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THEME PREFERENCES AND WRITING MOTIVATION IN ELEMENTARY NARRATIVES

ABSTRACT

This study investigates elementary school students' perceptions of narrative writing activities, with particular attention to their thematic preferences and factors influencing writing motivation. The study involved 30 fifth-grade students and five classroom teachers from ten elementary schools in Karawang Regency, West Java, Indonesia, selected through purposive sampling. A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed to explore students' lived experiences and subjective meanings related to narrative writing. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and analysis of students' written narratives and instructional artifacts. The findings indicate that students generally perceive narrative writing as an enjoyable and meaningful activity that promotes imagination, self-expression, and emotional engagement. Fantasy, friendship, and family emerged as the most preferred themes, often reflecting both personal experiences and imaginative aspirations. Despite positive attitudes, students experienced difficulties in organizing ideas, constructing coherent plots, and maintaining narrative flow. Motivation was strongly influenced by teacher support, instructional flexibility, and opportunities for topic selection. Students also demonstrated varied emotional responses, ranging from excitement and pride to anxiety associated with unfamiliar topics or writing difficulties. Beyond its substantive findings, this study contributes methodologically to qualitative research involving young learners by demonstrating how phenomenological inquiry can be adapted for children aged 10–11 through child-sensitive interviewing strategies and multimodal interpretation of experience. The study further illustrates the value of systematically integrating interviews, classroom observations, and student-generated written artifacts to enhance analytical rigor and credibility. These findings provide pedagogical insights while offering a transferable methodological framework for conducting qualitative research with children in educational settings.

Keywords
Narrative writing; Student motivation; Young learners; Phenomenological inquiry; Qualitative methodology.

1. Introduction

Story writing is an important language-learning activity that fosters students' literacy, imagination, and self-expression (Arşovan, 2023). In elementary education, writing skills develop not only through grammar instruction but also through narrative exploration that reflects students' experiences and interests (Fauzi et al., 2021). In Indonesia, story writing is an established component of language instruction under both the Merdeka Curriculum and the earlier 2013 Curriculum (Ariestina & Haryanto, 2022; Apriyanto et al., 2025). Beyond developing written language skills, narrative writing can support imagination, narrative thinking, and self-expression (Ramírez et al., 2024). However, its implementation in elementary classrooms continues to present challenges. Teachers may rely on conventional, unidirectional assignments with limited creative scaffolding or engaging instructional media, resulting in writing being experienced as a task to complete rather than an exploratory and enjoyable activity (Sibuea et al., 2023).

These challenges are particularly evident among elementary school students, who may struggle to initiate writing, organize ideas into coherent plots, and maintain narrative flow (Listyani, 2019). Some students experience anxiety associated with limited ideas or low confidence in their writing abilities (Kemalsyah et al., 2022). Such difficulties may be intensified when instructional strategies are not sufficiently aligned with children's cognitive and experiential characteristics, including the use of thematic, experience-based, and visually supported approaches (Licardo et al., 2023). Recent studies therefore emphasize adaptive and engaging writing instruction that incorporates students' personal experiences, creative media, and teacher facilitation of student-generated ideas (Meletiou-Mavrotheris et al, 2020; Taira et al., 2024; Aulia et al., 2024).

Although previous research has examined narrative writing through achievement outcomes, instructional interventions, and writing performance, less attention has been given to how young learners themselves experience and interpret narrative-writing activities. More importantly, investigating such experiences raises methodological challenges because children aged 10–11 have developing cognitive, linguistic, and reflective capacities. Their meanings may not be fully accessible through conventional adult-oriented interviewing, and their experiences may be expressed not only through verbal accounts but also through emotions, classroom behaviours, interactions, and learner-generated artifacts. Consequently, relying on a single qualitative data source may provide only a partial representation of children's lived experiences. Qualitative inquiry with young learners therefore requires methodological procedures that are developmentally sensitive while maintaining interpretive depth, analytical credibility, and transparency.

Phenomenological inquiry is particularly relevant to this methodological challenge because it enables researchers to examine how participants construct meaning from lived experiences within authentic educational contexts (Katsantonis & McLellan, 2023; Lim, 2025). However, applying phenomenology with elementary school children requires adaptation rather than direct transfer of procedures developed primarily for adult participants.

Developmentally appropriate language, concrete and familiar prompts, flexible conversational probing, and complementary forms of experiential evidence may be necessary to elicit meaningful accounts while minimizing the risk of constraining children's responses. Furthermore, integrating interviews, classroom observations, and students' written artifacts can provide a more multidimensional account of experience and reduce dependence on self-reported data. These methodological considerations are particularly important because children's verbal accounts may sometimes complement, diverge from, or leave unexplained what is observable in classroom interactions and written work.

Against this background, the present study aims not only to explore elementary school students' perceptions, thematic preferences, and motivational experiences in narrative writing, but principally to demonstrate and critically reflect on an adapted interpretive phenomenological methodology for researching children's lived experiences in educational settings. Specifically, the study examines how developmentally sensitive interviewing, contextual classroom observation, and systematic integration of student-generated written artifacts can be combined within a coherent phenomenological framework; how triangulated and reflexive interpretation can strengthen analytical credibility; and what methodological challenges, adaptations, and transferable lessons emerge when qualitative phenomenological inquiry is conducted with young learners. The empirical findings consequently function as methodological evidence through which the feasibility, strengths, limitations, and transferability of this adapted qualitative approach are critically illustrated.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design and Methodology Orientation

This study employed a qualitative interpretive phenomenological design to investigate elementary school students' lived experiences, thematic preferences, perceptions, and motivational experiences in narrative-writing activities. The phenomenological approach was selected to understand how children interpreted and constructed meaning from narrative writing within authentic classroom contexts rather than to measure writing performance through predetermined indicators. The study was grounded in an interpretivist perspective, viewing educational experiences as socially and individually constructed through interactions among students, teachers, and learning environments (Arias de Sanchez & Li, 2025).

Because the participants were children aged 10–11 years, the phenomenological methodology was adapted to their developmental characteristics. The adaptation included simplified interview language, concrete and familiar prompts, conversational questioning, and the systematic incorporation of student-generated written products as experiential evidence. These adaptations were intended to facilitate children's expression while retaining the interpretive orientation of phenomenological inquiry (Simon, 2020 ; Ubaidillah et al., 2024).

When conducting research with children, special attention should be paid to the requirements for age-appropriate, relevant, and respectful communication, as well as the responsibilities of adults to ensure transparency, safety, and social inclusiveness(Angelöw & Psouni, 2025).

2.2 Participants and Sampling

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to obtain variation in educational experiences and writing abilities. The study involved 30 fifth-grade students and five classroom teachers from ten elementary schools in Karawang Regency, West Java, Indonesia, representing both urban and semi-rural contexts. Student selection considered active participation in narrative-writing activities, ability to communicate experiences verbally, representation of high-, medium-, and low-achievement levels, willingness to participate, and parental consent. Teachers were selected based on their direct involvement in narrative-writing instruction, at least three years of teaching experience, and familiarity with classroom literacy practices.

2.3 Ethical Procedures

Because the study involved minors, comprehensive ethical procedures were implemented. Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Buana Perjuangan University Karawang (Approval No. 076/WR-IV/VII/2025) before data collection. Permission was also obtained from participating schools and teachers. Written informed consent was secured from parents or legal guardians, while students provided age-appropriate verbal assent. The assent process used simplified explanations and child-friendly language. Students were informed that participation was voluntary, that they could refuse to answer questions or discontinue an interview, and that withdrawal would have no academic consequences (Cotrim et al., 2021).

To minimize potential power imbalances between researchers and children, interviews were conducted in supportive and familiar school environments using conversational approaches appropriate to participants' developmental characteristics. Researchers continuously monitored students' comfort and emotional responses during data collection. Confidentiality was maintained through pseudonyms, removal of identifying information, and secure storage of recordings, transcripts, field notes, and written artefacts.

2.4 Data Collection

Data were collected over approximately eight weeks through methodological triangulation involving three complementary sources: semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and document analysis. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 30 students and five teachers.

Student interviews employed simplified wording, concrete examples, and flexible follow-up questions rather than abstract terminology.

Each student participated in one interview lasting approximately 15–20 minutes, whereas teacher interviews lasted 30–45 minutes. Interviews were conducted in quiet school settings, audio-recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim.

All interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, the participants' first language. Initial coding, memo writing, and thematic analysis were undertaken using the original Indonesian transcripts to preserve participants' meanings and linguistic nuances. Quotations selected for publication were translated into English only after the final themes had been established.

Non-participant observations were conducted during classroom narrative-writing sessions. Twenty observation sessions were carried out across the ten schools, approximately two per school, with each session lasting 60–90 minutes. Observations focused on teacher instructional practices, student engagement, verbal interactions, peer collaboration, observable emotional responses, and behavioural indicators of difficulty or enthusiasm. Field notes distinguished descriptive observations from reflective notes containing emerging interpretations.

Document analysis focused on 60 student narrative texts and relevant instructional artefacts, including writing rubrics, teacher feedback notes, and classroom writing guidelines. Narrative texts were selected to represent different achievement levels, thematic preferences, and writing experiences and to provide sufficient material for interpretation. The three data sources were treated as interconnected evidence rather than isolated datasets, enabling comparison between students' reported experiences, observed classroom behaviours, and meanings represented in their written products.

2.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an iterative thematic analysis process informed by phenomenological principles. First, researchers repeatedly read interview transcripts, observation notes, and written artefacts and recorded initial impressions through analytic memoing. Second, meaningful data segments were manually open-coded using Microsoft Word and Excel. Third, a structured codebook was developed and progressively refined. It contained each code's definition, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and representative examples. Fourth, related codes were clustered into broader conceptual categories and candidate themes through constant comparison across interviews, observations, written narratives, and participant groups. Fifth, themes were interpreted in relation to students' narrative-writing experiences and the study's phenomenological orientation, with representative quotations and narrative excerpts selected to substantiate interpretations. The iterative process allowed overlapping categories — particularly emotional and motivational codes — to be consolidated when researchers determined that they represented a broader conceptual dimension.

Inter-coder interpretive agreement was established through consensus rather than statistical reliability coefficients. Two researchers independently coded approximately 25% of the corpus before comparing their coding outputs.

Disagreements concerned overlapping code definitions, boundaries between conceptual categories, and interpretation of children's emotional expressions. The researchers discussed these discrepancies iteratively, clarified coding rules, and revised the codebook before applying the refined framework to the remaining corpus. Consensus was considered achieved when researchers reached a consistent interpretation of the relevant coded segments and no major discrepancies remained. This procedure enhanced analytical transparency and interpretive consistency while recognizing that qualitative coding involves negotiated interpretation rather than purely mechanical agreement (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

Three researchers contributed to the analytical process. Researcher 1 coordinated fieldwork, organized the datasets, and prepared transcripts; Researcher 2 independently coded interview and observation data and reviewed thematic consistency; and Researcher 3 analysed written artefacts, reviewed theme development, and participated in peer debriefing. Reflexive memoing and iterative discussion were maintained throughout analysis to make researchers' interpretive decisions visible.

The analysis was conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, the language used during interviews and classroom interactions. Quotations were translated into English only after the themes had been established. The selected quotations were translated by the researcher responsible for the qualitative analysis and subsequently checked through an internal research-team review against the original Bahasa Indonesia transcripts. The review examined semantic correspondence, contextual meaning, and the intended meaning of participants' statements. Any discrepancies or ambiguities were resolved by referring back to the original wording before the quotation was finalized for presentation in English. Thus, translation was treated as a reporting stage following analysis rather than as part of the coding process.

2.6 Trustworthiness, Member Checking and Applicability

Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was supported through methodological triangulation, whereby semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and student written narratives were examined in relation to one another. The use of complementary sources enabled the researchers to compare students' stated perceptions with observed classroom behaviours and the characteristics of their written products. This approach was particularly important given that children may express their experiences differently through verbal accounts, behaviours, and artefacts. The researchers also maintained reflexive attention to differences across participants and classroom contexts during data interpretation.

Rather than claiming prolonged engagement, the study therefore emphasizes triangulation and reflexive interpretation as the principal strategies used to support credibility.

Dependability was supported through systematic documentation of methodological decisions, coding procedures, codebook development, and analytic processes, while confirmability was supported through audit trails, reflexive memoing, and collaborative interpretation (Johnson et al., 2020).

Particular attention was given to member checking because the participants were children aged 10–11 years**.** Conventional member checking based on verbatim transcript review was considered inappropriate because lengthy transcripts and abstract analytic language could exceed some participants' reading and comprehension abilities. Instead, member checking was adapted developmentally through simplified summaries and conversational feedback sessions. Following preliminary analysis, key interpretations of students' responses were reformulated into age-appropriate language and presented individually or in small groups. Students were invited to respond to concrete prompts such as, "Is this what you meant?", "Does this describe your experience?", and "Would you like to add or change anything?" Concrete examples from their writing experiences were used to facilitate comprehension and encourage clarification. Teacher participants additionally reviewed broader thematic interpretations to assess contextual accuracy (Alons et al., 2026; Ahmed et al., 2025).

This adapted member-checking procedure was not treated as a simple confirmation of a single "correct" interpretation. Rather, participant feedback was used to identify possible misunderstandings, clarify contextual meanings, and refine interpretations while preserving the researchers' interpretive responsibility. This approach was particularly important for research with children, for whom communication modes and comprehension capacities require methodological sensitivity (Angelöw & Psouni, 2025). By adapting validation procedures to participants' developmental characteristics while retaining systematic documentation, the study provides a practical procedure that may be transferable to other qualitative educational studies involving young learners.

3. Results

3.1 Students' Interest in Narrative Writing

Students generally described narrative writing as enjoyable, imaginative, and personally meaningful. Interview accounts indicated that storytelling allowed students to construct imagined situations and express themselves creatively. For example, S5 (SDN Pasirawi 1) explained, "I like writing stories because it feels like watching a movie in my head." Similarly, S1 (SDN Kiara 3) stated, "I feel happy when I can imagine my own story. Like I'm the main character." These accounts indicate that students associated narrative writing with imagination, enjoyment, and a sense of personal involvement.

The student-written narratives provided convergent evidence for this interpretation. Analysis of 60 narrative texts showed a strong presence of personal-experience and fantasy-based stories, including family events and imaginative adventures. Thus, the themes expressed verbally in interviews were also manifested in students' written products. The written narratives provided evidence not simply of what students said they preferred, but of how those preferences were enacted in their actual writing.

At the same time, the sources revealed an important divergence between reported enjoyment and observable engagement. Although some students described narrative writing positively during interviews, classroom observations documented hesitation, prolonged pauses, and requests for teacher assistance during writing activities. This divergence suggests that enjoyment of storytelling did not necessarily translate into uninterrupted or confident writing performance. Rather than interpreting the observation evidence as contradicting students' accounts, the analysis treated the two forms of evidence as describing different dimensions of the writing experience: students could enjoy imagining and telling stories while simultaneously experiencing difficulty in converting those ideas into written language. This interpretation was consistent with the broader finding that students often possessed ideas but struggled to translate them into coherent written texts.

3.2 Difficulties in Translating Ideas into Written Narratives

Despite their generally positive attitudes toward narrative writing, many students experienced difficulties in organizing ideas, developing plot sequences, and sustaining narrative flow. Interview data illustrated this challenge. S2 (SDN Kamojing), for example, explained that although creating stories was exciting, writing required considerable imagination and sometimes became difficult when ideas had to be translated into written form. As the student stated, "I have the story in my mind, but I get stuck when I try to write it down."

S2's written narrative, Adventures with Childhood Friends, provides a concrete illustration of how these experiences were manifested in an actual student-produced text. The narrative describes playing with two childhood friends in an orchard and later in a rice field. In the English translation of the original Indonesian text, S2 wrote:

> *"Aryo asked me, 'Will we be friends forever?' I replied, 'I hope we stay friends forever!' Feri agreed as well."*

This excerpt illustrates S2's ability to establish a familiar social context, incorporate dialogue, and communicate an emotionally meaningful friendship experience. The narrative also contains a recognizable sequence of events and a concluding statement. However, the events are presented relatively briefly, with limited elaboration of the characters' actions, the development of the situation, or the transition between events.

The text therefore illustrates a distinction between establishing a comprehensible narrative structure and elaborating a more fully developed story. Rather than indicating an inability to construct a narrative, S2's writing suggests that the student could communicate an initial idea and organize basic events but had more limited development of the narrative beyond that foundation.

Classroom observations provided additional context for interpreting this textual evidence. During the same writing activity, field notes recorded that S2 wrote briefly, paused for an extended period, reread the page, and asked the teacher how to continue the story. Instead of supplying the next event, the teacher prompted S2 to identify what should happen next.

This interaction was consistent with the student's interview account of becoming stuck when converting ideas into written form. Although the completed narrative demonstrates basic narrative organization, the observation captures the difficulty that emerged during the process of extending and elaborating the story.

The comparison of these three sources — interview data, the student's written narrative, and classroom observation — revealed both convergence and complementary evidence. The interview captured S2's perceived difficulty in translating ideas into text; the written narrative demonstrated the student's ability to construct a meaningful, recognizable story while providing evidence of relatively compressed development; and the observation documented hesitation during composition. Together, these findings suggest that the difficulty experienced by S2 concerned not simply generating ideas but also sustaining the process of developing those ideas into a more elaborated narrative. This case illustrates the analytical value of integrating children's verbal accounts, classroom behaviours, and written artefacts rather than relying on any single source to represent their writing experiences.

Teacher accounts reinforced this broader pattern. T3 (SDN Sukamakmur 1) explained, "Organizing ideas is the hardest part for many of them, especially the weaker writers." Across the dataset, students' written narratives generally demonstrated familiarity with basic narrative structures, but some contained compressed event sequences, limited character development, or insufficient plot elaboration. Classroom observations added a process-oriented dimension to these textual findings: hesitation, prolonged pauses, rereading, and requests for assistance were particularly visible when students moved from generating ideas to developing them in writing.

The comparison also revealed that convergence was not complete across all cases. Some students described themselves as confident in organizing their stories, whereas their written narratives contained fragmented plot development or limited elaboration. Such differences were not interpreted as evidence that one source was necessarily more accurate than another. Rather, interview data represented students' perceptions of their competence, while written texts provided evidence of how that perceived competence was realized in completed products. The triangulation therefore distinguished between awareness of narrative structure and the ability to sustain and elaborate that structure during actual composition.

3.3 Understanding and Use of Narrative Structure

Students and teachers consistently identified explicit narrative structure as useful. S6 (SDN Cikande) stated, “When I use beginning, middle, and end, it’s easier to write,” while T1 (SDN Kiara 3) explained, “Teaching plot structure helps them plan before writing.” These accounts indicate that the beginning–middle–end framework functioned as a practical organizing resource during composition.

Written narratives provided partial convergence with these perceptions. Most student texts demonstrated evidence of the basic narrative structure taught in class, suggesting that students had incorporated the instructional schema into their writing.

However, the same texts frequently lacked elaboration in characters and plot development. Consequently, the document evidence distinguished between structural recognition and narrative richness: students could reproduce an overall beginning–middle–end organization while still experiencing difficulties in developing coherent events and sufficiently elaborated stories.

This finding was further contextualized by classroom observations. During writing activities, some students appeared to understand the task but paused or sought teacher assistance when attempting to develop their ideas. The observational evidence therefore complemented the written products by showing the process through which structural knowledge was translated — or not fully translated — into textual production. The combined evidence suggests that explicit structure provided an important scaffold, but did not independently resolve difficulties in narrative development.

3.4 Preferences for Narrative Writing Activities and Themes

Students expressed preferences for both personal and imaginative forms of narrative writing. S7 (SDN Margasari 1) stated, “I like writing about real things that happened to me. But I also like to imagine fantasy stories.” Other students preferred friendship and family-related themes, while some responded less positively to topics perceived as distant from their experiences. S9 (SDN Palumbonsari), for example, stated, “I didn’t like writing about the environment. But friendship stories are fun.”

The written narratives converged with these interview findings. Analysis of the student texts identified personal experiences and fantasy-based stories as recurring thematic patterns, particularly narratives involving family events and imaginative adventures. The convergence across spoken and written data strengthens the interpretation that thematic relevance was not merely an expressed preference but was reflected in the topics students actually selected and developed in their narratives.

Preferences also varied regarding the organization of writing activities. Some students preferred writing independently, whereas others benefited from group storytelling or peer discussion before composing. Teachers similarly reported that story-sharing activities stimulated confidence and idea generation.

These findings indicate that students did not experience narrative writing as a uniform activity; their engagement was shaped by the relationship among topic, interactional format, and perceived support.

3.5 Perceptions of Assigned Topics and Motivation

Students' motivation varied according to the perceived relevance and familiarity of assigned topics. Structured prompts helped some students because they reduced uncertainty, but many students expressed greater motivation when they could select or influence the theme.

Teachers observed greater engagement when topics were familiar or personally meaningful, whereas abstract topics tended to reduce participation.

The written narratives provided additional evidence for this pattern because students' actual texts frequently centred on personally meaningful experiences and imaginative themes. This convergence suggests that thematic preference operated at both the level of reported motivation and the content of students' written production.

However, the multimodal evidence also indicates that motivation should not be equated with writing fluency. Students could show strong interest in a topic while still encountering difficulty in organizing and elaborating their stories. The combination of interview, observation, and document evidence therefore points to a distinction between *wanting to write* and *being able to sustain the writing process*. This distinction was particularly important in interpreting the experiences of students who expressed enthusiasm but required repeated assistance during composition.

A similar relationship between motivation and writing behaviour was evident in the classroom observations. Students who expressed enthusiasm for personally meaningful or imaginative topics often began writing readily and discussed their ideas with peers; however, enthusiasm did not always persist throughout the composition process. In several observation sessions, students who appeared highly interested in the assigned theme nevertheless paused repeatedly or sought teacher assistance when developing the sequence of events. The written narratives showed a comparable pattern, with imaginative or personally meaningful themes appearing in the texts but sometimes accompanied by limited plot elaboration. These observations indicate convergence regarding thematic interest, while also revealing a divergence between motivation to write and the ability to sustain the writing process.

3.6 Emotional Response to Imaginative Writing

Students generally described positive emotional experiences when writing and sharing narratives. Feelings of happiness, excitement, and pride were frequently reported, while teachers observed enthusiasm through verbal expressions, physical gestures, and supplementary activities such as drawing before writing. S1's statement that imagining a story made the student feel happy illustrates the affective dimension of narrative composition.

Table 1. Summary of Interview Responses Based on Thematic Aspects

Aspect	Participant	Interview Excerpt	Interpretation
1. Interest in Narrative Writing	S5 (SDN Pasirawi 1)	“I like writing stories because it feels like watching a movie in my head.”	Students find narrative writing intrinsically enjoyable and imaginative.
	T2 (SDN Kamojing)	"They get excited when they know they can choose their story ideas."	Student autonomy increases motivation.
2. Perceived Difficulty	S2 (SDN Kamojing)	“I have the story in my mind, but I get stuck when I try to write it down.”	Students struggle with transforming ideas into written text.
	T3 (SDN Sukamakmur 1)	“Organizing ideas is the hardest part for many of them, especially the weaker writers.”	Structural challenges are common among students.
3. Perceptions of Narrative Structure	S6 (SDN Cikande)	“When I use beginning, middle, and end, it’s easier to write.”	Explicit structure helps students compose more coherent stories.
	T1 (SDN Kiara 3)	“Teaching plot structure helps them plan before writing.”	Narrative models support students' cognitive planning.
4. Writing Activity Preferences	S7 (SDN Margasari 1)	“I like writing about real things that happened to me. But I also like to imagine fantasy stories.”	Students enjoy writing both personal and imaginative stories.
	T2 (SDN Kamojing)	“Some prefer to write alone, others like to share stories in groups first.”	Students benefit from differentiated and collaborative approaches.
5. Interest in Given Topics	S9 (SDN Palumbonsari)	“I didn’t like writing about the environment. But friendship stories are fun.”	Topic relevance significantly influences engagement.
	T3 (SDN Sukamakmur 1)	“Letting them vote on topics increases their interest and participation.”	Student input in theme selection enhances motivation.
6. Emotional Response to Imagination	S1 (SDN Kiara 3)	“I feel happy when I can imagine my own story. Like I’m the main character.”	Imaginative writing fosters emotional connection and a sense of agency.
	T1 (SDN Kiara 3)	“They feel proud and excited to share stories they created themselves.”	Writing serves as a positive emotional and expressive outlet.

Source: Interview transcript (2025)

The thematic patterns identified through interviews are summarized in Table 1, which presents representative excerpts from students and teachers alongside their interpretations. The table illustrates how narrative writing is perceived as enjoyable and imaginative, while also highlighting challenges related to idea organization and structure. It further emphasizes the motivational impact of autonomy, relevant themes, and instructional support.

A summary of the transcripts of the interview results with students is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Findings from Student Interview Transcripts

Aspect	Qualitative Finding
Perception	Positive, fun, stimulates curiosity.
Challenge	Difficulty with ideas and story structure.
Creativity	Writing is considered a medium for expression and imagination.
Favourite Theme	Fantasy, friendship, and family.
The Role of a Teacher	Assisting the writing process and providing media.
Motivation	Want to share, get appreciation, and express oneself.

Source: Data Analysis (2025)

The observations and written narratives added contextual depth to these accounts. Observable enthusiasm sometimes appeared through students' active participation and imaginative engagement, whereas hesitation or requests for assistance became more evident when students moved from idea generation to written composition. Similarly, emotional meaning was not always expressed directly in written texts; it could be inferred from the themes and content students selected. The data therefore indicate that emotional engagement was dynamic rather than uniformly positive: enjoyment and pride coexisted with uncertainty and anxiety when students encountered linguistic or organizational difficulties.

Across the six themes, the three data sources demonstrated both convergence and divergence. Interviews established students' explicit perceptions and motivations; observations provided evidence of engagement, hesitation, assistance-seeking, and classroom interaction; and written narratives demonstrated how students' preferences, ideas, and structural knowledge were manifested in actual textual products. The strongest convergence concerned students' preference for imaginative and personally meaningful topics and their generally positive orientation toward narrative writing. The strongest divergence concerned the relationship between enjoyment or confidence reported in interviews and the difficulties visible during writing or in the resulting texts.

These divergences were analytically important. A student could enjoy narrative writing while pausing repeatedly during composition, or report confidence in organizing a story while producing a text with fragmented plot development. Rather than selecting one source as more authoritative, the analysis interpreted these differences as evidence that children's lived experiences are multidimensional and may be expressed differently through speech, behaviour, and artifacts. This cross-source comparison consequently provided a more nuanced account of narrative writing than would have been possible from interview data alone.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the consistently high level of interest in narrative writing activities among elementary school students, reinforcing the perspective that storytelling serves as both a cognitively engaging and emotionally fulfilling literacy practice. From a psycholinguistic perspective, narrative writing enables young learners to connect language production with memory, imagination, and identity construction (Mayo, 2025). Students' enjoyment of storytelling reflects the natural alignment between narrative discourse and children's developmental tendencies toward role-playing and symbolic thinking. This is in line with the Renninger & Hidi (2020) framework, which emphasizes the role of situational interest in sustaining engagement and facilitating deeper learning. Consequently, narrative writing not only fosters language development but also functions as a pedagogical vehicle for meaning-making, agency, and learner autonomy within the classroom.

Despite their enthusiasm, many students reported difficulties in organizing narrative ideas, particularly when attempting to translate mental images into coherent written texts. This challenge is consistent with theories of writing development, such as the distinction between the knowledge-narrating model and the knowledge-transforming model proposed by Cheung (2016). Younger learners often operate within the knowledge-narrating stage, in which narrative composition is linear and based on episodic memory rather than deliberate planning (Wang et al., 2015). This cognitive limitation explains students' tendency to start stories without a clear ending or coherent plot. In line with research by Wang and Troia (2023), such difficulties in narrative organization often result in reduced motivation and writing self-efficacy, underscoring the importance of scaffolding strategies that support students in transforming ideas into structured text.

Further interviews revealed that students benefited significantly from learning about narrative structure, particularly the commonly taught "beginning–middle–end" model. These findings support the notion that explicit instruction in text genres and their schematic structures enhances genre awareness and linguistic performance (Peungcharoenkun & Waluyo, 2024). By internalizing narrative schemas, students are better equipped to plan and monitor their writing, thereby improving the coherence and cohesion of their texts. Moreover, teacher feedback on structure plays a critical role in fostering metacognitive writing strategies, as demonstrated in research (Alisoy, 2024). When reinforced through modelling and collaborative writing activities, such instruction can help bridge the cognitive gap between narrative imagination and textual realization.

Students' preferences for narrative writing activities varied, with many expressing a desire to write about personal experiences or fantasy stories. This supports Liu's (2020) assertion that language functions as a social semiotic resource, reflecting the interaction between personal meanings and social contexts. Personal and imaginative narratives allow students to draw on their experiential and cultural schemas, rendering the writing process more personally meaningful and emotionally resonant.

Writing on familiar or personally relevant themes activates schema-based cognitive processes, which are known to facilitate fluency, lexical retrieval, and syntactic construction (Franck, 2017). In addition, collaborative storytelling and peer-sharing activities — as highlighted in this study — promote dialogic interaction, peer modelling, and the formation of communities of practice, all of which enhance both linguistic competence and social bonding (Gunawardena & Brown, 2021).

A key factor influencing motivation was whether a given writing topic was perceived as interesting or relevant (Meşe & Sevilen, 2021). Students demonstrated a clear preference for topics that resonated with their lived experiences, fantasies, or emotional states. This finding aligns with schema theory and genre-based pedagogy, both of which emphasize the importance of topic familiarity and cultural relevance in enhancing comprehension and writing fluency (Hyland, 2024). Research by Healey (2019) also found that children were more motivated to write when they perceived narrative themes as connected to their personal identities or imaginative worlds. Therefore, offering students topic choices or involving them in selecting writing themes may serve as effective motivational strategies, increasing their sense of ownership, relevance, and engagement in the writing process.

Finally, the data showed that students experienced positive emotional responses when expressing their imagination through writing, suggesting that narrative composition offers an outlet for affective engagement and self-expression. This reflects the affective filter hypothesis (Lu, 2022), which states that learners acquire language more effectively when they feel emotionally secure and motivated. Narrative writing is a form of emotional literacy, allowing students to navigate internal states, fictional dilemmas, and relational themes, thereby promoting socio-emotional learning alongside linguistic growth (Kurdi, 2024). The emotional engagement seen in students' stories supports Cen & Shakibaei's (2026) claim that creative writing fosters divergent thinking, resilience, and self-confidence. Hence, encouraging imaginative expression in writing is not only beneficial for linguistic growth but also essential for the holistic development of young learners (Cahyani et al., 2023).

Although the findings provide pedagogical insights into students' narrative-writing experiences, the principal contribution of this study is methodological. The study demonstrates that interpretive phenomenological inquiry can be successfully adapted for elementary school research when methodological procedures are explicitly aligned with children's developmental characteristics. The combination of child-sensitive interviewing, analysis of learner-generated artifacts, iterative reflexive coding, and triangulated interpretation enabled a richer understanding of children's lived experiences than could have been achieved through a single qualitative method. Consequently, the empirical findings should be interpreted primarily as evidence supporting the methodological framework rather than solely as substantive conclusions about narrative-writing instruction.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, the classroom observations were conducted within the scheduled observation sessions and therefore provide only a time-bounded view of students' narrative-writing experiences. Although observations complemented the interviews and written narratives, they may not have captured fluctuations in students' engagement, confidence, or writing behaviour across different lessons or stages of the school year. Second, the participating children varied in their expressive abilities. Some students were able to articulate their experiences and perceptions relatively clearly during interviews, whereas others expressed their experiences more readily through classroom behaviour or written artefacts. This variation may have influenced the depth and form of the accounts available for interpretation. Research with children similarly requires sensitivity to differences in children's developing communicative competencies and to the conditions under which they express their perspectives (Malloy & Stolzenberg, 2019). Third, the participating schools differed in their classroom environments, instructional practices, teacher–student interactions, and local educational contexts. Consequently, the observed patterns should be understood as contextually situated experiences rather than as uniform characteristics of elementary students' narrative writing. These limitations do not invalidate the triangulated findings; rather, they indicate that the interpretations should remain sensitive to temporal, communicative, and contextual variation. Future research could address these limitations through longer-term observations across multiple writing activities and more explicitly differentiated child-centred methods for eliciting students' perspectives.

5. Methodological Reflection

This study illustrates how phenomenological inquiry can be adapted to investigate the lived experiences of children aged 10–11 years in elementary educational settings. The methodological process demonstrated that researching children's experiences requires more than simply applying conventional qualitative procedures. It requires developmentally sensitive communication, attention to multiple modes of expression, iterative interpretation, and continuous reflexivity concerning the researcher's role in constructing meaning.

5.1 Child-Sensitive Interviewing and Interpretation

One of the principal methodological challenges concerned the use of phenomenological interviewing with young participants. Initial attempts to elicit descriptions of abstract concepts such as "experience," "motivation," or "meaning" sometimes resulted in brief or general responses. The interview protocol therefore relied increasingly on concrete, familiar, and conversational prompts grounded in students' actual classroom experiences. Questions such as what kinds of stories they enjoyed, what made writing easy or difficult, and how they felt when writing enabled students to communicate experiences using language appropriate to their developmental level.

This adaptation created an important methodological tension. Simplifying questions can improve children's comprehension and participation, but it can also influence how participants frame their responses. The researchers therefore avoided leading questions and used open-ended follow-up prompts to allow children to elaborate, clarify, or modify their accounts. This approach positioned child-sensitive interviewing not as a reduction of phenomenological inquiry but as an adaptation necessary for accessing children's lived meanings.

5.2 Triangulation as Interpretive Practice

The integration of interviews, classroom observations, and student-generated written narratives was particularly important because the three sources did not always produce identical accounts. Rather than treating discrepancies as methodological problems to be eliminated, the researchers interpreted them as analytically meaningful evidence of the complexity of children's experiences.

For example, some students reported during interviews that they enjoyed narrative writing and described it positively. However, classroom observations sometimes showed hesitation, prolonged pauses, or requests for teacher assistance while those same students were engaged in writing activities. In another instance, some students expressed confidence in their ability to organize stories, whereas examination of their written narratives revealed fragmented plot development or limited elaboration. These divergences demonstrated that students' verbal accounts alone could not fully represent their experiences. What students said about writing, what they did during writing activities, and what appeared in their written products represented related but not necessarily identical dimensions of experience.

Accordingly, the three sources were not used simply to confirm one another. They were treated as interconnected forms of evidence that could converge, complement, or diverge. When interview accounts and observations differed, researchers returned to the contextual circumstances surrounding the activity and examined the written artefacts to determine how the different forms of evidence contributed to interpretation. This process strengthened the phenomenological analysis by making visible aspects of children's experiences that might have remained hidden if the study had relied exclusively on self-reported interviews. The triangulation process therefore functioned as an interpretive strategy rather than merely a procedural technique for establishing consistency.

5.3 Iterative Coding and Researcher Reflexivity

The analysis also demonstrated the importance of maintaining flexibility during coding. Initial coding generated several overlapping categories, particularly around emotional responses and motivational experiences.

Expressions such as enjoyment, excitement, and pride were initially treated as separate codes but were subsequently reconsidered and integrated into broader affective dimensions when comparison across data sources suggested conceptual overlap. Similarly, children's emotional experiences were not always expressed explicitly. They could appear indirectly through classroom behaviour, interaction with peers, or the content of their stories.

The use of a structured codebook supported consistency while allowing concepts to evolve during analysis. Independent coding of approximately 25% of the corpus enabled researchers to identify differences in code interpretation, particularly concerning overlapping code definitions, category boundaries, and children's emotional expressions. Discussion and consensus-building subsequently resulted in refinement of coding definitions before the revised framework was applied to the remaining data. This process illustrates that interpretive agreement in qualitative phenomenological research is achieved through transparent dialogue and reflexive negotiation rather than through the assumption that meanings are mechanically identifiable.

Researcher reflexivity was particularly important because the researchers' backgrounds in language and literacy education provided valuable contextual knowledge but could also influence interpretation. Reflexive memoing, collaborative coding, peer debriefing, and repeated discussion of emerging interpretations were therefore used to make assumptions and analytical decisions more visible. The purpose was not to eliminate researcher interpretation — which would be inconsistent with an interpretive phenomenological orientation — but to examine how interpretations were developed and supported by the data.

5.4 Methodological Transferability and Practical Implications

The methodological experience provides several transferable lessons for qualitative researchers working with young learners. First, child-centred qualitative inquiry requires flexibility in communication and data collection rather than rigid adherence to adult-oriented procedures. Second, children's experiences should be approached as multimodal phenomena because meaning may be communicated through speech, behaviour, emotion, interaction, and learner-generated artefacts. Third, triangulation is most valuable when researchers actively investigate discrepancies between sources rather than using multiple methods only to demonstrate agreement.

The study also suggests that participant validation should be adapted to children's developmental characteristics. Conventional member checking through review of lengthy interview transcripts may be unsuitable for some children. In this study, simplified summaries and conversational feedback enabled students to clarify whether preliminary interpretations reflected what they intended to communicate. This approach complemented, rather than replaced, researcher interpretation and provided an additional opportunity to identify misunderstandings.

The transferability of these procedures does not imply that the same protocol should be applied identically in every educational context.

Instead, the methodological contribution lies in the principles underlying the adaptation: developmentally appropriate communication, multimodal evidence, explicit attention to divergent accounts, iterative coding, reflexive interpretation, and context-sensitive participant validation. Researchers investigating children's lived experiences in other elementary educational settings can adapt these principles to their participants, institutional contexts, linguistic environments, and research questions.

6. Final Considerations

The principal contribution of this study lies in advancing qualitative research methodology for educational studies involving young learners. Rather than proposing a new instructional model, the study demonstrates how interpretive phenomenological inquiry can be operationalized through developmentally appropriate interviewing, systematic integration of multiple qualitative data sources, collaborative reflexive analysis, and explicit procedures for interpreting convergent and divergent evidence. These methodological adaptations provide a transparent and transferable framework for researchers investigating children's lived experiences in authentic educational settings. While the substantive findings concerning students' preferences, motivation, and writing difficulties contribute to the literature on elementary literacy, they primarily function to illustrate the application, analytical coherence, and practical value of the proposed methodological framework. Accordingly, the study's enduring contribution resides not only in what was learned about children's narrative writing but also in how rigorous qualitative inquiry can be conducted with young participants while preserving methodological transparency, interpretive credibility, and contextual sensitivity.

Future research may extend these findings by employing longitudinal or mixed-methods designs to examine how sustained exposure to student-centred narrative instruction influences writing development over time. Expanding the research context to include diverse regions, digital storytelling practices, and multilingual settings may further enrich the understanding of narrative writing pedagogy. This study contributes to the growing body of research emphasizing the importance of student voice, thematic relevance, and emotional engagement in the development of effective narrative writing instruction in elementary education.

Ethics Statement: This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of research involving human participants. The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Buana Perjuangan University Karawang under approval number 076/WR-IV/VII/2025. All procedures performed in this study complied with relevant institutional and national research ethics guidelines.

Informed Consent: Written informed consent was obtained from the parents or legal guardians of all participating children prior to data collection. In addition, age-appropriate verbal assent was obtained from the children after the research objectives, procedures, and voluntary nature of participation had been explained using child-friendly language

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Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI): Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used solely to support language refinement and manuscript preparation processes. Specifically, ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used to assist with improving sentence clarity, language flow, and academic phrasing during manuscript revision; Grammarly was used for grammar checking, spelling correction, punctuation review, and enhancement of language accuracy. All conceptual development, methodological decisions, interpretation of results, and final manuscript content remain the sole responsibility of the authors.

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