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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 grous 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.

Results: Best Problem Solutions
(convergence>low>medium>high> neither>poor)

	Friends	Frds+Acqs	Acquaints
Girls	**Neither** *Cut belly & take out* (joint)	**Convergence** *Circle and shoot low intensity all around* (friends) *High* (joint, to finish)	**Low (lots)** *Lots of little…* (individual) *Quizzical questions e.g. How do you do this, must be an answer etc.* (joint)
Boys	**Convergence** *Get circle round it and shoot rays and not destroy it* (agreement, or no disagreement when asked, but very little impact, not very forthcoming)	**Medium** *Use two or a couple of rays at medium intensity* (partial consensus)	**Low** *Use low rays* (one individual, very little group focus, tended to work in parallel)

Type of Talk Displayed

	Disputational	Cumulative	Exploratory
GIRLS			
Friends			✓
Fds+Acqs		✓	
Acqs		✓	
BOYS			
Friends	✓	✓	
Fds+Acqs		✓	
Acqs	-		

Examples of 'Talk'

Exploratory: don't want to kill him, when Hammy died … don't want him to be in pain … [hint provided] … put sleep, cut belly open and take out

Cumulative: … and suck out [the Growth] … good idea, something to do with the battleship, get a circle round it and shoot rays and don't destroy it, try not to destroy the stomach as well (Other Children yeah) … if get stuck … only way to take a chance … not take a risk is do it … shrink it … little pieces … if suck stomach … food … shrink

Disputational: [interrupting] but what … and … [tries to continue] … why doesn't … what's the answer [reading] … won't kill the fish … what about this growth problem [reads]

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