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Young Learners: Teachers' Questions and Prompts as Opportunities for Children's Language Development[1)]

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Abstract

One highly regarded context for language learning is book reading, as teachers engage children in discussions around texts read. However, there is considerable variation in teachers' patterns of talk that mediate this learning with preschool children's oral language development dependent on the opportunities for engagement in language use provided by teachers. To explore the affordances of talk interactions within book reading a systematic analysis of teachers' questions and children's responses was undertaken. Results of this analysis show that the highest proportion of questions asked by this group of 18 preschool teachers were closed questions with a small proportion of open teaching questions asked. However, while open questions provided the most substantial opportunities for children's extended talk, the range of questions asked provided opportunities for preschool teachers to extend children's responses, support children's understanding of the text, develop vocabulary and world knowledge, and to model more complex language structures.

Keywords : oral language, book reading, early childhood, teaching questions

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Introduction

Reading to children is a key feature of early literacy practice and is considered a daily, routine activity by many preschool teachers. Book reading has been found repeatedly to have remarkable power in fostering language acquisition and improving children's early reading success (Dickinson, Griffith, Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 2012). The prevalence of this literacy event and its centrality to language and literacy learning in preschool programs accounts for the focus of research attention this practice has attracted. Alongside studies that highlight the facilitative role of reading to children on the development of print concepts, phonological awareness and comprehension, this context has been extensively researched for language learning (Hansen, 2004). There is now a substantial corpus of research that indicates text reading and talk about text fosters children's oral language development, with particular emphasis on expanding the vocabulary knowledge needed for reading (Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Elley, 1989; Ewers & Brownson, 1999; Wasik & Bond, 2001). However, familiarity with discourse structures that mirror the complexity of written texts has also been recognised as supportive of children's reading acquisition (Dickinson, 2001; Hill & Launder, 2009; Raban, 1999; Snow, 1991). Donaldson, in 1978, recognised book reading as a context for this learning, describing children who are read to as being more familiar with the structure of the language we write as distinct from the language we speak. Building on this research, this study of literacy practice aimed to consider talk interactions during book reading in preschools as contexts to scaffold children's extended utterances. The study examined teaching questions, as opportunities to foster children's talk, and the potential these created for children to use the syntactic structures, and morphological and lexical features of language particular to the discourse features of written texts.

Fostering Language Development through Book Reading

Book reading is a pleasurable, engaging event, highly efficacious in fostering children's understanding of self, their real and imagined worlds, language, and concepts of print. Further, research studies indicate children benefit from teaching practices that actively involve them in the book reading process, foregrounding the dialogue around text reading as promoting rich

learning (Hansen, 2004; Mol, Bus, de Long & Smeets, 2008). One line of research considers talk around text and the subsequent improvements in young children's vocabulary knowledge (Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Ewers & Brownson 1999; Gerde & Powell 2009; Penno, Wilkinson & Moore 2002; Whitehurst, Zevenbergen, Crone, Schultz, Velting & Fischel, 1999; Wasik & Bond, 2001). Hindman and colleagues (2008) also identify text talk as being linked to vocabulary outcomes. Alongside these studies, there are others that report "Matthew effects" (Stanovich, 1986) where the 'rich get richer' as children with larger vocabularies gain more from the book reading experience as they more readily learn words from context than children with low prior vocabulary knowledge. This research indicates that explicit oral scaffolding techniques and explanations of unfamiliar words support children to acquire understanding of new words (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Coyne, Simmons & Kame'enui, 2004; Elley, 1989; Ewers & Brownson, 1999; Penno, Wilkinson & Moore, 2002; Robbins & Ehri, 1994). These studies point to a preference for interactive shared reading, engaging children in conversations about text as the stimulus for expanding vocabulary knowledge.

Shared reading, as an approach to teaching, also provides opportunities for adults and children to use the information from the book to talk about objects and events beyond the here and now, exploring and employing extended, decontextualised language forms. Curenton and colleagues (2008) stress the importance of investigating opportunities for children to both hear and generate decontextualised language, as allowing children to handle complex language with growing facility.

Teachers' Questions and Children's Language Use

Dickinson and Smith (1994) identify effective read aloud teaching strategies. Such strategies include fostering discussion on major story ideas, dealing with ideas as they are encountered in contrast to after the story has been read, and involving children in discussions with the opportunities to be reflective. However, it is often challenging for teachers to move beyond constrained questions that require children to recall to simple facts and details in the text (Beck & McKeown, 2001). To address this issue, Beck and McKeown developed 'Text Talk', an approach that not only intended to promote children's comprehension of texts read but also to foster children's language development. Data from their pilot study showed

teachers' use of open questions prompted elaborated responses from children. Notwithstanding, these authors note that children often had difficulty constructing responses beyond one or two word answers. Further, they report that considerable teacher effort was required to create thoughtful follow-up questions to assist students to construct elaborated responses. Thus emphasis was given to supporting teachers to respond to children's initial comments in productive ways. Encouraging teachers to repeat and rephrase children's responses prompted more elaborated language and invited other children to connect the ideas that were being discussed. Another approach included the use of generic probes that required children to explain or provide further details, such as: "What does that mean?" Beck and McKeown (2001) conclude that even with an awareness of what makes reading aloud effective, "it is challenging to keep discussions consistently focussed on the most productive features…while monitoring children's often limited responses and scaffolding their ideas towards constructing meaning" (p. 19).

Similarly, recent studies highlight considerable variability in practices employed during book reading sessions with groups of preschool children. Gerde and Powell's study (2008) of teaching questions during large group book reading sessions reinforced claims of variability relative to the number and type of questions asked. Their study provides insight into question types and children's responses. They report that on average 13.81 questions were asked per book reading session and of these generally 9.13 questions were low level distancing (requesting labels, concrete descriptions), 1.45 were identified as medium level distancing (responses that moved beyond the immediate environment, inviting classification or comparisons) with 3.23 questions identified as high level distancing (requiring children to engage in causal inference, predict outcomes, and use hypothetical reasoning).

Massey and colleagues (2008) examined the types and complexity of teachers' questions to determine the extent to which these prompted opportunities for children to engage in "conceptually challenging conversations of a relatively abstract nature" (p. 341). They state that while educators can use a range of strategies to evoke children's participation in conversations, open ended, low constraint questions, and children's responses to these questions tend to be longer and more variable in their content to closed, high constraint questions that often require yes/no answers (Massey, et al., 2008, p. 344). They found a higher use of cognitively demanding questions within the context of storybook activities. Particular

to book reading, these authors claim that open-ended questions are an important mechanism for engaging children in sustained dialogue.

The Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years study (REPEY) (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004) showed that children advancing the most from preschool experiences on measures of cognitive, social and educational outcomes attended preschools that promoted talk interactions, with quality talk interactions indentified as 'sustained shared thinking'. These researchers define this interlocutor pattern as "an episode in which two or more individuals 'work together' in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative," and where both parties contribute to the thinking (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004, p.7). The ideal pattern in sustained shared thinking/talking is one where the teacher's language reflects and extends the child's attempts to understand, rather than judge, and responds constructively rather than assesses what the child produced. Through their analysis Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva recognised an early association between sustained shared thinking and this form of teacher questioning, noting that the child was given the opportunity to get further with their understandings through the use of facilitative language that modeled appropriate forms of 'thinking out loud'. Classroom interactions, therefore, can be characterized as either open and sustained or closed and ended, based on the linguistic style of questions, statements, and replies by the teacher.

Central to this discussion of practice to build children's oral language are the ways in which dialogue is invited, and the type of talk that promotes interaction and opportunities for children's extended, decontextualised responses. Most important is recognition that one of the primary purposes of teacher talk is to structure opportunities for children's learning. As Essex and Raban (1999) state:

> Talk used purposefully and concisely allows children opportunities for active and focused listening as well as providing a model for student talk. Most learning, however, will occur during the opportunities that are made for student talk (p.7).

With reference to research that highlights the role of the teacher in building children's language competency, the focus of this study was to complete a systematic analysis of teaching questions within book reading contexts and to consider the children's responses these questions prompted. It was intended that this study contribute to the theoretical and

practice base that supports the examination of effective talk practices and the evaluation of classroom discourse to inform teaching interventions.

Method

This study of literacy teaching practice is situated within the *Young Learners' Project (YLP),* a six year (2007-2012) research project conducted throughout Victoria, Australia. The project includes an investigation of the beliefs and practices of preschool teachers working with children aged 4–5 years and aims to identify distinct literacy teaching strategies and their impact on children's early literacy development (Brown, Scull, Nolan, Raban & Deans, 2012). The teachers involved in the YLP study were employed as preschool teachers delivering the government funded prior-to-school program for four-year-old children and were selected on the basis of opportunistic sampling**.** The researchers drew upon known early childhood networks to invite preschools, representative of typical practice across geographic locations, to participate in the study.

This paper reports on a subset of the Young Learners' Project data and provides an examination of 18 preschool teachers, from the first two years of the study, engaged in shared book reading with a small group of children. Of the eighteen participants (17 females and 1 male) one teacher had a Masters qualification, twelve held Bachelor degrees, while the other five had Diploma of Teaching qualifications. Their preschool teaching experience ranged from 1 to 39 years (M = 16.3 years). The sample size, although moderate, is similar to other studies that examine teaching interactions where small sample sizes are common due to the labor-intensive nature of transcription and coding (Curenton et al., 2008).

Data Collection and Analysis

Each teacher was invited to select a book to read to a small group of three to four children who attended their preschool program. Sixteen teachers chose to read fiction books, one teacher selected poetry, while one teacher selected a factual book. The shared book sessions were video recorded, with the camera and 'inbuilt' microphone placed in close proximity to

the teacher and the children, to capture talk interactions. All sessions ranged in duration from 10 to 15 minutes, and occurred most often in rooms occupied only by the teacher and the small focus group to avoid noise distractions. The teachers' and children's talk were transcribed verbatim for analysis, with YLP student identification numbers used to differentiate the child participants. A research assistant completed the first transcriptions of all videotaped sessions. The researchers checked these transcripts for accuracy and ensured that talk turns were correctly assigned to speakers.

Each shared reading session transcript was coded according to the types of teaching questions used by the preschool teacher. The coding scheme was developed according to Siraj-Blatchford and Manni's (2008) coding system and actual data of the present study. Five broad question categories (*Closed, Open, Statement, Pseudo Choice Request, and Recall Questions),* encompassing 12 question types emerged from the data. Results showed that 10 of the 12 question types fitted within the three broad categories of *Open, Closed and Statement Questions*. Three of the question types represented the category of *Closed Questions (Closed Known, Closed Not Known, and Closed Yes/No).* Five question types represented the category of *Open Questions.* These included: (1) *Open-Prediction, (2) Open-Inference, (3) Open-World Knowledge, (4) Open-Opinion,* and (5) *Open-Clarification questions.* Interesting patterns of question types were also evident in the category of *Statement Questions.* These included *Statement-Acknowledgement* and *Statement-Information* questions. Table 1 outlines the five broad categories and 12 question types used to code the data, along with a description of each question type and an example from the transcripts.

Once these categories were finalised, all questions were re-coded independently by two of the researchers. Consensus coding occurred when coding differences were noted. This was rare, but in such cases, both researchers sat together and coded until an agreement was reached.

In addition to the coding of teacher question types, illustrative examples of children's responses to each question type were also investigated. This involved examining children's responses as to whether these types of questions provided opportunities for children to use extended language. In cases where extended responses were given, these utterances were further analysed. Clauses rather than sentences were used as the primary unit of analysis. Butt and colleagues (2001) explain spoken language is not divided into sentences, with the term

Table 1. *Description and Examples of Question Categories and Types of Teaching Questions.*

Category	Question type	Description	Example
Closed			
	Closed question with answer known	A question to which the answer is known by the teacher and to which there is only one acceptable response	Is he flying or is he running?
	Closed question with answer not known	A question to which the child holds the answer. The response usually involves a small selection of acceptable possible choices.	And what is your favourite story?
	Closed question - Yes/No	A question which requires a yes/no response	Can bears fly?
Open			
	Open-Prediction question	A question to which the child is encouraged to predict what may be happening in the text	What do you think is next, Tom?
	Open-Inference question	A question to which the child is encouraged to infer from the text/illustration	Why do you think she wouldn't wear it?
	Open-World Knowledge question	A question requiring the child to relate to their own experiences and world knowledge.	Do you know another word for looking?
	Open-Opinion question	A question to which the child is encouraged to give their opinion	Which part did you like?
	Open-Clarification question	A question to clarify the child's response.	*C: It doesn't look like a boat* T: This one?
Statement			
	Statement-Acknowledgement question	A question which acknowledges the child's response.	It looks a bit the same doesn't it?
	Statement-Information question	A question which provides further information.	It seems to be very hard to make them happy, doesn't it?
Pseudo Choice Request			
	Pseudo choice question	A question which is usually a statement or demand and does not seek a response.	Are you ready to listen to me? Do you want to come a little bit closer and sit down here?
Recall			
	Recall question	A question which seeks to recall information previously learned, experienced, or taught.	What have we been exploring for the last week?

* Adapted from the study by Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2008).

'clause complex' a more appropriate term for the patterns of language above the clause level. This type of grammatical analysis provided an opportunity to examine the complexity of children's oral language in terms of syntactic control through the number of clauses, use of conjunctions (and the subsequent inclusion of compound or complex clauses) alongside morphological and lexical features of language determined by children's use of verbs, noun and/or noun groups, pronouns, and adverbial choices**.** For example, one child's extended response to the *Open* question "Why do you think they have to start here?" was "Because that's where the pirates were and then they sailed away".

This extended response shows the child's use of a dependent clause consisting of a compound clause complex. The child uses a number of morphological features such as contractions (that's), free morphemes (away) and bound morphemes (ed), plurals and past tense. In addition, lexical features are also evident such as nouns (pirates), pronouns (they) and adverbs (away).

Results

A total of 532 teaching questions, across the 18 storybook sessions between preschool teachers and small groups of children, were analysed and coded according to the 12 question types identified in Table 1.

The number of questions asked in each session of book reading ranged from 6 to 77 questions (M = 29.6). Figure 1 shows the distribution of teaching questions according to the 5 broad categories of *Closed, Open, Statement, Pseudo Choice Request* and *Recall.* Tallies for each category are expressed as a proportion of the total number of teaching questions (N=532). As detailed in Figure 1 the largest proportion of teaching questions were *Closed Questions* (.56). A smaller proportion of *Statement* (.17) and *Open* (.16) teaching questions were also evident with *Pseudo Choice Request* and *Recall* teaching questions used infrequently by this group of preschool teachers.

Teaching questions within the five broad categories of *Closed, Open, Statement, Pseudo Choice Requests,* and *Recall* questions along with examples of children's responses are outlined in the sections that follow.

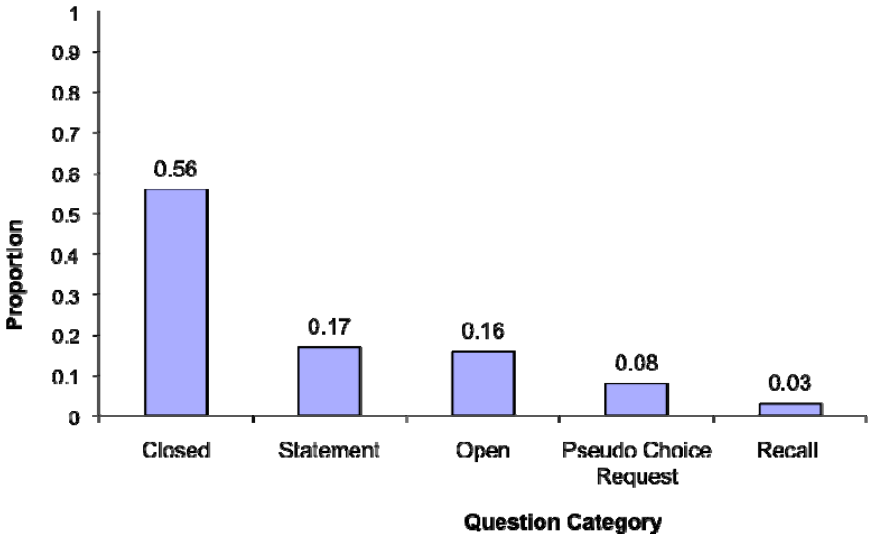

Figure 1. *Teaching Questions (N=532) According to the Five Broad Categories of Closed, Open, Statement, Pseudo Choice Request and Recall.*

Closed teaching questions category. Teaching questions within the broad category of *Closed* teaching questions (n=298) showed that the three main question types that were evident in the data included: (1) *Closed Known, (2) Closed Not Known*, and (3) *Closed Yes/No Questions.* Tallies for each question type are expressed as a proportion of the total number of *Closed* teaching questions. Results showed that there was a similar proportion of *Closed Known* (.45) and *Closed Yes/No* (.43) teaching questions asked by this group of 18 preschool teachers during shared book reading. Few *Closed Not Known* (.12) teaching questions were evident in this sample.

Further scrutiny of the *Closed* teaching questions revealed that all three question types provided opportunities for children to use extended language. For example, *Closed Yes/No* teaching questions resulted in three main types of child responses. First, the question was structured in such a way that the children could only respond using a yes/no response because the context was known. For example, *"Was it glass?"*

Second, these teaching questions were used throughout the interaction as a way of acknowledging children's responses then encouraging them to think further, extend their ideas, or to build on their experiences and vocabulary knowledge. For example, "Child: *I know! It's*

a wand. Teacher: *It could be a wand. It could be a thing that the king holds to show that he is king. Do you think that?"*

Finally, *Closed Yes/No* questions were also structured in a way that appeared to show that the intention of the preschool teacher was to elicit an extended response. Typically, these questions commenced with the phrases "Do you know?" or "Do you think?" and were often used to initiate discussion around the book. In some cases, children responded to these teaching questions with a yes/no response while other children gave more extended responses that appeared to show an understanding of the teaching intention (see Example 1).

Example 1

Teacher: *Do you think* that makes him scared?

Child 1: *No*

Child 2: *No*

Child 3: *He's just doing that so no-one can see him*

In Example 1, it appears that the children are being asked to think beyond the closed, high constraint question and to consider why the character in the book was scared. Interestingly, Child 1 and Child 2 responded with a more literal response to the question (i.e., yes/no) while Child 3 gave a more extended response that demonstrated the use of more complex language structures. Child 3's utterance in this example contains two clauses "He's just doing that" and "no-one can see him" that are linked by the conjunction "so", showing an understanding of the relationship between cause and effect.

This child also uses morphological and lexical features such as contractions (he's), present tense (doing), pronouns (he; him) and verbs (see; doing). Such differences in children's responses may suggest differing levels of understanding and linguistic development or may be due to rehearsed interaction patterns and familiar discourse routines during book reading where expectations of elaborated responses have been established.

Despite the small proportion of *Closed Not Known* questions within the data set (.12), this question type also provided opportunities for children to give extended responses. Although the nature of the questions limited the number of acceptable responses, the preschool teachers in this study demonstrated a genuine interest in finding out what children know and think, and

created opportunities for a range of responses and extended talk. Example 2 below is illustrative of the patterns of responses elicited from *Closed Not Known* teaching question types. Child 4 in this instance uses a large noun group (junk food honey and jam) and an adverbial phrase of time (at the same time), in addition to an adverbial phrase of manner (on the same toast).

In contrast, Child 2 and Child 3 show use of less complex language structures with each response containing a pronoun, verb, and two nouns linked by a simple conjunction.

Example 2

Teacher: *What else do you like on your toast?*

Child 1: *Peanut butter*

Child 2: *I like jam and peanut butter*

Child 3: *I like more butter and vegemite*

Child 4: *I have junk food honey and jam at the same time on the same toast*

Open teaching questions category. Teaching questions within the broad category of *Open* teaching questions (n=87) showed five main question types – *Open-Predication*, *Open-Inference*, *Open-World Knowledge*, *Open-Opinion*, and *Open Clarification*. Figure 2 shows the distribution of *Open* questions according to these question types. Tallies for each question type are expressed as a proportion of the total number of *Open* teaching questions. Results show that *Open-Prediction* questions were the highest proportion of *Open questions* (.32). A smaller, but similar, proportion of *Open-Inferences* (.25) and *Open-World Knowledge* (.23) teaching questions were evident. The smallest proportion of *Open* questions asked during the shared book reading sessions were *Open-Clarification* questions (.08).

Further scrutiny of the *Open* teaching question category data revealed that, while limited in the overall proportion of questions (.16), these question types provided the most substantial opportunities for children's extended talk. Children's responses to these *Open* questions revealed the varied use of syntactic structures, and morphological and lexical features of language.

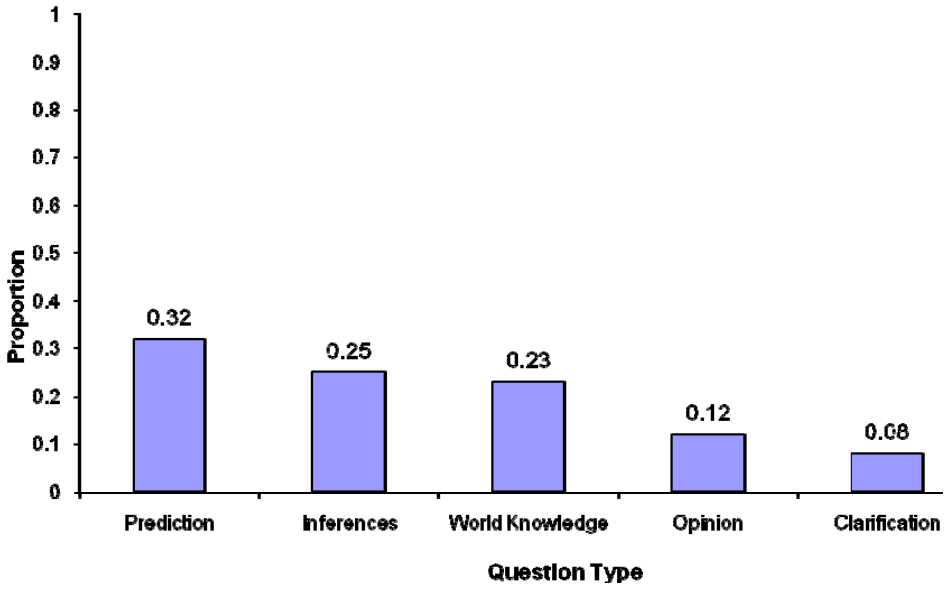

Figure 2. *Five Question Types - Open-Predication, Open-Inference, Open-World Knowledge, Open-Opinion and Open-Clarification Questions Evident in the Broad Category of Open Teaching Questions (n=87).*

Typically, children's extended responses to these questions consisted of both independent (the clocks will be mixed up) and dependent clauses (because that's where the pirates were and then they sailed away). Example 3 below illustrates typical responses to *Open* questions which contained a single clause. Child 1's response to this *Open-Inference* question shows the use of morphological and lexical features such as future verb tense (will have), a noun and a pronoun, while Child 2's response shows morphological features such as plurals (clocks) and the use of the future tense (will be). Both children show the ability to use the higher order thinking skill of prediction.

Example 3

Teacher: *What would happen to the rest of everything else?*

Child 1: *They'll have breakfast*

Child 2*: the clocks will be mixed up*

Example 4 shows a typical extended response to *Open* questions containing a clause

complex (i.e., containing two or more independent clauses).

The child in this example uses morphological features such as past tense, and lexical features such as pronouns (it: we), a conjunction to link the two independent clauses, and an adverbial phrase of time (at breakfast time). It is also evident that this child is using the higher order thinking skill of prediction and shows an understanding of cause and effect.

Example 4

Teacher: *What would happen to all the other children if we put the clock back?*

Child: *It would be muddled up and we will have dinner at breakfast time*

Statement teaching questions category. Teaching questions within the broad category of *Statement* teaching questions (n=90) showed two main question types – *Statement-Acknowledgement* and *Statement-Information*.

Tallies for each question type are expressed as a proportion of the total number of *Statement* teaching questions. Results showed that there was an equal distribution of *Statement-Acknowledgement* (.5) and *Statement-Information* (.5) questions in this sample.

Overall, the findings suggest that the intention of *Statement-Information* questions was not to elicit an extended response from the children but rather, to provide extra information with the use of a tag question at the end of the utterance. Further examination of the *Statement-Information* questions revealed that these types of questions were often used to correctly answer the teacher's previous *Closed* questions when the children did not know the answer. In Example 5, the preschool teacher asked the children a *Closed* question regarding one of the characters in the book. When a child provides an unclear response, it appears that the teacher subtly builds on this and provides the correct information through the use of a statement followed by a tag question.

Example 5

Teacher: *Who was Murrawee in the story?*

Child 1: *That old person who was eat crabs.*

Teacher: *She was the little aboriginal girl that lived a long, long time age, wasn't she?*

Statement-information questions were also used to expand the children's world knowledge and to support their understanding of the text. Typically, this involved a consistent pattern of interaction between the preschool teacher and the group of children. This pattern included the teacher asking a question, followed by a short response from a child that showed some understanding of the text, followed by the teacher providing more explicit information with the addition of a tag question, as illustrated in Example 6.

Example 6
Teacher: *What was it?*
Child: *Wood*
Teacher: *...it was a wooden bowl that they made from a tree trunk, wasn't it?*

Further inspection of the broad category of *Statement* questions revealed that *Statement-Acknowledgement* questions were used in two distinct ways during shared book reading. First, these questions specifically acknowledged the child's contribution to the group discussion. Example 7 is a typical example of this interaction pattern, whereby the teacher asks a question, the child's answers, and then the teacher repeats the child's response with the addition of a tag question.

Example 7
Teacher: *And how did he feel?*
Child: *very sad*
Teacher: *very sad, wasn't he?*

Second, *Statement-Acknowledgement* questions were often used as a vehicle for expanding children's responses. Typically, in using these types of questions, the children's responses would be acknowledged explicitly through repetition of the child's response by the teacher. It also provided an opportunity for the preschool teacher to extend vocabulary and model specific syntactic structures, linking the child's response with the text being read. In addition, it provided the opportunity to model an extended response for a child who appeared to be shy when responding in a small group. In Example 8, the child's response is acknowledged and

also, more extensive vocabulary is used that relates to the text in the story.

Example 8
Teacher: *What did he wake up with the next day?*
Child: *horns*
Teacher: *horns, hideously hard horns, didn't he?*

Pseudo choice request and recall teaching questions categories. The final two broad categories of teaching questions were *Pseudo Choice Request* and *Recall* questions. Given the small number of *Recall* questions in the overall sample (0.03), it was not appropriate to generalise the pattern of responses and report these findings. However, the single question type in the category of *Pseudo Choice Request* questions was typically used either as a way of directing the children to specific information in the text, or as a way of inviting the children to participate in a particular activity. These questions were immediately followed by another statement or teaching question by the preschool teacher or by particular children reacting appropriately, suggesting that this question type was not used with the intention of eliciting a verbal response from the children.

Discussion

The results reported here contribute to the empirical evidence available that promotes book reading as a key teaching context for children's language use and learning (Dickinson et al., 2012; Massey et al., 2008). Further, it reinforces associations between book reading and the types of questions asked as a stimulus for extended, more complex language use. Findings from this research reveal that over half of the teaching questions asked by this group of 18 preschool teachers during storybook reading were *Closed* questions (.56), with a small proportion of *Open* teaching questions asked (.16). These findings are comparable to other studies which have reported small numbers of open teaching questions (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2008). However, our data, drawn solely from book reading, shows a higher proportion of open questions (16%) than the 5.5% of open question varieties reported by Siraj-Blatchford

and Manni (2008) whose data set was obtained from four half-day observations in 12 settings. Furthermore, while it is well documented in the literature (Gerde & Powell, 2008; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2008) that open questions provide the most substantial opportunities for extended discourse and more complex language structures, the findings from this study show that other question types also provided opportunities for preschool teachers to support children's language development.

Open teaching questions. Open teaching questions asked to young preschool children provided opportunities to expand vocabulary, scaffold children's utterances while engaged in conversation around the book, and enabled children to use more complex language structures. Overall, open questions used by this group of preschool teachers required children to use higher order thinking strategies and were more cognitively challenging. For example, three of the five open question types encouraged children to predict, infer, evaluate and give opinions. Open questions were also used as a way of linking to the children's own world experiences and provided opportunities for teachers to support the children's understanding of new words. Teachers also sought clarification through the use of open questions. These clarification questions often provided opportunities for the teacher to work together with the children to solve problems and scaffold the children's comprehension of the text. However, the results from this study show that this group of preschool teachers used these types of questions less frequently, relative to the overall number of questions asked during book reading. This view is supported by the findings from Gerde and Powell (2008), who reported that these types of high distancing questions were used less frequently than questions which requested labels and concrete descriptions.

Children's responses to open teaching questions provided opportunities for extended utterances that included more complex, integrated language structures. Results showed that children typically used simple and compound clauses with some evidence of the use of dependent clauses. However, not all open teaching questions resulted in extended discourse. This suggests that some preschool teachers may not be aware of the opportunity for extended language these questions afford, and therefore neglected to 'press' (Raban, 2001) the children to engage in more complex language use. In contrast, some teachers may be very sensitive to the varying levels of language and text comprehension in the group, and intentionally select

questions, targeted to children's language competencies, and accept children's responses accordingly.

Closed teaching questions. The findings from this study reveal that the *Closed* teaching questions also provided opportunities for sustained dialogue. These findings are in contrast to the view presented in the literature, which reports that closed questions provide limited opportunities for extended discourse and higher order thinking during book reading. For example, the *Closed – Yes/No* questions elicited both yes/no answers and more extended responses. Similar to the findings from open teaching questions, closed questions provided opportunities to engage children as interlocutors in elaborated interactions around the text.

It appears that the types of responses elicited from the children were often dependent on the way the teaching questions were worded and the children's understanding of the teaching intention. For example, in some cases *Closed-yes/no* teaching questions were often structured in such a way that encouraged a yes/no response only. In other cases, the questions were phrased in a way that encouraged children to think further or to provide a more extended response. These findings suggest that many children may have been familiar with the routine and expected patterns of teacher/child interaction and discourse during book reading. These children demonstrated an understanding that book reading is a time for engaging in sustained talk and recognised the teachers' expectation that they provide more extended responses.

Other teaching questions. In addition to question types that prompted children's responses were those that sought clarifications or extended and built on the children's contribution to talk interactions. *Statement Acknowledgment and Statement Information questions* were frequently used to elaborate children's contributions, as teachers reformulated children's comments, expanding and rephrasing responses to clarify and extend children's meanings (Palincsar, 1998; Sharpe, 2001). These follow-up questions modelled distinct lexical items and linguistic patterns in contexts of use. By using a range of strategies such as these, teachers' language provided examples of more precise and explanatory speech forms. The importance of language input is reported by Hart and Risley (1995). Their research findings show that variation in language exposure impacts significantly on young children's language acquisition rates, with attention to vocabulary learning. Furthermore, Huttenlocher and

colleagues (2002) note that teachers who expose children to more complex forms of language in their own talk, developed children's growth in their command over complex syntactical structures in language.

Teachers' use of questions, to probe and elaborate children's responses, saw teaching move beyond the enduring initiation, response, feedback (IRF) pattern of classroom interactions (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). In contrast to teacher comments that evaluate and close down the conversation, the teachers in this study used questions as a powerful teaching option that demonstrated ways for children to extend their ideas verbally and participate in extended talk interactions (Cazden, 1988; Fisher, 2005; Palincsar, 1998). Likewise, teachers' turns as further questions, within the talk sequence illustrated contingent patterns of talk to promote discussion and thinking, as ways to articulate responses to texts (Hughes & Westgate, 1998; Palincsar, 1998; Raban 2001).

Conclusion

With respect to teaching practices that were observed around book reading, as one example of teaching to foster early language development, preschool teachers evoked a repertoire of responses in their engagement with children. There were a range of questions identified, with different question types, appropriate to context and purpose, used to foster children's participation and their engagement in talk interactions. Some questions resulted in more sustained conversations and prompted children's more extensive language use. As children were required to delve for deeper meaning during talk about text, and reach for more complex semantic and syntactic layering, vocabulary and syntax were built, alongside their conceptual understanding of the texts.

This study contributes to the growing body of research that emphasises the role of the teacher in developing children's language (Huttenlocher, Vasilyeva, Cymerman, & Levine, 2002; Vasilyeva & Waterfall, 2012), and reinforces the need for teachers to pose thought provoking questions and make comments that result in shared, sustained thinking about complex issues and concepts (Dickinson, Darrow, Ngo, & D'Souza, 2009; Siraj-Blatchford, & Sylva, 2004). Furthermore, it recognises the importance of "socially embedded, mediated

interactions with more knowledgeable conversational partners as critical developmental mechanisms that provide children with linguistic input associated with accelerated outcomes" (Justice, Mashburn, Pence & Wiggins, 2008, p. 985).

The results also highlight the need for teachers to reflect on their practice and engage in professional learning that includes a close examination of teaching behaviours. City and colleagues (2009) remind us, "people have to engage in sustained description and analysis of instructional practice before they can acquire either the expertise or the authority to judge it, much less to evaluate other people doing it" (p. 33). In the research reported here, the focus has been informing ourselves and others about those teaching activities which support young children's early language development.

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