management, relationship building, or emotional regulation based. I asked questions designed to gain understanding on the nuances of interacting with students, either regulated or dysregulated, and their perception of the impact of understanding this nuance in sustaining positive STR.

Fourth, upon completion of student and educator interviews, I conducted one structured observation of an instructional period and one alternative instructional period for the three

educators who were identified by the students as having the most positive relationships with students, based on student responses in the initial Educator-Student Relationship Survey. I was focused on witnessing interactions between students and teachers to gain a nuanced understanding of how teachers accept their students into the interaction, manage the interaction variables such as tiredness, escalation, or food insufficiency, and how they adjusted their relationship building approach based on those variables. Specifically, I wanted to observe teachers who were using strategies similar to those outlined in Hayden's relationship-building classroom approach, to support student behaviors and emotional well-being during everyday interactions, to help me decipher the impact this approach has on student-teacher relationships.

Following the observations, I conducted interviews to ask the educators to explain the interactions I witnessed and why they utilized the strategies they chose to use in order to gain understanding of how application of the strategies impacted the interaction, and ultimately their relationships. Additionally, I conducted follow-up interviews with students to understand, from their perspective, how the techniques used by the educator in that observed moment supported their emotional, mental, or physical dysregulation.

Summary

In summary, for my grounded theory data collection I used a cyclical model of collecting data, analyzing data, and using the analysis to continue collecting data until themes were created, saturation was reached, and a theory developed that was grounded in the participants' experience. I used the Educator-Student Relationship Survey, student and educator free response open-ended questions, student and educator semi-structured interviews, and learning environment observations as methods to collect the data. Through these tools, I gained insight that cannot always be observed as to how educators build relationships with students, implement behavioral support strategies, and how they chose the correct strategy in real time

based on the variables that included, but were not limited to, a specific student, specific behavior, setting, and audience.

Results

The purpose of my multiple-methods grounded theory study was to explore and explain how emphasizing student-teacher relationships (STR) can support rebuilding school-community in self-contained settings following the COVID-19 global pandemic through focusing on the perspectives and perceptions of the stakeholders in the learning environment. As the purpose of this specific journal publication is to deeply dive into the methodology and research design of this still-in-progress grounded theory study, the following presentation of results describe my experience utilizing the data collection tools and initial analysis based on initial pondering of the raw data. The initial analysis should not be considered finalized results until all steps of the data analysis process are completed during the 2023–2024 school year.

Educator-Student Relationship Survey

The quantitative nature of the Educator-Student Relationship Survey allowed me to gain perspective from student participants regarding five categories identified by Panorama Education (2015a) as essential in gauging student-teacher relationships. Ultimately, I wanted a measurable dataset to identify the three educators in the learning environment with the highest-rated relationships with students from the student perspective. Each educator participant received an average score out of 5 in each of the following categories: respect, concern, teacher's excitement towards the student, interest, and students' excitement towards the teacher (see Table 1). On the Likert-scale survey, the student participants answered one question for each of these categories for each educator. Each category was given a numerical score of 1 through 5 based on the participant's response. Column 1 featured not at all and almost never response options which were given a score of 1. Column 5 was given a numerical score of 5, featuring responses of extremely or almost always.

Table 1*Educator Average Score Per Survey Tool Category*

Educator Participant	Categories				
	Respect	Concern	Teacher excitement toward student	Interest in student needs	Students' excitement toward teacher
1	4.8	4.6	4.6	4.5	4.5
2	4.0	3.7	3.1	3.6	3.3
3	4.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	4.0
4	4.2	3.7	3.5	3.6	3.7
5	4.3	3.3	3.5	3.4	4.2
6	4.7	4.3	4.1	4.3	4.2
7	4.5	4.6	4.6	4.5	4.5
8	4.6	4.0	3.6	4.2	4.0
9	4.3	4.3	4.1	4.1	3.8
10	4.6	4.3	3.7	3.8	3.3

Note. Average score was generated by accumulating responses from all student participants in each of the five categories for each educator. While some people are opposed to averages in a Likert-scale, the results of the interviews verified the results were accurate.

I completed the following process to identify the average score per category. After completing the survey with each student, their responses were collected and organized on Google Sheets. Next, I compiled each student response per category for each educator and calculated the average. For example, one educator scored a 4.8 out of 5 in the respect category, as shown in Table 1. To get 4.8, I found the cumulative score of each student participant's individual score for this specific teacher in this specific category (48) and divided by the total number of student participants (10) to find the average (4.8), as displayed in Table 1. Next, I sorted each of the question category columns in Table 1 from highest to lowest average score to identify the highest three scoring educator participants in each question category.

Based on these sorted rankings, participant 1 received the highest or tied for the highest score in 5 out of 5 categories. Participant 6 received the second or tied for the second highest

score in 5 out of 5 categories. Participant 7 tied for the highest score in 4 out of 5 categories. Based on their placement in the rankings, these are the educators that I completed observations on in and out of the classroom environment. Additionally, the students identified teacher respect towards students, teacher concern for student emotions, needs, and feelings, and teacher level of interest in the student as the top three most effective categories.

Student and Educator Open-Ended Questionnaire

Next, these high school aged student participants were asked four identical questions in sit-down interviews that lasted on average of 12 minutes. During this process, each of the three educators, who received the highest average scores from the students, were highlighted individually by students when asked generic exploratory questions about what educators do, or can do, to build stronger student-teacher relationships, how educators show understanding for the student, one change educators can make to improve relationships with students, and one strategy the student would use to build relationships if they were a teacher. Results from the Student Free Response Open-Ended Questionnaire indicated a need for deeper exploration into respect, utilization of student-teacher check-ins, teacher emotional regulation, and confirmed the three educators identified through the previously explained Educator-Student Relationship Survey analysis process were in fact the educators with the best relationships from the students' perspectives.

Likewise, each educator completed the Educator Free Response Open-Ended Questionnaire and were asked a series of four open-ended questions to explore themes of relationship building from their perspective. During this process, each of the educators were asked what educators can do to build stronger student-teacher relationships, two things students can do to improve relationships with educators, how educators show understanding for the student, and one strategy the educator uses to build relationships with the students. Results

indicate that educators find significant importance in areas like patience, mutual respect, mutual interests, and students viewing educators as people too.

Student and Educator Semi-Structured Interviews

Students and educators individually sat for semi-structured interviews based on the five previously mentioned Educator-Student Relationship Survey categories and aspects of building relationships. Interviews lasted 30–50 minutes depending on the participant. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed the participant and me to dig deeper into categories they were more passionate and insightful about, while ensuring they commented on each category within the structure of the interview. For example, two student participants were less knowledgeable regarding the impact of school-wide positive behavior strategies, which was useful information to consider, yet allowed me to spend more time investigating the impact that transferring into our school had on their perception of their future post-secondary outcomes. While reflecting on initial jottings and ponders, the two most important contributions to the study coming from the participant interviews were: (a) the emergence of components of relationships I have not considered, and (b) in vivo subheading titles, in the participants own words, for when I organize future reporting of the results.

Learning Environment Observations

Conducting observations in the classroom learning environment and learning environments outside of the physical school classroom allowed me to view themes in the moment that began to percolate throughout the questionnaire and interview stages. I observed all three educators in each learning environment setting to gain understanding of how they utilized behavioral management strategies to mitigate or support escalations in the moment, and aspects of relationship building I had not considered, like pivoting. During two observations, students were observed showing signs of escalation (loud voices, unprompted movement throughout the classroom, and disengagement in direct instruction), prompting the classroom

teacher to “pivot” their instruction. In self-contained settings, pivoting often provides an opportunity for students to release some energy or emotions through physical activity (i.e., playing basketball in the schools’ gymnasium) resulting in the students showing a decrease in escalation. Following up on the observation with short fact-finding interviews, the educators and students confirmed that supporting the students’ needs in those moments through the pivot, as opposed to using disciplinary actions from the school-wide PBIS (Center on PBIS, 2023) model, increased the connection between the student and educator while also setting the student up for success for the remainder of the school day.

Summary of Results

Utilizing the relationship survey, open-ended questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and learning environment observations with follow-up interviews in a cyclical approach assisted me in exploring teacher pedagogy in theory and in practice. Gaining deeper insight into the structures used in this school setting supported the explanatory nature of the study and allowed me to make connections between the data that may have not been available without using multiple data collection tools in the research design process. Results show the data collection tools I utilized garnered the type of information I was hoping to receive, did not create emotional labor for the students, did not create power dynamics with students or educators, and increased my understanding of the importance of building and maintaining relationships between special education students with EBD and the educators that support them in a self-contained learning environment following the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Discussion

Special education students with EBD have the worst post-secondary outcomes of all students (Garwood, 2022; Garwood et al., 2021; Garwood & Van Loan, 2019; Marlowe et al., 2017; Van Loan & Garwood, 2018) and their teachers are more likely to reach burnout than any of their colleagues (Bettini et al., 2020). While districts across the country utilize school-wide

positive behavioral interventions and support systems, the results of this study show that a more effective foundational building-block for self-contained learning environments is focusing on relationship-based school-wide and classroom approaches. While educator perspective is important, what makes my research study different and impactful to the field is the emphasis on the perspectives and perceptions of the students. These data collection tools were designed and utilized to draw on student-voice and give students a platform, many for the first time, to be heard regarding what is important to them when building relationships with their teachers. The results of the tools' efficacy and my initial ponderings of the results show that when conducting research on how to best support students, the students should be the primary stakeholder in order for the research to have validity. Finally, repairing relationships was a component of this study, however, results and discussion on this component of STR will not be addressed until the final iterations of my dissertation study.

Limitations

Limitations in this constructivist grounded theory research study include, but are not limited to, positionality in the research setting, participant recruiting, and school year calendar. As a special education teacher in the research setting, I teach social studies to all the students who participated in the study and serve as special education case manager for several of them. To mitigate potential bias, students on my case management list were given the opportunity to have their participation overseen by an alternative educator. Regarding the recruitment of participants, in a small self-contained setting, findings are not generalizable to a broader setting. To mitigate this, I invited every student enrolled in the setting in order to collect data from the widest range of gender, age, race, disability category, location, and socio-economic level possible. Lastly, the time of school year could potentially affect how students and staff view relationships based on burnout, emotional dysregulations, and personal outside-of-school

variables. To mitigate this, I only interviewed or observed participants in moments when they were self-identified as being in a positive and regulated emotional state.

Finally, the potential power dynamics at play could have affected the answers and responses provided by both students and educators. It is impossible to remove power dynamics in hierarchical environments, like a public-school building. To mitigate concerns by students and educators, I obtained assent from students and consent from educators. Students and educators were repeatedly informed in the consent form and prior to each meeting of their option to discontinue participation at any time; participation had no effect on their academic standing for students and employment for educators.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused on the importance of building and maintaining student-teacher relationships in self-contained learning environments from the perspective of students and their teachers. Relationships are the foundational building block to reverse the negative trajectory of post-secondary outcomes for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. The results of this study should be applied to similar settings and student populations. Future research should examine the effectiveness of these strategies in building relationships between students and teachers in all learning environments, including general education setting as students across the institution of public education are feeling the mental health impacts of COVID-19. By digging deeper on this topic, researchers can contribute to the enhancement of school culture and community throughout the entire institution of public education. Additionally, the results from this study could be utilized as strategies for researchers to consider when examining effective methods specific to repairing relationships in the learning environment.

Final Thoughts

As a result of this study and the findings described within, I aspire to offer resources to educators to supplement their current professional development in hopes of providing the best

possible educational services to special education students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. This population of students is often left behind due to archaic and exclusive disciplinary practices by educators and administrators who have been less than successful in managing the student behaviors. Through my work, I hope to offer practical and applicable tools to help speed up the learning process for educators and make generational educational enhancements through sharing the importance of selecting a relationship-based pedagogy as any learning environment's foundational approach.

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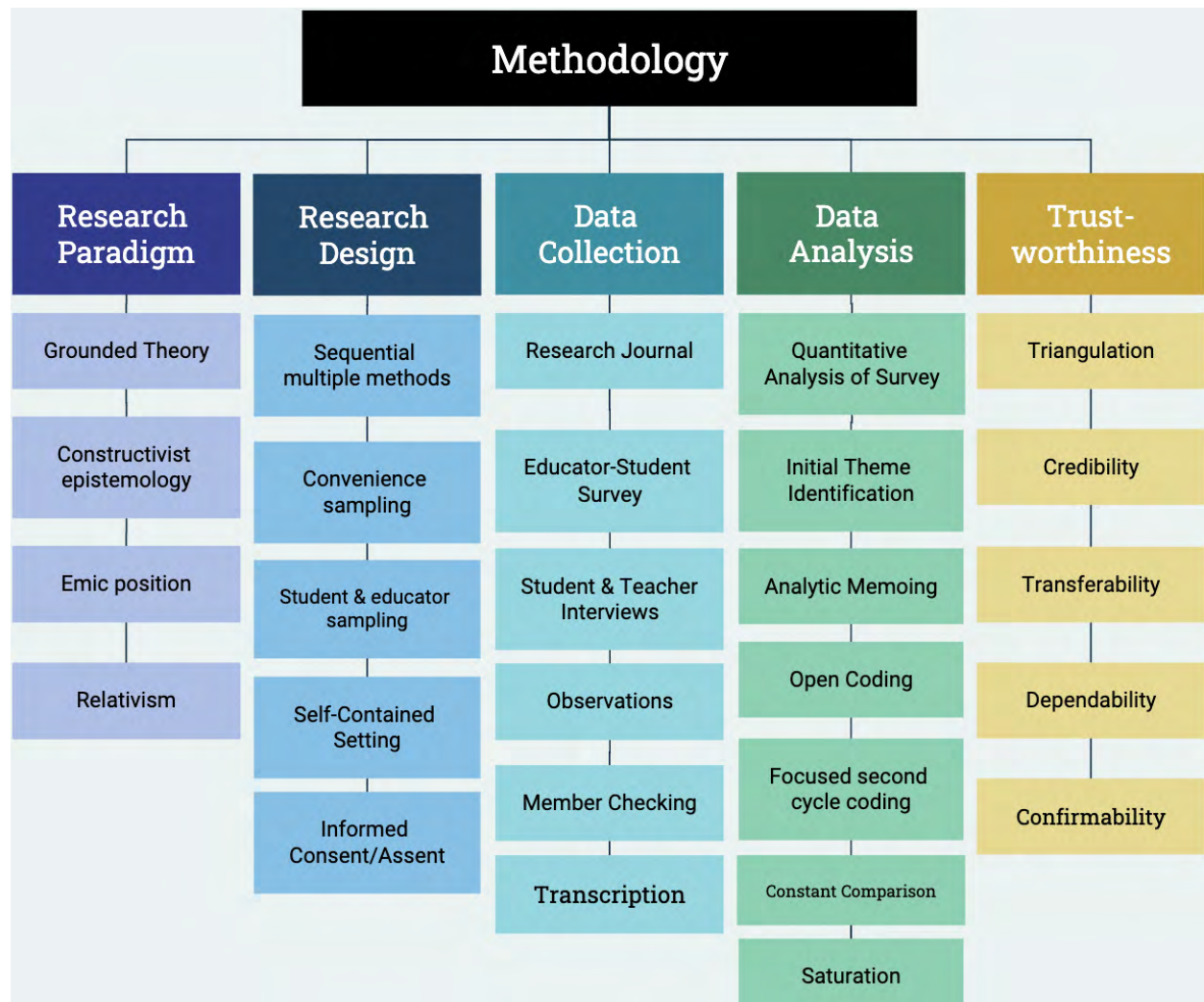
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Appendix A

Methodology

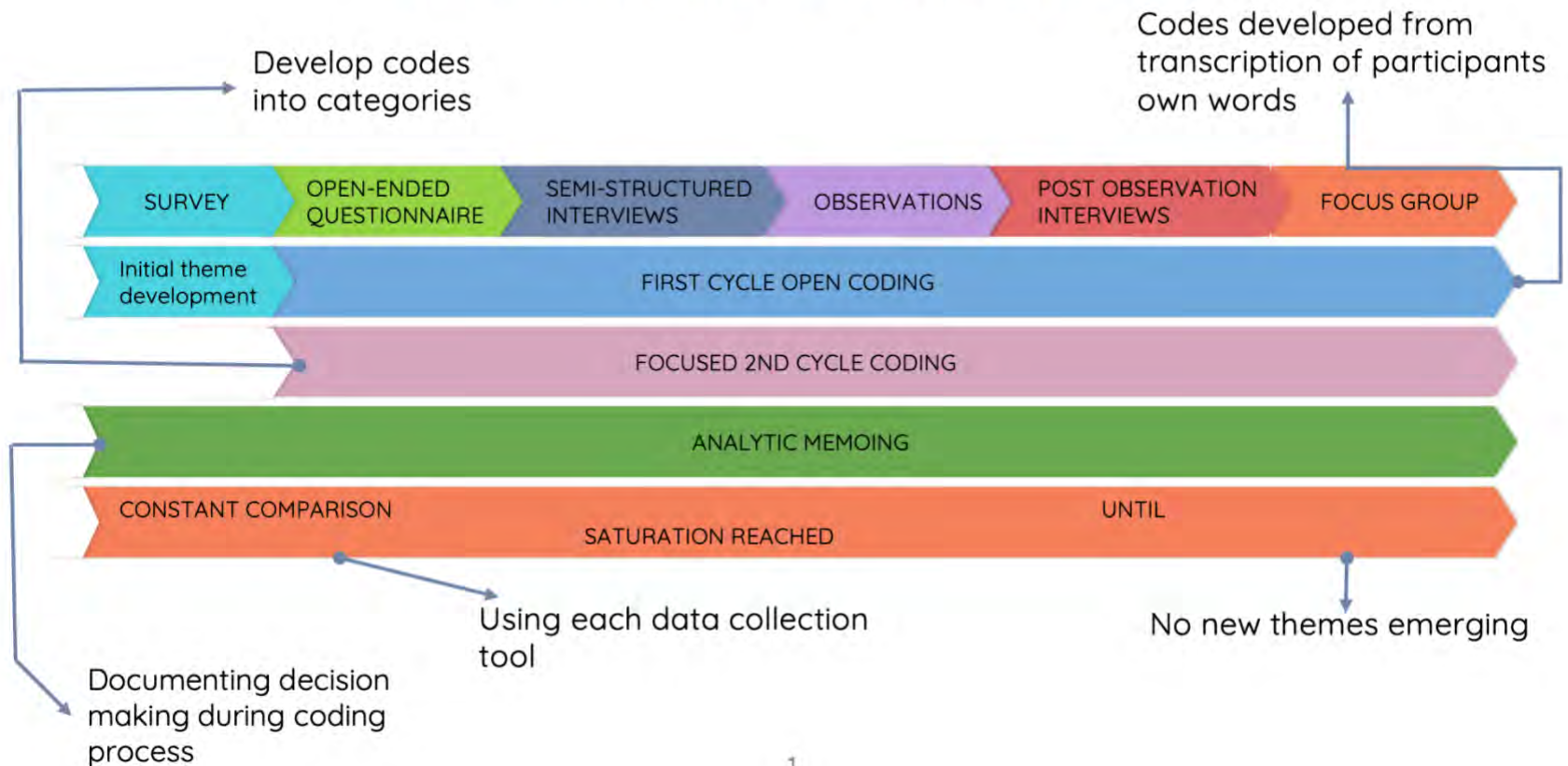


Source: Christopher Sacoco (2023)

Appendix B

Data Analysis Process

DATA ANALYSIS PROCESS



Source: Christopher Sacoco (2023)