Introduction

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Talking with Children

In early childhood education and care (ECEC), the importance of extended conversations with children is emphasized through professional practice principles (i.e. what teachers should do) and in learning outcomes for children (i.e. what children should be able to do). Early childhood curricula, frameworks, or statements of learning goals for young children necessarily respond to the historical, educational, and political priorities of their communities. There is, however, a universal understanding of the primacy of talk-in-interaction as both the medium of learning and a skill for children to develop. All early childhood curricula reference the fundamental importance of talking with children.

Early childhood curricula do not, however, specify how talking with children might be done. The deliberate lack of explicit directions on how to talk with children allows teachers to develop pedagogical strategies that incorporate each child’s experiences, abilities, and interests, forming a continuum of learning from their home and community environments. The flexibility and responsiveness of curriculum frameworks for early childhood education – frameworks developed and evaluated through national education and care policy – enables teachers to create individualized learning for the children and families they work with. The fact that early childhood curricula are not prescriptive aligns with a sociocultural approach to education where programmes can adapt and respond to the needs of local communities. It does mean, however, that the practices to implement national curricula and enable learning outcomes are less visible to teachers; this illusiveness can be problematic, as learning outcomes for children are specified in ECEC curricula. Teachers know where they are going (i.e. learning goals) and why (i.e. professional knowledge, beliefs, and theory), but they are not always sure how to initiate, navigate, and extend conversations with children throughout this journey.

Research reveals the extraordinary range of skills required for engaging in learning interactions with infants, toddlers, and young children in everyday moments. Studies in pedagogy demonstrate the demands on early
childhood teachers to continually notice, recognize, and respond to each child's interests to extend their learning in meaningful and relevant ways. Teaching requires complex skills of observation to notice when a child is engaged in an activity that presents itself as an opportunity for learning-in-interaction, an acute sense of the appropriate time and approach to use to initiate purposeful interactions, and skilful understanding of how to engage in talk in ways that extend each child's learning. Teaching as a responsive and intentional practice can be demanding and requires a renewable source of professional knowledge.

The aim of this Handbook is to support the professional learning needs of early childhood teachers. We aim to make empirical evidence accessible to teachers, using data that illuminates the how of high-quality learning interactions in early childhood settings. The intention is not to provide a checklist of practices, but instead to illustrate how key concepts and principles in early childhood education are realized through everyday talk-in-interaction. Extracts of video recordings provided in each chapter reveal child-teacher interaction in specific settings, and the authors distil implications for pedagogy by identifying the sequences of actions that provide opportunities for learning. In this Handbook, we are able to show how existing research in ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (EMCA) provides (1) empirical evidence of children's competencies, (2) illustration of teaching practices from original data rather than analytic summaries, and (3) accessible and practical resources to inform teacher reflection and practice.

This introductory chapter has three goals. First, we explain why evidence from conversation analytic research is useful and accessible as a professional learning resource in early childhood education. We then briefly identify the scope of conversation analytic research in early childhood education to show readers the sorts – and source – of knowledge available. Finally, we introduce the scope of topics in this Handbook to describe how each chapter contributes to a professional body of knowledge for early childhood educators.

Research in Conversation Analysis for Professional Learning

Conversation analysis (CA) originates in sociology and explores how people use language to achieve social actions. By paying very close attention to how people talk with one another – through careful transcribing of spoken and embodied features of talk-in-interaction – video recordings of everyday interactions reveal the systematic and sequentially organized nature of talk (see Lester & O'Reilly, 2019, and Sidnell, 2010 for practical introductions; and
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Heritage, 1984, Schegloff, 2007, and Sidnell & Stivers, 2013, for a more detailed review). The origins, approach, and methods of conversation analysis are outlined in the next chapter. In this introduction, we will limit the discussion to the sorts of questions about early childhood education CA can ask and answer, and why this method of studying discourse can be a valuable resource for professional development in early childhood.

The method of CA relies upon collecting (video-recorded) examples of everyday interactions, then analysing sequences of interaction repeatedly through the process of transcription. Using video recordings rather than subsequent analysis as the data means that social practices remain available for scrutiny and review by other audiences. As Harvey Sacks noted, not only do recordings of interaction allow the researcher to re-visit the data for analysis but ‘others could look at what I had studied, and make of it what they could, if they wanted to be able to disagree with me’ (Sacks, 1995, p. 622). This transparency of method means the original data is accessible for teachers, making visible the practices that enable children to engage in creative thinking, problem solving, and conceptual understanding. Data from CA research is available – but underemployed – for professional learning and reflection.

Elsewhere, the method of CA has proven useful as a means of professional development and training. Elizabeth Stokoe developed the Conversation Analytic Role-play Method (CARM; Stokoe, 2014) as a means of sharing findings – turn by turn – with project participants. Professor Stokoe, Rein Sikveland, and their colleagues have shown that the analytic features of CA provide a means of presenting practical professional insights for police in interviewing suspects (Stokoe & Edwards, 2008), for crisis negotiations (Sikveland, Kevoe-Feldman, & Stokoe, 2021), for mediators encouraging complainants to engage with mediation services (Stokoe 2013a), and for GP clinic administrators to better meet the needs of patients (Stokoe, Sikveland, & Symonds, 2016). Rather than simply sharing findings or reporting back outcomes of a study, CARM allows professionals to identify the constituent parts of effective communication practices in sequences of interaction typical in their own professional lives, by approaching the data as a conversation analyst would, interrogating why certain actions are responded to in particular ways (see Pomerantz & Fehr, 1997; Stokoe, 2011). Importantly, training relies on examples of real rather than role-play interactions (Stokoe, 2013b).

CARM proves valuable as a method of professional learning for early childhood teachers (Church & Bateman, 2019a), because sharing video-recorded data with teachers provides unique insights and prompts for reflection (Cherrington, 2018; Nolan, Paatsch, & Scull, 2018). Early childhood teachers typically work in small teams, and opportunities for informal or
formal peer discussions and professional reflection can be limited (Molla & Nolan, 2019). Deconstructing a sequence of talk-in-interaction between children and teachers by identifying the trajectory set up by each subsequent turn at talk allows early childhood teachers to identify the practices which enable children's participation (Church & Bateman, 2019b); essentially encouraging teachers to discover the research findings related to their own practice themselves. Such analysis of one's own interactions with children offers a valuable resource for reflective practice.

There are other productive methodologies for investigating interactions in early learning environments, but CA, with its insistence on repeatedly returning to original recordings of interactions, allows us to see what actually happens, rather than what we assume or recall to have been central to interactions with children. We see how children contribute to learning sequences and find evidence of their competencies that may not be immediately visible in the busy life of an early learning centre. Data from CA research provide a sort of detailed eavesdropping otherwise unavailable to teachers given the demands of their daily professional responsibilities.

Research in Conversation Analysis and Early Childhood Education

Given the volume of CA research in early childhood in the past forty years, an adequate summary cannot be provided in this chapter. Instead, the Handbook as a whole aims to bring together this body of research – from sociology, linguistic anthropology, applied linguistics, psychology, education, and childhood studies – as a resource for early childhood educators. We should point out that there is a wealth of CA research on interactions within family contexts, detailing interactions with very young children and their parents (e.g. Filipi, 2009, 2019; Keel, 2016; Morita, 2019) and between siblings and other family members (e.g. Galatolo & Caronia, 2018; Goodwin, 2017; Takada & Kawashima, 2017). This research reveals children's socially constructed knowledge of the world and relationships, and provides a developmental account of learning insofar as children's competencies are revealed in talk-in-interaction (Gardner & Forrester, 2010; Wootton, 2006). Obviously young children learn across settings, primarily at home with parents, siblings, and other family members. Indeed, CA research in family interactions (e.g. Burdelski, 2019a; Butler & Edwards, 2018; Goodwin & Cekaite, 2018; Searles, 2019) has much to offer early childhood teachers in understanding children's knowledge-in-interaction.
The focus of this Handbook, however, is evidence gathered in early learning environments and the first year of primary school; the extracts and discussion speak directly to the practices and professional experience of early childhood teachers. Conversation analytic research in early childhood settings broadly responds to two main themes: the structure of question-and-answer sequences between groups of children and their teacher(s), and the social organization of peer relationships. An interest in how pedagogy and peer socialization are managed in and through multilingualism, where speakers shift between languages, is also an enduring focus for CA research. Regardless of the aims of individual projects, however, the process of teaching and learning – or the praxis of education – is invariably documented in CA research, because the data records sequences of interaction in children’s early learning environments.

Question-and-answer sequences, unsurprisingly, are a focus for many researchers as the locus for learning-in-interaction. CA research has shown how question design influences the likelihood of children contributing their ideas, positioning the child as expert and qualified to make suggestions (e.g. Baraldi, 2015; Bateman, 2015; Ekberg, Danby, Houen, Davidson, & Thorpe, 2017; Houen, Danby, Farrell, & Thorpe, 2016), and that extended pauses make it possible for children to formulate and contribute their ideas (e.g. Cohrssen, Church, & Tayler, 2014). More recently, learning interactions supported by and engaging with digital technologies have been studied, as research funding has been directed towards the role of information and communication technologies (ICT) in young children’s learning (e.g. Danby, Davidson, Theobald, Houen, & Thorpe, 2017; Danby, Fleer, Davidson, & Hatzigianni, 2018). Studies of interaction also consider children’s agency when talking with teachers, exploring what rights and resources they have to influence topics and trajectories of learning activities (e.g. Church & Bateman, 2019b; Theobald & Kultti, 2012). Notably, intentional teaching is not limited to task-based activities, as skilful teachers extend opportunities for learning by supporting exploration of concepts during play (e.g. Dalgren, 2017; Pursi, 2019).

Conversation analysts are interested in how people construct social actions – including how group membership is organized and talked into being – so peer relationships in early childhood have received a great deal of attention. This includes how friendships are maintained during play activities, documenting the linguistic, environmental, and knowledge resources children draw on to maintain alliances (e.g. Bateman, 2012; Butler, 2008; Cromdal, 2001; Theobald, 2017). Studies of peer relationships also document how inclusion or exclusion from the group is negotiated in interaction
(e.g. Evaldsson & Tellgren, 2009; Kultti & Odenbring, 2015). This includes observations of peer conflict, because conversation analysts have sought to identify how social status is collaboratively achieved and continually negotiated through peer interactions (e.g. Burdelski, 2020; Cekaite, 2020; Church, 2009; Danby & Baker, 1998; Goodwin, 1990, 2006; Moore & Burdelski, 2020). Disputes and imaginative play also provide opportunities for children to establish a locally regulated moral order (Björk-Willén, 2018; Danby & Theobald, 2012).

The common thread in these studies is that each turn at talk provides us with evidence of what the speaker has made of the previous turns at talk (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). This understanding is on display for teachers, for children, and for the researchers observing and recording the interaction. Importantly, each turn at talk can be used as a resource for another person to build a subsequent turn, because talk is cumulative (Goodwin, 2018). CA research pays attention to particular features of the talk made salient by the speakers themselves. Furthermore, talking with children draws upon and displays conceptual and cultural knowledge, linguistic resources, working theories, emotional regulation, socialization rules, and so on (Bateman, 2013; Cekaite, 2013).

Research in this Handbook

One of the challenges of dividing a text and nominating topics as chapters is that the structure of this book does not reflect the fact that practices are distributed across early childhood programmes. For example, ‘wellbeing’ or ‘multilingualism’ are not distinct elements of early learning, but rather permeate and are woven into children’s experiences. Similarly, we are not able to reflect the diversity of early childhood education settings, nor diversity within communities. Children bring to early childhood education a myriad of languages, cultural funds of knowledge, and lived experience. Teachers have different opportunities for securing qualifications and engaging in professional learning, and centres and families have different resources to draw on to support children to thrive. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that we are not able to detail all elements of early learning curricula or approaches and philosophy of education. Instead, what we have collected here is the existing expertise on interactions in international early learning environments from experienced CA researchers. The topics are defined by the available empirical evidence in CA research.
We should emphasize the heterogeneity of early childhood settings, as children and families have diverse cultural, linguistic, ethnic, educational, and socioeconomic backgrounds, with a range of experiences, abilities, and expectations. There is always a risk when holding up examples of practice of inadvertently claiming a notion of ‘best’ or common practice. Yet the ‘ideal’ is teaching and learning approaches that respond to the individual needs of each child, embedded within knowledge drawn from family and community. We know that there is no one size that suits all, but at the same time we do not want the rich diversity of children’s experiences to prohibit efforts to detail the learning interactions we have observed, to illustrate for teachers the often opaque process of collaboratively building extended sequences of talk.

Finally, the Handbook cannot capture all elements of early childhood curricula; instead, we share topics in which each author has expertise and empirical research evidence. The first section details the practices of talk-in-interaction, introducing teachers to concepts from CA and the machinery of learning interactions. The interactional practices explained and illustrated in the first section of the book support the reader to engage with the content of the next sections, which provide details of interaction in common strands of early childhood education programmes. This second section of the Handbook then details practices in key learning areas and outcomes in early childhood curricula, highlighting how their implementation is achieved as a collaborative effort between children and their teachers. The third section of the Handbook details practices that apply across topics of learning and provides teachers with practical insights into key principles of early childhood education.

Part I: Talk as Social Action

Chapter 1: Conversation Analysis for Early Childhood Education

In the first chapter, we (with Susan Danby) provide an introduction to the methodology and methods of CA, explaining the features of interaction that allow us to make sense of each other in conversation. The aim is to introduce the reader to the procedures used in CA research studies, so that the subsequent chapters are accessible. The first chapter is also designed to establish why CA is ideally suited to documenting children’s participation in learning-in-interaction, and making the moment-by-moment practices of pedagogy transparent for professional reflection.
Chapter 2: Sequences

Children learn about interaction in interaction. In this chapter Mardi Kidwell shows us how toddlers use sequences of action to establish joint attention with caregivers. We see that the relative positioning of turns – one after the other – allows for intersubjectivity or 'how two individuals come to share their minds' (Kern, Chapter 4, this volume) and how children use actions to express intention in systematic ways. This chapter shows us the where and how of responsive engagement with children from a very young age.

Chapter 3: Participation

Through close analysis of child-teacher interactions in outdoor learning environments, Amanda Bateman shows how the theories of the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky), scaffolding (Bruner), and guided participation (Rogoff) can be understood using CAs detailing of participation frameworks. Participation in this light reveals how embodied practices (how teachers position their bodies) and the design of sequences of turns (eliciting expanded responses from children) structure the organization and possibilities of pedagogy.

Chapter 4: Embodiment

Talking with children draws on a range of interactional resources to achieve collaborative and cooperative social action. Where other disciplines may refer to 'nonverbal' behaviour, conversation analysts are able to show how the physical body and objects in the environment are used simultaneously with talk to accomplish intersubjectivity. Friederike Kern provides a thorough review of this research in early childhood, illustrating how gesture, gaze, touch, and orientation to objects are coordinated for specific purposes by children and adults.

Chapter 5: Emotion

Language and embodied resources are used to convey and respond to emotional states. In this chapter, Asta Cekaite illustrates how children's emotions (sadness, laughter, empathy, compassion, among others) are displayed and interpreted in social interaction, and how teachers respond to these displays as opportunities for learning early socialization practices.
Chapter 6: Socialization

Language socialization is a field of study in its own right, and in this chapter, Matt Burdelski illustrates how CA studies contribute to understanding language-in-interaction as the vehicle for how children learn to go about being in the world, in ways that reference and constitute social norms and locally ratified practices (i.e. doing the ‘right’ thing, at the ‘right’ time, in the ‘right’ way).

Chapter 7: Epistemics

The relative knowledge of teachers and children is central to teaching and learning. Mushin and Gardner’s overview of epistemics in interactional research (i.e. who knows what and how this knowledge is displayed and oriented to) illustrates the locus of visible learning as an interactional achievement.

Part II: Pedagogy in Interaction

Chapter 8: Literacy

Marjolein Deunk, Myrte Gosen, Frans Hiddink, and Jan Berenst show us how children's emergent literacy knowledge is constructed in everyday activities, through shared book reading and collaborative writing activities. Notably, the teacher is not the only authority in learning about literacy, as the data illustrates how peer scaffolding supports understanding both the form (e.g. which letter to use) and function (e.g. writing an invitation) of environmental print.

Chapter 9: Storytelling

Early childhood teachers understand that storytelling is fundamental to children's learning, their knowledge of the world around them, and is foundational to emerging literacy. In this chapter, Anna Filipi shows us how adults co-tell stories with young children, using sequences of questions to elicit children's accounts of characters and events, with data that shows children's increasing capacity to contribute novel content to a story.

Chapter 10: Digital Technology

Computers, tablets, and smartphones are ubiquitous in children's lives. In this chapter, Susan Danby and Sandra Houen illustrate how digital
technology (e.g. web browsing) can provide opportunities for educators to co-create interaction that supports inquiry-based learning, problem solving, and conceptual engagement.

Chapter 11: Mathematics

The data in this chapter shows how talking about mathematics and spatial thinking can be co-constructed in play-based pedagogy. Caroline Cohrsen’s analysis reveals how teachers can introduce mathematical concepts into a building and map-making activity, and can simultaneously achieve assessment-in-interaction (i.e. establishing whether the children have mastered relational prepositions such as ‘under’, ‘on top of’, or ‘in between’) while taking on a participant role in highly creative and boisterous play.

Chapter 12: Creativity

This chapter provides readers with an extended example of children’s creative role-playing in the context of designing, demonstrating, and enacting their own script about marine ecosystems. Christine Lee explains that creating space (by providing resources and the time and freedom for children’s spontaneous creative play), valuing children’s agency, and extending creativity across the curriculum all support creativity in science learning.

Chapter 13: Multilingualism

Education programmes are often built on assumptions of monolingualism, despite the fact of – and the cognitive and social benefits of – childhood multilingualism. Jacob Cromdal and Kirsten Stoewer encourage us to re-calibrate our understanding of childhood multilingualism, by moving away from a monolingual bias in our understanding of language development, to accommodate the interactional competence displayed and deployed by children when drawing on more than one language. The chapter demonstrates how language alternation (shifting between languages) for specific purposes is a common social practice and can be harnessed for learning interactions with children.

Chapter 14: Belonging

Belonging is an essential element of early childhood programmes, where children’s sense of being part of the group is foundational to teaching and