



Tanja Č. Glišić<sup>1</sup>

University of Banja Luka, Faculty of Philosophy, Republic of Srpska

Original  
scientific paper

## *Why Do Children Ask Questions – New Classification of Preschool Children’s Questions*

Paper received: Apr 6 2017  
Paper accepted: Sep 1 2017  
Article Published: Sep 29 2017

### **Extended summary**

This paper looks at the questions that preschool children spontaneously ask their teachers in the conditions of the institutional educational process. Their questions represent an important, but little studied pedagogical phenomenon. The classification of children’s questions has been selected as an approach that allows for the analysis of the essential differences among the questions. The analysis of different available classifications has shown that children’s questions are mostly studied as a cognitive category, while the function of speech, which classifies the questions as cognitive or social, is used as a main criterion in their classification. However, the interest in cognitive questions is generally more common than in social questions.

The validity of the existing classifications was tested on the concrete empirical data. The goal of the research was to identify the types and subtypes of the preschool children’s questions to their teachers during their whole-day stay in kindergartens, more specifically - to make our classification of the children’s questions. A large sample of children’s questions was created by means of a systematic observation. A qualitative content analysis of the empirical data was carried out, resulting in a new classification of children’s questions which differs from the previous classifications. The function of the questions was chosen as the basic criterion for distinguishing the questions relative to the context of their occurrence.

According to this criterion, which takes into account the context in which a question is asked, there are three types of children’s questions: cognitive, social and operational questions. By using thematic content as a criterion, each type was further differentiated into specific subtypes. The classification is described in detail and fully explained in the paper and the examples of all types/subtypes are provided as well. Cognitive questions, which children ask to get new information and satisfy their curiosity, can be classified as questions about oneself and others,

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<sup>1</sup> [tanja.v.glicic@gmail.com](mailto:tanja.v.glicic@gmail.com)

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questions about the world around us and questions about various activities. Social questions arise from children's needs which only interpersonal contact and interaction can satisfy. Their purpose is interaction and they are classified as questions the purpose of which is to draw attention and make contact, validation questions, questions requiring confirmation, questions expressing disagreement, and questions referring to playing games. Social questions have been more fully studied relative to the existing classifications, resulting in a greater number of the subtypes. Operational questions have been classified as either requests for help or requests for permission, while their basic function is to provide a child with the necessary conditions for their activities. The third type of questions is relatively new. In an effort to provide answers to the question – Why children ask questions? – our classification shows that children ask questions for at least three essentially different reasons: to get information about something; to make contact with adults for the sake of the interaction itself and for what it offers (confirmation, consolation, attention, etc.); to get the necessary permission or help to be able to act in accordance with their needs and wishes.

The extent of the influence of the children's age on the occurrence of different types of questions has also been analyzed. Statistical analysis indicates that children use questions differently relative to their age. The number of cognitive and operational questions increases up to the age of five, followed by a decrease, whereas the number of social questions virtually remains the same. This phenomenon can be explained by the specificities of the questions themselves and of the institutional context. It has also been concluded that the development of the questions follows a trend from social to cognitive questions.

The classification described in the paper was created by applying a specific approach and an inductive method, while the categories and subcategories were redefined by using the raw data. The entire research is based on the constructivist approach and relies heavily on the analysis of the context in which the studied phenomenon occurs. The value of the classification presented in the paper lies in its in-depth analysis of children's questions which should raise the awareness of actors in the educational process about the significance of these questions as manifestations of children's interests and needs. For this reason, children's questions should be given due attention and children themselves should be encouraged to ask as many different questions as they like. The final conclusion is that the universality of the proposed classification should be explored more in the future. In other words, the selected approach should and can be applied to the questions that children ask one another, their parents, and later on, at higher levels of formal education.

**Key words:** preschool children's questions, preschool teacher, classification of questions, function of questions, preschool institution.

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