In the majority of classrooms, the interaction among teachers and children can still be characterized as predominantly monologic in nature; it is overly teacher-steered, and mainly focused on the recitation of knowledge, giving children only few opportunities to talk and think together. While educators may appreciate the value of dialogic classroom talk, its actual occurrence in practice is rare. This is striking, as classroom talk that is characterized by open questions and discussions – referred to as dialogic classroom talk - is often believed to be beneficial to children's (language) learning, and motivation. This dissertation describes a study that offers insight in the concept, implementation, and effects of dialogic classroom talk in early childhood education.

The main objectives of this dissertation were to explore the concept of dialogic (or productive) classroom talk; theorize how dialogic classroom talk contributes to children’s dialogical capacities; develop and implement an intervention to promote dialogic classroom talk in early childhood education; and to investigate the effect of dialogic classroom talk on young children’s oral communicative competence. Conceptual explorations were combined with theory-driven empirical studies to advance the field of research on classroom talk and to contribute to the improvement and innovation of educational practice.

Chapter 1 presented the theoretical framework that was used in this dissertation, briefly described the methodological perspective and the context in which our research was conducted, and presented the outline of this dissertation.
Conceptual explorations of dialogic classroom talk

In chapter 2, we described a conceptual exploration of the concept of dialogic or productive classroom talk. We argued that classroom talk is both a context in which children are supported to learn new things (talking to learn), and a means by which children learn to talk and communicate in new ways (learning to talk). Furthermore, we argued that for classroom talk to be productive, dialogic, and accountable to knowledge, participants should be willing and able to understand each other, revise their own situated understandings in light of new evidence, and question each other’s arguments. This chapter ends with a description of three interrelated parameters to characterize dialogic classroom talk: (1) there should be a topic that gives direction, purpose, and duration to the conversation; (2) children should be given space to talk and think together; and (3) it should both contain a dialogue between persons, as well as a polylogue with knowledgeable cultural-historical others that are not physically present inside the classroom. These external voices can be introduced, for example, through non-fiction, informational texts. Our conception of dialogic classroom talk presented in chapter 2 can be used as a heuristic for teachers to orchestrate productive discussions in their classroom.

In chapter 3, we combined Dialogical Self Theory (DST) and Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) to theorize how classroom talk might contribute to the development of children's dialogical capacities and self. Our argument started with the observation that classrooms have increasingly become places where different perspectives, cultures, and religions meet. This might give children possibilities to broaden their horizons, and enter new worlds. However, as teachers and children might experience these heterogenous classrooms as confusing, difficult, and threatening as well, we argued that children need well-developed dialogical capacities to deal with diversity and otherness. These capacities can be developed by inducting children into dialogic classroom talk in which they meet and negotiate different perspectives, and engage in ‘self-persuasive discourse’. To support our argumentation, we provided examples from our empirical studies to
show how dialogic classroom talk gives possibilities to meet and negotiate different perspectives, and how these different perspectives (or voices) get taken up and become part of the self.

**Theory-driven empirical explorations of dialogic classroom talk**

In the second part of this dissertation we built on the conceptual explorations presented in chapters 2 and 3 to explore dialogic classroom talk empirically.

In chapter 4, we presented the development of an intervention and Professional Development Program (PDP) – the MODEL2TALK intervention - to promote dialogic classroom talk in early childhood education. The MODEL2TALK intervention consists of a PDP that supports teachers in implementing dialogic classroom talk, a set of talk moves that teachers can use to orchestrate discussions (see Appendix A), a teacher manual with materials for six whole-class discussions to practice the use of the talk moves (see Appendix B), and materials that support teachers to plan and evaluate dialogic classroom talk. Chapter 4 concludes with a brief overview of the most important results of the MODEL2TALK intervention: (1) it supported teachers to orchestrate dialogic classroom talk, (2) children’s oral communication skills were significantly improved over the course of the intervention, (3) no effect on children’s subject matter knowledge was found, and (4) children’s oral communicative competence was significantly related to the degree in which they were accepted by their peers.

Chapter 5 reported on a study in which we used a design-based approach to develop, implement, and evaluate an intervention to promote dialogic classroom talk. Over the course of 18 weeks, we collaborated with four teachers from two schools. The participating teachers developed and orchestrated classroom discussions twice a week, alternately in a small- and whole-group setting. Pre- and post-observations of classroom talk indicated that teachers were able to make their classroom interaction more dialogic. Our data, for example, indicated that teachers used more dialogic talk moves in the post-observation as compared to the pre-
observation. This indicated that they were able to move towards a dialogic classroom culture. With respect to the children \((N = 92)\), pre- and post-tests of oral communicative competence, as measured with the Nijmegen Test for Pragmatics, indicated that our intervention significantly contributed to oral communication skills, with medium to large effect sizes. Furthermore, pre- and post-observations of classroom talk showed that children used more words per turn (MLT) and more ‘long turns’ (i.e., turns equal to or larger than 13 words) in the post-observation, and used more key linguistic features of oral communicative competence (for example, ‘because’, ‘I/she/he mean(s)…’) over the course of the intervention. The relatively small-scaled, exploratory nature of the study presented in this chapter, allowed us to fine-tune the intervention and PDP, before implementing and evaluating it on a large-scale.

In chapter 6, we presented the results of a quasi-experimental study (pre-test-post-test-control group design) on the effects of dialogic classroom talk on children’s oral communicative competence and subject matter knowledge. In this study, we built on our experiences in the previous studies and aimed to implement and evaluate dialogic classroom talk on a large scale. This study is one of the few studies in the research field of classroom talk and interaction that uses a quasi-experimental design to verify whether a specific mode of organization of classroom talk is more beneficial than another mode. A total of 21 teachers and 469 children aged 4-7 years participated in this study. Teachers were randomly assigned to either the intervention condition (12 teachers) or the comparison condition (nine teachers). Over the course of six weeks, all participating teachers orchestrated the same six classroom conversations related to the theme ‘what animal is that?’ (see Appendix B). Teachers in the intervention condition participated in a PDP, consisting of a workshop on dialogic classroom talk and a set of talk moves to orchestrate discussions, weekly classroom conversations in whole-group settings to practice the use of the talk moves, and reflection sessions in which video-observations of classroom talk were watched and discussed. Before and after the
intervention we measured children’s oral communicative competence using the Nijmegen Test for Pragmatics and their subject matter knowledge using a test we developed in the context of this study (see Appendix C). Analyses of pre- and post-observations of classroom talk revealed that fidelity of our intervention was high. Furthermore, our analyses indicated that teachers in the intervention condition used significantly more dialogic talk moves in the post-observation compared to teachers in the comparison condition. With respect to the children, multilevel analyses of pre- and post-test scores showed that our intervention had a significant and moderate to large effect on children’s oral communicative competence. Surprisingly, no effect of condition on children’s subject matter knowledge was found. A possible explanation might be that children in the intervention condition oftentimes came up with unexpected questions or ideas that deepened their reasoning and guided the conversation in new directions. As a consequence, classroom conversations in the intervention condition did not always cover all the content from the teaching manual. Conversations in the comparison condition were often highly structured and covered mostly all the content from the teaching manual. Although this study did not find any effect on children’s subject matter knowledge, it does demonstrate that inducting young children into dialogic classroom talk can contribute to the development of children’s communicative abilities.

In chapter 7, the conceptual and empirical explorations presented in chapters 2-6 were integrated and critically discussed. We addressed several limitations of the research presented in this dissertation, such as the reliability of our subject matter knowledge test, the relatively short length of our intervention, and the difficulty of measuring a complex and multifaceted construct as oral communicative competence. Next to these limitations, the outcomes of the studies in this dissertation also stipulate the need for further research. First, we argued that more conceptual work needs to be done in clarifying the assumptions that guide studies in the field of classroom talk and dialogue. For example, what talk moves and formats are used in studying classroom talk, how is dialogic classroom talk
conceptualized, what instruments are used to evaluate the quality of classroom talk. Second, more longitudinal research is needed to study the complexities of dialogic talk and thinking and the trajectory of developing a dialogic disposition in children. Third, future research should also focus on the possibilities of developing less time-consuming interventions, such as the use of web-based professional development environments.

The studies presented in this dissertation have several implications for educational practice. Most importantly, our conceptual and empirical explorations provide teachers and teacher educators with a practical intervention to implement dialogic classroom talk in early childhood education. Furthermore, our studies have shown that dialogic classroom talk is beneficial for the development of young children’s oral communicative competence. Given the importance of children’s oral language abilities for academic success, social acceptance, and learning and thinking, we suggest that teachers support these abilities from an early age.

To conclude, while the occurrence of dialogic classroom talk in educational practice is still rare, in this dissertation we have shown that it is possible to teach early childhood teachers to use several dialogic talk moves that support them in making their classroom interaction more dialogic. In evaluating our intervention, it appeared to be effective in promoting young children’s oral communicative competence. It is our hope that the studies presented in this dissertation contribute to the interesting research area of classroom dialogue, and inspire other researchers and practitioners to take up the challenge of building on the research presented in this dissertation.