

# **An exploration of practitioners' perspectives of promoting sustained shared thinking in an early childhood setting.....a case study**

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## **Introduction and Aims**

The capacity to engage in sustained shared thinking (SST) with children is central to effective Early Years pedagogy and should be part of personal practice and modelled to colleagues (Allen and Whalley, 2010:98) Sustained shared thinking has been defined as:

'An episode in which two or more individuals 'work together' in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative etc. Both parties must contribute to the thinking and it must develop and extend the understanding.' (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002a:8)

This definition from The Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002a) study identified interactions such as SST as a significant means by which performance in early years' settings could be enhanced. The REPEY project considered such interactions were characteristic of high quality settings. However Allen and Whalley's (2010:99) research discovered 'widespread confusion about ... the meaning of the term'. This raises key concerns for trainers.

As a lecturer training early years' practitioners, I was challenged to find out more about SST. Would practitioners grasp the benefits of engaging in SST and would this interaction be embedded in their practice? Would they appreciate the importance of their role in supporting children's thinking skills?

## **Theoretical Framework**

The Effective Provision for Preschool Education (EPPE) project highlighted the fact that 'children whose thinking skills have been nurtured in the company of supportive adults will do better than children whose thinking has developed alone or in the company of their peers' (Sylva et al, 2004). Robson (2012 : 31) suggests that 'the creation of an atmosphere in which children are encouraged to reflect on their thinking, may be most important.' In settings considered effective, practitioners guided children into thinking in deeper ways by challenging their thinking. This was usually initiated by the child but then sustained through skilful interactions facilitated by practitioners. SST is neither solely teacher directed nor solely child-initiated. The very fact that it is 'shared' indicates that the thinking and interaction between the two participants is apportioned. Wild (2011: 230) supports this suggesting that there is 'a continuum of joint engagement with both participants potentially shifting position on that scale during an interaction.' Rogoff (1990) emphasised 'guided participation' in cultural activities and the effect of interpersonal and community processes in thinking: 'cognitive

development consists of individuals changing their ways of understanding...in shared endeavours with other people building on the cultural practices and traditions of communities.' (Rogoff, 2003: 236).

Several researchers including Rogoff (1990), Rinaldi (2006) and Jordan (2009) emphasise the importance of sharing the thinking, engaging with the understanding of the other and studying meaning with children, thus identifying links between co-construction and SST. Siraj-Blatchford (2002b: 85), states that 'child development progresses as children experience more challenging sustained shared thinking in their play initially with adults, then in reciprocal peer play and later in sophisticated collaborative play.' Whereas in scaffolding the teacher is in control, often with an outcome in mind, in co-construction, the interests and dispositions of the learner are important and the skill of the practitioner lies in establishing intersubjectivity, allowing the child to accept responsibility for their learning (Olusoga, 2009:47, Jordan, 2009:50).

Many researchers including Clark and Moss (2001), Dahlberg and Moss (2005), Rinaldi (2006), have highlighted the importance of listening to children. Siraj-Blatchford (2005) has identified a series of skills lead practitioners need to promote effective SST, one of which is 'tuning in' or listening effectively. Fumoto and Greenfield (2012:48) suggest that when we communicate by really listening, all the parties are empowered. Arguably, listening to children is the starting point for SST.

In terms of the most effective intellectual environment for SST, Siraj-Blatchford (2005), has identified a number of strategies to support children's SST. Dowling's (2006) teaching materials to support SST in the early years are based on these strategies. Nutbrown (2011:149) maintains that 'educators must be tuned into young children's thinking, open to their ideas and responsive to ever active minds.' In Siraj-Blatchford and Smith's study (2010) the ability of adults to show an interest in a conversation led by the child and develop the conversation without resorting to personal agendas was a significant success factor for SST.

Walsh, Murphy and Dunbar (2007:15) stated that 'staff in excellent settings were: more likely to encourage children to engage in new experiences; more enthusiastic about the child's efforts; and more proactive in seeking out opportunities to scaffold children's thinking.' Research by Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva (2004:720) concluded that 'positive cognitive outcomes are closely associated with adult - child interactions of (the) kind that involve some element of 'sustained shared thinking.'

Given the complexity and significance of SST and the paucity of research on this topic, as a lecturer in early years' education, the following research questions seemed to be the most appropriate:

1. What understanding do practitioners have of sustained shared thinking?

2. What do practitioners consider are its benefits?
3. What do practitioners consider are its challenges?

### **Method**

My perspectives on early childhood practice are influenced by socio-culturalism, with the assumption that the cultural context of the child affects the development of their cognition. Also important is a child's innate disposition to learning. In terms of methodology, this qualitative research, within the interpretivist paradigm, used a case study approach. Three different methods of collecting data enhanced the validity of the research. (Mukherji and Albon, 2010:194). My sample comprised nineteen practitioners in one nursery who worked with 61 children aged 16 weeks to 5 years.

### **Results and Discussion**

Findings were taken from fifteen writing frames, seven questionnaires and four focus groups

Research questions will be considered in turn:

#### ***1. What understanding do practitioners have of sustained shared thinking?***

##### ***Initial definition of SST***

Practitioners highlighted 'sharing of ideas', 'helping to lead them in their thinking', 'encouraging a deeper level of understanding through shared research' and 'learning alongside each other' in their responses, showing their agreement with many concepts expressed in the initial definition of SST. Such responses' may also be linked with Rogoff's (1990) explanations of "guided participation' in cultural activities' and developing understanding through 'shared endeavours with other people building on the cultural practices and traditions of communities' (Rogoff, 2003:237).

##### ***Success factors for SST***

Two significant success factors for SST are appropriate contexts and attitudes. An important context for SST is the outdoors, but attention was also drawn to emotional contexts where children 'feel confident and at ease', where 'it is quiet' and 'plenty of staff' can support. This provided further evidence for the idea that cognition is "'situated in" specific contexts' (Rogoff, 2003: 237). Practitioners also highlighted the importance of their own attitude to learning, such as 'by accepting as an adult you don't have all the answers,' 'adults can learn from the child and see a different viewpoint,' and 'shared research'. Salmon and Lucas (2011:373) conclude that when thinking is valued, children are more likely to value thinking too. Enthusiasm and professionalism, is clearly needed to engage in SST: 'the more committed and enthusiastic you are the more you do it', 'you need to practice it and do it again' and 'if you're not truly passionate I don't think it's something you would do'. Numerous references pointed to the need to listen effectively to children including 'showing an interest', 'tuning in with children', 'listening to the ideas, not interrupting them.' This is supported by Siraj-

Blatchford (2005), Dahlberg and Moss (2005:99), Egan (2009) and Fumoto and Greenfield (2012:48) in their discussions of listening and thinking skills.

### ***Language***

Communication, creativity and collaboration are of central importance in early years' settings (Siraj-Blatchford, 2007). Adults need to engage children in genuine dialogue to effectively support the development of thinking skills. In this research, practitioners stressed the importance of dialogue and discussion. However practitioners also stated that body language can contribute to effective SST, through such responses as 'you can tell by their facial expressions and their body language almost buzzing off what you are learning together', 'interacting through verbal and non-verbal means.' This is supported by Wild's (2011: 219) assertion: 'non-verbal signifiers of mutual attention are valuable indices of thinking.'

### ***The role of the adult in sustaining thinking***

In this study, many practitioners said they could not plan a session of SST as SST is initiated by the child. This view is also seen from responses such as 'learning that is child led', 'children can invite you to join in,' 'the children initiated the activity and came up with their own ideas,' 'waiting for them to introduce me into their play,' 'gave me a look that said please come and join in with my play,'. Practitioners considered SST is child initiated, not adult led.

The fact that it is 'shared' indicates that the thinking and interaction between the two participants is apportioned. Olusoga (2009:48) in a discussion of the concept of 'control' in adult child interactions, suggests SST is different from teacher directed play, for in SST power is shared with control being passed from one participant to the other, but in direct teaching control is in the practitioner's hands. The word 'shared' does not indicate just a sharing of time or resources but indicates sharing of power, direction and guidance. This was highlighted in responses such as 'asking open-ended questions', 'exploring and extending an idea,' 'encouraging a child to make connections,' 'suggesting to a child,' 'you have to keep the conversation going,' 'by helping to lead them in their thinking,' 'offering an alternative viewpoint.' Practitioners considered they have a crucial role to play in SST.

### ***ZPD***

Many aspects of SST, such as 'sharing of ideas', 'sharing a conversation,' 'by tuning in to their interests,' 'through following their interests,' reflect Olusoga's (2009:42) summary of the key features of Vygotsky's ZPD (1978:87). To bridge that gap between current and potential knowledge, practitioners supported Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva's explanation (2004:725) that SST benefits from adults knowing the child well. This was evidenced through comments such as 'knowing the children ...really well', 'knowing interests and processes of enquiry,' 'by knowing the developmental stage of the child,' and 'having a good relationship with the child.' The adult has a key role to play in being aware of the child's level of development and supporting them to move their thinking skills onto the next level.

### ***Co-construction***

Strong links can be seen with co-construction : ‘generating new ideas,’ ‘engaging with and alongside children to encourage a deeper level of understanding through shared research, questioning, active dialogue and participation,’ ‘by sharing ideas,’ and ‘making meaning, constructing understanding.’ This supports Siraj- Blatchford and Sylva (2004:720) in their premise that SST includes elements of co-construction in which both parties are ‘involved’ and the content is ‘instructive’.

### ***Strategies to support SST***

A useful insight into strategies considered important was provided through including in the questionnaires Siraj-Blatchford’s list (2005) of effective strategies to support SST. These included ‘showing genuineness and real interest’, ‘respecting the child’s own decisions and choices’ and ‘encouragement to further thinking.’ This adds to our understanding of SST.

### ***Two significant aspects of SST not highlighted in the literature.***

The first is encompassed in this comment: ‘Adults need to provide opportunities for children to return to their previous investigations.’ In addition one focus group response was: ‘The fact that they brought it up the following week showed it was deep level learning.’ Another significant response was: ‘If it’s important to them, they remember it afterwards.’ So perhaps the word ‘sustained’ does not just mean sustained for a period of time while the interaction is taking place but also ‘sustained’ in the sense that the learning has made an impact on the child, it has been remembered after a period of time. I consider this a significant leaning point from this study.

A second theme relates to the notion of deep engagement with the process of learning. Although this is touched on by the literature insightful responses take this a step further. For example: ‘A child who was very unsettled and found separation from his mother difficult – when involved in SST didn’t even notice his mother wasn’t there.’ In addition ‘You can tell when it’s really good because they don’t get distracted by anything else around them. You can tell how deeply engaged they are.’ Another commented that SST is ‘When both practitioner and the child become absorbed in a discussion through play.’ These are powerful responses and the last one in particular sums up what SST is about. Despite the difficulties with trying to define SST, when it has taken place practitioners know. It is a magical experience, totally absorbing for both parties; another highly significant learning point from this study.

The second research question asked:

### ***2. What do practitioners consider are its benefits?***

SST can ‘allow a child to explore with wonder and excitement and be really engaged’. In addition SST can ‘allow children and adults to discern their interests and see how the child explores and discovers’, and SST ‘ helps you understand the child better’, which supports the

suggestion that SST provides an opportunity to learn more about children's thinking and learning styles (Robson, 2006a:3).

Practitioners have suggested SST: 'expands the child's learning', 'helps a child share and express ideas', helps to further the child's development'. This adds to evidence from literature including the EPPE project that children do better when their thinking skills are supported by adults rather than developing alone or with other children (Sylva et al, 2004), research by Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva (2004:720) suggesting higher cognitive outcomes are closely linked with interactions such as SST and Sylva et al's (2007) reference to cognitive and linguistic outcomes being better as a result of SST.

The benefit of enhancing social and emotional well-being is shown through such comments as : 'helps them be a confident learner', 'high level of well-being, self-esteem and trust', 'better relationships and foundation of trust.' Sylva et al (2004), supported by Fumoto and Greenfield (2012) suggests children's progress was improved through close relationships with adults.

The third research question asked:

### ***3. What do practitioners consider are its challenges?***

Finding sufficient time was considered 'hard, especially finding equal time for each child and finding time to finish the activity.'

McInnes et al (2010:19) suggest that children might lose confidence when adults engage with them in their play, but practitioners considered that you should wait for children to 'invite you to join in', and most effective is 'waiting for them to introduce me into their play,' and 'you need to take a step back and really listen to the children first.' This provides more evidence for Nutbrown's (2011:149) ideas about tuning into children to ensure you are supportive and not interfering.

Important challenges were 'exhaustion and long hours' and 'ratio-group size or one to one, or understaffing'; also mentioning that 'others can distract and interfere.' Participants highlighted the importance of 'the whole team needing to understand SST' and 'lack of understanding or support by other practitioners.' Robson's study (2006b) of 80 early childhood professionals concluded that training needed to focus more specifically on teaching thinking skills.

## **Conclusion**

This research has significant implications. Recognising the immense value to children of engaging in SST should give practitioners pride in their work knowing that their involvement with children can make a difference. In terms of SST the following attributes have been recognised through this study as being most significant:

- seeking opportunities to make meaning together

- providing meaningful contexts based on children's interests
- recognising that sometimes children will know the most about the topic
- listening carefully
- looking for ways to reflect on previous episodes of SST to allow deep level 'sustained' learning
- providing opportunities for deep engagement and the ability to be totally absorbed in a discussion through play.

There are also implications for settings as practitioners suggested 'higher engagement leads to a calmer environment' that 'deeper understanding of the child leads to a more motivated team, higher adult engagement and staff retention.' Nutbrown (2012: 12-13) states that 'children learn much in sustained interaction with other children, as well as adults who are attuned to children's learning and development needs who can support their play and foster early interactions between young children.' The Teachers' Standards (Early Years) (Teaching Agency, 2013) identified engagement in sustained shared thinking as an important part of promoting good progress and outcomes by children (criteria 2). The government needs to invest in high quality training for early years' professionals to ensure all involved have a full understanding of SST and clearly see its benefits.

Further research is necessary at other nurseries to compare practitioners views and gain perspectives of parents and children. Practitioners in this study have spoken passionately about the benefits of SST, further developing our understanding. Although difficult to define, SST can be recognised by deep level learning. Children become totally absorbed and wish to revisit their investigation later showing that their learning is truly 'sustained' over time.

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