

## **Scenario-Based Interview: An Alternative Approach to Interviewing Children?**

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### **Abstract**

Data in qualitative research are mainly derived through observations, document analysis, and interviews. The interview process in qualitative studies, however, can become challenging and complex when a group of children is involved as participants. This paper examines the methodological challenges faced by researchers when interviewing children and makes a case for the use of scenario-based interviews to obtain quality data from children in phenomenographic research. The discussion is based on a phenomenographic study that aimed at exploring and understanding children's experiences of learning in government primary schools in Brunei Darussalam. The processes that led to the development of two scenarios in a series of phenomenographic interviews are discussed in this paper. While there are limitations in the use of scenario-based interviews with children in phenomenographic research, it has the potential to address methodological concerns and, more importantly, to elicit quality data. Finally, the scenario-based interview offers an alternative to the in-depth interviews typically used in phenomenographic research.

**Keywords:** interviewing children, phenomenography, qualitative research

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## **Introduction**

Educational researchers, teachers, and policy-makers have long been interested in investigating children's learning experiences or how they respond to different teaching strategies. Research trends in education have also shifted from getting information about children to getting information directly from them. Subsequently, various qualitative studies in teaching and learning have sought ways to conduct interviews that best support children to share their experiences and understandings as much as possible. This includes phenomenographic studies that are aimed at contributing to knowledge about the qualitatively different ways through which a phenomenon is understood and experienced by a group of people including children and by making evident the different ways, a particular phenomenon is experienced and understood (Marton & Booth, 1997). Researchers such as Dortins (2002) highlighted that pheomenographic data are typically collected through a series of deep and open-ended interviews, which are analysed through an iterative process of reading and rereading transcripts to produce an outcome space. However, based on the researcher's experience, attempting to elicit deep and rich data from children, especially in a context where education is highly-examination-oriented, traditional, and didactic, can be very challenging. This paper puts forth an alternative approach to interviewing children, using a scenario-based interview approach that is based on a phenomenographic study conducted with a group of eight to eleven years old children in Brunei Darussalam (henceforth called Brunei). In doing so, a brief background of Brunei and its education system is now presented to set the context for further discussions on the study.

The study took place in Brunei, a small country located on the northwest coast of Borneo Island in Southeast Asia. The official language of Brunei is Malay, but English is widely spoken in both formal and informal settings. Brunei adopted a bilingual education policy in 1984 and, more recently, a National Education System, codenamed SPN 21, for the 21<sup>st</sup> century was introduced in 2007 to "ensure that students are equipped with the relevant knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes, called for in the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (Brunei Darussalam Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 3). Prior to SPN 21, researchers have described the education system in Brunei as content and examination oriented (Jaidin, 2009; Majeed, Fraser, & Aldridge, 2001). According to Jaidin (2009), the content and examination

oriented system is typical in Asian countries (e.g. Singapore and Hong Kong) wherein academic qualifications are highly valued and emphasized (e.g. Sharpe, 2002; Wong, 2003). In these countries, including Brunei, children are tested regularly with examinations throughout their schooling years (Jaidin, 2009; Yeo & Clarke, 2006). In Brunei, the children's performances in examinations are significant indicators of school success (Jaidin, 2009; Scott & Fisher, 2002). This adds more pressure on teachers to complete a comprehensive syllabus and produce good results in examinations. Accordingly, teachers in Brunei choose to use traditional teaching methods that result in children being mainly passive in class where they rarely ask questions during lessons (Asmah, 2001; Attwood & Bray, 1989; Charleston, 1998; Scott & Fisher, 2002; Zaitun, 1997).

## **The Study**

The main aim of the study was to provide a better understanding of the ways in which children experience learning in government schools in Brunei. The study adopted a phenomenographic approach to research. It was argued that an insight into children's learning experiences as seen through their perspectives might improve our understanding of what aspects of learning are important to them. Involving children as important participants in phenomenographic research is not new. It began as early as 1983 (e.g. Pramling, 1983). In recent years, more phenomenographic studies have focused on highlighting children's views, opinions, and experiences (e.g. Karrby, 1990; Mumtaz, 2002; Rosário et al., 2013).

A group of sixteen upper primary children between the age of eight and eleven years old participated in the study. The study was conducted over a period of three years; the first year was the conceptualizing and preparation period that involved reviewing relevant literature, critical discussion of methodologies, and piloting interview questions with upper primary children in Brunei to explore their thoughts about learning in government schools; the second year comprised refinement of interview questions using the scenario-based approach and data collection; and finally, the third year was the period of data analysis and interpretation of findings.

The study was carried out under the influence and traditions of phenomenographic research that suggests, in order to understand the phenomenon of learning, there is a need to

start with the learners' experiences rather than with the content and outcomes of learning (Kelly, 2000; Pandey & Zimitat, 2005). The study further emphasized The Convention on the Rights of the Child drawn up by the United Nations in 1989, which recognizes children's rights to participate in decisions affecting their lives and communicate their own views. In other words, underpinning the study was the notion that children are the best sources of information about themselves. Other researchers have also adopted such notion as evident in the designs of their studies (e.g. Bearison, 1991; Deatrick & Faux, 1989; Thompson Jr & Gustafson, 1996). In addition, researchers such as Einarsdóttir (2005), Sheridan and Samuelsson (2001), Warming (2005), and Wiltz and Klein (2001) have used diverse methods in gathering data that revealed children are reliable informants and participants in qualitative studies.

Nevertheless, the study had found that the typical deep and open-ended interviews were not helpful in eliciting rich information from children participating in the study. Initial interview questions were pilot tested informally with several primary school children in Brunei. The interview questions consisted of main questions that triggered a tail of further questions in order to achieve a mutual understanding of the theme focusing on the participants' understanding and experiences of learning in government schools in Brunei. The children were reticent in responding to the questions and gave limited information about their learning experiences (Jaidin, 2009). The initial interview questions are listed in Table 1.

As a result, a scenario-based approach to interviewing children was devised for the study. The assumption was that scenario-based interviews might elicit richer descriptions about learning (Jaidin, 2009).

It is important to note that the term "scenario-based interview" was used to describe a form of individually conducted semi-structured interview that utilized the children's own learning experiences as triggers and prompts to elicit richer descriptions about learning. Two scenarios depicting teaching and learning situations were constructed from the children's limited responses in the pilot interview. In this way, both scenarios were drawn from the children's actual learning experiences in government schools in Brunei. In sum, the scenario-based interview comprised scenarios of learning experiences and a list of prompts to find out more about the children's understanding and experiences of learning.

Table 1. *Initial Interview Questions*

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<p><b>I. Introduction:</b></p> <p>Hi, my name is ... I am here to find out about what you think about learning. This session will be audiotaped so that both of us can listen to it again when we finish and for you to decide whether I can use it for my research. So, tell me about your favorite subject.</p> <p>Why do you like the subject?</p> <p>Can you tell me more about ... ?</p>
<hr/> <p><b>II. On the Children's Learning Experience:</b></p> <p>Can you tell me about something that you have learnt well in school?</p> <p>Can you give me examples?</p> <p>What did you mean when you said ... ?</p> <p>What was different about ... ?</p> <p>Can you tell me more about ... ?</p> <p>How about something that you have not learnt well?</p> <p>Why do you think you haven't learnt that well?</p> <p>Can you give me examples?</p> <p>How do you think you can learn that better?</p> <p>What was different about ... ?</p> <p>How about something that you have not learnt well?</p> <p>Why do you think you haven't learnt that well?</p> <p>Can you give me examples?</p> <p>How do you think you can learn that better?</p> <p>What was different about ... ?</p> <p>How do you know that you have learnt something?</p> <p>Can you give me examples?</p> <p>What did you mean by ... ?</p> <p>What is the difference between ... and ... ?</p> <p>So, what do you think about learning?</p> <p>What do you think it means?</p> <p>What makes you say that?</p> <p>Do you enjoy learning?</p> <p>What makes you enjoy it?</p> <p>What makes you not enjoy it?</p> <p>Can you tell me more?</p> <p>Can you give me examples?</p>

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### **The Scenario-Based Interview Approach**

The study used a series of two-phase scenario-based interviews to explore upper primary children's conceptions of learning in government schools in Brunei. Data in Phase 1 of the study were collected using the scenario outlined in Table 2 and Table 3 outlines the second

scenario used in Phase 2.

Table 2. *Scenario (Phase 1)*

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A couple of weeks ago, I was talking to a boy called 'Ahmad' (pseudonym) who is in Primary 4 in Brunei. I thought I would tell you his story about learning.

When I asked him about what subjects he liked at school, he just said, "*none, I don't like any because I just learn all of them*". He told me that in mathematics, he could remember his tables. In science, he wrote down notes, but he was really bored and could not say too much about what he had learnt. When I asked him about geography, he told me that "*the teacher asked us to do some work on what we had learnt that day ... and sometimes the teacher just explained stuff*". He said, "*if the teacher asks us to do some work, I just do it*".

The things he did love were art and computers at school. He said that in art, "*we did whatever we wanted to do ... as long as there's a shape and in computing they sometimes played games*". This boy loved playing computer games like Pin Ball and Kid Pix. He would often race home from school in the afternoon, have something to eat quickly, and then start playing his computer games. He did not do any homework usually because he loved playing games so much. He was so good at learning how to play his Play Station. Whenever he wanted to know how to play one of the new games, he would read the instructions and work the game out by talking to his best friend who lived next door to him. Sometimes, he would reread the instruction manual just to make sure he had worked out how to make the correct moves in the game. He even started reading computing games magazines to find out more about how other games worked and which games were the latest rage.

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Table 3. *Scenario (Phase 2)*

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A couple of weeks ago, I talked to two students who go to a government primary school in Brunei. They are both in Primary 5 and they told me their stories about learning. Let's just call student A 'Ali' (pseudonym) and student B 'Bahar' (pseudonym), okay? Although Ali and Bahar go to the same school, they go to different classes. I would like to talk about Ali's story first ...

When I met Ali, I asked him to tell me about his favorite subject and why he likes the subject. He told me that his favorite subject is science because in science, his teacher always asks them to do a lot of activities in groups such as experimenting with real things like sugar, water, and dissecting fish, drawing, going to the garden, and looking at flowers. He told me that he likes learning through these activities because they do not bore him in class. He also said that he had learned a lot about the different groups of animals because they did a project on that topic. He said the activities helped him to learn the topics in science better.

Meanwhile, Bahar told me a different story about learning. When I asked him to tell me about his favorite subject, he told me that he likes mathematics because he likes doing all the exercises in his mathematics workbook. To him, it is a good practice for the exam. He also likes to listen to his teacher's explanations and watch how his teacher works out examples on the white board carefully so that he can do the exercises later on.

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The scenario-based interview enabled the children to reflect on their own learning experiences and share their thoughts about learning with the researcher who was also the interviewer.

The total duration of each scenario-based interview was between thirty to forty-five minutes. According to Trigwell (2000), such duration is common in phenomenographic research although, in most cases, interviews in phenomenographic research can take longer than forty-five minutes. All of the interviews took place in the children's respective schools. It was more convenient for the children to be interviewed at their schools as their comfort was a priority to the interview process. A familiar location was aimed at providing the participants a relaxed and friendly environment, which was conducive to flowing discussions on their thoughts and ideas about learning.

All interviews began with ice-breaking sessions to establish rapport. The researcher informed the children that the focus of the interview was to find out more about what they think about learning and that the children's experiences are valued as an essential piece of information for the study. Similar to the protocol used in pilot interviews, the researcher started the scenario-based interview by asking the children to talk about their hobbies and the things that they like in general. The aim was to make sure that the children felt comfortable and easy with succeeding questions.

One of the challenges faced by the researcher during the interview was to remain impartial (Adawi, Berglund, Ingerman, & Booth, 2002) and bracket certain aspects about learning in Brunei. This was achieved by continuously and carefully preserving awareness of the phenomenon so that the children's thoughts and experiences of learning were reported as faithfully as possible. Open-ended questions that accompanied each scenario were also used to avoid leading data in a preconceived direction. The questions or prompts were drawn from each scenario to approach the phenomenon in question from a range of perspectives. Each scenario and prompts are now discussed in greater detail.

**Scenario and prompts in phase 1.** The scenario used in Phase 1 depicted Ahmad's (a pseudonym) story about learning. After each warm-up or ice-breaking session, the researcher shared Ahmad's story with the children. Each child in each interview was then

asked to share his or her thoughts about Ahmad's experience of learning. The researcher then posed the following questions:

What sort of learning do you think this boy liked? What sort of learning do you think this boy was good at? Why?

These probes were outlined to help the children reflect on Ahmad's learning experience and elicit detailed descriptions of what they think about Ahmad's preferred way of learning.

Next, the researcher moved on to ask the following questions:

What sort of learning do you like at school? At home? Why? How do you know that you have learned something in ... (referring to something they said they liked)? How do you know that you have learned something in ... (referring to something they said they disliked)?

These questions were designed to shift the children's focus on their own learning experiences at school and at home. They were encouraged to share incidences or examples of learning experiences that were meaningful to them and give reasons why these incidences were meaningful.

To conclude each interview session in Phase 1, the researcher posed the following questions:

How do your teachers teach you? What do they do to help you learn? What do you think learning is at school? At home?

These concluding probes were outlined to help the children describe experiences that they defined as learning at school and at home.

**Scenario and prompts in phase 2.** The scenario used in Phase 2 depicted Ali and Bahar's (pseudonyms) stories about learning. In Phase 2 of the study, the researcher read Ali and Bahar's stories about learning to each child in the interview and then proceeded with asking them the following question: "what do you think of the two boys?" This question was planned for a general discussion about the two different learning experiences as shared by Ali and Bahar. The researcher then asked the following questions:

What sort of learning do you think Ali likes? Why do you think he likes that sort of learning? How about Bahar? What sort of learning does Bahar like? Why do you think he likes that sort of

learning?

The aim of asking these questions was to elicit the children's thoughts about the different learning experiences. Then the researcher moved on to asking the following probes that were aimed at shifting the children's focus on their own learning experiences. It was anticipated that an earlier discussion about two distinct learning experiences would help the children to open up more about their own experiences of learning.

### **Critical Issues in Interviewing Children**

One of the critical issues highlighted in the study is the limited interaction between the researcher (the interviewer) and the children (the interviewee). Einarsdóttir (2007) noted that when children are involved in qualitative studies, the close and often long-term relationship between the participants and the researcher can become complicated. It is argued that "some children may not be accustomed to adults who are interested in their views and who ask for their opinion" (Einarsdóttir, 2007, p. 204). This is especially true in the case of the study where the children were not used to being given the opportunity to share views and opinion about their experiences of learning. This may be due, in part, to the prevalent teacher-centred approaches to teaching and learning as well as the prescriptive curriculum that have existed in Brunei's educational system since the 1980s (e.g. Attwood & Bray, 1989; Burns & Upex, 2002; Rashid & Jaidin, 2014). In traditional and teacher-centered educational settings, children are often expected to concentrate and focus on what is being taught. In these settings, children are seldom given the opportunity to ask meaningful questions and share their thoughts about a topic. A focus on teacher-centred approaches to teaching and learning may have been influenced by the sociocultural practices in Brunei. Asmah (2001) noted that the structural hierarchy is considered to have a strong influence on the child-rearing patterns and social relations in Brunei. Respect for the elders is important and children at a very young age are taught to obey their parents as parents are their well-wishers (Asmah, 2001). Such expectation extends to the teacher-student relationship where children learn to be passive with little capacity in managing their own affairs and in learning (Benware & Delci, 1984; Gijbels, Segers, & Struyf, 2008).

## Conclusions

This paper suggests the use of a Scenario-Based Interview (SBI) as an alternative approach to interviewing children. The SBI approach applies Marton (1996)'s suggestion to create a shared experience for the participants to reflect on, during the interview, and arrive at a "shared definition" (Bowden, 1996, p. 58) of how learning is experienced by a group of upper primary children in government schools in Brunei. Indeed, the SBI approach had made the interview more interesting as there was "a discursive practice in which people were trying to achieve something" (Säljö, 1997, p. 197). To the researcher's knowledge at the time of the study, this was the first of its kind to use a scenario approach in phenomenographic interviews with children.

Typically, audio-recorded interviews are used in phenomenographic research "to explore the lived experiences of interviewees and their conceptual meanings of the phenomenon of interest" (Sin, 2010, p. 313). Although data collection in phenomenographic research can be done through other methods, the one-on-one semi-structured interview or qualitative interviewing is often used because it enables a way of finding out what others feel and think about their worlds. This paper adds another variation to how semi-structured interviews in phenomenographic studies can be conducted to collect data, that is, using scenarios and open-ended questions as probes.

Nevertheless, in using "talk" as the main data, phenomenographers such as Säljö (1997) highlighted several concerns. For example, phenomenographic analysis depends highly on excerpts of utterances shared by interviewees "with varying motives" (Säljö, 1997, p. 177) and the analysis is usually performed without access to other aspects of the phenomenon of interest. Säljö (1997) argued that the compiled utterances might not reflect the interviewee's actual way of experiencing the phenomenon. It could possibly be just an attempt to fulfill one's obligation at answering questions posed by the researcher. As such, Säljö (1997) advised researchers not to just simply accept an interview conversation "as indicating a way of experiencing rather than as, for instance, a way of talking" (p. 178). In order to address these issues, Reed (2006) highlighted the significance of "context" when implementing a phenomenographic research. In the early phenomenographic studies, participants were placed in a meaningful context wherein there was something "meaningful

for the interviewer and interviewee to explore together” (Marton, 1996, p. 171). Reed (2006) notes that the key to phenomenographic interview is to enable a person to reflect over their experience of the phenomenon. Bowden (1996) also argues that an important element of a phenomenographic interview is that the researcher and the interviewee need to establish a “shared definition” of the phenomenon (p. 58).

The main advantage of using the SBI approach was that the children were able to relate to the characters introduced in the scenarios. For instance, in the second phase of data collection, some of the children were noticeably more open in sharing their own learning experiences in school with the researcher. The SBI approach provided an opportunity for the children to comment on the characters’ learning experiences. The children also appeared more relaxed and comfortable commenting on the characters’ experiences. Barker (1990) reminded researchers that children in general are familiar with being questioned about misdeeds but not for other purposes and this often leads to suspicion and uncooperativeness. For these reasons, it can be argued that the SBI approach, to some extent, provided reassurance to the children that they were not being questioned for their personal misdeeds.

Researchers have adopted a variety of interviewing techniques with children. For example, getting the children engaged in doing something during the interview (Cappello, 2005). Props such as toys, papers and crayons, sand, clays, pictures or photographs, and puppets have been used to assist the children to express as much as they could about the phenomenon of interest (Brooker, 2001; Doverberg & Samuelsson, 2003). This paper presents a discussion on how scenarios, along with open-ended probes, can be used to help children describe their own experiences in greater detail. The SBI approach, therefore, has the potential to provide a meaningful context (Reed, 2006) for both interviewer and interviewee to explore and engage in insightful conversations about the phenomenon of interest.

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