Oral language competence and high-risk boys: What can we learn from young male offenders?

A/Prof Pamela Snow
School of Psychology & Psychiatry
Monash University (Bendigo Regional Clinical School)

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In today’s presentation

• A look at oral language competence (OLC)
• Factors that promote OLC in early life
• Why does OLC matter across the lifespan?
• What does the research tell us about OLC in high-risk young males?
• What do these findings mean for young males who are not succeeding educationally?
Oral language competence?

- Everyday speaking and listening skills
- Auditory processing and comprehension
- Expressive language skills – semantics (vocabulary), syntax (grammar), pragmatics (use)
- Socially and culturally determined rules and practices
  - Developmental correlates
  - Vulnerability to developmental threats: maltreatment, deprivation etc
  - The means by which we transact the business of everyday life
Language: Surface and hidden meanings

- Similes
- Metaphor
- Idiom
- Jokes
- Sarcasm
Language competence is linked to

- Academic achievement – via the transition to literacy
- Social success – forming and maintaining friendships and other relationships
- Social Cognition
- Empathy

All of these factors promote

- Positive adjustment and mental health
- Prosocial attitudes and behaviours
- Marketable employment skills
Estimating the costs ($\text{)}$ of language impairments in the early years: UK data

A 16 year old male with speech, language and social deficits will cost the community an average of £200,000, assuming a custodial sentence can be averted; if not, in excess of a further £100,000 can be added to the bill (Hartshorne, 2006).

An estimated £1000 million per year is spent on “processing and dealing with young offenders” (Barrett et al., 2006)
Threats to the development of OLC

- Neglect – esp socio-emotional
- Abuse
- Parental MH problems e.g. depression, substance abuse
- Social disadvantage / low SES / chaotic family
- Developmental disabilities
- Male gender
- Sensory deficits
- Inadequate / interrupted education – b/c language continues to emerge / evolve throughout childhood, adolescence and across the adult life-span
Why study young offenders’ language skills?

- Oral language competence has been ignored, in favor of literacy, social skills, etc.
- They are socially, educationally and economically marginalised - the ‘system’ has already failed them.
- We stand to learn more from our own failures, as individuals and as systems, than we do from our successes.
- They were not always offenders – there was an earlier (but missed) opportunity to change their life trajectory.
What do we know about the “typical” young offender?

- Is male
- Leaves school sometime around Year 8 - 9; history of truancy, poor school attachment
- History of learning and **conduct** (behaviour) disorder
- High risk for substance abuse
- Associates with similar peers
- Chaotic family structure; involvement with Child Protection agencies
- Inter-generational risk factors
- Higher rates of all-cause mortality
- Polymorbidity
Behaviour Problems ...and the “Behaviour Problem”

• Behaviour Problems (ODD & CD) are **serious MH problems**, often with longterm consequences and comorbidities

**BUT**

• Adults can be blind-sighted by the existence of behaviour disorders

• There is high comorbidity between behaviour difficulties and language / learning impairments

• Behaviour is, in some cases, *a form of communication*
The transition to literacy

- Is biologically “unnatural”
- Promotes
  - academic achievement,
  - school attachment and retention,
  - positive self esteem
- An important **Protective Factor**

**Two important concepts:**

- *Learning to Read vs Reading to Learn*
- The Matthew Effect

NB Radio National *Ockham’s Razor* Sunday Jan 24 2010:
The Matthew Effect

Matthew Effects in Reading

Achievement vs. Grade

- With foundational skills
- Without foundational skills
Our research

• Extends what is known about social skills and learning disabilities in young offenders
• Is specifically concerned with oral language
• Seeks to position OLC more centrally as a protective factor for all young people
• Recognises that level of education is a powerful predictor of health status and economic productivity across the lifespan
• Two studies will be the focus today
The Victorian Youth Justice context

• Active diversion of youth offenders from custodial sentences
• “Dual Track” system for 17-20 year-olds
• Lowest rate of youth supervision or detention nationally (AIHW, 2006)
Our research samples

Community n=50 (+ n = 50 non-offending controls)
• Mean age* = 15.8
• Mean Yrs education = 7.6
• Standardised measures of spoken and receptive language
• A measure of nonverbal IQ
• Data about convictions (violent Vs nonviolent - categorised)
• NB Excluded known Hx of TBI, hearing imp, major psychiatric diagnoses etc

Custodial n = 100
• Mean age = 19.03
• Mean Yrs education = 9.8
• Standardised measures of spoken and receptive language
• A measure of nonverbal IQ
• Data about convictions (violent Vs nonviolent - quantified)
• Mental Health measure
• Child Protection Hx – OHC Placement
• No exclusions
Key findings

**Community n=50**

- 52% classified as language impaired according to standardised measures
- Difficulties were pervasive across measures
- Language problems not accounted for by low IQ
- Relationship b/w language skills and type of offending unclear
- 50% of those with LI had been identified for early intervention services
- 41% of those with LI had been diagnosed as ADHD

**Custodial n = 100**

- 46% Language Impaired*
- Significant differences on language measures between High Offending Group and Non-High Offending Group
- Of the 29 with a history of OHC, 16 (68%) were classified as LI
- No association b/w LI and self-reported MH problems
- Significant correlation between language skills and IQ for the non-LI subgroup, but not for those with LI.
- 62% of those with LI had been identified for early intervention services
- 43% of those with LI had been diagnosed as ADHD
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*Note: LI = Language Impaired
Take home messages

• Clinically significant language impairment is present in ~50% of young male offenders
• IQ is not an explanatory mechanism
• Early intervention has
  – Not occurred
  – Been inadequate
• Other labels (e.g. ADHD, Conduct Disorder) are likely to be applied
• Early risk (as measured by OHCP) increases vulnerability but is also a missed intervention opportunity
• Undetected LI will make being a witness, suspect or victim more challenging for a young person
Language problems are invisible
Language Impairment may masquerade as

- Rudeness
- Indifference / lack of concern
- Poor motivation to cooperate
- “Yep, nup, dunno, maybe”...and other minimalist responses
- Suggestibility / Over-compliance
What does all of this mean for

- Early intervention with high-risk boys?
- Forensic interviewing* of youth offenders?
- Counselling of young offenders?
- Restorative Justice conferencing?
- Mental Health across the lifespan?
  - Mastery
  - Optimism / Hope
- Delivery of literacy and social skill interventions within the (youth) justice system?

*Snow et al research re investigative interviewing with child witnesses – in Ref List.
& Current ARC Project
Language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) are the essential underpinning skills that enable people to be productive in their work, to continue to learn and develop, and to participate fully in society. This is an obvious statement, the truth of which has been recognised for decades. But it needs to be made, as progress to a satisfactory situation has been slow.
• **Literally millions** of Australians have insufficient Language, Literacy and Numeracy skills to benefit fully from training or to participate effectively at work

• The situation looks as if it could be getting worse, not better: the LLN performance of Australian students has, over the past decade, **worsened** in comparison to other OECD countries

• Access to LLN expertise at the right time in the right way remains limited.
There is undeniable evidence to demonstrate that poor communication skills adversely affect productivity in the workplace... productivity suffers as does our global competitiveness

The Hon John Dawkins MP
Former Chair of the UK Youth Justice Board, Rod Morgan (2007)

It may be too much to say that if we reformed our schools, we would have no need of prisons. But if we better engaged our children and young people in education we would almost certainly have less need of prisons. Effective crime prevention has arguably more to do with education than sentencing policy.
Selected Publications


Thank you

Further information: pamela.snow@monash.edu
Where to next?
Some unanswered questions

• To what extent will language / literacy benefits be maintained over time?

• How will we know one way or the other? What measures will be most important?
  – NAPLAN data?
  – Teacher ratings?
  – Student Support referrals?

• Will there be additional (flow-on) benefits regarding school attachment, middle years transitions, mental health etc?

• To what extent will teachers maintain their changed practices?
Need for a follow-up study

- Monash University Ethics approval has been granted to re-contact the parents of children in both Research and Control Schools and seek their permission to be invited in a follow-up study
- Schools have been approached about this
- Discussions underway between CECV, Monash and University of Melbourne researchers
- Need to refine research questions and methods
- Aiming for application to ARC Linkage program, Round 2 2011