

**Young offenders' perspectives on their literacy and communication skills.**

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## **Abstract**

*Background:* Research has revealed that the youth offending population has low language ability when assessed on standardized language measures. However, little is known about the perceptions young offenders (YOs) have of their own literacy ability and their communicative interactions with others. Such knowledge might further our understanding of the possible association between language, literacy and offending behaviour.

*Aims:* This study investigates the perceptions and experiences YOs have of using literacy and communicating with others. It addresses the following questions. How satisfied are YOs with their own literacy and communication skills and how important do YOs perceive these to be? How much do YOs believe they understand others in their communicative interactions? How satisfied are YOs with their communicative interactions with others and how does this influence conflict at home, school, and in the youth justice system?

*Methods & Procedures:* An opportunity sample of 31 YOs on court orders were recruited from a local youth offending service, excluding any who did not have English as a first language or were in receipt of current speech and language therapy provision. Twenty-six qualitative individual semi-structured interviews and two focus group interviews were carried out and analysed using a framework analysis method.

*Outcomes & Results:* Themes revealed participants were dissatisfied with their communication and literacy ability. Other themes identified were difficulty in understanding others, a perceived lack of support and respect gained from others, and a negative impact of communication on self-esteem. The findings suggest that YOs often found themselves in disputes with authority figures, but that they avoided using positive communication to solve such conflicts and also avoided confiding in others.

*Conclusions & Implications:* The findings support the results found from quantitative research on the language abilities of YOs. This emphasizes the value in adopting qualitative methodology to understand the relationship between literacy, communication skills and offending behaviour in YOs. The findings highlight a need for increased language, literacy and communication training, and support for YOs, and for the staff who work alongside them.

**Key Words:** Young-offenders, communication, literacy

Section 1: It is known that YOs can have significant language, literacy communication difficulties when assessed on standardised language and literacy assessments. Much less is known regarding YOs perception and experience using literacy and communicating in youth justice, education and at home.

Section 2: YOs reveal difficulties and limitations in their literacy and communication abilities, which negatively affect their interactions with others especially authority figures. Interviews could be used in addition to standardised language assessments to provide further insight into how to support the communication and literacy needs of YOs.

## **Introduction**

Crimes are most frequently committed between the ages of 14-16 years (Green Paper, 2005) and in 2013, an estimated 3,645 young offenders (YOs) received a custodial sentence in the UK (Transforming youth custody, 2013). It is also estimated that over 60% of offenders have difficulties associated with speech-language and communication (Bryan, 2007) and research internationally has found high percentages of language difficulty (to be present in YOs (over 50%). This is despite some variance in the range of difficulty (Gregory and Bryan, 2011; Snow and Powell, 2008; Bryan, 2007; Davies, 2004). Such difficulties can be defined as the individual showing problems in either their expressive (oral) language, or receptive language (understanding), which affects their communication. Communication in this instance can be defined as the expression and receipt of ideas and feelings (Riesch, 2006).

By addressing the speech-language and communication needs (SLCN) of YOs, the risk of re-offending could be reduced by up to 50%, according to the Princes Trust (2007). However, this point is a speculative one, as there is no research evidence justifying the impact of speech-language intervention on re-offending rates. Bercow (2008) recommends further research to investigate the association between language and behaviour in order to highlight the SLCNs of young people at risk of offending.

Standardised language assessments are the most frequently used method for identifying SLCN in YOs. For example, Bryan (2007) used standardised assessments to measure the language skills of a group of YOs in custody, aged between 15-18 years. Findings revealed that YOs scored significantly below a normative mean score expected for a younger age group. This was on assessments measuring vocabulary and grammar, demonstrating that they had significant language difficulties.

Research to date has mostly studied the language abilities of YOs who are in custody (Bryan 2007). However, Snow and Powell (2008) measured the oral language skills of 50 YOs with a mean age of 15 years, who were serving community court orders in Australia. Snow and Powell (2008) also recruited a comparison group of non-offenders who were on average one year younger and matched with the YOs on both socio-economic status and education attendance. Significant differences were found between both groups favouring the comparison group on all the oral language assessments. In addition, 52% of the offender group were identified as language impaired, based on a criterion of more than one standard deviation below the control groups' composite language mean.

More recently, Gregory and Bryan (2011) assessed the impact of a speech-language intervention on YOs' language skills. This group of offenders were on Intensive Surveillance Supervision Programmes and were aged between 11-18 years. Eligibility for speech and language intervention required a score of either 1sd below age equivalent normative mean scores, on at least two of the sub-tests of the Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals (CELF, Semel et al 2006) - i.e. Communication Observation Schedule, Word Association, Understanding Paragraphs, Formulated Sentences - or a score below the age equivalent normative mean on the Word Association test. Using this criterion, 65% (n=72) of the cohort were eligible for the communication intervention. Furthermore, only 8% of the YOs who were eligible for intervention met their age mean score on the CELF Understanding Paragraphs sub-test, and only 6% met their age mean equivalent on the CELF Formulated Sentences sub-test. This supports the finding that YOs can have significant receptive and expressive language difficulties.

The above studies focused specifically on YOs' oral and receptive language, without considering their literacy abilities. Snowling (2000) assessed the literacy ability of 91 YOs in custody, with an age range of 15-17 years. Standardised tests measuring word reading, spelling, and phonological awareness were administered. The spelling and reading scores were combined to form a composite literacy score and compared to a comparison group of non-offenders, matched on social economic status. The offender group scored significantly below that of the comparison group. In addition, the offender group scored significantly below the standard mean score for their age, on the individual literacy tests. The YOs' Non Verbal (NV) IQ score, obtained from the Block Design sub-test (Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, 1992), was used to predict their literacy scores.

The finding that YOs demonstrate literacy difficulties is also supported by Davies et al (2004), who found 57% of YOs in custody had reading levels below those of an 11 year old. However, the impact of this on behaviour is highlighted in a further finding from this study, revealing that the behaviour programmes offenders were required to engage in within the criminal justice service, required literacy levels similar to a GCSE A-C grade.

The results discussed suggest an association between language, literacy and behaviour as measured by quantitative language assessments. However, these standardised language assessments have been criticised for their lack of relevance to the YO population, with most normed on younger age groups (Bryan, 2004). Standardised tests also fail to account for the pragmatics of language that is applied in social interaction. This reduces the extent to which findings showing YOs as having low language ability obtained from these tests, can be generalised to communication that is applied in real-life settings (Whitmore, 2000). In addition, the insight into the perceptions and experiences YOs have of their language, literacy

and communicative ability has received little attention within the research literature. Yet such insight is important to increase our knowledge of the link between language and behaviour (Whitmire, 2000). The method of qualitative interview can be used to obtain this level of insight about social contexts that are relevant to YOs thus, reducing the over reliance on quantitative language assessments.

Sanger (2003) interviewed 13 female offenders, aged between 13-17 years who were in custody and were previously identified as having language impairment. Data were analysed in accordance with the epistemological position of Phenomenology (Smith Larkin and Flowers, 2009). This revealed that although participants were able to demonstrate knowledge of what characterised both good and poor communication, they still had difficulties expressing themselves and listening attentively to others. The YOs also revealed that they often struggled to understand what was said to them by teachers in school classrooms, and were unable to read work given to them. This resulted in work avoidance, especially when requests for help were ignored by teachers. Most of the group also expressed negative feelings about their self-esteem and confidence, often being put down by others because of their poor language ability. This led to a negative attitude towards education, which again affected their educational attainment.

Similar results were found by interviews conducted with 20 female delinquents in custody who had a history of maltreatment (Sanger 2000). Again, themes were analysed and extracted through a phenomenological approach, which revealed that the participants often expressed themselves aggressively, especially towards authority figures such as the police and teachers, by whom they felt dis-respected and belittled. Thus, a lack of trust had developed between them and authority figures, and they chose to confide more with their peers than others.

The findings from Sanger's work (2000, 2003) highlight how language and communication limitations can potentially explain behaviour through the way that it affects both the self and others in social interaction. This supports the social adaptation model that explains the association between language and behaviour (Redmond and Rice 1998). According to this model, language limitations, which include difficulties in both expressive and receptive language are compensated for by behaviour strategies that are applied to social interaction, which are often perceived negatively by others. Examples include external aggression or withdrawal avoidance behaviours (Redmond and Rice, 1998). Sangers' research only focused on a small sample of female offenders in custody. Therefore, more qualitative research is required to develop a detailed account of both male and female YOs' experience and perceptions of communicating with parents, friends and youth justice staff in order to provide the appropriate support and intervention. This is especially important as current intervention programmes used within the YJS, rely heavily on high literacy, communication and language abilities (Davies, 2004).

The aim of the present study was to explore the literacy and communication experiences and perceptions of YOs aged between 12-18 years, serving community court orders. In accordance with previous definitions, communication refers to the application of spoken and receptive language to social interaction. Literacy refers to reading and writing abilities.

The study addressed the following three research questions:

1. How satisfied are YO's with their own literacy and communication abilities and how important do they perceive these skills to be for the YJS?
2. How much do YO's believe they understand others in their communicative interactions?
3. How satisfied are YO's with their communicative interactions with others and how does this influence conflict at home, school, and in the youth justice system (YJS)?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

An opportunity sample of 31 YO's on court orders was recruited from a Youth Justice Service in the North of England. As part of inclusion criteria, all were required to have English as a first language or the prominent language and none were to be receiving any speech and language therapy intervention. It was also required that all YO's were serving community court orders.

Participants were aged 13-18 years with a mean age of 16 years (1.1sd). Their court orders ranged from 4-24 months with a mean length of 9 months (4.3sd). The majority of the group were male (n=28) and of white Caucasian ethnicity (n=20), with four of the group considered of ethnic minority status, consisting mainly of Black Caribbean and Asian Pakistani race. The most common crimes committed by the group included theft (n=18), assault (n=7) and drug offences (n=5), with various other crimes involving public order offences and criminal damage.

The majority of the group (78%) lived in areas of social deprivation based on the address of the secondary school attended. The schools' post code was compared to the Indices of Multiple Deprivation, 2010 (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011),

which considers factors such as average income, crime rates, employment deprivation, health deprivation, living environment and education deprivation. Schools with higher than average free school meals as well as those schools with lower than average GCSE pass rates, were also used to further validate a participant's school as residing in an area of social deprivation.

Educational data were obtained via the youth justice records for 30 out of the 31 participants. Informed consent for accessing this information was not obtained for this one participant. Of these 30, only 3 had no history of school exclusion. The mean number of days of exclusion was 20 days for the group (Range: 1-61 days, 15.6sd). School attendance data were also obtained for these 30 participants, which included the total amount of days each young person had attended school throughout their whole educational period from Yr1 to 11, or up until their current year if still in secondary education. The total attendance for each participant was compared to that expected in UK education, which is 187 days per year (Dfes, UK 2010). Where data were missing for some school years, this was estimated by using participants' average overall attendance based on the data available. The group had missed a mean of 2.8 school years (range: 0.9 to 4.2 years, 1.59sd).

Of these 30 participants, only 5 had not received any statement for special educational needs (SEN). SEN statements mainly consisted of emotional-behavioural difficulties and Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), and 4 of the group had SEN statements for dyslexia. Only one participant had received some previous form of speech-language input with regards to their stammering. Nine participants had experienced or were still residing under local authority care.

## **Design**

Semi-structured interviews were used to allow in depth exploration of YOs' experience and perception of their literacy and communication. This involved twenty-six individual

interviews, one focus group interview consisting of 3 males, and one paired interview with two females (Twenty-eight total interviews with 31 YO's). The focus group and paired interview were included to access those YO's who could not be seen individually. The same schedule was adhered to for each interview, with prompting used to encourage the participants to provide more detail.

Ethical permission for the study was granted by the University of Sheffield, via the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Human Communication Sciences, as well as from the local city council. Managers at the youth offending service granted permission for the study in the service and informed consent was given for each young person who participated in the study. Participants who completed all aspects of the project was given the opportunity to enter a prize draw to win a £15 shopping voucher.

### **Procedure**

To comply with safeguarding, all interviews were conducted at the local YJS centre so that a youth justice service staff member was in the vicinity and were available if required. The interviews ranged in duration from 15 minutes to over 1 hour and 30 minutes. For some, the interview was conducted in one session but this was dependent on the availability of the young person and often the interview was split into sections, which were completed over several visits.

All potential participants were identified by staff at the YJS and given information about the project. Written informed consent was obtained from those who agreed to participate. For anyone under the age of 16 years, parental informed consent was also obtained verbally and recorded. Copies of the completed verbal consent forms were made and then sent out to the parents. Participants were de-identified to protect their identity and all responses were kept

confidential. All participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time and had the right to refuse to answer any question, without providing a reason as to why.

Twenty eight of the participants consented to their interviews being audio recorded. Written notes were made during the interviews for the remaining three individual interviews. All interviews were transcribed and analysed using NVIVO (2010) software.

The semi-structured interview was split into three sections (See Appendix 1). The first section covered self-perception of literacy and communication skills, and help and support received for their development of both. The second section focused on how well participants' understood the language used by others in social interaction, as well as how satisfied they were with their experience talking to different people. The last section included questions on confiding and conflict with other people.

As part of the initial interview stage, definitions of communication and literacy were discussed and explored. Participants were first asked what they believed these terms meant and what skills were involved for each and their thoughts were noted. The researcher then provided additional points that were not mentioned by participants and their understanding of these were checked, by asking them to think of appropriate examples for each term. These examples of communication formed part of stage one of the interview (see Theme 1). When the researcher believed participants demonstrated sufficient understanding of these terms, the interview began.

Topics on participant understanding, satisfaction and perceived communicative ability were adapted from Sanger's (2000, 2003) qualitative research. However, the interview schedule consisted of further prompts on each topic to encourage greater participant response. The

interview questions were also related to communicative interactions with family, friends, teaching staff and youth justice staff, which included the police, case workers and court judges. The interview schedule was piloted on a focus group of four male YO's, who were not part of the main study. This resulted in alterations to the wording of open questions and the inclusion of additional themes relevant to the research question, e.g. using modern technology for communication and literacy purposes.

### **Data Analysis**

Framework Analysis (Ritchie and Lewis 2003) was used to analyse the interview data. This method required repeated reading of the interview transcripts, in order to identify themes that eventually formed a framework. The framework consisted of interview quotations from each participant that were relevant to each theme. An inductive analysis of themes was chosen to produce an original Framework that was grounded in participants' own data. This indexing continued to a point in which a Framework was produced, which incorporated participants' own accounts within each theme (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). Similar themes were grouped together under umbrella super-ordinate themes. Ritchie and Lewis (2003) emphasize the constant process of theme refinement and modification, which was also adhered to until data saturation, i.e. no more original themes could be obtained from the interviews. At this point, any interviews that had not yet been analysed were done so in a deductive method of analysis, in which interview extracts were mapped onto the existing framework matrix. This provided an efficient method of analysis, which was useful for transcribing and analysing large amounts of qualitative data. This was why the approach was chosen over other more inductive analytical methods, such as grounded theory or Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, Larkin & Flowers, 2009), as due to the time constraints imposed on the project, it would not have been possible to inductively analyse each interview.

The matrix produced through framework analysis also enabled a quantitative count of how many participants account for each theme, which was commented on within the results section. This made participant comparison across themes more feasible with large data samples, in comparison to other analytical methods such as thematic analysis (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003).

To ensure that themes were reliably extracted, nine interviews were randomly selected, de-identified and given to three undergraduate students enrolled on a speech and language course to analyse. The students were trained on inductive theme analysis. Consensus was found between the researcher and the students on all of the sub-themes that were generated for each interview, resulting in an average of 85% agreement on all themes for each interview. Any differences in themes found between the researcher and student were resolved through discussion, involving a third independent researcher familiar with qualitative analysis.

## **Results**

Each super-ordinate theme will be discussed including any sub-themes highlighted in bold. Note that some participants may have contributed to more than one sub-theme within a particular super-ordinate theme and some may not have contributed at all. Thus, frequencies described for each theme may not always equal the total number of participants. Frequencies of themes will refer to the number of participants rather than the number of interviews, due to the inclusion of a paired and focus group interview, which were analysed based on individual response.

[Insert table 1 here]

## **Theme 1: What is meant by communication?**

As Table 2 shows, for the majority of participants communication involved **speaking** or a form of greeting and **non-verbal language**, like eye contact and sign language. Fewer responses were given in relation to **listening and attending** information. Examples referring to being connected to or in a relationship with someone were also provided.

*YO: It's like sat here now, like good body posture, eye contact good attitude.*

*YO: "It's like how ya communicate with someone, how you involve yourself with them".*

When participants were asked what they considered **good communication** to involve, the most common examples given were politeness and respect. For **poor communication**, examples of violent forms of communication such as fighting, shouting and swearing were provided.

[Insert table 2 here]

## **Theme 2: Satisfaction with communication and literacy ability**

Over half of the participants (19) wanted to **improve both their communication and literacy skills** with a preference for improvement in literacy (See table 3). Spelling and neatness of writing were examples of how participants wanted to improve on this. Improvements in communication were in relation to clarity of speech and aggressiveness, a desire to reduce swearing, and the need to increase confidence in order to successfully converse with other people.

*YO: "Yeah I like get mixed up with my words".*

*YO: "I don't like, like my response aint right good. Like, i just like, argue more, put it across".*

*YO: "Me writing it just looks messy".*

*YO: "Cos id don't really, I don't really like talk to people. Like if they bring a friend and I don't know that friend, like it's just hard to communicate with them".*

[Insert table 3 here]

### **Theme 3: Implications of communication and literacy difficulties for experiences in the YJS.**

#### **Literacy**

For twenty participants, good literacy skills were not required in relation to working with the police and for court (See table 4). However, literacy was useful for reading and signing statements, as well as for reading letters.

*YO: "In police station the only time you have to like (2) read stuff, is like with statements".*

*YO: "There's a bit, just a bit of reading. You know when they send things to your house".*

#### **Communication**

For nineteen participants, speaking and presenting oneself well was an example of good communication required in court, and this included smiling to the judge and speaking clearly and confidently. For eleven participants, listening and understanding others in court were also frequently required in court.

*YO: " I did write a letter for judge and he did ask me what I put in it, so if I'm a right shy person, I wouldn't stand up in front of everyone and tell em, cos i'd be too shy".*

*YO: "Cos you wouldn't be able to like com come across to them, a a properly if you know what I mean? You wouldn't be able to explain".*

For twelve participants, good communication also affects levels of potential punishment, either through avoiding it or reducing the severity.

*YO: "Yeah yeah obviously every time I've been in court, I've got myself off with it cos I've stood up and spoke to the judge myself really".*

*YO: "You just wouldn't be able to answer the questions right, you just like stutter and everything and they'd think you were lying and stuff".*

*YO: "Everybody whose there you have to communicate with everyone. It's like, if went in court and sat with my head in my hands with my face down, I'd look a right little plonker wouldn't I? Do you know what I mean, sat there like yeah guilty".*

Good communication was not always required and this was in relation to their communicative experience with both the police and the YOS workers. For example, the police were often persistently aggressive in their attitude regardless of how participants spoke to them. In contrast, YOS workers were more supportive in their interactions and communicated in a positive and respectful manner (See Theme 8). Therefore for eleven participants, having poor communication skills was not a problem when interacting with YOS workers.

*YO: "They just automatically think you're up to no good"*

*YO: "You get some who talk to you like shit".*

*YO: Even if you had bad communication skills, i guess really they'd probably still be the same where they'd try and make you feel like you can be trusted, because this int police, this is someone who who will relate to ya''.*

*YO: "Err I just no not really just no I don't have a try my best to communicate with em (YOS staff), if you know what I mean"?"*

[Insert table 4 here]

#### **Theme 4: Participation of and preference for literacy activity**

For the majority of participants (23), literacy activities only occurred during school-time. For those that did engage in literacy activities outside of school, these examples involved **functional literacy** like reading newspapers and magazines and only two read books.

*YO: "Only at like when I'm at school or something".*

*YO:" I just read, I read like you know the paper. I just read in brief bits in that".*

All but one participant used **literacy in technological activities** such as online email, messaging and texting. This preference was often due to the efficiency found in using this literacy method, in comparison to conventional reading and writing because of the way in which words could be shortened, using abbreviations and slang. For six participants, slang and abbreviations affected the formality of their school work.

*YO: "Yeah yeah it's a lot better, cos on my text I put shorter words, but say I'm on computer doing like some exams, I put in shorter words and I have to go back and put longer words in".*

*YO: "I suppose you get predicted text and that as well, so there's a lot of stuff to help people like dyslexic people and stuff, that aren't that so good at reading and writing".*

Good literacy skills were not necessary for methods of communication such as texting and online messaging, for slightly more of the group who contributed to this theme (10/19).

*YO: "Not really need good reading and writing skills, cos you get hang of it don't ya? You don't, i mean, everyone's been through it, like our age now everyone's been bought up around mobiles".*

## **Theme 5: Attention and Understanding**

### **Attention**

Twelve participants didn't listen in school, at home or with staff at the YJS. In addition, attending to large chunks of information during long periods of time was difficult for seven participants. Six participants did not understand what was said to them in schools because of their lack of attention.

*I "why would you say that you didn't understand half of the time?*

*YO: I didn't concentrate that much"*

*YO: "Friends and school, them who used to mess about, they used to influence me to do stuff, so obviously, I weren't paying attention to what were going off".*

## Understanding

### School

For seventeen participants, difficulty understanding teachers in school was mainly attributed to the level of vocabulary teachers often used in class.

*I: "So from 1 to 5 again what would you say how much do you understand teachers?"*

*YO: "3 cos they usually use big words".*

Teachers would sometimes get frustrated in response to the participants' language limitations and would ignore requests for help, which frustrated five participants.

*YO: "Teachers just talk to you right really really serious and they get right mad if you don't understand them and stuff".*

*YO: "If i had my hand up I'll probably almost never get picked. And if i have to shout out, i get in trouble for shouting out".*

In contrast fourteen participants understood their teachers. This was mainly because of the additional help and support teachers provided in trying to resolve participants' comprehension difficulties.

*YO: "They'd say; if you don't understand it, highlight it and then I'll break it down into bits".*

*YO: "Yeah I'm like what you on about and they'd (teaching assistant) come and get one of the teachers to come in and tell me".*

Teachers helped support the literacy abilities of twenty-three participants, predominately using visual methods.

*YO: "Some teachers used to like just show it ya ,write it on the board and you used to copy it.*

## **Youth Justice System**

The vocabulary used in courts and in police statements also affected the understanding of thirteen participants.

*YO: "They come out with some big words".*

Twenty-five participants understood vocabulary and terms used by the police and YJS workers within the YJS. For thirteen participants, the YJS staff had helped in relation to clarifying misunderstandings to improve comprehension.

*YO: "I don't know, I just, I just understand them and understand where they're coming from and obviously I'm gonna ask them questions and they answer every question in full".*

Court communicated in a clear and helpful manner for nine participants.

*YO: They explain if you know what I mean? They explain what's what"*

*YO: "And she were smiling at me all the time, like she really really listened to me".*

## **Home**

Twenty-two participants had no difficulty understanding their family when communicating with them. This was attributed to the level of explanation parents provided as well as the avoidance of using complex vocabulary.

*YO: "If I'm in a room with like my friends, my family, they say it and pick the main points out for me to make my brain click and know what to do, then I'll know".*

*YO: "Like your parents know what you're like, know what you can do, know what you're capable of, so they talk to you like how you are".*

## **Theme 6: The use of avoidance and confrontation strategies in confiding and conflicting with others.**

### **Confrontation**

Physical and verbal confrontation was encountered frequently by most participants and included arguing with the police (n=15), arguing with teachers (n=16), and arguing with parents (n=17).

*YO: "Err well I've had quite a few like like bad arguments with teachers and stuff like that".*

*YO: " It's just, it's been like I've had to like be restrained and that, cos I just don't like it".*

Conflict with parents was often in context of a power struggle between both parties living together, in which both wanted to be in control of the household.

*YO: ' Its battles against your parents, because they wanna show that they are the authority figure".*

Nineteen participants were satisfied with the way in which conflict was resolved, compared to eight who were dissatisfied.

### **Avoidance**

Nineteen participants avoided the use of communication to resolve conflict, preferring not to communicate about the problem afterwards. This was mainly at home with parents and with the police to avoid further punishment.

*I 'So if you do something and does she (mum) get angry with you and does she shout at ya and then like what do you do then, do you shout back'?*

*YO: "Nah I run off".*

*YO: "We don't speak to each other".*

*I: "Do you think that's a good way of solving arguments"?*

*YO: "Nah".*

*I; OK. So how would you like to solve arguments"?*

*YO: "Talking them out. Well um understanding both sides but still putting your point across".*

Dissatisfaction involved situations in which participants, teachers and parents were being too stubborn and passive in solving the conflict and avoiding the use of communication.

*YO: "But sometimes things don't get dealt, with. Some arguments like, they'll just build up for the next argument you have and it's just worse".*

For thirteen participants, communication would be occasionally used as an attempt to solve conflict proactively particularly in relation to conflict with parents.

*I: "If you had an argument with your parents how would you sort it out?"*

*YO: We'd sit down and talk and then apologise to each other and that's about it".*

Fourteen participants would not confide in anyone regarding personal matters. Fear of embarrassment was a main reason for why two participants would not confide in others.

*YO: " I don't really talk to people about, but I talk to someone like, just say, like me mate will be like not talk about it, but talk around it".*

For ten participants, the decision not to confide in others was to avoid punishment, especially with respect to the police.

*YO: "When it comes to the police, i don't tell them jack. Nothing to do with them and i don't hear or see nothing. If they wanna find something out, they can do it themselves".*

*YO: "Like if I'm out with me mates yeah, i could probably go and talk about drugs sex alcohol and that. I wouldn't go school and talk about drugs. I wouldn't go in front of me mum and start saying that."*

### **Theme 7: Self-Confidence and Self-Presentation:**

Eleven participants were concerned about how they **presented themselves** to their peers through their communication. Their main aim was to present themselves positively. Four participants were embarrassed reading aloud in front of their peers, because they were not good at reading.

*YO: "It's not, not like not so good, like say that when your reading, your nervous aren't ya, so I tend to stutter.*

Furthermore, one participant preferred working with peers of similar educational ability and six participants were too embarrassed to ask for help either in schools or in the YJS.

*YO: "Yeah all the people not clever just with me like all people same as me".*

*YO: "I've always learnt myself like I don't like asking anyone for help or owt".*

Participants' **self-confidence** was affected by the way others communicated with them. For twelve participants, teachers spoke to them negatively, for example in a patronising or aggressive way.

*YO: "Certain teachers what will treat you as though you dumb, dya know what i mean and will talk to you like your a little kid".*

*YO: "School just think you're dumb, you can't like accomplish owt. No faith in you at all, so it just puts you down".*

Parents had negatively affected the self-confidence of three participants, talking down to them or not praising them enough.

*YO: "Because I try telling him (dad) what to do and he says look at that ladder, he says you're at bottom at that ladder and I'm at top".*

Within the YJS, communication with the police was immature, rude, impolite, aggressive, unprofessional and confrontational, negatively affecting the self-confidence of nineteen participants.

*YO: "Some coppers need to grow up a bit".*

*YO: "They (police) try and belittle you".*

### **Theme 8: Reciprocal Respect and Power**

Trusting and **respectful relationship** was important for seventeen participants to enable positive communicative interactions with parents, YJS workers, friends, and court judges. Thirteen participants were happy with the level of respect provided in communicative interactions with teachers, and eleven were with the police.

*YO: "If they(police) didn't speak to me like that, i didn't speak to them like that, and we'd treat other people like that, showing people respect".*

*YO: "If they (teachers) talk to me alright, then obviously I'll talk to them alright".*

*YO: "Same as me they (teachers) talk to me polite and give me respect and stuff"*

Feelings of dissatisfaction were related to the **unjust use of power** and most of these interactions involved the police (n=17). This referred to how they are spoken to and treated, especially in cases that involve being stopped and searched. The pre-judgements police and teachers held and acted upon were also examples of this and included not being believed or listened too. YJS workers did not hold these pre-judgements.

*YO: "they (police) just, they take everyone as if they're thugs and scaly, just cos they got their hood up or something, or in cos they're in a group of people. It's the way the way that they take people for like stereotypical and stuff".*

*YO: "Like police, they just take you for like a drugy, they just automatically think you're up to no good".*

An awareness of inequality of power was also present in teachers, but was less common in parents for eight participants.

*YO: "They just make you look look like twats in primary school. Teachers they make you feel wee big don't they"?*

## **Discussion**

This project aimed to explore the literacy and communication experiences and perceptions of young offenders in relation to school, home and in the criminal justice system.

Good communication and literacy skills were important within the YJS, and could reduce the likelihood of further punishment. However, participants were unhappy with their current

literacy and communicative ability and expressed a desire for improvement, especially in relation to their literacy ability. This is in keeping with previous studies that have incorporated self-report interviews to identify YOs' perceived oral and receptive language ability (e.g. Snow and Powell 2008, Bryan 2007).

Most participants did not engage in traditional literacy activities outside of school because of boredom, low attention and reading difficulties. However, they used more recent forms of literacy such as mobile phone texting and messaging, which were more efficient and flexible, and did not require good literacy skills. This suggests a possible reason for the overall preference for these methods. This finding reflects current trends generally, with the increased use of technological methods of communication during the adolescent period (Baron, 2008; Porath, 2011), and the benefit electronic reading devices can have in supporting young people with reading difficulties (Schneps et al, 2013).

Young people with conduct disorders have been identified as displaying pragmatic language difficulties (Gilmour et al 2004) and the YOs in this study found interacting with others difficult. Participants in this study had succinct knowledge of what may be termed good communication, but as Sanger (2003) also found, when participants provided examples of their social communication, this knowledge was not consistently applied. A small number of participants wanted to improve on some of these areas of social communication, such as listening and reducing the amount of swearing and verbal aggression that was often present within social situations.

The majority of participants experienced difficulties understanding others in school and in YJS contexts. In keeping with previous research on YOs (Sanger 2000; 2003) and adolescents generally (Spencer et al 2010), participants referred to the use of complex vocabulary as being

a common reason for this difficulty. However, despite examples of teachers' use of complicated vocabulary, participants still provided positive feedback regarding the level of support given by their teachers who were able to chunk, explain, and present information using different methods. Participants understood their friends, family, and youth justice case-workers in particular, because they avoided the use of complicated vocabulary and explained themselves well.

Some participants admitted that their own lack of attention and engagement was the primary reason for not understanding. This link between behaviour and attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD) is well documented (Snowling 2006), and some of the group recruited in this study had been diagnosed with ADHD.

Participants were dissatisfied with the level of support they had received from teachers, with teachers not providing help when asked. A lack of help with comprehension led to feelings of frustration, which would often lead to further confrontation with teachers and disengagement in class. Teachers became frustrated in response to participants' inability to comprehend what was said and how they responded in this situation.

Participants were often put down and embarrassed by those of high authority; mainly teachers and police who were being disrespectful. Feelings of disrespect and inequality increased participant conflict and aggression with these authority figures, as is documented in previous research (Sanger 2000).

Confrontation was common amongst participants and the majority were satisfied with the way disputes were resolved often through avoidance, rather than through positive communication. Participants were also satisfied in choosing not to confide in others about

any personal problems they had, supporting Sanger et al's (2000; 2003) finding with female delinquents.

### **Linking communication and literacy ability with offending behaviour**

The finding that YOs report and experience literacy and communication difficulties within the contexts of home, education and the youth justice system, supports research that has identified these limitations using quantitative language assessments (Gregory and Bryan, 2011; Snow, 2011; Snow and Powell, 2008; Bryan, 2007; Daves, 2004; Snowling, 2000). However, this has been obtained mainly with male YOs and more quantitative evidence of communication and literacy difficulty in female YOs is needed. Obtaining accounts of participants' use of language in these social situations shows how language, literacy and communication difficulties can affect behaviour in a way that supports the social adaptation model of language and behaviour (Redmond and Rice, 1998). This model refers to behaviour strategies that are adopted to compensate for language limitations. Examples found from the themes in these interviews include avoiding social interaction or behaving aggressively in class, in response to not understand something. These behaviour strategies frustrated authority figures such as teachers, resulting in an increased negative disrespectful response from them.

The majority of participants had low self-confidence in relation to their educational attainment and communicative ability, due to the negative way in which others would speak to them. This supports other research findings with young offenders (Sanger 2000, 2003, Bryan, 2004) and children with emotional-behavioural problems (Cohen and Lipsett, 1991; Redmond and Rice 1998, Dishion & Tipsord, 2011, Dishion, 1995). As a result of low language abilities, poor behaviour and low self-esteem, they may find themselves excluded from

mainstream education and their 'typical' peer group. This can lead to associating with peers who have also had negative experiences of school education and regard delinquency and risk behaviour as key to their group identity (Tanti et al 2011, Light & Dishion, 2007).

### **Conclusion and key findings**

This study investigated the experiences and perceptions YO's have of their literacy and communication obtained using qualitative methodology. The findings discussed reveal a relationship between language and behaviour that particularly supports the social adaptation model of Redmond and Rice (1998). The interview themes presented apparent difficulties in the communication and literacy abilities of the YO's that affected their socio-emotional behaviour. It was also apparent from the themes derived from the participant interviews that their behaviour had negative consequences for them in education, within the youth justice system, and at home. An alternative theory that could explain the language difficulties YO's presented in the interviews, is the theory of deficit (Bernstein, 1960). This theory proposes that individuals who reside in areas of social disadvantage (like the YO's in this study), communicate using less complex language that may not be appropriate or suit the expectations of establishments like education. This could explain why YO's disengage from education and experience more conflict with authority figures in such establishments. However, the linguistic properties of the YO's' speech were not measured or addressed in this study, thereby limiting the extent to which the theory of deficit applies to these findings.

The use of qualitative interviews proved an appropriate method for examining holistic, functional and personal accounts of adolescent language that may not be easily obtained by using quantitative standardised assessments. However, the use of mixed methods in

validating findings through triangulation would be beneficial in increasing understanding of the language, literacy and communication needs of YOs.

### **Methodological limitations**

Social desirability bias could have affected the results of the study, as participants may have provided answers expected of them or answered in a way that maintained a level of social identity and self-esteem. An example could include responding negatively or aggressively to questions concerning the police. As a result, themes relating to these authority figures may be distorted. YOs may also view authority figures as barriers to their sought after freedom and identity experimentation, which is not unusual during adolescence when conflict with authority figures may occur more (Wiley et al 2012). This theme seemed to be more prominent in the focus group and paired interview, in which YOs were influenced by their peers and often agreed with each other. This may not be surprising given that group identity and conformity is also common in adolescence (Tanti et al 2011). However, all but two of the interviews were individually conducted and the themes extracted from them were very similar to those obtained in the group interviews. In addition, these themes related more to instances of behaviour that was seen as unjust by participants.

A relatively small number of YOs participated in the interviews, and not all contributed to certain themes resulting in a small number of responses quantified for some themes. Thus, some of the themes may not apply to all young offenders and more quantitative research is required to enable generalisation of themes to a broader youth offender population. However, recruiting and interviewing YOs is difficult because of the time constraints that limit their availability, yet this study managed to gain views from male YOs on court orders that have not been obtained before. As part of their court order, YOs are required to attend

relevant intervention programmes and are often expected to complete reparation, the length of which is dependent on the order imposed by the courts. It is because of this and the regular schedule appointments with their caseworker that limits the time YOs have to participate in research. In order to overcome these barriers, researchers should aim to create a positive working relationship with probation workers, other YJS staff and YOs by attending meetings and intervention activities that staff and YOs participate in. This can increase both the likelihood of arranging potential visits with the YOs and the extent to which both staff and YOs will engage in research activity.

There is also a potential for bias in sample recruitment, where-by parental consent is required. It could be that for some YOs, the lack of communication or attachment with their parents, may reduce the likelihood of obtaining parental consent. However, in this study, all parents of those YOs under 16 years were contacted and all consented to the project.

It is also not known how many YOs recruited, had clinical language difficulties as this cannot be assumed from the qualitative interview responses alone. It could be that the responses obtained from this sample, may be of YOs who do not possess clinical language difficulty or impairment. Future research should consider incorporating qualitative responses of language experience with quantitative assessment of language difficulty to discover if similar themes obtained from this study, would apply to YOs with a recognised language impairment or difficulty.

Interviewing YOs is also difficult when a significant proportion of them are faced with language limitations that may affect their ability to participate. Because of this, a more structured interview schedule was used in the present study as opposed to other unstructured and inductive methods of analysis associated with experience and perception,

such as IPA (Smith, Larkin and Flowers, 2009). The latter examples of analysis involve broader, open ended questions that encourage long detailed response from the participant (Smith, Larkin and Flowers, 2009). Incorporating a more structured method of interview meant the interviewer had to use more encouragers and prompts to promote participant expansion on answers. However, this enabled participants to comprehend questions and verbalise answers, which increased response rates. The application of Framework Analysis was also well suited to the project, as mapping quotes onto the existing framework, proved to be efficient in reducing the time it took to analyse all interviews. In addition, the matrix enabled an effective organisation of participant response across themes, which is useful for participant comparison and for measuring frequency of response (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003).

Finally, the interview questions were presented in the same order and this may have affected individual response on topics that were asked at the beginning of the schedule. However, sensitive topics were placed at the end of the schedule to enable trust and rapport to have developed within the interview, thus increasing the likelihood of continued participation.

### **Implications**

The findings support the importance of collaboration between the YJS and Speech Language Therapy (SLT) services experienced in working with young people with language and behavioural problems.

Most of the YOs interviewed were on the special educational needs register for emotional-behavioural problems, but had not had an assessment of their speech language or literacy skills before. Only one participant had received SLT prior to the study, yet more YOs were experiencing difficulties with their language, literacy and communication.

Given the relationship between language limitations and negative behaviour (Redmond and Rice 1998) and the high incidence of language and literacy difficulties in YOs, then it follows that children with recognised behaviour problems should be screened for language, literacy and communication difficulties early in order to identify difficulties and provide support as appropriate (Snow and Powell, 2008). Although there is still a need for more quantitative evidence that highlights language difficulties in female YOs. In addition, the extent to which language ability, self-esteem and social identity are related in YOs could be investigated in further studies, along with how authority figures experience communicating with YOs and how they respond to their use of language.

It is important that the type of SLT service matches the needs of YOs and the interview responses suggest that this may involve aspects of listening comprehension, vocabulary and social communication. Not only should support be focused around YOs but support should also be provided for their parents and for staff in the YJS who interact with these young people. Examples of this may include support for social communication, conflict resolution and literacy.

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**Table 1: Super-Ordinate Themes and their associative Sub-themes, obtained from analysis of all 28 interviews.**

Super ordinate Theme	Sub-Themes
1. What is communication?	Speaking and listening/non-verbal communication/good and bad communication.
2. Language satisfaction	Improvement with language levels.
3. Implications of having good language skills for the YJS	Implications of literacy and communication in YJS.
4. Participation of and preference for literacy activity.	Functional literacy activity/technological methods of literacy.
5. Attention and understanding	Lack of attention/understanding in school YJS and at home.
6. Avoidance/confrontation in confiding and conflict.	Confrontation/Avoidance.
7. Confidence and self-presentation	Self-presentation/self-confidence.
8. Reciprocal respect and power	Perceived respect/unjust use of power.

**Table 2: Themes showing what YO's thought communication involved**

<u>What is communication?</u>	<u>Number of participants</u>
Speaking	24
Non-Verbal	15
Collaboration	9
Listening	8
Total	56

**Table 3: Themes showing how many YO's were satisfied with their language skills and how many wanted to improve on these**

Language Implications	How many believed this was required for functioning within the YJS.	How many believed this was not required for functioning within the YJS.	Total
Good literacy skills	17	20	37
Good communication skills	24	14	38
Total	41	34	75
<u>Language type</u>	<u>Number of participants satisfied with their language ability.</u>	<u>Number of participants wanting to improve on their language.</u>	
All aspects of language	8	9	
Literacy only	2	8	
Communication only	9	2	
Total	19	19	

**Table 4: Themes showing how important YO's perceived communication and literacy to be for the YJS.**

## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Interview Schedule Questions P =Prompts

#### Section 1

1. What do you think the word communication means?  
P: What else is involved? - how people speak, being able to express what you want to clearly so others understand and to listen to what other people say and understanding. Also non-verbal comm.  
So based on what you've just said what do you think makes good or bad communication?  
P- What are the reasons for this? – why do you think this?
2. If communication is about speaking well, understanding, listening and non-verbal communication, would you say you had good or bad communication skills?  
Scale: (1 -5 ; 1 being very poor and 5 being excellent).  
P: What reasons for this?  
What about your literacy skills – reading and writing? (Rating 1-5).  
Would you like to have better skills?
3. How often do you read or write? –why is this if not  
What do you read or when do you read (texting)? Do you do any reading on-line or when playing video games?  
Do you think writing is different from texting and emailing in the language you use?  
Do you think you need to have good reading and writing skills to use the above?  
Do you think emailing/texting etc. has affected your reading and writing skills?

4. How important do you think it is to have good communication?  
 P: What about for e.g. jobs/education/social life and relationships  
 How important is it to have good reading and writing skills?  
 P: Why – what reasons for this?
  
5. How much do you think your teachers have helped in developing your communication /reading and writing skills?  
 (Rating: 1-5)  
 Do you think they have made your communication/reading and writing skills worse in any way?  
 How much do you think they should help you develop your communication/reading and writing skills? (Rating: 1-5)

## Section 2

1. How much do you understand what your teachers tell you? (Rating 1-5)  
 P: Why have you rated them like this – what is it they do that makes it this score?  
 How does this affect your learning at school?  
 How much do you understand other people – friends and family? P: Why do you think this is different?
  
2. How satisfied are you with the way teachers talk to you? – (Rating scale 1-5)  
 P: What would you change and why?
  
3. How do you talk to your teachers and how different is this from the way you talk to your parents/carers? – P: What are the reasons for this?
  
4. How do you talk to your friends and how does this differ to teachers and family/carers?  
 Does the way you talk to your friends change depending on which friends you speak to?
  
5. If you had bad communication skills (speaking, listening and understanding) how much would this affect your experience in court and why?  
  
 What about with the police?  
  
 What about in the Youth offending service – like probation/case workers or other staff in YJS?
  
6. Do you think having poor reading and writing skills would affect your situation in court and with the police/YJS?  
 P: Why? – Do you have to do much reading and writing in court/police/YJS?

7. How much do you understand what police /judges and people in the YJS say when they talk to you? (Rating 1-5 – reasons for this asked).
8. How satisfied are you with the way these speak to you? (Rating 1-5)  
P: Why and how could it be changed?
9. If you had something personal you wanted to talk about, would you talk to anyone about it?  
P: NO- why not? YES- who would you talk to and why?

### Section 3

1. How do you talk to your parents/carers and how do they talk to you?  
P: Reasons for this.  
  
Is this different for either your mum or dad (male/female carers)  
  
P: In what way?  
  
How much do you like the way your parents/carers talk to you? – (Rating 1-5)  
  
P: Why and what would you prefer?  
  
How much do you think your parents/carers like the way you speak to them? (Rating 1-5)  
  
P: What do you think they like about the way you speak to them?  
  
P: What is it you think that they don't like about the way you speak to them?
2. If you have an argument with your parent/carer how might this be sorted out?  
  
P: Who sorts this out – you or your parents?  
  
Do you think this is a good way of trying to solve them or could it be better/worse? - reasons  
  
How often do you argue with your parents/family (Rating – never/hardly ever/once month/once week/once daily/more than once a day).  
  
What are these arguments mainly about?

Who starts the argument and why?

3. Do you have conflict or argue with anyone else?

P: friends/teachers/police/neighbours YJS staff...

P: If so - Why do you argue with them? Do you handle this argument any differently from parent carer conflict? – reasons for this.

P: If not – Why do you think you only argue with your parents/carers? (or whoever you argue with).