Communication and Perspective-Taking Skills of Pupils Excluded or At Risk of Exclusion from School:

An investigation into deficits in communication skill and implications for intervention

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Research Overview

Area of Focus

The research focuses on young people excluded from school, and those identified as being at risk of exclusion. It assesses their skills in communication, empathy / perspective taking, and incorporates information from staff at their schools relating to their perceptions of the participants' communication skills and their risk of exclusion. This data, along with interviews with a smaller sample of the young people who have experienced permanent exclusion, is used to discuss implications for policy and intervention with regard to supporting pupils with language difficulties.

The research is set out in two papers. Paper One describes the findings from an assessment of communication skill and empathy / perspective taking. Paper Two uses the findings from Paper One to compare the participants' skills with the perceptions of their teachers regarding their communication ability and risk of exclusion, and also describes the findings from interviews with a selection of the participants.

Background and Research Objectives

The research was carried out by a Trainee Educational Psychologist in one of the metropolitan boroughs of Greater Manchester in order to provide information on the communication skills and development of perspective taking in young people excluded from school or who may be at risk of exclusion in the future. Consideration is also given to the links between language and verbal abilities and involvement in antisocial behaviour, with regard to previous research and interview data from the current study.

Permanent exclusions in England have risen rapidly over recent years, and research has suggested that the disruptive behaviour of young people permanently excluded may be a result of difficulties with social understanding. This investigation seeks to provide further information regarding exclusions and whether difficulties with language, particularly with pragmatic language and perspective taking, may be related to behaviour issues and exclusion from school. The discovery of any connections between these areas can lead to consideration being given to how to identify young people with such difficulties and timely interventions that could be implemented to extend their language skills in order to reduce the risk of exclusion later in their school career. The research also aims to inform thinking

and policy developments regarding the work of Educational Psychologists in identifying children with language difficulties and working with parents, school staff and other professionals in order to assist young people to develop their language and communication skills.

Research Questions

The research poses many questions relating to language difficulties, behaviour and exclusion:

- Do young people who have been excluded from school or who are at risk of exclusion have difficulties with language and communication as assessed using the Children's Communication Checklist (CCC-2)? What are the extent of these difficulties in comparison to typically developing young people? Are these difficulties disproportionately in the domain of pragmatic language?
- Do young people who have been excluded from school or who are at risk of exclusion display deficits in their demonstration of empathy and perspective taking?
- For the above measures, are there differences between the sample groups, genders, and in relation to the age of the young people?
- Are members of staff in the young people's educational settings aware of any language difficulties that are discovered in the sample groups? Are there any differences in this awareness that relate to setting or the role of the member of staff?
- What themes emerge from in-depth interviews with young people who have experienced exclusion from school?

Methods

The sample groups were:

1. Pupils who had been permanently excluded from school;
2. Pupils on the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) database who had been referred to the service for reasons of emotional or behavioural difficulties (EBD);
3. Pupils identified by Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs) who were at risk of exclusion from school currently or may be in the future.

The specific key measurements taken during this study were:

- As assessment of each participant's communication skill to identify those who have a communication difficulties, and to explore the ease and adequacy of the assessment tool for future use in identifying children with language difficulties;
- An assessment of each participant's empathy and perspective taking;

The Children's Communication Checklist, CCC-2 (Bishop, 1998; 2003), was used to assess communication and was completed by a member of staff at the participant's school. Each participant completed the Interpersonal Reactivity Index, IRI (Davis, 1980; 1983), which measures the cognitive and affective components of empathy. Statistical analyses and comparisons were performed using the scores from the CCC-2 and IRI in order to discover any communication deficits in the sample, differences between sample groups, and also whether there were any correlations and links which may suggest the circumstances, processes and pathways leading to exclusion from school.

In the second phase of the research, reported in Paper Two, the same member of staff who completed the CCC-2 was asked to complete a questionnaire in order to explore their opinion on the young person's communication skill, their behaviour in school, and their risk of exclusion. In addition, a qualitative in-depth analysis of interviews with participants who had experienced permanent exclusion was performed. The data was gathered using semi-structured interviews with the participants regarding their exclusion from school and the support they received. Interviews were also completed where possible with a teacher from each young person's setting in order to triangulate the information obtained from the participants.

Key Findings

A total of 138 pupils were identified for involvement. Most were attending mainstream secondary schools, with others attending mainstream primary schools and the Pupil Referral Units. Questionnaires and checklists were distributed for all of these pupils; of these 81 were completed and returned for analysis in Paper One along with 81 staff questionnaires for the purposes of Paper Two. The respondents to the staff questionnaires were mostly teachers, with just over a quarter being teaching assistants or mentors.

The participants' scores on the CCC-2 demonstrated significant difficulties with most aspects of language and communication in comparison to the means obtained from typically developing children with no known language impairments. Over three-quarters of the sample had an overall General Communication Composite (GCC) within the lowest 10 percentiles, and almost three-quarters had disproportionate difficulties with pragmatic language.

There were few differences between the sample groups. Younger children obtained higher scores on the *Interests* scale than older participants attending secondary school, and pupils who had been permanently excluded obtained higher scores on the *Nonverbal Communication* scale in comparison to the participants known to the EPS for reasons of Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties. Around 16% of the sample had a profile typical of the Asperger Syndrome group in Bishop's (2004) validation study, with over 42% of the participants attending the Pupil Referral Unit at Key Stage 4 showing this profile.

Scores on the Interpersonal Reactivity Index differed significantly from published means but there were few differences within the sample groups. Only age groups showed a difference, with younger children obtaining higher scores than older participants.

The questionnaire in Paper Two, completed by staff, showed that they generally have an awareness of their pupils' difficulties with language. Much of this is attributed to 'overall' language rather than 'social' language, and comparisons of staff ratings with actual scores from the CCC-2 suggested that staff are not aware of the extent to which the pupils were experiencing communication difficulties. Correlations between staff ratings and actual scores suggested that teaching staff are more accurate than support assistants.

The interviews showed that all participants had been excluded as a result of behaviour issues. Most felt that more support from teachers and other professionals would have been beneficial to them, and many would have liked to attend a meeting with relevant school staff and other services where options could have been discussed relating to how they could be supported to remain in school. Many preferred attending the Pupil Referral Unit due to the smaller class sizes. Some were aware of some difficulties understanding language forms, and said that additional support in school regarding basic skills or small group teaching would have been useful.

Conclusions

The current research demonstrated significant communication difficulties in the sample groups. This has implications for their prospects, as the literature review highlights the difficulties that young people can experience if their language difficulties are not addressed.

The questionnaire completed by staff shows that although many staff were aware of the pupils' language difficulties, they often underestimated the extent of these difficulties. Furthermore, ratings from support staff showed no correlations with the actual language scores obtained by participants on the CCC-2. This suggests that staff training would be extremely beneficial relating to how language difficulties present, the connections between language and behaviour, the prospects for children with communication difficulties, and how to address language and communication difficulties in school.

The research also discusses interventions, giving examples of how young people can be helped. However the focus is more about how policy needs to develop in order for appropriate services and professionals to be able to provide the interventions needed. The study has demonstrated language difficulties in a group where language had not been expressed as a concern, therefore it is likely that there will be many more young people where language is a difficulty that has not been recognised. This has implications on the number of children that would benefit from access to additional support, which has consequent implications on the requirement for adequate staffing and resources to meet the needs of young people in order to prevent the negative outcomes occurring which have been highlighted by previous research. Due to the complex nature of communication and behaviour difficulties, and the other factors that are likely to be involved, interventions are likely to be more effective if delivered through a multi-agency approach.

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