

It is well documented that successful transition from school to further education and employment and indeed throughout life, relies upon a range of underlying skills and attributes that have not been taught in traditional curriculum.

Sometimes referred to as 'generic skills', 'key competencies' or 'meta-skills', these skills and attributes are now categorised into eight competency areas and called 'employability skills' (for more information see [www.dest.gov.au](http://www.dest.gov.au)).

While middle and upper secondary school teachers have traditionally been tasked with preparing students for post-secondary education and employment, research now points to the importance of this career-life preparation starting much earlier. For instance, children as young as five begin thinking about their futures as they grapple with the question often asked by family and peers, 'What do you want to do when you grow up?'

There are a complexity of factors which interact to shape the answer to this question. However, at the heart of a response are often a set of beliefs that not only shape a child's perspective about what they want to do but also what they start to believe they can't do. Hence, while the question seems innocent enough, from an educational perspective it can have far-reaching implications.

This paper uses the eight 'employability skills' developed nationally, but modifies them slightly to make them more applicable to younger age groups.

Hence, we refer to this skills set as 'foundation skills' and here we outline a case and present some strategies and tools for their inclusion in mainstream curriculum throughout primary and secondary levels.

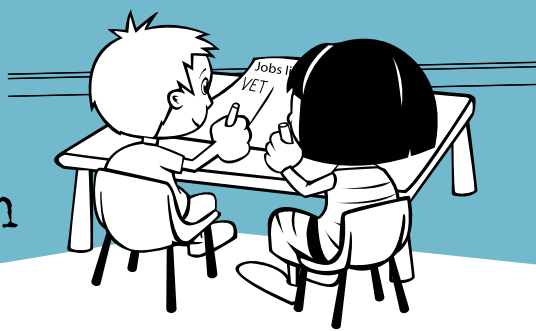
### **Case Example 1**

Recently a student in transition set as his personal goal 'to be more confident when talking about his achievements'. This student was 34 years old and had just completed a PhD in micro-economics but was finding it difficult to gain employment.

In the course of career counselling, confidence was a characteristic he identified as having influenced his career decision to stay at university and continue studying. He did not necessarily like what he was studying, but it was easier than facing the insecurity that transition brought.

He traced his 'quiet' and 'unconfident' demeanour back to early education and mentioned that all through his schooling his reports highlighted that he was a 'pleasure to teach'. This he associated with the fact that he never said much and quietly did his work .

'Confidence', he said, 'was something that I was left to learn for myself'.



## What are Foundation Skills?

Foundation skills include the range of abilities and attributes that underpin success in education, employment, relationships and personal development. They are the underlying learned abilities that play an important role in allowing a wider range of knowledge and skills to be used effectively in a variety of settings.

### Foundation skills include:

1. Self-concept building (recognise self-talk, build confidence, face personal fear)
2. Communication (intra and interpersonal communication)
3. Teamwork & Leadership (to work & interact with others effectively)
4. Problem solving (develop solutions using a range of strategies in different situations)
5. Initiative (adapting to change, develop ideas, harness opportunities, taking action)
6. Learning (habits of mind, attitudes, perceptions, strategies)
7. Planning and Organising (managing time, prioritizing, managing information)
8. Self Management (goal focus, persisting, doing what is important)

### These skills are at the core of a student's ability to:

- persist when the answer is not readily apparent
- plan to get homework completed even though a favourite TV show is on
- deal appropriately with negative peer relationship experiences
- solve problems before they escalate
- succeed when working in groups
- deal effectively with new and unfamiliar situations
- communicate needs, ideas and suggestions

*The examples above transcend any specific level of education. The ability to deal with issues of this kind influences performance across a person's lifespan. their many natural gifts and talents.*

## Early Intervention Needed

Foundation skills include the range of abilities and attributes that underpin success in education, employment, relationships and personal development. They are the underlying learned abilities that play an important role in allowing a wider range of knowledge and skills to be used effectively in a variety of settings.

### 1. Brain Development Theory

There are critical periods when a young child requires appropriate stimulation for the brain to establish the neural pathways required for optimum development.

Brain development research suggests that children establish thought patterns that will shape their emotional control, habitual ways of responding, language and literacy long before they reach secondary school (Shore 1997; McCain and Mustard 1999).



## 2. Behavioural Patterns

Habitual ways of responding are established early and these behavioural patterns influence the cognitive and behavioural strategies children use to solve problems and self-manage. These in turn influence performance over their lives.

These habitual patterns of behaviour can have significant influence on performance in adult life (Doherty 1997).

### Case Example 1

A client of mine explained that she was just not 'mathematically inclined' and that this had been the case throughout her schooling. While she had a number of 'excellent teachers' who worked overtime to help her address her maths deficiency, nothing seemed to work.

Now, at the age of 48 on an annual income of \$85 000, she spent the majority of her surplus income holidaying. Meanwhile, she had limited savings and superannuation and didn't own her own home.

This had come about because she had avoided anything 'mathematical and financial' since she left school and started work.

With retirement looming, it was time to understand and tackle her problem in a different way.

## Some Curriculum Suggestions

The intention here is to provide some guidelines for developing curriculum that teaches and establishes learning outcomes for foundation skills.

- Starting early. Develop age-appropriate curriculum initiatives as early as possible to establish highly functional brain and behavioural patterns.
- Intentional planning. Learning foundation skills is most successful when learning outcomes are explicitly stated along with other curriculum goals. Perhaps use a whole school approach so that different skills and demonstrations of skills are addressed at different year levels.
- Involving parents. Involving the primary caregivers in programs that develop foundation skills has been shown to improve the effectiveness of such programs. Additional benefits have been shown to include improving how parents relate to and care for children at home.



- Integration across a range of different contexts. Use cross-curricular approaches and a variety of environmental contexts. It is not uncommon for a child or adult to be confident in one situation but unconfident in another. Assessing foundation skills in different contexts enables students to practise such skills in unfamiliar situations and can help establish success patterns that will support future performance. For example, planning, organising or solving problems could all be assessable outcomes from a school excursion or camp.
- Adding supplementary programs to meet the needs of identified students. As with literacy, some students require additional support to develop core foundation skills. In these situations, parental involvement becomes even more important.
- Learning continuum. Given that the brain's development is a seamless continuum, initiatives for developing foundation skills will also benefit from a developmental approach that builds upon previous achievements. Hence, where possible, having a progress report that benchmarks the child's development so that it can be built upon in the following year will be beneficial.

### **About the Author**

Nigel Phillips is the founder of Careers Fast Track Pty Ltd – a company that provides career-life development programs, performance coaching and resources to individuals, educational institutions and businesses.

With more than 20 years experience, he has worked at every level of the education and training sectors and his programs assist thousands of Australians each year manage career-life transition.

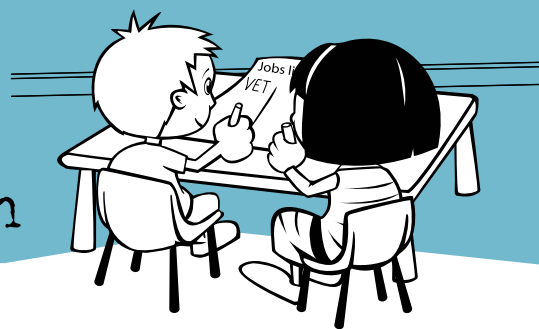
Writing regularly for a wide variety of national career publications, his ideas and contributions are sought by experts in the industry. He has produced a range of career-life development resources under the Career-Life Skills Development Series™ and his company also provides nationally accredited training to career counsellors and other professionals.



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## **Resources**

**The Big Question** and **TBQ** Magazine have been developed to address the educational matters described above. Please see this month's new releases section for details of **The Big Question**. These resources (part of the Career-Life Skills Development Series™) have been designed to develop a continuum of experiences that progressively build and document the development of the child's foundation skills in primary and early to middle secondary school. Click here for more details on **The Big Question**.

## **References**

Doherty, G. 1996, 'The great child care debate: The long-term effects of non-parental child care', Occasional paper no. 7, Childcare Resource and Research Unit, Centre for Urban and Community Studies, University of Toronto.

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