What is Sustained shared thinking? Is it important?
Sustained shared thinking has been discussed by educators as an important teaching strategy since the term was first used in the process of analysing research data as part of the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study in the UK. EPPE is a study of educational effectiveness in 141 prior to school settings and involved 3,000 children over a number of years. It found, amongst a number of important findings, the beneficial effects of quality practices in early year’s programs.

Though the findings of the EPPE study focus on individual adult and child interactions, sustained shared thinking has since been recognised as valuable on a broader scale involving educators and groups of children as well as between groups of children.

“analysis soon revealed a general pattern of high cognitive outcomes associated with sustained adult-child verbal interaction... sustained shared thinking thus came to be defined as an effective pedagogic interaction, where two or more individuals 'work together' in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, or extend a narrative. This can also be achieved between peers.”

Sustained shared thinking has been described 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”1. It provides an opportunity for those involved to think more deeply and for extended periods about their ideas, thoughts and knowledge. Sustained shared thinking links most strongly with the work of Vygotsky who contended that the support of an educator within a child’s ‘zone of proximal development’ (ZPD) extends children’s learning beyond what they could achieve alone.

Belonging, Being and Becoming draws on the EPPE findings and acknowledges that ‘early childhood educators…use a range of strategies to support children’s learning’ and extend their thinking1. It also acknowledges that supportive learning environments, both indoor and out, play an important role to ‘promote opportunities for sustained shared thinking and collaborative learning’2. In this it is important to acknowledge that learning and curriculum occur continuously throughout the day and opportunities for sustained shared thinking may be planned (between staff and/or with children) but also occur spontaneously.

The Australian E4Kids study4 (2010) has produced interim findings that indicate the quality of teaching practices need to improve as they score much lower when compared to other domains such as emotional support and classroom organisation. This was particularly the case for ‘activities that promote and extend children's thinking skills and understanding’4. Perhaps this relates to a general tendency for educators to be directional in their engagement with children, with a focus on their own view of what can be learned from an experience rather than conversational and open to other possibilities.

In sustained shared thinking, adults and children develop knowledge and meaning together (co-construct) as they become involved in sharing and clarifying their understandings. Each makes a contribution, reflecting and considering the knowledge, thoughts and views of the other/s. EPPE found that children who have these opportunities are more likely to have better outcomes both in school and life, so it is an important consideration for educators to provide an environment for children and themselves that has time, space and learning experiences that facilitate thoughtful and challenging conversations with children. The benefits to children’s learning come from them being heavily engaged in the conversation and experience. They become involved

3 DEEWR, (2009) Belonging, Being and Becoming, Early Years Learning Framework.
through their rising interest in the challenges and possibilities that emerge. Belonging, Being and Becoming describes the importance of ‘involvement’ as –

“a state of intense, whole hearted mental activity, characterised by sustained concentration and intrinsic motivation. Highly involved children (and adults) operate at the limit of their capacities, leading to changed ways of responding and understanding leading to deep level learning (adapted from Laevers 1994).”

To reach this level of engagement and responsiveness educators need to develop trusting and secure relationships with children and show genuine interest in them and their world.

“Responsive learning relationships are strengthened as educators and children learn together and share decisions, respect and trust.”

This allows educators to initiate and enter children’s play in a sensitive and non-threatening manner as a partner in their learning. In part, this will depend on an educator’s knowledge and understanding of children, developed through attention to their continuity of learning and their transition from home to early year’s settings.

“Whenever play partners communicate they do so from their own historically constructed perspective, which includes their understanding of the perspective of themselves constructed by the other participants in the communication (or sustained shared thinking).”

Importantly, sustained shared thinking can contribute to developing and strengthening those relationships.

Educators have an important role in both understanding the benefits of sustained shared thinking but also developing the skills to create such opportunities or recognising when they occur spontaneously. It requires intentional teaching, being ‘deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful in their decisions and actions’.

“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.”

It also requires educators to be skilful in making judgements about how much assistance to provide and when it can be gradually reduced or removed to develop independent thinking and action by children according to their learning progress and capability.

“This pedagogic sequence of modelling – progressive reduction of scaffolding – extension may continue to be employed in supporting children’s learning in a wide range of play contexts throughout the early years” (emphasis in original).

Some specific strategies have been identified that promote and engage children in sustained shared thinking –

• **Tuning in:** listening carefully to what is being said, observing body language and what the child is doing.

• **Showing genuine interest:** giving their whole attention to the child, maintaining eye contact, affirming, smiling and nodding.

• **Respecting children’s own decisions and choices by inviting children to elaborate:** saying things like ‘I really want to know more about this’ and listening and engaging in the response.
“An approach that can develop sustained shared thinking in the early years is providing for ‘projects’.”

- **Re-capping:** ‘So you think that…’
- **Offering the adult’s own experience:** ‘I like to listen to music when I cook dinner at home.’
- **Clarifying ideas:** ‘So you think that this stone will melt if I boil it in water?’
- **Suggesting:** ‘Could we try doing it this way?’
- **Reminding:** ‘Don’t forget that you said that this stone will melt if I boil it.’
- **Using encouragement to further thinking:** ‘You have really thought hard about where to put this door in the palace – where will you put the windows?’
- **Offering an alternative viewpoint:** ‘Maybe Goldilocks wasn’t naughty when she ate the porridge?’
- **Speculating:** ‘Do you think the three bears would have liked Goldilocks to come to live with them as their friend?’
- **Reciprocating:** ‘Thank goodness that you were wearing gumboots when you jumped in those puddles Kwame. Look at my feet, they are soaking wet!’
- **Asking open questions:** ‘How did you…? ’ ‘Why does this…?’ ‘What happens next?’ ‘What do you think?’ ‘I wonder what would happen if…?’
- **Modelling thinking:** ‘I have to think hard about what I do this evening. I need to take my dog to the vet because he has a sore foot, take my library books back to the library and buy some food for dinner tonight. But I just won’t have time to do all of these things.’

It also includes the use of ‘positive questioning’ and the use of ‘making-sense words’ –

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive questioning</th>
<th>Making-sense words</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘I don’t know, what do you think?’</td>
<td>I think</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘That’s an interesting idea.’</td>
<td>I agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I like what you have done there.’</td>
<td>I imagine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Have you seen what X has done – why?’</td>
<td>I disagree</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘I wondered why you had…?’</td>
<td>I like</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘I’ve never thought about that before,’</td>
<td>I don’t like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘You’ve really made me think.’</td>
<td>I wonder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘What would happen if we did…?’</td>
<td>What might</td>
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</tbody>
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An early association was also found between sustained shared thinking and ‘open-ended’ questioning which require more thought and consideration and are more likely to a more meaningful answer rather than a short response such as ‘yes’ or ‘no’.

An approach that can develop sustained shared thinking in the early years is providing for ‘projects’. As distinct from themes which is often a central idea around which other experiences are planned, projects provide an in-depth, extended learning experience over a period of time, providing opportunities for a child or group of children for deeper thought and understanding, problem solving, discussion, exploration and reflection with an educator and with peers. Projects provide greater potential to extend children’s funds of knowledge through children’s mutual interest as well as developing positive dispositions for learning through children’s deeper involvement.

> “A key feature of a project is that it is an investigation – a piece of research that involves children in seeking answers they have formulated by themselves or in cooperation with their teacher.”

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It is also suggested that extended play over several days promotes self-regulation, planning and memory skills. The EPPE study has shown us that facilitating sustained shared thinking opportunities broadens and deepens the learning that occurs including about others, their knowledge and their skills. Children become more capable in being actively involved in their own learning and that of others. Co-operation and collaboration is developed, enhancing children’s agency and strong sense of well-being. This means educators need to reflect on how these opportunities might be provided regularly and how individual practices might be improved for children to think and act in a more intellectual way.

“Children become more capable in being actively involved in their own learning and that of others.”

FURTHER READING
Siraj-Blatchord, I, (2009), Conceptualising progression in the pedagogy of Play and Sustained Shared Thinking in early childhood education: A Vygotskian perspective, Educational & Child Psychology Vol. 26 No. 2
Children’s services Central (NSW PSC), The importance of outdoor learning, Contemporary Research Insights, Issue No. 2, 2010

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
• How might you provide for sustained shared thinking in your service? Does the environment and routine provide for extended play? Are there opportunities and time for educator’s to have longer, more meaningful conversations with children?
• Are your educators able to use open-ended, positive questioning techniques that promote more thoughtful discussions?
• Are educators alert to and able to recognise spontaneous opportunities to facilitate sustained shared thinking throughout the day and able to include extended experiences in the program?
• Are children able to initiate opportunities for learning and influence the development of the curriculum?