This book sits within the field of research on language and social interactions, pedagogy and professional learning for the early childhood education (ECE) community. Adopting the methodology of conversation analysis (CA), the editors and chapter authors make visible the primary data and subsequent analysis of excerpts of interaction to display the practices that enable children to engage in creative thinking, problem-solving and conceptual understanding. In doing so, the contributors to this book provide invaluable source material for those working and researching in early childhood, and those preparing students to enter this field of practice. The book meets a genuine need in the ECE sector for unpacking the ‘how’ of ECE pedagogy in order to meet the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of ECE curricula frameworks and associated goals. Each chapter arises from interaction that has taken place in ECE contexts and draws upon the available empirical evidence in CA research pertaining to the chapter content.
Attention to the interaction that takes place between adults and children, and between children, is an ongoing professional endeavour, established in global ECE curricula, and a rich area of research enquiry. However, there is little to help the educator know ‘how’ talking with children might be done, day to day and moment by moment. Indeed, it is acknowledged that many practitioners lack knowledge about how to engage with children to support and extend their learning (Walsh, McGuinness & Sproule, 2019). Evidence also suggests that adults do not routinely consider children’s competencies when planning for their learning and participation in ECE contexts (e.g. Waters & MacDonald, 2020; Murphy et al., 2022). The exemplification throughout this book provides deep and clear insight, through empirical evidence, of children’s competencies, and as such supports educators to frame the child as both competent and capable.

Research in ECE has underlined the importance of adult–child interaction for children’s outcomes (e.g. Fleer, 2019; Lewis, Fleer & Hammer, 2019; Sylva et al., 2014); emphasizing the role of the adult in responding to children’s interests to extend or develop their ideas, thinking and/or conceptual understanding. There is also considerable attention paid to the need for relational pedagogy which attends to ‘the needs, passions and interests of learners’ (e.g. Papatheodorou, 2009, p. 4), and in which the learner ‘has experiences and knowledge that become the lenses through which new knowledge, information and experience are filtered and understood’ (p. 7). There is international consensus then, that adults working in high quality ECE should enact pedagogies that are responsive, relational and intentional (e.g. Fleer, 2011; Payler, 2009). This book evidences and unpacks practice from across diverse international contexts so that the knowledge and understanding of the participating child/ren is made visible in the turn-by-turn presentation of interaction. This enables readers to consider responsive, relational and intentional pedagogy from the perspective of engagement in day-to-day talk and interaction with young children. The book provides a lens through which to consider, reflexively and deeply, our own practices.

There is an international consensus that professional learning for the ECE sector needs to be systematic, sustainable and transformative (see for example, Waters & Payler, 2015; Sumshion et al., 2015). This book is a valuable resource in this endeavour. The specific contribution of the book is the explicit presentation of empirical research data and its analysis by expert researchers to inform – and potentially transform - practice. The
scholarship exemplified throughout the book makes it a valuable, and accessible, collection of expert knowledge applied to the field of ECE.

The editors, Church and Bateman, provide an accessible and engaging introduction to the book illustrating clearly the value of research in CA for professional learning for those involved in working with young children. In referencing the work of Elizabeth Stokoe (2014), we understand the value of sharing real interactions, exploring them turn by turn, with professionals to support learning about the ‘how’ of interaction within the specific professional setting. Within the ECE context such exploration allows not only the identification of practices which enable children’s participation, but also recognition of the competencies of young children. Divided into three sections, the book supports the practitioner reader, who is likely to be a novice in CA, to understand and engage in the processes by which CA makes visible what happens in the microcosm of short sequences of adult–child and child–child interaction.

Part 1 explores talk as social action; chapters explore, in turn: sequences that make tangible very young children’s intention and competency in establishing intersubjectivity with care-givers; how possibilities for children’s participation can be structured through teachers’ pedagogical actions; how children use gesture, gaze, touch and orientation (embodiment) to accomplish specific purposes in interaction; how teachers can respond to children’s displays of emotion made visible through interaction; how children learn ‘to go about being in the world’, that is socialize to local norms and practices, through the vehicle of language-in-interaction; and finally, the relative knowledge of teachers and children and how this is displayed and oriented to in interaction (epistemics). Such consideration is made accessible through the use of recognisable and relatable excerpts of talk taken from real ECE contexts. Each chapter, throughout the book, includes recommendations which can be taken directly into day-to-day ECE practice. These excerpts and the explanation they provide for what may appear to be complex constructs enable professional learning for the individual reader, though possibly more powerful is the potential to consider, as a group of practitioners, the ‘how’ of our own pedagogy through the lens of each chapter.

Part 2 of the book provides insight into pedagogy in interaction. The titles of the chapters may feel more recognisable to ECE teachers as they reflect aspects of global ECE curriculum expectations. However, each chapter, through the use of CA transcripts of classroom interaction, provides insight
into everyday practices and occurrences that deepen our understanding of how children come to know. This section of the book unpacks aspects of pedagogy, making visible what happens, and can happen, for children in peer-peer interaction, during storytelling, while using digital technology, and through play that is structured, and unstructured, across domains such as literacy, mathematics and science. This section of the book also celebrates children’s competencies in multilingual contexts and explores belonging as a visible social practice. Part 2 of the book demonstrates possibilities available for adults working in ECE to notice, recognize, and respond to children in ways that support them in knowledge building and understanding. It also allows us to reflect upon how we plan for children’s learning, how we create environments to support learning and whether and how we recognize children’s competencies during interaction.

In part 3 of the book the chapter authors consider enactment of key principles of early childhood education. The opening chapter in this section provides insight into intentionality in pedagogy by demonstrating what happens when an adult adopts a playful stance to support children to manage distress from parental separation, that is, supporting children to self-regulate their emotions. In the chapter concerning mental health and wellbeing the focus is placed on a communication toolkit, built from sequences of interaction between mental health clinicians and primary school aged children to illustrate how particular question design can elicit children’s experiences of their own emotional state and needs. Challenging us to reflect carefully on notions of normativity, the chapter takes a competence-based approach to understanding children’s experiences which is also adopted in the chapter considering neurodiversity. In challenging the assumptions implicit in typicality and taking a stance that affirms autistic identities and experiences, this chapter makes visible the competencies of autistic children that are on display in interaction with adults. The recommendations for practice challenge us to consider how support for, and assessment of progress in, autistic children might be re-imagined. In her chapter concerning preschool friendships Theobald demonstrates the process of friendship between young children, making visible their competencies in navigating the complex terrain of friend-choosing, friend-making, and friend-sustaining as well as how teachers can offer support or facilitate this activity through sensitive interactions. Logically following from this is a chapter considering children’s conflicts, recognized as productive sites of social interaction, and specifically, how teachers can support children’s
competencies in successful resolution and repair from conflict. Importantly this chapter provides evidence of the value of teachers engaging with children to elicit solutions to conflict rather than imposing solutions, and provides recommendations of just how to do this effectively. Aligned to this teacher behaviour is the focus in the next chapter concerning morality. In this chapter we can see the competence of young children to establish and defend their own position and even subvert teachers’ moral order to avoid blame for problematic behaviour. Understanding children’s competency and reflecting on the excerpts of interaction provided allow us to consider deeply how we may meaningfully engage with our young children in the joint construction of moral codes while respecting children’s agency and maintaining a democratic ethos. The final chapter of the book is based upon family interactions and demonstrates how learning is a socially constructed activity, with interactional practices taking place across informal and formal contexts from the very earliest months of life.

In the words of the editors, the content of this book ‘illuminates’ interactions to show us evidence of ‘children’s competencies, the achievement of intersubjectivity, and the skilful work of responsive engagement in early childhood education’ (p. 13). As such it is a powerful resource for professional learning and reflection in ECE, for interrogating practice and surfacing the often-unconscious norms within which we enact practice. The implicit invitation to use this approach to unpack, and understand better, our own practice in ECE settings and schools is tantalizing; I would urge ECE teachers, leaders and teacher educators, and fellow researchers in early years and childhood to allow themselves a deep dive into a world where young children are, evidently, competent, and to consider, carefully, what this may mean for our own work.

References


