

## **A Competent Learner**

The four components that make up a Competent Learner are:

- Making Connections**
- Being Imaginative**
- Being Creative**
- Representing**

These components are all interconnected. They all involve children in exploring, experimenting, looking for similarities and differences, interacting, imagining, creating and representing as they seek to learn about the world around them. To be competent learners children need materials, equipment and an environment that appeals to the senses and encourages movement.

Whilst, as Piaget notes, children are born with a drive to make sense of the world around them, they do not do this in isolation from the adults, other children and the culture in which they live. As Vygotsky notes, they need sensitive and responsive adults and other children who will enable them to make sense of what they have experienced. As early years pioneers such as Froebel and Isaacs have suggested, they also need to be able to learn the things that they want to learn, to be given sufficient time and encouragement and to make choices. Finally, they need opportunities to communicate, share and represent their learning in a variety of forms, including through the imagination, through creative responses and through mark-making.

Babies and young children are naturally curious and they start to learn and to understand the world around them through the sensory and physical exploration that they enjoy and engage in. These explorations are playful and play-based but they are also deeply meaningful. Babies and young children have a deeply rooted desire to interpret and to understand the world around them. This exploration is physical and sensory.

Babies' brains are predisposed to make sense of the world. Their seemingly innate interest in the human face is important in terms of ensuring a connection with significant adults who will look after them and enable them to learn about the world. Even babies of a few hours old will gaze at patterns which resemble the human face and at regular rather than random patterns, demonstrating that they are both able to distinguish between things that they see and that they like some things better than others. These sorts of visual preferences become the means by which very young children discriminate between and make connections between different objects and experiences.

As the baby explores the world using touch, sight, sound, taste, smell and movement, so these sensory and physical explorations affect the patterns that are laid down in the brain. Through repeated experience of people, objects and materials, young children begin to form mental pictures that represent them. These mental images then enable the child to increasingly make sense of new experiences by reference to ones already encountered. This is a useful and powerful way of learning because it means that young children can classify and begin to make sense of their world and use these

classifications to try to understand new experiences. As mental images and patterns of understanding, referred to as schema by Piaget, are laid down in the brain, so connections begin to be formed between them. The quality of these experiences is very important to the development and strengthening of synapses in the brain. Where synapses are not fed by experience, these connections will be lost, at least temporarily. Where connections are made, the child makes increasing sense of the world.

Young children are naturally curious and keen to make sense of and to represent the world for themselves. They are also intensely social. They learn about their world and their culture through interactions with significant adults and other children. Whilst it is clear that children create their own understandings about the world and how it works, they are not making these discoveries entirely alone and what they discover will depend on the help they are given and the experiences that they have. Competent learners are learners who are supported by encouraging and sensitive adults, who make very careful decisions about the things that children can do and can learn for themselves and the things with which they need some help. They need skilled adults who recognise this and how much help is needed – too much and the child will not learn from and take control of the experience, too little and the experience will be frustrating and a possible source of failure rather than success as a learner.

As young children become more mobile and more able to control motor movements and as they begin to form mental images of actions, events and experiences and to understand how one thing can stand for another, so their explorations become far more intentional. As Duffy notes (1998): *'Children need to represent their experiences, their feelings and ideas if they are to preserve them and share them with others.'* Young children remain intensely active and physical, however, and early mark making and creative activity may record what the body will do and the child's exhilaration in physical activity: marks may not remain on the paper if the arm is swinging enthusiastically around the body and if the paper is small. This physical and sensory exploration of objects and materials will, however, lead young children to begin to represent their experiences of the world around them using whatever materials are to hand. They will experiment, imitate, play with objects and materials, organise and classify and use marks of different sorts to represent their physical explorations. These early forms of representation demonstrate that children understand how one thing can be used to stand for another.

Early forms of representation can also demonstrate children's interest in particular schema, as they explore their significance as a tool for making sense of certain things in the world around. Children may become interested in vertical and straight lines, circles, the way that one object can cover another, the way that one thing can be inside another but still visible. These interests and concerns may be represented in physical and imaginative activities, as they run in lines and circles and cover the tea set with a blanket but they will also appear in children's creative and representational activities as they paint, draw, make models and make marks with a variety of materials. As Duffy notes (1998), from these forms of representation *'springs the understanding*

*to comprehend other forms of symbolic representation, such as written language and mathematics.* **Making Connections, Being Imaginative, Being Creative and Representation** begin to mean that children can share their understanding of patterns and relationships, their thoughts, feelings, understandings and identities with others using drawings, words, movement, music, dance and imaginative play.

### **References**

- \_ Duffy, B. (1998) Supporting Creativity and Language in the Early Years. Buckingham: Open University Press
- \_ For further references to Piaget, Vygotsky, Froebel and Isaacs see Bruce, T. (1997) Early Childhood Education (Second Edition). London: Hodder and Stoughton