

ARR2: Sustained, shared thinking

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Research Setting

This is a small action research project carried out in an early years setting in a special school. The school provides education for pupils with a range of SEND conditions, to include severe learning difficulties, profound and multiple learning difficulties and autistic spectrum conditions. There are 9 children in the setting aged from 2 to 7 years. There is one class teacher and 5 additional early years' practitioners, one of whom works part time. In line with early years terminology and to provide anonymity all adults will be referred to as practitioners for the purposes of this study.

Existing Research: What is sustained shared thinking?

The phrase '*Sustained, Shared Thinking*' appears to be stealthily making its way into early years terminology. It appears in the 'Teachers Standards (Early Years)', September 2013 Standard 2.4, where it states an early years teacher must: '*Lead and model effective strategies to develop and extend children's learning and thinking, including sustained shared thinking*'.

Sustained shared thinking as an idea and 'buzzword' appears in '*Development Matters in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)*' '*Sustained shared thinking helps children to explore ideas and make links. Follow children's lead in conversation, and think about things together*' [emphasis added] (Early Education, 2012 p. 7). For the purposes of this project the EPPE (Effective Provision of Pre-School Education) project 2004 definition of 'sustained shared thinking' (SST) will be used. They describe SST 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'.
(Sylvia et al, 2004b p. 36)

According to Sylva et al (2004a) more **sustained shared thinking** is found to take place in settings where children make the most progress. For readers interested in further details about sustained shared thinking:



Further reading Silva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I. and Taggart, B. (2004a) The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Findings from Pre-school to end of Key Stage 1 Available from: http://www.ioe.ac.uk/RB_Final_Report_3-7.pdf



Research interest and questions

Based on professional instincts and informed by reading relevant policy documents and literature it appeared that SST was strongly associated with high-quality teaching and learning for young children. In addition, experience of working in my current school context suggested that children who engage in sustained shared conversations are more likely to do well in school. The motivation for this research was to enable the class to focus on SST and establish a shared understanding of the common features of it within the classroom. The expectation was that this process would help us to recognise its importance and ultimately ensure the class were providing a very high quality education for the children.

The core questions that shaped this research were:

1. What does sustained shared thinking look like in practice?
2. What does sustained shared thinking look like in the current context?
3. What is practitioners' understanding of the concept of sustained shared thinking?

Research process

The following steps were undertaken to gather data for this action research project.

STEP 1	<p>Identifying my own thoughts about SST</p> <p>As a teacher researcher I captured my own views on SST in order to place them alongside those of my colleagues and to help me when I came to report on the findings</p>
STEP 2	<p>Interviewing colleagues</p> <p>Interviewed the other practitioners in the setting (my colleagues) to gather their views about SST. A standard list of questions was used:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What does SST look like? ▪ What causes it to happen? What might cause it not to happen? ▪ When does it happen? ▪ When was the last time you worked with child W? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did he do? • What did you do? • Do you think Sustained Shared Thinking was present in the session? • If yes, how could you tell? If no, why not?
STEP 3	<p>Initial analysis</p> <p>Interviews were transcribed and the answers to all questions reviewed. On the basis of preliminary analysis it was decided to undertake a further stage of data collection as it was felt that some practitioners may have felt the need to 'get it right' and provide answers that the interviewer wanted to hear. This is a common challenge as discussed by Houghton (2014) when researching the views of Teaching Assistants about feedback.</p>

STEP 4

Data analysis

There was a staged approach to analysis, this included:

1. reading and reviewing the transcripts
2. capturing emerging codes (individual ideas) using a mind map
3. confirming emerging codes by tallying the frequency of practitioners' comments relating to an individual theme.

Illustrative quotes from practitioner interviews were identified together with supporting evidence from the literature.

STEP 5

Themes and main findings

Finally the codes were reviewed and core themes identified. The core themes are listed below and provided the structure for the remaining discussion. The project findings cover three broad themes

1. The context for sustained shared thinking.
2. Children and play.
3. The role of the practitioner

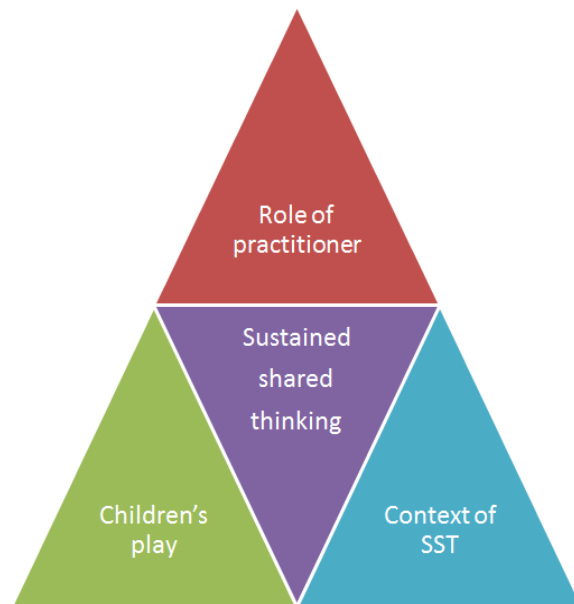


Figure 1: Core themes based on practitioner feedback

STEP 6

Dissemination of findings

The findings of this study will be shared with the immediate Early Years team who contributed to it and also with the wider school. The findings will also be shared at the 'East Lancashire Schools Support Alliance Research and Development Conference' in July 2015.

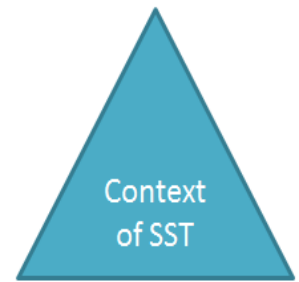
The experiences gained from this project will also be shared with teachers involved in the 2015-16 Action Research Project supported by the East Lancashire Inclusive Partnership (ELIP) teaching Alliance (<http://www.elip.org/>) as part of the research strand.

Findings

The context for Sustained, Shared Thinking

WHERE?

Practitioners described how SST can take place anywhere. They talked about how they ‘harness’ the moment wherever they were, this can be inside and outside the classroom and *‘it can take you by surprise’* This is consistent with research by Ann Purdon where her respondents say that episodes of SST cannot be planned because SST is initiated by the child and staff have to wait to be invited in to a child’s play.



WHEN? – CARPE DEUM

Practitioners explained how SST can happen *‘all the time’, ‘anytime’, ‘anytime of the day’, ‘throughout the day’* and *‘various times’*. It appears that practitioners were aware that the potential for SST exists all the time. The task as Nora’s comment shows is that practitioners need to ‘harness’ the moment or seize the day (Carpe Deum). *‘You are looking for it all the time but more in unstructured sessions, free play sessions’* (Nora). This is something that happens as a result of *‘just having time to spend with that child to share their thinking what they want’* (Hannah).

WHAT? RESOURCES....

When asked what causes SST to happen, one practitioner said *‘You need interesting things in the room’* (Susan) but she did not elaborate or give examples. It is interesting that subsequently, when practitioners went on describe successful episodes of SST they *all* mentioned the resources that contributed to effective SST, for example, rice krispies, straws and a doll’s pram. When practitioners were asked what might cause SST **not** to happen, five practitioners mentioned lack of resources as a major obstacle: *‘Not having the right resources and not having them in the right places, so for example, at eye level’*. In the context where this research took place, where resources were readily available, it was unclear if practitioners might take for granted having access to stimulating resources.

Children’s play



When practitioners were asked what SST looks like they described it as being rooted in child-led play *‘it is usually seen when children lead their own play with items of their choosing’* (Jenny).

A key feature of this play is where *‘the adult is taking the lead from the child’* (Tamara). There appears to be a particular type of session which supports and promotes SST. This seems to be when children are playing with an adult in a one to one situation.



Practitioner and child engaging in sensory activity resulting in Sustained Shared Thinking

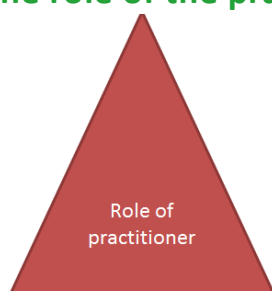
Children's play continued

Practitioners say that more traditional 'structured' lessons are unlikely to offer opportunities for SST, *'There are structured periods in the day when it can't possibly happen'*

One practitioner (Lauren) described how an opportunity for SST was missed because the child was asked to respond in a prescribed way in an adult-led cooking session. She described how practitioners may need to adopt a less prescribed and more child-led approach in order to ensure they engage in SST.

Interestingly two practitioners including (Hannah) explained that 'role play' sessions were times when SST is likely to take place.

The role of the practitioner



Findings suggest that the role and the skill of the practitioner is crucial to SST and that practitioners value children's spontaneity, their ideas and their experimental play. One practitioner stated that there needs to be an, *'open ethos or culture which embraces children's open-ended thinking and doing'* (Jenny)

Without exception all practitioners described the importance of 'knowing' the children.

By this they seemed to mean they need to:

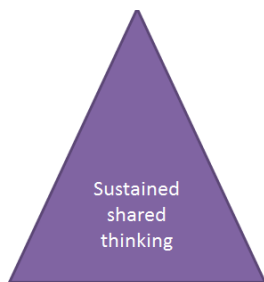
- be skilled in understanding the ways individual children communicate, for example, by reading their body language, facial expressions and gestures to, *'try to understand what they are thinking'* (Hannah)
- use strategies that are known to support early language development, for example: 'imitating', 'reflecting', 'taking turns', 'touching' and 'smiling'.
- have a deep knowledge about the sorts of things individual children like to play with or are interested in, *'.....so it's about finding those things, isn't it, that push their buttons really'* (Susan)
- be knowledgeable about play, for example, knowing *'when to join in or not join in, when to stand back and watch, when to speak or not speak, when to introduce a new idea'*

In line with wider thinking on SST practitioners also referred to the importance of using words and relatively complex sentences to encourage deeper thinking *'I wonder what will happen if.....'* (Nora), *'Ooh, where do you think we should put it?'* (Susan)

In some ways these examples of using more complex sentences seem to conflict with earlier observations about early language development. It is worth considering whether practitioners actually say these things or whether they 'think them' and then relay them through less formal means, for example, through body language or gesture. The interview technique used for this research means that it is not possible to confirm either way but it would be interesting to explore at a later date.

The role of the adult was regarded as crucial. All practitioners described how an adult's inability or unwillingness to intentionally engage in activities that promoted Sustained Shared Thinking would limit if not prevent SST from happening, *'An adult can do this [cause SST to fail] by not letting children have ideas'*. Lauren 22 and *'I think a lot of people struggle to play with children'* (Nora)

Sustained Shared thinking



The idea of Sustained Shared Thinking has much in common with what Laevers describes as deep level learning which emphasises, *'understanding of the physical world, social competence, communicative skills, curiosity, intuition, imagination and creativity and self-management'* (Laevers, 2000 p20). Although not used in this study, the Leuven wellbeing and involvement scale that focuses on quality aspects of early years provision: children's 'well-being' and 'involvement' (see Laevers, 2011). The complexity of the learning requires the practitioner to seek out and recognise the unique qualities of the children with whom they work. Within the DfE Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework there are clear expectations for practitioners to assess and respond to individual needs, *'practitioners must reflect on the different ways that children learn and reflect these in their practice'*. (DfE 2012 p 6)

The EYFS framework outlines three characteristics of effective learning which connect with the qualities and features identified by the research participants in this study, they are:

- *playing and exploring - children investigate and experience things, and have a go';*
- *active learning - children concentrate and keep on trying if they encounter difficulties, and enjoy achievements; and*
- *creating and thinking critically - children have and develop their own ideas, make links between ideas, and develop strategies for doing things.* (DfE, 2012 p 7)

Three practitioners referred (directly or indirectly) to the characteristics of effective learning when they described SST, for example, *'It's about working out how things work'* (Hannah) and *'SST is present when a child is excited, engrossed, focussed, patient, receptive to new ideas, active, interested and expectant'* (Jenny)

Practitioners referred to the importance of children's emotional well-being in relation to SST. They say that children need to feel *'comfortable'*. This appears to mean two things. Firstly that children need to feel at ease in their environment and with the people in it, *'You need to have a good relationship with your child. You know that as long as that child is comfortable with you any kind of play can happen as long as they are comfortable and trust me'* (Nora)

Secondly that children must have their basic needs met, *'The child might be in a bad mood, um, something might have happened, maybe their routine has gone out of the window or they have had a really bad morning....They might be feeling unwell, they don't want to be bothered by anybody, they just want to do their own thing'*



Figure 2: Wordle based on key words from interviews

Summary

The research found that:

- Each practitioner had a personal, clear understanding of what they understood *Sustained Shared Thinking* to be.
- Collectively, practitioners' understanding of *Sustained Shared Thinking* was very similar.
- Prior to the research we had not articulated our individual views.
- Post research, practitioners have begun to develop a shared understanding of *Sustained Shared Thinking*. The impact of this is that the phrase and its constituent elements are more obviously embedded in class planning and the phrase is used confidently during professional dialogue.

The other notable outcomes are:

- The findings show that the role of the practitioner is crucial to the success of *Sustained, Shared Thinking*.
- The phrase 'you need to know your child' appears to be used as a 'catch all' which masks the high level skills of practitioners related to knowledge of early language development, child development and play and the language required to communicate this knowledge.
- This means there are probable implications for the training of early year's practitioners, recruitment and continuing professional development.
- The availability and type of resources available may influence the ease with which practitioners are able to engage in *Sustained, Shared Thinking*.
- It is probable that the concept of *Sustained, Shared Thinking* can make a valuable contribution to learning throughout a special school.
- The small scale of this research has touched the surface of this complex issue and further research would be recommended.

Practical ways of using these findings

Even without further research, some of the steps in the action research process could be undertaken more informally in other contexts. Class teams could engage in a simple exercise of sharing their ideas about *Sustained Shared Thinking* and capturing examples during the course of a week which they talked to colleagues about. As in this action research project, discussion between members of a class team would support the development of: a common interpretation of a concept such as SST; the exchange of ideas and thus aid overall consistency and quality of provision.

Professional Development

Integrating action research into the workload of any teacher is likely to be a challenge especially with respect to time. However, the experience of Jan Reeves, teacher researcher suggests that there are a number of benefits: *'Teacher research offers the time to analyse and reflect on day to day practice and the opportunity to share and discuss ideas with fellow researchers and colleagues. It is a valuable and challenging process which contributes significantly to a teacher's continuing professional development'*

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East Lancashire Inclusion Partnership

This project was undertaken with support of the East Lancashire Inclusion Partnership (ELIP). It contributes to the research strand of the ELIP Alliance.

Researching Equity, Access and Participation (REAP)

The REAP group are based in the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University. They have worked with a number of Teaching School Alliances to foster an interest in the research process, and by engaging teachers build their research capacity and through them to inspire the next generation of researchers.



East Lancashire Inclusion Partnership

<http://www.elip.org/>

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