

1990

An investigation of children's questioning and help-seeking during language arts time

Barbara Maria Comber
University of Wollongong

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**AN INVESTIGATION OF CHILDREN'S QUESTIONING AND
HELP-SEEKING DURING LANGUAGE ARTS TIME**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
award of the degree

MASTER OF EDUCATION (HONOURS)

from

THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

BARBARA MARIA COMBER

Bachelor of Arts, The University of Adelaide

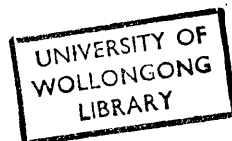
Graduate Diploma in Teaching, Adelaide Teachers College

Graduate Diploma of Reading Education, Adelaide College of

Advanced Education

FACULTY OF EDUCATION

1990



CERTIFICATION

I certify that the work for this thesis has not been submitted for a degree to any other university or institution.

Barbara Maria Comber

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This research documents the experiences of a grade four/five class and their teacher Marija Baggio. Without their cooperation, honesty and openness the study would have been limited and indeed difficult to carry out. My sincere thanks and admiration goes to Marija Baggio and the class who called themselves "the team". I am also grateful to the principal, Pat Shepherd who welcomed me into the school and the parents who allowed me to investigate their children's learning.

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SUMMARY

Research Focus and Questions

This investigation explored children's use of questioning and help-seeking during language arts time in a grade four/five classroom. It also considered the potential of monitoring children's classroom questions as a way of understanding their thinking and preoccupations. The research was interpretative in nature involving collaboration between researcher, teacher and students.

The main questions framing the investigation were:

1. What functions do children's questions serve during school literacy tasks?
2. In which contexts do children ask questions and seek help?
3. What do children's questions and help-seeking reveal about different children's approaches to school literacy learning?

These questions were addressed through close observation and analysis of everyday events in a classroom community. This involved:

- . recording children's questions during language arts time, in whole class and small group situations
- . documenting teacher talk, assigned literacy tasks, group composition and children's talk
- . describing and analysing participants' perspectives of learning contexts
- . categorizing children's questions and requests for help according to functions
- . describing children's contrasting questioning and help-seeking behaviours

Site, Duration and Informants

The investigation was carried out in a suburban primary school in South Australia. The research data was collected from February to November in 1987. Analysis of the data and critical review of interpretations and drafts of this report continued during 1988 and concluded in July 1990. The key informants in the study were the classroom teacher and twenty-eight grade four/five children. Three children became the informants for in-depth case studies.

Kinds of Data

The primary data for analysis were children's spontaneous questions and requests for help. These were recorded in the researcher's field notes, or audiotaped during independent group work. The teacher, children and parents also occasionally kept written records of children's questions. Five hundred and fifty-one questions were collected and analysed.

Other data included interviews with the teacher and groups of children. Written artefacts produced by the children and the teacher were also collected. Data and interpretations were checked with informants throughout the investigation.

Findings

Four major findings emerged from this research:

1. Children did not readily ask questions or seek help early in the school year. The teacher consciously attempted to construct contexts in which children would ask questions and seek help. Most questions occurred in small group situations and involved exchanges between pairs of children, or in private conversations with the teacher or researcher. Few questions or requests for help were made during teacher directed whole-class instruction.

The majority of the questions collected indicated that the children were working out how to create or comprehend texts. Questions concerned with nonacademic matters were rare.

2. Children's questions and requests for help served the following functions:
 - i Solving text problems
 - ii Requesting information
 - iii Checking peers
 - iv Checking expectations
 - v Making process decisions
 - vi Requesting resources
 - vii Requesting nonspecific help
 - viii Reminding teacher
3. The quality of responses elicited by children's questions varied from no response at all, to inappropriate responses, to useful help. Children's abilities to ask the right question and engage the help of a competent assistant varied considerably between individuals.
4. Monitoring the questioning and help seeking of individual children revealed differences in students' approaches to school literacy tasks. Children's differential abilities to enlist help affected the kinds, amounts and quality of instructional assistance they received.

Children's success at eliciting helpful responses may be seen as a key element in the quality of learning they experience in their school lives. The implications of these findings, both for teachers and researchers are discussed.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 FOCUS OF INVESTIGATION

This research investigates children's questioning and help-seeking during language arts time. It was conducted in one classroom over a school year. The study is exploratory in nature, in that it sets out to discover what can be learnt about children's thinking by monitoring their spontaneous questions and help-seeking as they work on classroom literacy tasks.

The potential of children's questions to provide access to their perceptions has been noted by researchers interested in early development (Piaget, 1959; Donaldson, 1975; Cochran-Smith, 1984; Tizard and Hughes, 1984; Morrow, 1988; Yaden et al, 1989). This research considers the usefulness of tracking children's questions and help-seeking in the school context. Such utterances should provide insights for both teachers and researchers about children's concerns, understandings and learning strategies. Several interrelated purposes guided this research. Firstly, the study explored the functions of children's questions and requests for help as they worked on school literacy tasks. In other words, it considered what was it that children tried to achieve by questioning and seeking help. Secondly, the kinds of contexts which encourage or discourage children's questioning and help-seeking were examined. Finally, three detailed case studies were conducted, in order to consider how different children go about seeking help or asking questions in the same literacy learning environment.

1.2 THE NEED FOR THIS RESEARCH

Although educators such as Piaget (1959) and Donaldson (1978) have testified to the usefulness of listening to children's questions, few classroom research studies have capitalised on this source of data (Morrow, 1988; Crowell, 1985). Thus this research was designed to provide information about children's questioning and requests for help in a school context. At the same time the investigation considers the value of teachers and researchers monitoring children's questions.

1.2.1 Limitations in Existing Research

Despite the fact that theorists assert the importance of learners' questions, (Tizard and Hughes, 1984; van der Meij, 1986; Lindfors, 1987; Dillon, 1988a) actual research on the topic is rare. One of the reasons for this is that most studies of questioning in educational contexts focus on the important role of teachers' questions (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975; Dillon, 1988a; Perrott, 1988; Cazden, 1988a).

However, during the last decade several studies which pertain to children's questioning and help-seeking have been conducted. These studies reveal the dearth of children's questions in school contexts. Dillon (1988a) announces that:

"it is a feat for a student to ask a question." (p 16)

A number of comparative studies of child-adult interactions at home and school (Wood, 1980; MacLure and French, 1981; Wells, 1981; Tizard and Hughes, 1984) have indicated that while children ask many questions of their parents,

relatively few questions are asked in the school context. Other research, conducted with primary and secondary school aged children, has yielded similar results (Dillon, 1988a; van der Meij, 1986; Good et al, 1987; Gerot, 1989). Compared to their teachers, students ask few questions and even this number diminishes in higher grades.

Studies of children's questions in school have mainly produced insights about the low frequency of their occurrence. Few studies have provided information on the features of the classroom context which affect questioning and help-seeking. There have been several calls for research to redress this problem (Good et al, 1987; Smith-Burke, 1987; Bourke, 1986; van der Meij, 1986).

Existing studies have provided little information about the possible purposes behind children's questions, nor have they provided detailed profiles of the learners. Exceptions to this general picture can be found in the work of Tizard and Hughes (1984) and Wilkinson (1985) who documented examples of questioning episodes and provided essential information about the children and their contexts. However, few studies have watched the same children over an extended period of time.

Researchers have reported the benefits of children questioning during literacy instruction (Graves, 1983; Calkins, 1983; Palincsar and Brown, 1986; Langer, 1986a). Because these researchers focus on children's reading and writing development, their investigations do not provide detailed analysis of question functions.

Several researchers have recently realized the potential of children's questions in revealing information about students' approaches to literacy learning (Yaden et al, 1989; Cochran-Smith, 1984; Palincsar, 1987; Crowell, 1985; Morrow, 1987). Yaden, Cochran-Smith and Morrow, in separate studies, consider young children's questions in one-to-one picture book reading events. Crowell analyses children's questioning during writing conferences. Palincsar investigates questioning as an aid to reading. She writes that children's questions create:

"a window on the way they're processing the text." (p 58)

While these investigations yield rich data about children's thinking, they are each restricted to one kind of literacy task. The monitoring of children's questions to peers, teacher and researcher across a range of school literacy tasks has not been investigated prior to this study.

1.2.2 The Unique Contribution of This Research

This investigation makes a unique contribution to the emerging field of research on children's questions and requests for help. Unlike some studies (Mishler, 1975; van der Meij, 1986), it provides a comprehensive examination of the whole range of questions that children spontaneously ask in class.

This study attempts to avoid the limitations of previous studies and so provides:

- . an in-depth analysis of contexts through the teacher's viewpoint, the researcher's narrative account and the perspectives offered by children's questions.
- . a framework describing the functions of children's questions and requests for help across a range of literacy tasks.
- . three profiles of contrasting students, depicting their questioning over a range of episodes.

1.3 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The possibility that children's questions might throw light on their development as literacy users motivated this study (Piaget, 1959; Donaldson, 1978).

Vygotsky's belief (1978) that learning is achieved socially, with help from more expert peers or adults, also influenced this research. Student questions and requests may help define the child's "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978) so that teachers can target instruction appropriate to the development of each child. This research explores what individual children's questions and requests indicate about their approaches to literacy tasks and considers how teachers might use this information.

1.4 ORGANIZATION OF THIS DOCUMENT

This document is organized in the following way. This chapter provides a brief rationale for the investigation. Chapter two provides a review of literature dealing with children's questions and requests for help, particularly focusing on their use in school contexts. It also pays extra attention to studies which have related students' questioning and help-seeking to literacy development.

Chapter three describes the way this research was conducted and makes explicit the reasoning behind methodological decisions.

Chapter four, "Questions in Contexts" is the first of the results chapters. The purpose of this chapter is to explain this particular learning community from the teacher's, researcher's and students' points of view. It describes how the teacher, Marija Baggio endeavoured to set up situations in which children would question and seek help. It summarizes the changes occurring during the school year which related to children's questioning and help-seeking. Finally, it provides views of the specific learning contexts of individual children.

Chapter five, "Children's Use of Questions and Requests: An Analytical Framework" summarizes the entire sample of children's questions and requests for help. The categories are defined and examples are discussed.

Chapter six, "Learning About Children Through Their Questions and Requests" includes case studies of Rachael, David and Mark. Each child's questioning and help-seeking is described. This chapter indicates what can be learnt about the workstyles of individual students, their approaches to tasks and participation in classroom life, by monitoring their questioning and help-seeking. A discussion of the children's contrasting approaches to learning and the implications for teachers concludes this chapter.

Chapter seven, "Conclusions and Implications" summarizes the main findings of this investigation and considers the implications for teachers and researchers.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 INTRODUCTION

"There is no unified literature on questioning, but separate traditions within various disciplines and fields; and there is no one knowledge, but different ways of knowing different things." (p 95)

Dillon's (1986) diagnosis of the field of questioning is both daunting and accurate. It is echoed by van der Meij (1986) who, writing at a similar time states that if he had understood the diversity of the area he would have "thought twice" about investigating questioning. He also quotes, Flammer, who stated that, questioning is "a badly defined topic and a dangerous research area." (p vii)

The multidisciplinary nature of the field of questioning means that this review needs to be selective. Those works related to *children's* questioning and help-seeking directed towards peers and teachers in *schools*, are reviewed in most detail. Where those behaviours have been studied in literacy learning environments, they have been afforded greater attention. Teacher questioning and self-questioning have only been referred to where they add to the picture of student questioning. Other reviews, dealing with these issues are already available (Gall, 1970; Kearsley, 1976; Wong, 1985; Dillon, 1986; van der Meij, 1986; Cazden 1988a; Gerôt, 1989).

This review is unique in that it brings children's questioning and help-seeking together with literacy learning. It draws on the insights from both experimental and field studies and from a range of educational traditions including ethnography, cognitive psychology and sociolinguistics. The review is organized into five major sections:

1. The importance of children's questions.
2. Children's development as question users prior to schooling.
3. The paucity of children's questions in school contexts.
4. Encouraging children's questioning and help-seeking in classroom learning.
5. How children use questions and help-seeking on academic tasks.

Sections one and two provide an introductory backdrop, yet nevertheless set an important context for the substantive part of the review in sections three to five.

2.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF CHILDREN'S QUESTIONS

"There is hardly any controversy about the importance of questioning" (van der Meij, 1986). Questioning in Western educational culture is taken for granted as an important behaviour for independent learning, almost an indication of healthy development. Dillon (1987) boldly states that:

"Those who question more learn more .. Those who question more act more, bending the world to their purposes in an active reach for mastery." (p 23)

In an essay about the relationship between questioning and intelligence

Sternberg (1987) argues:

"Intelligent people not only answer questions better, but also ask better questions. The time has come to teach not only how we answer questions, but also how we ask them." (p 13)

That questioning behaviour is usually tied to positive learning outcomes is rarely challenged in the literature. Indeed Cazden (1972) focused an entire review on children's questions alone, "because of the obvious importance of question-asking in intellectual life and therefore education.." Research has focused on what kinds of questions are needed, when they should be asked and by whom.

Claims for the importance of questioning are made by educators from a range of spheres, including: critical literacy, comprehension and composing, inquiry learning, and intellectual development.

Critical Literacy

Educators who talk in terms of empowerment of disadvantaged groups and the development of "critical literacy" argue for questioning approaches to learning (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1987; Greene, 1988). Freire describes his approach to literacy teaching and empowerment as "the pedagogy of the question" (Bruss and Macedo 1985). He argues that teachers and students must constantly experience the pleasure of asking questions, and feel the need to ask questions. Freire (1970) writes that otherwise, children "may find themselves thrust into a culture of silence". (p 97) Greene (1988) describes similar fears. "A powerlessness overcomes too many, the powerlessness that stems from wordlessness". (p 476)

Questioning is thus seen to be politically significant. Students need to question to change the status quo which depowers them. The role of questioning in learning for those who support critical literacy or emancipation is not just that it leads to achievement, it has a wider socio-political function.

Comprehension and Composing

Questioning is also seen as important in specific areas of literacy proficiency, such as increasing reading comprehension and recall of text. Recent comprehensive reviews of research discuss what kinds of questions are most effective and at what points in the reading process they are best asked (Wilhite, 1988; Andre, 1987; Wong, 1985). These reviews are related to students' abilities to improve their learning from texts through questioning processes. They report that questioning enhances active processing of prose.

Langer's (1986b) investigations reveal that questioning is an important reasoning operation in the construction of meaning when children read or write texts. Using a think aloud protocol approach, she analysed the kinds of reasoning children verbalized as they dealt with texts. Langer found that 42% of eight year olds' comments as they wrote were questions, which focused on how to get started, what to write about and how to present it. She also found that the fourteen year olds in her sample tended to make hypotheses about the text and the numbers of undirected questions decreased. Children asked more questions during report writing than story writing, suggesting the effects of genre and task on questioning.

Inquiry Learning

The importance of children's questions is also noted by those who advocate inquiry learning. Collins (1988) writes that:

"Skill in question asking and problem finding is critical to all problem solving in science and the arts. We suspect that these are the most critical skills students can learn during their schooling, and that students vary widely in their native ability." (p 44)

Collins also suggests that such skills are transferable and argues that schools need "to teach students questioning skills so that they can learn new domains or solve novel problems on their own." (p44) Similar beliefs underly courses, such as philosophy for children, (Matthews, 1980) critical thinking, (Fraenkel, 1973; Christenbury and Kelly, 1983; Smith, 1984) discovery learning (Hunkins, 1972) and active learning (Nelms, 1987).

An inquiry approach to teaching is espoused by some science educators (Bidduph et al 1986; Zoller, 1987). It is argued that formulating questions is an important part of problem-solving. Rowland (1984) argues that allowing children to pursue their own questions about the curriculum leads to abstract thinking and hypothesising and that children learn that:

"the answers to their own questions were not always straight forward matters of fact to which an all-knowing teacher or parent has priveleged access." (p 59)

Barnes (1976) contends that thinking in the "hypothetical mode" is more likely to occur, when children have opportunities to question each other about aspects of the curriculum in peer groups. Opportunities to question, it is argued, lead to qualitatively different kinds of thinking.

Intellectual Development

Researchers interested in children's intellectual development have also acknowledged the importance of children's questions. Piaget wrote many years ago (reported in Yaden et al, 1989) that "there is no better introduction to child logic than the study of spontaneous questions" because their classification can "throw light on the interest taken at successive ages in one intellectual activity or another." (p192) Piaget claimed that children's questions can

reveal their preoccupations and misunderstandings. Tizard and Hughes (1984) and Isaacs (1930) are critical of Piaget's view that children's questions reveal only limitations in their development. They prefer to see "children's questions as an indication of an active intelligence trying to make sense of the world, a forerunner of scientific curiosity." (p 103) Donaldson (1978) also points to the usefulness of eavesdropping and actively listening to children's questions.

"It is highly informative to listen to the comments children make and the questions children ask when they listen to stories. In this situation a rich harvest of evidence of reasoning may be reaped." (p 55)

Guide books which adapt a Piagetian viewpoint on children's questions, have since become available for parents, such as Formanek and Gurian's (1980) book. They write:

"Questions reflect the predicaments of childhood, and so allow the reflective parent a view of the growing, struggling mind ... Sometimes it might be necessary to learn what children think about the subject and what misconceptions they hold before providing an answer." (p 5)

Both Piaget and Donaldson realize the great potential children's questions have to reveal their current mental states, and provide valuable information for teachers, parents and researchers.

Vygotsky's (1978) work suggests that children's help-seeking behaviour is crucial to their intellectual development. He pointed out that children were always tested to find out what they could do independently, but that another valuable tool might be to find out what children could do with help from an adult or more capable peer. He challenged the usefulness of static measures and is renowned for the idea that "what a child can do with assistance today she will be able to do by herself tomorrow." (p87) Hence knowing the kinds of help a child requires is essential in Vygotsky's view of learning. He developed the idea of "the zone of proximal development."

"It is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers." (p 86)

Thus Vygotsky, along with Piaget and Donaldson, was aware of the importance of children's help-seeking or questioning behaviours. He pointed out that learning occurs in social interaction and looks positively at children's need for help as "functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state." Learning occurs in social contexts with the help of other people and then becomes internalised. Dillon (1988a) argues that children's questions can signal the kind of help they need.

"Every time a student question arises, a child's mind opens to learning. This is the perfect opening for teaching." (p22)

Challenges to The Importance of Questions

Children's questions then, are given much credit. It seems that children's questions are related to critical literacy; comprehension and composing; inquiry learning and intellectual development. This review supports van der Meij's (1986) contention that, little controversy exists about the importance of questioning.

However, while few negative views are to be found, it is important to represent the critical perspectives that do exist. Ennis (1986) in a philosophical paper entitled "Is Answering Questions Teaching?" asks to what extent answering student questions is really "at the core of teaching." He argues that it is too simplistic a view of the process and overstates the role of student questions. He raises the dilemma of who decides which questions need to be addressed in any curriculum area.

Bourke (1986) and Fillion and Brause (1987) report separately that student-initiated questions have been related to low achievement in a small number of studies. However, Bourke argues that the kinds of questions collected in one study of mathematical achievement were restricted to asking for repeats of instructions or actual answers to problems. Fillion and Brause report that a review by Rosenshine (1976) found negative correlations with student achievement, but no explanation or evidence was cited.

Biddulph et al (1986), although advocates of questioning approaches to teaching, also warn that:

"much exploration by a curious child may be internalised and that a questioning child is not necessarily the most curious. The questioning could indicate an anxious child, or perhaps one who has been reinforced to question-asking previously." (p 78)

Hence in this view, children's questions do not necessarily provide a mirror on the child's internal cognitive or emotional state. Even Friere, (Bruss and Macedo, 1985) who champions the pedagogy of questions is wary of noncritical responses to question-asking.

"We ask questions, but often we are not clear why we ask them. Then again, asking questions is an attempt to impress ourselves and others that we have a voice. This can be a kind of pact between teachers and students. Students ask questions and they say they are alive. Teachers feel happy because in asking questions students reveal their interest for the class." (p 16)

Thus, despite all the positive claims for the educational value of children's questions and help-seeking behaviours, there are some warnings about being too easily impressed by the fact of questions occurring. Such utterances need to be interpreted within the educational contexts in which they occur and their value and significance evaluated in terms of the children's history as learners.

2.3 CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT AS QUESTION USERS PRIOR TO SCHOOLING

This part of the review is intended to be illustrative rather than comprehensive. Its inclusion serves to make clear two main findings relevant to the current study. Firstly, studies of children's linguistic development reveal that preschoolers are able to use questions and requests appropriately to fulfil a great variety of functions. Secondly, studies of children's language use at home show that children initiate many interactions with their parents through questions.

Early Development of Question Use

In a comprehensive dissertation, Johnson (1981) deals with the literature about the development of children's questions and the discovery of interrogative syntax. Johnson summarizes the work of Halliday, Ervin-Tripp, Piaget, Searle, and Garvey in relation to children as question users and concludes that:

"By the time they reach school age, children can ask the full range of English language questions. Changes after this age have more to do with cognitive development than development of language terms and uses." (p 184)

Cazden's (1972) review also points to children's early development as question users.

In a study of four children, whose first language was not English, Lindholm (1987) concludes that although the questions were not "syntactically complex," the children were, "able to produce questions with different semantic functions ... and a wide variety of pragmatic functions." (pp 88 and 89) This study suggests proficient English question use in bilingual children.

In a review of research on language acquisition, Lindfors (1987) reports that some children use a "questioning strategy" to learn about language as early as two years of age.

"If a child is trying to figure out the names used to label objects and actions in his world, this strategy would seem to be a particularly effective one, for every time he asks, "What's this?" or 'What's that?' his conversational partner is likely to produce the appropriate label."

Lindfors reports that one researcher, (Nelson 1973) found questioning at age two to relate positively to vocabulary acquisition. (p 54) Garvey's (1984) description of children's talk includes an analysis of what she calls "the facilitation system" – how children learn to make requests and take note of politeness norms. She describes requests for permission and for action. While she shows that young children have many options for making their requests understood, she writes that it is not until the age of seven or eight that "children are able to place the standard options and their variants in appropriate contexts and assign them to appropriate persons in different role relationships." (p 119) However, McTear (1985) reports that even two year old children were more polite in their use of request forms to adults than to peers.

Bruner and Watson (1983) point out that:

"learning to request is not just learning language or even just speech acts. It is also learning the culture and how to get things done by language in that culture." (p 115)

Social rules associated with questioning differ across cultures (Goody, 1978; Heath, 1982a; Boggs, 1972; Hu–pei Au and Mason, 1981). These studies show that the ways in which children are questioned by adults and the norms

governing children's questioning of adults vary across cultures. Goody (1978) points out that questioning patterns in society are tied to relative status.

"Information is most readily obtained from persons in an equivalent status to oneself. That is people ask information questions most readily of those of similar status." (p 38)

She observed how Gonja children learnt to weave and found that they did not ask questions of their teachers at all. Goody explains:

"Whereas we think of questioning as intrinsic to the learning process, the Gonja have virtually excluded it from the training situation." (p 21)

Goody argues that the absence of questions occurs because questioning is intrinsically connected with status and that it would be considered socially inappropriate in this culture for the student weaver to question his trainer. However, she does point out that "children in Gonja freely ask information questions among themselves ... Amongst their peers children of all ages seem to initiate and answer questions without reserve." (p 25)

Heath (1982a) shows that parents from three different communities used questions with their children in different ways. She concludes that,

"A pre-school child who has frequent contacts with individuals of both sexes, different ages and varying degrees of familiarity with his world will learn very different uses of questions from the child accustomed to a small network of family and close associates." (p 110)

Children's use of questioning is a part of what children learn as they live in their culture. More experiences will mean that children learn more uses of questions.

It is beyond the scope of this review to deal with cultural differences in great detail. However, the ways in which children respond to and use questions in their school lives need to be interpreted with an understanding of children's cultural experiences about what might be appropriate.

McTear's (1985) reminder summarizes the key issue.

"The choice of a particular request form is determined by social considerations such as the age and rank of the addressee and the degree of politeness to be conveyed.

Language acquisition appears to be a by-product (and a vehicle) of culture transmission." (p 102)

However, while cultural differences in questioning patterns occur with respect to children's questioning of adults, children across cultures had no problems questioning each other and actually demonstrated a preference for asking peers (Boggs 1972; Goody, 1978). Hence there appear to be no developmental or cultural reasons which would prevent children asking questions of peers on entry to schooling.

Studies of children's initiations of conversations at home reveal that parents welcome their frequent and complex requests. In a study of thirty preschool girls by Tizard and Hughes (1984) the researchers found that the children asked their mothers an average of twenty-six questions an hour.

The authors ask themselves "Why did the children ask so many questions?" and conclude that "After reading the transcripts we doubted whether attention-seeking played a major role." (p 107) In analysing the lengthy questioning exchanges initiated by the children, Tizard and Hughes suggest:

"Advances in children's understandings seemed to depend as much on their own efforts to achieve greater clarity as on the quality of their mother's initial explanations."

Children's persistent questioning around a topic was as helpful to them as their parents' responses. Children's questions prior to schooling play a key role in their search for understanding about their world.

In the home situation, Wells (1981) reports that children ask as many questions as adults do.

"At home there is a close parity between adults and children in the proportion of utterances that are questions." (p 80)

MacLure and French (1981), in a comparative study of home and school dialogue between adults and children, indicate similar findings:

"Just as the child at home has more latitude to ask questions and evaluate and correct his adult interlocutor, so also he has more opportunity to introduce new topics and to attempt to change the topic of conversation." (p 227)

Lindfors (1987) also points out that children's questioning is an important feature of home conversations and that children even begin questioning while they talk in one-word sentences. The value of the preschool studies is that they have indicated how much of home talk is initiated by children in comparison with their caretakers.

Young Children's Questions During Literacy Events

Other researchers have focused on the ways in which children question and initiate discussions during literacy events. In particular, storyreading events have been the subject of a great deal of recent study. Researchers have investigated the roles which the adult and child participants take on.

Early research on parent reading, conducted by Ninio (1980) drew attention to the way mothers questioned their infants about various features of books. As studies showed that early readers and high achieving readers in schools, had usually been read to by a parent, the urgency to know more about the interaction between the parent, child and the text grew (Durkin, 1972; Clark, 1976; Holdaway, 1979). Flood (1977) reports that the number of questions asked by the child is an important component of the parent-child reading episode. He argues:

"It seems that children need to be part of the process; they need to speak, to ask and answer questions, to relate the content of the present story to past experiences." (p 866)

Since 1980, numerous studies have therefore been done to investigate how these story reading sessions help children to become successful readers. Only those studies which relate to children's questions will be referred to here.

Heath (1982b) describes what the children learnt from story reading sessions emphasizing "the authority which books and book-related activities have in their lives." She explains the status of these activities:

"Any initiation of a literacy event by a preschooler makes an interruption, an untruth, a diverting of attention from the matter at hand (whether it be an uneaten plate of food, a messy room, or an avoidance of going to bed) acceptable. Adults jump at openings their children give them for pursuing talk about books and reading." (p 53)

Heath (1982b) demonstrates the ways in which these adults prepared their children for school literacy events by sharing books. While she mentions that children's initiations are encouraged, Heath does not describe the kinds

of initiations they actually make. Yaden et al (1989) however, have recently begun to focus explicitly on children's spontaneous questions during home story reading events.

"Case studies of early readers are nearly unanimous in reporting that these children incessantly request information about what words in books or signs and labels "say," and that, at least in the parent's view, this constant questioning seems to account in large part for these children's precocity in literacy development." (p 190)

Yaden et al (1989) point out that "few studies have considered the nature and frequency of these questions and their value in enhancing the child's knowledge about literacy concepts." (p 191) Parents in this study were asked to refrain from asking questions themselves. Children asked a range of questions about the texts, both print and story related, but their major focus was on the illustrations. Yaden and his colleagues also found individual differences in focus and sophistication of the children's questions. They conclude that the direct channel of information or feedback aids children's literacy development.

Similar research has also been done by Morrow (1987; 1988). Like Yaden et al (1989), Morrow's investigations were inspired by earlier research which had shown that the numbers of questions children asked did predict success on reading readiness scores (Flood 1977) and that answering children's questions during story book reading also predicted reading achievement.

Morrow reports Cochran-Smith's (1984) view that:

"from the types of questions and comments children make during story reading events we can gain insights into the way young children attempt to construct meaning and make sense of text. The process lets us know what children know and what they want to know about the text." (p 94)

Morrow (1987) argues that because the incidence of children's questions and comments increases in one-to-one story reading sessions, such opportunities need to be provided in schools. Her research supports the hypothesis that one-to-one story reading sessions in schools "increased lower SES children's question and comment responses to literature in number and complexity." (p 81)

The concensus of research seems to be that children's questions during story book reading events are positively related to the development of children's early reading. The one-to-one nature of the interactions and the freedom of the child to initiate talk appear to be important to the success of this literacy event. Children, it seems, are guaranteed their parents' undivided attention on such occasions and often control the choice of book and topics for discussion. While adult questions in scaffolding such events have been shown to be important, in preparing children for school literacy events, (Snow and Ninio, 1986; Cochran-Smith, 1984) it appears that the reciprocity of children's questioning rights is also an essential feature.

It seems clear also that children's development as question users prior to schooling is encouraged by parents. Even when the parents' responses are minimal, children seem to persist. Children's questions occur frequently in all cultures and in different socioeconomic populations, although the form, audience and response may differ. By the time children enter schooling they are already well practised, successful questioners in their home contexts.

Indeed some children have already begun "to regulate their own learning by questioning adults in literacy situations". (Morrow, 1988:84, reporting Holdaway). Hence, if questioning is indeed an important aspect of learning, preschoolers seem ideally placed to be successful learners. Questioning has developed without any conscious training or external motivation. Children become so expert at questioning that folklore frequently respects their prowess. What then happens to these expert questioners in the school context?

2.4 THE PAUCITY OF CHILDREN'S QUESTIONS IN SCHOOL CONTEXTS

This section reviews studies which reveal the lack of children's questions in school, the poor quality of the questions which do exist and explanations for their absence.

Children's Questions At Home And At School

Comparative studies of language use between children and adults at home and children and adults at school reveal a bleak picture of children's questioning in the school context. Wells (1981) explains his findings:

"Where the major differences occur, both between adults and children and between settings, is in the proportion of questions and requests – categories of function, it will be noted, that occur only in exchange – initiating position.

At home there is close to parity between adults and children in the proportion of utterances that are questions; at school on the other hand there is a very considerable imbalance, children asking only a third as many questions as at home, and the teachers asking almost half as many questions again as the parents (pp 79–80)

Tizard and Hughes (1984) present similar results and also indicate class differences.

"The working-class girls were much less likely to approach the staff with a question than were middle-class girls ... all the children showed a noticeable reluctance to ask questions of the nursery staff. While they bombarded their mothers with questions, the proportion of questions in their talk to staff was much smaller. This was especially true of "why" and "curiosity" questions. The working-class children were particularly affected in this respect. While half of their questions at home were "curiosity" questions, this was the case with only a quarter of their questions at school; 70 percent of their questions at school were routine "business" questions." (p 217)

Yet in their interactions with their mothers at home Tizard and Hughes found no social class differences in the frequency of appeals for help. Wells, (1986) emphasizes the lack of social class differences in children's talk at home.

"For no child was the language experience of the classroom richer than that of the home – not even for those believed to be linguistically deprived." (p 87)

MacLure and French's (1981) study of home to school transition also revealed that in schools children had few opportunities to question the teachers.

They conclude that unlike the home situation, at school there exists "asymmetry in the distribution of rights to initiate sequences." They summarize the situation in the following way:

"Not only do teachers do by far the largest part of the talking in class, they also ask most of the questions. Questions from pupils are much less frequent and usually concern procedural matters." (p 213)

Wells (1986) supports this view:

"But not only do the children speak less with an adult at school. In those conversations they do have, they get fewer turns, express a narrower range of meanings, and, in general, use grammatically less complex utterances. They also ask fewer questions, make fewer requests, and initiate a much smaller proportion of the conversations (p 87)

While the "difficulty of handling large numbers of participants", is acknowledged, French and Woll (1981) point out that restricted conversation rights are not confined to children's interaction with adults. Adults also curtail children's interaction with their peers.

The small group of British studies reported above present a clear picture of children's minimal questioning behaviour in early schooling. An American study by Slaughter et al (1985) in kindergarten classrooms also revealed that "students asked less questions than expected. Indeed, eliciting student questions on oral discourse did not seem to be a part of the teachers' explicit or hidden agenda." (p 9). Cazden (1972) quotes a similar study by Haupte in a kindergarten situation where children were unable to take on a reciprocal questioning role.

While Heath (1982a) also investigated questioning at home and at school, she focused more closely on the differences in adult approaches to questioning children, rather than on children's questions. She noted what MacLure and French (1981) call "display questions," where teachers call for displays of knowledge to which they already know the answer. She reports that teachers ask questions to which the answers are "labels, attributes and discrete features of objects and events in isolation from their context .." Whereas in the home community, "questions were about whole events or objects and their uses, causes and effects." (p 105) Teachers' styles of questioning were foreign to the children. Children held different assumptions from their teachers about the uses of questions. One can speculate that this difference may make children more wary about the questions they ask in school. Heath (1982a) adds that,

"For Trackton students to succeed academically, therefore, they had to learn to use questions according to the rules of classroom usage."
(p 123)

Heath (1982a) explains that the teacher-parents in her study appeared to teach their own children,

"to ask the right questions in the right places and not to ask questions which seemed to challenge the authority of adults. The children were told:

Don't ask why people are sick
 Don't ask that kind of question
 Don't ask so many questions
 Don't ask why." (p 113)

These teachers reserved their right to use questions powerfully with their own children in the home context. Goody (1978) explains the connection between questions, teaching and power:

"the use of questions in the teaching situation is structured by the fact that the teacher – pupil relationship always tends to be defined in terms of status inequality, with superiority stressed as intrinsic to the teacher's role." (p 41)

Wood (1988) argues that the way questions are used in schools is quite different to the way that are used in everyday life:

"Questions asked in school 'violate' many of these normal conventions. Teachers are licensed by our society (like policemen, doctors and lawyers) to ask questions with the expectation that they will receive answers, even though these transgress everyday conventions." (p 138)

To summarize, comparative studies of children's questioning at home and at school indicate that at school children ask fewer questions than at home, and that those questions are of mainly a procedural or business nature, rather than motivated by genuine curiosity. It appears that the social structure of school situations does not encourage student questioning, despite its theoretical importance. Gilmore (1983) summarizes this ironic situation neatly.

"In school settings, verbal expression and language skills are highly prized and rewardable goals, but talking is probably the offense for which students are most frequently reprimanded or punished – talking too much, at the wrong time, and about the wrong things." (p 236)

The Absence of Students' Questions

Questioning, it seems, is one utterance which is most difficult for children to initiate and sustain at school. Yet the lack of children's questions at school is not a new phenomena. As early as 1949, Austin noted this problem:

"Why do children ask so many questions outside the classroom and so few inside it?" (p 33)

She continues, saying:

"The small child learns that he must to some extent control and suppress his questioning and his demands on the time of the teacher who has many other children to deal with at the same time." (p 33)

Wells (1986) also speaks in terms of suppression.

"Thus are children's enthusiasms dampened and their impulses to question and explore suppressed." (p 89)

However, it is not only in early schooling where children reduce their questioning. Studies across the school age range indicate a generalized absence of student's questions.

Gall (1970) provides a broad historical review of the use of questions in teaching, including a short section on students' questions. She notes that "students have only very limited opportunity to raise questions." (p 715) Gall suggests that children need to be given opportunities to talk about possible lack of understanding and may need training in question-asking skills.

Cazden (1972) in her review of children's questions, focuses on forms, functions and roles of children's questions in education. She comes to the conclusion that the lack of extended units of interaction in which children

can take initiative and responsibility for their own learning, is the normal situation in schools, hence the lack of children's questions.

Both Gall (1970) and Cazden (1972) quote from a range of sources some alarming figures about student questioning in classrooms. Gall (1970) quotes Houston's study of eleven junior high classes, reporting an average of less than one student-initiated question per class period. (p 715) Gall reports similar low frequencies for a number of studies, but does note differences in ratios in some subjects and in some classrooms, suggesting that context may make a difference. Cazden (1972) reports on Suchman's study, indicating 97% of the questions were asked by the teacher. (p 89) Cazden (1972) also quotes the results of a review by Fahey which concluded that children ask less questions in classrooms as they grow older.

Flanders (1970) in a review of the results of the previous ten years of research on classroom talk, discusses not only the quantity of talk, but the quality in talk and refers particularly to questioning behaviour.

"The percentage of all talk that appears as questions by the pupils varies with grade level, subject being studied, and so on, but the range is from about 1 percent to about 3 or 4 percent. It is shocking, however, to discover that less than 20 percent of these infrequently asked questions are thought-provoking questions, most pupil questions ask for clarification of directions or ask for statements to be repeated etc.(p 145). [Reported in Parker (1983)]

In England, the picture seems little different (Barnes, Britton and Rosen; 1969). Barnes asks:

"Why, then do our pupils not actively ask questions that would help bridge the gulf between their frame of reference and that of the teacher?" (p 44)

In a later publication (Barnes, 1976) he continues to identify the same problem,

Her young pupils ask hardly any questions, except for permission to fetch ink from the cupboard." (p 11)

However, later in this book Barnes describes an alternative way of organizing for classroom talk, where children are encouraged to hypothesize, discuss and question. This might lead to the expectation that by the 1980s the situation in schools, regarding students' questions might be quite healthy. However, despite pockets of alternative styles of classroom discourse and distribution of power and responsibility as foreshadowed by Barnes, recent studies suggest that situations in which children talk and question freely are still in the minority.

Three large studies attest to the continuing lack of children's questioning in schools (Van der Meij, 1986; Good et al, 1987; Dillon, 1988a). A host of studies and reviews explain the existing patterns of classroom discourse (Eder, 1982; Parker, 1983; Hull, 1985; Bourke, 1986; Beynon, 1987; Lindfors, 1987; Young, 1987; Cazden, 1988a; Dillon, 1988a; Engelhard et al, 1988; Perrott, 1988; van der Meij, 1988; Baker, in preparation).

In the section that follows the findings from the three larger studies, which focus directly on questioning, are summarized. Next, the findings from the other reports of classroom discourse which have a bearing on children's questioning are described. Then the overall picture of the state of children's questioning in schools is drawn and the features of classroom interactions which have been shown to constrain questioning are listed.

Dillon (1988a) went into six schools and twenty-seven upper secondary classrooms during social studies discussion lessons. Only eight students from the seven hundred and twenty-one students asked a question during the observation of these classes. The topics for discussion included Abortion, The American Revolution, Environmental Pollution, A Racist Trial, Smoking, and Marriage. These eight students asked a total of eleven questions. Dillon emphasizes that even the eleven questions were "sad questions," comprising procedural, conversational, and self-answered items. On the other hand Dillon reports that "questions accounted for 60% of the teachers' talk. The overall rate works out to eighty questions per hour for each teacher and two questions per hour from all the students combined." (p 9) Despite the collection of data on just one occasion from each classroom, Dillon argues that it is representative of "normal practice" and alludes to other studies of classrooms to support his contention. He points out that the teacher and the students are both disadvantaged when students do not ask questions and states that:

"When students do not question the teacher will not know the state of mind of the people he is teaching." (p 11)

Dillon concludes that "it is normal for students not to ask questions," (p 12) because "student questions are fairly excluded by the cycles, rules, and norms of classroom discourse." (p 13) He emphasizes, quite poignantly at times, the way that the teachers' own questioning limited the children's opportunities to ask questions.

In the second large study, van der Meij (1986) conducted several investigations into children's questioning behaviour with elementary school children in third and fifth grades. Van der Meij used questionnaires, interviews and experiments to gather his data. Through these different approaches he learnt about pupils' views about their reluctance to ask questions and seek help. In a review of van der Meij's work (Hunkins, 1987) summarizes one of the key findings:

"80% of the subjects indicated they liked to solve the problem themselves. ... Pupils learn well in their classrooms that becoming autonomous problem solvers is a worthy goal." (p 220)

This adds another perspective to explain the lack of student questions. Not only do teachers not allow time or space for children to make successful bids to question, but pervasive beliefs about the value of independent problem-solving also lead students to suppress their help-seeking behaviours. In this study students also revealed that they were concerned that asking for help might affect future interactions with peers and their teacher in negative ways. Students were reluctant to ask because they preferred to act independently.

In regard to help-seeking, 60% of children also revealed that they hesitated to ask questions if they doubted the competence of the helper. Other reasons for not asking included children's perception of classroom rules which either disallowed or discouraged help-seeking. Children were more concerned about asking the teacher for help than they were about seeking help from their peers. As most of van der Meij's conclusions come from children's self-reports, he does advise that the findings need to be checked in other ways. His major contribution, however, is to identify possible

causes for reluctance to seek help from the child's point of view. The contradiction between wanting to succeed on one's own and yet needing to get help to succeed, obviously creates confusion for children.

In the third large study on questioning, Good and his colleagues (Good, Slavings, Harel, Hobson and Emerson, 1987) state that "little is known about students' questioning rates." They go on to explain that "This study explores the relationship between student achievement, sex, age and student questioning." (p183) Their research investigated the extent to which "the question-asking behaviour of low-achieving students in K-12 classes reflects an increasing intellectual passivity." The researchers observed math and language arts sessions in twenty-two classrooms on twelve separate occasions each.

A key finding from this broad study is that questions diminish with grade level. A similar result emerged from a recent study by Engelhard and Monsaas (1988). Good and his colleagues found that low achieving students asked more questions than their more able peers in kindergarten and first grade and then their questions diminished, apart from a slight rise in seventh grade when they began secondary education. After the first year in secondary school low achieving students' questions fall again and it seems they become less active participants than their more academically successful peers. It is hypothesized that teachers' responses to low achieving children's questions may subtly teach them that it is better to answer than ask. This research does suggest that unsuccessful students learn to be passive in school.

A similar view is put by Finn (1989) who suggests that dropping out of school "is a developmental process that may begin in the earliest grades." Such children, it appears, fail to bond with school and rejection of their questions may be one possible contributor to their alienation. Good et al (1987) fear that "the questioning data imply that students may learn different roles in schools." (p 190) This conclusion seems to support the findings of Wilkinson and Spinelli (1982) that classroom communication can create "a rich-get-richer scenario in which high achieving students who are already effective communicators command and obtain more teacher attention than ineffective communicators." [reported by Good et al, 1987] The outcome is that:

"In subtle ways, then young students may learn that asking questions reflects negatively on them." (p 194)

While the van der Meij, (1986) and Good et al, (1987) studies are important because they provide broad pictures of question asking in classrooms and their conclusions are based on large numbers of students, they do not provide research data about the classroom contexts that discourage or encourage questioning.

How Patterns of Classroom Discourse Discourage Students' Questions

Numerous studies conducted over the last decade and a half, from sociolinguistic and microethnographic perspectives, shed light on the paucity of children's questions by explicating the patterns of discourse that predominate in teacher-learner contexts. A brief summary of those studies is included here.

The major pattern of talk which occurs is described as the IRE pattern. This stands for initiation (by the teacher) response (by the pupil) and evaluation (by the teacher). This sequence is then repeated over and over, maintaining teacher control of the pattern of talk. [see Cazden, (1988a) and Perrott, (1988) for excellent reviews of related research]. Perrott calls this "school speak" and notes its asymmetrical pattern or lack of equality in turntaking between students and teachers. (p 16) She also writes of the "lesson's facade of discussion." (p 55) Her description is reminiscent of Dillon's (1988a) findings of only eleven student questions, and eighty questions per hour from each teacher.

Dillon (1986, 1988a) and van der Meij (1986, 1988) and Wood et al (1980) found that high frequencies of teacher questions correlate badly with children's questioning. Wood puts it this way:

"The more an adult questions a child, the less likely he is to elaborate on his answers, to take double turns or to ask questions of his own". (p 80)

Dillon's book, Questioning and Teaching (1988a) also provides a comprehensive analysis of this sequence and its effects on students' questioning. Many other researchers have identified such asymmetrical patterns (Furlong and Edwards, 1978; Mischler, 1978; Mehan, 1979, 1985; Bourke, 1986; Young 1987; Perrott, 1988).

Young provides a view of the IRE (although he calls it IRF and substitutes Feedback for Evaluation) cycle from the critical theory viewpoint. He found that such cycles account for 60% of all official classroom talk and that "answers to teacher questions" constitute 80% of official student talk (p 129) He points out that such distribution of talk serves to preserve,

"tacit rules for speaking which specify that student answers should be 'what the teacher wants' and that teacher questions should be ... in some sense closed questions no matter how open in form." (p 130)

In the worst light, such cycles can be considered a form of indoctrination, a "specifically pedagogical form of strategic action" (p 130) to get at what the teacher is driving at. Such classroom talk "produces a distorted form of communication in which telling masquerades as dialogue." (p 133)

In such lessons children's talk exists only to preserve an illusion of involvement and really assists the teacher to construct a monologue. Edwards (1987) argues that "classroom talk sets up the controlled transmission of knowledge". (p 218) This worst case interpretation makes Bourke's (1986) statistics even more disturbing. He points out that questions "do indeed take up a significant portion of lesson time," but his research (in Australian schools) showed that 80% of the questions were asked by teachers and 20% by children. He also comments that questions which required students "to grapple with why and how" were rare, about one in two hundred. Kerry (1987) also noted "the paucity of higher order questions" (p 33). The frequency of teacher's questioning serves to rule out children's questioning and directs their responses. In a study of secondary classrooms, Hull (1985) writes:

"I made a habit of noting down pupil questions and comments that seemed voluntary or spontaneous and to bear some relation to the task at hand. Once I had started to look for them it was striking how infrequent they were." (p 112)

Hull went on to explore how teachers responded to the rare genuine curiosity questions and noted how quickly teachers started to talk about "wasting time" and "not getting on." Even when the teacher's initial response to a

student's question might have been a positive acknowledgement of the contribution, the teacher did not allow follow-up dialogue or discussion about the student's question, but quickly moved on to the planned course of lesson. Hence the rare curiosity questions make no impact on the curriculum.

In a recent study by Baker (in preparation) children's earliest experiences with stories in schools are described in a similar fashion.

"The students can be heard both to be answering questions about the stories and to be acknowledging their part as question-answerers in the choreography of a lesson, to be participating in accomplishing a social order." (p 5)

Thus students learn that their role does not include asking questions. When children are given the role of peer tutor, the tutor tends to take over the questioning role. Questioning it seems is an integral part of teaching (Griffin and Mehan, 1981). Hence the removal of children's questions from the academic talk in classrooms helps to define the power relations and social order of schools, while at the same time preserving the illusion of dialogue. As Dillon (1988a) so neatly puts it:

"No one would dream of instituting a rule against student questions; everyone just acts as if there were a rule against them" (p 15)

It is not surprising therefore that teachers themselves are not always conscious of these patterns, nor of the effects they might have on learners. Susskind (1979) found that teachers were unaware of the lack of students' questions. He states:

"The teachers are receiving less than one fifth the rates of SQ [student questions], they estimated as occurring and as desirable." (p 103)

Thus the actual rates of students' questions are much lower than what teachers believe them to be. This group of teachers would not believe the findings and described them "as the standard nonsense produced by ivory tower researchers". (p 103) The teachers continued to believe that the ratio of student questions to teacher questions was 1:1 although the data showed 28 teacher questions to each student question. However, upon tape-recording their own interaction with children, the teachers were forced to admit that the researchers' analysis had been correct, and that the researchers' projection that an individual student would ask only 8.3 questions in all their social studies classes over a year, might also be true.

Thus if teachers are unaware that students do not ask questions, it is likely that they are also unaware that students are afraid to ask questions (Dillon, 1981; van der Meij, 1988). Dillon (1981) explains that there exists:

"a powerful individual self-inhibition and social student norm against student questions, operating at a level perhaps beyond the ken of the teacher." (p 137)

Results from a number of studies combine to suggest that a situation exists that prevents many educators and students from acknowledging the real power forces which drive their interactions.

The reviews and reports summarized here suggest that the rhetoric about children "talking to learn" is not translated into reality in many school contexts.

Dillon (1988a) concludes:

"Student questions enjoy generous place in educational theory but small room in classroom practice." (p 8)

Studies of children's questions have been especially useful in providing a critical view of classroom dialogue. As Susskind (1979) claims, student questions "reveal the extent to which students feel they have the right to influence the classroom discussion." (p 101) Johnston (in press) also sees students' questions as potential indicators of the state of the learning environment.

"A good measure of the health of the teaching/learning relationships might be the frequency with which children are prepared to say 'I don't understand', or to admit as much through their questioning."

Good et al (1987) claim that students' questions can be seen as a primary unit of data to discover students' involvement with school work.

To summarize, it seems fair to say that despite the potential that educators imagine in learning about children from their questions (Piaget, 1959; Donaldson, 1978; Dillon, 1988a) much of the research over the last few decades indicates the paucity of children's questions in classrooms, particular those in which a transmission model of teaching is employed. (Barnes, 1976; Perrott, 1988). The titles of Dillon's recent articles "The Remedial Status of Student Questioning" (1988b) and "A Norm Against Student Questions," (1981) indicate a problem that exists in many classrooms. Yet in the midst of this pessimistic view, researchers have continued to note exceptional contexts, where children asked more questions than in other classes.

Recently research into children's questioning and help-seeking has begun to analyse the interactions which occur in classrooms where the teachers use group work (Stodolsky, 1984) collaborative learning, (Slavin, 1984) peer tutoring and process approaches (Calkins, 1983) and where they negotiate the curriculum with their students (Wells, 1986; Boomer, 1982)

Boomer writes that:

"If schools are to become more powerful institutions of learning, we must change the balance of 'question asking'. The amount of learning is directly proportional to the number of questions asked by the learner. If the teacher is asking all the questions, then by this formula, the teacher is doing most of the learning. Questions will come from learners if they intend and if they get puzzled. The question asking balance will change as the teacher gets more children intending and arranges for them to be well-and-truly puzzled." (p 120)

The following section explores the results of studies from contexts in which teachers or researchers have taken up this challenge and made space for children to question.

2.5 ENCOURAGING CHILDREN'S QUESTIONING AND HELP-SEEKING IN CLASSROOM LEARNING

This section of the review includes two parts. The first part provides a summary of findings about contexts which promote students' questions. The second part reviews research documenting kinds of literacy instruction which encourage students' questions.

Contexts Which Promote Students' Questions

Despite overwhelming reports of the lack of children's questions and requests for help in school contexts, there are, as Good et al (1987) point out, considerable differences in rates of questioning in different classroom contexts. They ask:

"Are there important variations in the way in which teachers structure classrooms that make it easier for students in some classrooms to raise questions?"

Wood (1980) argues that, "It is within an adult's power to determine how conversations develop". (p 81) It seems clear therefore that the communication systems in classrooms do not occur by accident but are constructed by teachers with various amounts of negotiation and power-sharing with students. A number of researchers have begun to investigate how the communication system could be set up to encourage students' questions (Dillon, 1988a, 1988b; van der Meij, 1988; Hunkins, 1972; Barnes, 1976; Fraenkel, 1973; Susskind, 1979; Biddulph et al, 1986).

Dillon (1988a) describes how teachers can encourage questioning by changing the cycles, norms and rules of classroom discourse that prevent children's initiation of talk. He proposes a pedagogy to facilitate student questioning, suggesting that teachers:

"make room for them;
invite them in;
wait patiently for them;
welcome the questions;
and sustain the asking." (p 7)

He provides teachers with specific details of how such conditions might best be achieved and advises that they begin by reducing their own questioning. He confirms that the imbalance between teacher asking and student asking needs to be redressed as a first step. Dillon's formula should not be considered a simplistic answer to establishing contexts where children question. Indeed he warns that teachers' responses to children's questions are critical.

Dillon points out that students may take some time to begin to ask questions, especially if previous experiences of schooling have made them wary of initiating classroom discourse. Several teacher-researchers inspired by the work of Barnes et al, (1969) have also noted that it is difficult to change established patterns of teacher and student talk (Blackie, 1971, Alcock, 1972). Dillon's (1984) advice is to "maintain deliberate appreciative silence." (p 55)

Like Dillon, Perrott (1988) explains that the first step in encouraging children's questions is to ask for them and make space for them to occur. She explains that teachers need to be very sure that pupils do receive their message to ask questions as a genuine invitation, not just a polite offer.

"Note the difference for example, between saying at the start 'Have you got any questions?' and saying 'What questions have you?'" (p 94)

The second invitation to ask signals that the teacher honestly welcomes and expects student questions, whereas the first could be interpreted as a warning that it is almost time for them to begin work. Only the bravest students are confident enough to take up the first kind of invitation.

Perrott (1988) suggests strategies to create contexts which students might perceive as safe environments in which to question. She recommends that the teacher "vacate the floor," and that the usual IRE cycle or 'school speak' needs to be stopped so that children have opportunities to initiate turns. She

also promotes teacher use of inquiry training, deliberate puzzles, "outrageously incorrect points," problems and provocative questions to enhance creative and divergent thinking in students.

She concludes:

"Pupils have little opportunity in the usual classroom talk to ask critical, thoughtful and searching questions. To overcome this teachers can develop a sceptical attitude in pupils, insist that they keep asking until they understand; and remove the fear and threat from pupil questioning." (p 95)

Making safe times for students to ask is a key feature of classroom contexts in which children will openly admit confusion and seek help. A reduction in teacher questioning appears as essential criteria in changing the communication system.

Susskind (1979) notes, however, that it is not only frequency of teacher questions which affects students' participation but the kinds of teacher questions. He argues that children's questions are fostered where the teacher uses:

- 1) a relatively low rate of total T.Q. [teacher questions]
- 2) a relatively high percentage of Higher Order T.Q.
- 3) a relatively high percentage of Discussion T.Q.
- 4) a relatively low percentage of Competitive T.Q." (p 104)

According to Susskind, teachers' questions are not only too numerous but of a lower order, encouraging only rote memory answers from students. He argues that as well as reducing the rates of their questions, teachers need to consider the quality of their questions. They need to examine whether their

questions open dialogue and reciprocated questioning from students, or effectively close down conversations. Susskind (1979) also points out that the extent to which the topic for discussion relates to students' own interests may also affect their curiosity and questioning. Teacher questions which promote competition amongst students are also shown to have negative effects on student questioning. Susskind's research suggests that the frequency and quality of teachers' questions, the topic for study, and norms about competitiveness, all affect children's questioning behaviour.

Biddulph et al (1986) suggest four ways of promoting children's question-asking in the science curriculum. These include:

- "(i) providing suitable stimuli;
- (ii) modelling question-asking;
- (iii) developing a receptive classroom atmosphere and
- (iv) including question-asking in evaluation." (p 80)

The authors explain each strategy in turn. Providing suitable stimuli entails the use of a problem, experiment, interesting materials or data to get children generating questions. They echo Susskind's point emphasizing the importance of modelling higher order and effective questioning. They also emphasize the importance of the classroom context. They suggest that developing a receptive classroom environment ensures that children should feel free to "share their ideas without fear of censorship, criticism or ridicule." (p 81)

Familiar themes, concerning worthwhile, relevant and challenging curriculum, teacher modelling and student safety are reiterated throughout a number of studies. Biddulph et al (1986) add an important dimension when

they suggest "including question-asking in evaluation." They point out one way to ensure that a skill or behaviour is valued in schools, by teachers and children alike, is to test it. Hence raising the "remedial status of children's questioning" (Dillon, 1988b) may involve formally evaluating the questions children pose. Zoller (1987) also reports on research where students' question-asking in chemistry was fostered by making it a part of what was tested.

Hunkins (1972) also argues for the value of taking time to promote and evaluate children's questions. He recommends that children and teachers openly discuss what makes an effective question and work to establish criteria for judging questions. He suggests that peer and teacher feedback and workshop activities on questions may help increase students' questions and enhance their quality. He also suggests that teachers monitor the effects of their own questioning by critically reviewing videotapes of their own performance in lessons. Hunkins is concerned to help children and teachers engage in active critical self-review so that they gain more insight and control over their own learning processes. His strategy is to make questions the focus of curriculum.

Similarly Fraenkel (1973) suggests discussing a taxonomy of questions with the students. He also recommends puzzles and games such as "20 questions" to promote children's use of questions to solve problems. His work is inspired by a similar view to Hunkins – that it is necessary to demystify the questioning process, make it explicit to students, and help students evaluate their own questions.

Another unique way for students to achieve a heightened awareness of questions is for them to become researchers. Heath (1983) describes how she involved school students as co-researchers and helped them to learn how to ask effective questions. She writes:

"They had to be forced into situations in which they had to formulate specific questions to obtain particular bits of information..." (p 321)

She also had them review each others' interview processes. Hence Heath encouraged children's questions by requiring them as a valued school activity and by making time to review their effectiveness.

Boomer (1982) holds that questions can be encouraged where they are given a role in the curriculum and used to help make the connections for students between knowledge, process and product. As a way of negotiating the curriculum he advises:

"teachers and learners together should then ask four questions, and together negotiate the answers

1. What do we know already?
2. What do we want, and need, to find out?
3. How will we go about finding out?
4. How will we know and show that we've found out when we've finished?" (p 140)

Other teacher-researchers from a host of contexts have tried to make students' questions the basis of their programs (Rowland, 1984; Short and Burke, 1989; Jervis, 1986; Howard, 1989; Wallerstein, 1983; Couch, 1989; Queenan, 1986). They have suggested modifying teacher talk both in quantity and quality, particularly teachers' questions. This then makes more space for students to question. These studies also suggest that the absence of competition with peers is likely to promote students' questions. They argue that children's questions need to become an official part of the curriculum content.

Not surprisingly studies of student–student interaction in group work provide evidence that children ask more questions in this type of interaction than in interaction controlled and dominated by teachers. Barnes (1976) explains why this might be so.

"Equal status and mutual trust encourages thinking aloud: one can risk unexplicitness, confusion and deadends because one trusts in the tolerance of the others. The others are seen as collaborators in a joint enterprise rather than competitors for the teacher's approval."
(p 109)

Barnes also describes how the most successful groups operate in the use of the hypothetical mode, where pupils ask questions, "which invite surmise and discussion and ask ruminative questions of themselves and their statements are tentative, exploratory, inviting elaboration by others." (p 67)

"Children in small groups (four to six members) ask better questions than they do in larger groups (twelve to thirty) and alone." (p 93)

However, not all groups work equally well. Webb (1985) notes that teachers and children need to establish clear norms about helping. Webb's work also suggests that status within the small group affects the helping process. So that even though children ask questions more freely in the group situation, some children may remain isolated from their group. She concludes that "only in groups with the same number of boys and girls is the achievement of boys and girls comparable", and that boys perform better in unequal groups.
(p 36)

So while research points to group work as a form of interaction likely to foster children's questions, investigation is needed to discover what actually occurs when children assist each other in groups. A number of studies

exploring this issue will be described in section five of this review (Wilkinson et al, 1981, 1982, 1985; Nelson–Le Gall, 1985; Cooper, 1982a; Webb, 1985). Bourke (1986) calls for such work.

"The probable importance of student–to–student questions, particularly in less formal classrooms, should be investigated as part of the overall pattern of questions asked in classrooms." (unnumbered page)

Literacy Instruction Which Encourages Students' Questions

Insights about the conditions which foster children's questioning and help–seeking have come not only from researchers who deliberately focus on these behaviours. In fact some of the key findings have emerged from attempts to improve other facets of learning. Researchers have unwittingly discovered the kinds of contexts and tasks which support children's questioning. For example, investigators studying writing development and reading comprehension have uncovered student questioning patterns in learning episodes. In other words while trying to explain how to help students improve their writing and enhance comprehension of texts, they have made discoveries about children's questions and help–seeking.

A brief description of studies which relate literacy instruction to children's questioning concludes this section.

During the past two decades the work of Vygotsky (1978) has had a profound influence on a number of researchers interested in the interactions which support children to become literate. Vygotsky believed that all learning is social, in that it initially is done with the support of others and only later internalised and done independently. Bruner (1986) described the way adults helped children to talk and carry on conversations as 'scaffolding'.

The adults provided whatever structures were necessary to make the event work. The themes of 'scaffolding' and Vygotsky's view of learning have dominated recent research in literacy learning [see Cazden, (1988c) and Lehr, (1985) for comprehensive reviews].

However, only the small body of such research which illuminates the contexts in which children question and seek help will be considered here. Graves (1983) writes about the process of "conferencing" to improve children's writing.

Basically children were provided with opportunities to have conversations with the teacher or peers about their current piece of writing. Children were asked questions and were encouraged to ask questions and raise problems they had with the writing. The conference achieved an appropriate time for children's questions, when students did not have to compete for talking time because the purpose of the conference was to voice their questions. Since Graves' work many studies of this form of writing instruction has followed. In some cases the focus has turned to the kinds of questioning and helping that occur in conferences (Calkins, 1983; Strickland, 1989; Crowell, 1985; Cambourne and Turbill, 1987; Allen and Carr, 1989; Nelms, 1987).

The key finding of these studies in terms of this review is that the children gradually begin to ask the questions that their teachers (and in some cases researchers) have asked them. It works like this. At first the questions of the expert adult writer are seen as crucial to the children's writing. Their

questions help the children solve their own problems. Gradually the children are taught how to conduct peer conferences in group and pair situations.

The researchers, previously cited, noticed that as the children began to take more responsibility for conferencing, they began to ask types and levels of questions similar to those which the adults had asked them. The adults' models had been appropriated by the children in working with each other. In some cases children also seemed to have internalized these questions and used them independently to monitor the effectiveness of their own writing strategies and written products. The development of metacognition also seems to have been facilitated. Calkins (1983) summarizes the outcome in the following way:

"We soon found that because we asked children to look back and assess their work, the youngsters began to ask the same things of each other!" (p 137)

She continues:

"It seemed that sometimes when children asked themselves questions, they were not only anticipating their audiences' questions, but also generating their own questions. Instead of filling in gaps in the *presentation* of a subject alone, they were also filling in gaps in their *understanding* of it." (p 140)

Crowell, (1985) and Hubbard, (1989) report similar results. Such questioning was found to go beyond the duration of the research process. One teacher (Hubbard, 1989) reported that the researcher's questions were "incorporated into the classroom structure" and that even in the researcher's absence the children "drive me crazy, always asking, 'What was going on in your head while you were writing that?'" (p 135)

Crowell (1985) points out how this approach is based on Vygotsky's notion of the zone of proximal development, where a social approach to solving writing problems gradually becomes internalised. Other studies report on very young children, five and six year olds, helping each other in similar ways (Branscombe and Taylor 1988; Allen and Carr, 1989).

Investigations into reading conferences, where children question each other about the stories they are reading, report similar benefits (Hansen, 1985; Shanklin and Rhodes, 1989). Other studies report on the value of questioning in dialogue journal writing, where students and teachers conduct written conversations (Staton, 1984; Milz, 1985; Five, 1986; Lindfors, 1988). In these private written conversations students seem to feel safe to pose questions to their teachers.

The scaffolding in the above literacy events, in which student-initiated questions play a vital role also occurs in a different form in certain approaches to improving student's reading comprehension. Students' questioning of each other and a change of pupil and teacher roles are key aspects of reciprocal teaching (Palincsar and Brown, 1986; Weisenbach, 1987; Collins, 1988; Moore, 1988). In this approach teachers help the children to learn how to ask questions about the text. Collins provides a summary:

"Here the teacher starts out asking questions, but then tries to turn questioning over to the students, providing whatever scaffolding the students need to take over the role of questioning." (p 44)

Students are coached or trained in their questioning strategies along with predicting, summarizing and clarifying. Different students take on the teacher's role. Moore (1988) provides a useful review of research into reciprocal teaching and reports on the improvement of children's questions with training. The overall outcomes, he argues, are "improved comprehension scores of students with comprehension deficits." (p 13)

Reciprocal teaching is not the only practice for improving comprehension which entails children's questions. Davies and Greene (1982) review a range of approaches that foster children's active questioning as they read.

They argue that:

"When pupils have the opportunity to control their own question and answer exchanges, the questions which are asked are different in quality and quantity from teachers' or text questions. It is clear that when pupils ask questions, they ask about what they do not know and about what they need to know." (p 167)

They conclude that only students can ask questions which are appropriate to their learning goals. Teachers and text books often ask the wrong questions.

This review of literature indicates that children's questioning increases in quality, quantity and appropriateness when time is made for children to ask, where questioning becomes an official academic task and where the students are deliberately assigned the roles of questioners by the teacher. Where children's open questioning and help-seeking do occur, it is because teachers have constructed communities where the norms, rules and academic tasks encourage children to become active inquirers.

2.6 HOW CHILDREN USE QUESTIONS AND SEEK HELP IN ACADEMIC CONTEXTS

A number of taxonomies, typologies and classification systems have been developed by researchers working in the area of children's questions and help-seeking. The earliest were those put forward by researchers interested in children's cognitive and linguistic development (Piaget, 1959; Isaacs, 1930). However, it is only recently that such analysis has been conducted on children's questioning in school contexts, largely because such behaviour was rare in classroom discourse. Over the last decade and a half, researchers have worked in contexts where questioning and help-seeking have been permitted, encouraged and even required. This section, provides a series of brief accounts of recent studies which have yielded descriptive categories of children's questions. It also summarizes recent research on children's academic help-seeking.

Descriptive Categories of Children's Questions

Teachers and text-book questions are often referred to in a dichotomous fashion, as "open or closed" "higher-order or lower-order questions." Barnes (1969) reviewed children's questions in groups in a similar way, pointing out that only some groups achieved questioning that achieved "the use of the hypothetical mode" (p 67) that comes with an open approach to tasks. His descriptive categories (1969) for children's talk include:

"requests for information for its own sake;
 requests for information to confirm an insight;
 requests for theoretical explanation;
 questions about the method for carrying out the task." (p 44)

Tizard and Hughes (1984) distinguished between different types of questions and requests in nursery school children. They categorized questions and requests in three groups:

- business questions (where ?)
- challenges (why do I have to?)
- curiosity (how and why?)" (p 106)

They also describe questions where children indicate they are puzzled, that is where a child is:

"faced with ... events which seemed discordant with her previous knowledge and experience." (p 106)

They point out that such questions are the kind teachers would want to encourage in schools. They also describe persistent extended questioning episodes where the child's curiosity sustains lengthy interactions. They label these "passages of intellectual search." (p 108) Hence, Tizard and Hughes see questions that show puzzlement and intellectual searches, as those worth striving for in academic contexts. Their descriptions focus on both quantity and quality of children's questions.

Susskind (1969) devised a coding system to cover both teachers' and children's questions. His seven categories include:

- "Procedural eg. What page are we on?
 - Recitational eg. Who is the premier of Russia?
 - Causal eg. If you do X, what happens to Y?
 - Personal eg. Has anyone ever been to California?
 - Affective eg. Do you like ...?
 - Normative eg. Is segregation right?
 - Other ie. a question not falling into any of first six categories"
- (p 134)

Susskind also reveals his preference for questions which reveal genuine curiosity.

Similarly Lindfors (1987) describes a simple framework for analysing children's questions. She suggests that curiosity questions are asked to satisfy the askers, procedural questions to satisfy an external source, and social–interactional questions to initiate or maintain relationships. Hence Lindfors simple system derives from what the question might achieve for the asker.

Lindholm (1987), who adapted Piaget's semantic categories, also produced a pragmatic categorization system for describing questioning development and usage in ESL (English as a second language) students. Her categories include:

"factual information eg. What colour is that?
 personal information eg. What did Ana do yesterday?
 directive eg. Would you like to sweep the floor?
 clarification–linguistic eg. What? Huh?
 clarification–meaning eg. Could you explain what you mean?
 emphasis eg. You wanna see my picture? You wanna see it?"
 (p 68)

Another pragmatic coding system comes from James and Seebach (1982) who divide their data into three categories:

- . information–seeking questions
- . conversational questions
- . questions serving a directive function.

Mishler (1978) combined analysis of both form and function into his investigations. Mishler's sociolinguistic analysis deals with the social aspects of power in discourse use. He looked at types of questions, length of questions and the complexity of responses generated. He looked at natural conversations initiated by children's questions in a first grade classroom. The dialogue unit studied was the question/response/confirmation sequence,

rather than only the questions themselves as the unit of analysis. One revealing finding was that "Responses of children to other children's questions are consistently more complex than their responses to adult questions". (p 286)

Mishler concluded also that "compared with children, adults ask proportionately more closed-type than open-type questions." (p 287) He took a particular view of asking and questioning, arguing that asking puts the asker into a subordinate position, but questioning puts the questioner into superordinate position. As Mishler looked only at questioning his analysis does not include requests for help.

These questioning taxonomies suggest several main features. Most researchers in this area have used a functional or pragmatic approach to children's questions in school contexts. Many researchers have valued the rare curiosity questions over the more common procedural and social questions. However, as Barnes (1969) points out, "even these requests for practical advice appear to function as part of a child's learning, and can give investigators information about it." (p 46)

The Ways Different Children Question and Seek Help

The final part of this review deals with those studies which throw light on the impact of different children's uses of questions and help-seeking behaviours on classroom learning. Even in classrooms where group work, cooperative learning and peer helping are encouraged, children may remain

outside of the help process. Furthermore children may ask only limited questions or request help at a procedural level and so affect their learning outcomes (Smith et al 1988; Cazden, 1988c).

One of the reasons Nelson–Le Gall (1985a) suggests for the lack of research on help–seeking as a positive learning attribute is that:

"Although help is sometimes recognized to be beneficial and necessary, seeking help has been characterized, until very recently, as a degrading activity to be avoided." (p 56)

This is confirmed by van der Meij's (1986) study, in which the contradictions students face between solving problems independently or choosing to get help when necessary, emerged. Van der Meij also points out that pupils see learning as a solitary experience.

Help–seeking may be restricted due to the social dynamics of the classroom (Eder, 1982; Wilkinson and Spinelli, 1983; Good et al, 1987). Studies into classrooms where open help–seeking occurs indicate that low achieving children are often unable to get the help they need. Schwartz (1981) describes this problem. Students adhere to "diverse behavioural patterns that will perpetuate and solidify spirals of academic success or failure." (p 100)

Schwartz (1981) found that during independent study times, academically successful students continued to work seriously and "volunteer to help each other and respond positively to peers' requests for help" (p 106), but "low–track students" shifted their discussion to real life events, issues and fantasies about the future. In other words low–track students failed to help each other academically. When help did occur Schwartz found it was at a level of mechanics and organization.

Other studies have also revealed differences in the quality of help sought and received by different students. As Cazden (1988c) points out there is a difference between "learning a strategy and learning an item." Smith et al (1988) found a similar problem.

"The students were asking questions for the wrong reasons. They wanted the monitors to tell them how to complete an assignment rather than helping them understand how the computer and the word processor worked." (p 53)

Dyson (1983a) also noted that children struggling with literacy, often confined their attention to achieving the surface features of the task.

To return to Schwartz's (1981) findings, there are several key problems. On the one hand low-track students help each other less often with academic tasks, yet on the other when they do help, it appears to focus on completion of a task. This creates problems because as Schwartz explains, "In the classroom, students' peers became their social and potentially educational resources". (p 110) Schwartz argues that top-track students are able to shape classroom discourse and pace their own involvement in it. Her findings suggest that help-seeking then is not just a simple matter of teachers encouraging students to help each other. Help is more or less available to students of different ability groups. Although Schwartz's study compared patterns in homogeneous ability groups, Eder (reported in Good et al, 1987) found that "high and low achievers learn different academic norms, even when they are instructed by the same teacher in the same class." (p 183) Therefore, even when children of mixed abilities work together in

collaborative classrooms lower ability children find it more difficult to get appropriate help. Thus academic help-seeking and help-providing may be influenced by children's academic status within the classroom and this may impinge on future academic achievement.

Nelson-Le Gall and her colleagues (1985a, 1985b, 1986, 1989a, 1989b) have conducted numerous studies in help-seeking with different groups of children. They note the differences between children's success in enlisting and using peer help. They (1989b) describe some children as "mastery-oriented" and other children as "helpless". In another study (1985b) they explain this in detail.

"The child's goal in seeking help may be merely to complete a task without comprehension or mastery as an objective, to avoid criticism from an agent of evaluation, or to avoid the task altogether. Help-seeking may, however, serve a far more constructive purpose, such as enhancing the child's own competence. We therefore underscore a distinction between "executive" help-seeking and "instrumental" help-seeking..." (p 59)

They explain that the child may seek "executive help" in two ways: by focusing on content and asking for an answer, or seeking a solution to a problem of mechanics. However, when a child seeks "instrumental help" the educational situation is qualitatively different. In this case a child seeks an explanation of a process. Hence the "mastery-oriented child" seeks explanations and the "helpless" child seeks answers or solutions. Nelson-Le Gall (1985a) suggests that "only some children are able to overcome obstacles to learning that serve to defeat other children." (p 85)

Cooper et al (1982a) have investigated similar issues. They write that:

"admission to peer-learning exchanges is not as automatic as we might suppose." (p 79)

They conclude that:

"Our observations in both experimental and classroom contexts demonstrate, sometimes poignantly that children differ in their access to one another as resources and in their effectiveness in communicating their learning needs or offering help." (p 81)

Cooper and her colleagues looked at different situations in which children helped each other, the roles taken by different children and their discourse. They found that the ways children negotiate to help each other learn are variable and indicate different status and speaking rights.

Thus the roles and choices of helpers are negotiated within the specific group, according to its unique combination. Webb (1985) makes a valuable contribution in pointing out that helping is as beneficial to students' learning as is being helped. Yet she adds that giving and receiving "terminal explanations," similar to "executive helping" (Nelson-Le Gall and Glor-Scheib, 1986) is detrimental to learning. Hence the quality of the helping situation affects both helper and the person who is helped.

Wilkinson and her colleagues (1982a, 1982b, 1983) have also explored children's communication in small groups from a sociolinguistic perspective, in a number of related studies. Their basic question was how communicative processes are related to ability and achievement. Their conclusion follows:

"Students in the low-ability group were less likely than those in the high-ability group to have their requests responded to appropriately by other students, which probably made it more difficult for these students to complete their assignments." (Wilkinson and Calculator, 1982a:117)

Wilkinson et al (1983) also contribute to the field by their profile of an "effective speaker", that is, a student who is able to elicit appropriate responses from listeners. (p 480) Effective speakers express themselves clearly and directly; they use direct forms designated to one particular listener; they are on task and sincere; they revise their request if necessary. This linguistic analysis adds to the picture of children who are successful helpers and suggests ways in which teachers might help children improve their strategies. By outlining features of effective speakers and the ways in which they operate it is possible to direct other less successful speakers. In short:

"Not only must the individual acquire the structural and functional knowledge that will allow him or her to produce speech, but also, the social norms that govern the use of language to secure compliance from listeners". (p 88)

Wilkinson et al (1983) also emphasize major individual differences in children's capacities to be "effective speakers" in seeking help in small instructional groups. Children's different status, academic ability and linguistic effectiveness all seem to have an impact on their relative success or failure in eliciting peer help in small group work. One further factor, gender difference, still requires more comprehensive investigation.

Nelson-Le Gall (1986), Webb (1985), Gill and Dyer (1987) suggest gender differences in help-seeking and help-giving. The results seem inconclusive and confusing as yet, despite the claim by Nelson-Le Gall et al (1989a) that it is well documented that "boys seek help less often than girls." (p 15)

Gill and Dyer (1987) found that:

"If the questioner was a girl the other girls would supply the answer in a helpful but hushed way, whereas if the questioner was a boy he would disregard the helpful peer comment and insist on a response from the teacher." (p 62)

Webb (1985) reports:

"Students who receive the most explanations tend to be relatively extroverted and usually are male rather than female." (p 35)

The findings of the Good et al (1987) study may be more useful here. They reveal that gender differences altered with age level and classroom context. Such different findings point to the need for more comprehensive research focusing on gender, questioning and help-seeking in a variety of contexts.

To summarize, children's use of questioning and help-seeking in academic contexts occurs most frequently in peer group situations. Children appear to respond to each other's questions in more complex ways than they do to adults' questions, yet their responses are not always appropriate answers. However, not all children are equally successful in seeking help. The kinds of help different children seek and receive is qualitatively different.

2.7 SUMMARY

Van der Meij's (1986) warning that questioning is a complex and diverse area to study, is supported by this review of literature on students' questions and requests for help in academic contexts. However, some conclusions can be made. Most educators take for granted that questioning is integral to

the learning process. Some have pointed out that children's questions can provide useful insights on children's thinking, misunderstandings, interests, attitudes and preoccupations. It is clear that children develop their uses of questioning prior to schooling and are able to use questions for a variety of purposes.

In spite of this for many children the use of questioning in schooling represents a new and sometimes alienating experience. Children's self-initiated questioning and help-seeking in schools are rare events. The predominance of the IRE cycle where the teacher centrally controls classroom discourse, leaves little space for student questions. Students are frequently afraid to ask questions as strong norms deter them. Apart from the teachers' dominance in classroom talk, students also suppress questions because they subscribe to the goal of individual independent learning.

Nonetheless, some classroom contexts and some teachers do encourage children's questioning and help-seeking. The kinds of contexts which promote student initiation of these behaviours include safe environments which are collaborative and cooperative, rather than competitive. The teacher must be prepared to swap roles and reverse the asymmetrical communication system which normally applies.

Even when teachers orchestrate such contexts different students are more or less able to capitalize on what this new system offers them. In fact high achieving children seem better able to use this system for their own purposes than do low achieving students, who, presumably need more help. Hence even in this more equitable situation where the teacher affords students greater speaking rights, some students continue to be disadvantaged and remain outside the academic helping processes or receive only limited assistance.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

It is a challenging time to be carrying out research in education. Numerous debates abound, concerning what kinds of research are most appropriate to investigate educational issues. Indeed, little consensus exists even within similar traditions (Jacob, 1989; Atkinson et al, 1988). Gage (1989) writes of paradigm wars. Arguments centre on the methodologies, purposes, questions and validity of different kinds of educational research. [see Comber, (1988b) for a detailed review.]

However, what is clear is that researchers need to make their particular theories and beliefs explicit, so that research can be judged in the light of what it has been designed to do. Furlong and Edwards (1986) warn that:

"Theory will still dictate what questions are being asked and what categories are likely to emerge in the analysis. It is essential therefore that the researcher makes explicit the theory that guided his observations and that provided the basis for his particular selective record of events. If he fails to do this, his account will seem more "open" than it is, the observations being so impregnated with interpretation that they can support no other view of events than the one offered." (p 54)

The first part of this chapter is devoted to making explicit the amalgam of influences and theories which led to my particular methodological decisions. The remainder of the chapter provides specific details about how the research was conducted.

3.2 KIND OF STUDY

The research was designed to provide an in-depth analysis of the ways in which children in one classroom asked questions and sought help during language arts time. It was hoped that the research would provide information that would be useful to the teacher, Marija Baggio and to other researchers interested in literacy instruction and classroom discourse. The study focused on one type of utterance – child initiated spontaneous help-seeking or questioning. The entire conversation, classroom context and relevant academic tasks were all recorded in detail. The participants' perspectives of literacy events, both teacher's intentions and learners' interpretations, were sought.

Analysis of children's questions and help-seeking utterances was done from a functional point of view taking account of specific social and academic contexts. In other words, the researcher tried to understand the children's immediate intentions in asking questions or in seeking help. Marija and I used the ongoing data analysis to assist children to participate more successfully in the curriculum. This report describes and analyses the contexts in which children questioned and sought help, the ways in which children questioned and sought help, and the role of such behaviours in the learning of individual children.

This section was originally called, "research traditions which influenced my methodological decisions". However, as I began to write about ethnography, action research, sociolinguistics, collaborative research, emancipatory research and case studies, I realized that I was influenced by each of these related approaches to educational research. I was in fact influenced by

individual researchers from within the naturalistic, interpretative paradigm and the critical emancipatory paradigm. I have attempted to use specific insights from a number of related, but different, kinds of research. Because the research was related to a number of fields it became necessary to understand what these approaches might offer in this study before deciding what kinds of data gathering and analysis would be most appropriate to the research questions. While the research is not "a pure ethnography" nor "action research" it is certainly not an eclectic amalgam. Rather what I have sought to do is to learn from experienced researchers and expand my ability to see and hear afresh, and at the same time to stay realistically critical.

My methodological decisions are based on the purposes of my research, my commitment to the informants in my context, my role in teacher development, and my curiosity about children's learning. The methodology has been shaped by the practices and theories of the following educational researchers:

Shirley Brice Heath, Judith Green, Anne Haas Dyson, Carole Edelsky, Robert Walker, Patti Lather, Stephen Kemmis.

While there are other researchers whose work has influenced mine, these were the voices I kept hearing as I made decisions about my research. These were the writers whom I consulted throughout the process and whose works I read and reread. These researchers represent ethnography, case study, action research and emancipatory research in terms of methodology. Their fields include sociolinguistics, feminism, early literacy, and the politics of schooling. What they have in common is respect for the people with whom they share the research enterprise, their informants – teachers, children, adult learners, or

parents. They also share a preference for research which is valuable to the participants as well as the broader educational community. They demonstrate their commitment to the understanding of educational contexts from a range of different participants' views. They write about their data in ways that allow readers to reconstruct a multiperspective interpretation of the events reported.

In one sentence my methodology could be described as a case study approach, with researcher acting as a participant observer. However, I believe that this denies the complexity of the role which I took and the endeavour on which the teacher and I embarked. By briefly examining the specific influences of the key researchers I will demonstrate the kinds of methodological decisions I made and the reasoning behind them. A summary of my own stance as a researcher will follow.

3.3 EDUCATIONAL RESEARCHERS WHO INFLUENCED THE METHODOLOGY

Shirley Brice Heath

From Heath (1982a, 1983) I learnt what an ethnographer does, the value of longterm studies and the importance of analyses of school and home communities from an anthropological basis. I realized the need to know about the ways in which different cultural groups approach learning and use language and literacy. I learnt the importance of living within the culture in order to understand it. I found Heath's distinction between "ethnographer learning" and "ethnographer doing" useful in deciding how to make use of the data. From Heath, I learnt that the kinds and uses of literacy we engage in are culturally constructed and valued. I discovered what a "total picture" of schooling in a

community might look like. In Ways With Words (1983) Heath managed to recreate the context by using, respectfully, the words of her informants and the detail of their everyday lives. From Heath, I heard about the possibility of having children act as researchers.

After reading Heath I decided that ethnography was the kind of research I would like to do. However, it was reading her work that made me realize that my research would not be a pure ethnography. I couldn't live in the culture. I had a fulltime job somewhere else. I had a year as a maximum period for data gathering. My total time commitment was restricted to two mornings per week. Nevertheless my research makes use of a number of ethnographic methods. Like Dyson (1983a) I would describe this study as "ethnographic in spirit".

My understanding of ethnography through the work of Heath led me to make the following methodological decisions.

I chose to work in a site where I already had a history with the informants and knew something of the values of the school teaching community. I collected information about the children's ages, home language background and previous school success. The teacher and children were invited to become co-researchers, to collect their own data and to give their own perspectives and interpretations on both their data and mine. I observed, noted and described everyday activities, tasks and events. I collected artefacts made by the children and their teacher to get another view of their perspectives.

I adapted my approach in consultation with Marija, the collaborating teacher, by having open review sessions with the class, focusing on specific children for a period of time and using a group interview.

I scrutinized my data looking for patterns and incongruities to provide an analysis which does justice to the ways the children sought help.

I described the teacher, the children, the tasks, status, expectations, rules and routines in this classroom, so that the questions and requests for help could be seen in context. This report attempts to provide the reader with the informants' perspectives on ongoing events.

Hence in data collecting, analysis and in writing about this study I was guided by the goals of ethnography through the insights of Heath in particular.

Judith Green

Green's ability to synthesize a large body of sociolinguistic and ethnographic research and spell out key features about classrooms as research contexts, provided me with an understanding of the progress and insights of interactive naturalistic classroom research. The comprehensive "steps to be considered in conducting an observational research study" (Evertson and Green, 1986, p.206) were useful both in planning and reviewing my investigation.

The Green and Smith (1983) review of studies of teaching and learning as linguistic processes provided me with a sense of the varieties of observational research and the importance of the context, purposes and history in research. As I looked and listened in one classroom for children's questions and requests for help, I was instructed by Green and Smith's sociolinguistic conceptual framework of classroom processes.

- . "classrooms are communicative environments;
- . contexts are constructed during interactions;
- . meaning is context specific;
- . inferencing is required for conversational comprehension
- . teachers orchestrate different participation levels" (pp 355–362)

This conceptual framework led me to collect intensive data on the contextual detail of each lesson: the teacher's language behaviour, introduction, blackboard notes, charts, children's physical demeanour and attitudes. Because I wanted to understand the teacher's and the students' frames of reference, shared rules, routines and expectations, I collected the teacher's written programme, spoke to her about her intentions and I listened, watched and talked with the children to get their view of classroom events and tasks. In short, I tried to work out the communicative environments that were being constructed.—This approach to research seeks to "understand how teaching and learning are realized through face to face interaction among participants" (Green and Weade, 1987:4). Classrooms are described as communicative environments where students' perceptions and tasks and teachers' perceptions and tasks provide each with a frame of reference for interacting that all participants need to continually monitor as they construct lessons (Green and Bloome 1983).

Anne Haas Dyson

Dyson helped me to understand what I had suspected but had not clearly articulated. She describes the gap between the school curriculum and child mind (1983a), that is the difference between the teacher's intentions for particular tasks and the child's perception of what is meant. Dyson shows that in any literacy event such as copying from the blackboard (1983a) or sharing written stories (1985) children may have unique understandings of what an activity means. This is dependent on their intentions, their work style and the support system of the classroom. Dyson's emphasis is on understanding individual learner's perspectives in literacy events, and on the multiple realities of literacy events (1985).

In this research I have sought to understand children's unique responses to classroom literacy tasks, revealed by their questions and requests for help. Dyson has alerted me to the need for viewing literacy tasks in progress and listening to children's conversations as they work. (1983b) Her comparative case study approach to answering the research questions (1987) led me to conduct detailed analyses of the behaviour of several contrasting children. As the research progressed I became particularly interested in the questions and requests of several children. Like Dyson's work, my investigation focuses on understanding learners' views by listening as they talk about literacy tasks.

Carole Edelsky

It was Edelsky, Draper and Smith's report (1983) that led me to decide to work with a highly successful language arts teacher in a collaborative fashion. Their paper "Hooken' 'Em In At The Start of School in a 'Whole Language' Classroom", made me realize the usefulness of analysing what effective teachers do and how they do it. I could see parallels between Karen Smith, their successful sixth grade teacher, and Marija Baggio, the collaborating teacher in my study, particularly in the ways each of them established clear ground rules for behaviour.

Edelsky et al, emphasized the value of observing in classrooms early in the school year before rules and routines become almost invisible and commonplace. This led me to observe Marija setting up her relationships with the children and helping them to relate to each other. These ground rules for appropriate interaction and establishment of teacher and student roles and routines would affect the ways in which the children looked for help.

Robert Walker

Walker (1980) uses the analogy of a field researcher being like a documentary film maker. He cites the occasion of a film made about a starving family and points out that the family was still starving when the film maker left. As I read Walker's analogy I made a clear decision. If my research uncovered distress, unfairness or inequality, I would not simply record it in secrecy, describe it in detail and publish it eventually. I would provide the teacher with such information to enable her to take immediate action. My role as a researcher was not to sit back removed from the situation, but to become part of the context and make a difference, in collaboration with the children and the teacher.

From Walker (1980), I also learnt the importance of trust in conducting case study research – trust based on:

"a style of educational research in which methods and procedures are explicit and visible" (p. 52)

I was open with Marija and the students, so that they knew exactly what I was doing. In a lesson on the 23rd February 1987 we had a class meeting where I described what a researcher does, what I wanted to find out, what I wanted from them, why I was interested in their questions and what I hoped to learn. I invited the children to ask questions or make comments. I asked for their approval to work in their classroom. One child asked me what I actually wrote down in my book. (I had spent two lessons in the previous week as a nonparticipant observer). This gave me the chance to read the actual transcript I had recorded of a group of children in their classroom. Hence the children knew exactly what I was doing and the sorts of notes I made. Marija explained to them how she was hoping that my being there would "help her too, to know how things were going".

Another contribution that Walker (1980) made to my thinking was the idea that if research methods and processes are visible to the participants, they have the option of continuing the research in the absence of the researcher. He explains:

"that the method of research should through the process of the research, become available to those being studied, so that when the project terminates they will have not just a copy of the report, but access to the skills which allow them to continue to research unaided" (p. 43)

By making my own field notes available, I had begun this process. My next decision was to invite Marija and the children to keep their own field notes. I provided memo books for each child for this purpose and Marija set aside an exercise book to record her observations.

Walker also helped me to conceptualize the kind of research approach my question necessitated. While I could not do a full scale ethnography, I could do what Walker describes as "condensed fieldwork" where useful knowledge was produced throughout the research through explicitness and negotiation. This happened in a variety of ways in this study. The most common was that I simply kept Marija informed about what I had heard individual children saying and my understanding of what this might indicate. We would then discuss possible interpretations and action.

At other times we reviewed a block of lessons and discussed more general feelings about groups or the class as a whole. On two occasions Marija and I organized a class meeting to deal with what the research had revealed. On the 30th April 1987 we talked about why children avoided asking questions and on the 4th June 1987 we discussed the children's difficulties in doing library research. On each occasion the teacher, children and I were able to brainstorm and select useful solutions and strategies. The idea of useful "condensed fieldwork" contributed to this study, because it meant there were immediate tangible payoffs for the teacher and the students.

At the end of the formal data collection early in term three Marija announced her intention to continue with similar research the following year.

"I am going to keep up with this and when I go back teaching next year, I am just going to do this type of journal for all sorts of questions ... Get a bigger book for this, give them one of those to write their own questions, and call it a journal or whatever."

Marija was beginning to plan to use valuable research strategies in her future teaching.

Patti Lather

Patti Lather (1985) writes about "emanicipatory" research which is openly ideological and intends to empower the participants. Lather echoes many of the themes in Walker's work, but stresses even more strongly the use of research to bring about educational change for disempowered groups. Where we found children who were not asking questions, or getting the help they needed, we identified them as students whom Marija and I made special efforts to help. Thus the research did not merely record and interpret problems, but instead openly addressed situations in which children's learning was at risk. As a result, Marija listened actively to children's questions and requests for help, and encouraged the more reluctant children.

Marija began to find that the research helped make her aware of individual children. She said that one of the best things about listening to children's questions was that:

"No one escaped you".

She realized that some children become invisible and live with all kinds of confusion in the classroom context. She established strategies to change classroom values so that voicing problems uncertainties and questions publicly, was considered an acceptable behaviour by both teacher and children. Like Lather, Marija and I wanted to know "reality in order to better transform it."

(p 33)

Stephen Kemmis

In 1983, Carr and Kemmis published Becoming Critical: Knowing Through Action Research. Their influence led many local teachers, advisers and lecturers to try action research. Action research became the basis of inservice courses, an element of further degrees and national projects. Action research became a major way of obtaining and sharing knowledge between practitioners. Whilst still a classroom teacher I heard Kemmis speak about action research and became involved in using this approach. I conducted my own action research studies, identifying a problem, taking action, watching and documenting what happened and examining the results with my colleagues. Later as an adviser and lecturer I helped other teachers to conduct action research.

From Kemmis I learnt about the importance of teachers conducting their own investigations on their own questions and creating their own knowledge. I learnt about the importance of having critical colleagues to help to examine the data. I learnt that educational research needs to be about the real concerns of teachers in actual contexts. These principles led me to find out the teacher's concerns and identify a topic that was of practical use to Marija, her students and other classroom teachers.

Summary of Influences

It is important to understand major research paradigms and traditions, yet as a novice researcher I found it equally useful to try to get into the heads of individual researchers. I read their essays, their books and their reports to work out how they functioned and on what basis they made their decisions. Their continued expertise helped me to establish a clear and appropriate stance from which to conduct this investigation.

My research methodology was shaped by the insights of these key educational researchers. The result is that my methodology is unique and deliberate.

However, the following principles which this collection of researchers have in common have guided my decision making throughout the study:

Explicitness

I have tried to make my purposes, questions, processes, data and interpretations explicit throughout.

Usefulness

I have framed and investigated questions which not only satisfy my personal and professional curiosity, but are important to practising teachers.

Emancipation or Improvement

Where the enquiries revealed inequities and problems for the learners, Marija and I worked out changes which might solve their difficulties. The status quo was not regarded as sacred when students' interests were at stake.

Meanings Exist in Contexts

In writing I have tried to provide an account which makes the multiple realities of the participants in the events clear.

Informants' Voices

I have endeavoured to let the informants create the picture in this report, through the use of verbatim quotes and artefacts.

Readable Research Reports

I have deliberately tried to use language and organizational features to increase the ease of reading. My intention was to make this report accessible both to teachers and educational researchers.

Having laid out my principles and intentions. I will now detail the decisions I made, the procedures I used and the role I took.

3.4 SITE AND INFORMANTS

The site chosen was a suburban primary school in a predominantly residential suburb. Thirty-nine percent of the school population were of non-English speaking origins, mainly of Greek and Italian backgrounds. The socio-economic status of the school's population ranged from low to middle class. The study took place in one classroom with one teacher and twenty eight children, fifteen girls and thirteen boys. The class was a grade four/five composite, with eleven children in grade four and seventeen in grade five. The children were aged between eight and eleven years of age. Fifteen of the children had at least one parent who was born in a country other than Australia and spoke English as a second language. The class comprised children of mixed ability and included one child who had a mild intellectual disability.

This class proved to be typical of this school population, with a mixture of economic, social, and cultural backgrounds. Although all the children were observed in the course of the investigation, three children were studied in more depth in the second part of the study. These children, Rachael, David and Mark, were selected for further observation and analysis because they used questions and sought help in contrasting ways.

The teacher, Marija Baggio was in her seventeenth year of primary teaching and in fact her twelfth at this school. Her expertise in innovative approaches to assessment, training the children in social skills and classroom management were recognized by her peers and in the local educational community.

I had met Marija in 1985, and known her professionally through inservice courses I conducted in which she participated. We shared mutual respect, similar views of learning and literacy and optimism about children, teaching and learning. These features allowed us to develop a collaborative, honest working relationship immediately we began the study. As a novice researcher I appreciated working in a context where I was trusted and valued. We could avoid the fears and reservations that occur when researcher and teacher are strangers.

3.5 DURATION OF THE STUDY

Data collection began on February 16th 1987, the first day of the third week of the school year, and concluded on the 18th December 1987, the end of the last term of the school year. During the first semester I spent two language arts lessons in the classroom each week, from 9.20 am to 10.40 am. This was immediately followed by a recess break which I spent in the staffroom talking with Marija. During the second semester I continued to visit the classroom, and to talk with Marija once a week. In those visits I focused on the questioning of two children only and obtained Marija's responses to my analysis and interpretation of the data.

Analysis of data was conducted over 1988 and 1989. In a sense the study continued until the final report was completed, as the teacher read and provided response to each draft of this document, throughout its production.

3.6 DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS

Questions and Requests for Help

As the purpose of this study was to investigate the occasions on which children sought help or raised questions, a syntactic definition of the terms "questions" and "requests" was not used. All utterances children used to initiate or maintain discourse in order to elicit helpful responses, were recorded. Therefore statements such as, "I wanted you to help me," or "I don't know what to write about," were recorded as requests for help. The terms "questions" or "requests" are used interchangeably to refer to any verbal sequence where a child has clearly sought help or specific answers.

Literacy Tasks

In this study a literacy task was any assigned classroom task where the outcome or process involved reading or writing. Therefore, a group discussion on how to conduct research on polar bears, was defined as a literacy task. The group discussion required the students to imagine the way they would divide the task, work out roles and devise a list of questions to explore the topic. Other literacy tasks included writing self evaluations, writing Dear Diaries, listening to the teacher read stories, writing different endings to published stories, drawing a flow chart to describe their writing processes, enacting favourite picture books, and designing their own language arts contracts.

Literacy tasks can take a huge variety of forms. Some may last several minutes and others may be accomplished over weeks or months. The notion of "literacy event", underlies this research. A literacy event is defined as "any action sequence, involving one or more persons, in which the production and/or

comprehension of print plays a role" (Anderson et al, 1980). In this research I was interested in any events which related to the use of reading and writing in the classroom. However, I preferred the term literacy task because it matched more closely with the teacher's and students' views of the curriculum. One literacy task was made up of a myriad of literacy events. For example one literacy task, as seen by the teacher and children was to complete their language arts contract. The contract described the task which included many parts. One child's language arts contract is shown below. (see Figure 3.1)

Figure 3.1 Work Required Contract

NAME: _____

1. Draw a diagram after discussion about the steps in writing. _____

2. After discussion make a personal diary of the steps in my writing. _____

3. I want to be able to:
use capital letters,
use punctuation,
not to make it boring,
write of other people
4. I am going to:
write a story
write some poems

Signatures _____

Comments:

The first two steps were not negotiable tasks and were set by Marija. Points three and four involved the child setting goals and choosing tasks.

Another literacy task requiring many different literacy events was conducting research or projects. Briefly this involved setting a topic, writing questions, reading resources, writing answers and presenting what had been learnt to the class. The set literacy tasks provided the academic context from which children's questions emerged.

3.7 DATA COLLECTION, ANALYSIS AND REVIEW

Data Collection

Three kinds of data were collected: field notes, transcripts and summaries of audio and videotapes, and teachers and children's artefacts. (see Summary in Figure 3.2 below)

Figure 3.2 Summary of Data

-
1. Field notes
 - a) researcher's field notes
 - b) teacher's field notes
 - c) children's field notes

 2. Transcripts and Summaries
 - a) one audiotaped interview with Marija
 - b) two videotaped interviews with Marija
 - c) two videotaped interviews with students
 - d) videotapes of two language arts lessons
 - e) audiotape of six lessons of small group

 3. Artefacts
 - a) parents' records of children's questions at home
 - b) teacher's programme, reflections, reports, contracts
 - c) children's self evaluations, writing, achievements lists.
-

The researcher's and teacher's field notes and transcripts of children's conversations from audiotapes provided the primary data for analysis. Other sources of data were used to provide extra related detail and weight to the findings. Interviews, videotapes and artefacts from parents, children and the teacher were used as sources of triangulation, to enhance the credibility of research findings (Woods, 1986; Mathison, 1988) For example, children's writing confirmed insights about individuals which had emerged from their questions. A detailed summary of the data follows.

Researcher's Field Notes

I observed thirty language arts lessons and recorded the teacher's talk (including instructions, anecdotes, responses etc.), explanations of set tasks and the children's questions and requests for help. I copied blackboarded notes and collected copies of work and contracts. Although my main focus was on the children's questions and requests for help I needed to record as much contextual information as possible to be able to understand the function and meaning of the children's questions. I sat at the same table each language arts session, and as the children changed places each week, I worked with the children who sat at my table. Between four and seven children sat at the table where I was based. I recorded all conversations in which I observed a child seek help or ask a question of the teacher, peers or myself. I recorded questions or requests verbatim and if I was unable to hear it all, I checked with the child a little later in the lesson. I recorded who they asked and what kind of response they received.

After each lesson Marija and I discussed what I had recorded and our initial interpretations. At the end of each session I left the school and wrote descriptive summaries based on my field notes and discussions with Marija.

Teacher's Field Notes

Early in the project I encouraged Marija to keep a journal including any reflections or jottings about children's questions or difficulties. However, through Marija's participation in a teacher development course on writing I knew that she was a self-confessed avoider of writing. I didn't want to make her keeping field notes a condition of the research if it added to her stress and was done only for my benefit. This meant that Marija kept irregular field notes and only on occasions when it occurred to her to do so. In the third and fourth terms Marija kept notes on two focus children. Her field notes usually included short conversations between her and a student, initiated by a question from the child. Her notes were brief, but included direct quotes of what was said. Usually they acted as prompts or reminders to Marija and during our discussions I added the extra contextual information as we talked.

Marija kept a class field notes book called Talking Circle. When the class had a meeting about a particular topic, for example difficulties with project work, Marija acted as scribe and recorded the contributions of various children so that it could be referred to on later occasions. While Marija's field notes did not form a major part of the data for analysis, she indicated that she saw the value in this kind of documentation by using it with the class.

Children's Field Notes

On February 25th when I explained to the class about my research I also issued them with small memo books and invited them to record their questions, both the ones they actually asked and those they wanted to ask, but didn't. I explained to the children that I was interested in any occasion when they needed help and that it would be useful for me if they wrote down what kind of task they were working on. The sheer physical demands of writing for this age group meant that keeping regular field notes would have added an arduous task, if I had insisted children keep them thoroughly. Initially the children recorded them with enthusiasm. Then they were forgotten or simply became a chore to do. Once I noticed a child show confusion about which book she should be writing in, her field notes, her writing journal or her daily diary. Therefore I did not insist that the children use their book. However, the field notes booklets served a real purpose in initiating the study and legitimizing the children's questions and their co-researcher status. Distributing the field notes book indicated that I took their contributions seriously.

On the 5th of May I collected their booklets, recorded their questions and wrote back a brief comment and thank you to each child. From this time the children's field notes died a natural death. Some children continued to use their field notes booklet throughout the year to record their research questions, for example on May 13th, Michael wrote:

"What is radiation?
Where does it come from?
How do we use it?
Who discovered it?
Is it safe?
In what form does it come in?"

To summarize, the children's field notes did not become a major data source in this research. However, they involved the children in the research process, and helped to change the status of questions and problems in this classroom community.

Interviews with Teacher

Early in term one I made a videotape of Marija discussing the children in her class, and presenting her views of teaching and learning. Marija described her aims and intentions and indicated the ways in which she attempted to monitor individual children's progress in her classroom.

Early in term three I interviewed Marija about our research progress. As I wanted to be able to respond to her directions in the interview, rather than use only my set questions, I decided to audiotape it for our future reference. This was transcribed, typed and summarized, and a copy was provided to Marija.

A third interview was recorded during third term as a follow up to a group interview with children. In this discussion I gave Marija feedback on the children's perceptions of current contract work and what they felt they had struggled with or achieved. Marija gave her interpretation of each child's performance in the classroom at the time and any developments or changes she had noticed. This discussion was videotaped as a recorded example of the kind of debriefing, sharing of data and discussion Marija and I regularly undertook.

Interviews with Students

Early in first term, I videotaped a formal interview with three students from Marija's class, and one parent. Although this interview was not a central part of the data collection, it provided an example of the ways in which the children were often asked to self-evaluate and review performance in Marija's classroom. The videotapes constitute a permanent record of participants' perceptions and have a triangulation function when added to the central field notes for analysis.

A second interview was conducted in third term, with six student participants. The group included children of non-English speaking background and represented a range of academic abilities in Marija's classroom.

I asked the children to tell me what it was like to be a student in Marija's classroom. I was interested in the children's perceptions of life in this class after eight months of the school year. I used a group interview because I thought that the children might be more relaxed and vocal if surrounded by their peers. My close observation of these children had given me a view of their experiences, achievements and struggles as readers, writers and learners, but I wanted to hear their comments. I also wanted their views on whether it was easier to admit questions and problems now, rather than earlier in the year, and why. The children watched a replay of this video to check whether there was anything they wanted to add or change. I had intended to show it to the rest of the class and add their comments, but the six children were not happy for me to share it more widely and I respected their opinion. The children's analysis of their classroom life provided a unique contribution to my understanding of the classroom context.

Videotapes of lessons

Videotapes were made of two language arts lessons as a permanent record of the ways in which Marija interacted with the students as a whole class. I wanted to record in particular her verbal messages and her use of body language. The videotapes show Marija introducing the lesson and her guided discussion with the whole group about the task. They also show one group of students talking as they work. These gave me a record I could refer to and compare with my own analysis of the field notes.

Audiotape of a small group

A group of four children, initiated an independent project on countries of the world. The children invited me to watch and listen to them as they worked in the library. As they continued to work independently on their task over the next four weeks, they audiotaped their discussions for me, without any further reminder from me. One child in particular was keen to "star" in my research and he often invited me to listen to their tape.

The transcript of their discussions as they worked on their collaborative project proved to be a rich source of data from a teacher-free context. The children worked on a self initiated task in a collaborative way over an extended period, without teacher intervention, in a small room in the library. The questions and requests for help made during this time were analysed along with my field notes.

Parents' Records

In the third week of February we wrote a letter to the parents about the research and invited them to participate by recording their children's questions about school work at home. Sixteen proformas were collected from parents. Although only half the parents recorded their children's questions, many parents verbally gave their support to the study and continued to check our progress with Marija.

Although this data source did not fulfil the potential we had hoped for, it was a useful way to inform parents of our work and let them know they could contribute. At Baggio's Bistro, a restaurant run by the class and Marija for one day at the end of the school year, many parents talked readily with me about Marija as a teacher, their children, and their progress over the year. The explicit letter and invitation to parents meant that the research was visible and parents indicated their trust in the project during their open discussions about their children. Although this data did not become a separate focus, it showed that some parents were eager to become involved in such a project and it suggests that this approach may be useful to pursue in further studies. Regular parent meetings with teacher and/or with me would have been essential to keep up the impetus and involvement of using parents as co-researchers.

Teacher's Programme, Reports, Reflections and Contracts

Although Marija claimed not to write, she did in fact produce over the year many documents essential to her teaching that provided clues about her beliefs and intentions as a teacher. Her programme, her written assessment reports, her reflections on her programme and her language arts contracts were analysed and used to form the description of the context and the literacy tasks.

Children's Self Evaluations and Surveys

Marija often asked the children to write about how they thought they had performed on various literacy tasks. At the beginning of the year Marija asked the children to complete a survey showing their attitudes to reading, writing and school. She kept these throughout the year and then had the children complete the same survey late in the year and looked for changes and similarities. It was another of her teaching strategies which encouraged the children to articulate their thinking about learning and literacy. As these artefacts provided another view of children's thinking, they were used to triangulate with the results my observations of the children's questions and Marija's monitoring of their progress.

Data Analysis and Review

Data review and analysis included a number of phases. The process used to review and analyse the data can be summarized in the following way:

1. Immediate ongoing interpretation of events
2. Collaborative review
3. Checking emerging interpretations
4. Categorization of children's questions and requests for help
5. Review of categories
6. Description and theory building grounded in contexts
7. Emerging theories and patterns
8. Drafting and critical review

While this presents an almost sequential story of data analysis, in fact with an interpretative study such as this one, theory building occurs almost on entering the site as the researcher immediately tries to make sense of life in the classroom and at the same time tries to avoid leaping to inaccurate assumptions and conclusions. Data analysis comprised all the procedures listed above. Each will be described separately in detail. However, it should be noted that each of these procedures was used and repeated at various phases of the study, not simply done once and then followed with the next step.

Immediate Ongoing Interpretation

Being a participant observer in a classroom requires continual making sense of the context so that one can participate in socially appropriate ways. This allows other participants to get on with their daily business in their usual manner. After each observation Marija and I met informally during recess time and discussed any interesting incidents or problems, students' reactions to tasks, and individual children's approaches. This meant that although the data was collected to address my questions as researcher, it was also explored immediately in terms of the teacher's questions and classroom implications. Through this process Marija was able to get student's views of literacy tasks which enabled her to make teaching decisions. This continual and immediate review led to the emergence of new research questions. This meant that the accuracy of my perceptions were checked and any contextual questions were answered. As I made sense of events in order to participate in and record what was happening, hunches and further questions began to emerge. For example, after two lessons of observing the children ask few questions, a working theory that "students avoid asking public questions in the classroom," was developed.

Collaborative Review

During the data collection and analysis I met regularly with a group of five fellow researchers to review and critically examine our work. This group was led by an experienced educational researcher and educator, whose role was to help us to help each other and keep us honest and vigorous in our interpretations. Emerging hunches such as the above were checked with the

teacher and discussed with this group. I read them my transcript of the first lesson and my journal which summarized what I had observed. I then put forward my initial interpretation. I repeated this process with a group of interstate educational researchers. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe this process as "peer debriefing." Through this data review and examination of hunches with key informants and other educational researchers, I developed a more specific question. Instead of: "Children avoid asking public questions in the classroom" I asked, "Why don't children ask public questions of the teacher early in the school year?"

Together, Marija and I took our observations and emergent theories to the children and asked for their feedback and explanations. Lincoln and Guba (1985) call this process "member checking".

Because this pattern of behaviour, that is, children's avoidance of questioning or admission of difficulties, was one that Marija and I both wanted to change, we made decisions in order to alter the children's perceptions by making it safe for them to question openly and seek help. Our ongoing theory building was crucial to our collaborative research and teaching. Our decisions continually changed the context in which we operated. In this case, the status of asking questions or seeking help was altered by our collaborative action. So we began again to develop new theories as we observed and participated in the changing community.

Checking Emerging Interpretations

As patterns emerged in the data, I made decisions to observe particular children to compare how their questions and requests for help might indicate differences in individual work style or approach to tasks. For example, I watched Rachael to check out my hunches about her approaches to tasks. I had noticed that Rachael's questions were often of the same type. She rarely asked about how she might approach a task. Rather she imagined different ways of tackling the task and used her peers and teacher to get feedback about the best choice. Other children used questions and requests for help about different aspects of literacy tasks and revealed different kinds of preoccupations and strategies. Ongoing data analysis therefore led to decisions on my part about who to observe and for what reasons.

Categorization of Children's Questions and Requests For Help

Although, as indicated above, I developed hunches about patterns in individual children's help seeking during the data collection, the systematic and complete analyses of the entire data pool of children's questions and requests for help was completed after the data collection period. The major data sources for the development of categories were my field notes, the teacher's field notes and the transcript from the audiotape of six lessons of a group working independently. The children's field notes and parents' records were used to triangulate my findings.

By scrutinizing the major data sources I arrived at eight categories of children's questions and requests for help. The categories were established to describe the children's immediate purposes in asking, as far as that could be ascertained from my ongoing observations. In other words in the analysis of

the questioning sample I attempted to answer the question, "What is the child trying to do in asking that question?" or "What is the child's primary or most obvious intention in using that request?" While I recognize that all utterances serve many simultaneous purposes, this analysis was intended to provide a broad picture of the reasons for which children question in language arts time. I then tried out my categories on questions recorded in the children's field notes and parent records.

Review of Categories

After this process, I asked the teacher and a group of educational researchers to examine my data and the categories I had used to describe it. I asked them to point out incongruities, contradictions or any problems with the categories. Their feedback helped me to re-examine my assumptions, to identify inconsistencies and further analysis of the sample of questions. Most importantly it re-emphasized the need to describe the specific context for children's questions and requests for help. The selected category often depended on my knowledge of the actual situation and on being able to consider the children's intentions by watching the behaviours which preceded and followed the utterance.

Description and Theory Building Grounded in Contexts

Children's questions and requests for help about literacy tasks are inextricably tied to the classroom contexts in which they operate. To develop theories about what children's questions and requests might indicate about how they learn literacy, it became essential to describe the classroom contexts in which they operated. As I studied the context I realized that it was continually

developing, being reshaped and constantly evolving as the participants negotiated and renegotiated their lives together. The story of the evolving contexts within one classroom is based on my observations, interviews and videotapes. My analysis of ongoing events was enhanced by collecting the artefacts that the teacher used and those which the children produced during language arts time.

Emerging Theories and Patterns

From my investigation I uncovered patterns of interaction in the children's help seeking and built theories about the kinds of contexts and tasks which led these children to question and seek help in language arts time. Although the theories which emerged are specific to one context, the potential of monitoring learners' questions and requests for help as a way of understanding their progress and participation may be useful to other teachers. As a way of studying individual learners, students' questions and requests may provide researchers with valuable insights.

Drafting and Critical Review

A process similar to that used to examine data and interpretations was used to get feedback about this report. That is, Marija, the local group of fellow researchers and the group leader, read and provided verbal and written responses to drafts. I was then able to make decisions about where I needed to be more explicit or provide further description.

3.8 RESEARCHER'S ROLE AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

Several days after I missed a scheduled visit with Marija's class due to illness, I received a bundle of get well cards from Marija and each child. These cards were not only a surprise, but they provided me with unexpected revelations showing how the students saw my role in their classroom after two terms of participant observation. Michelle's acrostic poem indicates one of the themes that ran through their cards.

23.6.87

Dear Mrs Comber,

Here is a little letter for you and I hope you feel better.

Great Lady

Extra neat writer

Taking lots of notes

We talk and you listen

Enjoys talking to us

Likes videotaping us

Listens to what we say

from Michelle.

Not only has Michelle mentioned some of my techniques such as field notes and videotaping, she has referred twice to my listening and enjoyment. She has even teased me about the unreadable handwriting in my field notes. Scott's card also indicates that the children were aware of my interest in them and seemed to welcome my attention.

Dear Mrs Comber,

I hope you get better.

This poem could change your life.

I'm writing this letter so you will get better

And come to school and observe us

We want you here

So you can look at our work.

Scott.

Other children's cards indicated that they saw my role as a helper.

Dear Mrs Comber,
 We want
 you back
 because your
 such a
 help to
 our class

Janelle.

As well as a letter Peter included a poem.

CINQUAIN LADY
 Tall, wise,
 talking, observing
 writing
 Heys people

Get well soon
 from Peter."

[Children's original spellings are used in this report]

Tracy also included a poem as her greeting.

Mrs Comber
 nice
 blonde hair
 helps our class
 is Mrs Bajgir's
 friend."

David's letter used a more direct approach to giving me feedback.

Dear Mrs Comber,
 I hope you will get better. What ever is wrong with you. I really
 appreciate you helping me. It is good how you write things in your book.
 And how you just mostly write down interesting things about it.
 Love David

The letters are interesting because they provide a view of how the children saw my role as a researcher in their class. Though they were very aware of my watching, listening, taking notes and videotaping, they also saw me as a helper and Marija's friend.

The informality, joviality and inclusion of jokes in their cards also indicated that the children were not intimidated by my investigations, rather, (as later discussion will show) they seemed flattered at my involvement and interest in their work.

Bogdan and Biklen (1982) mention that being "identified as a helper" (p. 128) by informants can cause difficulties for participant observers. However, for me being identified as a helper was a bonus. Because I was exploring the questions and requests for help children made about literacy tasks, being seen as a helper meant that children saw it as appropriate to ask me. This in turn, made it easier for me to collect data. Hart (1982) explains the advantage of the researcher being seen as a helper in the following way: "Although I influenced the events observed by participating, my involvement deepened my insight." (p 415)

Cards from Kim, Terry, Mathew, Rachael and Peter also included information about what the class was doing in my absence. The children took seriously the fact that I wanted to know about them and their work. Matthew told me "we're going on an excursion some day,"; Terry let me know that "Mrs Flaherty is filming us about Margaret Mahy,"; Peter mentioned "today we are getting our photos"; in her P.S. Rachael announced "I hope you get all the information you need from us".

The children saw me as a part of their school life. I had been explicit with them about my role and my interests and they accepted me as a researcher and a helper and actively collaborated with me to get my task done. They

expected and received a reciprocal relationship with me. I helped them understand their work and get it done.

That the children saw me as a helper emerged over time. However, their teacher, Marija, made clear at the outset that she thought I could help her to "analyse her teaching more deeply." Marija had no doubts that her teaching "seemed to work," but she expressed the view that she was unsure what she did, that she virtually operated instinctively. She wanted to examine and improve her practice and have a more selfconscious and deliberate understanding of it.

Marija's aim for the class community was that they develop mutual trust. She wanted me to find out more about how the children were "thinking about school and about themselves". She mentioned that she "enjoyed having another adult in her classroom." She also recognized the value of my written records of classroom discussions.

"The beauty of having you is that when we had our discussions one could sort of lead off, and the other was doing the scribing, and it was a good time then too, I suppose clarifying everything for the kids; and we got it down in writing."

I have described how I was seen to make evident how the informants understood my role. My view of my role changed as the research progressed. As I began to see Marija and the children as researchers, I began to see myself as a helper, rather than an outsider taking what I needed.

Lurie (1978) explains why a field researcher cannot remain uninvolved.

"I sometimes (though not often) hear social scientists talk about the effects of participant observation on the group studied – but never about the effects on the participant observer himself. Field procedure is based on the premise that you can do something over and over again without really doing it, without its really counting, because you are just pretending to be a member of the group under investigation."

It was never my intention to remain uninvolved. Erickson (1984) explains the researcher's role similarly.

"It was I who was there doing the fieldwork, not somebody else. My fundamental assumptions and prejudices are part of my me. I cannot leave them home when I enter a site. I must study the place as me. But you are not me, and you are not there. It's I who have been there. So I should at least make explicit to you the point of view I brought to the site and its evolution while I was there, as well as the point of view with which I left." (p. 60)

Walker (1980) describes the researcher's involvement as critical to the success of the study.

"The point is not that the field anthropologist is in danger of becoming part of the situation under study, but that he fails unless he does". (p. 50)

Validity of research is no longer seen to depend on the objectivity of the researcher. Rather there is pressure to become explicit about the researcher's stance. Lather (1985) argues

"Our best shot at present is to construct research designs that push us toward becoming rigorously self-aware." (p. 31)

My stance as a researcher led me to collect particular kinds of data in a variety of methods, which I hoped would help me to build theories about children's questions and requests for help about literacy tasks.

Throughout this report then I have attempted to be explicit about my values, beliefs and assumptions and how these developed through the research process. I learnt that some of my assumptions on entry were naive. I learnt this from the children. For example, because I knew Marija to be a teacher who encouraged honesty and independence in children, I assumed that the children would be open about their questions and difficulties from day one. I learnt that their experiences of schooling made them too wary to easily admit confusion. I realized that it would take Marija time to develop the trust she had spoken of. My experience as a teacher should have led me to expect this situation, that is, children being cautious and quiet at the beginning of a new school year, but I was blinkered by my own intentions as a researcher. After all I was there to write down questions! Peter Woods (1986) describes the reciprocal learning situation between researchers and informants neatly.

"The ethnographer, as his/her own major research tool, emerges imprinted in part with the peculiarities of his/her own private negotiation with one particular organization." (p. 150)

My stance as a researcher then was to become part of the classroom as an adult who took a role in helping children to learn, by answering their questions and giving them the help they requested. I was also "Mrs Baggio's friend" and took on the role she expected and asked for. By feeding back my observations and interpretations honestly I was able to assist Marija in analyzing her teaching more deeply, by "making the familiar strange, and interesting."

(Erickson, 1984). My role was

"Not that of a participator observer who comes from the outside world to visit, but that of an unusually observant participant who deliberates inside the scene of action." (p. 157)

We involved the children as researchers and sought to improve their learning and lives in the classroom in an emancipatory fashion. Lather (1986) suggests that one new criterion for validity of educational research might be "calalytic validity," that is, where it is judged by the "degree to which the research process reorients, focuses, energizes participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it." (p. 272) A similar approach is taken by Savage (1988). She argues that the aim of research should be to empower people so that they can transform the limitations of their circumstances.

3.9 LIMITATIONS AND STRENGTHS OF THE RESEARCH

This investigation was conducted in one unique classroom community. Thus the findings are necessarily context specific and no generalizations about the state of children's questioning in schools can be drawn from this research. However, the indepth study of one classroom community's use of questioning and help-seeking does contribute to the largely unexplored territory of student initiated discourse in schools. It is one of only a small number of investigations which deal with children's questioning and help seeking. This study indicates the potential, for teachers and researchers alike, of encouraging and monitoring students' attempts to elicit help in classrooms.

Because there is only a limited amount of research on this subject, the researcher had few models from which to seek guidance. Most of the existing studies have been done by teams of researchers both collecting and analysing the data. The present investigation represents the efforts of one researcher and one collaborative teacher working intensively with one group of children.

The result is a focused case study, providing a detailed portrayal not previously reported in the literature on this topic. Thus, the findings need to be read as both illustrative of what occurred in one context and suggestive of further investigations. For example, this study does not deal thoroughly with the nature of responses to students' questions. Nor does it offer analysis of children's questions in comparison with other utterances children initiate in the classroom. Another criticism could be made of the study in regard to the lack of continuity of literacy tasks. That is I was not always able to observe the entire task to its conclusion, as tasks continued across days and weeks and were not restricted to single lessons. This research is therefore limited, as indeed are most case studies, by the constraints of time and the scope of the data.

However, the strength of this research is that it provides a rich portrayal of students' questioning and help-seeking over a school year, with an emphasis on teacher's perspectives and students' multiple realities. It provides comprehensive profiles of focus children, offering insights on their different approaches to literacy learning in this classroom.

The strength of my research is the way in which it enabled Marija and the students to improve their teaching-learning interactions. The methodological decisions were made with the interests of the children, the teacher and the researcher in mind. Listening to children's questions and requests for help over time has the potential to provide a barometer for teachers of children's understandings, confusions and preoccupations. The contribution of this research is to make educators aware of this possibility.

CHAPTER FOUR: QUESTIONS IN CONTEXTS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

When I first undertook this research, I believed, naively, that I should be able to give a straightforward description of the classroom context, as a backdrop to the study itself. I had expected that a brief account of the teacher's aspirations, the children's backgrounds and the typical social interactions would fill several pages, before I got into the real business of analysing the children's questions. However, I learnt that contexts are by no means one dimensional and static and that understanding contexts is crucial to the interpretation of children's questions.

This chapter therefore forms an essential part of the results of this research, not simply an introduction to the findings. It indicates the potential of children's questions to illustrate the multiplicities of learning contexts.

It includes four main sections:

1. The Importance of Contexts
2. The Teacher's Role in Establishing the Learning Community
3. Life in Language Arts Time: A Narrative Account
4. What Children's Questions Reveal about Learning Situations.

The first section argues for the importance of understanding and specifying contexts in naturalistic educational research. The relevance of contexts to the interpretation of questions is explained.

The second section describes the teacher, Marija, and the kind of learning community she tried to establish. It describes what Marija thought to be important in teaching (literacy in particular), why she believed this, how she planned her literacy program and how she interacted with her students. The focus is on beliefs, values, and practices that made Marija's teaching unique. The section includes descriptions of her professional reputation, management and communication skills.

This analysis is essential, because children's questions do not occur in a vacuum. What children ask (if they ask at all), who they ask and how they ask depend on the teacher's rules, values, beliefs, expectations and ways of operating (Edelsky et al, 1983; van der Meij, 1988). The teacher's role in constructing the learning community is therefore central to this research.

The third section consists of a brief narrative account of life in language arts time over the year. It describes children's initial reluctance to ask and the collaborative attempts of the teacher and researcher to raise the status of children's questioning. A narrative account is necessary because the classroom community is not static. In particular, it discusses the phases and changes over the year which relate to children's questioning and help-seeking behaviours.

The fourth section of the chapter considers what children's questions reveal about learning situations. Two separate extended questioning episodes are examined. The purpose of this section is to look at the experiences of individual learners as they worked on literacy tasks. The contrasting realities of different children and the differences between Marija's intentions for tasks and the children's interpretations are explored.

A brief summary of the findings concludes this chapter.

4.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXTS

This section provides a rationale for the kinds of analysis of the learning contexts described in this chapter. Firstly, it is argued that specification of the contexts, as they are understood by participants, is essential in the interpretation of classroom communication. Secondly, the difficulty of describing contexts, due to the continual renegotiation of values, rules and meanings is acknowledged. Finally, the need to understand contexts in order to interpret the meanings and functions of children's questions is emphasized.

Wilkinson et al (1981) claim that:

"An important issue in the study of interaction is the context within which the data are collected. Specification of context is essential for interpreting findings, as human behaviour varies according to the situation within which it occurs." (p 208)

Furlong and Edwards (1986) point out that when the classroom is "informal" rather than "formal", and the teacher employs a non-traditional approach, contexts cannot be taken for granted. They explain that in informal

classrooms the observer will have far more obvious interpretative work to do because easy references to "the context are no longer possible." (p 8) As the teacher in this study operated in an "informal" manner, rather than employing a "transmission" model of teaching (Perrott, 1988), it is important to describe the learning community or context for learning that she established.

Despite the importance given to describing contexts in naturalistic educational research, what constitutes a context remains unclear.

Smith-Burke (1987) explains that:

"it is difficult to uncover exactly how the context is constructed ... and how and when teacher goals, values, social rules and cues – whether implicit or explicit, verbal or nonverbal – are related to selections of materials and activities, classroom social structures, and students' roles and learning." (p 245)

What is clear is that the teacher plays a central role in establishing the context (Wood, et al, 1980; Edelsky et al, 1983; Cazden, 1988c). Cazden (1988c) uses a dramatic metaphor to explain what occurs:

"What she does – in setting the stage and then herself performing on it – will have considerable influence over how her student partners will play their role, and their actions will in turn affect her perceptions of them as learners and her subsequent response." (p 19)

She explains that:

"One can think of each classroom as a particular instance of an educational philosophy and a social organization in which to carry it out." (p 5)

Following Cazden (1988c), this report will provide a thorough description of the teacher's philosophy and the social organization she established in the classroom.

However, the construction of contexts also depends on the students. Green and Weade (1987) argue that "contexts are constructed by participants as they work together." (p 8) Thus they emphasize the reciprocal role of students in negotiating contexts. Barnes (1976) takes a similar view of the ways a "communication system" is established in the classroom.

"The communication system is a matter not only of how the teacher sets up classroom relationships and discourse ... but also of how the pupils interpret what the teacher does ... The communication pattern of any classroom is the outcome of a history of mutual interpretation by teacher and pupils, in each case based upon previous experiences which they bring to the lessons." (p 33)

Thus, it seems that contexts are constructed by all those who have a role in the social situation. Mutual understanding of contexts is crucial for appropriate participation.

Green et al (1988) describe how the continually evolving nature of contexts makes a difference to the teacher and students.

"Participants may be able to predict that a type of action will be taken, but not how it will occur. Thus, teachers and students must monitor what is occurring as the lesson develops in order to gain access to the information, to present information in appropriate ways, and to participate in (students) or conduct (teacher) lessons." (p 13)

Because classroom contexts are everchanging, a narrative description of life in language arts time over the year is provided to account for the macro phases and changes in the development of the class community. Detailed analysis of specific episodes explores the micro contexts as they are interpreted by participants.

The meanings and functions of an utterance are multiple. In everyday conversations participants avoid ambiguity and confusion by taking into account their knowledge of the speaker and the context. In analysing

children's questions in classroom discourse, similar knowledge is required. Questions are often impossible to interpret without an understanding of the context and the speaker's role in that context.

Several researchers have recently noted the need for studies of classroom discourse to take account of contexts (Good et al, 1987; Smith-Burke, 1987).

Smith-Burke (1987) argues that:

"In future work on classroom questions ... the instructional context must be considered along with the question, the content and the form of the available oral and written discourse." (p 242)

Good et al (1987) explain that the lack of contextual information was a limitation of their study and suggest that subsequent research needs to examine the contexts in which questions occur (p 189).

Two simple examples from my field notes indicate that questions, on their own, are open to many interpretations and reveal only something of "what" the child is thinking about, they do not explain "why" a question was asked.

When Gabriella asks a fellow student, "What are we meant to be doing?" a hasty interpretation could be that this teacher does not communicate instructions clearly. Another interpretation might be that Gabriella is an uninterested student who has not bothered to listen to the teacher's instructions. However, information about the specific learning context allows a different interpretation.

There were many competing activities going on in Gabriella's classroom during language arts time. On this occasion Gabriella returned from the library and was unsure whether it was time for writing her "Dear Diary" (a daily journal entry), working on her language arts contract, or something else. Her question was not asked in frustration or boredom, but in her eagerness to identify the

current class priority. Watching Gabriella ask the question also added important contextual information. She quickly put away her library books and scanned her group, leaning from side to side to see what others were doing. When she couldn't work it out from simply watching, she asked a friend. As soon as she got the information she needed she began the task. Understanding Gabriella's context is essential in analysing and drawing a conclusion about her questioning behaviour.

A second example, involving Mark, suggests that an understanding of context also requires a knowledge of individual students. When Mark asked Marija, "Can I present my research after recess?", it was not simply a request for permission or for information about scheduling. Meaningful interpretation of the interchange which followed can be achieved only if one is familiar with Mark's approach as a learner. His initial request appeared to be for permission to present his research at a specific time, but what he really wanted was one-to-one instruction on what "presenting research" entailed. My knowledge of Mark told me that his question was more than a simple request for permission. Earlier observations had indicated that his opening questions were more about a safe way of initiating conversation with Marija than about getting the help he really needed.

An understanding of contexts therefore requires a knowledge of teachers and individual children as they operate on tasks, and learn to coexist in classrooms. Collections of questions out of their contexts do not have the same potential to throw light on children's thinking as they work and learn in classrooms.

The remainder of this chapter therefore attempts to make explicit the kinds of contexts negotiated between these participants.

4.3 THE TEACHER'S ROLE IN ESTABLISHING A LEARNING COMMUNITY

This section describes the key beliefs and unique strengths of the teacher, Marija, in establishing the learning community. Firstly, Marija's professional reputation is briefly described. Secondly, a summary of Marija's key beliefs about teaching and learning is provided. Thirdly, Marija's expertise as a manager is explained. The ways in which she established groundrules and routines, and organized the physical environment are detailed. The implications for children's questioning and help-seeking are noted. Fourthly, Marija's skills as a communicator are outlined. Both her oral and written discourse are discussed. The communication system Marija orchestrated for her students is revealed. A summary of the kind of learning community she established concludes this section.

4.3.1 Marija's Reputation

Marija's considerable expertise, her commitment to individual achievement and her trust in children made this community unique. One student, Rachael, described life in Marija's class in the following way:

"It's different to most classes because you usually have a teacher that'll tell you what to do all the time, won't give you a say in anything really, but Mrs Baggio, she asks you. She's not a know-it-all sort of teacher that tells you everything. She lets you find out things for yourself and she lets you do things your own way, like the timetables." (Group Interview 2/9/87)

In this classroom children's energy and enthusiasm for the curriculum was overwhelming. Their sophistication and independence in directing their own learning was impressive. The excitement about the next public showing of their work, the next excursion and the next academic enterprise was contagious. As I observed Marija I became aware that she was an outstanding teacher. I realized that in reporting my investigation on children's questions I would need to address the kind of community that she had established.

Because Marija welcomed visitors, I asked two other tertiary educators, who regularly worked in primary classrooms, to observe with me for several lessons to check out my interpretations. They noticed the students' engagement and cooperation and Marija's ability to achieve open, honest communication.

Not surprisingly, Marija enjoyed a flourishing professional reputation. Parents confided to me that they were delighted to hear Marija was their child's teacher. Student teachers wanted to work with her. Teachers from other schools came to observe her. The principal encouraged her to be the school representative on a statewide reference group about assessment. Children made special cards, foods and presents for Marija. An education department film crew took classroom footage and conducted an interview with Marija, about her approach to assessment.

The principal described Marija in the following way:

"She's a top teacher. Every school should have one. I only have one small reservation about Marija – the kids worship her to the extent that they could become clones." (Interview with Principal 20/9/87)

Marija had a reputation for getting the best out of children, even those whom other teachers found difficult. Her conversations with me prior to the study, indicated that she was fascinated by children's learning and passionate about improving her teaching. To Marija teaching was not just a job, but a vocation.

Thus there was no shortage of evidence to support my view that Marija possessed rare expertise in both "the art and science of teaching" (Boomer, 1985). However, the purpose of this report is not to analyse what made this teacher so effective [see Comber 1988a and 1989b for further analysis of Marija Baggio's teaching], but rather to investigate how she enabled children to ask questions and seek help to learn. Only those aspects of her teaching which directly relate to children's questions and help-seeking during language arts time are explained in this chapter.

4.3.2 Marija's Beliefs

Marija and her teaching colleagues had participated in intensive school policy writing, including formulating comprehensive lists of beliefs about learning. Marija told me that this writing had taken so much time that she thought she needed to use it to "get her money's worth". She indicated that she felt strong ownership of these documents.

An excerpt from the policy document, written by Marija, follows. (see Figure 4.1)

Figure 4.1 Marija's Beliefs

-
- . I believe that all children want to learn and that they all learn at different rates.
 - . I believe that open communication with the children leads to reciprocated trust.
 - . I believe that children need to feel positive towards themselves.
 - . I believe children should be encouraged to see and solve their own social problems.
 - . I believe it is important for the teacher to be a model for the student.
 - . I believe that children learn more from each other.
 - . I believe children need a certain amount of guidelines to follow so they can monitor where they are going.
 - . I believe in making my classroom a place so that the learning environment can be enhanced.
 - . I believe it is important for children to respect each other and persons in authority.
 - . I believe in parent involvement at all school levels. e.g. class level, school management.
 - . I believe in leading children to their fullest potential.
 - . I believe children should be made aware of other Ethnic backgrounds.
-

My observations suggested there was remarkable congruence between Marija's articulated beliefs and her practice. She translated her beliefs about children's learning into practice by providing many opportunities for different kinds of peer talk and teacher child talk. She also encouraged continual peer assistance on tasks.

However, this talk was not just idle chatter around a topic, but usually directed at working out opinions, scripts, reports or stories. There were also different rules for different talk situations. For example in a "brainstorm" situation, (for which children sat facing the blackboard) children were permitted to "just

call out" their offerings. In a discussion (for which they sat in a circle) children were expected to take turns, or raise hands, wait to be called on and maintain eye contact with the current speaker.

Marija's espoused beliefs clearly guided her enacted practice. Her beliefs about children learning more from each other and the value of talk, led her to construct contexts in which children were able to seek help and ask questions. They did not have to compete with the teacher for air time and talking with peers was not discouraged. This was a classroom where symmetrical speaking rights were orchestrated by the teacher, unlike other classrooms where children are unable to get opportunities to speak (Dillon, 1988a; Perrott, 1988).

I do not wish to indicate that Marija's beliefs made her teaching easy or that she felt that she knew all there was to know about teaching. Indeed Marija's belief that children learn at their own rates presented her with a continuing challenge. She was often frustrated by children whose progress was slow. They seemed to ask over and over how to do things that Marija thought she had already modelled and explained. This belief set up a challenge for Marija. If children learnt at different rates and children needed to trust that they could openly seek help and ask questions, how would she make sure that the children at risk academically also learnt to solve their own problems and did not become totally dependent on her? Marija expressed her frustration in an interview reviewing the progress of the research.

"I mean how often we really get peeved off, if kids come in and say, "But I didn't understand". And you think, well, I went through it two or three times and I asked if whether you understood and no one said anything; and now you are saying that you don't understand. But there were genuine cases where the kids still didn't understand."

The tensions between providing help and wanting each child to become self-reliant remained a challenge for Marija throughout the research.

4.3.3 Marija As A Manager

Marija had many strengths as a teacher. One which relates directly to this research is her skill as a manager. Her principal attested to Marija's management skills saying that:

"Marija sees the kids as workers and herself as the manager/coordinator... She spends time getting organization and relationships working from the start, before curriculum content."

Marija did this by organizing groundrules, routines and the physical environment of her classroom.

Groundrules

In the first week of the school year Marija negotiated five specific groundrules. These were:

- . All groups had to include boys and girls
- . No groups were to be bigger than five
- . Children had to move their seating each week, so that they had at least one "new" person next to them
- . Children were to solve their own social problems
- . All children were to sit on the mat for shared book and circle time discussions.

Marija's groundrules concerning group work had important implications. Girls and boys had to work together. Because the group size was limited, children were often forced to work with people who were not their best friends. Because the children moved each week there was less chance of cliques forming and there was shared ownership of the whole classroom; children did not dominate the same places in the classroom. Because children knew that they were expected to solve their own social conflicts, they did not come to Marija to "tell on" their peers or complain about injustices. Because children sat on the mat during shared reading and discussion times they often were clustered closely together around their teacher, with all of them on the same level.

These groundrules provided the children with some challenges. They could not avoid working with people they did not immediately like. They could not depend only on their close friends for help. This situation presented particular difficulties for children without a wide circle of friends.

Early in the year, children who were not popular, assertive or confident sometimes found it difficult to get help from the children in their group. Such children asked questions only to be ignored. Some children tried to deny others assistance by covering their own work and refusing to respond to requests.

Marija helped the children to overcome their distaste for assisting less attractive peers by training the children continuously, reviewing their progress in open forums and maintaining her explicit values about "working like a team"

and "helping each other out". She was able to make this approach work because she avoided setting up a competitive ethos in the classroom. By the end of the first semester children were no longer ignored, and I observed no instances of help being denied.

As well as these specific groundrules, several clear understandings were also established. Children were not to "put each other down"; rather they were to help each other out. Marija made sure that these understandings extended to the treatment of *all* children. To protect one child with a mental disability, Marija counselled the children about acceptance of differences. Children were explicitly coached in social responsibility and just ways of operating, and so gradually a special learning community developed.

Routines

Marija established predictable ways of doing things early in the year. Children knew that their morning timetable began on the mat with Marija simply talking about plans for the day, news from home, and her feedback about the previous day. Then they participated in daily fitness activities outside for fifteen minutes. Next they returned to the mat where Marija read aloud for five to twenty minutes from a picture book, a collection of short stories or a novel. She encouraged the children to predict how the story might go and to make comparisons with their own lives. After reading and talking about the text, Marija explained their writing task, which sometimes arose from the text they had just read, and at other times related to a school event.

After explaining the task, Marija often demonstrated possible ways of tackling the work. Children brainstormed ideas. Sometimes Marija provided outlines and frameworks. Before asking the children to commence the task Marija invariably asked, "Any questions? Any problems? Know what to do?".

After Marija had set the task, children left the mat and returned to their desks, where they were given another five minutes to discuss the task before beginning to write. When Marija told the children that it was "time to write", they wrote for ten to twenty minutes, talking quietly if necessary. During this time Marija circulated, giving feedback and help, often reading out examples of effective beginnings or ideas from children's pieces. The last part of language arts time always involved the children sharing in some way, reviewing their writing, or discussing the difficulty of the task. Normally they returned to the mat to read examples out loud or to talk about how they had gone with the task. On some occasions they shared in groups at their tables instead. At other times, children were asked to vote for the best piece of writing from their group, to be published in class books.

Marija's morning routine early in the year is summarized in Figure 4.2

Figure 4.2 Morning Routine

8.55 – 9.05	talking time
9.05 – 9.20	daily fitness
9.20 – 9.30	teacher reads aloud
9.30 – 9.50	discussion of text and rehearsing written task
9.50 – 10.10	writing and quiet talk with peers
10.10 – 10.20	share and review.

This summary describes a typical sequence of events. It should not convey that every morning represented an identical ritual. The important features in the predictable pattern were talk, read, respond, discuss, plan, brainstorm, watch demonstrations, talk in groups, write, share and review.

Children quickly learnt to expect their morning to include particular kinds of experiences, tasks and interactions. Because Marija was so clear about groundrules for interaction, her routines were easy to establish and worked very efficiently.

Other routines also aided this smooth functioning. Resources were organized in ways that meant children could find them easily without depending on the teacher. Marija established where the resources were and how they were to be used. Children knew what they could get for themselves from the cupboard, their own tray, the artroom or the library. They also knew what Marija would distribute. The only confusion about materials noted during the research period occurred when new materials were required. For example, once special scissors were required for edging a notice, and on another occasion early in the year, several grade four students were unsure if they were allowed to use ballpoint pens.

Physical Environment

The final aspect of Marjia's skills as a manager included the physical environment – how Marija organized the room so that her objectives could be carried out. This was important in establishing the learning community, because the seating arrangements and organization of children's property

affected the ways they were able to interact. The children sat in groups facing each other. Talking in small groups or pairs was made easy. There was also a large carpet square big enough for all of them to sit comfortably as a whole group, to share, listen to stories, talk or watch plays. No distance or furniture separated them during these events, which were important both academically and socially. Marija sat on a carpeted cube on the edge of the carpet during these times, so that she was only just above them, where each of them could see her and whatever she was holding.

The teacher's desk was almost invisible at the rear of the classroom. There Marija kept special resources such as the children's literature she brought in from home, her program and her records. When a child wanted to work alone, permission was given to sit at Marija's desk, which was cleared for this purpose. Marija never sat at her desk during lesson time. She wrote at the board, sat on the cube or moved amongst the children, bobbing down beside them or sitting in a spare chair.

The notice boards within the classroom and in the corridors were always in use displaying children's work. The children's trays with their books, folders and writing implements were stored in three mobile trolleys. Two of these were in the corridor to make extra space in the classroom. Children were expected to collect all their resources before the lesson began, but were not prevented from getting whatever else they needed as they worked. The physical environment, including the positioning of furniture, resources, teacher's desk and cube, noticeboards, and the carpet square, all made it easy for children to work together and to talk with each other and their teacher.

Marija's success as a manager depended on her setting up groundrules, routines and an appropriate physical environment. Hard work, open honest communication, enjoyment of literature, and personal and group responsibility for maximum achievement became the norms of this community. This was in spite of working with a group of children with mixed histories of success and failure at school. In practice these norms meant that children knew what to expect of their school day. The children demonstrated their acceptance by abiding by the groundrules that they had negotiated with their teacher and by following routines for events without reminders. For example, after fitness they immediately took their places on the mat and waited for Marija to read. When Marija picked up her book, silence fell. At class meeting time the children automatically sat in a circle. Once the system was in place there were smooth transitions between regular classroom events, requiring little extra input from Marija. The establishment of clear groundrules and routines meant that children were unlikely to ask questions about these aspects of classroom life.

4.3.4 Marija As A Communicator

"She relates brilliantly with kids; she can talk their language and is not afraid to do so." (from principal's written notes 20/9/87)

Marija's principal alluded to one of her greatest strengths – her ability to communicate, to get her message across. Whether Marija talked "kid's language" or whether the children learnt to speak her language is not clear, but they certainly responded with enthusiasm. They were attuned to her levels of excitement, energy and commitment. As an observer one often got the impression that Marija and the class were "in collusion", plotting their next important event.

Examining Marija's talk is essential in this study of children's questions. The teacher's talk is not only a vehicle of instruction. It contains important messages about the academic and social environment, about who can ask what and when, and what is important to be said. What the teacher does not say is significant also. The teacher's repeated phrases, words and sentences help to establish the unique classroom community. What the teacher talks about and how she says it adds up to a set of strong underlying messages.

Marija's enthusiasm for classroom tasks was not just manufactured for the children's benefit, as becomes clear in a letter she wrote to me in early September.

"Sorry you are not feeling well. I'm afraid I have so much on the plate that I can't be ill. I'll have to wait for the holidays to collapse. Instead of winding down in class we keep spiralling."

When Marija talked, she watched the children for signs of confusion or disinterest and punctuated her own input with phrases, such as: "Are you with me?" "Are you following?" "Got that?" "What do you think?" She expected great commitment to the enterprises she negotiated with the children. While she allowed considerable freedom with task options she would not accept half-heartedness or non-completion of work. She tried to ensure that her messages, communicated orally and through individual written feedback, were clearly understood.

What messages did Marija try to communicate? What kinds of talk did Marija use? Were there any mixed messages that caused problems for students?

These questions can in part be answered by examining Marija's talk. Later, discussions of children's questions will throw light on these issues. Marija's talk was divided into the following descriptive categories:

- Invitations (to guess, predict, suggest, question, reflect, recall, explain, seek help)
- Explicit Explanations (of tasks and the ground rules for proceeding)
- Modelling (ways of talking, reading, writing or solving problems)
- Personal Acknowledgement and Celebration (with an individual child, group or class)
- Personal Revelation (about herself and family)
- Response to Inappropriate Behaviour

Each of these categories is explained with examples of Marija's classroom talk to provide an idea of the kinds of communication she tried to foster and the messages she delivered.

Invitations

The kinds of talk Marija used the most were invitations phrased as questions. The following are examples of invitations to engage in different kinds of thinking or discussion.

Invitations to guess and make suggestions included:

When I read this story to you I had something up my sleeve – I wonder what?
Now you're going back to your seats. Now you're going to write something ... I wonder what?

By inviting the children to make guesses about possible tasks, Marija required them to mobilize their information about what they had done before and think about how this might connect to the new task.

Invitations to review work on a task included:

Who found it a hard task?
 Why was it so easy?
 What's important in groups? Did that happen in your group?
 I want you to sum up how you worked as a group. Were you happy?
 Could you have worked better?
 If you were to change it what would you do?
 Which things work and which don't?
 How do you show a person you're listening?

Marija's invitations to review required the children to evaluate processes they had used. Such invitations meant that children often spent longer debriefing about a task, than on the task itself. Marija's emphasis was on learning about processes.

Invitations to explain included:

What was the pattern in this story? How did it start? What were the repeating words?
 I wonder if you can pick up some of the clues. What do you think?

This was typical of questions which required the children to work on explanations of text structures. Her invitations to explain also included questions about their own feelings, social problems, and characters in books.

Invitations to seek help included:

Now who's not sure what to do?
 Who's unclear?
 Who would like more time?
 Problems?
 If you're not sure, see me?
 Well show me – we'll go through it.
 Do you think you'll be alright?

Such invitations are simple and straight forward. What was important about them was how often Marija invited the children to admit difficulties and confusions and the genuine way in which she checked for frowns or subtle signs of confusion.

Marija's invitations required the children to do many different kinds of thinking. They were genuine invitations and the children knew that Marija expected a response from them. She waited for their response and restated her invitation or question until they dealt with it. Early in the year this meant significant silent pauses while the children developed the confidence to speak honestly in public. Her questions sought children's inquiry and children's decision-making, rather than right answers.

Explicit Explanations

When Marija introduced a task she made the options for choice and product expectations explicit. The following examples show the ways she talked about tasks.

Our task is a writing task. You've got to do "something absolutely enormous" for me, but what you do is up to you. You could carry on her story. You could start on your own project.

Our next task is going to be really hard. You have to think for yourself – it's going to be a writing task, like a little debate.

I want you all to write to me about the language arts contract that you did. You're writing a letter to me – basically feedback on how you went about answering some of my questions that I asked you.

Our task is to personally invite parents.

Marija often began her explanations with the phrase "our task is". This marked the end of more general chat or discussion and signalled to the children that they needed to engage differently. She prefaced her messages with familiar phrases that warned the children they needed to listen and remember. Then she explained the task by brainstorming suggestions, demonstrating how to begin, and analysing the structure of the text on the blackboard.

As the semester progressed, the tasks and Marija's instructions became more complex and she started to list the work required. Marija also asked the children to rehearse aloud what they were going to do before they returned to their desks. Often this rehearsal led children to anticipate problems and ask questions to clarify what was expected.

Other explanations about tasks set the procedural rules and the time limits.

They were simple and direct, such as:

Five minutes to talk to your neighbour to get ideas.

Just call out and I'll write.

We're going to have two groups after lunch and vote for your favourites.

Discuss with your group and have someone as a spokesperson after.

As a group you will have to work out what questions you would like to answer, who is going to do what and how you will present it.

I'd like this to be completed today. Got that?

Marija's explanations were specific and direct. She made it clear what she expected the children to produce and when she expected it.

Modelling

Another major part of Marija's talk time involved her modelling the processes she wanted children to learn and value. She read aloud; wrote aloud; analysed texts; demonstrated; solved problems and rehearsed how she approached difficult tasks. Marija made her thinking public in a number of ways. As Marija read, she thought aloud about the characters and the plot, musing on her response or on her predictions, or commenting on the illustrations. As she demonstrated tasks she exposed her thinking and strategies.

I'll see if I can come up with a list too. I might have to look for ideas too. I'm stuck.
 What clues do I get from the pictures. I'll think of my family.
 Shall we list the reasons?

Yet such demonstrations of her thinking processes were not done in a patronising fashion. Marija confessed that she found writing quite difficult and her struggles were accepted as genuine by the children.

Sometimes Marija rehearsed complex tasks with the children. For example, when they undertook a group research presentation on bears, Marija rehearsed the decisions they would have to make to be successful, saying:

What are the things we do when we get back to the desk?
 Who's doing what?
 What are our questions?
 How do you present it?
 What information do we need?
 How can we get help?

In these ways, Marija showed that it was acceptable for things to be difficult and it was appropriate to admit problems and seek help. She also indicated that it was sensible to anticipate difficulties and plan strategies.

All teacher behaviour can be considered a model for children. The kinds of talk that Marija demonstrated, such as questioning, reflecting, joking and problem-solving became legitimate forms for children's classroom use.

Personal Acknowledgement and Celebration

Marija balanced the high demands she made of children by acknowledging individual successes and group achievements.

Sometimes her acknowledgement was directed at the whole class with statements like:

Well done team – it's going to be a brilliant class book!

At other times her praise was uniquely personal, when she invited Amy to:

Read it out loudly in your wonderful voice.

Marija regularly shared children's products indicating what she liked.

Gabriella I really loved your Dr Gumption.

Listen to Amy's letter, I really like it.

I liked the way that you didn't choose sexist jobs for the people.

I like the way some of you are numbering your points.

When reading to the class, Marija often commented on the text by saying how it reminded her of a particular child. "Scott, that reminds me of you at the beginning of the year, when you used to drum on the table." To Luke she remarked as she read, "You really like the rats, don't you?"

Sometimes she acknowledged a special expertise. For example when Sophie had completed her own research on koalas, before the class started a topic on bears, Marija asked, "How can we use Sophie to help us?" She thus recognized expertise in ways that Webb (1985) suggests.

"Wherever students do not participate in beneficial kinds of interaction ... because their characteristics lend them low status ..., it may be possible to raise their status by giving them special expertise in some material." (p 36)

Marija excelled in this strategy. Her specific acknowledgement of the children's achievements or personal idiosyncracies was intended to make individuals feel special – to feel that they could make a unique contribution.

Marija was aware that the children needed community celebrations to sustain their high motivation. Such celebrations often involved public performances of effective individual or group work. Social outcomes and satisfying consequences for academic achievements kept the children "spiralling". They were always planning their next ambitious enterprise.

Personal Revelations

Marija often started the day by revealing personal details about her own life, family or feelings. Sometimes this was connected to literature or the next task, but often it appeared that the children were being treated as confidants. Dion and Bianca, Marija's own children, regularly featured in her talk, both fondly and as the source of annoyance.

Dion still really loves his cuddlies, and Bianca, when she was little she used to have a thing about Miffy.

I'm really wild with my family at the moment. I'll tell you why.

Marija followed up the second statement about her annoyance by explaining to the children that her family expected her to do all the cooking and cleaning. Then she read Piggybook (Browne, 1986), which deals with the theme of gender imbalance for household chores. On another occasion she told them about her daughter's response to a task at school.

Bianca, when she wrote about what she wanted to be, for her teacher, she wrote what she thought the teacher would want.

Marija used this to explain to the children that she wanted their honest opinions and aspirations, not what they thought she might want to hear.

Marija's personal revelations let the children know their teacher as a person. She entrusted them with secrets of her family life.

I bought The Two Giants two years ago for Dion – so he could read it to Bianca and Bianca could read it to him.

This book was later used in the classroom to lead into a discussion of the pointlessness of fighting. Two further examples of Marija's personal revelations follow.

I'm very upset today. Something very sad happened and I need you to help me out. I'll tell you about it later.

Do you remember Mrs. T. – she taught some of you in year two, well she came over to see me last night.

Because Marija had an important life outside of school which she shared with the children, the door was opened to reciprocal trusting relationships. The children knew that this kind of talk was valued and appropriate in their classroom. They knew their teacher trusted them with important information. The message to the children was that they mattered.

Response to Inappropriate Behaviour

I observed Marija responding to inappropriate behaviour on two occasions only. However, as Goetz and Le Compte (1984) argue, "even if an activity occurs only once it is significant." (p 169) On one occasion a child asked Marija for permission to photocopy in the resource centre, and she responded abruptly:

"That's wasting time – you know you can."

Marija did not tolerate children forgetting classroom routines. She did not see it as her role to remind children of such details. At another time a group had forgotten to bring their camp reflection booklets to school and Marija had asked the children to use them. When Gabriella announced "I forgot my camp booklet", there was a chorus of moans. Marija replied: "Well, do it on paper. Then write it out. Suffer those people, suffer!"

Children were not protected from the consequences of their own behaviour.

Marija expected them to be organized and remember what was needed. If they did not, they quickly learnt that this meant more work for them.

Edelsky et al, (1983) write that at the beginning of the year, the teacher

"offers a 'deal', presenting curricula and his or her own meanings for situations. If the offer seems reasonable to students, if it seems to be in their interests, if the teacher does not renege but, instead, keeps demonstrating the sincerity of the offer, does not simultaneously, perhaps unwittingly, make a contradictory and therefore double-message offer, the children do not make a counter offer." (p 276)

As Marija said "there was no trying out". The children did not challenge Marija's offer, but seemed to realize that cooperation was going to make them happier. They accepted Marija's "deal" of behaving like a "team".

The few minor transgressions, such as not listening to another child's contribution, or continuing to carry on group discussion in the whole class sharing time, were met with a look, or "the evil eye", from Marija. Such problems did not interrupt the learning agenda in the classroom. Peer pressure was also strong in enforcing high standards of behaviour and responsibility.

Marija's talk included children. Her use of "we" and "us" emphasized the "team" idea. She included herself as a co-learner and established a community where thinking out loud, being tentative, asking questions, self evaluating, telling personal anecdotes and providing specific feedback featured regularly. This encouraged similar kinds of talk in the children.

Written Feedback

Marija also communicated with individuals through written feedback. Just as Marija's public acknowledgement of individuals contributed to children's self esteem, so also did Marija's private written feedback demonstrate to children that their learning was being taken seriously. Marija was a demanding teacher who did not tolerate non productivity. She placed considerable pressure on all students to achieve. She balanced the often frantic pace of classroom life with personal acknowledgement, celebrations and specific feedback.

Two letters from Marija to Melanie illustrate how she provided encouragement for students to continue to take on ambitious enterprises. Melanie was treated as a serious writer. (see Figures 4.3 and 4.4)

Figure 4.3 First letter to Melanie

Dear Melanie,
 I must say that I really enjoy reading your work. You have a special talent when it comes to poetry. Please keep a file of all your poems this year. Maybe we can get them published. Your illustrations give that special touch to your work.
 Keep on being brilliant.
 Mrs Baggio.

Figure 4.4 Second letter to Melanie

27.4.87
 I enjoyed your newspaper. How long did it take you to set it out? When we get the computer back into the room would you be interested in continuing to publish "The Kidman Times"?
 Maybe you could hire a few roving reporters, an editor etc.?? I feel you should pin this up on our board and encourage some feedback from members in our class.

Marija's letter to Michelle is an example of the kind of feedback Marija provided to a hard-working student who struggled with literacy tasks. (see Figure 4.5)

Figure 4.5 Letter to Michelle

Dear Michelle,

Thank you for setting out your work in such a way that it made reading for me quite pleasurable.

I guess when handing up work presentation does play an important role.

Congratulations for completing your Work Required.

What I enjoyed the most were your comments. It shows that you are able to work effectively without having an adult breathing down your back to make sure you are on task.

I feel your group worked well on the commentary. I can't wait to see what it looks like on the video.

What you need to concentrate on next time is proof-reading. Proof-reading is a complex skill which we all need to practise. Remember if you aren't sure of a word highlight it and then check it out.

Here is a list of words you should add to your personal spelling list. (The words are really tricky – good on you for using them.)

- | | |
|------------------|----------------|
| . commentary | . complication |
| . research | . satisfaction |
| . evaluation | . sponsor |
| . especially | . oozing |
| . extra-ordinary | . unusual |
| . sweat | . because |

Grand effort Michelle
Signed
Mrs B.

Once again, Marija's written feedback was detailed and specific. Michelle knew what Marija liked, where to improve and how. Even in pointing out areas for improvement Marija mentioned that "proof-reading is a complex skill which we all need to practise". There was no sense of Michelle being inadequate – it was just something else she needed to practise, along with everyone else. Marija reinforced that practice was an acceptable part of learning. Her written feedback to Michelle was likely to inspire further determined efforts from this learner. On a one-to-one basis Marija promoted her values of risk-taking, effort and persistence.

Marija's letter to Kirsty, however, demonstrates how she also used personal letters to reinforce her high expectations and identify disappointments. (see Figure 4.6) Marija expressed her basic faith in Kirsty, but let her know that she would not accept Kirsty's failure. Kirsty was not allowed to get away with being unsuccessful.

Figure 4.6 Letter to Kirsty

Dear Kirsty,

For your contract work you only handed up the 'pop-up' book. You did not hand up your letter, three different forms of poems and a story.

Because you had 6 weeks to do it in I still need to see the work. It may mean that you have to do the unfinished work in your time.

Kirsty don't allow yourself to waste time – if you need help I'm here to help you. Remember we have to work at things to improve. It won't happen by doing nothing.

I believe in you Kirsty – let's see you do things such as complete work in time.

Signed,
Mrs. B.

Marija showed, by continuing to demand that Kirsty completed the work required that she valued the tasks and believed that Kirsty could still redeem the situation and complete her work successfully.

These four letters indicate how Marija used written feedback to balance the challenging nature of the classroom tasks with the needs of individual learners. They show that she was alert to what children achieved and where they failed. In this community, no one was allowed to "drift" through tasks. All children received an individual letter in response to their work, making it clear where they had met, exceeded or failed to meet Marija's expectations.

Marija was indeed an unusually successful teacher. As Gabriella said, "She does different things from other teachers." Her skills as a communicator played a major role in establishing this community of learners. The essential messages her students received were:

- we are involved in important enterprises
- our teacher really cares about our successes and failures
- it is compulsory to try hard
- we can succeed.

Students were left with no doubts about working hard, doing their best and helping others.

4.4 LIFE IN LANGUAGE ARTS TIME: A NARRATIVE ACCOUNT

The need for narrative accounts of classroom life is argued strongly by Clandanin and Connelly (1986). They emphasize the "rhythms" of classroom teaching and how approaches to teaching are "intensely personal and historical". They also point out the influences of cultural events and experiences on teachers' selection of classroom themes. My observations and discussions with Marija revealed that her teaching was directly influenced by her own childhood experiences of schooling. As a student of non-English speaking background she remembered "feeling so stupid". Her own eventual academic success after considerable struggle represented the kind of scenario she imagined for each student. Marija's language arts curriculum changed in emphasis during the year. This section reports on three phases of classroom life in language arts time.

1. Phase One – Establishing "The Team"
2. Phase Two – Negotiating Challenges and Providing Help
3. Phase Three – Maintaining the Momentum Through Celebration.

The narrative form is used to show how the learning environment changed as the year progressed.

4.4.1 Phase One: Establishing the "Team"

In the first month of the school year Marija's program focused on developing children's self esteem, establishing "the team", and getting children to work cooperatively. An excerpt from Marija's written program for the first week is provided below.

- . discussion of "what makes a good team"
- . in pairs find out as much as you can about each other
- . write ten things about yourself, "eg. I can't swim well, I like lasagna"
- . write a list of things you like about your appearance
- . describe things you like to do
- . list the names of people who love you
- . list the four most important things in your life right now.

The children were involved in writing many lists, which acted as props to help them talk about their lives. The written products were short and the talking times were lengthy. Academic tasks involved personal reflection and social interaction. At the same time Marija worked hard to establish shared groundrules and values.

In an interview at the end of first term Marija described how she had negotiated with the children on the first day of school.

MB On the very first day I just talked about myself and how long I was teaching and a little bit about my family and that hopefully we will work as a team this year. And if that's to happen what can we do? And if things don't turn out what will it mean? We talked about behaviour and things that are expected from us and from me, and I asked them, "Shall we write these all up or what are our memories like?" And they said, "No we don't need to write them up, we will know." I said, "What can we do?" and someone said, "Let's just call it the team", and it just stuck. And when there was a problem we just talk about it. Are we acting as a team or why aren't we? What went wrong?" And we talked about being selfish or whatever it was.

BC So you just remind them of the kinds of things they wanted and then ask them why it was not happening?

MB Yes. Because I said, "What is the outcome if it doesn't occur?" We were talking about teachers shouting or disciplining and stuff like that, stopping others from learning and that's not fair; and "Do we want that happening?" And they all talk about teachers that do shout, etc. and the type of atmosphere it creates, and it was not really fair to the people who are working and doing the right thing.

BC So they wanted to avoid all that?

MB Yes. That was day one!

Working as a team became a theme of academic work and was their class label decorating the door. When asked what she was hoping to achieve for the children Marija replied:

I really want them to believe in themselves. Once they believe in themselves, I think the sky's the limit and that's what I'm after. And like I keep telling them, they don't have to be academics, it's just being a really good person and from that I just think anything is possible.

Marija's program in language arts, social studies, and art involved looking at the self and the group. Marija's social objectives were reflected in the academic tasks she asked children to tackle.

At the end of the first week she recorded the following reflections:

A great deal of talking went on during this week. My greatest concern was for the children to become actively involved in finding solutions to problems through caring.

Content was minimal because I thought open communication was important for me to establish.

Many of the children are very teacher dependent which is natural – but that is something I want to work on – for them to be individualists who are independent workers.

In Marija's written program and reflections there were consistent messages about the value of talk, open communication and the need for children to feel positive. Marija pursued similar themes in the second week of school. Tasks such as the following were recorded in her program:

- . Discuss, brainstorm and roleplay, using these questions: What is a friend? What you can do to make friends and keep friends?
- . Discuss "Fears at school" and reasons why people pick on each other.
- . Discussion about loneliness.
- . Children write up poems on loneliness, share writings on loneliness.

In Marija's reflection on this week she wrote,

I want them to realize that because we are all similar we are also different and that not many of us want to be a left-out person.

In the third week Marija's program read:

- . Children to continue with their poems on loneliness
- . In small groups, debate the question "Do people need people?"
- . Discuss "We can learn something from everybody."
- . Brainstorm lists of words which can be placed on display on:
 Friendship
 Caring
 Why we need each other.

In meeting her key objectives, that children would develop trust, open communication and high self esteem, Marija made these social aspects of community life the official academic curriculum. Her clear priority was to establish shared values and attitudes about personal worth and working as a team. She summarized these aims in an interview with me early in third term.

I think the very first thing that I was hoping to achieve was for them to have trust in me and in themselves, and I really did look at self esteem and self concepts and most of the topics and books that I introduced to them were on that theme, and from that led on to communication and that was where I am still at.

During this time Marija read to the children each day. The reading matter was often humorous, usually related to family situations or concerned with personal emotions. It included Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing (Blume, 1979) and the poetry of A.A. Milne, and Something Absolutely Enormous (Wild, 1984). Such reading was always connected through discussion to the children's own lives, both in and out of school.

In the first few weeks activities were usually short in time span; tasks were often completed within a lesson. While similar themes were explored throughout the day, each discussion or task was achieved within a short time. Gradually, children were required to continue a piece of writing from one day to the next. Marija supported this by allowing them time to share what they had done and by setting short deadlines. The written tasks themselves were limited to short poems, lists and alternative story endings. By requiring limited amounts of writing Marija hoped to make success possible for all students. Her input consisted mainly of reading to the class, setting up focused discussions and demonstrating how to compose texts on the blackboard.

Children were given time to seek help in their groups and to generate ideas collaboratively. Marija also read student drafts aloud and visited each group while they worked. Formal writing conferences (Graves, 1983; Calkins, 1983) between teacher and children were not scheduled, but individual children left their desks regularly to seek Marija's help or opinion. In this first phase Marija trained the children to work as a "team". She did this by requiring them to work together in pairs and small groups. She also made the lesson content relate to friendship, loneliness, similarities and differences between people and the reasons people need each other.

During this period, Marija and I discussed the fact that very few questions were asked in the teacher-led whole class discussion time, even though Marija tried to make openings for children to question. After open discussions and setting the task, she checked that children were clear before asking them to begin.

On 16/2/87 she asked, "Now who's not sure what to do?" No one responded.

In the next six lessons Marija made similar invitations:

Problems? (repeated several times)
 Who found it a hard task?
 Who's unclear?
 What made it so difficult?

Few children responded to these opportunities to state a problem, ask a question or admit confusion. Before they began to work on their plays Rachael asked, "How many people are in each group?"

Only two other questions were asked in front of the entire class. Derek asked if he could continue to read his novel when he finished his written task early. Melanie asked if she could write her list in a particular form, "Can you do it like a recipe – like you need courage?"

Children demonstrated a consistent reluctance to ask questions in front of the whole class even when Marija asked for them. They also avoided talking about difficulties.

On another occasion the children used an interesting group strategy to alert Marija to a problem. As she prepared to read, Marija directed the children "to put your writing away". Many children started to whisper frantically, "Can we finish this?" "Can we publish this?" "Does this have to be finished?" Nobody directed the question aloud to Marija, but gradually the momentum and noise level associated with this issue built up. Marija realized there was a problem

and overheard one group of children murmuring about their confusion. Marija clarified the situation immediately. The children had used an interesting collaborative strategy to draw Marija's attention to a problem, without any individual having to ask a question.

Although phase one, as reported here included only seven lessons, several observations can be made. Children appeared to avoid asking questions of the teacher in front of the whole class group, even when Marija invited them to do so. They postponed asking until they returned to the comparative safety of their small groups. The few children who did ask questions in the whole class situation were all very able academically. Obviously, no firm conclusions can be drawn from this limited amount of data, but further research might explore which children verbalize the rare questions asked in whole class instructional situations. However, what can be emphasized from this initial selection of data, was that few children, early in the year, were prepared to verbalize questions about assigned academic tasks, even when the teacher made efforts to welcome them. As Dillon (1988a) points out, previous experiences of schooling may well have made them wary, despite their current teacher's approach. Often contexts do not support questioning. Dillon (1981) contends:

"Students are afraid to ask questions, largely because of their experience with negative reactions from the teacher." (p 136)

Van der Meij (1988) also notes:

"Questions are asked only when the advantages of asking are greater than the disadvantages of not asking." (p 401)

4.4.2 Phase Two: Negotiating Challenges and Accessing Help

In the second month of the school year Marija commented that she had noticed that the children were showing signs of being ready to work more independently. This comment marked a new phase in the narrative of Marija and the team. She switched her emphasis from social and personal issues to the academic content of language arts. She focused on author studies and reading to learn. Instead of short term, teacher directed tasks, Marija began to allow greater self direction and longer times for completion of work.

The new approach meant that children needed to sustain their enthusiasm and organization for a task or series of related tasks over several weeks. Marija introduced work required contracts (see Chapter 3, page 81) to show them how to manage their own time and keep on task. These contracts provided the basis of a system of curriculum planning, negotiation and assessment involving both teacher and students (Johnston & Dowdy, 1988). The idea is that the teacher explicitly informs the students of the curriculum area to be covered, in terms of content and skills. This may involve a printed outline or blackboarded notes. Usually some of the tasks are non negotiable and set by the teacher, and others are initiated by a student or a group. After discussion, each child fills in the details of the contract which is then signed by parents, teacher and students. The work required contract provides a written agreement of what each child should complete over a set period of time.

Marija experimented with different kinds of contracts over the year. Some contracts focused entirely on language arts or science; others covered the entire curriculum. Some contracts were designed by Marija; others were done entirely by the students. The common elements were that children needed to set their own goals and decide what they wanted to produce. All contracts were discussed and negotiated with Marija.

During this time Marija continued to conduct whole class and small group work where she focused on children's literacy skills, such as reading for information and helping children become more critical of their writing. She also set tasks which promoted self awareness. For example, children designed flow charts to describe their personal writing processes. They kept process journals where they recorded their strategies as they worked on their writing.

Marija's monthly language arts objectives included:

- . that the children can verbalize what they like about writing
- . that children can write fully on how they see themselves as writers
- . that children can participate in class discussions.

Her talking circle topics focused on similar themes:

When we write, how do we get started and where do we end?
 How do we know that we have written well?
 What do we do to get help or understand the problem?

Marija's language arts program explored the question: What makes writing effective? She and the children talked about audience, purpose and different forms of writing, and they discussed problems writers face. As well as this new emphasis on the writing process, the children were learning how to master the new tool – the work required contract.

From the children's point of view, the contracts were a major source of both excitement and dread. Working on a contract system meant a number of new kinds of decisions, requiring different kinds of thinking. These challenges included deciding what to write about and finishing the contract on time.

In a group interview I asked six children to tell me what they had found most difficult so far that year. There was immediate consensus: "The contracts!" Yet when I asked the children to say what they had achieved, improved in or felt proud of, again they repeated: "My contract." Children mentioned they were proud of "organizing our own time". Gabriella explained, "You learn, doing your own things by yourself." Rachael added, "I didn't think I'd ever do anything like that. I always think the teacher tells you what to do and you do it. That's that." The students' strong reaction to the contract approach makes it essential to consider any likely implications for children's questions and requests for help. It was important because nearly all of the data for this research (after the first month of the year), was collected as the children worked on the contract system.

One immediate effect the contracts had on children's questions was that they were forced to ask about this new procedure – its rules and expectations. Yet these questions were not trivial. They were learning new ways of operating which led to more independence in the long term. Later in the year it became less obvious when children were asking about contract work, because almost all of their tasks were set in this way. Children had learnt how the new system worked and their questions once again were more often about specific

academic content, than about how they were meant to operate or what their product should look like. Ironically, although it was Marija's intention that this approach would encourage independence, initiative and self monitoring, the initial stages of setting up work required contracts made the children more hesitant and anxious. Their questions revealed that this approach had them thinking at a number of levels at a time. They had to make decisions, document their decisions, and predict what they could achieve.

Some children found the new level of demands difficult. I overheard Peter make the following complaint to Luke.

Peter: We got another contract. [sighing audibly]
Luke: What kind? How long?"
Peter: Three bits!" [stated with horror]

In a group interview Peter explained his problem with contracts. Although he claimed to "like how she's given us lots of contracts", Peter added that he did not like having two contracts to do at once. Other children agreed, and this feedback was given to Marija, who solved the problem by organizing integrated contracts rather than subject specific contracts.

Although the children were happy to tell me about their frustrations with the contracts in an honest, critical way, they maintained their reserve about questioning Marija. She had consistently checked to see if the students had any difficulties before the whole class disbanded to continue their work, but very few children took up this opportunity to make inquiries or complaints. In a class meeting discussing children's reluctance to ask for help (30/4/87), the children identified their reasons for not asking. A short excerpt from the meeting follows.

- Rachael: Some people don't ask because they're embarrassed to ask.
 Renee: I just guess. It works sometimes.
 Rachael: Sometimes I don't want to ask because it isn't the right thing to ask, so I look.
 Michelle: You don't ask for the answer, you want to work it out for yourself.
 Melanie: Maybe she said it over and over again, but you still don't understand.

The children revealed similar concerns to the groups interviewed by van der Meij (1986), including fear of embarrassment and a preference for solving their own problems. Because Marija realized that they were more likely to ask each other in the relative privacy and safety of their small groups, she made time for this to happen in several ways.

These included the following:

- . whole class meetings
- . a blackboard list "People in Need"
- . Friday's "Hour of Power"
- . pre-task discussion time
- . making individuals' questions public.

Each will be described briefly in turn.

Whole Class Meetings

Marija regularly had class meetings called "circle time" where the children sat in a circle and reviewed their progress. During these times Marija, a student or myself recorded the discussion in the Talking Circle book. Marija began to use circle time to review academic issues, such as the difficulties associated with their library research. The children talked about problems that they had faced, such as inappropriate reference books, complex texts, and insufficient resources. Various solutions and strategies were suggested to deal with these problems, so that next time they could be avoided. Marija reminded students of this discussion and referred them to the record before they began another project in the library.

During such discussions children openly admitted a range of literacy difficulties, such as not knowing how to use alphabetical order or subheadings, having the wrong questions, and being unable to write the information in their own words. Marija dealt with these problems through a series of "mini lessons", where she worked with small groups of children who identified common difficulties.

A Blackboard List – "People In Need"

Marija explained to the children that she got anxious when they wandered around the classroom or sat with their hands up indefinitely. Both these ways of seeking assistance irritated her. She told them she was worried about how long it took for them to get help. By admitting to the children that she was frustrated by the physical ways in which they sought help, Marija began to confront this problem. A child suggested that people in need of help should write their names on the blackboard. In this way, Marija wouldn't be interrupted, but she would quickly know who needed her help. Marija liked this idea and asked the children to suggest a title for this list, so that it could have a regular, easily recognized place on the blackboard. "People In Need" was chosen.

One of the most difficult things for children to do in classrooms is to initiate conversations with the teacher (Dillon, 1988a; Cazden, 1988a). The blackboard list set up an everyday routine for dealing with difficulties without children having to make a bid for teacher attention. The students had invented a safe way of making it known they needed help. They could take action

by putting their name on the list, rather than just waiting to be noticed. In practice children often discovered at the blackboard that they could help each other, and their names were frequently erased before Marija had responded. Having the list on the blackboard meant that children did not wander around the classroom or wait endlessly without help at their desks. Once their names were listed, the rule was that children worked on another task until they got the help they needed.

The "People in Need" list acknowledged that it was acceptable and appropriate to seek help. It solved Marija's problem of being overwhelmed by too many confused children at the same time, and made it easy for children to make a request.

Friday's "Hour of Power"

As a way of managing the many questions and problems that emerged during the week, Marija instituted a Friday afternoon session, named after a local religious program called the "Hour of Power". Children were encouraged to ask for help with a particular skill or strategy. For example, students could ask Marija or a peer for assistance with hand writing, establishing a storyline, making pop-up books, or ways of illustrating their work. Often children gathered around a peer who was known to have specific skills. The time was spent sharing strategies, watching an actual demonstration, or practising the skill itself with the peer tutor or Marija available for assistance.

Because the children knew this time would be available to them they could think about particular things they wanted to learn to do and actually demand access to more information, modelling and feedback. Unlike the everyday help-seeking which was tied to particular tasks and immediate achievements, this time provided an opportunity for children to explore skills and strategies which they had admired in others. For example, calligraphy became a trend across the class. Children with calligraphy skills taught their peers the techniques they had discovered and hand writing skills improved noticeably across the class. Pop-up cards became another popular item, and peer experts were sought in Friday's "Hour of Power" to demonstrate their construction and design.

Rather than some children being left in awe of other peers who could do these special things, all children were given access to the current favourite skill. Children got the message that people learnt how to do things by being given the opportunity to share knowledge. Marija removed the magic of achievement and helped all children join in.

Pre-task Discussion Time

Early observations and reports from the children suggested that one reason for the scarcity of their questions was that asking takes up time. As children looked for help they were aware of what their peers were producing and their teacher's deadlines. Sometimes children began their work, without seeking clarification, so that they had a tangible product to show for their efforts. They were happier to produce inappropriate work than nothing at all.

To prevent children from beginning tasks while they were still confused, Marija instituted short times when they were encouraged to predict problems, seek help and ask questions before proceeding with the task.

Sometimes Marija gave children's questioning status as a tool for learning by making it the first part of the task itself. By providing time to come up with questions, Marija made it possible for children to have time to think, talk and get feedback, before they committed themselves to work that would lead to a final outcome.

Making Individuals' Questions Public

When Marija overheard children questioning and helping each other, she acknowledged this in front of the whole class. When she was asked questions that made her think again, Marija repeated such contributions for the benefit of the class.

Melanie just asked about the possibility of ...
 Gabriella wasn't sure about how to do

Often children's questions triggered in Marija an awareness of possible misunderstandings. At other times she became aware of innovative ideas from individual children. Because questions were welcomed in this way, children became more confident about verbalizing their uncertainties and exploring alternatives.

4.4.3 Phase Three: Maintaining the Momentum Through Celebration

After the first six months of the year Marija sought to capitalize on the learning that had already been achieved. She maintained the same ways of

working, but neither the community nor the curriculum remained static. As Marija put it herself, the class kept on "spiralling". She described the children's energy in the following way:

"The buzz is just electrifying ... they get so excited that if you're walking by they will want to involve you in that conversation as well."

Having established and trained the children in social, organizational and academic habits that worked smoothly, Marija saw her major task as continuing to provide worthwhile challenges. This involved planning ambitious group, whole class and individual performances of poetry or plays. Public outcomes for children's writing, reading and learning were arranged. Children's contracts were not just completed and submitted to the teacher, but became the focus of social events involving parents, grandparents, friends, siblings, the principal or other teachers. Marija looked for audiences to respond to her students. Public speaking, drama, choral reading and videotaped performances were typical events. The children even planned their own restaurant and made it a reality. Throughout the remainder of the school year the class continued to "spiral" and the buzz remained "electrifying".

4.5 WHAT CHILDREN'S QUESTIONS REVEAL ABOUT LEARNING SITUATIONS

As the narrative indicates, Marija was effective in constructing a collaborative community where teamwork and helping each other were valued strongly. The children, as a class, accepted this "deal" (Edelsky et al, 1983) and tried hard to meet Marija's expectations. However, the reality of contexts is such that even children in the same classroom have quite different experiences from each other. Children may also have different experiences from those their teachers intend.

The following episodes illustrate the contrasting realities of different learners and the unanticipated demands of academic tasks. The episodes raise several key issues about collaborative learning. These issues include:

- differences in children's abilities to access help
- differences in children's abilities and willingness to provide each other with complex academic assistance
- the frustrations, challenges and satisfactions experienced by different learners within one classroom.

4.5.1 Episode One: "What Can I Write About?"

The episode which follows, reports the conversations of four students as they worked on a writing task. This episode is included because it suggests the contrasting experiences of different learners within the same group. The task required them to use a story they had just read together as the basis for their own writing. The children were sitting around a large table, but their conversations occurred in separate pairs: Renee and Natalie, Rachael and Janelle.

Firstly, part of the story and Marija's blackboard notes are described so that the children's questions can be meaningfully interpreted.

Marija read the title, "Something Absolutely Enormous". Then she began reading the story in an animated dramatic fashion.

Sally loved knitting
 Every birthday and every Christmas
 She asked for wool. Balls and balls of it,
 Red, blue, green, yellow, purple,
 pink, white and black.
 Her bedroom was piled to the ceiling
 with wool.
 Wool up the walls.
 Wool under the bed.
 Wool on the bed.
 She knitted scarfs, gloves and booties
 for the baby ...
 "Now", said Sally, "now I am going to knit something
 really big – something absolutely enormous."

Predictably, Sally's knitting becomes so enormous that it engulfs all in its path and becomes a nuisance, until somebody finds a use for it, as a new circus tent. Finally, Sally, burnt out with knitting, sets off to bake something absolutely enormous. Marija intended that the children use the structure of this story to construct their own texts about "something absolutely enormous".

Before asking them to write, Marija analysed the pattern and features of the story.

Marija: What is the pattern in this story? How did it start?
 Mark: She loves knitting.
 David: She asked for balls and balls of wool. They filled her bedroom.
 Marija: What were the repeating words?
 Many children: Knit, knit.

Marija talked about other words that might fit this pattern, such as "bake, bake". One child suggested "kick, kick", as in football. This answer was accepted even though it did not match the plot of the story. Next Marija discussed the structure at work in the story and a simple framework was blackboarded.

1. loved it
2. wanted it
3. started
4. getting bigger and bigger
5. a use for it
6. ending – do something else.

Finally she allowed the children "five minutes to talk with your neighbour to get ideas." The following conversation took place between Natalie and Renee.

Renee: What can I write about?
 I want you to help me.
 Natalie: I wanted you to help me.
 Renee: I don't know what to say.
 Natalie: What are you going to do?
 Renee: What are you going to write about, what part?
 Knitter? ... Sewer ...?
 Natalie: I don't know.
 Natalie: Well ...
 Renee: Write about a kangaroo
 Natalie: It won't do.
 Renee: An enormous kangaroo that grew and grew.

At this point Renee seemed excited that she had found a solution and she began writing. Then she stopped and watched the other children for a minute, without talking or writing. Natalie commenced the next part of the dialogue.

Natalie: I guess I could write about Return of Jedi? (said in a questioning manner)
 Renee: What can I write about?
 Natalie: What can I write about:

At this point the girls looked to me in desperation and Renee announced, "I'm having some trouble." As we talked about possible topics, both girls revealed that they did not understand that the story needed to involve making something. Renee decided to write about the largest game ever, and then immediately asked Natalie, "Do you want to?" Renee did not want to choose something different from Natalie. Over the next few minutes Renee looked over Natalie's shoulder and copied her text.

In this episode Renee's questions indicate that she was not confident about her topic options. She had not understood how the text worked in a way that helped her to identify appropriate possibilities. When Renee asked, "What part? Knitter ..? Sewer .. ?" it seemed as though for a fleeting moment she may have understood what was required. But Natalie's response did not help her to know that she was on the right track and her next tentative suggestion, "Write about a kangaroo," was entirely inappropriate. Perhaps Renee had abandoned her correct response because of the lack of supportive feedback at the right time or perhaps she did not trust her own ability enough, to stick with her own ideas. This was a critical moment for Renee in the interchange. At this point she lost the chance of meeting Marija's intended outcomes for this task.

Renee's questions, combined with her very tentative suggestions, indicated that she didn't know how to begin. The fates of Renee's questions in the first part of her dialogue with Natalie are summarised in Figure 4.7. It can be seen that each attempt to get help leaves Renee's needs unsatisfied.

Figure 4.7 The Fates of Renee's Questions

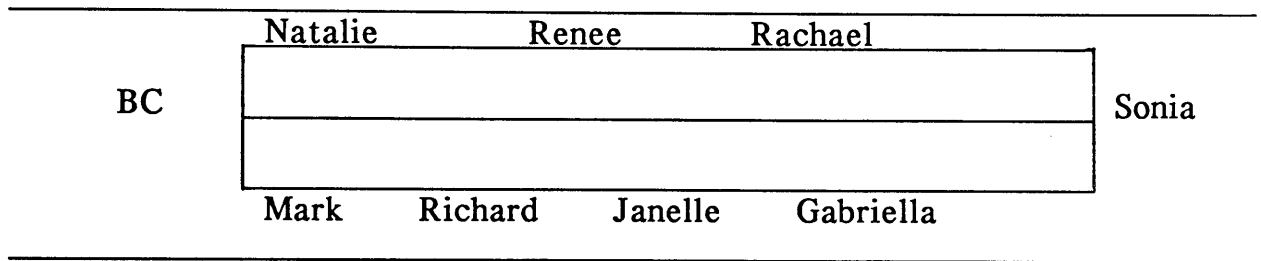
<u>RENEE</u>	<u>NATALIE</u>
Asks Question 1	No response
Rewords Question	Unsatisfactory Response
Rewords Question	Unsatisfactory Response
Rewords Question	Unsatisfactory Response
Makes Suggestion	Unsatisfactory Response
Makes Suggestion	Unsatisfactory Response
Repeats Question 1	Unsatisfactory Response
Rewords Question	Receives Help From Researcher

Renee was not an "effective speaker" (Wilkinson 1985), because she could not get appropriate responses to her requests. However, she did demonstrate the stamina and self esteem to keep asking. Renee's questions did not receive the response she needed to go on. The peer she chose to help her, needed help herself and was unwilling and unable to give much support to Renee. Because Renee did not fully understand the key features of the model story her questions were limited. While she tried to come up with options and demonstrated a dogged persistence, she did not have the status to get help from her more accomplished peers at the table who ignored their dialogue. Natalie did not explain why an enormous kangaroo would not do. One can imagine Renee's frustration when her efforts to get the task done met with such dead end responses and one can imagine days filled with similar episodes. Wilkinson (1985) describes such episodes as "conversations reflecting futility", where no one helps or was helped.

Renee's friend Natalie was in a similar position. Natalie's questions were like Renee's. They focused on choice of appropriate topic. However, Natalie did not really expect to get help from Renee and was concerned that Renee might copy her. Natalie seemed more comfortable with sitting and waiting for an idea to strike and appeared to find Renee's requests irritating.

On the other side of Renee, sat Rachael. (see Figure 4.8 showing seating arrangements).

Figure 4.8 Seating Arrangements



Like Renee, Rachael also found it difficult to choose an appropriate topic. She asked only two questions and directed them to Janelle.

Rachael's questions were:

"But what should happen if I put swimming in my story?"
 "What should I use the swimming for?"

Rachael started to realize, almost as she framed her first question to Janelle, that the problem with swimming was to find a use for it. She and Janelle went on to discuss this problem, that swimming was not attached to a product like knitting or baking. Unlike the laborious conversation between Renee and Natalie, the conversation between Rachael and Janelle involved rapid interchange with both girls talking at once. This made their dialogue impossible to record in full. However, I was able to watch them progressively

help each other to solve Rachael's problem. They were able to work out the key to the plot for themselves. Although they had also been thrown off the track initially by the "kicking" example, they were able to rule out inappropriate options through their discussion.

Rachael was sitting next to a peer who could understand the task, the text and the cause of her problem. Not only did Janelle want to help Rachael, she could help. Rachael had high status within the classroom, and readily thought aloud about options in a way that was quite unlike Renee's furtive whispering. Her questions indicated as much about what she understood as what she did not. Rachael's questions led to satisfactory responses and academic solutions.

Children's questions then, can illuminate what is going on in the classroom. This episode raises issues about comparative status in the classroom and children's different abilities to seek and receive help. It raises the problem of what collaborative classrooms may might for low status children. It supports the findings of other studies which have shown that peer assistance is not provided equally to all students (Cooper et al, 1982b; Wilkinson et al, 1982; Webb, 1985). Cooper and her colleagues explain that,

"children do not have equal access to all other children. Peer learning occurs in a network of social or friendship relations." (p 186)

Children's learning may be restricted by peer groupings. Smith's comment that, "learning is a simple consequence of the company you keep", (1989) takes on considerable significance. If children's learning depends at least in part on their asking questions, then it would also follow that their success will depend

partially on the answers they receive. My observations showed that children differ in their success rates for obtaining helpful responses to their questions and requests for help. A number of learner characteristics seem to influence the fates of children's questions (Cooper et al, 1982b; Wilkinson, 1985; van der Meij, 1986).

- . the child's ability to phrase the right question.
- . the choice of person whom the child asks.
- . the child's status with peers and teacher.

Thus, even when children did voice their questions in the classroom there was no guarantee that this would ensure satisfactory learning outcomes.

4.5.2 Episode Two: Answering Questions Using Books

The next episode focuses mainly on the questioning of one student, Peter, as he began work on his project. It is included here because it illustrates how children's spontaneous questioning can inform teachers about how students interpret and approach academic tasks in specific learning contexts. It also provides an example of the mismatch between the teacher's intentions for tasks and children's experiences of carrying them out. This problem is recognized by a number of researchers (Clark and Florio, 1982; Dyson, 1983a; Green et al, 1988; Campagna, 1989). Listening to children's questions is one way of identifying cases where a mismatch occurs.

"Doing projects" or "doing research" are fairly common activities for children in the upper primary school. Marija was aware that some children simply copied down large extracts of information about their topics. Often this resulted in little learning of information and even less learning about

efficient reading and writing strategies. Marija attempted to confine the topics children chose, hoping that she could switch their focus from producing large amounts of writing to self directed efficient reading to learn. Children used a "What I Know/What I Want to Know" approach to organize their questions for study (Goodman et al, 1980). They chose three questions only, to investigate. Marija set a short deadline so that the children would not be tempted to judge their work by its quantity, but by the quality of what they had learnt.

The episode which follows indicates that when children tackle individual and self directed topics they will meet challenges that are different from their peers and that go beyond what the teacher may have anticipated.

Peter chose to find out why experiments are conducted on animals. Peter's written questions for investigation are shown below.

1. How could you figure out why they do some experiments on animals?
2. What are some experiments used for?
3. What do they do with the experiments when they have finished with them?

His questions indicated genuine curiosity and a sophisticated approach to the topic. Most teachers would be delighted with such questions. I was looking forward to helping Peter on this task. Marija suggested that I go with a small group, including Peter, Sophie and Luke, to provide help if needed. A detailed account of what occurred in the library follows.

Peter read his first question aloud. "How could you figure out why they do some experiments on animals?" Luke immediately replied, "You could look it up in a book." Peter nodded and addressed his next comment to me. "Mrs Baggio said after I'd done some experiments I'd know answers to my questions, but I don't." Marija had hoped that as Peter conducted his own experiments he would be able to logically work out why animal experimentation was needed, but he had not worked out that testing on animals reduced the risks of people being hurt by new products or experiences.

Peter read his second question and he and Luke agreed that the answer to this one was 'for testing', but they did not elaborate. I suggested that he might ask the librarian to help him look for answers, so he showed her his questions. She responded by saying, "Well I know the answers," and winked at me. Then she suggested that he look for the books on animals and check in the back to see if there was anything about experiments. With difficulty, Peter and Luke located the books on animals. As they looked at the shelves, Peter asked, "Which ones should we get?" Luke replied, "Let's try Animals in Danger." They looked through the contents and index of this book without success. At this point Peter told me that he was thinking of asking Marija if he could change his questions, because he could not find the answers. Luke added that he had changed from his first topic, "hurricanes", because there were no books in the library on hurricanes. Observing Peter and Luke and listening to their questions indicated how difficult it was for them to locate appropriate resources. They appeared to have few strategies to solve this problem.

I thought that a useful way for Peter to begin might be for him to interview people about his questions. I suggested this to him and he responded enthusiastically. He went to ask Marija's permission. In the meantime I asked Luke what he was researching now. He had changed his topic to "kookaburras" because he had two books at home on that. I asked him what his questions were and he replied that he did not really have any. He was just reading and copying down bits. After this admission Luke decided that he wanted to know if kookaburras lived in New Zealand and went to look for a book about New Zealand.

Peter returned with Marija's permission to interview. I suggested that the librarian might be a good person to start with because she had said that she knew the answers to his questions. Peter asked, "Shall I go and ask Mrs F? (the librarian); shall I bring my book?" Finally he went. I watched and noticed that he was not writing as she talked with him. Peter returned with an encyclopaedia that the librarian had helped him to locate. She had not given him an interview after all. She had found him a resource that dealt with animal experimentation and even pointed out the correct page. Peter immediately prepared to write. He opened his notebook and asked me, "How do you spell 'answers'?" I asked him to write the parts he knew. His confusion was with 'e' and 'w'.

Peter had made slow progress on the task so far and now seemed determined to answer his questions quickly. Yet as he began to read the encyclopaedia he looked worried and once again turned to me. The following brief exchange, sustained by Peter's questions, occurred.

Peter: You've got to know what it means to write it down, don't you?

BC: Yep, why? Don't you know what it means?

Peter: Not some of it.

BC: Read me the bits that you don't understand.

Peter: "Animal experimentation is the scientific study of life processes in animals to advance biological knowledge." [reading the text]

I began to realize how difficult the text was and I mentioned this fact to Peter before translating the first sentence into language he could understand. I asked Peter what he intended to do.

Peter: I'll just copy some of it down and cut off some bits. You cannot borrow this can you?

BC: No, because it's an encyclopaedia.

Peter: What does this mean? [pointing to and trying to say "toxicity".]

BC: How poisonous something is, like a chemical or something.

At this point Peter began to write his answers to his original questions by selecting key sentences and phrases from the encyclopaedia. After he had written his answer to question one, he began to read it aloud and in doing so realized that he had really answered his second question, rather than his first. We discussed how he could use arrows to solve this problem by reordering his text. Then he asked me:

"What can I write for question three? Shall I put down "for example" e.g.?"

Peter's questions provide information about his literacy development and information about this literacy task. His questions indicate that he did not have independent strategies for finding library resources. He expected the

librarian and his peers to assist him. When he was unable to find answers his initial solution was to change his questions. He quickly accepted the interview alternative, but was not willing to proceed without his teacher's permission. He seemed to believe that answers had to come from books. When he went to interview the librarian, he was unsure whether he should write down what she said.

Peter did not see himself as a successful speller. He asked directly for the word, rather than attempting it himself. He had difficulty understanding complex reference material. He found it hard to formulate answers on the basis of his reading. As the end of the lesson approached he became anxious to get something written down. He knew he wasn't allowed to copy and did not understand it well enough to write it in his own words. Peter knew he could not borrow the encyclopaedia. Listening to his questions gave me insights into his approach to this literacy task, which directed the ways in which I tried to help him.

Peter's questions also reveal the complex demands of the task he faced. His questions and those of his peers provided Marija with insights into students' experiences of learning to conduct research. Marija immediately acted on this information. She worked out the decision points for children in doing projects and predicted the times where they were likely to need help. She devised a process chart to assist children (see Figure 4.9)

Figure 4.9 Research Process Chart

-
1. What are the possible topics?
 - what are the constraints?
 - brainstorm lists
 - prioritize
 2. What resources exist to help me?
 - library
 - home
 - peers
 3. What I know/what I want to know?
 4. Have I got the right questions?
 5. How can I get the information?
 6. How will I begin?
 7. How can I record what I learn?
 8. How can I present it?
-

In this episode, Peter addressed questions to his peers, to Marija, to the librarian, to texts and to me. In this one "literacy event" the crucial role of questioning in learning is illustrated. His questions reveal a great deal about Peter as a learner and also uncover the many levels of thinking required in this task, many of which had not been anticipated by Marija. Peter's questions and those of his peers had assisted Marija to reflect on and make conscious changes to her teaching.

4.6 SUMMARY

The purpose of this chapter is to describe this classroom community from a variety of perspectives, in order to provide a clear view of the multiplicity of learning contexts within this one environment.

Interpretations of the functions of children's questions depend in part on understanding the teacher's values, expectations and ways of operating. Interpretations also depend on appreciating the unique social and learning milieux experienced by individual children. Children's questions provide valuable information about the academic challenges inherent in particular tasks. This chapter offers a macro picture of life in this classroom community – the patterns, routines and shared values. It also offers the micro perspectives – individual children's struggles to fit in and be successful, as captured by listening to their questions and requests for help.

I did not simply describe the contexts in which children learnt, but also played an active part in changing these contexts. Marija's participation in the research led to continual critical reflection. She became conscious of encouraging children's questions and making the community a safe place to seek help. Children revealed confusions and misunderstandings that may well have remained invisible in a classroom where questions were not valued or avoided. Because we discussed the data and our interpretations throughout the research, Marija had access to extra information about how individual children and groups went about different literacy tasks. She had "inside" information about the stumbling blocks they faced, which had been revealed by their questions and help-seeking behaviours. Thus, my presence made a difference to Marija's ongoing planning, reflection and interaction. My presence also meant that there was an extra adult available to help children as they worked.

Learners' questions occur in specific contexts which are negotiated between the teacher and the students. Questions and requests reveal students' unique ways of operating within these contexts and the social and academic challenges that confront them. Monitoring these questions can provide both teachers and researchers with valuable information about individuals and patterns across children.

CHAPTER 5: CHILDREN'S USE OF QUESTIONS AND REQUESTS: AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of the kinds of questions and requests for help asked by the entire class over the data collection period. Five hundred and fifty-one questions were recorded and analysed.

The system of categorization used, describes children's intentions in asking questions and seeking help. To assign utterances to categories, each question was considered in the context in which it occurred. This required that preceding events and talk, and the events and talk which followed the question were taken into account in the analysis. While speakers' intentions are never "directly available to an observer" (Heap, 1982:397), my knowledge of the teacher and individual students, along with my long term involvement in the classroom allowed me to interpret the kinds of help, information or interactions which the child was seeking.

Questions and requests which fulfilled similar intentions were grouped together to form the following broad categories. (see Figure 5.1)

Figure 5.1 Categories and Frequencies of Children's Questions

	<u>No of Questions</u>
1. Solving Text Problems	221
2. Requesting Information	79
3. Checking Peers	74
4. Checking Expectations	63
5. Making Process Decisions	53
6. Requesting Resources	38
7. Requesting Nonspecific Help	19
8. Reminding Teacher	<u>4</u>
	551

By providing an analytical framework of the total sample (following Graesser et al, 1988), a broad picture of the intentions driving children's questions and help-seeking is provided. Such a framework affords insights into children's thinking as they tackle literacy tasks. Children ask questions to achieve different goals (Flammer, 1981; Dillon, 1988a). Systematic monitoring and analysis should reveal the kinds of assistance learners seek in achieving these goals.

Each question was assigned to one category according to its primary purpose. However, as with all human utterances each question served more than one purpose simultaneously. For example, Terry's question, "Do you know what "hypnotised" means?" appears a simple request for a word meaning. In this case Terry's primary purpose in asking this question was to check if the more academic Michael had heard of this word, which Terry had just recently acquired. Hence this question was assigned to the Checking Peers category. By watching children ask questions in context over lengthy periods of time, one can see patterns in their approaches to classroom social life and academic tasks which make the preferred categorization for each question, more reliable. The analytical framework, including definitions of categories and exemplary questions, was checked by two independent readers. Their critical feedback was used to revise and refine the categories and subcategories.

A brief definition of each of the categories is included in Figure 5.2. The remainder of the chapter provides detailed explication of each of the categories in the framework and indicates the kinds of thinking revealed by children's questions and requests.

Figure 5.2 Definitions of Categories

1. Solving Text Problems:	Questions through which children tried to solve problems with specific texts.
2. Requesting Information:	Questions through which children tried to elicit factual information.
3. Checking Peers:	Questions through which children checked peers' opinions, behaviour, and knowledge.
4. Checking Expectations	Questions through which children sought permission or clarified expectations and rules.
5. Making Process Decisions:	Questions through which children tried to make decisions about how to proceed.
6. Requesting Resources:	Questions through which children sought resources.
7. Requesting Nonspecific Help:	Questions through which children tried to enlist help without specifying problems.
8. Reminding Teacher:	Questions through which children sought to remind their teacher.

5.2 SOLVING TEXT PROBLEMS

Solving Text Problems includes all questions or requests for help which were related to children understanding or composing texts. That is, as the children worked on reading and writing tasks they asked questions about the problems they confronted along the way. Well over a third of the children's questions were attempts to solve text problems. There were two hundred and twenty-one questions in this category. Examples of such questions include:

I don't know what title to have.
Do you think scene three should be Christmas Eve?
What's the next sentence?
I don't know what to write about.
Does it have to rhyme?
Where do you put your heading if you're doing an invitation?
What are these two-worded poems?
How do I find "koalas" in this book?
How do you spell "fascinating"?
What does this mean? (pointing to "toxicity")

Not all questions related to solving text problems are of the same order.

Within this large category three subcategories were generated from the data:

- . Composing
- . Task Expectations
- . Using Texts

Each category will be dealt with in turn.

5.2.1 Composing

Composing included any questions or requests for help that addressed problems with composing a written or oral script (for drama, or storytelling). Questions about composing focused on a range of issues such as: topic choice, forms, status of models, inclusion of information, blocks, effectiveness and correctness. Each of these subcategories will be explained with examples.

Because questions about composing were so diverse a summary is provided to guide the reader. (see Figure 5.3)

Figure 5.3 Types of questions about composing

Topic Choice:	Questions which showed that children had difficulty deciding on a topic.
Blocks:	Questions which showed that children were stuck, partway through the process.
Forms:	Questions which revealed an uncertainty about appropriate features of forms such as invitations, letters or research reports.
Status of Models:	Questions which revealed children were uncertain about how to use a text model.
Inclusion of Information:	Questions which revealed children trying to decide what to include in a text.
Effectiveness and Correctness:	Questions which revealed children's concerns with effectiveness or correctness.
Isolated Words:	Questions in which children asked about isolated words: spellings, abbreviations, meanings or pronunciation.

Topic Choice

Requests concerned with topic choice occurred frequently when children began a new task or a contract.

I don't know which one to do.
I don't know what title to have.
I don't know what to write about.
What can I write about?
What could you write about a shoe?

Sometimes children's questions revealed a problem of deciding between choices, as in the first two questions. At other times children's questions revealed a lack of confidence in generating any appropriate topic, as in the third or fourth questions. Children who asked the latter questions indicated that they were less assured than the children deciding between options.

Topic choice was the subject of many questions from children. Early in the year most lessons included such questions. Because Marija allowed the children to negotiate the work required for language arts it became their responsibility to generate topics; therefore the high incidence of such questions is not surprising. Indeed it is consistent with a number of other research findings, suggesting that getting started and choosing a topic can be a major source of difficulty for writers (Graves, 1983; Calkins, 1983). Some children continually asked questions about topic choice and received little assistance or encouragement from peers during conferences to solve such problems.

Questions about topic choice can represent either the healthy beginning of a writer's struggle, leading to satisfying outcomes, or an ongoing pattern of behaviour in which children become non-writers, because they are unable to

independently solve this problem. If children spend fifteen minutes of each writing lesson agonising over what to write about, they get little practice in writing itself and little experience of the challenges and satisfactions of extended pieces and completed works.

Forms

Requests about forms occurred when children were uncertain about which form was appropriate and how that kind of text worked.

I don't know – an adventure.

I've forgotten what to do for mine (that is, how a cinquain poem works).
Would you say like "Kidman Park, Dean Avenue"? (in regard to an invitation).

Can you do it like a recipe, like you need courage?

Can I present my research after recess? I don't know how to present some words.

If you're doing – if you're not like Melanie and Rachael, can you still do experiments and write it?

Children's questions revealed an awareness about different forms of writing, in regard to appropriate layout, language use, content and order. Yet their questions also revealed that in many cases they were unsure of what the final product or performance should be like. Many of their questions about form indicated their need for models of the product or demonstrations of how to produce specific forms of writing. Children were aware that there were specific conventions required, but did not know what they were.

In a few cases children's questions revealed sophisticated understanding of particular forms that allowed them to be creative in their approaches to tasks. Melanie's question, "Can you do it like a recipe, like you need courage?" is one

such case. Faced with the task of writing a list of "What is needed to make and keep friends", Melanie thought about the similarity between the language of this task and that of a recipe.

Status of Models

Children asked many questions about the status of models which Marija used to introduce tasks. Because Marija believed that children learnt about writing by reading good examples of children's literature, she frequently used published pieces as the starting point for their writing. These included novels, picture books, short stories and poetry in particular. Often the structure and features of the writing were analysed and blackboarded. In cases where Marija wanted the children to produce writing for which she had no models, she wrote detailed outlines or questions on the board and then added brainstormed responses from the children.

Children's questions indicated that at times they were unsure about how they could use the model in their own writing. They didn't know what needed to change and what needed to remain the same. Questions such as the following, indicate children's problems with the status of models.

Do you write these questions and then the answers?
Do you have to write that and that, the question and the subheading?
What I've done is write my own first bit and then I've just written down the next bit except I said "mad." Will that be alright?
Does it have to rhyme?
"But when she came back" (reading from the blackboard text) ... what do you write then? "He ..."?
Do we have to write that?
Does it have to be about meat, because Mrs Baggio put the "meat" up there?
What part are you going to write? Knitter? ... Sewer ... ?

Children's questions revealed their confusion about what could be legitimately "copied" from the teacher's notes or from published authors, and what it was they had to invent. Previous experiences with blackboarded texts in earlier schooling may have led to their confusion. Many children's first response was to copy whatever was written on the blackboard. Perhaps this had been a strategy which had served them well in the past. Yet children knew that, to use Peter's words, "you cannot just write that down". They knew that simply copying was not what was required.

The children for whom composing was still a considerable struggle, in terms of spelling, handwriting and punctuation, seemed most confused about how to use models. It may have been that the rhetorical structures in the model which Marija had tried to explicate through reading and discussion, were "lost" on these children, as their questions still focused at a word level or on one salient feature that had captured their interest, such as rhyme.

Questions about the status of the models they were exposed to, however, represent an important step in their growth as writers. These children realized, in some cases for the first time, that they could draw on other written resources for ideas. At this stage, as their questions indicate, they were unsure of the extent to which they could use the words of others and unsure of how to distil structures or linguistic patterns on which they could improvise. However, as the year progressed, there were several instances in which children revealed they could independently use models of products for

their own purposes. For example Katherine reminded Michelle that she could work out how to write a cinquain poem by looking at her previous contract, which included such a poem. Derek offered similar advice to Travis about acrostic poetry and Mark almost "overdosed" on Open The Door poems once he had the format under control. Children's questions sometimes led to the discovery that they could get help by referring to previous texts they had composed themselves.

Inclusion of Information

Questions about **inclusion of information** occurred in cases where the child had become enthusiastic about an idea or had recently acquired information and then wanted to fit it into the current piece of writing.

What, can it still be in the story?
I don't know what to write in my story.
What about that lolly business?

The first of these questions emerged as Mark began to write a new story. He had become absorbed in buildings, such as the Empire State Building and man-made structures such as the Statue of Liberty. During writing time Mark decided to write an adventure. He began by making a list – the "who, what, why and where" of his story. This list included the Empire State Building. Mark asked me if he could write about this building in his story. He was unsure whether real places could be included into his fictional piece. His question represented a source of confusion shared by other children who, because they had not yet read novels or stories which included real places in fictional accounts, remained unsure about whether this was permissible.

Another request asking about inclusion of information occurred when Kirsty announced, "I don't know what to write in my story."

I asked Kirsty what had happened in her story so far. She replied that the story was called "Bubblegum Land". It was based on a story she had heard before. Having decided to borrow an idea from another source, which gave her the setting and the key idea, that is, "bubblegum land", she was unsure what else to put into her story.

Kirsty's request for help was not unusual. Children often began their writing by deciding on a title, sometimes borrowed from a television show, a video movie or from other literature. In a sense, Kirsty had postponed her difficulty with beginning to write a new piece by selecting a secondhand title, but now she had to confront her lack of content. Questions such as Kirsty's and Mark's sometimes led to scaffolded conversations to generate appropriate content. Their problem involved working out what plausible or entertaining plot they could invent to go with their title.

A third example about inclusion of information arose in a group of children working on a play about friendship. One of the group suggested, "Start again. Instead of all this arguing, say: I'll give you a lolly?" This suggestion was ignored. Michael, who was playing the part of the child who was left out, tried to clarify their decision by asking, "What about that lolly business?" Michael's question was ignored again. When Marija called in the children to

put on their play Rachael checked with Michael that he understood what to do. Michael nodded and the children began to act out their play without deciding about whether to include the "lolly business". Michael simply watched and waited and the group improvised as they performed. The "lolly business" was excluded. Children's questions about inclusion often occurred during collaborative tasks. Sometimes they were resolved through group discussion. At other times the question was ignored as more powerful group members controlled the conversation and directed the activity.

Other questions about inclusion of information indicated different dilemmas. When Rachael and Janelle were composing an Australian Christmas play together, they wondered about how to bring a kangaroo character into the scenario. Rachael's question exposed the problem – an appropriate entry point for the kangaroo and what role it might have. They were imagining how their script might be enacted rather than seeking clarification about what was permissible. Such questions revealed as much about what children knew and understood as they did about their limitations.

Blocks

Questions revealed blocks when children indicated that they did not know what to say next, or were "stuck" or confused partway through their text. Such blocks often occurred early on in the composing process, that is, after the first sentence or two had been written. Blocks also frequently occurred when children attempted to continue a piece they had begun on a previous day. Such questions included:

I don't know what to write about, now that I've written one sentence.
What shall I write here?
But what should happen if ... what should I use the swimming for?
Oh dear, I cannot think – I've got a mental blank.
I don't know what to write about Terrible Tuesday.
What do I say?
What else do I write here?

When Kim announced his problem, "I don't know what to write about, now that I've written one sentence," he was verbalizing a problem I witnessed on a number of occasions. Marija usually spent considerable time discussing possibilities and demonstrating how to begin. Little time was spent discussing or demonstrating how to expand ideas or add depth to the plot. Some children became blocked when they needed to extend the piece past the opening section.

Effectiveness and Correctness

Questions about the effectiveness and correctness of pieces of writing included requests for proofreading and audience response. The writer asked for feedback. They included:

Is this all right?
Can you check our work for mistakes?
Will you correct it?
Do you like it?
Can I have an opinion?
What do you think of my story?
Does that look good?
Just check for spelling, I think it is all right.
What do you think Katherine?

Children did not always make it clear in their questioning what exactly they wanted feedback about. They were required to seek peer help and feedback on their writing before talking to Marija about their writing. Diagrams and charts about the writing process were displayed in the classroom including suggested steps to follow such as:

- . discuss ideas
- . draft
- . get opinions
- . make changes
- . read to a friend
- . proofread

Peter used steps straight from the suggested process in asking "Can I have an opinion?" Later he asked me to "just check for spelling". Because Marija trained the children to conduct peer conferences about their writing and expected them to help each with effectiveness and correctness questions such as the above were common. After one such session about useful conferencing questions the children wrote some model examples in their field notes so that they could refer to them later if they didn't know what to ask.

Could you describe the alley?
In what way was he ugly?
How scared was Janelle? (a character in the story)

When the children were asked to add other questions to use in conferences, Richard added:

What did the little man look like?
What were your characters like?
Have I described the characters enough?
How spooky was the small town?

Janelle added:
What do you want to do with that story?
What does "Claus" look like?
Could you describe (sic) the characters more fully?

Children's questions about effectiveness and correctness were fostered by Marija's drawing their attention to questions that were likely to help writers. Usually special times were not set aside for peer conferences or teacher child conferences; children sought feedback when they needed it. Some children,

such as Ben, Renee and Sophie, asked questions mainly about the correctness of their writing, revealing their preoccupation with the challenges posed by conventions.

Isolated Words

Questions about isolated words, such as spellings, abbreviations, meanings, and pronunciation occurred frequently across the year.

Questions about spellings included:

When I'm saying "we did skipping, running", and you want to carry on, what do you put, "etc." or "ect."?

How do you spell "Mark"?

How do you spell "appreciate"?

How do you spell "concerned"?

How do you spell "video"?

Other ways of asking about spelling included:

You know, "embarrass", is it with an "em" or an "im"?

Is this right? (pointing to the word)

Is "e.g." for example?

When children made attempts at the word before seeking help or when they asked about a syllable, it was clear that they were developing independent strategies for solving their own spelling problems. Such questions are quite different from those simply requesting the whole word.

Questions about spellings of unfamiliar words also indicated signs of risktaking in individuals. For example, when Kim asked what "concerned" meant and then a few minutes later asked how it was spelt so that he could include it in his letter, he demonstrated his confidence in risking the use of new vocabulary. Peter was the only child observed asking about abbreviations, suggesting that

this was a preoccupation unique to him. It can be seen that even in questions about spellings, teachers can find signs of growth or a change in confidence, in the ways children choose to ask.

Questions about meanings of words were less common than spellings and usually referred to text books, such as encyclopaedias, or notes on the blackboard. Such questions included:

What does "concerned" mean?
Mrs Comber, what does "dreading" (pronounced as "dreedding") mean?
What's that word? (pointing to "toxicity")
"Exceed" means not to go more than, doesn't it?
"Mating" – what's that?
What's this? (pointing to an Italian word)
What's "ado"?

Other questions of this nature may also have occurred during reading time after recess, which was not observed by the researcher. Questions about meanings during language arts time usually occurred when children wanted to use new words but were unsure of their appropriateness. Such questions also occurred when the children were researching. As Peter put it so well, "You've got to know what it means to write it down, don't you?"

Knowing Marija's rule about not copying what they didn't understand, they could either ignore what they didn't understand or seek help. Such questions were usually addressed to the teacher or a child with a high academic reputation or to me. Children quickly established who was likely to be able to answer questions about the spellings and the meanings of "hard words".

To summarize, questions about composing included many aspects of the writing process. Not all children asked questions in all categories. In fact some children's composing questions were almost all about spelling and word meanings. Other children's questions about composing dealt more with inclusion of information and effectiveness. Rachael, for example, focused on these issues (see Chapter 6). Children's questions have the potential to reveal their knowledge, understandings and limitations about the writing process.

5.2.2 Task Expectations

The second subcategory aimed at solving text problems, comprises those questions asked when children needed to know what their teacher or peers expected them to do in relation to a particular task. These included the following issues: quantity, time, status of draft and task definition. A summary is provided in Figure 5.4

Figure 5.4 Types of questions about task expectations

Quantity:	Questions seeking clarification of amount of writing.
Time:	Questions seeking clarification about time constraints.
Status of Draft:	Questions seeking clarification about first and good copy drafts.
Task Definition:	Questions seeking clarification about the task itself.

Quantity

Questions about the quantity of writing were asked to find out the teacher's expectations. Marija rarely mentioned length of writing or the number of entries required, partly because she believed that children should work at their own rates and not compete with each other. She also wanted to dismiss the assumption held by some children that the best piece of writing was the longest piece. It was Marija's intention that the children should work on the effectiveness of their writing and that this might best occur on very short pieces.

Because Marija avoided specifying length, many questions were asked to clarify expectations, including the following:

How many should we have?

Is it enough to write?

How many do you have to do?

A whole chapter? (asking about whether "a whole chapter" is a reasonable amount to do)

Do you reckon I should do another page after this?

Have you got any long notes on your thing, Rachael?

What happens if you have about six pages of notes and you want to know more and you've got the information?

Do we have to do all of this?

What kind? How long? (size of contract)

Children's questions about expectations of quantity concerned both their work required contracts and single pieces of writing. Often there were no definite answers to such questions. For example when David asked Rachael, "Do you reckon I should do another page after this?" the best he could hope for in response was her advice. David's ultimate concern was whether his contribution to the group project would be considered enough in comparison

with what the other three children had done. David had struggled to begin the research, and as the deadline loomed he became anxious about the amount he had produced.

Working in groups of mixed ability did cause some problems for the children who faced more difficulties in completing the work. When Janelle suggested that they "could write a chapter called Facts About Australia to show their differences", Kim anxiously tried to clarify the situation and repeated, "A whole chapter?" A little later during that lesson he added, "I may as well just copy out the whole book." Children's questions about quantity were asked not only in relation to how Marija might have judged their products, but also in relation to what their peers might think. Children were aware that failure to live up to expectations of the group might make it more difficult to join next time.

Scott's question to Marija represents a different case. In front of the whole class he asked, "What happens if you have about six pages of notes and you want to know more and you've got the information?" It is necessary to understand a little of the history of this activity to interpret Scott's question.

Because children had shown signs of confusion in their previous research project and had resorted to last minute copying of texts which they did not understand, Marija put strict limits on the time and quantity of writing for their next research piece. On this occasion she restricted their reading time to a day and even commented that they might not want to write anything down,

but present their findings orally. It was difficult to tell whether Scott was seriously asking for permission to do more (which of course Marija agreed to) or whether he was really announcing, by his question, that he had already done a lot and wanted recognition. Alternatively, Scott's question may well have been asked in total confusion. He had begun the task very quickly and written a lengthy text only to be told that a written product was not the key outcome as far as Marija was concerned. Interpreted in this light, one can see how children become confused when teachers, for sound educational reasons, shift expectations.

Questions about quantity sought to clarify both the teacher's and peers' expectations for the size of the final product. For children with literacy difficulties such questions were often asked with a sense of panic, as if, even before starting, they suspected they would be unlikely to measure up. The only observed references to quantity from the high achievers in the class were made in a confident manner, when Rachael asked the group how many countries they should choose for their research and when Janelle suggested writing a whole chapter. Questions of quantity were less of a problem to children whose previous literacy experiences at school had met with success.

Time

Questions about time were concerned with finding out when certain tasks were to be started and completed. In comparison with other categories, questions about time were rare and in most cases occurred when a child had been absent from school or in the resource centre, when time constraints were set.

When can we finish it?
What are we doing now?
How long have we got?
So do I start my poems now?

Marija was aware of how difficult it was for children to organize their time and keep to deadlines. Hence class meetings and review sessions regularly featured discussions about time management. On one occasion Marija showed the children how she organized herself to meet deadlines through a written timeline. Children were asked to construct their own timelines for their current contract. Marija also set up a process where children could negotiate for more time. Perhaps her consistent attention to this topic and open demonstration of time management strategies paid off, for there were surprisingly few questions about deadlines.

Status of Drafts

Questions about status of drafts were those in which the children sought clarification about whether the task was to be done as a rough copy first or as the good copy. Questions included:

Is this the good copy?
Is this the good one or the rough?
Do I have to cut my rough copy?
Why do we need to write it out neatly on paper if we're going to write it out again in the camp booklet?

These questions occurred more often early in the year when Marija handed out different kinds of paper for rough or final drafts. As the year progressed and children worked at different rates and organized their own resources, these questions dwindled. Marija developed routines where children kept and submitted drafts and final copies. Early in the year such questions were usually asked to check on whether tidiness and correctness were expected of their writing and whether Marija would be reading the piece.

Two questions about the good copy issue were slightly different from those discussed previously. When Sophie asked Marija if she should cut her rough copy, she revealed a very interesting view of the function of rough copies. Marija answered, "Yes, it would be a good idea to try it out so that you can see what it looks like." On this occasion the children were designing and writing invitations for their families to attend a picnic. Marija had demonstrated two different ways of writing the invitation, one of which had a tear-off return slip down the bottom, for parents to use in reply. When Sophie asked about whether she should cut her rough copy, she was asking Marija about the whole purpose of doing a rough copy. Marija answered that it would be good to do because then she could see how well her invitation would work. Marija knew that Sophie had a hand writing problem. Her writing was very large. Marija might have anticipated that Sophie would need to write the entire invitation and response slip more than once in order to work out how to divide the space and fit in all that was required.

Marija might have answered differently if someone else had asked this question. Cutting up the rough draft would not normally have been a necessary part of the process of drafting an invitation. Getting the information, wording and layout right would seem to be the main challenges. Perhaps Marija suggested Sophie go that step further so that she could actually see how much paper her parents would have left over to write their response.

Travis' question about the status of a draft needs explanation as he challenged the logic in what Marija required. He asked in front of the whole class, "Why do we need to write it out neatly on paper if we're going to write it out again in the camp booklet?"

Marija was not bothered by the question and simply replied, "Work out what you need to do for yourselves." Because children were at different stages of writing their reflections on the camp, Marija did not try to make a rule for each group. A minute later she explained her main purpose for the writing. "I want your perspective in case we do it again, because you know how adults see things differently. It's also for me to know what you think." Travis' challenging question about the process was accepted and seems to have alerted Marija to the fact that the children were focusing on issues of rough copy and good copy. She switched the emphasis back to her intentions for their writing, rather than what to her seemed a trivial question.

Travis' question is interesting, however, because it is one example of a child questioning the logic of the teacher's expectations – perhaps a rare event in classrooms. In this community his challenge was accepted and Marija did not argue, but instead told the children to rely on their own judgement. Hence Travis was neither rewarded nor rebuked for his question. Marija simply responded to the fact that children's focus on this aspect of the task was not important to her.

Task Definition

Questions described as **task definition** were those where children revealed that they had not understood the task required of them. Such questions were not composing problems, because the children were still at least one step away from understanding the writing options.

Questions about defining the task included the following:

No, I don't know what to write inside it. (Writing Journal)
Is this supposed to be a Dear Diary?
Are you meant to do a letter first?
What do you write for the second one?
Do you have to write what you want?
Which journal?
What do you do when the teacher gives you that paper?
Now what do I do since I have ruled up two columns?
The questions is, "Is there anything you would change if you went again"?
I understand what it means for the people who went, but what about the people who stayed?

Such questions revealed a difficulty with understanding the teacher's overall intentions for the work. On some occasions it seemed as though children had not been able to select from the preceding discussion, or Marija's introduction, what was relevant to the task at hand and what was just general talk about issues. For example, Terry had appeared attentive during Marija's introduction to the writing journal. He had contributed to the discussion, looked at Marija while she was speaking and had listened to what other children said. They had been diverted to a conversation about seeking help. Marija then returned to the writing journal briefly. She reminded them of their previous discussion about it the day before. She had also mentioned that they would "share their Dear Diaries in ten minutes." Terry was not the only child who was confused. Michelle and Sophie both commented that they didn't know what to write.

Questions about defining the task often seemed to occur when there had been lengthy class discussions about a variety of topics and tasks beforehand. Some children seemed to have missed the signal when the conversation changed from general discussion to Marija setting the task for that particular day. They remained unsure of the significance of the talk they had just heard or in which they had participated.

A similar problem occurred on the day the principal conducted a lively session on the book, Leo The Late Bloomer (Kraus, 1971). The children participated with enthusiasm throughout the shared reading and discussion, but were unable to work out what they had to do when they returned to their desks.

Natalie asked: "Do you have to do a letter to parents or something?"

Rowena asked: "What do you have to write for the second one?"

Gabriella burst into tears.

David wrote questions in his field notes book.

As with the previous occasion, the children had participated enthusiastically in the class discussion but seemed unable to distil the instructions from the discussion, reading and explanation. Perhaps the many different types of talk meant that the task definition remained hidden. They were unable to work out what was negotiable and what wasn't. Usually someone at the table was able to clarify such problems, but on these occasions most of the children seemed confused and therefore they were unable to assist each other. This problem may have been caused by a combination of several factors. On the one hand it may have been that the group at the table comprised less confident readers and writers. On the other hand it may have been due to the mixture of discourses in which the task instructions and definition were embedded. Some children seemed unable to listen selectively for the instructional component and so seemed overwhelmed by the options.

5.2.3 Using Texts

Using texts, the final subcategory of questions aimed at solving text problems, comprised questions which children asked in order to use and understand the texts they needed to read. Their use of questions about texts involved comprehension, recall, choice and location of information. Examples of such questions included the following:

Oh Gosh, I wonder what the girl's names were?
How do I find "koalas" in this book?
Where would "kookaburra" go from here?
Oh this map, would it be Abyssinia?
I'm having trouble choosing a character (to see how the person was described in a novel).
When it says "sailed off almost over a year" and then it says "a year", it doesn't make sense?
Is that something new? (pointing to a section in a reference book about gills)
I tried to show my parents how to find Younghusband Peninsula, but I couldn't.
Do we have any information on wombats?
I have to write about the people on the notes. Can you help me find out who they are and why they are important?

Children's questions about using texts revealed both their problems and strengths as readers. Some questions indicated that locating specific information was a common difficulty. Other questions focused on recalling information and on rare occasions children questioned the logic of published texts.

Sophie's question, "How do I find koalas in this book?" revealed that she didn't know how to use alphabetical order in locating information in different volumes of the encyclopaedias. She was familiar with the alphabet and could say it off by heart, but didn't know what to do about finding the right volume because she did not know that alphabetical order of second and third letters was also used to organize the entries. Luke's question, "Where would kookaburra go from here?" revealed the same difficulty.

Another question from Luke, "On this map, would it be Abyssinia?" revealed a more complex problem. One of the books Luke was using for his research used the term "Abyssinian Plateau". However, in the more recently published atlas it was not listed. At first it appeared that Luke did not know how to use the atlas index, but when I double checked I found no entry under this name.

Perhaps the name of the Abyssinian Plateau had been changed, but to what? How could he track it down? I helped Luke to find his original source and he worked out that Abyssinia was now called Ethiopia.

Luke had stumbled upon a problem that was difficult for an eight year old to solve. It was difficult enough for children to work out what they wanted to know and find books that would help, but finding out that places changed their names represented an entirely unexpected challenge for Luke. Such discoveries were reported in review sessions so that other children could learn from them also. Luke's question is one example of a simple question opening up a complex path of investigation and learning. However, if there had been no one able to follow through on the problem with Luke, it could have remained a source of unresolved confusion.

David's question about the picture book Where The Wild Things Are (Sendak, 1963) was unusual in a different way. David voiced his confusion by quoting the text.

"When it says "sailed off over almost over a year" and then it says "a year", it doesn't make sense."

As he stated his problem he thumbed through the picture book and indicated where the offending parts of the text were.

In the story it takes Max, the main character, almost a year to sail to where the wild things live and a year to sail back. Many logical explanations could be provided to explain why the author, Sendak, has written it this way. The interesting aspect which is relevant to this study is David's preparedness to challenge the published word of an author. As will become clear later, (see Chapter 6) David did not readily admit confusions, so this question is doubly significant. That David felt confident enough to ask such a question in front of the whole class provides evidence of Marija's eventual success in establishing a learning community where children felt safe enough to question.

5.2.4 Solving Text Problems: A Summary

Children's questions concerned with solving text problems expose different kinds of thinking. If questions are recorded over time teachers may see patterns occurring across the class, in individuals or in groups of children. The teacher can use this information in planning instruction and in responding to individuals. For example, a multitude of questions about topic choice may suggest that children need more time to generate possibilities or to get more suggestions from the teacher or peers. Questions suggesting blocks during composing may lead the teacher to demonstrate how to sustain and extend a passage, or to look at how ideas are developed and expanded in published texts. A number of questions about how to find items in the encyclopaedia may lead to a demonstration of a repertoire of strategies to locate information.

Many of the same kinds of questions from one child may indicate an idiosyncratic approach to tasks. For example Sophie frequently had difficulty when asked to use a model for her writing. On one occasion she complained, "I wrote it this way and I wrote it that way – I don't know how to make it longer".

This was typical of questions asked by her and several other children of non-English speaking background. Marija became sensitive to these patterns of questioning and used this information source to select skills to demonstrate topics for discussion and strategy work in mini lessons.

5.3 REQUESTING INFORMATION

The second largest category of children's questions recorded during language arts time were requests for information. There were seventy-nine questions in this category. When children requested information they assumed there was a definite factual answer to their question. Within this broad category were three subcategories.

- . School/task related details
- . Non task related affairs
- . Task related curiosity

School/task related details

Questions which address school/task related details included:

- What number Dean Avenue?
- Who drew that?
- What's the date today?
- How did you find it on Tuesday? (a book)
- Are we getting marks on it?
- What's the address again?
- Who's doing Japan?
- Are they ours? (referring to new sets of pencils)
- What does that mean? (referring to an alarm bell)
- Is this Friday's Hour of Power?

Such questions sought factual information related to what the children were actually doing as part of a class task or a school event. They were usually easily satisfied by a chorus of answers from helpful peers.

Non Task Related Affairs

Questions not related to tasks were rare in this learning community.

However, the small number that did occur are interesting to examine in relation to who was asking such questions and why. Questions that sought information not related to the classroom task at hand included:

What's your middle name?

Did you watch ...? (names of television programmes)

Scott, are you coming to my house on Sunday?

What happened when you pulled it out? (the ballbearing from a ballpoint pen)

Shall I bring my calculator?

Have you ever been in a movie?

Have you been to Melbourne?

Do you have any pets?

All of these questions were asked by a small number of boys. Perhaps the girls were more wary of asking such questions in front of me. Many of these questions were asked by Terry, who on a number of occasions used questions to change conversations to topics of his choice, such as pets, Melbourne, movies and middle names. His questioning behaviour supported the findings of Schwartz (1981) who suggests that less academic students "shift their activities to discussion of their real and imagined life outside school; in small groups they discuss neighbourhood and family events and share their fantasies about the future". (p 107) When Marija was reading or talking, and on occasions where the children sat on the mat, Terry conformed to her expectations. However, on some occasions, where he was expected to work independently and was free to talk with his peers, he was tempted to talk about non-school matters. This may have been due to the fact that in previous years of

schooling Terry had enjoyed a reputation as a "tough" student. In Marija's classroom he was unwilling to risk defiance and preferred to get positive feedback. Now, to keep up his schoolyard and community reputation Terry continued to offer some resistance to Marija's values and expectations by talking about other things and encouraging his peers to do the same.

Michael's question about whether Scott would visit on Sunday was asked in a context where Terry had been working on his status with other male students in the group. He had actually put Michael on the spot, by asking him the meaning of "hypnotised". Michael's question to Scott about the Sunday visit may have indicated Michael searching for an ally against Terry, as if to prove that he had friends too. Such conversations, which were related to peer group popularity and status were rare indeed, but the fact they happened at all highlighted how much the children usually assented to play by the rules which they had negotiated with Marija.

Task Related Curiosity

Questions which indicated curiosity related to the task usually occurred when the children were working on work required contracts such as "Easter" or "Bears".

What's Easter?

How could you figure out why they do some experiments on animals?

What are experiments used for?

How do space shuttles land?

When did the war start?

Where was the war held?

Why do they call them koala bears if they're not bears?

Why are polar bears called polar bears?

What if they can't have any babies a year?

What if they can only have a baby in five years?

I don't get that. How do they "mate"?

What was in that other bottle when you did that experiment?

How come one of the popped balloons is heavier than the other?

How did you get the crystals to come out of the jar?

Although the sample of children's requests for information motivated by curiosity is quite small, several observations can be made. It seems likely that many such questions may have been asked during times devoted to social and environmental studies, that is, times outside the focus of this study. However, this small sample of curiosity-driven questions raises two issues, namely which children ask such questions, and which tasks promote curiosity.

One student, Travis, asked many questions in this category. Travis asked

What's Easter?
When did the war start?
Where was the war held?
Why do they call them koala bears if they're not bears?
How come one of the popped balloons is heavier than the other?
How did you get the crystals out of the jar?

Travis' questions indicated his determination to know about and understand historical and scientific events. He was not afraid of revealing what he did not know, as his questions about the war reveal. He had the confidence to ask questions which demonstrated his limited knowledge. His questions about the war led him to write his first piece of historical fiction, where he took on the voice of the pilot who dropped the first atomic bomb on Japan. Because he asked genuine questions about things he didn't know about or understand, Travis opened the way to ambitious learning projects. On this occasion he spent several weeks researching and writing his piece, "War Times". Travis was unwilling to write from a position of ignorance or from his "piecemeal" knowledge of the war, obtained from the media. His genuinely open and curious questions meant that he received different kinds of help and knowledge from that received by children who did not request such information. Travis was able to find ways of connecting his curiosity with ongoing contract work, so that his idiosyncratic searches for information were seen as legitimate use of time.

Travis' curiosity questions were associated with a number of different kinds of tasks, including classmates' presentations, narrative writing and work required contracts. However, curiosity questions from other children mostly occurred when Marija required them to pose questions as the starting point for their work required contracts. For example, Peter's questions about experiments on animals (reported in Chapter 4), the questions related to polar bears and Scott's question about space shuttles were all generated in situations where asking questions had been the first step required in reading for information. When required to generate questions on topics about which they were curious, children demonstrated the ability to ask fascinating and complex questions.

While this study did not generate a large sample of questions which were driven by curiosity, it did suggest that such questions could be fostered by the teacher. It also showed that some children were more likely to ask such questions than others and were able to tie topics they were curious about to the academic requirements of their teacher.

5.4 CHECKING PEERS

The third largest category of questions was checking peers. Seventy-four questions were included in this category. This category is very similar to Lindfors (1987) "Social-interactional" category. She describes this as:

"a question form functioning mainly to initiate or maintain or clarify a relationship." (p288)

Such questioning behaviour was intended to demonstrate genuine interest or to deliver critical feedback to peers. Hence two subcategories emerged:

- . genuine interest
- . critical feedback

Genuine Interest

Questions asked out of genuine interest in peers' work or expertise included:

How many pages have you written?
Which ones did you choose?
How did you get to draw that?
What are you doing, a roll-up or pinking-shears?
Sonia what did you do there?
Do you want to?

Children asked friends what they were doing in their work as a way of demonstrating altruistic motives and genuine curiosity.

When David asked "How did you get to draw that?" his question indicated his admiration for his peer's product and his desire to hear about how the product was made. Usually such questions seemed to be a way of children letting their peers know they cared about what they were doing. It bolstered children's confidence when they found friends had made similar choices.

Critical Feedback

Other questions were asked to deliver **critical feedback** to peers about their performance, knowledge or behaviour. Such questions included:

Are you going to write that again?
Don't you even know that?
Aren't you supposed to be working?
Is this your rough draft?
Michael do you know what "hypnotised" means?
Michelle are you still working on that address?
Why are you always using my ruler?
Do you know we had better work?
How should we know where they are?
You don't know what "hemlines" means, do you?

These critical questions were intended to give peers a negative message, either about their work or behaviour. They were very rare and really stood out when they did occur, because in some cases they signalled resistance to the kinds of

values that Marija was trying to set up, such as helping others and respecting each other's contributions. However in these cases, student status was often at stake. In the following questions Rachael signalled to David that she was boss and that he needed her more than she needed him.

Why are you always using my ruler?
You don't even know what "hemlines" means, do you?

Janelle joined her and gave him a similar message about his lost property, "How should we know where they are?" So, while on some occasions critical questions marked a breakdown in the kind of community Marija was trying to establish, when children deliberately "put down" the work of a peer, in other situations such language was also used to give a peer a message about inappropriate behaviour.

5.5 CHECKING EXPECTATIONS

Questions in which children checked expectations were reasonably frequent, especially early in the year, or with a visiting teacher or when they were asked to do an unfamiliar task. There were sixty-three questions in this category.

Such questions included:

Do we do a border?
Do we have to do it in pen?
Mrs Baggio, can I go on with Ash Wednesday?
Do you have to show the teacher?
Do you have to publish the poems?
Can I use the photocopier, please?
Am I allowed to make an Easter card for mum and dad?
Can you rule it up in a special way?
Can I go to the library?
Where do you put these now – in your draft folder?
Can you decorate your cover?
Can we do them in pairs?
Can we do a special project?
Can you do it in grey?

Although all these questions seek clarification about what is allowable or appropriate, not all questions which seek permission or clarification should be considered equal. Marija seemed to find some questions about expectations or rules irritating. For example, when Peter asked Marija if he could use the photocopier, she looked up crossly and replied, "That's just wasting time – you know you can."

When Richard asked Marija if he could "do research on kingfishers?" Marija challenged him with a question, "It's writing time – so is that your writing?" On one other occasion when children milled around Marija she stopped her conversation with one student, looked at the gathering group and asked,

"Does this mean you cannot solve your own problems?"

Most of the throng returned to their seats. Only those children who were confident of what they had to say to Marija, waited. Marija found these questions irritating, because she interpreted them as signs of unhealthy dependency.

However, Marija's negative responses to children's question asking or help-seeking were rare indeed. She seemed to reserve her annoyance for questions about routines that she thought had been clarified previously. She saved her helping for what she saw as academic problems. Questions such as the following were treated with an enthusiastic response.

Can you rule it up in a special way?
Can we do a special project?
Can we start now?
Mrs Baggio, are you allowed to vote twice?
Can me and Luke work on it together?

Marija took these questions not simply as requests for permission but as signs of initiative and enthusiasm. Therefore she was keen to bestow permission and congratulated the asker on these occasions. To Marija these questions signalled the independent thinking she welcomed.

The importance of understanding the teacher and the context becomes evident in exploring these categories. For while each of the above are requests seeking teacher approval, they represent in this context, quite different acts. Some are treated as signs of dependence or not having listened well enough, and others interpreted as signs of positive involvement on the part of students. So, while the categorization can provide a broad view of what children seek to achieve by asking, children's questions really need to be interpreted within the contexts in which they occur to provide useful data for teachers and researchers.

5.6 MAKING PROCESS DECISIONS

Children's questions which were asked in order to make process decisions involved choices about preferred options. This category included fifty-three questions, including questions such as the following:

- Who can be the one left out?
- Who agrees?
- Have we got any other ideas?
- Shall we list the reasons?
- Which one is the best?
- What can we do?
- Are we going to have staples?
- Who's going to be our leader?
- Who votes for Katherine as recorder?
- Should we do that too?
- Who's going to do what?
- What does the recorder do?
- If you do the sort with the kind on the bottom do you bring it back?
- Does it have to be a boy?
- How about I do Great Britain?
- What's Kim going to do though?
- Wait, how many countries are we going to have in the end?
- Why don't we stop the tape while we look through our books?

Children asked questions about three main kinds of decisions. Firstly, they asked questions about who would take on particular roles. Secondly, they asked questions about preferred choices of content. Thirdly, they asked about the best way to go about doing a task. Such questions occurred with greater frequency when children were allowed to negotiate parts of the task and when children worked in groups.

It is interesting to note that one student, Rachael, asked almost a third of questions within this category. This suggests that Rachael was very aware of the decisions that need to be made and took on particular kinds of roles in a group situation. (see Chapter 6) On the other hand some children did not ask any such questions. While this occurred in other categories, one feels that being able to make decisions about processes may be considered an important attribute of an independent learner. Children who think about process decisions designed to help the group's progress, may have a rare and useful talent. Alternatively and perhaps more optimistically one could say that all children could be taught how to ask such questions.

However, Rachael was not the only child to ask questions about decisions about process. Janelle and Melanie demonstrated similar questioning behaviour in small group situations. Rachael, Janelle and Melanie were all high achievers academically. Yet, Luke, Kim and Katherine, whom Marija considered average achievers in this context, also demonstrated similar questioning behaviour in groups. Asking questions which facilitated group decision-making therefore, was not limited to highly academic students. Boys and girls demonstrated this kind of questioning, suggesting that gender was not a key factor.

5.7 REQUESTING RESOURCES

Questions in which children requested resources were relatively rare in this classroom. This may add to the evidence provided earlier (see Chapter 4) that Marija was a highly effective manager. Of the total sample of thirty-eight questions in this category almost half were asked by one student, David. (see Chapter 6) Questions about resources occurred on two kinds of occasions. Firstly, children sought resources from each other when they had forgotten or lost their own. These questions included:

Have you got a spare pencil?
Can I use the rubber please?
Has anyone a pen I could borrow?
Anyone got a ruler here?

The second type of occasion in which children sought to locate physical resources involved unfamiliar activities. That is, when children were tackling a new task, questions about resources were likely to emerge.

I wish I could find a map of Spain.
Mrs Baggio, where are the pins?
Where's the cartridge paper?

In these instances children were asking because they had not used these materials before. However, given the considerable emphasis on innovative productions such as class newspapers, charts and pop-up books, there were only a small number of questions in this category. The infrequency of such questions provided evidence of Marija's highly organized approach to resource management.

5.8 REQUESTING NONSPECIFIC HELP

Nineteen requests for nonspecific help are included in this category.

Sometimes these entreaties were worded as statements, announcing difficulty.

I'm having some trouble.
I need help.
I'm confused.
I've forgotten what to do.
I don't know what to do.
This is hard.
I cannot think.
I want some help here.

At other times children asked general questions.

What do I do now?
What do we do?
What should I do?
What are we doing?

At these times children appeared totally confused. On some occasions absence from class had led to discontinuity. When children asked nonspecific questions they were usually ignored by peers. When they were addressed to me, I was able to help the child to specify their problem.

On no occasion did I observe children make nonspecific requests for help to Marija. Requests such as these seem only a little removed from non-verbal bids to gain assistance. Indeed, as Gabriella announced she needed help, she also burst into tears. David showed frustration by dropping his pencil and stating, "This is hard." Thus, dramatic body language often accompanied these less specific requests. Such requests appear to be fairly unfruitful in terms of achieving a helpful response. On the other hand they do indicate that children were prepared to openly admit that they needed assistance. However, one suspects that in a classroom where questioning and help-seeking were not highly valued by the teacher that such bids for assistance might be suppressed altogether.

5.9 REMINDING TEACHER

On several occasions during the data collection period I observed children ask a question as a polite reminder to Marija. Following Goetz and Le Compte (1984) a new category was formed, despite the small sample. These questions were:

Are you going to read Superfudge?
Can you read Penny Pollard's Letters?
Shall I go get the people from the library to do this?
Is Sophie in the Koala group?

The first two questions were asked by the same girl, Michelle, who seemed to take on the role of making sure the class got its quota of story reading. I observed Michelle later in the year make similar polite requests on behalf of her peers.

Derek's reminder was slightly different. He had noticed that a group of children had not returned from exchanging library books, and his teacher had begun to introduce an entirely new task. Derek's responsible concern for his peers is demonstrated through his helpful reminder to his teacher. Travis' question about Sophie being in the koala group was intended to remind Marija about his peer's special expertise. On further visits to the classroom after the major data had been collected, I observed similar questions. Although only four questions were collected in this category, Marija mentioned in our discussions that the children frequently needed to remind her about books, events and activities. She saw this as evidence of them taking responsibility and being enthusiastic about their schooling.

5.10 DISCUSSION

If children's learning depends on their ability to ask questions, then what they ask about and for what reasons will affect the kinds of learning they do. A framework such as this provides some illumination of children's preoccupations, misunderstandings and thinking. If, for example, a large percentage of an individual child's questions fall into Requesting Resources or Checking Expectations, that child will have different kinds of interaction and receive different kinds of help than a child whose questions are largely about Making Process Decisions and Solving Text Problems. Even within the same learning community, children will experience different learning outcomes. Yet if a teacher is able to identify patterns in children's questions they may be able to help students learn how to ask questions, that will help them to learn in the future rather than questions that meet only immediate needs.

The main value of this analytical framework is that it indicates the broad functions of children's questions and requests for help during language arts time. A large percentage of the questioning sample concerned Solving Text Problems. Within that category children's questions revealed where their strengths and problems lay. We could quickly tell whether children were preoccupied with spellings or were struggling with topic choice. As well as providing a picture of children's thinking as they work on literacy tasks, the analytical framework suggests a great deal about the kind of literacy learning community that was established in this classroom.

CHAPTER SIX: LEARNING ABOUT CHILDREN THROUGH THEIR QUESTIONS AND REQUESTS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

"The process of observing even a single individual sensitizes us that much more to other individuals." (Bissex, 1987:14)

The value of closely studying individual learners is also argued by other researchers investigating literacy development (Calkins, 1983; Bussis et al, 1985). Dyson (1983a, 1985, 1989) emphasizes the usefulness of comparative case studies in understanding both developmental patterns and the unique approaches of young learners. This study investigates the patterns shared by groups of children and the idiosyncratic approaches of individuals.

As the research progressed both Marija and I began to notice patterns in the questioning behaviour of individual children, over time and on different tasks. For example, Marija commented that Mark always needed a private consultation with her immediately after she had given instructions. At the same time I realized how often Rachael's questions concerned making choices and that David frequently requested resources. We identified consistent help-seeking behaviours within individuals, but we also discovered striking differences between children – in how they asked, what they asked about, who they asked, when they asked, and indeed, if they asked. We found out that

they experienced different success rates in receiving useful help. The implications of these differences for successful learning led us to focus closely on three children: Rachael, David and Mark. These children were selected for two reasons. Firstly, each child had asked at least forty-five questions during the data collection period. Secondly, the children used contrasting approaches to asking questions and seeking help.

Although this study focused on children's questions, the importance of other utterances was not ignored. Statements, jokes, recounts and answers were recorded. Examples of children's writing and Marija's oral and written feedback were also used to build an accurate profile of each learner. Each of the children was interviewed in a group situation. The primary data source for analysis consisted of children's questions, but other relevant sources of information were used in order to better represent individual learners. In short, multiple sources of data were used as a method of triangulation.

By looking in detail at children's questions I hope to provide another window on their thinking as they face learning challenges in classrooms. Individual children's help-seeking within literacy events is described, along with details of set tasks and illustrative transcripts of questioning episodes. The reader has the opportunity to consider the child at work during several learning episodes. I also provide a summative profile for each learner by dealing with their whole questioning sample across the year.

The chapter is organized in the following way. Three individual case studies are provided in turn. For each child the following information is included:

- . age and language background
- . representative questions
- . typical questioning episodes
- . a questioning profile
- . language patterns within questions
- . delivery of questions
- . how the child enlisted help
- . a summary about each learner.

Comparisons and contrasts are drawn between the children in the discussion and summary which concludes the chapter.

6.2 RACHAEL

Rachael was nine years and five months old and in year five at the commencement of the study. She spoke English only. She was closely observed in the small group situation during fourteen language arts lessons. She was interviewed in a small group and contributed to three class discussions about the research. Marija recorded Rachael's questions on two occasions during the second semester and her parents twice completed the response sheet about Rachael's questions. A selection of her questions across the year is provided below.

Have we got any other ideas?
Now do we all know what to do? (18.2.87)
Shall we list the reasons?
Mrs Baggio, can we do a special project? (23.2.87)
Do you think the letter should come first and then the story or the other way around? (16.11.87)

Reading these six questions, even without contextual knowledge suggests possibilities about Rachael as a learner. These questions are concerned with making decisions and getting tasks done. Another sample might add to the reader's hunches about Rachael.

In one country, if the crops are destroyed how will they get food?
(23.2.87)

Who's going to be the spokesman? (23.2.87)

So we have got, how many choices? (3.4.87)

Do you want to call it similarities? (10.4.87)

What do you think about "redrafted" – meaning another draft? (16.11.87)

Rachael's questions, even totally out of context, give some clues about her approach to learning in this classroom community. Her questions are related to tasks and focus on choices to be made between content, vocabulary and ways of doing things. Her questions suggest an organized confident learner who is able to consider options.

6.2.1 Rachael's Questioning Episodes

Rachael's questioning patterns can best be interpreted by looking at her questions as she worked on literacy tasks. The episodes show the different roles Rachael took on as she questioned during language arts time.

Episode One: Group Play on Friendship

Marija had been talking with the children about their fears. She asked them to recall a story about a boy wetting his pants. Gradually she steered the discussion to friendship and asked them "Why do you play with certain people?". The children brainstormed responses and Marija wrote their list on the board. Then she asked a further three questions. "What could you do if you wanted to make a friend?" "How can you keep a friend?" "Which things work and which don't?" There was another brief but energetic brainstorm and Marija set their task.

"Get into small groups to do a play about someone being left out. You're going to try and bring them into your group." Marija elaborated on the task and before sending them off she checked that they knew what to do and asked if there were problems.

Rachael put up her hand and asked, "How many people are in each group?" They decided on five people and Marija reminded them that each group must include boys and girls. She told them they had five minutes to talk about their play and ten minutes to work it out and practise it. The small groups scattered to get started on their play and the following discussion occurred in Rachael's group.

- Rachael: Who can be the one left out?
[There was much discussion on this with all the children talking at once and no decision was made.]
- Janelle: Can we just give our idea?
- Rachael: About Bottroff!
[a ball game children play]
- Michael: That really happened to me.
[Michael recalled being left out of this game at school]
- Scott: Where's the ball?
- Michael: Who agrees?
- Rachael: Have we got any other ideas?
[At this point the children decided that they all agreed with Janelle's and Rachael's suggestion about acting out a scene around the game "bottroff."]
- Scott: Where's the ball?
[Scott was determined that they need a real ball to do their play. Rachael ignored his request and intimated that they could mime it. Then she continued.]
- Rachael: Come on. We've got to practise.
- Michael: We need a ball.
- Rachael: Who's going to be the person left out?
- Michael: I will.
[The others accepted his offer.]
- Michael: Who's going to be King?
[They began to improvise, working out the details of their short play as they went along.]
- Janelle: Instead of all this arguing say, "I'll give you a lolly." How does that sound?
- Michael: What about the lolly business?

Rachael ignored the last two questions and continued to direct Richard. She then suggested they rehearse it again and the group followed her lead. Finally she checked that everyone knew what to do, saying, "You know, don't you Michael? Now do we all know what to do?" The children in the group agreed that they knew what was expected of them. At this point Marija called each group back to perform for the whole class.

In this episode Rachael's questions served an important function for the group. She and Janelle worked well as a pair to organize their peers. Rachael's first question, "How many people in each group?" clarified the size of groups for the whole class.

In the small group situation Rachael took the floor immediately. Her question caused much discussion about who would act the main part. When no decision was made, Janelle and Rachael presented their idea about the ball game as the context for the play. Rachael checked if anyone had other ideas but they all agreed with her suggestion. Scott became concerned about the need for a ball. Rachael pointed out that miming didn't require a real ball. She reminded them they needed to practise. When Scott was still preoccupied with finding a real ball as a prop, Rachael again interrupted him and repeated her original question about casting the person who was going to be left out. The group began to work on the task at hand with Rachael actively directing other children. When she did not agree with the "lolly suggestion", she simply ignored it and got them to practise the play again. When the time limit was almost up she questioned the main actor, Michael and checked with the whole group, "Now do we all know what to do?"

Rachael's questions within the group helped her peers to start work on the task, to make key decisions, to avoid side tracks, and to stay on schedule. She did not ask many questions but what she did ask was well chosen and helped the group to progress. Her questioning was similar to Marija's, in that it was goal-directed and inclusive.

Episode Two: A Special Project

At the conclusion of a small group task about "people needing people", Rachael suggested to her group, "We could ask Mrs Baggio if we could do a special project". Three other children, including her faithful friend Janelle, David and Kim agreed, without fully understanding what Rachael had in mind. With their approval, Rachael approached Marija at the end of the lesson and asked, "Can we do a special project?"

Rachael explained to Marija how they had been discussing different countries, that some were poor and needed extra food. She told Marija how the group had decided they would like to do a project finding out about other countries.

Marija agreed to Rachael's suggestion and in the following few weeks, during "free time", Rachael and her little group worked independently in the library on their self-selected "special project". The group recorded all of their discussions on audiotape and I observed on two occasions.

As their first discussion lasted twenty minutes, the entire transcript was too lengthy to include here, but Rachael's questions are listed below.

Well, why don't we choose maybe four, maybe five?

Any more suggestions?

Just say – any more countries we are suggesting, that you can think of that you want to suggest?

Wait, how many countries are we going to have in the end?

So we have got, how many choices?

Their "special project" involved researching several countries. As Rachael put it, "We are going to have a few different countries and we are comparing them all with Australia to see what the differences are." The children brainstormed countries they could study. Many offers were rejected. For example, Kim suggested both "Europe" and "overseas", showing that he did not really understand what defined "a country". David suggested Italy, because "I'm Italian." Next Kim suggested "Bulgaria" because one of his parents was from Bulgaria. Janelle suggested France, because "My dad knows a lot about France", and eventually Rachael chose Spain because she "couldn't find one single book on Greece". Later David changed to Japan, after Rachael worked out that another class was studying Italy. The children's discussion was fascinating, in that it revealed a great deal about how personal experience and school constraints combined to influence their choices of topics.

Once again Rachael's questions indicated the kind of role she took on, in helping the group to make choices that related to the final outcome as she imagined it. Her questioning was a strong indication of her leadership. Her questions initiated processes such as brainstorming and voting that Marija had used. Rachael asked questions which guided her peers through the task at hand and provided a scaffold for their thinking. She also asked questions to which she already has a preferred answer. Thus Rachael took on a teaching role, both

in asking helpful process questions and also in asking questions to get "right answers" from her peers. While there was a pretence of democracy, in the end Rachael influenced strongly which ideas were taken up and which were ignored.

Episode Three: The Australian Christmas Play

Recent research has suggested that successful writers know how to ask questions about their writing (Calkins, 1983; Murray, 1984; Langer, 1986b). This can occur as private dialogue within the head of the writer or as a writing conference with peers or teachers. On numerous occasions, Rachael questioned herself and others about her writing.

In the episode which follows Rachael and Janelle talked as they jointly scripted their Australian Christmas play.

- Rachael: I think we've finished scene two.
Do you want to listen to it?
[Renee and David agreed to listen and Rachael started to read it out, but as she read, she thought about the next scene and checked with Janelle]
- Rachael: Do you think scene three should be Christmas Eve?
Janelle: Christmas, right?
Rachael: Well what do you think if we had it like Christmas day and Santa comes and hands out presents?
Janelle: Yeh and early in the morning.
Rachael: It might be good if we got your mum to type it up and photocopy it.
[Janelle agreed and then asked if she could have a look at scene one. She began to copy it out.]
- Rachael: How can we make this a kind of Australian version?
[They had included a Christmas song in their play.]
Janelle: It has to end in "heat".
[They went back to writing parts individually for several minutes.]
- Janelle: In what order should we introduce the people?
[Rachael made these decisions immediately and Janelle recorded what she said.]
- Rachael: How are we going to put the kangaroo in? Oh yeh, he'll be hopping around at the end when the chorus is going!
[The children at her table looked up and laughed.]
We've got to find another boy for Mat.
Peter, do you want to be in the play?

Rachael's questions in this episode revealed her sophisticated ability to juggle simultaneously the different levels of problems that face writers . Her questions dealt with:

- . content
 - . presentation
 - . practical issues
 - . appropriate language
 - . introduction of a character
 - . casting
- the Christmas Eve decision
 - the decision to ask Janelle's mum to type
 - the decision to photocopy the script
 - the "Australization" of the Christmas song
 - including the Kangaroo
 - finding a small boy to play Mat's part.

At the same time as Rachael made these decisions she proofread her work. Because she was able to verbalize her specific problems, she was able to talk through possible solutions. She didn't accept confusion. Rachael's questions become more remarkable and distinctive when looked at in comparison with other peers in her class. While they are the kinds of questions that many teachers would hope for this kind of self and peer questioning may be quite rare.

Each of the three episodes discussed, the group play, the special project and the Australian Christmas play, revealed her abilities to use questions like her teacher and to use questions as an experienced writer might do.

6.2.2 Rachael's Questioning Profile

Rachael's questions were categorized according to the analytical framework, described in Chapter Five. (see Figure 6.1) In total sixty-seven questions were recorded. These questions were distributed across six of the eight categories, but mainly fell into three: Solving Text Problems, Making Process Decisions and Checking Peers.

Figure 6.1 Rachael's Questions

	<u>Number</u>
Solving text problems	22
Making process decisions	19
Checking Peers	16
Checking expectations	4
Requesting information	3
Requesting resources	3
Reminding teacher	0
Requesting nonspecific help	<u>0</u>
	67

The distribution of Rachael's questions is interesting. Her questions meant that she was involved in significant academic conversations about solving problems with texts and making decisions about processes. The distribution indicates her preoccupations and urgent concerns. Rachael was task oriented and produced highly effective writing. She skillfully identified decisions to be made and assisted others to do the same. She enjoyed giving feedback and receiving it from peers. While the distribution of questions broadly indicates where Rachael focuses her attention, the small number of questions in other categories are revealing also.

Rachael rarely checked Marija's expectations. Yet even in seeking permission, she showed her initiative and confidence.

Mrs Baggio can we do a special project?
 Could we do it the way we did the Easter cards?
 Can you rule it up in a special way?

Her request for resources was not trivial either.

Mrs Baggio have you got any interesting material so that I could make something for Christmas?

Rachael's questions indicated her ability to think ahead, imagine how things could be and make plans. That she asked such questions indicated the degree of match between Rachael's approach to learning at school and the classroom context Marija established.

A seemingly mundane question about spelling also revealed Rachael's confidence. The children had been asked to choose a word beginning with "M" and to write their selection on a card and decorate it for display in the library. The word was meant to describe the writing of Margaret Mahy, a humorous children's author. Rachael asked me how to spell "marvellous". When I replied, she smiled and said nothing. Several days later she commented in a videotaped interview that she hated it when teachers corrected your spelling, especially when they were wrong. Rachael had been double-checking "marvellous", a word that Marija had altered in her writing. (In fact this word has two alternative spellings: "marvellous" or "marvelous") Even her simple question about spelling was a sign of her independence and confidence as a learner.

6.2.3 The Language of Rachael's Questions

Looking at Rachael's questions in the classroom context and the summary of her distribution of questions gives a picture of Rachael's abilities and preoccupations. The language of Rachael's questions also revealed interesting patterns which provide clues to the typical uses Rachael had for questions.

Her questions featured four repetitive patterns of vocabulary and style:

1. "Why don't"?
2. "Who's going to"?
3. "Now what"?
4. "Special" and "Interesting"

Several examples of each type are provided, followed by a brief discussion of what this suggests about Rachael's use of questions.

"Why don't?" Questions

Why don't we stop the tape?
Why don't you choose another one Kim?
Why don't we do Yugoslavia?
Why don't we choose four, maybe five?

Rachael used this approach with her peers when she had already made a decision but she wanted to give them the opportunity to decide or at least go through a democratic process. That is not to suggest that Rachael did not consider the feelings of her peers. Her question to Kim was aimed at helping him change to a topic where there were more resources. In asking her group "Why don't we do four, maybe five?" Rachael summarized the state of their current situation. Her question helped them move towards closure on that issue.

Rachael's "why don't we?" approach was inclusive of her peers and there was no indication that they were offended by her way of operating. She gave them the message that she knew what to do and she wanted to take them with her. It is a powerful user of language, indeed, who can make decisions for a group, but let members feel as if their voices have been heard.

"Who's going to?" Questions

Rachael thrived on the numerous opportunities Marija provided to work in groups, where children took on various roles and she asked many questions which initiated conversations between group members.

Who can be the one left out?
Who's going to be the person left out?
Who's going to be the spokesman?
Who else could we have?

When Rachael asked such questions I wondered if she was trying to influence others to select her for key roles. However, when she was not chosen she showed no resentment. She simply seemed to get satisfaction from keeping the group moving and achieving the required outcomes.

"Now What?" Questions

Rachael continually monitored her own and her group's progress on tasks. Sometimes she engaged in a running monologue and at others she addressed her peers. Such questions included the following:

Now, what do I do, since I've ruled up two columns?
Now, which one has the highest votes?
Now, what are we doing?

Other similar questions began with "Hang on", "Wait", "So", "Just Say". On these occasions Rachael appeared to be taking stock of the situation, reflecting on what had been done and working out where to go next. These kinds of questions were often asked midway through a task, when partial progress had been made. Rachael questioned its relevance, accuracy or direction, before proceeding. Even though such questions were intended for her own benefit, they also helped her peers to reflect on their work in a similar fashion.

"Special" and "Interesting"

Rachael's questions to Marija often featured the words "special" or "interesting":

Can we do a special project?
Can you rule it up in a special way?
Mrs Baggio, have you got any interesting material so that I could make something for Christmas.

In each of these situations Rachael initiated the conversation with her teacher and asked for something out of the ordinary. Seeking permission or resources are not easy events for a child to initiate (Dillon 1988a). Rachael increased her status in these exchanges by making her requests "special" and "interesting". She seemed to know what appealed to Marija and phrased her requests accordingly. In her question about the "interesting" material, she provided Marija with essential contextual information. A blander question, such as, "Have you got any material?" might have met with a less successful response, such as, "What for?" or "Why ask me?" or "What are you meant to be doing?". Rachael's tactful wording made it likely that she would get the help she wanted.

Rachael was not frightened to ask questions. Because of the clarity of her questions she received helpful responses. Her questions rarely indicated confusion or misunderstanding. Usually she sought help or feedback in order to make appropriate decisions.

6.2.4 Delivery of Questions

Rachael turned her head and looked directly at the person to whom she was talking. If her question referred to her writing she had the artefact with her. She spoke clearly, and slowly and maintained eye contact during her

conversations. She waited until she had the undivided attention of her listener before she verbalized the question. When Rachael sought help from Marija (other than in the whole class situation, where she raised her hand) she usually addressed her teacher by name saying, "Mrs Baggio ...". Rachael presented her questions and dilemmas in a cheerful, sincere way. She prepared herself before she spoke and was able to give listeners the context for her questions. There was no sense of desperation, but rather a strong sense of commitment. Rachael's questions did not come from having listened poorly but rather from listening so well.

6.2.5 Enlisting Teacher Help

Rachael asked for Marija's help in both whole class and one-to-one situations. In the whole class situation Rachael often sought clarification about specific aspects of tasks.

Could it be something like our "boiling frog"? [The group's name for a previous piece of research]
When are we going to have the interviews?
How many people are in the groups?

These questions demonstrated Rachael's ability to think ahead. She took opportunities to test out her developing ideas. In responding to such requests Marija provided extra information and examples which assisted other children as well.

The following exchange shows how Rachael initiated private consultations about her writing.

Rachael: Mrs Baggio I'm stumped. We've got the letter worked out, but I'm trying to get some ideas for the story part.
Marija: Show me what you've done.

Rachael produced her letter and explained what she was trying to do. She read out the letter punctuated by Marija's positive response and laughter. Marija left the decision with Rachael, but encouraged her to seek more peer feedback.

Marija: Why don't you see if Janelle can help you out with some input.

Rachael began to read it out to Janelle, but stopped and announced: "Hang on, that doesn't make sense?"

Janelle started to do her own writing and Rachael turned to Katherine instead and asked her about the choice of a word.

Rachael: What do you think about "redrafted" – meaning another draft?
[Katherine nodded her approval and then asked Rachael about a problem she noticed in the text].

Katherine: How come there's two Travis Browns in the pictures?

Rachael fixed this problem while Katherine watched intently. Together they read the new alternative and announced to Janelle and Marija (who was still nearby). "We've cut out half the story now."

For the next ten minutes Rachael wrote continually then she passed the story and letter to Katherine.

Rachael: What do you think Katherine?

[Katherine read with obvious amusement.]

Katherine: It's very good – it must have been hard to work this out.
What's "ado"?

Rachael: "Ado" – like without any more waiting or fuss.
Do you think the letter should come first and then the story or the other way around?

Katherine suggested the letter should be first. Rachael began to talk to herself about how she would set it out. She started to imagine Maurice Sendak opening it and saying, "What are they getting at?" Rachael then involved Marija.

Rachael: We've decided the order was the story, the letter, the book.
We thought we'd have that as an intro.

Marija: That's brilliant.

With that Marija read the story and the letter to the class and asked "What do you think he'll think when he reads it?" The children brainstormed possible responses and Marija asked, "What does it mean to have feedback?" She looked meaningfully at Rachael, but Melanie spoke first.

Melanie: I like feedback because I can improve my work.

Rachael: I like it because then I know someone has been paying attention.

This discussion continued around examples of feedback until Marija turned to Rachael again.

Marija: What do you think about the order – are you happy with that?

Rachael: I don't know – that's why I really needed other opinions. It's representing the whole class so I needed to see what they think.

In this episode Rachael's admission that she was "stumped" initiated a series of short but related talks between Marija, Rachael and her peers about the problem of order in the materials the class was about to post to Maurice Sendak. (The children had used the book, Where the Wild Things Are (1963) as a model and produced their own book called "Where the Novel Things Are.") Rachael openly told Marija she was blocked. Marija listened and asked Rachael to explain what she had done so far. Marija made no suggestions about the text. Rather Marija's advice was of a process nature. She recommended that Rachael check what Janelle thought. When Janelle was busy Rachael turned to Katherine and only involved Marija again when she had something to

report. Rachael was able to pursue a problem over a long period of time until it was resolved. She had easy access to Marija, who made time to listen, and took her writing seriously.

Marija did not simply answer Rachael's questions. She provided advice on ways that Rachael could answer them herself. Rachael not only received advice about solving specific problems but also learnt healthy ways of operating as a writer. Rachael's approach to questioning was that of a "mastery-oriented" child (Nelson-Le Gall, 1989b). The help she received, helped her to work out complex processes, which were applicable to future problems.

6.2.6 Rachael As A Learner – Working The System

Rachael's questions revealed a self motivated, self directed, self regulated learner. To conclude this profile, triangulating evidence from the teacher and from Rachael herself is included.

Marija's view of Rachael is evident in the following passages from the official school report to Rachael's parents.

"She is an independent worker who always follows through her own inquiry. Rachael is aware of her talents and interests therefore she sets personal goals to monitor her own learning."

"Rachael is on "overload" with regards to Language Arts. Her reading repertoire is so long that there aren't enough school hours to satisfy her thirst for books. When it comes to writing, once again there are so many styles of writing that Rachael wants to experiment with that time becomes her enemy. She shares her ideas readily and is skilled in supporting others."

Marija also described Rachael as a "rare and extraordinary student."

Rachael's written assignments also reveal some of her values and beliefs.

I think that learning to read is vital and that I get a lot of enjoyment out of just reading.

I think that my teacher is perfect in every way of teaching, even spelling.

I think that school is extremely informative.

The thing that makes me happiest is when Mrs Baggio is pleased with my work.

The thing that scares me most is the thought of starting at W..... (new school) and not knowing what to do.

Rachael obviously valued schooling and learning to read. She clearly admired Marija and was keen to let her know that. Her fear about "not knowing what to do" at the new school was interesting, given the way Rachael operated so successfully in Marija's classroom.

In her "Achievements in 1987" piece, Rachael wrote "I feel excellent with what I've done so far this year". She explained that, she had gotten "better at writing because I've got more friends." The messages in both Marija's and Rachael's writing support the picture shown by her questions. She thought about the decisions she needed to make and was able to articulate the choices which faced her. Her questions indicated that she felt confident to seek help from both her peers and her teacher.

In a class discussion about asking questions Rachael explained her view that there are appropriate occasions on which to ask and other times when it "isn't the right thing to ask." It would have been interesting to follow up this perception further, that is, how Rachael judged the right time to ask a

question. In regard to helping others, Rachael explained,

"Maybe they won't learn anything if they don't try, so I give them help – depends on the question."

Her understanding of the importance of questioning in learning and the risky nature of questioning was strikingly accurate. Rachel's ability to ask the "right questions at the right time" contributed in no small way to her success in this classroom community. Erickson and Shultz (1982) describe students who enjoy a special rapport with their teacher, as experiencing "co-membership" with the teacher. Rachael experienced a high degree of "co-membership" with Marija, which allowed her to ask questions freely.

This chapter now goes on to explore David's questioning behaviour to consider what it reveals about him as a learner.

6.3 DAVID

David was eight years and eight months old and in year four at the commencement of the study. He was bilingual, speaking fluent English at school and Italian at home. David was closely observed in the small group situation during ten language arts lessons, interviewed with a group of peers and audiotaped on six occasions. David's parents twice completed the response sheet about his questions at home. A selection of his questions across the year is listed below:

Are you meant to do a letter first?

What's the next sentence? 4.3.87

Do you have to go back now?

Do you want me to trace those dollar notes? 13.3.87

Do I write things about Spain and things about Australian there? So what should I write there? What do I write? Show me, show me, show me.

What else do I write there, Japanese? 20.3.87

What should I do?

Could I just have a look at yours? 22.3.87

Just as Rachael's questions revealed much about her approach to learning, so too David's questions provided information about his ways of operating. The above questions show David's concern about what he should do.

Further questions add extra information about how David operated as a learner.

Do you have to do a rough copy?
Do you know what to write? 4.3.87
How did you get to draw that?
Can I publish mine? 13.3.87
Say if there was a real fire, what would you do, come on?
What's so funny Janelle?
Should I write anything?
Do you want to do my idea?
Have you got any long notes on your thing Rachael? 20.3.87

These questions show a similar concern about what has to be done, but they suggest curiosity about his peers' opinions and skills as well.

6.3.1 David's Questioning Episodes

David's questions are most revealing when explored in context. Three episodes are described in detail to indicate David's questioning and help-seeking style.

Episode One: "Leo The Late Bloomer"

Marija had invited the principal to read to the class and introduce some work on personal goal-setting. The principal began by reading the picture book Leo The Late Bloomer (Kraus 1971). The story is about a young tiger who fails to learn to talk, walk, sing, read, write and eat neatly, while his peers of the same age seem to achieve these things easily. His father became anxious but his

mother is optimistic that Leo will "bloom" in his own good time, which of course, he does. The obvious message of the story is that given support and trust, we all learn to do things at different times. The principal told the children that she had only recently "bloomed" in learning to speak German, to use computers and to write with her left hand. She emphasized that people learn new things throughout their lives. Marija admitted that she was only just learning to swim.

Following this discussion about "blooming" in various areas, the principal began to explain the possible tasks.

"If you worked in pairs you could do an interview – a conversation. One is Leo. One is the interviewer. Or you could write to Leo's father telling him not to worry. Or why might we write to Leo's mother? Or letters to the principal, teacher or parents to give them advice on late bloomers."

The principal became excited about possibilities and invented more options as she talked. Then she stopped and demonstrated how to set out a letter. They brainstormed lead sentences on the blackboard. The principal remarked, "If you write a nice one, I could put it in a newsletter." Then she sent the children back to their desks to work on the task. David initiated the conversation which follows.

David: Are you meant to do a letter first?
Kim: Yeah.
David: Do you have to do a rough copy?
Natalie: Are you supposed to write a letter first?
David: What's the date today?

No one responded to the last three questions, so David checked on the blackboard. Meanwhile Kim talked to himself and Natalie asked the principal about the task saying, "Do you have to do a letter to parents or something?"

The principal explained the possible options again to the whole class. When she finished the children began to talk. David immediately asked, "Do you know what to write? Hey that's a question! I'd rather write that down." He fetched his field notes and recorded his question. A little further around the table Gabriella became very red in the face and burst into tears. I offered to help her and asked if anyone else was still confused. David admitted he didn't know what to do. At this moment the principal called the children back together on the mat. She asked them why the task "went flat" and, "What made it so difficult?" Nobody answered.

Marija took over the discussion as the principal had to leave. She talked to the children about taking on challenges and reassured them, saying, "We don't mind if the answer is wrong." Then she let them return to the task set by the principal. Back at their tables the children looked more relaxed and their questions began to flow.

Kim: What does "concerned" mean?

[As soon as I finished explaining, David spoke.]

David: What do you do if you don't want to finish the letter and you're doing a play?

Natalie: You have to do the letter first.

Kim: I don't know what to write about now that I've written one sentence.

Marija interrupted and read Amy's letter aloud to the class. David looked at his letter, read it silently and then asked.

David: What's the next sentence? When Mrs Baggio comes back I'm going to ask her if mine can go in the newsletter.

At this point the bell sounded and the children went out to play.

In this episode lasting approximately forty five minutes David asked nine questions and once admitted confusion. His questions revealed his preoccupation with knowing what you "have to do." However, he was not the only child to experience confusion about this task as the description shows.

Because the principal had mentioned so many possibilities, but only discussed and demonstrated one on the blackboard, the children were uncertain about what their real choices were. David's first question, "Are you meant to do a letter first?" showed his confusion about the order of tasks. David accepted Kim's answer and began his letter, even though later, he indicated that he would have preferred to do an interview.

David finally wrote his first sentence, after Kim read his out loud. Then David looked to me for help about what might be an appropriate second sentence. Before I responded he added that he wanted to ask Mrs Baggio about getting his published, which he did on his way out to play.

In this episode David's questions indicate his concern about completing the task in the way his teacher intended. Even though he preferred the second option, acting out an interview, he did not ask Marija if he could begin with this. He accepted his peer's versions of what they were meant to do. He expected that they knew the right thing to do. His eagerness to be seen doing well was exposed when he asked about publishing his letter after writing only the first sentence.

David's questions not only reveal his concern to do the right thing, but also the way in which he approaches this literacy task. After writing the first sentence David revealed that he did not know how to continue, exposing his lack of understanding of the purpose of the task as a whole. He solved each problem – the date, the address, the first sentence, the second sentence as if they were separate, rather than related aspects of the one task. As the lesson concluded at this point I am unable to describe how David progressed with this piece or whether he ever organized the interview, but by looking at his questioning during another writing task his portrait as a learner becomes clearer.

Episode Two: A Special Project

David was a member of the small group which worked independently in the library to conduct the "special project" initiated by Rachael. He asked many questions during this small group activity. The entire transcript of the children's discussions covers forty typed pages (without commentary from the researcher). What follows are selected excerpts from the transcript in which David asked frequent questions.

At this stage, the children had decided which countries to research and had collected resources to help them. David initiated this part of the conversation.

David: I am writing, alright.
Now be quiet.

First Rachael, before we start, I just want to ask you something – do I write things about Spain and things about Australia there?

[David referred to Rachael's work to check out what she had done.]

Rachael: Like, what you do is you put Fact No. 1 and Fact No. 1 here and they have fiestas and what we have instead of fiestas.

- David: So what should I write there?
Rachael: You're not doing Spain.
David: Sorry.
Rachael: What an idiot!
David: Sorry, now what!
[David was starting to worry that he didn't know how to go about the task of comparing his chosen country, Japan, with Australia. Although he had already traced a map of Japan, he hadn't written anything. He was so worried about getting something down that he began to copy Rachael's work on Spain. At this point Marija entered the library.]
Kim: Mrs Baggio is here.
Rachael: Oh great.
David: Tell her to come in here for a minute.
Rachael: That's Lebanese (referring to a reference book).
Kim: I know, this is Australia.
David: Go and tell Miss Baggio to come in here quick, go and tell Miss Baggio to come in here, so she can see what we are doing. But first, come here, what do I write? Show me, show me, show me.
Rachael: Right, well what do they have?
They have
- [Rachael stopped and waited for David to suggest something special about Japanese culture. David offered nothing, but asked Rachael to look at his reference book.]
David: Have a look.
Rachael: They have idols and rabbis.
David: What do they have?
Rachael: Don't worry. [She realized it was open at the wrong page.]
David: Find something!
Rachael: Look, you are supposed to be doing your own research.
Janelle: This is a simple way you can do it. Just look at the buildings and things and we can get ideas. Like, this is different. They have got slanty roofs because of the weather.
Rachael: So write that down.

David's requests for help during this brief passage reveal his uncertainty about how to proceed. He was unable to visualize how his product should look and he didn't understand how to write a comparison and contrast list. He was keen for Marija to recognize their efforts, but anxious because he had no writing done.

Rachael gave David a mixed response. On the one hand she wanted him to succeed perhaps because he was part of her group, and on the other she was frustrated by his inability to understand what was required. David trusted

Rachael enough to be absolutely honest about his confusion. However, his eagerness to produce something led him to rush. He did not really understand the logic of Rachael's two columns for comparison and contrast. In his desperation, he even forgot that his study was about Japan. David focused on completion of the task without fully understanding what the task required. As Rachael was the initiator of this "special project" and had admitted David into the group, he remained dependent on her for advice about how to proceed.

Several days later the children were once again working together in the library and the following brief interaction occurred.

- Rachael: And he goes, "I love you" and he starts chasing after you and he hugs you and everything.
 David: He's a sex maniac.
 Kim: Oh thrills me.
 Rachael: Why don't you write that as a different thing?
 David: What do you have to write? I don't know what you have to write. What do you have to write? Mammalata!
 Janelle: "Mammalata", wow.
 Kim: You mean, "Mamma mia."

David had been joking with Rachael about girlfriends and boyfriends, but he was unable to laugh at her sarcastic suggestion that he include this information in his project. He realized that he was not getting very far with his work and forgot the fun of the gossip and went back to his writing. Unlike Rachael, David could not afford to work and play at the same time, because he still had not conquered his intellectual battle with the task at hand. During this week, his father had visited Marija to discuss his worries about David's progress. He had also reprimanded David about his work and behaviour in front of his classmates. David's questions at this stage were voiced with genuine desperation.

When I listened to the tape recording of their discussions I realized that David and to a lesser extent Kim were in trouble with the task so I decided to visit the group. During the first five minutes of the lesson, I observed David make the following requests:

Where's my paper?
Where's the black pen?
I need a piece of paper.
Anyone got a ruler here?
Could I use it please, and could I use your felt pen please?

While David made a desperate attempt to get organized, Janelle read the encyclopaedia.

Janelle: Who's doing Japan?
David: Me.
Janelle: Look, it has got something on Japan here and something on China here.
Rachael: Japan [reading] "under an agreement with the ..." and there was something on China as well, so if you want it, it's there.
David: Yes ma'am!
Can you read this word please?
Janelle: What word?
David: That (pointing)
Janelle: Japan
David: The other word – not Japan, that word.
Janelle: That's Japan to a – that's how they write Japan.

Throughout the special project, David's questions indicate a state of confusion and disorganization in regard to the academic task. Socially he was tolerated by Rachael. At times they enjoyed the off-task chats about girlfriends and boyfriends. There are many references throughout the tape about David's girlfriends. However, while Rachael and Janelle occasionally indulged in classroom gossip they continued to work on their project, at times almost mechanically. Rachael even chanted, "Boring, boring, boring," as she wrote.

Yet the experience for David as his questions reveal was neither boring nor satisfying. His questions reveal a lack of self trust, a deferral to peers' perceptions of how tasks should be done. He did not give up however, and even suggested that the group could put their work together and publish a book. This was consistent with his many other positive references to publishing. David preferred to work in groups, perhaps hoping that the others would help him to solve his problems, or at least make his deficiencies less obvious. He often sought partners for academic tasks. On one occasion David even asked Marija if he could work with Derek (a very able student) on his Mother's Day card! Derek pointed out that partners were not appropriate for this task.

Episode Three: The Wrong Question

On several occasions, I failed to understand what kind of help David needed. His initial question signalled a problem, but not the real problem.

The following requests for help from David, occurred after Marija had introduced the idea of writing journals. The purpose of these journals was for the children to make notes about their writing processes. For example, they recorded when they asked friends, reread previous drafts, made changes, or proofread. Before beginning, David turned to me for help, saying, "I don't know what to call this," (showing me his blank journal). I thought that he simply needed an idea for a title. Other children had already talked to me about what to call it. I suggested that he check out what they had done, but he didn't accept this response and continued, saying "I don't know what to do inside it." I realized that David had not grasped the purpose of a journal and therefore did not know what to include.

David's first question had not indicated his actual problem, and led me to provide a useless response. When he explained that he didn't know what to do inside it, I was able to provide the kind of explaining and help he needed. If David had not had the opportunity to make a second request, or if I had closed down the conversation by answering "My Writing Journal", his real difficulty might not have been solved.

On another occasion David asked me what the word "dreading" meant. "Dreading" was a key word in the story they were studying – central to the plot. His subsequent questions revealed that he was not only confused about this word, but also about how to use the story as a model for his own writing. David's questions revealed only part of his confusion and therefore led only to partial help.

David's questions helped me to realize that verbal explanations were insufficient for him to handle a task. He needed to see the whole task demonstrated and to have a model to work from. Perhaps working with a partner was his way of meeting this need. David persistent requests for help indicated his desire to be successful and his continuing faith that help would be provided.

6.3.2 David's Questioning Profile

David's questions were distributed across seven of the eight categories in the analytical framework. (see Figure 6.2) The majority of his questions fell into three categories: Solving Text Problems, Requesting Resources and Checking Peers.

Figure 6.2 David's Questions

	<u>Number</u>
Solving text problems	25
Requesting resources	17
Checking peers	15
Checking expectations	9
Requesting information	8
Requesting nonspecific help	7
Making process decisions	3
Reminding teacher	<u>0</u>
	84

Although the dispersion of questions provides a broad picture of David's concerns as he worked on literacy tasks, the distribution of his questions in subcategories is more revealing. For example many of David's questions about solving text problems concentrated on the meanings or spellings of single words.

Other questions sought closed answers to open problems. That is, David frequently asked other children "What do I write?" or "What do I put?" He did not seek opinions or advice about options. David's questions about texts frequently suggested that he believed that writing was a question of being right or wrong.

The most obvious feature about David's questioning profile is the high number of requests for resources. He asked over half of the questions in this entire category. On many occasions David was not able to independently organize his materials for literacy tasks. This disorganization took time away from the academic focus.

David also checked with peers on numerous occasions. With more academically able peers he showed genuine curiosity and admiration in his questioning about their work. With less able students David's questions sometimes carried a negative message, as in the case where he challenged Michelle saying "Don't you even know that?"

David's requests for information focused mainly on nonacademic matters, such as fire alarms and other children's families.

David regularly checked Marija's expectations with other children, indicating his fear of being wrong. David also made a number of nonspecific requests for help to his peers, where it was apparent that he was having difficulty, but it was not clear where that difficulty lay. These requests were rarely acknowledged by his peers and therefore proved an ineffective approach to help-seeking.

David's questioning profile does provide useful information about his approach to school literacy tasks. However, the subcategories and examples in context are far more revealing.

6.3.3 The Language of David's Questions

Like Rachael's, David's questions were also phrased in ways that revealed his own idiosyncratic patterns. The contrasting patterns indicated the very different approaches to learning of these two children.

There were three main repeated patterns in the language of David's questions:

1. "Do you have to?"
2. "Where's ?"
3. "Don't know what?"

Examples are provided to illustrate each of these patterns and a brief interpretation of their significance is included.

"Do you have to?" Questions

Do you have to go back now?
Do you have to do a rough copy?
Are you meant to do a letter first?

Where David asked "Do you have to ...?" or "Are you meant to ...?" he almost removed himself from the context, as if it was not his problem. Such questions suggest David's belief that succeeding in school was about working out what "you had to do." His emphasis was in finding the right outcomes, without really understanding the purposes or processes for tasks. Interestingly, towards the end of second term, David's phrasing changed slightly to "What do I have to do?" or "What should I write?" The "you" began to disappear. Perhaps this was an indication that now at least David was willing to own his confusion. —

"Where's?" Requests

Where's the black pen?
Where's my paper?
Where are they?
Where's that funny book again?
Where's that Greek book?

David's requests for resources, both his own misplaced property and school texts, revealed his problem with organization and maintenance of artefacts

connected with tasks. In a classroom where Marija expected independence on such matters, David stood out. This lack of organization resulted in his having less time on task and having to repeat work that he had lost. Peers also become impatient with his interruptions and continual desire to borrow their paper, pens and rulers.

"Don't Know What?" Requests

Do you know what to write?
I don't know what you have to write.
I don't know what to call this.
I don't know what to do inside it.

David frequently made requests of this kind. Such requests suggest his assumption that other people did "know." It seemed that David believed that even where students were allowed choices, some choices were more highly valued than others and that he believed other children might "know" what the right choice was. Such questions also indicated David's focus on knowing what, rather than asking about how. He sought direct and simple answers to questions and avoided complex decisions.

Even though the language of David's questions reveals strong patterns, his approach was not irreversible. Given consistent encouragement from Marija over the year, David eventually broke out of some of his ineffective patterns and began to ask critical open questions.

6.3.4 Delivery of Questions

David was considered an attractive child by his peers. Other children teased him about his girlfriends. He vacillated between enjoying this attention and finding it annoying. Due to his sporting ability, boys sought him out to be in their teams. David's popularity, due to his appearance and sporting ability meant that his self esteem was quite high regarding social and personal issues. This gave him the confidence to demand frequent help from peers on academic matters. His social status meant that he often worked in groups including academically able students. These children often gave their time, information and skills generously to David. Other times, they were unwilling to rescue him. As Nelson-Le Gall and Glor-Scheib (1986) point out "Peers may feel resentment toward those children with whom the helping relationship is undirectional". (p 192)

David's questions were spoken loudly and if he did not get the response he wanted, he repeated the question more loudly, at times thumping on the desk. He also readily questioned me and reworded his questions when my response did not meet his needs. David was not reticent about seeking help from peers, but he sought Marija's help infrequently.

David's questions were delivered quickly, with a sense of urgency. Sometimes the speed of his questioning might have led to inappropriate wording. His usual approach was to ask closed questions that required specific answers such as yes or no. His questions usually sought immediate closure, rather than continued inquiry.

6.3.5 Enlisting Teacher Help

David addressed few questions to Marija early in the year. When he did ask he usually sought permission to do particular things such as, visit the library or publish his writing. These questions provided David with a way of drawing Marija's attention to his progress. This was not always honestly done. For example, on several occasions David asked Marija if he could publish his writing after producing only one sentence. His question suggested to Marija that his writing was going well, when in fact the reverse was true. This was not an isolated incident.

David wanted Marija's recognition and approval. He attempted to hide his actual confusions by asking Marija's permission about final outcomes of tasks. He rarely enlisted Marija's help about the actual problems confronting him. His real intellectual plight was revealed to peers.

There were strong patterns in David's questions which suggested the kind of role he took as a learner. However, later in the year on several occasions I noticed these patterns changing. In one instance David confidently announced his difficulty with the wording of a picture book.

"When it says "sailed off almost over a year" and then it says "a year" it doesn't make sense."

This request for help was quite different from his earlier help-seeking. Here, he questioned Marija about the logic of a text in front of the entire class. Perhaps David finally trusted that he could safely reveal his uncertainty and that "right" and "wrong" were not indisputable conditions.

6.3.6 David As A Learner: Wanting to Work The System But Not Knowing How To

David's questions reveal a learner who was highly dependent on the understandings and knowledge of his peers and his teacher's approval. While he wanted desperately to achieve in school he did not appear to know how to work the system in place in his classroom. He realized that some students were more successful so he wisely sought assistance from them. Often he asked for models which he could copy. He disliked confusion and sought to resolve it quickly. His questions were largely directed at finding right answers. Webb (1985) describes this as seeking "terminal help" and claims that this kind of assistance is in fact detrimental to learning. (p 34)

Early in the year David did not seek understanding of the task, the content or the process, but rather he sought help to simply complete a product that would be "alright." David recognized there was a system of values, rules, routines, expectations and preferred choices in this learning community, but he was unsure of how to operate appropriately within it. Rather than risking his teacher's opinion of him, David sought success by mimicking the behaviour and products of successful students within the class, such as asking to publish or working on Rachael's self-initiated "special project."

Because David avoided real intellectual dilemmas, Marija's approval was often withheld. Marija was very much aware that she was not getting an honest approach from David. Her view of David was clearly expressed in her June report to his parents.

"At the moment he is too reliant on his friends. He must learn to be more independent."

In regard to his language arts work, Marija wrote:

"He often needs encouragement and individual help to develop his stories in length."

David's own writing provides some hints about his view of himself as a learner early in the school year. His first entry into his fieldnotes book, about "things I've never done before", made it clear that being a student in Marija's class involved many tasks that were new to him. He summed up his feelings writing that, it was "such hard work". He appeared worried that he found the work hard and avoided admitting difficulties to Marija.

David wrote about himself less openly than Rachael, and therefore it is more difficult to establish how he viewed himself. However observation of David in several critical incidents provides some insights. He was the only child I observed openly ridiculing another student's request for help. Considering David's own difficulty with spellings and meanings his response to Michelle, "Don't you even know that?" was rather hypocritical. Perhaps this incident reveals his need to have high status in comparison with his peers. It also suggests how David might have felt when he was forced to ask for help and shows that he did not accept or applaud simple questions. Perhaps David saw help-seeking as a sign of weakness. Not surprisingly, other children did not ask his help.

When he started to ask genuine questions and take risks Marija noticed and acknowledged his efforts and in November, she reported that:

"He is willing to ask questions, therefore he is gaining confidence in himself ... I am pleased with the perseverance David has shown in completing all his tasks. It has enabled him to acquire a realistic understanding of his own abilities and those of others."

In a piece of writing required by Marija late in the year David completed the "I wish" sentence with "do schoolwork like my friends". In his survey he also wrote that,

"I think my teacher helps out with your work when you have got problems with things."

It seems that David had learnt to be honest and self critical and now saw the need to admit problems. The following letter from his father may have enhanced his view of seeking help.

Dear David,
That afternoon when I came from work, personally saw you on the floor in the Family Room. You were doing some work which I was very happy. Thank you for asking me some questions and I hope I was able to help you. You appeared to be interested in what you were doing and that was a good sign.

Good luck in your future attempts.
Love
Dad and Mother
[original spellings].

David wanted to be a good student and to be successful. His earlier belief that successful students automatically knew what to do and just did it, was modified during the course of the year and he changed the kinds of questions he asked. From questions designed to present himself as a competent learner, David moved to asking questions driven by genuine confusion and inquiry. From very short, repetitive questioning episodes where David sought quick answers from peers in a demanding fashion, he extended his questioning and began to reword his questions. At the conclusion of the research David's potential to sustain uncomfortable intellectual endeavours had been unleashed. However, he was not entirely self directed or self regulated and academic success remained a risky business.

David sought Marija's approval throughout the schoolyear. This approach to learning reflected almost the opposite of what she intended. While Marija valued decision-making, organization and initiative, David exhibited indecisiveness, disorganization and reluctance to commit himself. He certainly did not experience the "co-membership" Rachael enjoyed. But he did finally confront the challenge of realizing that real learning was hard work!

6.4 MARK

Mark was eight years and three months old and in year four at the commencement of the study. He was bilingual, speaking Italian and English. Mark was observed closely during twelve language arts lessons, videotaped on three occasions, and interviewed in a small group situation. His teacher kept field notes about Mark, which included his questions. A representative selection of his questions across the school year is listed below.

Can I write that poem down? 31.3.87
 I still couldn't find out how to spell "hungry". 12.5.87
 Mrs Comber, shall I write the date on that because it's my story?
 Should I read it out? 28.5.87
 What should I say first?
 Then do I show them all the pictures of these clouds? 28.5.87
 Do you have to put on your billboards? 18.6.87
 What do we do now? (undated – teacher's notes)
 What happens to the people who aren't going to the A.G.M.? 28.11.87

Mark's sample of questions suggests his approach to learning in this classroom. He used questions in these instances to find out what he should do. What was unique about Mark's above sample was that each of these questions was addressed to the teacher or to the researcher. While Mark's own field notes indicate that he did address questions to peers on several occasions, I did not

observe any occasion in which Mark asked questions of his peers. Another sample of Mark's requests shows more about what he tried to achieve through seeking help.

I'm trying to think of a title.
 What can it still be in the story? 28.5.87
 I didn't know how to say some words.
 When I talk about the clouds do I have to say which ones are fluffy,
 which ones are straight and which are windy? 3.6.87
 Do you have to write down things like nonfiction or scary things?
 Do we write the same as on the board? 28.4.87
 Are you allowed to go out to recess?
 What do you do if you need to go to the toilet?

Mark's questions about literacy tasks focused on both process and content. He asked about titles, specific words, and what to do about the notes on the board. He openly admitted all problems, no matter how trivial.

6.4.1 Mark's Questioning Episodes

Mark's questioning patterns are best illustrated by looking in detail at the learning episodes in which they occurred. These episodes illustrate Mark's questioning as he composed an adventure story and prepared to "present his research" to the class.

Episode One: An Adventure Story

The children were working on their personal contracts for language arts. I had just finished a lengthy conference with Travis about his war story, when Mark spoke to me.

Mark: I'm trying to think of a title
 BC: A title – what for?
 Mark: A story
 BC: What kind?
 Mark: I don't know – an adventure!
 BC: What kind of an adventure?
 Mark: I don't know – it could be treasure
 BC: Who will be in your story, what kind of characters, where will it be, what might happen?

Mark smiled at my questions. He wrote the questions down and was enthusiastic to begin his story. I suggested that he brainstormed a list of ideas and worried about the details of the story line later. Then Mark started a new line of questioning:

- Mark: What, can it still be in the story?
[referring to his brainstormed list]
- BC: Yes, of course, you can use any ideas from your list in your story.
- Mark: The Statue of Liberty, could it be in the story?
[I nodded]
Is the Empire State Building in America in New York?
[Travis answered this question]

Mark began to write the list which follows.

People main – Andrew, Bary, Daniel treasure
Statue of Liberty
Empire State Building
Golden Gate
Grand Canyon
Bodies.
[original spellings]

At this point he stopped and asked.

- Mark: How do you spell "adventure"?
- BC: Write what you know.

Mark wrote "adventure" perfectly and then asked me to check it.

For the last few minutes of the lesson Mark wrote quietly. On my next visit to the classroom Mark had progressed with the "treasure adventure" and was keen for me to see it. He had been able to use his ideas about setting the story in well known American places. As I read his story he initiated the following exchange:

- Mark: Mrs Comber, shall I write the date on that, because that's my story?
- BC: That's OK. You've got it there.
[pointing to the date at the top of his page.]

I didn't understand Mark's problem. His next comment helped me to realize where the difficulty was.

Mark: Yeh, but I won't finish it today.
BC: Oh I see, well when you start again why don't you write that date in the margin and then you can see what you've done on different days.

Mark was worried that his usual convention of dating his writing piece at the top of the page would be inaccurate because his story was going to take more than one day to write. This was a relatively new experience for him as he usually finished his writing within a lesson. This story became an epic.

Mark's problems, as his questions reveal, occur at many levels. He needed help to work out the kind of story he might write and what might go into it, but he also sought help at a mundane level about dates. Yet all of Mark's questions are interesting because they indicate the kinds of things he was concerned about. Even the question about the date signalled a turning point. It was the beginning of many lengthy episodic stories.

Getting started on his writing was a difficult time for Mark. As Marija wrote in his first semester report,

"Although Mark participates in class discussions he must learn to listen more critically. He had difficulty in starting work for he always needs to consult the teachers first for reassurance."

Later in this report she added:

"He is often uncertain of tasks and needs the teacher to explain things to him on a one-to-one."

His approach to the adventure story illustrates Mark's difficulty with beginning. Getting started is difficult for most writers. What was unique about Mark was that he did not begin any task, simple or complex, without a private consultation with an adult helper. If adult assistance was unavailable Mark's strategy was often to wait for recess time or for the next classroom event.

The adventure story episode described above indicates Mark's need for "scaffolded" writing experiences (Graves, 1983). Faced with the task of writing a story alone Mark was often overcome by the number of decisions to be made. However, with ready access to sustained conversation Mark appeared to enjoy making decisions. In fact during the above discussion Mark began to realize that he could make notes that could be used in his story. In other episodes Mark revealed a similar confusion when he asked about the legitimacy of using blackboarded notes from class brainstorm sessions. Perhaps he had been reprimanded previously for copying. Whatever the reason for his suspicions, Mark was delighted to discover that he could use blackboard notes and his own jottings to help him write. These examples indicate that children can become worried about problems that may seem entirely illogical to adults. As Bissex (1980) states, "the logic by which we teach is not always the logic by which children learn." (p 11) Perhaps Mark had failed to understand the rules about copying in the past and now feared using his common sense to make decisions.

Mark's questioning sequence also revealed that his initial request for help, "I'm trying to think of a title", did not necessarily represent his whole problem. In this case the problem with the title was the "tip of the iceberg." As we talked Mark showed that not only did he not have a title, but he did not have a plot, characters or setting. He may have already thought of "treasure", or perhaps this was invented in response to my question. Mark did not articulate possible scenarios in his talk about writing. He needed to have possibilities teased out. Mark did not seek opinions and ideas from his peers, so he remained dependent on adult help.

Episode Two: Presenting Research

The children had been working on a library investigation on a topic related to science. Their task was to pose questions on the topic, find answers and present their findings in an interesting way. Marija warned the children that their presentations should be engaging and that no one wanted to listen to other people say in a really boring voice "My topic was" ... or "I think that ... " Marija had demonstrated a boring presentation in a humorous way.

On this occasion Mark prepared himself for his presentation on the topic, "clouds." He left his desk and went to Marija. Sophie was with her so he waited. When Sophie finished, Rowena interrupted before Mark could speak. Mark returned to his desk without speaking to Marija at all. I asked him what his problem was. He replied that he didn't have a problem, that he had just wanted to present his research. I suggested he go back to ask Marija if this was possible so he did.

- Mark: Can I present my research after recess?
 Marija: Do you want to, are you ready?
 Mark: Do I have to present it to the year threes?
 Marija: You might just want to do it with our class first.
 Mark: I don't know how to present some words.
 Marija: Well show me – we'll go through it.
 Mark: I don't know how to say some words.
 Marija: Read it to me now.

Mark fetched his book and pointed to the words he couldn't pronounce, such as the proper names for the different kinds of clouds. Marija read each one aloud for Mark and then asked him to try to do the same. For the next few minutes Marija gave Mark intensive help. He gradually let her know that he didn't know what "presenting his research" actually meant. Marija decided that he needed some charts or posters to help get the information across to the class and they went to the library to see what was available. The only chart was very complex and Mark did not want to use it.

- Mark: Should I show them the clouds?
 [pointing to his own illustrations in his note book]
 Mark: Should I say there are all different types of clouds?
 Marija: Do you want to have a practice with me now? Say you're giving the talk. What are you going to say?
 [Mark read his first question about clouds and read his first answer.]
 Mark: I've forgotten the second question but I know the answer.

At this point Marija needed to help another child so I began to work with Mark. He was worried about whether or not to read his notes out loud. He didn't know in which order to put the information. Marija returned and reassured him.

- Marija: Shall we try that and if it didn't sound good we can change it?
 Mark: Then do I have to show them all the pictures of these clouds?
 Marija: What are you going to say?
 Mark: When I talk about clouds do I have to say which ones are fluffy, which ones are straight and which are windy?
 Marija: I think it would be a good idea. This is really high school stuff that you are doing.

Mark began to read his notes aloud and stopped when he got to "billowing".

Marija explained the word and suggested that he checked to see what the clouds were like that day. She asked him what sort he thought they were.

Mark replied eagerly.

Mark: Cirrus, because they are high up.
Do I have to show that?
Do I have to draw clouds on the blackboard?
Marija: Do you want to?

Mark indicated that he wanted to show the drawings in his note book. Marija was distracted by another child's question, "Who discovered rain?" When she returned to Mark he asked:

"Mrs Baggio, do I have to go back to class? Do I have to read out to the class?"

Marija suggested that he could read a question aloud, show them the illustrations of clouds in his book and then read the answer. Then they could all go outside to look at real clouds. Next she asked Mark to rehearse again what he was going to do.

In this episode it became clear that Mark did not understand the classroom language in which the task was embedded, language that Marija took for granted, such as "presenting research."

Mark's first question was a polite request for permission which masked a much more complex set of questions. He really wanted to know how to conduct an oral presentation – a specific language genre. Marija allowed Mark many opportunities to get to the right questions by keeping the exchange open. She provided Mark with a context for safe rehearsal and helped him to make decisions.

Mark's questions during this episode revealed that:

- . he had written down words which he could not pronounce
- . he used Marija's terminology for events without really understanding what it meant
- . he was committed to learning how to do the task
- . he wanted to meet Marija's expectations
- . he was unsure of how to use his written text to help him conduct the presentation.

Mark's concern about what he didn't know meant that he mistrusted the value of what he had already achieved. Without continuing access to a sympathetic teacher, Mark's need for reassurance throughout each step of a task has alarming implications for his future success in school.

6.4.2 Mark's Questioning Profile

Mark's questions were distributed across five of the eight categories. (see Figure 6.3) Mark asked no questions which were aimed at making decisions about processes. He asked no questions which involved him in checking with peers. Before discussing the kinds of questions Mark did ask, it is interesting to consider the absence of other categories.

Figure 6.3 Mark's Questions

	<u>Number</u>
Solving text problems	24
Checking expectations	15
Requesting information	4
Requesting nonspecific help	3
Requesting resources	1
Making process decisions	0
Checking peers	0
Reminding teacher	<u>0</u>
	46

Mark's approach to completing tasks was to seek step-by-step guidance from his teacher. His questioning rarely showed evidence of him thinking ahead about choices between options or considering the impact of making difficult

decisions. Perhaps Mark did not see this as part of his role as a student, or perhaps he had been discouraged from showing initiative in other situations.

The absence of questions which involved checking with peers is also interesting. Mark directed all his questions to adults, usually to Marija and occasionally to me. When a visiting teacher, such as the librarian or a professional storyteller was conducting the class, Mark preferred to seek help from these less familiar adults rather than from his peers. This behaviour was unusual as other children demonstrated a preference for asking each other. Several tentative explanations can be offered. Mark had transferred to the school at the beginning of the year of the research. He may have felt shy with his new peers or he may have been used to a different set of groundrules at his previous school. Both of these factors may have influenced Mark's directing of questions to adults. It may also have been a pattern established at home. Alternatively, Mark may have simply believed that the teacher was the best person to help him and since Marija did not refuse him, he followed his first preference on most occasions. It is impossible to give a definite interpretation of this result, but by looking at other instances of Mark's help-seeking some suggestive patterns do emerge.

Most of Mark's questions fall into two categories: Solving Text Problems and Checking Expectations. Mark's questions to solve text problems often indicated a lack of confidence in his understandings about what was required. On a number of occasions he was unsure about what he could copy, what he could read and what he could write. He seemed overwhelmed by the responsibility of having to make so many choices about content and genre.

Mark's questions to check expectations reflected a similar approach. He continually checked with Marija about what he should do. He needed her to be very explicit about the appropriateness of his actions. He was a polite and respectful child and was wary of making the wrong decision.

Mark's distribution of questions across the categories indicated his preoccupation with doing what was expected, both socially and academically. His questions were clearly focused on the academic tasks. Marija's first response to Mark was that he asked an annoying number of questions. Many of his questions seemed to have self evident answers or had already been explained. Marija's initial interpretation was that Mark had not "listened critically". However, my observations showed no sign of inattentiveness on Mark's part; in fact he regularly contributed to class discussions. Yet consistently he was unable to work out what Marija's instructions meant in terms of what he had to do. He was not able to distil instructions from the rest of her discourse. Despite his difficulty Mark confronted each problem in a determined fashion, usually appearing at Marija's side within five minutes of the class being set a task.

6.4.3 The Language of Mark's Questions

Distinct patterns of language were also noticeable in Mark's questioning. These patterns provide insights into his ways of operating as a learner.

Two main patterns emerged in Mark's questions and requests:

1. "How?"
2. "Can I?" "Should I?" "Do I?"

Each pattern is illustrated with examples and briefly discussed.

"How?" Requests

Mark's requests at first look quite similar to David's in terms of language.

Both began many requests with "I don't know" or "I still don't know". However, looked at more closely there was one critical difference in their language.

David's questions focused on not knowing *what* – topic, book, or content, whereas Mark's requests usually dealt with *how* to complete tasks.

I don't know how to present some words
How do you use a thesaurus?
How would I show them the clouds?

Mark's requests often led Marija to provide physical demonstrations and actual models of products rather than only verbal feedback. He confronted what he didn't know, without disguising his ignorance. There was no indication of shame or of panic in Mark's questioning, rather paralysing confusion about how to do what was expected.

"Can I?" "Should I?" "Do I?" Questions

Mark continually asked questions about the appropriateness of his behaviour or possible choices.

Can I copy that poem down?
Can I do mine at home?
Can it still be in the story?
Can we use a Thesaurus?
Can I go on with my story?
Can you turn this into a book?
Can I present my research?
Do I have to show that?
Do I show them all the pictures of these clouds?
Should I read it out from my book?
Should I read it out?
Should I present it to the grade threes?
What should I say first?

Mark's questions show his ongoing uncertainty and are surprising in their guilelessness. He appeared to need constant feedback that he was on the right track before he could continue. His perseverance in asking provides evidence of the trusting relationship between Mark and Marija. As the year progressed she reported that Mark "worked confidently during the latter part of this year" and "was willing to experiment with his writing."

6.4.4 Delivery of Questions

Very early in the year Marija described Mark as "cute". Yet, very quickly she became concerned that his speech and behaviour would be seen as "babyish" by his peers. Mark received help for a speech impediment which involved unclear articulation. Mark often behaved in "coy" or "shy" manner – looking at the floor, saying his questions quietly, shuffling his feet, looking around and fidgeting with his hands. He appeared nervous but not unhappy, as he usually grinned widely as he spoke.

Over the year the manner in which Mark asked his questions brought a mixed response, partly because Marija received mixed messages about Mark's seriousness and commitment. From seeing him as "cute", yet immature, Marija began to interpret Mark's requests as signs of inattentiveness and attention-seeking. Ultimately she recognized his vulnerability both academically and socially and began to encourage his questioning and rehearsal. Marija helped him to gain confidence in speaking clearly in front of his peers and to her. After presenting his research on clouds Mark wrote the following self evaluation. (see Figure 6.4)

Figure 6.4 Mark's First Self Evaluation

	Self Evaluation	11.8.87
Mark	How I felt? when I was presinding I felt a little empressed [embarrassed] because I migh did something wrong What I did? first I said it cloudy read my research and said do you know the clouds out the window. How I might improve it next time? I must speak louder. I must not talk fast. [original spellings]	

As his above evaluation shows Mark still faced a number of difficulties writing conventionally, but his final two sentences show that he was very much aware of what he needed to do to improve. The tasks that Mark engaged in helped him to be honest about his own progress and pushed him to develop his confidence.

6.4.5 Enlisting Teacher Help

The previous descriptions of Mark's questions provide examples of the way he enlisted teacher help. Mark's usual pattern, early in the year, was to listen to Marija's explanation of task, participate in class discussions, act as a silent spectator in peer group discussions and appear silently at Marija's side as she moved around the room. Mark then waited to be noticed. On several occasions he appeared to change his mind and sat down again without speaking to Marija. Mark avoided interrupting her to ask a question and seemed very concerned about politeness.

Mark's continual questioning and dependency provided Marija with a professional dilemma. On the one hand she believed that children should develop at their own pace and that they should pursue their questions honestly and with persistence. On the other hand Marija's explicit goals were for her students to become independent problem solvers who learnt with the help of their peers and only sought her as a final resource.

In her literacy curriculum she operationalized such goals through peer conferences, peer proofreading, group discussion, voting and group decision-making. Her overriding intention was to help children make decisions between appropriate options and to take responsibility for their own learning.

Despite Mark's self effacing manner and Marija's fears about dependency he managed to be very successful in enlisting her help. In fact by the end of first semester she regularly asked Mark if he knew what to do, (on those rare occasions when he did not appear at her side). It seemed he had trained Marija to offer him special assistance! By helping Mark, Marija also monitored the likely confusions of other more reticent students. Marija interpreted Mark's continual questioning as a sign of genuine intellectual struggle and no longer saw it as a nuisance or an attention-seeking device.

Gradually Marija built up Mark's alternative strategies for gaining assistance. The following transcript indicates the way in which she tried to decrease Mark's dependency without rejecting his questions.

- Mark: Do you have to write down things like nonfiction or scary things?
 Teacher: Why are we doing this list? [pause] Why did we brainstorm the list?
 Mark: To get ideas for writing?
 Teacher: Do you think the list will help you?
 Mark: Yes because I could look at it. Can I go on with my story?
 [At this point Marija addressed the entire class.]
 Teacher: Class once you have finished your list, you can go on with your current writing piece.
 Teacher: Would you like to? [Marija turned to Mark and responded to his question with another question.]
 Mark: Yes. Can I turn it into a book?
 Teacher: Well, what do you have to do before you turn it into a book?
 Mark: Check for spelling?

Teacher: Anything else?
Mark: Can't think of anything else.
[Marija waited silently]
Mark: Oh yes, we could make changes. Proofread.
Teacher: Anything else.
Mark: Get opinions.
Teacher: Are you ready for all of those things?
Mark: No, I haven't finished the story yet.
Teacher: How is it going?
Mark: I'm happy with it.
[At this point Mark, smiling, returned to his desk and started writing.]

As this episode shows Marija accepted Mark's questioning and at the same time she encouraged him to use his own memory and understandings to work out what needed to be done.

She did not answer Mark's initial question. Instead she framed a question intended to help him clarify the situation for himself. When Mark did not respond, she reworded the question and waited. Then she made sure that Mark understood the purpose for the list and how it was connected to his writing. She discovered that he was trying to find out whether to continue his story or to keep writing the list on the blackboard. Marija also realized that other children may have the same problem, so she clarified what to do with the whole class in one brief instruction, intended also for Mark's benefit.

Mark continued the conversation and asked whether he could turn his story into a book. At this point Marija took over the questioning entirely and set up a dialogue intended to remind Mark of the steps involved in publishing. Mark's decision to continue writing stopped their conversation. Through her questioning she demonstrated to Mark that he could make appropriate choices.

When the exchange finished Mark had not only answered his original question, but also had revised how to prepare his story for publication. He had helped Marija clarify the task for the rest of the class. Marija made no attempt to simplify things for Mark but through extended open dialogue allowed him to solve his academic problems. Mark was learning how to juggle priorities and work on more than one task simultaneously.

Because Marija no longer assumed that Mark was inattentive she did not give him quick answers. She acknowledged that Mark had listened, but had not made sense of her instructions. Her trust was rewarded when Mark demonstrated he did understand Marija's writing routines by explaining what he needed to do to achieve publication. Targetted teacher help at "the zone of proximal development", (Vygotsky, 1978) became a reality in Marija's interactions with Mark. Their extended dialogue contrasted sharply with the interactions between David and Marija which achieved speedy closure, but solved only surface level problems.

Marija also tried to train Mark to trust his peers as helpers. In the following episode her strategies for encouraging Mark's independence become apparent.

- Mark: Mrs Baggio what do we do now?
 Mrs Baggio: What are the rest of the children doing?
 Mark: Christmas contracts and some are reading.
 Mrs Baggio: What else?
 Mark: Oh achievements.
 Mrs Baggio: What does that mean?
 Mark: We can add more things that we are proud of to our achievement plans.
 Mrs Baggio: Good! Do you think you can now solve your problem?
 Mark: Yes I'll go on with my book, "Where the Christmas things are."

In this short exchange Marija drew Mark's attention to what his peers were doing. Rather than answering Mark's question, Marija tried to show him that he could solve his own problems by using the information which surrounded him. With Marija's help to begin to experience the kinds of thinking needed for independent decision-making.

Mark's achievement was considerable when compared with David who followed his peers' decisions, and avoided honest confrontation of problems. Mark's questions initiated scaffolded interactions where he was explicitly trained in how the classroom system worked.

6.4.6 Mark as a Learner: Understanding How the System Works

Mark's questioning revealed a lack of understanding about classroom events, procedures and rules and a guileless innocence. He also revealed that he believed that his teacher was his major source of help. Unlike Rachael, Mark did not seem to understand the classroom system so he could not begin to make it work for him in her sophisticated manner. Unlike David, Mark appeared unperturbed at what Marija might think of him, as a result of his questions. He unashamedly asked questions throughout the year. His profound belief that the teacher was the source of important knowledge had the potential to create conflict with Marija. However, his genuine determination to work out what to do seems to have protected him from a negative response from Marija, despite the simplistic and repetitive nature of his requests.

Mark's questions revealed that he was easily confused by the introduction of new information. For example, brainstormed blackboarded notes or a discussion of possible activities inevitably led Mark to Marija's side. Perhaps previous experiences of schooling had given him the message that when teachers wrote on the board the children copied it down. The relationship and importance of the newly introduced curriculum items to previous tasks was not obvious to Mark. When we listened patiently to Mark's questions we discovered a learner desperately trying to work out the context he was in and the tasks he had been asked to do.

By the end of the year Marija wrote that Mark, "manages to write his achievements without the worries of first term ..." She added that he, "achieved a great deal as a reader/writer because he was willing to ask questions all of the time and therefore got instant feedback." Marija's view of Mark became quite positive. Instead of his questioning behaviour being a source of irritation Marija interpreted it as a sign of determination and commitment.

Late in first term Mark wrote the following self evaluation. (see Figure 6.5)

Figure 6.5 Mark's Second Self Evaluation

Confessions of a Writer 27/4/87

I thing I'm a good writer writing with pencil. I don't like writing when I'm very tired I like writing when I've nearly finished writing. I get idea from other people sometimes they tell me some ideas. I like writing shopping lists I like writing my own lists. Writing was fun but not if you have to write a lot I'm not good at writing in pen (I write messy in pen). In grade two I was a really good writer but in garade three I was a bad writer. Now I'm half bad writer and half good writer.

by Mark

Mark's confession revealed a similar picture to that provided by his questions, that is, his uncertainty about his own judgements. The lines, "In grade two I was a really good writer but in grade three I was a bad writer. Now I'm half bad writer and half good writer," suggested that Mark's previous schooling may have fostered some of his doubts. At this stage of the year he was still unclear how to assess himself in his new context.

However, late in the year when Mark wrote a poem about his achievements he sounded very self confident. (see Figure 6.6)

Figure 6.6 Mark's Achievements

THE DOOR

Go and open the door to my achievements
I liked having conferences with Mrs Grant
Because I have published a couple of books

Go and open the door to my achievements
I really enjoy my poems and am proud of ...
The good things I do

Go and open the door to my achievements
Best subject was maths now ...
Poems are added on the list

Go and open the door to my achievement
Learned Judaism and represented my team in
800 metre sprint on sports day

Go and open the door to my achievements
don't have to worry about contracts ...
I finish on time.

Mark, age nine, year four.

Mark's constant help-seeking and Marija's assistance did not feed his dependency in the long term. His poem summarized his experiences of learning that year. He included publishing books; writing conferences with the ESL

teacher, Mrs Grant; enjoying poems; being proud of the good things he had done; learning about Judaism; representing his team on sports day; and that he didn't have to worry about contracts ... "I finish on time" Mark's self evaluation matches Marija's evaluation. Mark, the continual questioner had become a self confident learner in this safe context, where mutual trust had been created between him and his teacher.

Despite differences in age, gender, and academic ability, like his peer Rachael, Mark also experienced a high degree of "co-membership" with Marija. While Marija trained Mark to become more independent and self confident over the year, Mark trained his teacher to look out for him, to invite him to ask questions and to provide extra reassurance whenever necessary. Mark's questioning behaviour signalled paralysing confusion on a number of occasions. Without Marija's support, Mark did not begin tasks. His questions led Marija to demonstrate, to provide models of products and to assist Mark in rehearsing processes and in making decisions. Given Marija's goals of independent problem solving and Mark's teacher reliance, it was an amazing achievement on the part of both teacher and student to achieve such mutual trust and honest negotiation.

6.5 DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

Rachael, David and Mark used different kinds of questioning and help-seeking. Their questions revealed vital information about the approaches to literacy learning each of them took in this context. These case studies suggest the need for further comparative research of different learners and in particular to consider the questioning and help-seeking of students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Rachael's questioning closely matched Marija's approach. During independent group work Rachael frequently took on a teaching role and used the strategies to lead her group that Marija had demonstrated. Rachael's questions revealed her sophisticated abilities as a writer, group leader and decision-maker.

Unlike Rachael, David enjoyed less of a match between his approach to learning at school and Marija's intentions for students. David was reluctant to admit any academic difficulties to Marija, rather he used his high social status with his peers to demand their assistance. With Marija he tried to present as confident and self assured. Sometimes he used questions to suggest to Marija that he was progressing well when the opposite was true. David wrote on one occasion that he was "scared of getting into trouble." His furtive questioning of his peers in order to produce what Marija wanted confirmed the view that David's motivation for classroom action was often based on fear of negative consequences.

Marija tried to encourage honest communication but David avoided interactions where he might look silly. Yet eventually he learnt to trust the communication system and by the end of the year he even risked asking questions of Marija in front of his peers.

Mark was a different kind of learner again. Like David, he was not an independent operator. Unlike David, he was honest in his communications with Marija. His questions revealed his confusions and his need for models and demonstrations. He required explanations of how to go about tasks.

Unlike David he did not seek quick answers, but repetitions of explanations through one-to-one dialogue. Although Mark depended greatly on Marija, his honest approach brought her approval. Gradually, Marija trained Mark to make his own judgements by observing those around him, by using classroom charts and by referring back to his previous work.

By listening to the questions of Rachael, David and Mark, we developed our awareness about how each of them operated as learners in the classroom community. As well as learning about individuals, children's questions have the potential to help teachers understand the contrasting realities students experience and what Dyson (1983a) describes as "the gap between the child mind and school curriculum" – the points of disjuncture. (p 17)

In collaborative classrooms such as the one Marija established, children's learning often depends on their ability to get academic help, both from peers and from their teacher. These case studies indicate that children seek different kinds of help and ask different kinds of questions, therefore their opportunities for learning differ. Rachael, David and Mark all asked questions and all received help. Over the year David learnt to ask questions which could help him to learn, rather than just complete assignments. Mark learnt to answer some of his own questions. Rachael experienced enormous satisfaction at asking and answering sophisticated questions. She exceeded her own and Marija's expectations.

Despite the positive progress of each of these children, the differences between them point to the vulnerability of many children in classrooms: those who don't ask questions at all; those who only question enough to survive, but not to learn; and those whose first language is not the language of instruction; who may have difficulty making their questions understood.

The questioning and help-seeking of learners provides insights about their knowledge and gaps in their knowledge; about their understandings and misunderstandings; about their strategies and lack of strategies; and about their emotional responses to their classroom context. Such insights are available to those who provide safe contexts where students can question freely.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

7.1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study was to investigate children's questioning and help-seeking during language arts time. The research provides a comprehensive analysis and description of year four/five children's questions and requests for help, collected as they worked on a range of classroom literacy tasks. The analysis indicates why children asked questions and what they hoped to achieve through their questions. The study also provides detailed descriptions of this unique classroom and the kind of learning community Marija tried to establish. In-depth case studies of three children demonstrate how questioning and help-seeking play key roles in students' classroom learning.

This chapter discusses the major insights and pedagogical implications which emerge from this investigation.

7.2 INSIGHTS

Four main insights emerged from this research. They relate to:

- . contexts, questioning and help-seeking
- . kinds of questions and requests for help
- . children's contrasting approaches to classroom learning
- . children's classroom questions: a window on thinking?

7.2.1 Contexts, Questioning and Help-Seeking

Three conclusions relating to contexts, questioning and help-seeking may be drawn from the study:

- . The teacher promotes or discourages children's questioning.
- . It takes time to establish safe contexts for children to question.
- . Some contexts are more helpful and safer than others.

Each will be explained in turn.

The teacher promotes or discourages children's questioning

This investigation confirmed findings from other research indicating that the teacher plays a central role in constructing contexts which either promote or discourage children's questions (Wood, 1980; Good et al, 1987; Dillon, 1988a; Cazden, 1988a; Perrott, 1988).

Teachers may be unaware of their influence (Susskind, 1979). Even teachers who believe that questioning is important to learning may unwittingly deter children from asking. From the beginning of this study Marija made a conscious decision to welcome children's questioning and help-seeking. Yet her repeated invitations to ask did not immediately generate questions from the children in the whole class group. Marija therefore, deliberately set up a range of different situations in which she encouraged children to ask questions and seek help.

It takes time to establish safe contexts for children to question

Dillon (1988a) reports that children do not automatically begin to question because the teacher invites them to do so. Previous experience of schooling makes them wary of admitting confusion or uncertainty. Children told us that they feared interrupting their teacher and peers. They worried about looking

stupid. They also suggested that they preferred to work out their own problems independently. This confirms the findings of Dillon (1981, 1988a) and van der Meij (1986) relating to the reasons children are reluctant to seek help. It took several months before some children freely asked questions. Because the present study was conducted over a school year, it was possible to observe children gradually lose this reluctance to ask questions when provided with safe, helpful contexts.

Some contexts are more helpful and safer than others

A consistent observation, made over the entire year, was that few children asked questions of Marija in front of the entire class. Marija's public attempts to elicit questions or get children to seek help were rarely taken up. The few children, who did ask questions in the whole class context, were usually the high achieving students, who perhaps were less fearful of appearing foolish and were able to anticipate their teacher's response to a good question. Perhaps fear of peer response in the yard led other children to suppress their questions. Whatever the reasons, this situation meant that Marija had to construct safe contexts in which all the children would question and seek help. Safe contexts had two essential features, privacy and access to helpers.

Marija enabled the children to have private conversations with her and with their peers so that they could seek help without an audience. I was also available for private help. Private helping sessions could be arranged through the "People in Need" blackboard list. Marija made herself physically available by moving around the classroom. Because children were allowed to move when they needed to, they could wait until she was free and then go to her for assistance.

Marija also encouraged private peer assistance by providing "time to talk to your neighbour". Many opportunities for group work and peer tutoring programs also established ready access to private help.

In these situations children questioned freely, demonstrating a preference for one-to-one private assistance with the teacher (or researcher) or help from peers sitting nearby.

It is clear from the data that questions and help-seeking occur more readily in some contexts than in others. This study suggests the importance of easy access to relatively private helping situations in addition to the teacher making time available and welcoming children's questioning.

7.2.2 Kinds of Questions and Requests For Help

The total sample of children's questions and requests was categorized into an analytical framework. This indicates at a broad level, what children tried to achieve through their help-seeking and questioning. Children used questions to solve text problems; to request information; to check with peers; to check expectations; to request resources; to make process decisions; to remind the teacher and to make nonspecific requests for help.

Their questions and requests revealed an emphasis on solving problems with texts. Given the opportunity, children actively sought solutions through discussion with peers and their teacher. Children rarely used questions to waste time, seek attention or avoid work. Rather, their questions demonstrated a strong commitment to understanding and completing tasks. The analysis of questions revealed that children face different kinds of difficulties with tasks and have different strategies for dealing with problems.

Categories of questions provide broad descriptions only. The questions within the categories offer interesting insights also. Previous research has often degraded the value of procedural questions. Children's requests for permission or questions about how to proceed on a particular task have been considered as poor relations to the rarer curiosity questions (Mishler, 1976; Tizard and Hughes, 1984; van der Meij, 1986; Lindfors, 1987; Perrott, 1988). Some researchers have therefore ignored such questions as unworthy of study. Such research appears to rest on the assumption that only trivial procedures are the subject of children's questions.

This research reveals that some procedural questions may indeed be worthy of further investigation and that even some requests for permission might indicate independent learning. For example, questions about voting procedures or roles in groups, though they are concerned with classroom procedures, are by no means trivial. Procedural questions may signify the learning of complex and sophisticated social skills. Similarly, seeking permission is sometimes seen as a sign of dependence or a lack of initiative, but this research suggests that the reverse may be true on occasion. When a child asks for permission to do a special project or seeks materials for extra self-initiated work, such requests might indicate enthusiasm and independent planning.

While this analytical framework provides descriptive categories of the purposes of children's questions, the categories do not automatically suggest different levels of thinking. Within the category Making Process Decisions, for example, the levels of thinking signified, vary considerably, depending on the specific

context and what kind of process decision the child was trying to make.

Although the analytical framework does provide a broad picture of why the children asked questions in this classroom, some surprising insights emerge by comparing questions within each category and by comparing the questions of different children.

7.2.3 Children's Contrasting Approaches To Classroom Learning

Recent studies have demonstrated children's contrasting approaches to classroom learning (Calkins, 1983; Graves, 1983; Bussis et al, 1985; Dyson, 1989). This investigation has yielded similar findings through focusing on the ways in which individual children seek help and ask questions over the school year. It also suggests that children's abilities to ask the right questions of the right people at the right time may be inextricably linked with success and failure at school.

In this class, children demonstrated different uses of questions and requests for help which meant that they received different kinds of help and different amounts of help. Depending on their chosen helper, the quality of the help varied. In collaborative classrooms where children negotiate some of the curriculum, their learning depends on the help children are able to enlist from their peers and from their teacher. This investigation confirmed the results of other studies which suggest that some children are more effective at seeking and obtaining help than others (Cooper, 1982b; Wilkinson, 1985; Webb, 1985; Nelson-Le Gall, 1985a).

This study also revealed that the children's ability to understand and trust the system that Marija had established and to use it for their own ends was crucial. Thus, achieving help depended in part on the match between the child's understanding of the learning context and Marija's intentions for that context. Children's success in enlisting help also depended on their peers' willingness and preparedness to help them. In a collaborative classroom context such as this, children need to understand the social rules and learn how to work the system to achieve the kinds of academic help they need. This case study provided further evidence that even within one classroom, children have different experiences of learning and demonstrate contrasting approaches to learning (Eder, 1982; Bussis et al, 1985; Dyson, 1989).

7.2.4 Children's Classroom Questions: A Window on Thinking?

The potential of monitoring children's classroom questions as a way of gaining access to their academic struggles – their thinking, preoccupations and strategies – has rarely been investigated (Crowell, 1985). Usually children's questions have been collected only in "think aloud" protocols (Langer, 1986a) or incidentally, where the focus has been to enhance specific kinds of learning (Wong, 1985; Palincsar, 1987). In contrast, this study set out to document children's questions across a range of activities in the literacy curriculum, and over a whole school year. These questions and requests indicated that there were:

- . patterns across children
- . patterns within individual children
- . contrasts between children.

Patterns Across Children

Children's questions and requests for help sometimes revealed confusions or difficulties that were common to all. For example, their questions revealed difficulties selecting topics; confusions about how to use headings and subheadings; insecurity about how to research from books; and confusion about task expectations. Because many children began to ask similar questions, Marija was able to identify ongoing problems from the children's perspectives. This allowed her to take immediate action or to organize review times in which children developed strategies for handling such difficulties. Noting similarities and recurring questions proved to be a useful way of monitoring children's understandings of tasks. Marija used this information to make teaching decisions. Patterns of questioning across children alerted us to difficulties with literacy tasks about which we had previously been unaware.

Patterns Within Individual Children

Listening to the questions of individual children over an extended period of time proved richly rewarding. When children question or request help the listener has access to their current preoccupations, thoughts, problems, strategies and concerns, or at least as much as they are willing to reveal.

Because Marija set up an honest, trusting community, students questioned readily. By studying the individual cumulative questioning sample of every child I was able to consider the potential of monitoring the questions and requests for help of individual children. This data suggest that much can be

learnt about individual learners by recording and analysing their questions. For example, I realized how often Sophie's questions about writing concerned syntax; I noticed how Travis' questions were usually requests for information about the world: culture, history or science; I found that Terry often used questions to check with peers about their lives and opinions. Only three detailed profiles of individual learners are reported in this study, yet the potential of monitoring the questions and requests of individual learners is strongly indicated. Rachael, David and Mark revealed themselves as learners through their questions and requests.

The study does not claim that students' questions are more important than other ways of getting to know how learners operate, but merely that such utterances provide useful data often neglected by researchers and sometimes discouraged by teachers. If teachers are attempting to teach "from where the learner is at", or to target instruction to the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), children's questions and requests provide a valuable starting point and a barometer on their developing understandings.

Contrasts Between Children

As well as providing illuminative data on the approaches of individual learners, children's questioning and help-seeking also revealed considerable differences between students. Because Marija believed that children should become independent learners able to self direct and self evaluate much of their work, the responsibility to enlist help and clarify uncertainties rested with students. Marija also believed that children learnt more from each other than from the

teacher, hence both formal and informal collaborative work were encouraged. In this academic context therefore, children's success in eliciting help was crucial. This study revealed children's different abilities in getting their questions answered or the help they needed. The case studies reveal contrasting pictures of children's questioning and help-seeking and confirms the finding of other researchers, that some children may be ineffective in soliciting the academic assistance they need (Cooper et al, 1981; Wilkinson, 1985; Webb, 1985; Nelson-Le Gall, 1985). Thus, simply providing times when children might ask questions and seek help does not ensure that all children will receive the assistance they need in order to learn.

7.3 IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS AND RESEARCHERS

Many teachers believe that children's active inquiry is essential to learning. Many teachers see themselves as helpful facilitators, encouraging children to take risks and providing the help children need to be successful. Yet, if children do not ask questions and do not know how to enlist help from peers or teachers, the quality of their learning experiences in schools will be affected.

This research presents the findings from one classroom only, but it does suggest the importance and usefulness of teachers welcoming, listening to and monitoring children's questions. It also suggests the need to provide opportunities for them to ask in relative privacy. Marija changed her attitude to children's questions during the course of the research. Originally she had found children's questions irritating and believed that they were signs of poor listening. However, over the duration of the study she had come to trust the children and accept their confusion as genuine.

Marija's frustration is shared by many teachers, who feel that they provide plenty of opportunities for students to ask questions which students fail to take up. Yet children either fear public admission of a problem, or don't realize the difficulties until they begin the task. Marija explains:

"As a kid I would have been embarrassed to come out and would have stewed for a long, long time; or we would have cheated from someone else to write things down, so the teacher got what she wanted. But for a kid truly to learn for himself and for him or her to come up and ask those questions to make sure it's all clarified in their mind... I mean that's the biggest thing."

Marija highlights through her honest self assessment teachers' ambiguous attitudes to children's questions. For teachers who decide to listen to children's questions, the potential exists to learn much about how children understand classroom tasks, about individual learners and also about children's perceptions of classroom contexts.

This case study has confirmed that children's questions and requests are indeed a revealing source of data. However, further studies are needed to examine:

- . what children's questions indicate about school literacy learning.
- . how different teachers encourage students' questions.
- . how different teachers respond to students' questions.
- . how children respond to peers' questions.
- . the contexts in which all children are able to ask questions and seek help.
- . how children, whose first language is not the language of instruction, use questions.
- . how children's questioning and help-seeking strategies contribute to success or failure in school.

The role of student questioning and help-seeking in learning is a new area for researchers. Children's questions may not provide a clear window on all their thinking, but they do at least open the shutters.

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