Friendship and ‘talk’ as a facilitator of children’s learning in a ‘natural’ classroom setting: exploring ‘talk’ and ‘task progress’ to inform classroom practice.

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Background
Uses of analogy, peer support, friendship and types of talk used have all been shown to have an impact on children’s problem solving and reasoning (e.g., Azmitia & Montgomery, 1993; Mercer, 1995; Mercer et al, 2004; Schacter, 1999), and to impact differently on boys and girls (Keogh et al, 2000).

This study investigated the relationship between sophistication of talk (from disputational through to cumulative and finally exploratory) and sophistication of analogy problem solving.

Method
Social exchanges were observed amongst three groups of girls and three groups of boys consisting of either (i) four friends, (ii) four acquaintances, or (iii) a mixture of two friends and two acquaintances in a learning context using an established problem analogy termed ‘Battleship’ – ‘Growth’ (Pressler & Williamson, 2002).

Findings
Conversation was analyzed in terms of types of ‘talk’ (e.g. disputational, cumulative and exploratory) in conjunction with sophistication of problem analogy outcomes across the different friendship groups. Varying patterns of communication, as evidenced in the ‘types of talk’, in relation to progress with the ‘task’ were evident for the different friendship groups, which also appeared to differ in respect of gender. Complexities in communication related to friendship and gender and the implications for classroom practice, especially that concerning collaborative learning or that involving conflict and/or co-operation are relevant in connection with what constitutes ‘progress’ for the learner.

It is concluded that the research findings may have implications in respect of the ‘outcomes’ focused orientation of current educational policy in the UK.