
Practitioners' Experiences of Personal Ownership and Autonomy in their Support for Young Children's Thinking

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ABSTRACT This article reports the third phase of the Froebel Research Fellowship Project: 'The Voice of the Child: ownership and autonomy in early learning'. Building on the first and second phases of this study, this phase examined early years practitioners' experiences of supporting young children's thinking in relation to the personal ownership and autonomy they felt in their practice. Thirteen early years practitioners (1 male, 12 female) working in private, voluntary and local authority nursery schools and reception classes in England took part in the informal one-to-one semi-structured interview study. Themes such as (1) dealing with constraints, (2) the importance of flexibility based on shared understandings amongst the team of practitioners and (3) interpersonal relationships emerged as central to practitioners' views about concepts of ownership and autonomy, and the ways in which practitioners endeavour to exercise agency in directing the course of their practice in extending children's thinking.

Introduction

In recent years, early childhood education and care in England, along with many other countries (Bennett, 2005; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2006), has been the subject of significantly enhanced attention from central government, with the introduction of statutory curricula and child profiling, and strengthened inspection regimes, amongst others. This 'increasing steerage from the state' (Osgood, 2006a, p. 188) and centralised control has been identified by Mahony & Hextall (2000) as a potential threat to professional morale and autonomy.

A sense of autonomy and ownership of learning has long been seen as an important condition for the successful support of young children's development. In order to have a sense of ownership of their own activity, children and adults alike need to be able to exercise their autonomy: that is, 'their own regulatory principles to the way they manage their lives' (Leontiev, 2006, p. 56). Professionals' sense of self-efficacy can play a significant role in determining their actions (Bandura, 1989), and the ways in which professionals conduct themselves can go beyond the influence of sociocultural factors, whereby their 'authentic understanding and reasoning' can shape their own actions (Martin et al, 2003, p. 100). For early childhood practitioners in particular, their positioning as 'docile bodies' in some critiques (see Osgood, 2006b; Fenech & Sumsion, 2007) may have a negative impact on their capacities to exercise such agency in their professional practice. In other words, external factors by themselves do not determine the ways in which professionals make choices: it is the interactions between these factors and a professional's self-determination that shape their practice.

This article reports data from the third phase of the Froebel Research Fellowship Project, 'The Voice of the Child: ownership and autonomy in early learning', at Roehampton University,

and focuses on early childhood professionals' sense of ownership and autonomy in their efforts to extend children's thinking. A key issue highlighted in all phases of the project (see Robson & Hargreaves, 2005; Fumoto & Robson, 2006) is the extent to which practitioners feel that they support children's autonomy and engage in 'sustained shared thinking' (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002, p. 8) with the children. As the project has developed, it has become increasingly evident that practitioners' personal experiences of satisfaction and fulfilment about the time that they spend with children may be related to the ways in which they themselves feel a sense of ownership and autonomy, and the potential for exercising agency, in what they do to 'shape their professional identity' (Fenech & Sumsion, 2007, p. 110) and support the development of young children's thinking. The present study looks at those factors which practitioners themselves suggest may militate against feelings of ownership and autonomy in their work, and serve to constrain what they do, and at the ways in which they may seek to resist or ameliorate the impact of such experiences in their efforts to support young children's thinking.

Background

Since the introduction of the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (CGFS) in 2000 (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority & Department for Education and Employment, 2000), practitioners and children aged three to five years in early childhood settings in England have followed a statutory curriculum. Both the CGFS and its successor, *The Early Years Foundation Stage* (Department for Education and Skills, 2007), emphasise the importance of developing young children's thinking, making explicit reference to it in all six areas of learning.[1] Looked at globally, Pramling (2004) highlights the emphasis placed upon thinking in a number of curriculum statements from around the world. Kite (2001) goes so far as to suggest that it should be seen as the major focus for education. This enhanced focus may, of itself, ensure that practitioners, in their interactions with children, pay more attention to this aspect of their role than may have been the case in the past. If this emphasis is appropriate, then a consideration of how practitioners believe that they can support and extend young children's thinking, and of the factors which they perceive as negatively impacting upon their activities in this area, may be valuable for both practitioners and policy makers alike.

The aim of this study is therefore to explore the ways in which professionals make explicit their experiences of extending children's thinking, including the difficulties and frustrations they encounter and, importantly, the ways in which they manage these perceived constraints, and exercise resilience, in their work with children. The present study is interpretative in nature as it involves the process of making sense of participants' experiences through our attempt to understand 'what [they] say or do in their life setting' (Creswell, 2007, p. 21). Through this exploration, it was expected that factors affecting the ways in which they experience ownership and autonomy of their practice would emerge. As referred to above in relation to Martin et al's (2003) views on human agency, we were not interested in the 'observable' constraints, but the ways in which professionals experience and deal with these constraints.

Method

Participants

Thirteen practitioners (1 male, 12 female) were drawn from the 80 respondents to a questionnaire survey in Phase Two of the project (see Fumoto & Robson, 2006) for participation in this interview study. Whilst the final sample cannot be described as representative of the range of practitioners and settings in England, we nevertheless attempted to ensure that as broad a range of views and experiences as possible was included. An initial criterion was that participants were directly involved in children's learning, for example, planning sessions or facilitating children's learning on a day-to-day basis. The respondents were then grouped according to their responses (on a Likert scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree') to a key item in the questionnaire survey: 'I feel that I have enough time during the session to enhance children's thinking.'^[2] We then selected a sample of private, voluntary and local authority settings and a range of professional roles from each group.

Of those contacted, the majority were keen to participate. The only exceptions were those whose survey response had been 'strongly disagree', who tended to say that they felt that they did not have time to be interviewed. Whilst we attempted to facilitate their involvement, they remain the least represented group. Table I identifies the final 13 participants by role type (self-identified), type of setting and age group worked with. Those working in local authority settings are over-represented here in relation to their proportion of the workforce. However, they were the largest group to express an interest in participation. It was not the remit of the study to consider why this group of practitioners might be most likely to respond in this way, but it may be that the statutory obligation of practitioners in the public sector to engage in continuing professional development supports them in seeing such activity as a more usual event. Some of these issues are considered in more depth in Robson (2006).

Participant	Role	Years of experience in setting	Employer	Age group worked with
Teacher A	Teacher with qualified teacher status (QTS)	8	Local authority (LA) primary school	Reception (children aged 4-5 years)
Childcare Worker B	Childcare worker (unqualified)	2.5	Voluntary community childcare centre	Cross-age (children aged 1-4 years)
Nursery Nurse C	Nursery nurse	5	LA primary school	Nursery (children aged 3-4 years)
Nursery Nurse D	Nursery nurse	3.5	LA primary school	Nursery
Nursery Manager E	Nursery nurse, centre manager	21	Centre incorporating private, voluntary and LA sectors	Cross-age
Teacher F	Teacher/early years coordinator with QTS	18	LA infant and nursery school	Reception
Chief Executive G	Chief executive	8	Group of Voluntary Childcare Centres	Cross-age
Nursery Nurse H	Nursery nurse	6	LA primary school	Nursery
Teacher I	Teacher/early years coordinator with QTS	3	LA primary school	Nursery
Practitioner J	Practitioner	11	Private Montessori nursery	Cross-age
Teacher K	Teacher/early years coordinator with QTS	4	LA infant and nursery school	Nursery
Teacher L	Teacher with QTS	3	LA infant and nursery school	Reception
Teacher M	Teacher with QTS	2	LA primary school	Reception

Table I. Summary of participants by role, employer and age group worked with ($n = 13$).

Informal One-to-One Semi-structured Interview Study

In order to explore the professionals' experiences of extending children's thinking, the semi-structured interview schedule consisted of three main areas: (1) getting to know the participants and their settings; (2) eliciting participants' thoughts and feelings concerning time in relation to extending children's thinking; and (3) finding out about systems or practices in place that support opportunities to interact with children, i.e. to put into practice 'sustained shared thinking' (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002, p. 8). The interview schedule is included in the Appendix. The British Educational Research Association's (2004) ethical guidelines were observed in order to ensure the appropriateness of the study.

Procedure

The participants were visited in their settings by a researcher, who spent a morning or afternoon observing, particularly focusing on adult–child interactions in support of young children’s thinking, followed by a one-to-one interview. Field notes were made of the observations and the interviews were tape-recorded. Using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the interview tapes were transcribed and independently coded by two researchers for congruence, and 12 categories were established (Creswell, 2007).

Results and Discussion

Data from three categories are principally drawn upon here: (1) constraints; (2) flexibility; and (3) interpersonal relationships. Data from categories (4) to (9) are also made use of: (4) interpretation of the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage*; (5) making use of environments and contexts; (6) significance of observing and interpreting children’s actions; (7) assessing and documenting children’s thinking; (8) balance between adult- and child-initiated activities; and (9) a sense of ownership of their practice.

Constraints

The majority of the participants (10 of 13) made one or more comments about the extent to which they felt constrained in their efforts to support young children’s thinking. Of these, eight participants cited between two and five different factors, most frequently related to four areas: timetabling and organisational routines, the curriculum, physical factors, and issues relating to people. By far the highest number of concerns related to the first two of these factors. In both cases, over half of all the participants talked about these as constraints, from all types of setting and role type.

Timetabling and organisational routines. The potentially negative impact of over-reliance on routines was mentioned by a number of participants. Reflecting on experience, Childcare Worker B suggested that:

Too often in our setting in the past ... the routine would often dictate over certain things that you wished to do and develop with the children and you wouldn’t find that quality time perhaps that you would like to have in order to promote children’s thinking.

This over-reliance on routine, Hartley (1993, p. 73) suggests, can have a negative impact on both children and adults: ‘There is routine and its elements rarely change, either in order or duration ... Slowly but surely, the children ... tacitly acquire our sense of “clock time”’. Chief Executive G, in her strategic role, expressed her concerns about practitioners who get ‘hooked up to the routine ... because it makes them feel secure’, leading to what she saw as less risk taking by practitioners, and less emphasis on following the children’s own ideas and thinking, a phenomenon noted by Suransky (1986, p. 60).

Participants working in school-based nursery and reception classes tended to refer to the challenges they faced as part of a bigger school. Those working in reception classes, particularly, commented on the negative impact of timetabling, which they saw as compromising their efforts to support children’s thinking. The obligation to fit in with the rest of the school in areas such as timetabled use of spaces for physical education, assemblies and fixed playtimes, they felt, served to disrupt the flow of children’s ideas. Cousins (1990, p. 38) points to similar concerns in her study of new entrants to a reception class, referring to them as being ‘visibly frustrated by bells and other signals to stop’ and too often interrupted ‘at a crucial point in any problem solving’.

The curriculum. Similar levels of concern were expressed by participants about the second main area, the curriculum, and, in particular, the pressures they felt about meeting the requirements of a statutory curriculum, the CGFS (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority & Department for Education and Employment, 2000). In common with the findings of McInnes (2002) and Hargreaves & Hopper (2006), the participants were generally positive about the CGFS, but also

expressed their concerns about the ways in which any statutory curriculum could potentially drive and constrain both them and the children. This comment reflected the concerns of a number of participants: 'You could say that what stops children thinking is a curriculum that is imposed from outside' (Teacher K). Concerns were expressed about the ways in which such a curriculum might not meet the children's needs, interests and cultural contexts, as in the following comment from Chief Executive G:

Well, I've seen places ... where they've used the 'Stepping Stones' to actually be the planning. So how can that be child-led and how can that be responsive to the children or the environment you're in as a community?

This sense of potentially inappropriate planning was a feature of a number of participants' concerns. These included calls for a more holistic, and less subject-based, approach, and a concern that the CGFS militated against time for children to reflect and really focus on something. The comment of Nursery Nurse H that 'There's too much "right, this is set for now"' in relation to curriculum delivery reflected her view that children need time to develop their thinking 'at their own pace'. Her views reflect those of Duckworth, who cites Hawkins' assertion that 'You don't want to cover a subject, you want to uncover it' (Hawkins, cited in Duckworth, 1987, p. 7) in support of her argument that children should have time and opportunity to pursue 'wonderful ideas'.

Nursery Nurse D was not, however, unique in her comment that, as a staff, they had learned ways of making the prescribed curriculum 'fit' their intentions and the children's ideas: 'We've learned to fit the topic or whatever comes up from wherever to the learning goals' – which is reminiscent of Hoyle & Wallace's 'principled infidelity'. This is characterised by practitioners who 'neither rebel nor opt out but seek to "work round" policies and structures' (Hoyle & Wallace, 2007, p. 19), whilst trying to sustain their professional values. This has potentially both positive and negative implications. On the one hand, the time practitioners spend making sure that the curriculum 'fits' may mean less time for thinking more productively about the best ways of meeting the children's needs. Alternatively, as Fenech & Sumsion (2007, p. 110) suggest, the exercise of such resistance strategies in the face of a perceived constraining element such as a statutory curriculum may be 'necessary, possible and potentially transforming', and thus more positive in its impact. This reading of practitioners' actions positions them as far from docile, and active in exercising agency and developing 'critical consciousness' (Osgood, 2006b, p. 7).

The implementation of statutory curricula such as the CGFS has necessitated a plethora of continuing professional development activities for practitioners. This has included a consideration of strategies such as practitioners' use of questions in their interactions with children. Siraj-Blatchford & Manni (2008, p. 8) highlight the use of open-ended questions by practitioners as a very important way of extending young children's thinking, by supporting articulation of 'ideas that may still be awkward and unrefined in their mind'. However, the observation about pedagogic practice in questioning made by one participant here also supports their assertion that such a supportive questioning style is insufficiently evident in practice:

Everything is question and answer time. I went on a course last week and we were told within the first half hour the teacher would throw 70 questions at a child, so there was no time for thinking at all. (Nursery Nurse H)

Her comment reflects a fundamental concern expressed by a majority of the participants. Their references to the main areas of constraint discussed here seemed to arise from their beliefs that both time and a sense of ownership are necessary conditions for children to develop their thinking. Lambert (2000) suggests that ensuring sufficient, uninterrupted time for children's problem-solving activities supports them in developing deeper understandings and more complex knowledge about those problems. With regard to ownership and self-initiated activity, Siraj-Blatchford et al (2002) emphasise child-initiated activities as particularly effective starting points for adults in supporting the development of the children's thinking.

Physical factors. The third main area of constraint practitioners referred to related to physical factors. Four of the six participants who cited physical constraints worked in schools, where the

limitations of school buildings designed primarily with older children in mind did not, in their view, meet the needs of young children, as in Teacher K's comment:

We also have toilets that are at the other end of the corridor so that children have to constantly walk down a corridor. So if they want to go to the loo they have to stop their thinking, to go and then come back.

Practitioners in our previous study (Robson & Hargreaves, 2005) emphasised outdoors as an important, often more relaxed, space for children's thinking. Participants in the current study were sometimes frustrated by poor or limited access to outdoors, as expressed by Teacher A: 'With the constraints of the building we haven't got natural access to outdoors ... I'd like to change the shape of the building so that they naturally go out and extend their ideas.' The multi-purpose nature of some outdoor spaces was also a cause for concern. Teacher F described how the outdoor area, shared between nursery and reception, was also the place where parents waited when they collected their children. As a result, each day the full-time children were obliged to come in towards the end of the morning in order that parents could collect the part-time nursery children. Her concern, as with timetable issues, was that this restricted children's opportunities for uninterrupted activity and sustained thinking.

Issues relating to people. The fourth area cited by participants as a constraint concerned people. Not unexpectedly, some participants made reference to the difficulties of unfavourable adult-child ratios. One commented that more adults would give them more flexibility with staff roles, including assigning a member of staff to a 'floating' role where they could support children's thinking by talking one-to-one with them. However, one participant felt that, in some circumstances, it was the staff themselves who were potentially a constraint to children's thinking, by not giving children enough opportunity to exercise their independence. She saw this as more likely the younger the children were:

So they start helping them to, say, do their laces or something and they tend to help them, you know. So that, in a sense, sometimes children don't have experiences of being able to kind of solve problems for themselves and to be able to work things out. (Chief Executive G)

Practitioners' rationales for this kind of action may arise from a number of ideas: concern for children's care, concern to be seen to be doing their job and pressures of time. More worryingly, they may reflect a lack of awareness that, as Lambert (2000) suggests, it is precisely those problems which arise spontaneously as a result of children's everyday activities which may be most valuable to them in developing their thinking. Figuring out how to put your coat on the right way round, or how to use the stapler, may be better contexts for developing problem solving than ones set by adults. Whatever the reason, the outcome is to restrict opportunities for children to develop their thinking in context-rich situations.

Flexibility

How, then, did participants here feel that they were managing to resist, ameliorate the impact of, or even avoid feeling such constraints? The most frequent references made by participants related to flexibility. Overall, 12 participants emphasised flexibility as important, both for themselves as adults, in feeling a sense of ownership and control of what they were doing, and as a way of supporting the children's thinking. Their use of expressions such as 'flexible', 'fluid', 'not rigid', 'relaxed', 'laid back', 'go with the flow' and 'no pressure' invokes a sense of control and may, of itself, be a way for the participants to feel that they are dealing with stress, and maintaining satisfaction and fulfilment in their work (Sumsion, 2003).

Significantly, those participants who made high reference to flexibility were also those who made no or low reference to constraints. (High reference to the data categories of flexibility, constraints and relationships [see below] was defined as four or more references, medium as three, and low as one or two references.) This relationship was most evident at the margins, with a positive association between high emphasis on flexibility and low reference to constraints, and vice versa. The comment by Teacher I that 'Our timetable is very, very flexible' exemplifies this. She was one of three participants who all referred to the importance of flexibility, and made no

reference to constraints. The converse was also true here: those participants who cited a high number of constraints (four or more) also tended to be those who made no or low reference to flexibility. The one participant here who made no reference to flexibility was also the person who cited the widest range of constraints (five references).

How, though, did participants see their flexibility as acting to support them in their efforts to develop young children's thinking? The different ways cited reflected how they felt that they were dealing with the constraints they identified.

Flexibility in time and routine. Comments in this area were made by 10 participants. The majority talked of how they had addressed their concerns about interruptions to children's time, as here:

We've tried to free our curriculum as much as we can from things such as [set] playtimes or anything like that so that children have got the opportunity to really develop their thinking for a long period of time. (Teacher K)

They often emphasised how they had changed their practice over time. Comments such as 'as time has gone on we have adapted our timetable to make it more fluid' (Teacher F) and 'as I've worked longer in early years ... I'm finding ways of being, of trying to overcome that and not let the routine and the environment dictate' (Childcare Worker B) suggest feelings of confidence and control on the part of the participants.

Flexibility and the curriculum. Similarly, in their references to the curriculum, there was evidence of a relationship between flexibility and a sense of control. Eight participants made comments in this area, many similar to this remark by Teacher K:

What we've tried to do is to take elements of the Literacy and Numeracy Hour into our practice but we try not to let them rule us. We rule them, we decide what is going to be useful to our children to extend their thinking and learning.

Overwhelmingly, their comments related to flexibility in pursuit of following the children's interests, which necessitated departing from plans and 'work[ing] to the children's pace' (Nursery Nurse H) or, as Teacher L said: 'If we think children are moving with something in a really interesting way then we'll just continue it and bump something on or rethink our plans for the rest of the week.' Nursery Nurse C emphasised the importance of a team approach: 'But we're just very flexible and I think the team we've got, it works really well that we all feel like that.'

Three features in support of flexibility. Analysis of the participants' comments about the value of flexibility reveals three features which may be important in its support. It is worth noting that these echo those often cited as important qualities to promote in children, especially in relation to the development of their thinking and a sense of ownership and control (see, for example, Carr, 2001; Department for Education and Skills, 2007). The first of these features is confidence, as in this comment by Teacher F:

As the years go on, I'm having more and more confidence to be able to devote more time ... we're spending a particular length of time on something and not all tidying up because it says so on the timetable.

The second feature is practitioners' ability to engage with uncertainty, as in this comment from Nursery Nurse D: 'You've got to allow for children extending themselves and we don't know how that's going to go.' Sumsion (2003) identifies such confidence and ability to take risks as important qualities in practitioner resilience.

The final feature relates to the ability to think creatively about ways to manage perceived constraints. This kind of creative problem solving was an important issue for a number of participants, and was closely related to a sense of control. Participants referred to how they had had an impact on whole-school practices in order to make time for what they saw as important. As one participant put it:

I've been very proactive with my colleague in Reception and stood up at management meetings because we are both senior management and said 'This is the road we are going down'. (Teacher K)

Fenech & Sumsion (2007, p. 118) point to the positive impact on early childhood practitioners of 'actively engaging in power relations' within their settings. Nursery Nurse H felt that this engagement had had a wider impact, and related how the whole school was now looking at ways of changing the timetable to make more time for stories, seen as valuable for developing children's thinking.

Other examples of this creative thinking included the children's use of cameras as a way for them to 'hold that thought' when interrupted, to help them 'remember or to cue themselves back in later' (Teacher F), and children mapping their thinking visually as a way of documenting it (Teacher K). In our earlier study (Robson & Hargreaves, 2005), one participant talked about how photographs also facilitated talking about thinking and learning with the children, and Clark & Moss (2001) point to the use of children's own photographs as a way of giving children a 'voice'.

Interpersonal Relationships

The other major aspect participants talked about as being supportive, in both managing constraints and positively developing young children's thinking, was the role of relationships between adults, between adults and children, and between the children themselves. The most frequent references concerned relations between adults, and it is this aspect of the data which is discussed here. As with constraints and flexibility, there was an association between participants' references to constraints and relationships. In particular, the three participants who made high reference to relationships made either no or low reference to constraints. The converse was also evident, and the two participants who cited a high number of constraints made no reference to the importance of relationships. This may be particularly significant if, as Sumsion (2003, p. 143) suggests, professional resilience is supported by environmental factors such as effective support systems and caring others, and person-environment interactional processes such as 'the contribution of individuals to the creation of supportive communities that in turn sustain them'. Such resilience, she suggests, contributes to the development and maintenance of a 'committed, well-qualified and stable workforce' (p. 142).

Making time for relationships. Making time for adult relationships was emphasised, and paralleled with the importance of making time in developing young children's thinking, as in this comment by Nursery Nurse C: 'I just think that the key thing is that you need to make time ... whether that's like on a personal level or interacting with the children.' In her view, 'it all comes down to the team really', and both she and others emphasised the importance of deriving enjoyment from being part of a team:

I know this sounds funny but we tend to laugh ... There are days when we've just had enough but if you laugh your way through it then you can do it, you know ... and also I think it's really important, we all really, really, enjoy what we do and I think that plays a part as well, and because we get on as well. (Nursery Nurse C)

Such relationships may be valuable in engendering 'attachment and a feeling of responsibility, rather than an obligation, towards common goals and objectives' (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006, p. 13).

Shared beliefs and expertise. This emphasis on good team relationships was commented upon by a number of participants, with its benefits being seen as, amongst other things, shared beliefs, pride in achievements and a sense of feeling valued, as in this comment by Nursery Nurse D: 'we really believe in what we're doing ... we do give a lot of our own time, yeah, we do, but you know we're happy to'. In her leadership role, Nursery Manager E commented: 'I thought, when I'm a manager I'm going to make sure everyone feels valued.' Her comment reflects Kouze & Posner's (1998, cited in Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006, p. 13) identification of caring about the people they lead as the feature that separates effective from ineffective leaders.

The importance of mutual support was evident in comments such as those by Nursery Nurse C, 'if someone is having a bad day, you know, the rest of the team just pick up and that's the way we go', and Teacher F: 'there's that sense of openness and sharing'. This sharing of ideas and

expertise may be another mechanism for feeling a sense of agency and control (Sumsion, 2003), and is well summed up in Teacher L's comment:

So we've had a lot of discussion time and in planning we do discuss what thinking skills we're going to promote. Everyone talks about thinking skills in this school and I think everyone's interested and wants to extend what they know about it.

Siraj-Blatchford & Manni (2006) identify such shared vision as a characteristic of effective settings in their study.

The role of managers. Siraj-Blatchford & Manni (2006) cite a range of research which points to the significant role of managers and leaders. Participants in this study identified managers, including team leaders, nursery managers and head teachers, as being of key importance. Some emphasised the part played by leaders in providing advice, guidance and professional development, as in this comment:

I remember the very first observation that [the head teacher] did of me and she said, 'Did you realise you were asking evaluative and inferential questions?' No, I hadn't a clue what they were. I do that all the time and ... when you're doing something intuitively and you don't realise you're doing it, and then you don't realise the impact that has on teaching and learning do you?
(Teacher F)

Reflecting on her own leadership role, Nursery Manager E commented:

I know that they [the team] are a fantastic group of people and they are quite capable, they don't need me holding their hand. And it also gives them responsibility as well and that's, you know, they've all said that that's what they like.

Nursery Nurse D commented on the part played by her team leader in doing this: 'If you want to discuss something, you just say ... oh, can you put that down on the agenda. In other places you [nursery nurses] weren't even part of the agenda!' Siraj-Blatchford & Manni (2006) link such attitudes of giving staff responsibility and involving them in management in the setting with higher self-esteem and morale, and a lower incidence of staff turnover.

Conclusion

The finding that positive relationships and a sense of personal agency and ownership may have a beneficial impact on practitioners' perceptions about their work with children is not, of itself, particularly surprising. It concurs, at least in part, with Fenech & Sumsion's (2007) conclusion that most participants in their study exercised agency in the form of resistance to perceived constraints. However, the significance of this research lies in both the strength of the participants' views about these factors and the particular aspect of their work – that is, the development of young children's thinking – which provided the focus for the study. If the emphasis placed upon the development of young children's thinking by Kite (2001), Siraj-Blatchford et al (2002) and Pramling (2004), amongst others, is appropriate, then a consideration of how practitioners believe that they can act most effectively in this area may be very significant. As Martin et al (2003) emphasise, it is the ways in which participants deal with the external factors by exercising their agency that could determine the course of their practice. The conclusions drawn here may be valuable in informing the development of strategies and practices which enable practitioners to provide the best support for the children in their care, in ways which promote a sense of agency, ownership, resilience and well-being in the practitioners themselves.

Two conclusions, in particular, arise out of this current study. The first is that practitioners' experiences of personal ownership and autonomy, and their confidence about what they do, may have a positive impact on how they perceive constraints on what they do to support children's thinking. By corollary, those practitioners who believe that they have little control over what they do may focus on constraints rather than opportunities, in ways which may lead to them exercising less agency in their work, and providing fewer opportunities for the children in their care to engage in 'sustained shared thinking' (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002, p. 8). The second conclusion is that

positive team relationships may support practitioners in overcoming constraints, or lead them to be less likely to acknowledge constraints on what they do in support of children's thinking.

Such conclusions are consistent with Sumsion's (2003, p. 152) identification of professional resilience as 'a complex and multidimensional phenomenon', which comprises the kinds of personal qualities and characteristics identified by participants here as central to their feelings of agency and ownership, along with the contextual, environmental features they see as supportive of the development of such feelings. As Sumsion identifies, it is the interplay between these characteristics and features which may be most important in the support of professional autonomy, ownership and a sense of self-efficacy. Attention to the support and promotion of these features and characteristics, by individual practitioners, teams and ultimately as part of policy development, may act not only to support such feelings in practitioners, but also to enhance the ways in which they support young children's thinking. This has the potential for a positive impact on the children themselves.

A third point is one that deserves more exploration than was possible within the scope of the current project. That is, that the implementation of a prescriptive curriculum may have multiple impacts. It may act to focus practitioners on meeting the demands of that curriculum, at the possible cost of their time and ingenuity in thinking about how to most effectively support children's thinking. However, it may also be potentially transformative, by supporting the exercise of agency through resistance to the demands of the curriculum and its regulatory mechanisms.

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Notes

- [1] The six areas of learning are: personal, social and emotional development; communication, language and literacy; problem solving, reasoning and numeracy; knowledge and understanding of the world; physical development; and creative development.
- [2] For a further discussion on constructs of time, see Fumoto & Robson (2006).

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APPENDIX
Interview Schedule

1. To get to know the participants and their settings
 - How long have you been working in this setting? Can you tell me about the general experience of working here?
 - Can you tell me what happened when ... ? (an event from the observations)
2. To elicit participants' thoughts and feelings concerning time in relation to extending children's thinking
 - In the questionnaire, you said that you felt you were effective/not very effective in extending children's thinking. If effective: How do you think you are doing this? What do you think works best? Or, if not effective: What gets in the way of you being effective?
 - In the questionnaire, you said that you have/haven't got enough time during the session to enhance children's thinking. Can you tell me some of the things that you do to make this happen/what might be preventing you from doing this?
3. To look at any systems or practices that might be in place to support opportunities to interact with children
 - You mentioned that you feel more in-service training on how you can extend children's thinking would be helpful. What sort of training do you feel would be helpful? Or, you mentioned that you feel you have already received sufficient training on how to extend children's thinking. Can you tell me the sort of training you have received that was helpful?
 - You mentioned that the importance of extending children's thinking is/is not explicitly referred to in your documents (for example, prospectus, school policy). Can you expand on this? In what ways do you feel this is reflected in your planning?
 - Do you feel the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage has been useful in ensuring time to extend children's thinking? Can you tell me why?
 - Can you tell me about the way you involve parents/carers to support children's thinking?
 - Is there anything that you would like to change in order to ensure more time to extend children's thinking?