

Sustained shared thinking in an early childhood setting: an exploration of practitioners' perspectives

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Abstract

Sustained shared thinking (SST) has been identified in the Teachers Standards (Early Years) (2013) as contributing to good progress and outcomes by children. In this paper, I define SST and discuss the outcomes of a study of practitioners' understandings of SST, its challenges and benefits. Writing frames, questionnaires and focus group interviews were used with nineteen practitioners. SST was considered a child-initiated interaction with links to co-construction. The interaction occasioned deep level learning in children, who were often totally absorbed and showed learning which was 'sustained' over time. Implications are highlighted, especially the need for additional training in using SST.

Keywords:

- Sustained shared thinking
- co-construction
- deep level learning
- thinking skills
- child- initiated
- early years

Introduction and Aims

It has been claimed that the capacity to engage in sustained shared thinking (SST) with children is central to effective Early Years pedagogy. (Allen and Whalley, 2010:98). But what exactly is SST? 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. Although the REPEY project considered that such interactions were characteristic of high quality settings, the claim does beg the question of whether and how other practitioners working with children on a day to day basis would understand the term and put it into practice as part of their daily routines? Allen and Whalley's (2010:99) interviews of a number of practitioners about SST had, after all, suggested some 'widespread confusion about ... the meaning of the term'.

The aim of the current study was, therefore, to explore the views of a number of nursery practitioners about the term SST and its associated practices. Would this form of interaction be embedded in the practice of these practitioners and how would they conceptualise the benefits of engaging in SST with children? Much debate has taken place about the role of the practitioner in early years settings but how would these practitioners see their role in supporting children's thinking skills in an early years setting?

The concept of SST incorporates a number of themes which need to be explored, such as, the nature of thinking skills, the pedagogy of thinking skills including links with language development, the role of the adult including links with the Zone of Proximal Development and co-construction. Other issues to discuss also include listening to children as a prerequisite of SST and the role of the environment. SST certainly highlights many important aspects of early years practice.

Firstly it is necessary to establish what thinking skills are and how children might develop them. Fisher (2005:x) suggests that thinking is the primary process of human life for there is no doing without thinking. Therefore it is crucial to support children at an early stage to help them think and make sense of the world. In the knowledge that children think in different ways, Robson (2012 : 31) suggests that 'the creation of an atmosphere in which talking about thinking happens and in which children are encouraged to reflect on their thinking, may be most important,' an idea supported by Salmon and Lucas (2011:373) who suggest that practitioners' attitudes to thinking are significant.

There are many contrasting theories about teaching and learning thinking skills. Whereas Piaget (1951) stressed self-initiated discovery, Vygotsky (Ford, 2009:70) stressed the role of the adult in contributing to a child's learning and development. Rogoff (1990) supports this by emphasising '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).

Piaget (1951) believed that children already think before the onset of language. He saw the role of language initially as expressing thought (rather than creating it) but as children got older, language was seen as the key way in which initial ego-centric thought became more social and abstract. In contrast Vygotsky (1986) considered that for a child under two years of age, thought was non-verbal, but by the age of two, language and thought become connected. From that point on, intellectual development would be determined by language. For Vygotsky, (1986) language skills and new concepts develop as a child speaks, listens and plays. Johnston and Nahmad – Williams (2009: 145) agree, explaining that children make sense of the world through language. Palmer and Doyle (2004) explain that the structures of a child's thought processes emanate from the speech structures which they have acquired. Therefore their linguistic skills affect the development of their thought processes. The acquisition of language relates closely to SST as sharing the thinking with someone else through language helps to promote thinking skills.

The Effective Provision for Preschool Education (EPPE) project tested the hypothesis 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). The EPPE project showed links between positive learning outcomes and effective support offered by adults through language. (Sylva et al, 2004). In the related REPEY study (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002a) effective settings were found to be those balancing learning opportunities from teacher-directed interactions with opportunities for freely chosen play activities. 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.

Through Olusoga's (2009:42) summary of the key features of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (1978:87), clear links can be seen with SST. Siraj -Blatchford and Sylva (2004: 725) have suggested that adults need to have understanding of the child's 'cognitive, cultural and social perspective' to enable bridges to be built between the child's current knowledge and knowledge the child is capable of gaining. Therefore the adult has a key role to play in knowing the child, being aware of their level of development and through SST having the skill to support them to move their thinking skills onto the next level.

Several researchers (e.g. Rogoff,1990; Rinaldi, 2006; Jordan, 2009) emphasise the importance of sharing the thinking, engaging with the understanding of the other and studying meaning with children, which suggests some possible links between co-construction and SST. Siraj-Blatchford (2002b: 85) in addition, 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 and often has an outcome in mind, in co-construction, the interests and dispositions of the learner are all 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).

Ford (2009) suggests that 'all contemporary theories are agreed that the environment, both physical and social, plays an important role in nurturing children's learning.' In terms of the most effective intellectual environment for SST, Siraj-Blatchford (2005) has identified a number of strategies to support children's SST one of which is 'tuning in' or listening effectively to what is said. Dowling's (2006) teaching materials to support SST in the early years are based on these strategies. (A list of these strategies can be seen in question 4 of the questionnaire in appendix 3.) Nutbrown (2011:149) maintains that 'educators must be tuned into young children's thinking, open to their ideas and responsive to ever active minds.' Many researchers including Clark and Moss (2001), Dahlberg and Moss (2005), Rinaldi (2006), have highlighted the importance of listening to children. Fumoto and Greenfield (2012:48) suggest that when we communicate by really listening, all the parties involved are empowered. In Siraj-Blatchford and Smith's study (2010) one of the success factors for effective SST was the ability of adults to show an interest in a conversation led by the child, extend it, and develop it without resorting to their personal agendas which often involved trying too hard to lead children to the 'right' answer.

The findings of the EPPE project suggested that the quality of interactions between practitioners and children were crucial. Where warmth was displayed and adults responded to children's needs, more progress was made (Sylva et al, 2004). Sarsani (2005) maintains that building self-confidence in a child is the most important factor in encouraging creative thinking skills. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), Fumoto and Greenfield (2012) have recognised the influence of the environment on the development of a child's thinking skills. Therefore the promotion of children's creative thinking and social relationships are vital in enhancing the quality of early childhood practice as a whole (Fumoto and Greenfield, 2012:8).

The REPEY report (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002a) stated that interactions such as SST played an important part in raising levels of achievement and were mostly found in settings of the best quality. 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,' which they consider supported learning effectively across the whole curriculum. The benefits of a structured approach including the use of SST were considered to be better cognitive and linguistic outcomes.

So how does SST relate to government policy? The Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) Standard 16 states 'engage in sustained shared thinking with children,' which 'refers to the development of children's thinking skills ... essential tools that enable children to learn' (CWDC, 2010: 41). In addition in the EYFS (DfE, 2012) one of the three characteristics of effective teaching and learning is described as 'creating and thinking critically – children have and develop their own ideas, make links between ideas and develop strategies for doing things.' However Fumoto (2012: 120) proposes that some of the challenges faced by the early years workforce in promoting SST include 'practitioners pay and conditions, the training of the workforce, the resourcing of early childhood provision and practitioners' professionalisation.' The Nutbrown Report (Nutbrown, 2012) raised concerns about the standard of qualifications and career pathways in the early years, stressing that high quality early education and care should be led by well-qualified staff. 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.' Nutbrown's recommendations (2012), if implemented, should help practitioners to be equipped to support children's thinking skills. Fumoto (2012:128) concluded that practitioners' efforts to engage in SST with children would be enhanced through commitment by policy makers to this interaction evidenced by adequate resourcing and training. It appears that the government have recognised the link between effective SST and high quality settings but has not followed this up with funding to develop training. In the knowledge that engaging in SST has been identified in the Teachers Standards (Early Years) (Teaching Agency, 2013) as part of promoting good progress and outcomes by children, it will be interesting to see how the training for Early Years Teachers proceeds.

In defining SST the literature has highlighted 'guided participation', sharing the thinking through language and co-construction as important themes and suggested that

challenges for practitioners including finding time to talk about thinking, listening and 'tuning in', knowing each child well, providing strong emotional support and being committed to the interaction. My aim in this research was to find out practitioners' experiences of SST, thus the research questions which guided the study were as follows:

1. How do a group of practitioners conceptualise sustained shared thinking?
2. What do practitioners consider to be the benefits of SST?
3. What do practitioners consider to be the challenges of SST?

Method

My perspectives on early childhood practice are influenced by a socio-cultural approach which recognises the significance of social context in children's learning. If the fourth overarching principle of the EYFS (DfE, 2012:3) is correct, that is that 'children develop and learn in different ways and at different rates,' then it is likely that the cultural context of children will affect the development of their cognition and that the role of SST within this is worth investigating.

In terms of methodology, the aim of qualitative research is to 'understand individuals' perceptions of the world,' (Bell, 2010: 5) – in the present case, the ways in which a group of early years practitioners conceptualised and used sustained shared thinking. A variety of data-gathering techniques were employed to gather evidence. Writing frames, similar to those used by Egan (2009), were chosen because respondents could use their own words without judgment, the researcher could take a non-participatory approach, participants were empowered and writing could be as detailed as wished.

Taking into account the limitations of the open question style of the writing frame, principally in the way they make data analysis more complicated (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007:330), two other methods of data collection were used. Focus group interviews allowed power to be shared between facilitator and group members (Mukherji and Albon, 2010: 123). Questionnaires, with some open questions, allowed for in depth replies and easier data analysis. Using these three different methods of collecting data would, it was felt, enhance the validity of the research (Mukherji and Albon, 2010:194).

Using one setting provided the opportunity to 'see effects in real contexts, context being a significant determining factor of both cause and effect.' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007:253). My sample comprised nineteen practitioners in one nursery.

Practitioners were asked to reflect on their experiences of SST using the writing frame, to participate in a focus group discussion and to complete a questionnaire (shown in the appendices). Practitioners were asked to reflect on any recent experience of SST with any child or group of children in any location in the nursery at any time of day during any type of activity for as long a period of time as the practitioner wished.

A consideration of ethics is important at every stage of the research process (Mukherji and Albon, 2010:40, Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007:51). Letters of consent were collected and confidentiality maintained as no names could be matched to any data.

The direction of the discussion could have been influenced by the researcher's values and beliefs but with only one researcher, the influence would have been the same for each focus group. Honesty is critical at all stages of the research process (Walliman, 2005: 337), since the researcher is accountable. 'Silently rejecting or ignoring evidence which happens to be contrary to one's beliefs constitutes a breach of integrity' (Walliman, 2005:337). This was considered when transcribing the focus group interviews and analysing data.

In case studies, participants should be allowed to have their own voice, since respondents' own words are often rich in detail and more illuminating than researchers' words (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007:254). Therefore quotations directly from practitioners were used to enhance validity.

One strength of my research methods is that I used both deductive and inductive research approaches. Where the questions were closed, as in the questionnaire, then this 'top down' approach or deductive method enabled me to move from the general to the more specific (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995:22). Where the questions were open, for example in the writing frames and in the focus groups, a 'bottom up' inductive approach allowed me to start with the ideas of the practitioners and see if their ideas matched the literature or if they expressed new insights.

The data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke's, 2006:82), which involved 'searching across a data set...to find repeated patterns of meaning.' The process of analysis involved six distinct phases. After becoming familiar with the data through reading and rereading, and the transcription of the focus group interviews, some initial codes were generated manually, driven by the three research questions. Once all the data was both coded and collated, decisions were made about combining various codes to configure an overall theme using tables as a tool to facilitate the analysis. After reviewing, refining, defining and naming the themes, the final phase involved writing a report by producing an analytic narrative of the data.

Results

Although all the nineteen practitioners agreed to take part in the research, four practitioners did not return their writing frames. Fifteen questionnaires were distributed but only seven of these were returned. There were four focus group interviews involving a total of fifteen members of staff.

The first theme which emerged from the data was related to how practitioners conceptualised SST. 'Learning and exploring alongside the children' was a response from nine practitioners from the writing frames and seven highlighted 'engaging with and alongside children to encourage a deeper level of understanding through shared research, questioning, active dialogue and participation.' Six practitioners described SST as 'sharing a conversation'. Four practitioners from the writing frames highlighted the fact that the play was child-led and that practitioners had to wait to be invited to join the play. One practitioner explained that, for her, SST was 'when both practitioner and child become absorbed in a discussion through play.' 'Tuning in through the use of verbal and non-verbal means' was emphasised by six practitioners, giving the children 'an opportunity to think and improve their thinking.' One practitioner explained that

'SST could include interactions between child and child as well as between child and adult'. Yet another practitioner said SST was 'children building on each others ideas,' which might include children 'asking each other questions.'

Some significant responses help to explain the word 'sustained' more clearly. '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 in a focus group 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 is a significant leaning point from this study.

The four focus groups provided an opportunity to explore some of these themes in more detail. Some important questions were posed to practitioners around their conceptualisation of the term SST. When asked 'What made you decide that SST had taken place?' in all of the focus groups, practitioners explained '...because we were learning from each other.' In one focus group a practitioner responded 'it was really deep level learning.' In two focus groups there was a discussion about SST enabling children to focus on the activity more effectively. One practitioner explained: 'You can tell when it's really good because they don't get distracted by anything else around them,' with which other practitioners agreed. Another reply was: 'You can tell how deeply engaged they are. 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.' The fact that SST appears to promote such deep level learning leading to very focused activity I consider is a second significant learning point from this study.

When asked 'What did you do to make you consider that SST had taken place?' One focus group agreed that: 'You have to engage them.' In all four focus groups, practitioners agreed that 'You have to keep asking open ended questions and keep the conversation going.' One practitioner in particular explained that 'You have to ensure you're taking the conversation to a place of their interest and not going off to my knowledge and interest.' Focus group members in three of the focus groups considered this to be an important part of facilitating SST. Two focus groups highlighted the need to let the child lead the interaction. This was clear by responses such as: 'Don't take over by giving them too much information or it is no longer shared thinking it's you taking over ' and 'You need to wait for them to introduce you into their play.' What seems important in the comments above is that the interaction was considered to be child led and a practitioner would only follow if they were sure that was what the child wanted.

The idea of listening to children as a concept underpinning SST was emphasised in responses in all of the focus groups through the words 'listening', 'watching' and 'waiting' and also through 'asking sensitive questions.' One practitioner said: 'We listen to them, they listen to us, but they take the lead.' Another member of staff explained their role was 'To ensure the correct resources were at hand, modelling, asking open ended questions, engaging them.' These were all seen as crucial skills to help them guide children to improve their thinking.

When asked 'What did the child do to make you think that SST had taken place?' two focus groups said 'Show a high level of engagement.' One practitioner said that her episode of SST lasted 40 minutes. 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 that is totally absorbing for both parties. Two focus groups discussed the children's eagerness to find things out. One practitioner said: 'They can't wait to find out more.' Another said 'They can't wait to go on to the next part.' Yet another said 'You can tell by their facial expressions and their body language almost buzzing off what you are learning together.' The majority of staff in the focus groups felt that SST encouraged children to have great enthusiasm for learning.

The practitioners' responses to the question 'How can you ensure SST is a genuinely shared experience?' provided insight into strategies used to get involved in the thinking process with the child or children.' One member of staff said '...by really knowing the child.' Another said 'You can see it on them if it's shared or if it's just you.' Other responses included 'By accepting as an adult you don't have all the answers.' 'Be prepared to learn alongside them and give them time.' It could be deduced that practitioners consider that their attitudes to learning are critical in supporting children to improve their thinking skills.

When asked what are the best contexts for developing SST, three focus groups said that 'outside, learning from nature,' provided an effective context. Two groups said 'a quiet place' was important and other responses from individual focus groups included 'a place where they feel confident and at ease', 'when there are plenty of staff around' and 'it happens all the time.'

Another revealing question posed in the focus group was whether practitioners' conceptualisation of SST had changed as a result of this research and the discussions ensuing from it. Various responses were received such as 'My practice hasn't changed but my understanding of it has. I've always done it but this has made me realise how important it is and how much children can get from it.' 'The more committed and enthusiastic you are the more you do it. And then it becomes embedded in your practice.' Some practitioners explained that they didn't realise SST was taking place and another commented that she now 'realised how often we do it.' Practitioners at this nursery highly value SST.

Practitioners identified a long list of benefits from SST, for the child, the adult and the setting. 'Allowing a child to explore with wonder and excitement and be really engaged,' was a response seen in three writing frames. 'Helps a child share and express ideas,' was written in three writing frames and highlighted in one focus group discussion. Six practitioners expressed through the writing frames that SST helped a child to 'learn for themselves', 'encouraging more confident learning.' High levels of well being, self esteem and trust were seen as benefits of SST through one writing frame, two focus groups and two questionnaires. The notion of SST facilitating deep engagement with the process of learning must be considered a significant benefit.

In the writing frames, two members of staff considered benefits for the adults concerned included ‘...an improvement in their listening skills.’ Four practitioners in the writing frames considered SST ‘Helps you understand the child better.’ One response in the writing frame was ‘It forces practitioners to think outside the box, to be creative and enthusiastic.’ Five responses in the writing frames were that ‘SST will allow adults to discern the children’s interests and see how the child explores and discovers.’ In one writing frame the benefit for the setting in engaging with SST was ‘Higher engagement leading to a calmer environment.’ Another response was ‘A more motivated team, better staff retention.’

Numerous challenges were listed by practitioners in promoting SST. Five writing frames suggested ‘Finding time can be hard, especially equal time for each child and time to finish the activity.’ Four said it was ‘Difficult to maintain in a busy environment.’ Six staff mentioned ‘Exhaustion, long hours,’ as a significant challenge. Three said ‘Others can distract and interfere.’ Five said ‘Ratio- group size or one to one, or understaffing’ was a problem. One practitioner wrote about ‘lack of understanding or support by other practitioners.’ Another explained: ‘the whole team need to understand SST in order for the spontaneity to support children to continue to discover.’ In one focus group practitioners explained that it is not an interaction that comes easily as ‘you learn it from experience’ and another stated ‘you need to practice it’. The four practitioners in one focus group commented on the need for professionalism in their work, commenting that: ‘The more committed and enthusiastic you are the more you do it,’ and ‘You need to practice it and do it again.’ ‘If you’re not truly passionate I don’t think it’s something you would do.’

Discussion

Research questions will be considered in turn:

1. How do a group of practitioners conceptualise sustained shared thinking?

Initial definition of SST

Practitioners comments such as ‘sharing of ideas’, ‘encouraging a deeper level of understanding through shared research’ and ‘learning alongside each showed 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).

Attention was 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 ‘learning alongside each other’, ‘by accepting as an adult you don’t have all the answers,’ ‘adults can learn from the child,’ and ‘shared research’. Salmon and Lucas (2011:373) conclude that when thinking is valued, children are more likely to value thinking too. Enthusiasm, commitment and professionalism, is clearly needed to engage in SST as reflected by the high level of skills practitioners considered

necessary and also comments such as : ‘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 participants pointed to the need to listen effectively to children as part of SST including ‘showing an interest’, ‘tuning in with children’, ‘listening to the ideas, not interrupting them.’ This is supported by many discussions about listening skills and SST including those of Siraj-Blatchford (2005), Dahlberg and Moss (2005:99), Egan (2009) and Fumoto and Greenfield (2012:48).

The role of the adult in sustaining thinking

In this study, when practitioners were asked to plan a session of SST, many said they could not as it would not then be SST as SST is initiated by the child. This view is also seen from their responses such as ‘learning that is child led’. Practitioners at this nursery 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 that 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 that it is just a sharing of time or resources but indicates some sharing of power, of direction and guidance. This was made clear in responses such as ‘asking open- ended questions’, ‘exploring and extending an idea,’ ‘encouraging a child to make connections,’ adults guiding the children,’ ‘suggesting to a child,’ ‘you have to keep the conversation going,’ ‘by helping to lead them in their thinking.’ Practitioners considered that they have a crucial role to play in SST.

These ideas of the practitioners are clearly supported by literature. For example, Siraj-Blatchford (2005) lists strategies to support children’s SST including tuning in, showing real interest, re-capping, clarifying, suggesting and speculating. Dowling’s (2006) teaching materials to support SST are based on these strategies.

Strong links can be seen with co-construction as evidenced by comments such as ‘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 suggestions,’ ‘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’.

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 suggesting 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.

Social and emotional well-being is also considered a huge benefit 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 where adults made close relationships with them.

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.' Perhaps the revised, simplified EYFS (DfE, 2012) will help staff to have more time to spend with children.

Although it is suggested by McInnes et al (2010:19) that children might lose confidence when adults engage with them in their play, practitioners expressed the view 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.

The most important challenges seen by staff were 'exhaustion and long hours' and 'ratio-group size or one to one, or understaffing'; also mentioning that 'others can distract and interfere.' Fumoto (2012: 120) drew attention to pay and conditions, training and resourcing for early years' staff. 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. Changes recommended by Nutbrown (2012) might help to alleviate this.

Conclusion

This research has several potential implications for practitioners. 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

There are also important implications for settings as practitioners suggested that '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.' Further training in SST especially for those new to the role would therefore be beneficial.

Challenges practitioners outlined included 'understaffing', 'finding time', the fact that the 'whole team need to understand SST', 'not having the right resources', 'lack of understanding or support by other practitioners' and 'exhaustion.' Fumoto (2012:120) proposes that some of the challenges faced by the early years' workforce in promoting SST include 'practitioners pay and conditions, the training of the workforce, the resourcing of early childhood provision and practitioners professionalisation.' 'We need political commitment to creating safe and secure environments in which good early childhood practice can thrive' (Fumoto et al, 2012:137).

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 that all involved have a full understanding of SST, this crucial interaction which can clearly be seen to have many benefits and is a valid criterion for a quality setting.

Further research is necessary to discover practitioners' perspectives from other nurseries to compare their views and to gain the perspectives of parents and children themselves. However practitioners at the nursery in this study have spoken passionately about the benefits of SST, which has contributed to our understanding of this interaction. 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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Appendix 1

Focus Group Questions

1. How did your episodes of sustained shared thinking go?
2. What made you decide that this interaction was truly SST?
3. What did *you* do to make you consider that SST had taken place?
4. What did *the child* do to make you think that SST had taken place?
5. What have you found are some of the best contexts for developing SST?
6. How can you ensure SST is a genuinely shared experience?
7. Has your understanding of sustained shared thinking changed by carrying out this episode of SST? If so in what way?
8. What do you think might be some of the benefits of carrying out SST?
9. Can you describe any difficulties you encountered about *planning* your episode of SST?
10. Were there any difficulties in *carrying out* your episode of SST? If so, what were they?
11. Do you have any final reflections on SST?

Appendix 2

The Writing Frame

In my experience sustained shared thinking is

In my experience the benefits of sustained shared thinking include.....

In my experience sustained shared thinking is difficult because.....

Appendix 3

Questionnaire on Sustained Shared Thinking

1. How did your episode of SST go?
2. Do you consider that you were able to get involved in the thinking process with the child, and if so how did you do this?
3. Tick which of the following features of early years practice are the most important things a practitioner can do to encourage SST to take place.
4. Which ones did you actually do when you carried out your episode of SST? Put a star by these features.
 - Showing genuineness and real interest
 - Respecting the child's own decisions and choices
 - Suggesting
 - Reminding – of something the child said earlier
 - Encouragement to further thinking
 - Offering an alternative viewpoint
 - Use of open ended questions
 - Modelling thinking
 - Recapping
 - Clarifying ideas
 - Offering your own experience
 - Inviting children to elaborate
5. Which of the following aspects are most important in an early years setting to facilitate SST?

Reflective practice

- Staff knowledge and training
- Establishment of effective trusting relationships
- Effective listening to children and tuning in to them

- Sound knowledge of child development
 - Opportunities provided for children to become involved in activities that interest and intrigue them
 - Finding meaningful ways of engaging children's thinking e.g. mark making and drawing
6. Do you think SST is a helpful and worthwhile type of interaction to practice and perfect? If so why? List the main benefits of SST.
 7. Do you think SST helps you to understand how a child sees the world? What is meant by this and can you give any examples?
 8. Do you think sheer exhaustion could be one reason why SST does not happen more often and if so what can be done to change this?
 9. Do you think SST is easier or harder to carry out in a free flow setting? If so why?
 10. Do you find using open ended questions is a challenge in the promotion of effective SST and if so what can be done about this?