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**CHILDREN AS INFORMATION SEEKERS: THE COGNITIVE
DEMANDS OF TOPIC WORK, BOOKS AND LIBRARY SYSTEMS**

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ABSTRACT

The problems associated with retrieving information are becoming more evident to library professionals and teachers as knowledge continues to grow exponentially. However, children are frequently expected to use library resources independently, yet little is known of the cognitive demands imposed upon them by research tasks, books and library systems. Here 23 Form 1 children shared their thinking processes as they endeavoured to generate questions and find information for topic work. Video recordings of think aloud/concurrent interviews, and subsequent audio recording of retrospective interviews, were used to gain a child's view of the problems involved in such assignments.

It was found that the children's limited knowledge base resulted in formulation of general, frequently vague, questions. These made the choice of search terms compatible with the demands of indexing systems rather difficult. The children understood the Dewey Decimal system in terms of locating a broad subject area but the distinctions made possible by the use of decimal points were understood by only 1 child.

The children's theoretical understanding of the Dewey system could not always be put into practise because of a lack of understanding about the relationship between catalogue index cards and the actual books on the shelves, together with confusions caused by the manner in which books are shelved. Only 3 children showed clear evidence that they knew that the library shelving consisted of adjacent bays rather than shelves which ran continuously around the room. 15 children located books relevant to the topic BIRDS.

Most children relied on cover information to determine which books should be examined more closely. 7 of them sought a title which contained the exact word they had chosen as a search term. While only 1 child failed to use the table of contents or indexes in books, the children found relevant information during the interviews to answer only 30 of the 86 questions generated. Completed projects included answers to only 48% of the questions

originally posed by the children together with questions substituted to fit the information found. This appeared to be a function of the questions themselves, the search terms chosen and whether the table of contents or index was examined. Further, several books were found to lack both (or either) contents or indexes and some had no page numbers, thus making information location extremely difficult.

The management of a task as complex as information seeking demands knowledge of the information retrieval process itself and a range of appropriate cognitive and metacognitive strategies to allow the searcher to monitor and regulate strategy application in terms of information seeking and the demands of the information resources to hand. Given the barriers to information location inherent in both the books and the library system as viewed by these children, it appears that students need to approach information seeking with a problem-solving orientation.

Several levels of assistance are required by Form 1 students engaged in topic work. Blanket assessment of the end product of such assignments ignores much of the learning potential inherent in the task. The implications of these findings for the teaching of information and thinking skills are discussed.

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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES	vi
CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 2 - THE PRESENT STUDY	22
CHAPTER 3 - METHOD	29
CHAPTER 4 - RESULTS	42
CHAPTER 5 - DISCUSSION	75
CHAPTER 6 - CONCLUSION	93
APPENDICES	
1. Information and consent form sent to parents	97
2. Children's consent form	99
3. Contract form used by students	100
4. Sample transcription	101
5. Guide for interviewer questioning	113
BIBLIOGRAPHY	115

LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

FIGURES

1. An organisational framework for exploring questions about learning as applied to topic work 26
2. Non-fiction subject index entries found by 21 of 23 subjects 47
3. Shelving layout of non-fiction collection relevant to searching for BIRDS, 598 and 598.2 53

TABLES

1. Summary of children's interaction with the catalogue 44
2. Summary of children's location of books 51
3. Summary of children's gathering of books for information seeking 59
4. Sources of keywords and their appearance in book organisation aids 65