

Inter-conneXions

Dr Hilary Fabian and Aline-Wendy Dunlop

'Interconnexions' was presented as a parallel session at the 'Progress with Purpose' conference on March 18th 2002 in Edinburgh. It highlighted the connections between socio-emotional well-being and learning. The way children feel about themselves and the way they are supported by adults are the foundations for them to feel emotionally secure, ready to meet new challenges and continue learning from the very beginning of their school lives. The session identified some of the social and learning challenges for children as they begin school. It asked how children can be helped to develop social and emotional resilience and how they can be best supported to achieve success in learning at the next stage. It demonstrated that children are more likely to be successful at school when they are confident, get along with others and have acquired social skills such as waiting their turn, sharing, expressing their needs and being able to ask for help, and cognitive skills such as being able to anticipate change, 'read' the teacher, adapt their learning styles and attend and understand in less familiar situations. A virtuous cycle develops with those children who are socially skilled, as they are more likely to have a succession of positive experiences with other children (Goleman 1996) and adults, and consequently develop cognitively.

Starting school means having to face a number of social challenges such as getting acquainted with new adults and children, and getting to know new social rules and values (Thyssen 1997). On entering the wider social world of school there is the possibility of making new friends, but it also means entering the world of social comparison, 'reading' group situations, coping with playground stresses and the mores of eating in unfamiliar surroundings. In order to become a social member children require a social understanding. Their social experiences and interactions with adults and peers are important to cognitive development, as learning is framed within a social context (Vygotsky 1978).

The 'seriousness' (Griebel and Niesel, 1999) of life starts with school when children undergo a change in identity and become a 'school child'. Certain rites of passage, such as wearing a school uniform, can help with this but more is needed to bridge the gaps and ensure socio-emotional well-being. Individual transitional links between home and school, for example, a toy or photograph, can support 'transitioners'. Parental confidence that comes about from having a knowledge and understanding about school can also boost children's confidence. The first teacher has a role to play in scaffolding social

relationships for children, teaching social skills and helping children gain social understanding. Empowering children by teaching them social competence and problem-solving skills gives them some sense of control over their lives and enables them to maximise their potential learning power.

Children come to school well able to think and reason about the world, about events, about people, about number, in ways that make 'human sense'. School demands that children learn to think and reason in "disembedded contexts" (Donaldson, 1978). Often, instead of dealing directly with the world in situations that make human sense, children have to use symbol systems and deal with representations of the world (in words and numbers, pictures and diagrams). Success in school depends on this ability to work with disembedded concepts: the key to being able to do so is to have an awareness of the mind's activity: deliberately using talk about thought, about taking another's perspective, about imagining how someone will think or what they should do in a given situation. Such considerations help people to develop this reflective awareness. The consequence of this discovery of the mind has cognitive, social and emotional importance.

There are substantial changes in the development of representational skills between the ages of three and five, but not all children entering school will have an emerging capacity to mind read: to read the teacher's intentions, to understand the requests made, and to pay attention and respond appropriately. The growing understanding of mind that children acquire in the pre-school years underlies their social interactions with family and friends and provides the foundation for their cognitive activities in school. Relating to teacher expectations demands an increasingly sophisticated grasp of other's desires, motivations, ideas and capacities (Dunn. 1996).

The child who is emotionally and socially ready for school may be better placed to meet the cognitive challenges of a new stage of education and accommodate changes in their status as a learner so that they move readily into the changed demands on their capacities to learn. We cannot ignore the mutual influences of social and cognitive change.

The main conclusions from this session were:

- to become effective learners children need to have developed some social understanding;
- teachers and others can give individualised support to empower children's socio-emotional development;

- children meet new cognitive challenges of interpreting the teacher, adapting their learning styles, and developing their ideas about themselves as learners in the school situation;
- children can be best supported in a purposeful start to primary education through shared views of children as learners and joint planning for a transition curriculum which bridges the 3-5 and 5-14 guidelines and increases the agency of the child.

Donaldson, M. (1978) *Children's Minds*. Glasgow: Fontana Collins.

Goleman, D. (1996) *Emotional Intelligence*. London: Bloomsbury

Griebel, W. and Niesel, R. (1999) 'From Kindergarten to school: a transition for the family'. Paper presented at the 9th European Conference on Quality in Early Childhood Education 'Quality in Early Childhood Education – How Does Early Education Lead to Life-Long Learning?' Helsinki.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978) *Mind in Society* Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard.

Correspondence to: hilary.fabian@ed.ac.uk and
a.w.a.dunlop@strath.ac.uk