Patterns of teacher talk and children's responses: The influence on young children's oral language

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ABSTRACT

The importance of teacher-child dialogue in facilitating young children's language learning is well established in the research literature, with significant outcomes accrued from rich language use in the classroom (Shiel, Cregan, McGough & Archer, 2012). This study focuses on the opportunities teachers provide to engage children in talk during small group teaching sessions and considers teacher-child talk patterns, within and across preschool and school settings. The intention was to examine teacher talk behaviours that facilitate children's language use and explore how teachers support children's oral language development as they move from preschool to school. Teachers from a preschool and school setting serving children from a low socioeconomic region of outer western Melbourne in Victoria, Australia were invited to plan, implement, and record teaching interactions with small groups of children that specifically built on their oral language skills. This paper reports on the fine-grained analysis of the teacher-child talk patterns in two specific ways: (1) teachers' talk behaviours, to review the discourse patterns used to foster young children's language learning; and (2) the children's responses, to ascertain the dialogic interplay that created opportunities for children's talk and learning. The findings indicate that during talk where teachers were supporting children's oral language, the teachers' preference for closed questions that were directed toward the immediate stimuli resulted in limited responses from the children. This particular teacher-child talk pattern was dominant in both preschool and school settings. While the common teacher talk behaviours across both settings support the continuity of children's learning, as they transition from preschool to school, there was little evidence of interactions that engaged children in rich dialogue to extend their oral language competencies.

These results suggest that expanding teachers' repertoire of talk practices to involve children in a wide range of oral language experiences that draw on children's understandings and are associated with building knowledge, provides a foundation for engagement in children's language use and learning.

Introduction

Over many years, early years educators have reported the significance of quality classroom talk interactions, particularly given the established relationship between early language development and literacy within the research literature. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) national early childhood reform agenda (Council of Australian Governments, 2009) recognises

the importance of the early years to human capital development, with strong language skills in these early years linked to educational success throughout life (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2015; Hoff, 2013; Pordes-Bowers, Strelitz, Allen, & Donkin, 2012). In addition, research also acknowledges the cultural influences on language use and learning (Gee, 2002; Hoff, 2006) and the rich variation in children's language, that reflects cultural and linguistic diversity, and the multiplicity of languages and literacies available as resources for meaning making (New London Group, 2000). However, the language repertoire of many young children from vulnerable communities ill-prepares them for the complexity of the language discourse patterns of schooling (Heath, 1982; Rivalland, 2004) or is limited in terms of laying the foundation for later literacy learning (Burns, Griffin, & Snow 1999; Christie, 2005;). Among the many implications this raises for practice, this paper considers the critical role of the early years teachers in developing young children's oral language, as it is through the teachers' own talk and dialogic interactions with young children that oral language is fostered (Henry & Pianta, 2011; Huttenlocher, Vasilyeva, Cymerman, & Levine, 2002; Raban, 2014). This study responds to the ongoing challenge of improving classroom talk interactions with the intention to identify the aspects of teachers' talk that are most conducive to developing young children's oral language.

Literature review

Research clearly positions language as the foundation for building literacy (Clarke, Mitchell, & Bowman, 2009; Daly, 2015; Dickinson, Griffith, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2012), with strong connections between a young child's early language experience and later literacy development (Dickinson, McCabe, Anastasopoulos, Peisner-Feinberg, & Poe, 2003; Dickinson & Porche, 2011; Hoff, 2013; Snow, Tabors, & Dickinson, 2001). Clay (2001) identified oral language as facilitative of children's literacy learning, yet the aspects of oral language that are more clearly related to later literacy outcomes is often contested (Dickinson & Porsche, 2011; Snow, 1991; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002).

Children's early reading development is dependent on them being very familiar with the sounds of the language (Konza, 2016) alongside their ability to associate the visual symbols of writing to spoken language as they master the alphabetic code (Castles, Rastle & Nation, 2018). The importance of phonological awareness and phonics to beginning reading has been acknowledged consistently in large scale reviews of teaching reading (Adams 1990; DEST, 2005; NICHD, 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). However, as Paris (2005) states, the learning of letter sounds relationships comprises a finite skill set 'that are learned quickly so the trajectory of mastery is steep and the duration of acquisition is brief' (p. 188). Conceptualising oral language more broadly, the National Early Literacy Panel Report Developing Early Literacy (2009) found that some aspects of oral language were clearly more related to later literacy outcomes than others. Specifically, this report notes 'complex aspects of oral language, such as grammar, definitional vocabulary, and listening comprehension, as having more substantial predictive relations with later conventional literacy skills' (p 78). For many children, expressive and receptive vocabulary, the ability to recall and comprehend sentences and stories, and the ability to engage in extended verbal discourse are also predictive of early literacy (Daly, 2015; Jones & Chen, 2012; Snow et al., 1998).

Rapid language development during the early years depends directly on the models of language young children experience (Raban, 2014). Vocabulary development in particular has been linked to environmental influences and the conversations children experience with adults who know them well (Hart & Risley, 2003; Hoff, 2013). Specific to teacher language, Huttenlocher and colleagues (2002) found that differences in teachers' language input to be a source of variation in children's syntactic skill levels. The results of their study indicate a 'substantial relation between teachers' syntactic input and syntactic growth in the classes they teach' (p. 367). Similarly, children tend to make better language gains when they are with teachers who have stronger language skills and regularly model those skills (Weigel, Lowman, & Martin, 2007). Indeed, some researchers identify the teacher as the most important variable in making a difference to unequal educational outcomes (Chall, as cited in Comber & Kamler, 2004).

Traditional classroom interactions and teacher conversational styles are often described with reference to the classic work of Sinclair and Coulthart who, in 1975, identified the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) classroom discourse pattern. This interaction sequence has been critiqued as 'a recitation script', reducing child responses to brief and minimal answers in response to closed questions and teacher feedback (Hardman, 2008, p. 133). In contrast, teachers who use a range of questioning techniques and follow-up responses promote more discursive practices, with increased occasions for children to engage in conversations (Scull, Paatsch, & Raban, 2013; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2008; Wells & Ball, 2008). Siraj and Asani (2015) report high cognitive outcomes for young children associated with sustained adult–child verbal interaction. They refer to *Shared Sustained Thinking*

as an effective pedagogic interaction where the 'prime objective should be further opportunities for meaningful talk between adult and child, providing cognitive challenge that is manageable for the children' (p. 413). Similarly, engaging children in intellectually challenging and extended conversations have been found to have a significant effect on children's literacy learning (Dickinson & Caswell, 2007). Incorporating a range of opportunities for teacher-child dialogue, recognises the centrality of talk in children's learning, regardless of whether they are in preschool or school (Alexander, 2008; Dickinson, Griffith, Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 2012; Edward-Groves, Anstey & Bull, 2014; Raban, 2014; Siraj & Manni, 2015). Despite levels of agreement about environments and expectations for learning, studies that examine pedagogy across both settings continues to emphasise the need for greater continuity of teaching and learning experiences that facilitate children's transitions and progressions in literacy learning (Mackenzie & Petriwskyj, 2017; Mantei & Kervin, 2018; Scull & Garvis, 2015).

Neuman (2001) states that the real leverage in improving early literacy instruction for children with diverse linguistic and textual experiences lies in supporting students to learn new knowledge and information, with an emphasis on language development. A useful way of framing the distinctions related to the content and concepts discussed with young children is to use the terms 'immediate' and 'non-immediate' talk (DeTemple, 2001; Massey, Pence, Justice, & Bowles, 2008). Immediate talk refers to talk interactions that relate to the here and now, with non-immediate talk focused on more generalised knowledge or personal experiences. Particular to the *Home School Study of Literacy* (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001) it was only non-immediate talk that was 'positively associated with later measures of literacy' (DeTemple, 2001, p. 48).

Previous research has reported the key role of oral language in children's learning, particularly the role of the teacher in fostering a learning environment that involves dialogic talk practices between teachers and students (Alexander, 2008; Barnes, 2008; Edwards-Groves, Anstey, & Bull, 2014). This study contributes to research that has specifically explored the relationship between teachers' talk patterns, including whether the talk is related to non-immediate or immediate stimuli, such as picture story books and teacher-led activities, and the ways that these patterns foster young children's language learning. Specifically, this study investigated the talk behaviours used by teachers when they are intentionally supporting oral language skills in small groups of young children in preschool and in the first year of school. The two research questions guiding this study are:

1. What is the continuity of teacher talk behaviours across preschool and school settings?
2. What is the interplay between teachers' talk behaviours and children's responses?

Methodology

The study

This paper reports on selected video data from a larger project – *Teacher Talk in the Early Years: Building Children's Oral Language for Literacy*. This project was a systematic exploration of teachers' talk behaviours during oral language teaching within and across preschool and school settings. Teachers from both settings recorded their practice and came together to critically reflect on practice through the use of video methodology and researchers' facilitated discussion. The project was located in a low socioeconomic outer western area of Melbourne, Victoria.

Following ethics approval from the university's ethics committee and associated education department, three preschool teachers and six Foundation Year (first year of school) teachers located in a school where the preschool children transition to were invited to work with small groups of children within their classrooms (preschool group size = 2 to 3 children; school group size = 5 to 10 children). Specifically, the teachers were invited to plan and implement sessions where they were intentionally supporting young children who they identified as benefiting from specific oral language support.

Data collection

Teachers at each setting were given GoPro cameras and asked to record their small group oral language teaching sessions at designated times throughout the year. The choice of video was seen as a useful way of capturing moments of practice (Nolan, Paatsch & Scull, 2018), and classroom complexity (Cutter-Mackenzie, Edwards, & Quinton, 2015). Video methodologies are well established in research into teacher practice (Blikstad-Balas, 2016; Harris, 2016) as they allow for rich interpretation through multiple viewings of the event by individuals or groups of observers (Moyles, Adams, & Musgrove, 2002). As the video data were self-selected and captured by each teacher, research selectivity in the choice of events to review was not an issue (Clarke et al., 2009). In total, 30 video recordings (2 x 3 preschool teachers and 4 x 6 Foundation teachers) were collected and analysed, supported by transcriptions of the recorded interactions.

Table 1 presents the main teaching focus for each self-selected video session for each participating teacher.

Table 1. Session focus for the 30 sessions video recorded by the nine teachers

	Teacher	Session	Focus of the session
Preschool	Anna	1 2	Shared reading with picture story book Shared news
	Maryanne	1 2	Shared reading with picture story book Discussion using a picture of food
	Rebecca	1 2	Shared reading with wordless picture book Shared reading with wordless picture book
Foundation	Donna	1 2, 3, 4	Phonemic awareness using objects Shared reading with different picture story books
	Harriet	1, 2 & 4 3	Syntax: Regular past tense Syntax: Pronouns Syntax: Questions
	Matt	1 2 3, 4	Shared reading using a picture story book Mathematical concepts Guided reading using set texts
	Tanya	1 2, 3 4	Shared reading using a picture story book Guided reading using set texts Sequencing stories using picture cards
	Sara	1 & 4 2 3	Mathematical concepts: Shape and division Guided reading using set texts Syntax: Pronouns
	Stephanie	1 & 3 2 4	Shared reading using a picture story book Guided reading using set texts Sequencing stories using picture cards

Data analysis

All video data were transcribed according to speaker turns within the interaction. In this study, the definition of a turn included one or more utterances or non-verbal communicative acts (such as head nods or pointing) prior to and followed by a change of speaker, or a pause of two or more seconds (Caissie & Rockwell, 1993; Paatsch & Toe, 2014). Specifically, pauses were noted in the transcript to indicate when the teachers were waiting for a response from the child [Wait time] and when there was a gap between utterances [Pause]. All video interactions were then coded using the licensed software package Studiocode®. Studiocode® provides customised video tagging and coding where the user can identify specific moments useful to the research process. Timelines, databases, and transcription text can also be generated to allow for cross-referencing and analysis, assisting in the identification of patterns and trends.

The coding process began with all three researchers watching 10 of the 30 video recordings together and identifying teacher talk behaviours, and child responses. Typically, children responded to the teacher one at a time so each response was coded and each child was assigned a number that corresponded with the one speaking (e.g., Child 1; Child 2). In the few instances where more than one child responded at a time, the child response that was specifically acknowledged by the teacher was the response coded and included in the final analysis. All teacher talk behaviours and child responses were assigned initial codes based on previous research into the types of questions used by teachers when talking with preschool children (Scull et al., 2013; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2008) then broadened to account for other types of talk behaviours and responses. The remaining videos were then divided among the three researchers and coded independently using these initial codes. Codes were then discussed, with further revisions made to the coding framework to ensure all teacher talk behaviours and child responses

Table 2. Teacher behaviour codes and descriptions

Code	Description
Closed question	A question to which the answer is known by the teacher and to which there is only one acceptable response (e.g., is the bird flying or running?)
	A question to which the child holds the answer. The response usually involves a small selection of acceptable possible choices (e.g., what's your favourite colour?).
	A question which requires a yes/no response
Open question	A question to which the child is encouraged to predict what may be happening in the text/ illustration (e.g., what do you think will happen?)
	A question to which the child is encouraged to infer from the text/illustration (e.g., why don't you think he was happy?)
	A question requiring the child to relate to their own experiences and world knowledge
	A question to which the child is encouraged to give their opinion (e.g., which character did you like the best?)
	A question to clarify the child's response
Statement question	A question that acknowledges the child's response (e.g., it looks like a very happy rabbit, doesn't it?)
	A question which provides further information (e.g., it also looks like a queen with a crown, doesn't it?)
Nominating: Name	When the teacher specifically directs a task/question to one child.
Nominating: Non-verbal	Eye gaze or gesture, such as pointing, with expectation that the child will respond.
Reading	When the teacher reads or paraphrases from the text
Modelling	Modelling a language pattern structure
Instructing	Teacher instructs students what to do
Personal comment	Teacher provides own experiences and opinions
Extension	Building on what the child says
Teacher repeating	Verbatim repeat of what the child says
Acknowledging	Affirmation – verbal or non-verbal
Pausing (Wait time)	Connected to an expectation – Teacher does not fill the response after their prompt that requires an action but waits for the child to respond
Reformulating	Teacher responds to the child's response by reformulating what was said with correct grammatical structure
Oral close	Only the last phrase of the teacher's utterance is the oral close – anticipating the oral close (e.g., 'and he ate through 5 …')

identified could be assigned to a code, ensuring the researchers had reached verification and comprehension, and completeness (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002).

To ensure that the sampling strategy was sound and representative of the data (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001), and was a size that ensured credibility of content analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004), it was decided that the first three minutes of each video would be coded – 90 minutes of video in total (72 minutes = foundation teachers, 18 minutes = preschool teachers). With most video recordings no more than five minutes in duration, choosing to analyse three minutes of each captured a large proportion of the total video data.

When the coding framework was finalised, 10% of the videos were coded both individually and then compared across the researchers to check intercoder reliability (Vaismoradi, Bondas, T & Turunen, 2013). Any points of ambiguity were viewed as a group and

discussed until consensus was reached. This meant returning to the data time and time again to check interpretations, and to enable the definitions of each code to be detailed and explicit (Pyett, 2003).

Table 2 presents the 15 teacher talk behaviours that were apparent in the data generated by the 30 video recordings.

Children's responses were coded according to three specific categories: (1) verbal or non-verbal; (2) immediate or non-immediate; and (3) type of child response. Non-verbal responses included pointing, gestures and nodding, while verbal responses were spoken utterances. Immediate responses were those that specifically related to the stimulus or focus of the session (e.g., picture story book, picture card, or object), while non-immediate responses were those that related to contexts beyond the immediate stimulus or focus of the session. Table 3 presents the 10 child response types evident in the data.

Due to the small number of participants in the sample size, the final analysis involved scrutinising the total number of teacher talk behaviours and responses by children across each setting. As a result, there were a total of 339 coded behaviours combined across the three preschool teachers and 174 responses from the group of preschool children. In addition, there was a total of 1,301 teacher talk behaviours across the six Foundation teachers and 461 responses from the group of Foundation children. The 15 teacher talk behaviours and the three categories of child responses (verbal/non-verbal; immediate/non-immediate; 10 response types) are presented proportionally for each setting (preschool and school).

Results

The results are presented in three sections according to the main aims of the study: (1) group teacher talk behaviours for each setting to explore continuity of talk behaviours across preschool and school teachers; (2) group child responses for each category across preschool and school children; and (3) the interplay between teachers' talk behaviours and children's responses. Overall, these results show evidence of the opportunities teachers provided to foster young children's oral language learning.

Teacher talk behaviours across preschool and school teachers

Three preschool teachers (Anna, Maryanne, and Rebecca) each recorded two group sessions while the six Foundation teachers (Donna, Harriet, Matt, Tanya, Sara, and Stephanie) videoed four sessions each. Results show that all 15 behaviours were evident in both the combined preschool teacher talk data (n = 339 teacher talk behaviours) and the combined Foundation teacher talk data (n = 1,301 teacher talk behaviours). Figure 1 shows a comparison of the teacher talk behaviours between the preschool and the Foundation teachers.

Figure 1 highlights that the highest overall teacher talk behaviour for both preschool (PS) and Foundation (F) teachers was closed questions (PS–28%; F–25%), while teachers repeating (PS–12%; F–13%) and acknowledging (PS–10%; F–13%) children's responses were also evident across both groups of teachers' talk. Further, results show that preschool and Foundation teachers less frequently used talk that extended (PS–3%; F–1%) or reformulated (PS–2%; F–2%) children's utterances, or modelled oral language throughout the talk.

Table 3. Child response type codes and descriptions

Code	Description
Child question	Inquiring – clarifying – asking for more information
Explaining	Response to a why question – explaining something
Labelling	Naming something specific that related to the book/activity
Initiating	Response does not directly relate to the teacher's question/statement
Opinion	Gives own opinion
Recalling	Drawing from past experience – Drawing on known knowledge
Child repeating	Teacher's utterance repeated verbatim
Yes/No	Simple Yes/No response
Predicting	Suggesting possible actions/events often in a response to a 'What …' question from the teacher
Adding on	Children added further information to the teachers' talk (e.g., Teacher: 'it's yellow', Child: 'and red')

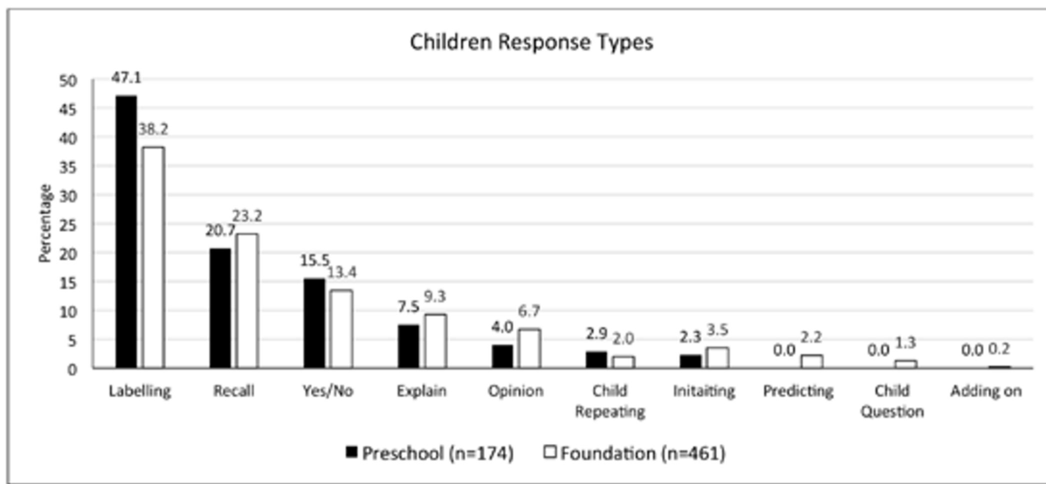

Figure 1. Combined teacher talk behaviours for preschool and Foundation teachers

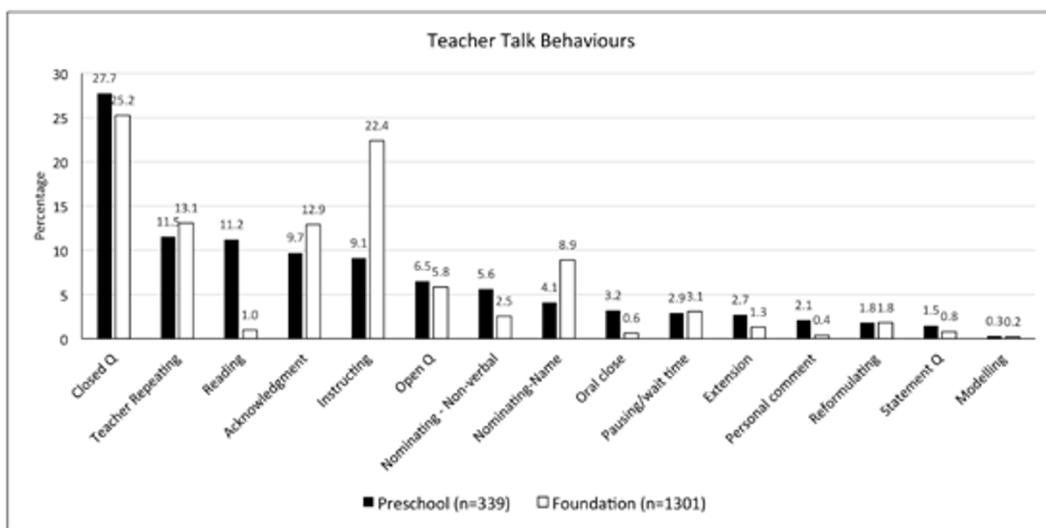

Figure 2. Type of child responses in response to the teachers' talk in both preschool and Foundation.

There were three notable differences between preschool and Foundation teachers' talk. Preschool teachers spent more time reading with their preschool children as a way of supporting their oral language (11%) compared to the Foundation teachers (1%). In contrast, the Foundation teachers instructed their children (22%) and nominated children by name (9%) more often than the group of preschool teachers.

Child responses across preschool and school children

Children's responses to teachers' talk behaviours were coded according to three main categories: (1) verbal or non-verbal; (2) immediate or non-immediate; and (3) response types. Results show that the highest proportion of children's talk in both preschool and school was verbal (PS–88%; F–87%) and related to the immediate (PS–84%; F–99%) context of the lesson (i.e., picture story book, puzzle, guided reading, picture sequencing).

Examination of the data in relation to the type of child responses within a turn showed that 7 of the 10 response types were evident during the preschool talk, while all 10 response types were evident during the Foundation talk (see Figure 2). However, combined preschool data (n = 174 total responses) and combined Foundation data (n = 461 total responses) showed that labelling accounted for most of the children's responses in both groups (47%; 38%). Further results showed that there were opportunities for recalling (PS–21%; F–23%) and yes/no responses (PS–5%; F–13%) to teacher questions. In addition, results from the combined child talk data showed that both preschool and Foundation teachers provided limited opportunities for children to explain, initiate or give an opinion. The most notable differences between the preschool and Foundation children's response type were evident in the opportunities provided for Foundation children to predict, ask questions, or add further information in their responses in contrast to no opportunities provided for the preschool children.

Interplay between teachers' talk behaviours and children's responses

Findings from the analysis of teachers' talk behaviours show that both preschool and Foundation teachers shared common talk behaviours, with some particularities dependent on the context in which they intentionally aimed to support the children's oral language. In addition, results also showed that particular teacher talk behaviours resulted in common response types from the children.

A typical teacher-child talk pattern during shared book reading across both settings involved teachers reading the text then leaving a pause for the children to fill in the missing words of the text (oral close) followed by a child response that is typically verbal and within the immediate context of the story. This is then followed by a teacher closed question and another child response. For example, in the following extract, preschool teacher Anna is reading the story *of The Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle, where she reads the text but leaves a pause for the children to fill in the missing words (Line 1: oral close). She then appears to check for the children's comprehension by asking a series of closed questions (Line 4).

Extract 1:

1. Anna: [Reading] One Sunday morning the warm sun came up, and pop out of
the egg came a tiny and very hungry [Pause]
2. Child 1: Caterpillar.
3. Anna: And how many things did he eat?
4. Child 2: One, two, three, four

Another typical teacher-child talk pattern that occurred during shared reading involved the teachers reading parts of the text followed by asking a closed question that resulted in a child response. The child's response was followed by a repetition and acknowledgement by the teacher before continuing to read the text. For example, in Extract 2 Foundation teacher Matt was reading a text with the children. He commenced the session with brief instructions (Line 1) then started to read the text. He then paused the reading to ask a series of closed questions to nominated children (Lines 4 and 6). After each child's verbal response within the immediate context of the text, recall (Line 5) and labelling (Line 7), Matt would repeat the child's response then acknowledge what the child had said (Lines 6 and 8) before continuing with the reading.

Extract 2:

1. Matt: Okay, so I'll read it and then you'll read it, as a group. [Reading] One little
2. puppy playing by a tree. Ready?
3. Child 1: One little puppy playing by a tree.
4. Matt: Good. How many puppies were playing by a tree, Luke? [Wait Time]
5. Child 2: One.
6. Matt: One, good boy. What was the puppy playing next to, please, Isabella?
7. Child 3: A tree.
8. Matt: A tree. Good work. [Reading] Two more puppies come. Now there are three.

A further typical teacher-child talk pattern that was evident across both preschool and Foundation teachers involved teacher instruction followed by closed question, child response, followed by teachers repeating the child's response and acknowledging their response. This pattern occurred across a number of different contexts, including shared reading (see Extract 2), picture discussions (Extract 3) and specific phonological or syntactic language teaching activities (Extract 4). However, there were notable differences between the preschool and school teachers when instructing the children. Typically, the preschool teachers gave shorter instructions at the beginning of the session compared with the Foundation teachers who generally gave longer initial instructions and continued to instruct throughout the entire sessions.

For example, in Extract 3 preschool teacher, Maryanne, is using a picture as a stimulus to engage children in talk. Maryanne verbally nominates the children, instructing them at the beginning of the session regarding the aims of the activity. This is followed by the child's response to the closed question (Line 3) which is verbal, immediate and involves labelling the object in the picture. Line 4 shows Maryanne repeating the child's response and then asking a series of closed questions. This talk pattern continues throughout the 3-minute recorded interaction (e.g., Lines 5 to 11).

Extract 3:

1. Maryanne: Tina and Indy – we're not going to complete this puzzle but I want you
2. you to have a look at the picture in here and tell me something that you see.
3. Child: Ants.
4. Maryanne: Ants. Which ones? The little ones or the bigger ones?
5. Child: The little.
6. Maryanne: The little ones. Where do you think they've come from?
7. Child: From the grass.
8. Maryanne: From the grass. What can you see, Tina?
9. Child: Pumpkin seeds.

10. Maryanne: Pumpkin seeds. They've got flowers on the end, too. Do you think pumpkin seeds grow on the flowers?

In contrast, Foundation teacher Donna commences the session with instructions to the children (Lines 1, 2 and 3) followed by a closed question. The child responds with a verbal label of the object that the teacher is holding up. Donna then repeats the child's response (Line 5), then continues with further instructions (Lines 5 and 6).

Extract 4:

1. Donna: Okay, today we're going to learn about initial sounds or sounds that we can
2. hear at the beginning of a word. Tell me what the beginning sound or the first
3. sound you hear when you say this word.
4. Child 1: Spider.
5. Donna: Spider. I'm going to see if we can write some of the sounds that we hear as a
6. group first and then I will let you to pick some out yourself.

As evident across the four extracts detailed above, the most common teacher talk behaviours across both preschool and school involving closed questions, teacher instruction, repeating and acknowledging resulted in a high proportion of child responses that involved labelling, recall and yes/no within the immediate context of the session. However, there were opportunities for children to produce longer and more complex language when teachers from both settings invited children to explain or give an opinion. Typically, these responses resulted from incidences where teachers asked questions that invited the children to connect to their own world experiences beyond the immediate context of the stimulus or focus of the session. Generally, these teacher questions were open-ended (e.g., 'Why do you think?', 'What would happen if?') or were questions that were closed in structure but appeared to show that the intention was to invite the child to give an extended response (e.g., 'Does that remind you?' or 'Do you think?'). For example, in Extract 5, preschool teacher Rebecca, invites one of the children to relate the picture in the book to her own experience (Line 1). While the question posed is structured as a yes/no closed question, it appears that Rebecca's intention is to elicit a more extended response. The child provides a lengthy response that recalls her experience (Line 2) then initiates a further response to explain that the picture in the book was not her own baby brother but a person in the hospital with a baby (Line 4).

Extract 5:

1. Rebecca: A baby. Does that a baby remind you of anything Adelina?
2. Child 2: It looks like my baby brother.
3. Rebecca: It looks like your baby brother. It does a little bit.
4. Child 2: But I think a person with hospital with a baby.

Similarly, in Extract 6, preschool teacher Maryanne also invites the children to move beyond the immediate context of the picture to provide an opinion (Line 4) and explain their view (Lines 7 and 9).

Extract 6:

1. Maryanne: Why not?
2. Child 1: Because I won't eat ants and worms.
3. Maryanne: You wouldn't eat ants and worms. What about you Indy if this lady offered
4. you some of this food, would you eat it?
5. Child 1: No.
6. Maryanne: Why not?
7. Child 1: Because they ants.
8. Maryanne: You think these are ants?
9. Child 1: They're real ants.

The use of open questions also supported children's oral language in the Foundation setting. For example, Extract 7, Foundation teacher Sara was teaching the children the concept of division. In Line 1 Sara asks an open question to the children, which results in one child responding with an explanation (Line 2). This talk pattern is then repeated in Lines 3 and 4.

Extract 7:

1. Sara: Why isn't it fair?
2. Child 1: Because that one has two and that one has four.
3. Sara: So how might I share it so it is fair?
4. Child 1: You can do there's four and then [inaudible] like that.

Similar use of open questions also provided the opportunity for children to given their opinions in an extended response. For example, the purpose of Foundation teacher Tanya's session was to teach sequencing through the use of picture cards of a well-known nursery ryhme. Extract 8 shows Tanya's use of open questions that commenced with the phrase 'Why do you think…' (Lines 1 and 3), which provided the opportunity for the child to give their opinion in an extended response (Lines 2 and 4).

Extract 8:

1. Tanya: Why do you think they were going up the hill for?
2. Child 1: Maybe they runned out of water so they can fetch out some water.

3. Tanya: Why do you think they needed some water?
4. Child 1: Because they have to have some food so they can't get thirsty.

Another teacher-talk pattern evident across both settings that provided opportunities to support young children's oral language was seen when teachers reformulated or extended children's responses. For example, in Extract 9 Foundation teacher Tanya used open questions to elicit a response from the child (Line 1). The child gave a limited response so the teacher expanded on the child's responses by reformulating the structure of their sentences to model correct syntax (Line 3).

Extract 9:

1. Tanya: Why do you think it he might be hungry, Jarrod?
2. Child 1: Because food.
3. Tanya: Yeah, he needs to eat food. Why, why do you think he's really hungry?
4. Child 1: Because he broke into the house.

In contrast to the teacher-talk patterns common across both settings, the Foundation teachers also used open questions to invite children to predict what might be happening in a text or in a specific stimulus (e.g., picture card or mathematical concept). This particular pattern was not evident in the preschool setting. A typical example is shown in Extract 10 where Foundation teacher Matt asks the children to predict what is happening in the text by inviting the children to have a look at the cover of the text. This use of open questions to invite children typically resulted in extended and more complex utterances from the children as seen in this extract.

Extract 10:

1. Matt: What do you think the picture it's going to be about? What is the
picture telling us? Ella, what do you think the story is going to be about?
2. Child 1: The puppies go [Pause] the puppy's play around and two–one puppy
goes and gets. He went in the paint and he got himself dirty and the other one
went to the tree and he was trying to get the ball back and the next one,
they were running away from their mum.

Discussion

In the current study, all teachers working with small groups of children shared a common repertoire of talk behaviours. There were high levels of consistency in the early childhood teachers and the primary school teachers' use of questioning and feedback responses to the children. Particularly noticeable was the high proportion of closed questions – when talk behaviours for each participant were tallied, this question type was the most frequent. These findings are comparable to previous studies of classroom interactions (Scull et al., 2013; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2008). The use of closed questions provides children with a limited range of response options that allows them to effectively engage in classroom conversations as active interlocutors. Nonetheless, the data also indicates that when given the opportunity, children can be supported and challenged to provide explanations and opinions and to think more abstractly about content and concepts discussed. When engaged in this way, the children's responses provided evidence of their ability to elaborate on the content and concepts discussed and draw on a range of more linguistically complex structures.

Notwithstanding the levels of similarity, the teachers' use of instructions varied across the two settings, with the Foundation teachers engaging in this type of talk behaviour more frequently. From the data sets analysed, it appears that as children transition to school, talk as a means of transmission (Raban, 1999) increases, as the teacher communicates what is known or what is required to be known. This places demand on the children as listeners, with children's successful participation in language learning activities based on their interpretation of transmitted messages. Foundation teachers will need to be cognisant of the skill shift required for more active listening, while also engaging children in talk interactions that supports them to express meaning and build on their understandings.

Also of interest was the teacher-child talk patterns evident as teachers responded to children. As discussed earlier, the IRF recitation script, prevalent in classroom interactions, shows a triadic pattern of teacher question, student response, and teacher feedback. In this study, the teacher repeating the child's response, followed by a simple acknowledgment, was the most frequent feedback move. Both talk behaviours are acknowledged as affirming the child's contribution, to foster continued engagement. However, with respect to teacher-child talk patterns, we are drawn to studies that extend and build on children's contributions where teachers, for example, encourage the child to elaborate, ask for clarification, or suggest alternatives (see Massey et al., 2008). When the teacher's response was related to the meaning expressed by the child, there was a sequence of talk turns that allowed for more substantial connections to the topic and elaborated language use with increased grammatical complexity. These features of language are identified as having a significant impact on children's learning (Dickinson & Caswell, 2007,

Siraj & Asani, 2015).

Children's responses were examined for levels of abstraction, using the categories of immediate or non-immediate talk (DeTemple, 2001; Dickinson, De Temple, Hirschler, & Smith, 1992; Hindman, Skibbe, & Foster, 2014). Non-immediate talk, defined in this study as talk outside of the immediate experience, was rare. On occasions when children were encouraged to explain, predict, offer an opinion or recall events, this was directed toward events currently occurring or related to materials or props in the teaching environment, with high levels of support provided. Non-immediate talk has often been associated with book-reading interactions (Luo, Snow, & Chang, 2012; Nyhout & O'Neill, 2013) when children are encouraged to connect the story to their own experiences or world knowledge. This was typically not the case in the interactions observed. The findings in this study provided evidence of book reading across both settings being largely associated with immediate talk interactions, with children being asked to do little more than provide labels to respond to 'what' or 'where' questions, with the answers clearly apparent in the illustrations or the text most recently read to the children.

On the occasions when the children's talk was coded as more cognitively challenging, children were responding to 'how' and 'why' questions or when asked to predict upcoming events or the plot of texts during book reading. Opportunities for cognitively challenging talk were also evident as children explored mathematical ideas or were required to reason. Such occasions were seen to stimulate children's thinking, build knowledge, and extend on their understandings. This prompts us to consider learning contexts more broadly and the texts and curriculum areas that provide a stimulus for young children's language learning in preschool and school settings.

The relationship between teachers' talk patterns and the language learning opportunities afforded to young children has been well documented. This body of research considers the positive impact resulting from exposure to complex language forms (Huttenlocher et al., 2002) alongside the effect of adults' well-tuned contingent responses during conversations with children (Justice, Mashburn, Hamre, & Pianta, 2008). Despite what is known about the benefits of open questions, and conversational exchanges that require children to elaborate and clarify ideas, and build on concepts discussed, numerous studies of early years environments report that occasions for oral language learning are rarely optimised (Dockrell, Stuart, & King, 2010; Howes et al., 2008). Our study provides further evidence of the limited opportunities provided for extended, sustained language use, as is often the case for children in disadvantaged contexts (Nelson, Welsh, Trup, & Greenberg, 2010), with this explained in part by teachers' knowledge and practice (Dickinson, 2011; Locke, Ginsborg, & Peers, 2002).

The data collected and analysed for this study provides a rich resource for professional learning. The videos, coding, and transcripts clearly point to practice examples of classroom interactions for critique and review (Nolan et al., 2018). As illustrative of a range of classroom interaction patterns and contexts for language learning and use, these provide opportunities for focused reflection while also building professional collaborative networks within and across educational sectors (preschool and school). As Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner (2017) state, 'professional development is an important strategy for ensuring that educators are equipped to support deep and complex student learning in their classrooms' (p. 23). It has also been argued that 'language learning is a system which may be strongly affected by relatively small shifts in the details of ongoing conversational exchange and social-emotional engagement' (Nelson et al., 2011, p. 166). With this in mind, we strongly encourage teachers to reflect on the intentional practices they employ to support young children's oral language development, for two reasons. The first reason is to ensure they are proving opportunities for the children they teach to be exposed to and draw on a range of linguistically complex structures and abstract thinking in their language usage; and second is the potential that critical reflection can offer for teachers to build on and expand their own teaching repertoires to better support children's oral language learning.

Conclusion

This paper has provided a close analysis of talk interactions occurring in early years settings, exploring teacher talk patterns and the continuities in pedagogy that supports children as they transition from preschool to school. By focusing attention on teachers' talk behaviours and the teacher-child talk patterns we have reviewed classroom discourse to ascertain the dialogic interplay that created opportunities for children's talk and learning. While we acknowledge the small size of the study, with teachers from one school and one preschool, we propose that the results have wider application for teacher practice. Drawing attention to the discourse patterns that teachers use to intentionally engage children in interactions to develop oral language provides an opportunity to begin to shape and modify practices toward improved opportunities for children's language learning in both settings. Through expanding the repertoire of practice by

involving children in a wide range of talk contexts that draw on their understandings and are associated with building knowledge, a foundation for engagement and the possibility of extending children's language use and learning is provided.

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