ONLINE GROUP INTERVIEWS WITH CHILDREN: BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT: *This article aims to contribute to the literature on the value of group interviews in capturing children's thoughts and experiences. These observations are based on online group interviews with Grade 3 students (aged 8–9) conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews explored how the children perceived humor in translated poems. Using a semi-structured format, the method proved both appropriate and effective for children, providing sufficient structure to guide discussion while allowing flexibility for them to respond in their own ways. More broadly, the study offers methodological insights and practical recommendations, based on reflective experience, for optimizing the use of group interviews as a qualitative research method with children. It also underscores the importance of transcription as an integral part of data generation and analysis, a step that is often overlooked. In particular, the study highlights the complexities involved in transcribing group interview data, including the decision of whether to work in the original language or in the language of reporting. By foregrounding this issue, the paper highlights an important area for further examination in qualitative research.*
KEYWORDS: *group interviews, transcription, children, Filipino, qualitative research*

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INTRODUCTION

Children are increasingly seen as credible witnesses to their own experiences. Rather than being limited by developing linguistic skills, unreliable recall, susceptibility to suggestion, or confusion between fantasy and reality (Moston 1990; Dent 1991; Lamb et al. 1994; Warren–McGough 1996; Schetky 1997, cited in Morison et al. 2000), their reliability often depends on how they are interviewed. Indeed, research has shown that children can provide meaningful responses when questions are phrased in a way that is contextually appropriate and understandable to them (Amato–Ochiltree 1987; Robinson 1987; Faux et al. 1988; Oakley 1994, cited in Morison et al. 2000).

This paper focuses on group interviewing as a tool for exploring children's perspectives and experiences. It aims to demonstrate how group interviews with children, particularly in an online format, can serve as a robust qualitative research method. While group interviews effectively elicit children's perspectives, further empirical research is needed to systematically examine how specific processes and variables influence their outcomes (Heary–Hennessy 2002). To address this gap, this study asks: How effective are online group interviews in engaging children and eliciting their perspectives? Some of the questions that it seeks to answer include the following:

1. What strategies can ensure the depth and quality of children's responses in an online setting?
2. What techniques can ensure children's focus and participation in an online group interview?
3. What are some challenges that arise when conducting online group interviews with children, and how can these be addressed?

Beyond offering insights into online group interviews with children, this paper also presents practical considerations related to transcription. These are grounded in the recognition that transcription – and the decisions that shape it – is fundamental to rigorous qualitative research using methods such as group interviews. Despite its importance, transcription remains underexamined in the literature, particularly in studies conducted via videoconferencing platforms, as in the research on which this paper is based. Thus, in addition to the questions mentioned above, this paper investigates the following central question regarding transcription: What practical considerations shape the transcription of online group interviews with children? Specifically, it addresses two sub-questions:

1. What environmental and technical factors impact transcription accuracy, and how can they be managed?

2. How do manual and automated/AI-assisted transcription methods compare in terms of accuracy and efficiency?

This paper aims to contribute to the literature by examining the strengths and limitations of conducting online group interviews with children, as well as the nuances of transcribing these interactions, two areas that appear relatively underexplored. The interviews are designed as poetry reading sessions involving eight- and nine-year-old Filipino children. Beyond identifying practical challenges, the paper offers recommendations to address them. These insights are particularly relevant in the post-pandemic landscape, where online data collection has become increasingly widespread.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Group interviews are particularly useful for understanding children's insights and experiences. They have several advantages over individual interviews. They offer an environment where children can be with their peers, which makes it natural for them to construct meanings collectively through interaction (Eder–Fingerson 2001, cited in Guthrie 2020). With the right research questions, they help uncover shared opinions, encourage deeper responses by allowing participants to challenge each other, can be used to confirm research findings from other methods, and improve the reliability of children's answers (Lewis 1992).

But there are also possible disadvantages of group interviews. El Refaie (2011) mentions the artificiality that can arise when interviewing participants as a group, as their responses could be influenced by social pressure to conform or hide prejudices. She argues that group sessions can produce different findings than individual interviews, as children may behave differently in a group. Reviewing research studies with adolescents, Daley (2013) also found social desirability effects in focus groups, such as participants conforming to others or hesitating to disagree. However, no such inclination was observed in this study, a point that will be discussed in greater detail later.

The study reported here used semi-structured group interviews in the form of poetry reading sessions. Widely used in qualitative research, the semi-structured interview is a data collection method that involves asking questions based on a pre-established thematic framework while allowing flexibility for exploration within that structure. O'Reilly and Dogra define it as "a qualitative technique that requires the researcher to have a schedule of questions, but implements

them flexibly, allowing the participant to guide the direction of the interview." (O'Reilly and Dogra 2017: 38) The design of the poetry reading sessions is discussed in detail under Methodology.

It is important to reiterate that the method employed in this study was more broadly a group interview, not a focus group discussion. As a form of group interviewing (Gibbs 1997), a focus group relies more on participant interaction as the source of data (Morgan 1997), while a group interview may not emphasize such interaction. Bolin et al. (2023) note that while the ideal focus group encourages interaction among participants, their sessions often fell somewhere between this model and one where participants primarily engaged with the interviewer. In this study, this latter interaction pattern aligns more closely with a group interview format, which is also how the poetry reading sessions turned out. While interaction among participants is also present in a group interview, Brown and Edmunds (2011) explain that the researcher's primary role in a group interview is to ask questions, listen, and document individual responses. In contrast, a focus group aims to capture not only individual responses but also collective or group-level insights that emerge through interaction among participants. In this study, however, the data were generated primarily through interactions between the interviewer and the participants rather than among the participants themselves.

Semi-structured interviews are an effective approach for engaging children as they offer the flexibility to explore unexpected topics and ideas that may arise during the conversation while still providing enough structure to guide the children in the discussion. Reviewing 19 methodological articles across multiple disciplines, Do Carmo et al. (2024) identified "*inherent* challenges" (italics in the original) in using traditional semi-structured interviews with children. In response, they proposed a set of guidelines that emphasize a "flexible and laissez-faire approach" and offered a list of alternative methods to semi-structured interviews for elementary-aged children. This study seeks to make a similar contribution by offering recommendations derived from reflective experience.

What distinguishes this study is the format of its group interviews. The shift to online modes of research gained urgency with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30 January 2020. This global crisis compelled researchers to rapidly adopt digital methodologies to sustain their work. Yet despite the relevance of online group interviews during the pandemic, this area remains underexplored, as most studies involving online interviews with children during the COVID-19 pandemic have focused on the effects of lockdowns on their daily lives. For example, using online semi-structured interviews, Larivière-Bastien et al. (2022) examined how the pandemic has affected children's social life and friendships.

This does not mean that online group interviews have not been closely looked at in the literature. Drawing on pre-pandemic experience, Willemsen et al. (2022) developed practical tips and guidelines for conducting what they term "online focus group interviews." Similarly, Bolin et al. (2023) reflected on their experiences of transitioning to virtual focus groups during the global pandemic. Though conducted at different times, both studies, for instance, suggest limiting online focus groups to a maximum of five participants.

Compared with focus groups, online group interviews, broadly speaking, remain underexplored in the literature, underscoring the need for closer examination. Several studies have also compared qualitative methods, mostly focus groups, conducted virtually and in face-to-face settings. Research evidence suggests that online focus groups can yield data comparable to those conducted in person and may even offer advantages, such as facilitating more open discussions of sensitive topics (Woodyatt et al. 2016). In terms of content, Guest et al. (2020) found no significant differences in the thematic content between online and in-person qualitative data collection. However, key differences also emerge. For instance, Dos Santos Marques et al. (2021) note that, unlike the typical six to eight participants in in-person focus groups, the ideal size for online ones is smaller, at three to four participants. Likewise, online focus groups require advance preparation, including participant training (e.g., "Zoom etiquette") and clear instructions about joining the session, whereas in-person focus groups generally involve minimal preparation, with guidelines reviewed at the start of the discussion.

More importantly, while prior studies have enhanced the understanding of online qualitative methods, a critical gap persists – children have rarely been considered participants, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic when digital engagement became essential. This omission is significant, as children's perspectives and experiences in virtual settings may differ markedly from those of adults. By foregrounding children's participation, this study addresses this gap and contributes to a more inclusive understanding of online qualitative methodologies.

While researchers may generate rich qualitative data, the robustness of the analysis ultimately depends on how accurately and carefully that data is transcribed. Thus, it is important to examine transcription as part of the research process. Transcription must be explicitly addressed within qualitative methodology because it shares commonalities with group interviews. Transcription, like interviewing itself, is an interpretive process. Decisions about whether to transcribe filled pauses verbatim (such as "um"), capture nonverbal cues (like facial expressions and gestures), or translate spoken responses require subjective choices by the researcher. These choices directly

determine how participants are portrayed and how knowledge is constructed within the research dataset. This interpretive feature parallels the decision-making process during a group interview, where the researcher continuously chooses which follow-up questions to ask, how to phrase probing questions, and which participant contributions to prioritize. In both stages, the researcher actively shapes the scope and interpretation of the data.

Because online group interviews rely on internet-based technologies, transcription is shaped by both the quality of the tools that are used and their inherent limitations. For example, Anthony et al. (2025) identify restricted access to nonverbal cues as a drawback of online interviewing: interviewers typically see only participants' faces and, at most, their upper bodies, leaving gestures and lower-body movements outside the frame. This constrains what can be captured in transcripts. In addition, video quality may affect how facial expressions and other nonverbal communication, such as eye contact, are interpreted, even though these can constitute important data. Together, these factors shape what is ultimately transcribed.

McMullin (2023) notes that while data collection and analysis are well-explored in qualitative research, transcription as a key part of the research process has received comparatively little scholarly attention. She argues that this gap is especially relevant today, given how new technologies have introduced innovative ways of transcribing interviews. The shift in how research is conducted, such as the widespread use of videoconferencing during the COVID-19 pandemic, calls for a critical examination of the role and significance of transcription in contemporary research practices. She adds that the fact that more than half of the articles she surveyed used interviews as a research method but failed to mention the transcription process raises concerns about transparency in qualitative research. Saldanha and O'Brien (2013, citing Bucholtz 2000) further emphasize that the transcription process should not be underestimated, as it already introduces a layer of interpretation to participants' language. They also note that the complexity and richness of verbal data generated in interviews or focus groups often prompt analysis at a very early stage, particularly in small-scale studies where the interviewer or moderator is also responsible for transcription, as in this study.

One issue with transcription is whether to transcribe in the participants' language or the language of reporting. Alzyood et al. (2020), drawing on Brooke et al. (2019), Mariani et al. (2016), and Chen and Boore (2010), note that several studies emphasize the importance of analyzing data in participants' native language to preserve meaning and context, and avoid losses in translation. However, citing Selman et al. (2017) and Mariani et al. (2016), they also observe that other studies translate all data into English to enable analysis by the full

research team. These considerations shaped the decision-making process for this research.

The extent of transcription depends on the purpose of the study and the volume of data available (Hepburn–Bolden 2017). In conversation analytic research, simple transcripts based on standard orthography are insufficient, as they may overlook important features of interaction. Hepburn and Bolden (2017) also point out that transcription involves varying levels of detail in capturing elements from audio or video data, and suggest that, at the outset, a standard orthographic or verbatim transcript may be sufficient for familiarization with the data. In producing such transcripts, interviewers are advised not to "tidy up" the grammar by rearranging or adding words that were not originally spoken. Because the interviewer is directly involved in data collection, they are best positioned to judge what is meaningful in the responses and determine which aspects require detailed transcription. This is why transcription is often considered a form of translation (Slembrouck 2007; ten Have 2007, cited in Davidson 2009).

Although modern technology offers new approaches to transcription, such as built-in AI-based tools that automatically transcribe online group interviews, this study relied on manual transcription, and the rationale for this choice is discussed. It is hoped that this paper can serve as a guide for researchers weighing the decision between automated and manual transcription of online interviews.

METHODOLOGY

This paper draws on a larger study that examined how Filipino children respond to humor in translated children's literature. It sought to capture children's perspectives on humorous poems translated from English into Filipino – whether they found them funny and, if so, which elements they considered humorous. The study also explored the extent to which Filipino children could relate to these poems, originally written by foreign authors, after they were translated into Filipino. While both English and Filipino are official languages in the Philippines, the children reported higher proficiency in English, which makes the reception of texts in Filipino of particular interest.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on the research methodology, particularly because the children who were the target participants were directly affected by restrictive measures aimed at controlling the virus's spread. When COVID-19 arrived in the Philippines, the national government implemented

various lockdowns, closed schools, and prohibited children from leaving their homes, even for exercise or recreational activities. As a result, learning from home – once an adult-centric practice using web conferencing platforms – became the primary mode of education for many schoolchildren, particularly in Metro Manila.

These emergency measures significantly altered the course of the research, shifting the data collection process from an in-person format to an online format. By the time the data collection took place, the children had already been attending real-time virtual classes for over a year. They had adapted to the online learning environment and were comfortable navigating the technology, making remote participation in the discussion a natural extension of their daily activities. The shift to online means of gathering data, therefore, had an unexpectedly positive impact on the study: the ability to conduct remote interviews facilitated participation and data collection under challenging circumstances.

Nine online group interviews, organized as poetry reading sessions, were held with Grade 3 students aged eight and nine from a school in Metro Manila, Philippines. In the ideal setup, eight poetry reading sessions were planned. However, a ninth was added to accommodate a participant who missed her assigned session. Most sessions comprised three to four students; however, one group included only two participants after a third was reassigned due to scheduling conflicts. All of the sessions were conducted as single, one-time meetings. They took place in 2021, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, and were held via Zoom, the video conferencing platform the children use for school. They were held after school at 2:00 PM, when the children had already eaten and had time to rest. Similarly, Visagie et al. (2017) conducted focus group interviews in the afternoon to avoid interfering with the children's curricular activities.

A total of 202 Grade 3 pupils were initially invited to participate in the poetry reading sessions. Despite the support of school officials and section advisers, the initial target of 40 participants across the eight planned poetry reading sessions was not met. The class advisers attributed the low turnout to competing research invitations, the demands of remote learning on families, particularly those with working or frontline parents, and the broader impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, including health concerns, financial constraints, and shifting family priorities.

Although fewer pupils participated in the study, turnout was still sufficient to form small groups. Research suggests that the ideal group size for children aged ten and younger is typically four to six participants, as this range fosters effective discussion and engagement during activities (Mareschal–Delaney 2019). This also highlights a key difference between youth and adult focus groups, where the

ideal size for adults is typically six to eight participants, with a maximum of ten (Krueger 2002; Eliot 2005). Clark (2011) cautions against overrecruiting in focus groups with children – a practice common in adult focus groups – since children are more likely to attend once they have committed. In this study, only one of the 27 children who signed up for the poetry reading sessions did not attend, resulting in a final sample of 26 participants, evenly split between 13 boys and 13 girls. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the recommended size for online focus groups is three to four participants (Dos Santos Marques et al. 2021).

All sessions were conducted and recorded on Zoom with the children logging in using their school accounts. Although they did not change their screen names for pseudonymization, their names were retained during the sessions to facilitate better connection and trust, as recommended by experts such as Russell (2014). Calling participants by their names is important because, unlike in a face-to-face setup, the online setting does not allow the interviewer to rely on gaze or physical orientation to indicate who is being addressed. To ensure privacy, however, codes (C1, C2, C3 …) were used in the transcripts instead of their actual names.

During the poetry reading sessions, participants viewed MP4 videos of the poems, ranging in length from 1:42 to 1:58 minutes. While the goal was to complete each session within 45 minutes, the actual interview times varied from 36 to 54 minutes. Research suggests that group discussions with children under the age of ten should generally not exceed 45 minutes (Vaughn et al. 1998, cited in Heary–Hennessy 2002). However, discussions with children aged eight to twelve can extend to 60–90 minutes without compromising engagement (Heary–Hennessy 2002; Kennedy et al. 2001). For context, a typical Grade 3 class at the participants' school lasts 50 minutes.

The questions given to the participants were intentionally a mix of open-ended, closed-ended, and multiple-choice (poll) questions. Although closed-ended questions were easier for the children to answer, they were not relied on exclusively. Research by Ponizovsky-Bergelson et al. (2019) analyzed interviews with three-to-six-year-old children and found that open-ended questions elicited the richest data while closed-ended questions tended to result in fewer narrative responses. This insight influenced the balance of question types, ensuring that the interviews encouraged storytelling and deeper reflection.

No health and safety protocols were required as the group interviews were conducted via Zoom. The following statement was included in the invitation sent to the parents of the Grade 3 pupils invited to participate in the group interviews: "Risks and benefits: There are no risks to your child's safety. Since the session will be held on Zoom, your child can join in the comfort and safety of your home under your supervision."

The study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities at Leiden University, with which the author was affiliated at the time. The children were clearly informed during recruitment about the purpose of the research, how the findings would be used, and their right to decline participation at any stage. Parental or guardian consent, both to be interviewed and to be video-recorded, was required for children to take part in the study. The children's privacy was further protected by restricting access to the video recordings to the research team and anonymizing all participants in the transcripts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Ensuring quality and depth of responses

Fostering independent responses in group interviews

As previously noted by El Refaie (2011), one limitation of group interviews is their potential to feel "artificial," as participants may feel pressured to align with others' views or provide socially desirable responses. This can be reflected in statements that echo earlier answers. For example, C1 uttered "Similar to what C2 said" in response to one question. This may reflect conformity insofar as the child may have been reluctant to depart from perceived expectations for a response while himself struggling to come up with one, or instead defaulted to an answer deemed acceptable by the interviewer. But conformity is not only observable in verbal responses. Even silence can signal conformity in some situations involving children, as a child may defer to a dominant participant or mirror the group's overall behavior when children do not talk often. The children's tendency during the poetry reading sessions to wait to be called on before speaking may also signal conformity, likely rooted in classroom norms where speaking typically follows acknowledgement by the teacher, and deviation from these rules may be discouraged.

However, findings from the poetry reading sessions suggest a more nuanced dynamic. When prompted, children frequently offered responses that differed from those of their peers, indicating the presence of independent perspectives. Consistent with Porcellato et al. (2002), who interpret a wide range of responses in children's focus groups as evidence against over-conformity, this study likewise treats response diversity as indicative of non-conformity. Indeed, some

children described the poems discussed during the poetry reading sessions as funny, while others said otherwise, illustrating variation in interpretation rather than alignment with a dominant view. Overall, these patterns suggest that group interviews are conducive to the expression of non-conforming perspectives among children.

Taken together, these findings highlight the complexity of interpreting children's responses in group interviews, where behaviors may be influenced by different factors, including social dynamics (e.g., classroom-type set-up), individual traits (e.g., hesitance to initiate), and perceived expectations (e.g., expectation to give a response). Signs of conformity in children's group interviews remain underexplored in the literature; thus, this study points to an important area for further investigation.

Facilitating active engagement

Building a safe and supportive environment for open expression

Adler et al. (2019) emphasize how focus groups can help create a safe peer environment for children, fostering a space where children feel comfortable sharing their perspectives. They also note that focus groups can mitigate some of the power imbalances typically present in one-on-one interviews between adults and children. However, as Adler et al. rightly point out, only some of these power dynamics can be addressed in a group setting (*ibid*.). Even if power were distributed in a setup where children were free to express their views and experiences, culture and the school setting would still affect the adult-child relationship. In this study, some of the children referred to the interviewer as "Teacher," which indicates how they perceived her role in the activity and her "legitimate authority" over them.

During the interviews, the interviewer made a conscious effort to wait for participants to volunteer their responses. Nonetheless, few participants answered without being prompted, particularly to closed-ended questions. Most of the children patiently waited their turn to be called upon, which, as mentioned earlier, may have been influenced by the structured format of their usual classroom setting. This waiting behavior could also be culturally informed, as Filipino children are taught to show respect by speaking only when directly addressed by an adult. That the dynamics of group interviews with children may vary across cultural contexts points to a significant area for future research.

Despite this tendency to wait to be called upon, it was emphasized that participants could answer at any point during the group interview without

needing to raise their hands. However, asking the children one by one had advantages. It helped keep the group interview organized and ensured that all children participated equally, preventing the conversation from being dominated by a few more vocal or active individuals. This approach also encouraged each child to reflect and contribute, as every participant was allowed to answer each question. Furthermore, this method was particularly beneficial for quieter or more reserved children, allowing them the space to share their thoughts in a less pressured environment.

One drawback of this method is that it can make responses feel less natural or spontaneous. Another potential disadvantage is the pressure that children may feel to respond, especially if they see their peers answering before them. To mitigate this, the interviewer was careful to avoid any coercion. For example, if a child was unsure of an answer and either said "I don't know" or remained silent, the interviewer gently encouraged participation by offering a few possible answers or suggestions to help spark ideas. If the child still could not provide an answer, the interviewer accepted their response without judgment and smoothly moved on with the discussion. Moreover, the interviewer limited the use of probing questions, typically restricting them to the initial responses to one or two questions to avoid making the children feel interrogated or challenged. Here is an example:

Interviewer (I): *Which do you like more – reading poems or reading stories?*

C14: *Reading stories.*

I: *Why do you like stories more?*

C14: *I don't know.*

I: *You just like stories better. You said earlier that you're busy, so you don't read poems. Do you feel that reading poems takes work?*

C14: *Yes.*

I: *Why does it take work?*

C14: *I don't know.*

I: *Okay, you don't know.*

Establishing a relaxed environment to foster openness and trust

Equally important to the success of the group interviews was the creation of a relaxed and comfortable environment, which the interviewer worked to establish as best as possible. The children were enthusiastic about discussing their favorite books, authors, and poems, often volunteering their thoughts without prompt. They felt comfortable enough to correct the interviewer when inaccuracies arose. For example, when the interviewer interpreted C4's response

as indicating a dislike of poetry, the child quickly clarified: "I just don't read poetry. It's not that I don't like it. I just don't read it."

The children were also remarkably open in sharing personal information, even details that could have been seen as potentially embarrassing, such as admitting to faking illness to avoid going to school. This level of openness may reflect the trust they had in the interviewer. Many children even spontaneously elaborated on their answers to closed-ended questions, providing richer insights into their thoughts. Even the more reserved, soft-spoken participants displayed confidence in sharing their responses when asked.

While the primary interaction occurred between the interviewer and the participants, as expected from a group interview, there were also instances of participant-to-participant interaction, which may indicate that the children felt comfortable in the setting. For example, children would supplement suggestions or acknowledge each other's presence with comments like, "For C2, it's obviously going to be language," or "I will just let C21 speak." These moments of peer interaction enriched the interviews and made them livelier. There were also instances of collaboration – some children enjoyed building on one another's ideas when creating alternative endings to the poems. For example, C9 suggested that the twist at the end of one poem could be imagined as a movie scene, with the director calling "Cut!" C6 then added: "Then a real crocodile comes in and eats the actor," prompting laughter from the rest of the group.

Summarizing and confirming responses to validate participant contributions

Ennis and Chen (2012) recommend that in semi-structured interviews, the interviewer briefly summarize a participant's initial response to demonstrate understanding, then ask a probing question if further details are needed. The interviewer must also be skilled at managing group dynamics and asking questions simultaneously (Merton et al. 1956, cited in Fontana–Frey 2000). In this study, the interviewer not only repeated or summarized participants' responses but also sought confirmation of the accuracy of the summary. To do so, the interviewer used questions like "Is that right?" "Is that what you mean?" or "Did I hear that correctly?" Asking for confirmation proved particularly useful in the virtual setting, where issues such as poor audio clarity – due to microphone or headphone problems, connection difficulties, or background noise in the participants' homes – could hinder the interviewer's ability to fully understand the responses. Furthermore, confirmatory questions helped foster a

sense of validation for the participants. By actively seeking confirmation that their responses had been accurately understood, the interviewer communicated to the children that their ideas were not only heard but also valued. This added an element of respect and attentiveness, ensuring the participants felt their contributions were important and thoughtfully considered.

Consistent with the nature of semi-structured interviews, although the questions were prepared in advance, the interviewer allowed for a degree of flexibility during the sessions, particularly in the order of the questions, to ensure the conversation flowed naturally. Some questions were also rephrased when necessary. For example, terms such as "connect with" or "see yourself" were used in place of "relate" in the final two questions, as the original phrasing appeared to be daunting for some participants and resulted in limited responses. This adjustment was made to help the children feel more comfortable and encourage a more meaningful exchange. The role of interviewers is particularly crucial in groups as they are responsible for keeping participants focused and guiding the discussion. This task is more challenging than in individual interviews as the interviewer must manage multiple participants, ensure everyone has a chance to speak, and handle group dynamics to keep the discussion focused and productive. Krueger (1994) emphasizes that effectively conducting interviews – through open-ended questioning, the use of pauses and probes, and the ability to transition appropriately between topics – requires a level of skill and expertise that untrained interviewers often do not possess. Interviewing children requires particular care and consideration. If not handled properly, the gap between the interviewer – who may not share the same social world as the children – and the participants can become even more pronounced.

One technique that appeared to help maintain focus and flow in the interview was the reiteration of questions as the interviewer moved from one participant to another. This not only added to the conversational quality of the discussion but also helped ease the burden on the children, who generally have shorter attention spans than adults. In fact, a few children even requested that the question be repeated while they were in the middle of answering it. Repeating questions ensured that participants stayed engaged and helped them focus on the discussion.

In addition, reiterating questions provided an opportunity to refine or clarify them if needed. If a question seemed confusing or unclear to one participant, the interviewer could rephrase it using simpler language or offer a brief explanation, ensuring that all participants understood the question before responding. This approach helped maintain clarity and improved the quality of the responses. Here is an example:

I: *C12, what do you think? Do the poems seem foreign?*
C12: *No, because the translation was done well, and like what C11 said, the Filipino words that were used were deep.*
I: *The Filipino words are deep. C10, what do you think?*
C10: *What does the question mean? What is it like for a foreigner?*
I: *When you read the poem, do you feel that the poem from which it was taken was not written by a Filipino? Do you feel that?*
C10: *No.*
I: *Why not?*
C10: *No, because of the translation. Because part of the second poem, Filipino kids would also do [write it like that].*

OVERCOMING ENVIRONMENTAL AND TECHNICAL CHALLENGES IN ONLINE GROUP INTERVIEWS

Attending the discussion from the comfort of their own homes likely helped some children feel more at ease, but it also had its drawbacks. For instance, some participants became distracted, leaving the session to grab a snack or move to another room. Others who did not have a private space to themselves spoke to family members or friends who were present in the household. Despite these distractions, the majority of participants were able to stay engaged, which the interviewer found impressive.

There are some drawbacks to conducting group interviews virtually, particularly when technical issues arise. Poor internet connections not only disrupted children's participation but also disrupted the overall flow of the discussion. In addition to causing delays between the video and audio or freezing of the video, low bandwidth or unstable connectivity led some participants to turn off their cameras or log out of the web-conferencing platform and rejoin the session multiple times during the discussion, as in the case of C13. As a result, certain questions had to be repeated, and the recording of the poems was replayed for those who missed them, which consumed additional time. These technical glitches, while sometimes unavoidable, created challenges in maintaining the smooth, efficient flow of the conversation.

Evaluating the benefits of online group interviews

Despite the challenges, the benefits of conducting the group interviews virtually far outweighed the drawbacks.

First, the spontaneity typically experienced in face-to-face interactions was maintained. Children could still respond and react quickly to one another, preserving the conversation's fluidity. Second, the virtual format provided significant convenience for the participants. For example, one pupil joined the session while traveling in a car, and another participant, who had difficulty speaking due to a mouth disorder, still contributed by using the chat feature of the web conferencing platform.

In addition, the virtual setting encouraged some children to use the chat box instead of speaking aloud, allowing them to respond to questions or react to others without interrupting the flow of conversation. This helped prevent participants from talking over each other, ensuring that the audio recording was clearer and more coherent. To ensure that the entire group heard the chat responses, the interviewer read aloud any written comments or answers to the group, ensuring full participation. For example, C10's comment in the chat box about having thought of a codename, though not related to the question that had been asked, was read aloud, not only to support accurate transcription but also to ensure that the child felt heard and that her idea was valued. In one instance, C1 was asked to repeat out loud what he had written in the chat box – that most of the poems he knew were "dark and brooding" – both to ensure accurate transcription and to acknowledge his contribution to the discussion.

Moreover, the online format made it easier to record both video and audio than with physical meetings, which would have required more equipment and logistical coordination. However, extra care was needed to manage the recording settings, as the configuration of the videoconferencing software could change unexpectedly. For instance, in the second-round sessions, the recording defaulted to speaker view (where only the person speaking is shown), rather than gallery view (where all participants are visible at once) because the software had updated its settings and the interviewer was unaware of this change. As a result, many of the participants' physiological responses, such as laughter and smiles, were not captured on video. This experience highlighted the importance of conducting a test run before each session to ensure all technical aspects are properly set up.

ENHANCING DATA COLLECTION AND TRANSCRIPTION THROUGH GROUP INTERVIEWS

Group interviews are often valued for revealing a more nuanced understanding of a topic than what may emerge from individual interviews. The main advantage of group interviews for transcription is that they efficiently collect data with

lower time and cost demands (Williamson 2018). Therefore, group interviews offer an efficient approach to collecting diverse, in-depth data, providing a broad range of insights without substantially increasing the time or cost of the research process, including transcription.

Capturing non-verbal and inaudible cues during online group interviews

It is worth mentioning that during the interviews, the interviewer was careful to verbalize inaudible verbal responses (i.e., "nos," "yesses," and "okays" uttered while the microphone was muted and any comments written in the chat box) and non-verbal language (e.g., nodding or shaking of the head or laughing while the microphone was turned off) in anticipation of the transcription process. Otherwise, these utterances and gestures, which can be substantial, would have been lost from the data because they cannot be captured in audio transcription (Ritchie–Lewis eds. 2003). This was particularly important in the second round of group interviews when only the speaker was visible in the video recording.

Using naturalized and manual transcription to improve data quality

Since the verbal data in this study will not be analyzed linguistically, naturalized transcription was chosen for practicality. However, audible pauses such as "ums," as well as non-verbal cues such as smiles and laughter, were still included, as they contribute to the responses explored in this study. Furthermore, in line with the recommendations of Hepburn and Bolden (2017), unpolished grammar was preserved in the transcription. For example, C16 commented that the child in Silverstein's poem would be given "a lot of medicines a lot of times a day," to which C17 added, "100 vegetable," and C15 exclaimed, "Then the medicine a thousand, a thousand medicine a day. In all." (When the interviewer asked how the character could possibly take all that, C17 laughed.)

The group interviews were transcribed manually by the interviewer from video recordings. Although the video conferencing application offered an automated transcription feature in the second round of interviews, the interviewer chose to transcribe the sessions manually. The advantages of manual transcription – particularly for accurately decoding important information and capturing non-verbal or inaudible cues – outweighed the convenience of using automated transcription, which still requires thorough checking for accuracy.

For example, in one instance, one of the child participants hesitated in his initial response, stretching the word "yes" and ending with a question mark to indicate uncertainty. A transcription program would not have captured this nuanced expression of hesitation. It is important to include such details in the transcription because the interviewer noticed the hesitation and, upon prompting, the participant quickly offered a more decisive response. This interaction suggests that the interviewer's presence influenced the participant's answer, highlighting the importance of human judgment in the transcription process.

Another key advantage of having the interviewer transcribe the group interviews is that it enables a deeper familiarity with the data, which in turn informs decisions about subsequent coding (Saldanha–O'Brien 2013). Some categories emerge during the transcription process (Davidson 2009). For instance, a few participants in this study mentioned pictures, but the responses were not numerically significant to merit a separate category. In the end, the related responses were clustered with other codes.

Needless to say, a significant drawback of manually transcribing virtual group interviews, aside from the slow speed, is that the audio is not always easy to understand, for instance, when two participants speak at the same time or when they talk very fast and their pronunciation is not clear. In some of these instances, the interviewer asked participants to repeat their responses to improve the quality of verbal data for transcription. For instance, in the transcription of the last discussion in the second round, there were ten responses in which a few words or whole sentences were hard to comprehend. Five of the ten responses were repeated by the participants upon the request of the interviewer, leaving only five responses partially or entirely unclear.

In general, although web conferencing platforms (e.g., Zoom) now provide convenient tools for transcribing online group interviews, manual transcription is recommended when the interviewer also serves as the transcriber. Transcription is a complex process that warrants dedicated study in its own right; however, in the context of evaluating online data collection for qualitative research, it cannot be treated as separate from it. This study underscores the importance of recognizing transcription as an integral component of data collection rather than a merely technical or subsequent step.

CONCLUSIONS

This study highlights the effectiveness of online group interviews for gaining insights into children's experiences and perspectives. It demonstrates that group interviews can elicit meaningful responses when the questions are framed within a context that children can understand, particularly schoolchildren aged eight and nine. Moreover, group interviews are most effective when the interviewer creates an environment in which children feel comfortable and confident, something that is harder to achieve with more rigid methods like questionnaires. The study revealed that group interviews mirror a familiar classroom setting, helping Filipino children feel more at ease – especially given cultural norms that emphasize speaking only when directly addressed as a sign of respect.

The semi-structured format proved particularly effective for interviewing children by providing enough structure to help them formulate responses. At times, probing required translating original Filipino questions into English, as the participants primarily spoke English and experienced difficulty with Filipino. This highlights the importance of remaining sensitive to child participants' specific needs.

While online group interviews, as demonstrated in this study, present certain challenges, primarily technical ones, they also offer distinct advantages, particularly during events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when schools were closed and children were required to stay at home. The strengths and weaknesses of online group interviews with children have not received sufficient attention in the literature, highlighting the need for further investigation.

A key challenge in reviewing previous studies is the limited body of work on group interviews with children, particularly as a broader method distinct from focus groups. Much of the literature focuses on focus groups – treated here as a specific type of group interview – or on in-depth individual interviews. As a result, it remains difficult to draw clear comparisons between how group interviews (as opposed to focus group ones) are conducted with children versus adults. Such a gap indicates a promising direction for further research, particularly in the context of online group interviews.

This study highlights how data collection and transcription share a key trait: both depend heavily on researcher interpretation and judgment. During interviews, a researcher's background shapes which questions get asked, how follow-ups are handled, and what details matter most. The same logic applies to transcribing. Deciding how to write down spoken words influences how participants are portrayed. For instance, when some participants struggled to express themselves in Filipino, questions and responses were translated into English. Even with bilingual education, the children's language abilities

varied. Choosing to capture these code-switching moments in the transcripts directly affects how their background – such as their middle-class context – is represented in the final data.

The study also highlights the advantages of group interviews for transcription, particularly regarding cost and time efficiency when gathering data from multiple respondents. In small-scale research where the interviewer and transcriber are the same person, as in this study, transcription remains deeply integrated with data collection. This setup enables the researcher to make immediate, informed decisions about which data to prioritize during transcription. Conversely, larger-scale studies often rely on external transcribers, presenting distinct advantages and challenges that warrant further exploration.

One challenge in using transcription for data analysis is deciding whether to work in the participants' original language or in the language in which the findings will ultimately be reported. This issue was particularly relevant in this study due to the multicultural composition of the research team. While the responses were initially transcribed in a mix of Filipino and English, they were subsequently translated entirely into English for analysis and reporting.

Although most studies on group interviews with children focus on benefits to researchers, little literature addresses how such interviews can also benefit children as participants. The success of these interviews should not be judged solely by the quantity or quality of responses collected, but also by the participants' overall experience. In this study, the group interviews were conducted as poetry reading sessions, designed not only to gather data but also to foster an appreciation for poetry and to create an enjoyable and interactive learning environment. Overall, the sessions helped awaken or strengthen children's interest in poetry and discussion of it. For example, a week after attending a session, one participant emailed the researcher to apologize for missing the next "meeting," assuring that it would not happen again. Interestingly, this was the same pupil who had previously said he did not particularly enjoy poetry. In another instance, two participants in the same group openly expressed disappointment upon learning that the group interview was a one-time event. Some parents even shared positive feedback, noting that their children enjoyed the activity and wished for more sessions. These participant-centered perspectives are often overlooked in research on group interviews with children, yet they provide valuable insight into the broader impact of such methods. It is hoped that this study will inspire other researchers to explore this frequently neglected aspect of qualitative research.

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