Question

05 Read Item B below and answer the question that follows.

Item C

Investigating streaming

Streaming involves teachers differentiating between pupils on the basis of their perceived ability, placing pupils whom they believe to be of similar overall ability in the same teaching group. This may result in working-class pupils and those from certain ethnic minorities being placed in lower streams. Lower-stream pupils may lose self-esteem, give up trying and even join an anti-school subculture. By contrast, higher-stream pupils may identify strongly with the school’s values and goals.

One way of studying streaming is to use unstructured interviews. These are often effective in exploring interviewees’ personal feelings about sensitive subjects. However, for a variety of reasons, some pupils and teachers may refuse to participate in an unstructured interview.

Applying material from Item C and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of using unstructured interviews to investigate streaming.

[20 marks]

Mark scheme

Marks

Level descriptors 17–20

Answers in this band will show accurate, conceptually detailed knowledge and sound understanding of a range of relevant material on unstructured interviews.

Appropriate material will be applied accurately and with sensitivity to the investigation of the specific issue of streaming.

Students will apply knowledge of a range of relevant strengths and limitations of using unstructured interviews to research issues and characteristics relating to streaming. These may include some of the following and/or other relevant concerns, though answers do not need to include all of these, even for full marks:

• the research characteristics of potential research subjects, eg individual pupils, peer groups, parents, teachers (eg class, ethnic and gender differences; parental literacy skills; teachers’ professionalism, self-interest or stereotypes of pupils)

• the research contexts and settings, eg classrooms; staffrooms

• the sensitivity of researching streaming, eg policy and resource implications for schools; schools’ market and league table position; its impact on achievement or behaviour; stigmatisation; parental consent).

Evaluation of the usefulness of unstructured interviews will be explicit and relevant. Analysis will show clear explanation. Appropriate conclusions will be drawn.

13–16

Answers in this band will show accurate, broad and/or deep but incomplete knowledge of the strengths and limitations of unstructured interviews.

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Understands a number of significant aspects of the question; good understanding of the presented material.

Application of knowledge will be broadly appropriate but will tend to be applied in a more generalised way or a more restricted way; for example:

• applying the method to the study of education in general, not to the specifics of studying streaming, or

• specific but undeveloped application to streaming, or

• a focus on the research characteristics of streaming, or groups/contexts etc involved in it, with implicit links to some features of unstructured interviews.

There will be some limited explicit evaluation, eg of one to two features of unstructured interviews as a method, and/or some appropriate analysis, eg clear explanations of some of the features of unstructured interviews.

9–12

Answers in this band will show largely accurate knowledge but limited range and depth, including a broadly accurate if basic account of some of the strengths and/or limitations of unstructured interviews. Understands some limited but significant aspects of the question; superficial understanding of the presented material.

Applying material (possibly in list-like fashion) on unstructured interviews, but with very limited or non-existent application to either the study of streaming in particular or of education in general.

Evaluation limited to briefly stated points. Analysis will be limited, with answers tending towards the descriptive.

5–8

Answers in this band will show limited undeveloped knowledge, eg two to three insubstantial points about some features of unstructured interviews. Understands only limited aspects of the question; simplistic understanding of the presented material.

Limited application of suitable material, and/or material often at a tangent to the demands of the question, eg perhaps drifting into an unfocused comparison of different methods.

Very limited or no evaluation. Attempts at analysis, if any, are thin and disjointed.

1–4

Answers in this band will show very limited knowledge, eg one to two very insubstantial points about methods in general. Very little or no understanding of the question and of the presented material.

Significant errors and/or omissions in application of material. Some material ineffectually recycled from the item, or some knowledge applied solely to the substantive issue of streaming, with very little or no reference to unstructured interviews.

There will be no analysis or evaluation.

0

No relevant points.

Indicative content for strengths and limitations of the method

Strengths and limitations of unstructured interviews, as applied to the particular issue in education, may include: time, cost, access, flexibility, hypothesis-formation, qualitative data, insight, depth,

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empathy, validity, lack of reliability, sample size, unrepresentativeness, lack of generalisability, ethical issues (eg informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, psychological harm and vulnerability).

Student response A

Examiner commentary

This answer is mostly focused on the method, with only stated links to the study or streaming without applying these.

In a few places there are points made about the characteristics of the research group (students), but without and explicit links to the method.

10 marks awarded.

Unstructured interviews are those in which there is no rigid format on behalf of the interviewer, just a checklist of topics. The questions are more likely to be open ended, attempting to make the interview as natural as possible.

Firstly, one advantage of unstructured interviews is that they allow access to sensitive groups. As the item says, lower-stream pupils may “lose self-esteem”, making them a sensitive group. They have access to sensitive groups as they provide opportunities for rapport and trust to be built, they also allow access to the sensitive groups’ views on sensitive subjects, such as being placed in lower streams. However, it can be argued that this ‘can’ lead to interviewer bias. This is because those working class students placed in low streams may “lose self esteem” as the item says and will therefore exaggerate aspects of their behaviour they see as good and conceal aspects seen as undesirable in order to show themselves in good light.

Another advantage is validity and depth. If respondents feel at ease then they are more likely to open up and say what they really mean. They produce rich and valid data and they accurately obtain the respondents viewpoint. However, there are practical issues in gaining this depth as it takes several hours for each interview. In order to access the interviewees views on sensitive topics, such as streaming, they have to be approached slowly as they are sensitive topics and students are minors and therefore a vulnerable group.

A further advantage of unstructured interviews is that verstehan is gained because there is no set questions, the interviewee can talk subjectively about streaming and how they feel affected by it, such as it driving them to join anti-school subcultures, as the item says. This gives them the freedom to talk in their own terms about issues that really concern them. This allows the researcher to gain a true understanding about the views of the students life. In contrast, unstructured interviews are not as reliable as structured interviews, as each one is unique and has no schedule. This makes it virtually impossible to be replicated by another researcher.

To conclude, investigator triangulation could be used to check for interviewer bias amongst the students. Alternatively, questionnaires can be used in order gain comparability of data, as unstructured interviews alone, do not provide this.

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Student response B

This essay will examine the idea that for sociologists, such as those from a Positivist or Interpretivist approach, there are both strengths and limitations in using unstructured interviews to investigate streaming.

One strength of using unstructured interviews is that they are higher in validity than other research methods, due to them being flexible. This means a more qualitative, in depth understanding of the participant is achieved, making unstructured interviews an effective method in “exploring interviewees personal feelings about sensitive subjects”. This is useful in exploring the effects of streaming in particular, as researchers can get to know a pupils true feelings and experiences of streaming, due to unstructured interviews allowing children to be honest.

Streaming has been criticised for affecting those in lower streams especially – to advantage those in higher streams. This makes this research difficult especially with unstructured interviews. Supported by interpretivists, it is a method that at best produces high validity and insightful / meaningful rich data. However, one has to be careful how it is used in a school setting – access might be difficult. Research on streaming is likely to produce defensive attitudes by heads and access to students in lower streams might not be given. Lower stream students are likely to be anti-school and might be less than positive about school life. Heads are less likely these days, when school representations are uppermost in the eyes of parents and potential parents, to allow lower stream students to produce detailed material focused on negative accounts of their experience at school.

However, although unstructured interviews may be high in validity, they can be low in reliability. As they are so flexible and extra questions and answers can be added spontaneously, it is almost impossible for another researcher to replicate the research and get the same results. This means that one researcher may come to the conclusion that “higher stream pupils … identify strongly with the school’s values”, whereas another may not come to this. This links with detachment and objectivity, as the more extensive and flexible the questioning, the more likely the researcher is to form a subjective opinion on the data collected.

Another weakness can be that unstructured interviews take a long time to conduct, due to them not following an interview schedule and being flexible. This means “some pupils and teachers may refuse to participate in an unstructured interview” as, especially for children at secondary school, time is precious. Older children may need to revise for important GCSE’s, and teachers are often overworked. This means that, although they may want to be helpful, they do not have the time for a qualitative unstructured interview, and another method, such as a closed question questionnaire, may be more appropriate. As an unstructured interview, if conducted, must be kept short, the amount of data collected will be restricted. This may fail to get to the meanings of the issue of streaming and how it affects the students under study.

There is the possibility of interviewing parents in their homes to discuss the issue of streaming, but middle class parents of students in higher streams are more likely to accept an in-depth interview and researcher might find that they are very busy and have appointments that stretch into evenings so may not give up face time to be interviewed. If access can be gained to these households there is likely to be a more positive view of streaming as their children are likely to be in the higher streams.

Working class parents or parents of lower stream students might accept being interviewed but problem have of language codes of researcher. Parents may also feel intimidated by the researcher and so not want to speak out about issues that affect their child in the school system. Parents may also be defensive, they might feel their children aren’t valued by the school system as they have been placed in a lower stream. For some ethnic minority groups there may also be problems of language and a translator may be needed.

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Examiner commentary

A wide range of points are made about the method. In most cases these are linked to the issue in the question. The answer considers pupils and parents as research subjects. It also considers the school as a site of research, showing good application to the study of education. The points are also developed to include specific links to the study of streaming by using aspects of streaming or its impact. There are some specific references to the item and points from the item are used and developed to show application.

20 marks awarded.