

Paper One:

An investigation of the social competence of pre-school children within three pre-school settings

Paper Two:

A case study of four children's social competence during their transition from pre-school to Primary school

Resubmitted by Julie Elkins to the University of Exeter as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Educational, Child and Community Psychology in February 2011.

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Overview

With the inception of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum (2008) in England and Wales, the development of children's social and emotional skills have been prioritised and considered to be central to children's school attainment and progress as well as children's long-term future well-being. The EYFS is aimed at children from 3 to 5 years old and therefore, 'travels' with children as they experience the move to their reception class. This research aimed to investigate how staff in a small group of pre-school settings had interpreted this change within the curriculum and how their practice supported children's social competence. Following this, there was an intention to monitor how transition impacted on four children in the new EYFS climate. The first paper, therefore, aimed to explore the environmental context of the children within their pre-school setting at age 4. This involved an examination of the interactions of the adults with the children in the setting and, also of the pre-school managers' attitudes and beliefs about social and emotional development within the pre-school. It also focused on the children themselves and examined the predominant types of interactions between children within each pre-school setting. During the second study, four children were followed up in detail with the continuing emphasis on their social competence as they experienced the transition from pre-school to Primary school. With transition acknowledged as a time of 'discontinuity' (Margetts, 2002), the emphasis in the second paper was to investigate changes in children's social competences as they settled within their new school.

The paradigm position in this research was social constructivist. The assumption was to explore diverse levels of meaning rather than seek one representation of reality. Within this interpretative framework, the objective was to provide the adult participants an

opportunity to reflect openly on their experiences, and to gather their multiple perspectives in relation to their working approaches, relationships and contexts. This core emphasis on socially constructed meaning imbued how children's interactions were interpreted within their play contexts and also, how themes were garnered through observation.

Crucial to a social constructivist position is the necessity of the researcher to declare any of their own biases and perspectives; at the same time, the researcher must also acknowledge that they do not operate as an objective outsider but bring their own interpretations and realities to the research. The researcher's cultural frame of reference was as a white, educated, mother of two with a previous teaching background in the Secondary school system in the United Kingdom. Therefore, it is important to note that the researcher's experiences and previous detailed contact with young children lay completely within her experience as a mother and not as a professional practitioner. The researcher was also looking through the lens of 16 years of professional background experience within the field of education, mainly teaching the post 11 age groups but also more recently as a Trainee Educational Psychologist.

In the first study, qualitative methods were used. Twenty-one children were observed in their free choice time across three pre-schools. Four children, who attended two separate Primary schools but were from the same pre-school, were followed up using a case study approach for the second study. In papers 1 and 2, both systematic and naturalistic observational data were gathered for children and adults. For paper 1, observation data was collected within a four-week period during the term prior to Primary school transition. For paper 2, the observations took place during the second term of the reception year and in the same term during Year

1. Semi-structured interviews took place in both studies; in paper 1, these involved the pre-school managers and for paper 2, members of staff with responsibility for transition were interviewed. For the second paper, questionnaire data (Social Competence Behaviour Evaluation Pre-school Edition, 2003) was also gathered from parents and teachers, pre and post transition.

The findings in paper 1 revealed that children were sociable with both peers and adults but adult/child interactions were infrequent and focused on practical matters (e.g. requests) rather than extending the content and theme of the play activities. Each setting had varied interpretations about how they supported children's social competencies. Despite the small scale of the study, it was concluded that the findings suggested that there was scope for pre-school practitioners to offer children a balance between choosing freely and giving good quality support to extend interactions with their peers during play. The second part of the study, which examined how children's social competences changed over transition, found that children's social interactions were stable over time. Though differences in priorities regarding social competence and transition were noted in the pre-school and two Primary school settings, no single factor was identified as having a negative or positive impact on transition. It was concluded that though children's social competence appeared stable over time, the variation in Primary school practices could involve further examination. In particular, it was suggested that future focus could pinpoint how links are maintained with pre-schools and how children's individual play skills can be given greater prominence during the early Primary years.

This research, therefore, extends the body of literature, which underscores the importance of the adult's role during prolonged and meaningful social interaction with pre-school children. The attitudes

framed by the adults within the pre-school, through policy and practice, can have a formative effect on children's social competence: Where children and adults were less interactive, children undertook fewer pro social acts (like sharing and helping) but were nevertheless curious to observe or stand alongside their peers. The importance placed upon developing children's social competence was found to be a high priority in Primary schools' agendas at the point of transition. However, despite the Foundation Stage curriculum easing the way and offering greater homogeneity to practitioners, this research found that children attending two Primary schools had differing experiences of transition and had reduced opportunity due to poor links with their pre-school settings. Supporting social competence and play in the transition to school was a stated aim by the schools but somewhat constrained by the allocation of time within the curriculum. Educational Psychologists and other professionals working within the Early Years have a definitive role in helping practitioners to raise and implement the broad profile of social competence for children, both within their relationships with families and within their own staff teams.

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