

Supporting Young Offenders to Communicate in the Youth Justice System: a Scoping Review.

Anna Sowerbutts^{1,2,3}, Emma Eaton-Rosen^{2,3}, Karen Bryan⁴, Suzanne Beeke¹

¹*Language and Cognition, Division of Psychology and Language Sciences, UCL, London, UK.*

²*The Children's Integrated Speech and Language Therapy Service for Hackney and the City, London, UK*

³*Homerton University Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, London, UK*

⁴*York St John University, York, UK*

Correspondence to Anna Sowerbutts, Speech and Language Therapy, Room 31b D Block, St Leonard's Hospital, Nuttall Street, London, UK N1 5LZ. Email: a.sowerbutts.11@ucl.ac.uk

Anna Sowerbutts is a speech and language therapist working with children and families in Hackney, London. Her clinical and research interests lie chiefly in Developmental Language Disorder. Her ORCID ID is 0000-0002-7224-4982 and her Twitter handle is @pinchof_SaLT.

Emma Eaton-Rosen is also a speech and language therapist in Hackney. She specialises in working with adolescents. Her ORCID ID is 0000-0003-3624-3859.

Professor Karen Bryan OBE is a speech and language therapist and Vice Chancellor at York St John University. She has carried out extensive research into young offenders with communication difficulties and is a Fellow of the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists. Her ORCID ID is 0000-0003-0742-1193 and her Twitter handle is @KBryanYorkSJU.

Dr Suzanne Beeke is a speech and language therapist and Associate Professor of Language and Cognition at UCL. Her research focuses on understanding the impact of language and communication disorders on the everyday communication activities of adults with acquired neurological conditions. Her ORCID ID is 0000-0002-6772-2820 and her Twitter handle is @BCAphasia.

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Abstract

Young offenders disproportionately present with Developmental Language Disorder and are likely to struggle with the communication demands of the justice system. Professional guidance outlines strategies for facilitating successful communication, but it is not known to what extent recommendations are substantiated by evidence. This review aimed to map academic and grey literature regarding the communication requirements, barriers and recommendations for routine youth justice interactions, such as forensic interview and courtroom testimony. Academic papers were identified through searches of five online databases, and OpenGrey, Google Scholar and organisational websites were searched to identify grey literature. 75 of 505 retrieved papers met inclusion criteria. Extracted data were presented regarding a) the requirements and barriers a young person would encounter in the youth justice system, b) the communication recommendations made for each stage of this journey, and c) the type of evidence underlying the outlined findings. Communication barriers included exposure to unfamiliar vocabulary, repairing misunderstandings, constructing narratives and displaying the appropriate attitude. Recommendations were wide-ranging and broadly consistent, though very few had been evaluated for effectiveness. Some papers queried the practicality and effectiveness of recommendations such as rephrasing difficult terminology. A relatively small number of papers considered the views of young offenders or observed real youth justice interactions. Future research should include observational studies of real youth justice interactions to evaluate the effectiveness of widely recommended strategies. Policy makers may wish to consider the concerns raised that rephrasing the

language used in the youth justice system is not practical or sufficiently effective, and that broader changes to the communication environment are required.

Keywords: communication; language disorder; young offenders; youth justice

Introduction

Participating in the youth justice system (YJS) entails regular and skilful language use. From the initial contact with police, through to court appearances, restorative justice conferences and therapeutic interventions, young offenders (YOs) must navigate a series of challenging verbal interactions. These are high-stakes encounters; a YO's understanding of the language used, their linguistic dexterity and their ability to provide appropriate responses at the expected times may have implications for compliance with bail conditions, the relationship with their legal representation, and even the sentence they are given (Lavigne & Rybroek, 2011).

Studies have repeatedly demonstrated that YOs are far more likely to have significant communication difficulties than their peers (Snow, 2019), with a substantial number presenting with undiagnosed Developmental Language Disorder (DLD). The term DLD refers to persistent language difficulties which affect the individual's everyday functioning and which are not associated with a known biomedical aetiology; when a potentially associated condition such as autism is also present, the term 'language disorder associated with [condition]' is used (Bishop et al., 2017). Unless DLD is specifically used by referenced studies, the shorthand D/LD will be used in this paper to cover both possibilities. A systematic review by Anderson et al. (2016) found that across countries and settings, there was a strong association between offending status and D/LD, with several studies documenting prevalence rates over 50%, compared with the wider population rate of

approximately 7% (Norbury et al., 2016). This association does not appear to be explained by factors such as socioeconomic status or overall IQ (Hopkins et al., 2018). Moreover, the presence of a language disorder is often not recognised in this population (Snow & Powell, 2011), meaning individuals are less likely to have their needs supported. There is thus a fundamental mismatch between the communication requirements of the YJS, and the communicative abilities of many who encounter it.

The barriers YO with D/LD are likely to face in the YJS have been considered from various angles, with numerous studies having assessed particular linguistic or pragmatic skills in YOs that are deemed relevant to YJS interactions. These have included understanding of key legal vocabulary, such as ‘caution’ and ‘penalty’ (Sanger et al., 2001), the ability to correctly interpret non-literal language (Snow & Powell, 2008, 2011) and comprehension of longer spoken passages (Gregory & Bryan, 2011; Kippin et al., 2018; Winstanley et al., 2019). YOs’ expressive skills have also been examined. The ability to construct a narrative or explain an event is considered particularly important to successful participation in the YJS; forensic interviewing, courtroom testimony and restorative justice all require the participant to present a convincing story (Snow et al., 2012). This has been repeatedly shown to be an area of difficulty for YOs (Hopkins et al., 2018; Humber & Snow, 2001; Snow & Powell, 2005). However, assessment of these skills has largely taken place using ‘proxy’ measures, such as explaining the rules of a game, rather than direct observation of language use in routinely occurring YJS interactions. These assessments cannot realistically or ethically recreate the contextual factors and potentially stressful conditions of YJS interactions, and so may not provide a full picture of communication barriers.

In the UK, speech and language therapists (SLTs) are increasingly employed to work with YOs, providing assessment, therapy, and/or staff training (Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists [RCSLT], 2019). Within this role, they may support YOs to participate

in YJS interactions, either by providing direct interventions (for example, to develop their understanding of commonly used institutional vocabulary) or by training staff to facilitate communication (Bryan & Gregory, 2013). Initial research suggests that SLT involvement in this setting can be beneficial (Gregory & Bryan, 2011; Snow & Woodward, 2017) and that it is perceived positively by YJS professionals (Bryan & Gregory, 2013; Snow et al., 2018). However, SLT involvement is inconsistent across YJS settings, with many services having no direct access to specialist support. Many YOs are thus reliant on the knowledge and skills of YJS professionals to support them to communicate in this demanding setting.

Attempts have been made to mitigate the impact of communication difficulties on courtroom participation in the UK legal system. Vulnerable witnesses and victims are able to access Registered Intermediaries to assist their communication, and formal published guidance for justice professionals outlines how to support victims and witnesses to give evidence. These guidelines ('Achieving Best Evidence') include detailed advice on how to establish rapport, how to initiate and support a narrative account, and the type of questions that should be used (Ministry of Justice, 2011a). Neither of these initiatives apply to defendants. Judges may, at their discretion, appoint a non-registered intermediary to support a defendant with communication, but they do not have access to the Ministry of Justice's training and accreditation schemes, and provision is inconsistent (Cooper & Wurtzel, 2013). An independent body, The Advocate's Gateway, has published toolkits for communicating with witnesses and defendants (Toolkits - The Advocate's Gateway). When communication difficulties are identified, special measures may be put into place and a protocol for communicating with the defendant established at a 'ground rules hearing' (Ministry of Justice, 2019). However, these initiatives focus on courtroom interactions, with less attention given to supporting YOs' communication at other stages of the justice system. The Ministry of Justice has published a toolkit for prison and probation staff working with YOs with

communication difficulties; this includes a brief overview of different types of communication difficulties, tips on communicating effectively and six ‘Communication Principles’ (Ministry of Justice, 2009). However, this lacks situation-specific guidance (such as how to conduct a probationary interview with a YO with D/LD) and is far less comprehensive than the ‘Achieving Best Evidence’ guidance.

Critically, it is unclear to what extent any of the available communication recommendations are underpinned by research or reflect current evidence regarding what supports interaction for YOs. In fields such as healthcare, research has analysed genuine patient-provider conversations to discover what strategies are effective in supporting interactions affected by aphasia, dementia and psychosis, leading to effective communication skills training skills programmes for professionals (O’Brien et al., 2018). Expert opinion-based guidelines which have not been verified by systematic analysis of real-life interactions are at risk of being ineffectual or even detrimental.

Existing reviews

A 2016 systematic review of DLD in YOs (Anderson et al., 2016) revealed the high prevalence of communication difficulty in this population. However, as an epidemiological review, it did not consider how YOs are supported to access YJS interactions. The two narrative reviews that did address the impact of DLD on participating in YJS interactions (Snow, 2019; Snow & Sanger, 2011) drew conclusions on the basis of YOs’ poor performance on language assessment tasks. The authors concluded that this population is likely to be disadvantaged in a range of verbal encounters such as police interviews, courtroom processes, restorative justice conferences and psychological interventions. While extremely valuable in outlining the various communicative demands of the YJS, these papers did not aim to map all the grey and academic literature and did not set out to report evidence

regarding the effectiveness of strategies employed to support YOs to communicate in these contexts. A preliminary search of PROSPERO, MEDLINE, the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews and the *Joanna Briggs Institute Database of Systematic Reviews and Implementation Reports* was conducted and no additional scoping reviews or systematic reviews on communication strategies for YOs were identified.

Given the sparse empirical evidence underpinning support for the communication of YOs with D/LD in YJS interactions, a review is warranted to collate current knowledge, sketch out research trends, and clearly identify evidence gaps, thereby guiding the focus of future study. Scoping reviews are routinely used for this purpose, and employ an iterative search process to ensure relevant studies are not overlooked (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). The method's inclusive approach to literature type is particularly suited to this study's objectives, as advice on supporting YOs with communication may be published in professional guidance rather than academic journals.

Objectives

This scoping review aimed to map literature regarding a) the communication requirements and barriers of routine YJS interactions; and b) recommendations or strategies to facilitate YOs' communication (with or without D/LD) within these encounters, as well as considering the nature of the evidence presented.

Methods

The protocol for this scoping review (Sowerbutts et al., 2019) was drafted according to the Joanna Briggs Institute methodology for scoping reviews (Peters et al., 2017) which is congruent with the PRISMA extension for Scoping Reviews (Tricco et al., 2018).

Eligibility

The review considered research relating to young people involved at all stages of the YJS. Rather than imposing age restrictions, all publications which used the term ‘young offender’ (or synonymous terms such as ‘juvenile delinquent’) were considered, as the age range for this category varies across countries (though typically applies to individuals aged approximately 10 to 18 years; Anderson et al., 2016). The review excluded studies which focused solely on witnesses or victims. Due to the high prevalence of undiagnosed D/LD within this population, all papers referencing YOs were considered, whether language difficulties had been identified or not. The search did not specify other conditions such as autism or brain injury, but papers which referenced these were not excluded as the content could still be relevant for those with D/LD, given the overlap of D/LD with other conditions.

The review considered primary research of quantitative, qualitative or mixed-methods design, as well as reviews, editorials, and relevant grey literature. This open approach was essential to capturing and cataloguing the full range of evidence for how to facilitate YOs’ communication in the YJS, and is consistent with scoping review methodology. It also enabled consideration of the three components of evidence-based practice: scientific evidence, clinical expertise and client perspective. Articles were restricted to those published in English, and no publication date range was specified. Searches were conducted between October and December 2019.

To capture publications from both linguistic and legal fields, a wide range of information sources was used. For academic papers, the databases CINAHL, PsycINFO, LLBA, Social Sciences Citation Index and Criminal Justice Database were searched (see *Tables 1* and *2* for examples of search strategies). To capture grey literature, the following sources were used: OpenGrey, Google Scholar, the web pages of international SLT organisations (Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, the American Speech-

Language-Hearing Association, Speech Pathology Australia, Speech-Language and Audiology Canada), the Youth Justice Board Resource Hub (UK), and youth justice government websites of the USA, Australia, Canada, Northern Ireland, Ireland and New Zealand. Reference lists were scanned to identify additional papers, and authors were contacted to obtain papers unavailable through other means.

Table 1: Search Strategy for CINAHL¹

[insert Table 1 here]

Table 2: Search Strategy for Criminal Justice Database

[insert Table 2 here]

Following the searches, identified records were collated and uploaded into Mendeley (V. 1.19.4) and duplicates were removed. All titles and abstracts were independently screened by the first and second authors against the inclusion criteria, and the process was repeated by both authors for full texts. Disagreements¹ at both stages were resolved through discussion. Due to reviewer time limitations, where papers were very long (e.g. doctoral theses), content pages, executive summaries and key word searches were used by the first author to highlight potentially relevant sections, which were then read in full by both authors. Extended video content (e.g. seminars) was excluded, but e-learning resources were included. During the review process, the following additional criteria were agreed upon:

- Papers which do not feature YO participants but which look at the effect of replicated YJS situations on young people were eligible.
- Communication strategies were relevant if they related to how participants interact with one another; broader practical strategies (e.g. the arrangement of the room) were not deemed relevant.

¹ MH= Exact Subject Heading. MW=Word in Subject Heading.

- Sources which merely alluded to communication needs problematising YJS access without providing specific details were not included.
- Papers which focused on communication difficulties relating solely to having English as an additional language were not included.
- Studies which focused on adult offenders were only included if there was clear applicability to YOs (e.g. studies which evaluated the demands of behaviour programmes which are used with both adult and juvenile offenders).
- Guidance split into multiple different publications (i.e. *The Advocate's Gateway Toolkits*) was considered as one evidence source.

To extract the data from included sources, a reviewer-developed tool was used, adapted from the *Joanna Briggs* manual in order to incorporate the distinct criteria and variables under scrutiny (Peters et al., 2017). This was revised from the published protocol version included in the protocol, with additional rows to allow for more detailed data extraction (Table 3). The first author extracted the data for all included sources, and the second author extracted data for every eighth paper (8 in total); results were compared to check consistency, and no alterations were made. Critical appraisal of sources was not carried out, but where possible, the basis for the included communication requirements/barriers/strategies was documented.

Table 3: Final data extraction tool

[insert Table 3 here]

To synthesise the results visually, a tally was made of the variables across sources regarding the type of publication (e.g. primary research, review article, guidance for YJS professionals), the context of the interactions described (e.g. police contact, courtroom), and the basis for the requirements/barriers/guidance. Results were converted into graphs.

To arrive at a narrative synthesis, the first author catalogued into a table the textual descriptions of communication requirements, barriers and strategies reported by each source. This was structured according to YJS context, ordered in the approximate chronology a YO would encounter each situation. A narrative synthesis was then written for each stage of the YJS to present a ‘walk-through’ of the likely barriers a YO navigating the YJS would face.

Results

After duplicates were removed, a total of 505 sources were identified from searches of electronic databases, website searches of relevant organisations and reference list scanning. 366 were excluded based on the title and abstract, leaving 139 full-text articles to be assessed for eligibility. Of these, 51 were excluded because the sources did not specify YJS communication requirements or discuss communication strategies, three were excluded as they focused only on witnesses or victims rather than offenders, and three because they focused only on adult offenders. A further seven were excluded because it was not possible to retrieve the full-text articles.

Figure 1: Selection of evidence sources

[insert Figure 1 here]

Individual source results

Due to the large number of evidence sources, characteristics and results for individual sources are provided in Supplements 1 and 2 respectively.

Visual summary

The following figures display the summarised findings. Each evidence source could be counted under multiple categories; for example, a paper might use both a reference to other sources and YO reports as the basis of described barriers, or might discuss both police interview and courtroom appearance. Only sections of papers which referenced YJS communication requirements, barriers or recommendations were counted; for example, if a study carried out language assessment but this was not used to make inferences about a YO's ability to cope with the language demands of the YJS, this was not tallied under 'performance on assessment'.

Figure 2: YJS Context referenced by sources.

[insert Figure 2 here]

Figure 3: Basis for referenced communication requirements/barriers/recommendations, by source type. 'Other' included case study observations, legal precedent, simulated interview, modification of existing guidelines, and inference from recidivism rates.

[insert Figure 3 here]

As can be seen in Figure 2, the literature is broadly split between different YJS contexts, with rather less attention paid to communication with legal representation (n=six) and more to the post-conviction stage (n=32), though this could be partly due to the greater variety of contexts this covers (e.g. behaviour rehabilitation programmes, sessions with key workers or probation officers, restorative justice conferences) and the decision to group all *Advocate's Gateway* toolkits as a single evidence source. Figure 3 highlights the somewhat circular nature of evidence and guidance relating to communication in the YJS; 52 sources reference other sources as evidence for the described communication barriers and recommendations, and the evidential basis for descriptions is difficult to pinpoint on 22

occasions. The voices of YOs themselves (n=13) and direct studies of YJS interactions (n=10) are relatively underrepresented within primary research.

Narrative summary

This summary tracks the journey of a hypothetical young person (YP) with D/LD as he progresses through the YJS. It summarises the evidence for what communication requirements and barriers he may face and what strategies are advised to facilitate communication at pre-conviction, peri-conviction and post-conviction stages. The summary integrates reports from grey literature, review articles and scientific research; for original research papers, the nature of the studies is included. Our YP will progress through several different categorisations (suspect, detainee, client, defendant, YO, inmate) and terminology used will reflect his evolving conceptualisation by the YJS. It should be noted that, unless they have access to language assessment findings, YJS staff would be unlikely to notice his language difficulties. The masculine pronoun is used to reflect the fact that males outnumber females considerably in the YJS (Youth Justice Board, 2021).

Pre-conviction: Initial encounter with police

Requirements and barriers. The first challenge for our YP arises in his initial encounter with police. In a review article on youths with traumatic brain injury (TBI), Wszalek and Turkstra (2015) highlight the importance of effective communication to optimal co-operation with law enforcement. They point out that poor language skills and slower processing speed could impair a suspect's ability to follow and answer a line of questions quickly and accurately. This might come across as hesitation, defiance or obstinacy, potentially increasing chances of

arrest. Indeed, a large-scale study of American youths found that verbal IQ significantly predicted arrest, albeit not in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Yun & Lee, 2013).

Having failed to satisfy the police with his account of his actions, our suspect is arrested and read his rights. Several studies and reviews have examined comprehension of the police caution (known as the ‘Miranda Rights’ in the USA). This encounter is crucial: if the YP does not understand their rights, waiving them should be considered invalid (Lavigne & Rybroek, 2011; Lieser, 2015). Miranda Rights should be delivered in clear unequivocal language (Rogers et al., 2016) but they still require an understanding of abstract concepts, a consideration of the effects of one’s current actions on future events and theory of mind to predict others’ behaviour, all in a stressful and distracting environment (Wszalek & Turkstra, 2015). Unsurprisingly, this presents barriers for a YP with a language disorder. The vocabulary of the caution is abstract (Lavigne & Rybroek, 2011; Lieser, 2015), used infrequently in conversational speech and involves different definitions for familiar-sounding words (e.g. ‘rights’), which may be confusing given those with D/LD are known to have difficulty inhibiting dominant information (Lieser, 2015). The syntactic complexity of the caution presents difficulties for those with receptive language disorder (Lavigne & Rybroek, 2011; Lieser, 2015), and its length presents a barrier given the verbal working memory deficits associated with D/LD (Lieser, 2015).

Several studies support the hypothesis that young people with D/LD will struggle to understand the caution. Rogers et al (2016) found that regardless of whether the caution was presented orally, in writing or both, young people were unable to recall even 50% of the key details. Lieser (2015) compared adolescents with D/LD and a group of typical peers, finding that the former had significantly greater difficulty understanding their Miranda Rights. YOs with foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) were found to perform lower than controls on

tests of Miranda comprehension, but reported similar levels of confidence in their comprehension (McLachlan et al., 2014).

Strategies. The Box, an e-learning tool for professionals working in the YJS (RCSLT, 2018), recommends that the police caution is simplified and provided verbally and in writing. Are either of these strategies likely to help our YP? O'Mahony (2012) considers the example of a police officer who follows up the caution by explaining it in more detail, trying to use simple language. Despite his efforts and the defendant's acquiescence when asked if she understands, further questioning reveals she has not fully understood. O'Mahony (2012, p.82) highlights the fundamental difficulty of making such a complex set of concepts comprehensible in the moment, and argues that police officers' attempts to do so are futile: 'it is perhaps unreasonable to expect any communication expert to facilitate an understanding of the complexities of the police caution to a person with significantly impaired cognitive functioning.' He consequently argues for a standard simplified caution, rather than impromptu rewording. However, Rogers et al (2016) found that 'easy' oral versions did not significantly improve recall, and they observe that juvenile versions of the Miranda Rights are often longer and more complex than the original. Lieser (2015) argues that providing the caution in writing as well is likely to offer little benefit to an adolescent who has difficulty with both oral and written language skills, though it could be helpful for those who only struggle with oral language. Rogers et al (2016) found that optimal understanding was associated with providing an easy-read version only (not oral or combined), though even this still produced under 50% recall. The authors conclude on a pessimistic note: 'Sadly, we are convinced that fine-tuning the language of Miranda warnings will have a negligible effect on Miranda misconceptions' (Rogers et al., 2016; p.534).

Nature of evidence. With the exception of O'Mahony's study (2012), which considers a transcript of a police interview, research examining comprehension of the police caution largely consists of experimental studies in controlled conditions. As Rogers et al (2016) point out, it is very difficult to adequately and ethically recreate the real conditions of hearing a caution, so the findings from these controlled studies are likely to overestimate our YP's ability to understand the caution.

Pre-conviction: Police interview

Requirements and barriers. Having been arrested and cautioned, our YP arrives at the police station where he is questioned. During interviews with police, our YP's narrative skills will be paramount. He must provide a logical and sequential narrative (Coles et al., 2017) which gives a clear picture of events for someone who was not present (Snow & Powell, 2005). This is likely to be a problem for our YP. Snow and Powell (2005) used a story elicitation task to compare the narrative skills of a group of male YOs with those of a demographically similar control group. They found that the YOs were less able to articulate the protagonist's plan, the consequences of a character's actions, and how resolution was achieved. These are important skills when needing to account for one's actions in a forensic context. Responding to questioning is also likely to pose challenges. Some studies found that suspects with communication difficulties are likely to be disadvantaged in understanding questions and the implications of the answers they provide (O'Mahony, 2012), and may struggle to understand figurative language used by the interviewer (Snow & Powell, 2004a). Snow and Powell (2005) argue that difficulties understanding questions may lead to a vicious cycle. The YP provides a minimal response, leading the interviewer to rely on specific and closed questions, which then allow the YP to cover up their comprehension limitations by repeating back the

interviewer's words, providing a stereotypical response and agreeing to yes/no questions when they have not understood. The authors point out that any misunderstandings are unlikely to be overcome through conversational repair. Adolescents with poor expressive language skills struggle with resolving communication breakdown in normal circumstances, and the power differential of a police interview makes it even less likely.

Strategies. What might facilitate our YP to answer questions and provide his story in this crucial interview? In the UK, an Appropriate Adult will be with him and may be able to assist, though when examining an interview transcript, O'Mahony (2012) found that the adult did not intervene when lengthy or complex questions were posed. For the police themselves, guidance on how to challenge discrepancies when interviewing a vulnerable suspect is minimal (O'Mahony, 2012). The Box (RCSLT, 2017) suggests that Police and Criminal Evidence (PACE) guidance techniques are not always helpful for those with communication needs. If asked whether they have anything to add, the YP might think they have got something 'wrong' and contradict their previous responses. Their explanation might also become confused when asked questions to probe its accuracy and reliability, and long silences may not represent refusal to answer a question, but the time taken to process the question and form a response. Snow and Powell (2004b) recommend that interviewers need to minimise their use of figurative language, reduce the length and complexity of sentences, use open-ended questions, probe understanding by asking the same question in different ways, allow extra time and provide clear cues when they haven't understood an aspect of the YP's account.

Nature of evidence. Again, with the exception of O'Mahony (2012), the conclusions here are based on evaluating language skills using abstract tests in environments of low stress which, as Snow and Powell (2005) acknowledge, is likely to overestimate skills.

Peri-conviction: Communication with legal representation

Requirements and barriers. Our YP has been charged, and appointed legal representation: he is now a client. How important is communicative competence at this stage? According to Lavigne and Rybroek (2013, p.73), it is paramount: 'the client's ability to effectively assist counsel is inextricably interconnected with language. Or to put it more simply, in the attorney-client relationship, communication...is all there is'. A client must be able to 'provide informative narratives, articulate emotional states, anticipate the thoughts and reactions of others...and contextualise the abstractions of the legal system' (Lavigne & Rybroek, 2013; pp. 84-85). Snow et al (2016) and Wszalek and Turkstra (2015) echo the importance of narrative skills in briefing legal counsel, and the latter also highlight that lawyers need to use closed questions in order to produce the required facts. Unsurprisingly, our YP is likely to struggle. LaVigne and Rybroek (2011) suggest that an impaired client may be unable to discern the motivations and expectations of their attorney, to provide background or factual information, or to tell a story. In their later paper (Lavigne & Rybroek, 2013), the authors highlight that language disorders are often marked by an inability to seek clarification and to use questions to negotiate unfamiliar circumstances, making it difficult for the lawyer to gauge how much the client understands. The attorneys they interviewed also reported that while clients can provide a series of events, their accounts lack a narrative arc, thought processes and emotional content— crucial elements when constructing a defence (Lavigne & Rybroek, 2013). Parsons and Sherwood (2016) also report solicitors' experiences of detainees

simply saying ‘yes’ when asked if they understand, even when this is not the case. McLachlan et al (2014) found that youths with FASD performed lower than a comparison group on a measure of ability to communicate with counsel.

Strategies. LaVigne and Rybroek (2011) recommend that lawyers should reframe their way of talking: relinquishing their use of jargon, the passive voice, and obtuse sentence structure, and instead make more use of role-play, diagrams, analogies and storytelling. They also recommend that lawyers observe how the client interacts with their family, so as to use a similar communication style. In their later paper, they critique the predominant advice, highlighting that for these clients, taking on a directive role with a lawyer is unfamiliar territory: ‘The standard response is usually to exhort the attorney to spend more time and “explain carefully,” but such simplistic advice overlooks the fact that such a relationship represents a tectonic shift in how these clients interact with the world.’ (LaVigne & Rybroek 2013, p. 86.) Repeating and explaining in ‘plain English’, the authors state, does not necessarily work.

Nature of evidence. Unsurprisingly, given the highly sensitive and confidential nature of lawyer-client communication, the literature does not draw on observational methodologies to test the barriers or strategies. LaVigne and Rybroek (2013) and Parsons and Sherwood (2016) use professional report, while McLachlan’s study used a clinical interview, the ‘Fitness Interview Test-Revised’, to evaluate psycholegal abilities including the ability to communicate with counsel.

Peri-conviction: Courtroom interaction

Requirements and barriers. Our YP has now reached his trial in the courtroom, a notoriously difficult linguistic environment in which language competency is key. As the Judicial College's Equal Treatment Bench Book puts it, 'Effective communication underlies the entire legal process: ensuring that everyone involved understands and is understood. Otherwise the legal process will be impeded or derailed' (Judicial College, 2018, p.4).

The literature highlights various receptive and expressive language skills that are required in order to successfully participate in court. Necessary comprehension abilities include understanding the use of legal jargon, understanding the conversation between the crown prosecutor and the judge (Suri, 2019), understanding the evidence, materials, process, the meaning of questions and the answers given (Judicial College, 2018), being able to pay attention, rapidly process information, recognise non-verbal cues, focus on more than one person and understand more than one type of question (RCSLT, 2018). Expressively, a defendant needs to be able to produce a coherent narrative (Hopkins et al., 2018), recounting what happened in the right order with as much detail as possible (RCSLT, 2018).

Questions represent a particular hurdle for understanding in the courtroom. O'Mahony (2012) and Suri (2019) both report experiences of observing a defendant unable to keep up with or understand questions, and this may be exacerbated when questions are multi-part (Toolkits - The Advocate's Gateway). They may misunderstand the purpose of a question, as observed in an analysis of videotaped criminal trials (Houwen & Jol, 2017), or have their answer constrained by tag questions (RCSLT, 2018; Toolkits - The Advocate's Gateway) or by forced choice questions (RCSLT, 2018). A vulnerable defendant is likely to have difficulty understanding the vocabulary used (O'Mahony, 2012), particularly legal terminology (Judicial College, 2018; Talbot & McConnell, 2017), as well as the roles, proceedings and concepts of a courtroom (Heritage et al., 2011; Houwen & Jol, 2017; O'Mahony, 2012; Rap, 2016). The expectation that a defendant will monitor his own understanding and take steps to

repair it is also a barrier: judges may assume that if a defendant does not say anything, they have understood (Houwen & Jol, 2017), putting the responsibility on the defendant to speak up when there is a problem (O'Mahony 2012). LaVigne and Rybroek (2011) point out that 'do you understand' is a leading question that prompts an affirmative answer, particularly when there is a power imbalance, and defendants may not even recognise when they have not understood or be too embarrassed to admit this (Judicial College, 2018; Toolkits - The Advocate's Gateway). These difficulties with understanding and repair have been echoed by young people themselves: one interviewee commented 'The judge goes "blah blah blah blah blah, do you agree" and then you go "yes" and then I get on curfew' (Ministry of Justice, 2011b, p.42). Another reported learning to 'tune out' and 'look still' when they don't know what is going on, and another that they daydream and stare at the judge but don't listen (Ministry of Justice, 2011b). More unexpected difficulties understanding may also occur: O'Mahony (2012) reports the case of a vulnerable defendant who was confused when someone of a different gender to herself read out her transcript.

Expressively, a vulnerable defendant may have difficulty adapting their tone and lexicon to suit the court, using potentially compromising vocabulary from a different register and not using the preferred terms of address with professionals (Suri, 2019). Their sentences may be disordered and difficult to follow (Suri 2019), and narratives may be unstructured (RCSLT, 2018). These communication barriers impact upon perceptions of the defendant. Narratives which lack consistency, details, structure and cause/effect analysis may impair the credibility of a speaker (Lavigne & Rybroek, 2011, 2013), and Heritage et al. (2011) argue in a clinical impact report that difficulty responding to questions may make a defendant appear unfeeling, unrepentant or unable to provide a consistent rationale for their behaviour. Failure to conform to politeness conventions may negatively affect the judge's character assessment (LaVigne & Rybroek, 2011), while attempts to draw a young person out by asking more

questions may result in further silence and thus in negative assumptions about their character (Bryan & Gregory, 2013; Judicial College, 2017). LaVigne and Rybroek (2013, p.92) conclude that ‘To ask an individual with already limited receptive and expressive skills to sit in front of a room full of people who will be judging his credibility by his words, demeanor, and ability to hold up under an arcane questioning form seems cruelly farcical.’

Strategies. The grey literature is replete with suggestions for facilitating communication in the courtroom, with extensive official guidance from sources such as the Judicial College’s Bench Books and the Advocate’s Gateway Toolkits. General strategies include adjusting the formal speech required of participants (Suri, 2019; Youth Justice Agency & RCSLT, 2009), avoiding redundant words, phrases, jargon, complex vocabulary, abstract concept words and non-literal language (Judicial College, 2017, 2018; Talbot & McConnell, 2017; Toolkits - The Advocate’s Gateway), allowing extra thinking time (Talbot & McConnell, 2017), introducing one topic of conversation at a time if using communication aids (Toolkits - The Advocate’s Gateway) and giving one piece of information per sentence (Talbot & McConnell, 2017).

Much of the advice centres around helping vulnerable defendants understand the baffling language, procedures and rules of the court. The purpose of the hearing, its procedures and participants should be explained (Rap, 2016; Toolkits - The Advocate’s Gateway), and the chair should sensitively and appropriately check the young person’s understanding of these and if necessary, explain again, not proceeding until satisfied that the young person has understood (Judicial College, 2017). Van der Houwen and Jol (2017) advise that the judge explicitly marks different courtroom activities, primarily addresses the suspect (trusting legal professionals to pick up on subtle instructions), summarises the gist of

discussions and makes it more understandable by anticipating potentially difficult words and explaining these.

On the subject of repair, judges are advised to set out communication ground rules, highlighting that participants don't need to agree with statements if they are not true (Toolkits - The Advocate's Gateway). Judges should stop asking 'do you understand' and instead ask the defendant to explain information in their own words (Lavigne & Rybroek, 2011; Talbot & McConnell, 2017), repeat back their understanding of what has been said (Judicial College, 2018) or choose a non-verbal cue to indicate comprehension problems (Toolkits - The Advocate's Gateway). The Judicial College (2018) also suggests that judges summarise what they consider the position to be and ask the party if they agree, though this appears to contravene other advice which cautions against asking affirmation-seeking questions.

When questioning a defendant, the Advocate's Gateway advises using short, simple questions in the appropriate tense (i.e. past tense questions for past events) and avoiding the following question types: front loaded (e.g. 'I put it to you that...'), tag (e.g. 'you did X, didn't you?'), those which require a yes/no response, those which are statements (e.g. 'you wanted X to happen'), forced choice questions, those which contain one or more negatives, and those which suggest the person is lying or ask 'do you remember X'. Following a question being asked, a lawyer should count to six silently before rephrasing or asking another question (Toolkits - The Advocate's Gateway). More structural changes are proposed by the Ministry of Justice (2011), who suggest asking the young person to introduce their family in order to make them feel more comfortable, and by Suri (2019), who advises that courts should employ legal professionals with the role of translating legal jargon to young people. Such a role exists in the UK in the form of intermediaries, though as O'Mahony (2012) notes, access to this scheme for defendants is at the discretion of the presiding judge.

The language modification strategies outlined here are not without critique in the literature. YJS staff interviewed by Plotnikoff and Woolfson (2002, p.31) reported that magistrates in youth courts were not sufficiently skilled at differentiating their language for this to be effective, with one interviewee commenting ‘It is appalling how bad magistrates are at explaining. They try, but their grasp of appropriate language is poor.’ O’Mahony (2012) also queries the success of simplifying questions, as abstract terms are often used in the attempt. Metzger et al. (2018, p.10) quote a judge who forcefully argues that there is ‘an urgent need to change the language, forms and processes we use to make them capable of being properly understood. This must go beyond simply moving the anachronisms and institutional language; New, fresh and meaningful approaches are required.’

Nature of evidence. Much of the guidance provided is in the form of handbooks and toolkits written by expert contributors, and as such does not directly reference the evidence source of each recommendation. This makes it problematic to pinpoint the evidence base for many of the highlighted barriers and strategies. Research studies referenced in this section include reported experiences of young people (Metzger et al., 2018), YJS professionals (LaVigne & Rybroek, 2013) or both (Ministry of Justice, 2011b; Plotnikoff & Woolfson, 2002). A small number of papers (Houwen & Jol, 2017; O’Mahony, 2012) analysed actual courtroom interactions.

Post-conviction: Youth offending services, secure institutions and probation services

Having failed to perform verbally in the courtroom, our young person is now recategorized as a Young Offender. He follows one of several post-conviction pathways, depending on which country he is in and the nature of his sentence.

Requirements and Barriers. Whichever institution he finds himself in, linguistic barriers abound. The rules of supervision orders are often given in linguistically obtuse language (Lavigne & Rybroek, 2011), using words such as *breach, remorse, condition* (The Communication Trust, 2014), but our YO is expected to ‘coherently verbalize’ his understanding of these contractual rules (Hopkins et al., 2018, p.115). If placed in a secure institution, he will be expected to follow oral commands, which underlie prison order and discipline (Lavigne & Rybroek, 2011), but he is likely to have difficulty understanding these (Talbot, 2007). He will be expected to adjust his communication style regularly depending on whom he is interacting with (Centre for Youth & Criminal Justice, 2018), which may lead to aggressive communication with authority figures (Hopkins et al., 2018). He may be excluded from activities (Talbot, 2007), avoid situations that require communication such as support groups (Ministry of Justice, 2009) and if bullied, might struggle to communicate this to staff (Lewis et al., 2015). Even measures designed to identify language difficulties, such as the verbally mediated Comprehensive Health Assessment Tool (CHAT), might prove challenging, particularly if administered by prison staff without training or support (Malhotra et al., 2013). The narrative demands have also not ceased; for his progress reviews, our YO will be expected to recount information about his offence and personal history (Coles et al., 2017).

Our YO must also regularly interact with a key adult assigned to his supervision. How he conducts himself here may affect how he is categorised and how his progress is evaluated (Nijnatten & Elk, 2015). He is expected to open up, discuss his behaviour and negotiate how to deal with problems (Nijnatten & Stevens, 2012), while recognising whether the adult is acting in a supportive or corrective capacity (Nijnatten & Elk, 2015) and respond appropriately. Van Nijnatten and Stevens (2012) found that in sessions between YOs and probation officers, the nature of the conversation was not made clear to the YOs: most of

them did not know what to expect of the encounter or what would be talked about, and opportunities to co-define the agenda were scarce. This reflected wider conversational dominance by the probation officers, who attributed YOs' minimal participation to a lack of interest or motivation, language difficulties, or dishonesty.

Strategies. The Ministry of Justice (2009) provides a detailed list of tips for prison and probation staff to communicate effectively with offenders with learning disabilities/difficulties, though no strategies are given for D/LD specifically. Suggestions include using the person's name at the start of each sentence, breaking information into small chunks, avoiding vague questions and using concrete rather than abstract terms. Trotter et al. (2015) collated the following communication principles in the context of culturally-informed communication when working with Aboriginal YOs: avoid jargon, use simple language and visual aids, ask questions about their understanding of complex ideas, avoid disrespectful or patronising terms of address, use casual language with humour to create flow and rapport, take a non-judgmental approach to customs, sit beside them, and be aware of different connotations of certain words. These principles may well be helpful in the context of D/LD.

Lowe et al (1974) found that researchers who used a less formal interviewing style with young inmates elicited more verbalisation and greater self-disclosure, and argues that those responsible for facilitating behaviour change in YOs should be trained in how to build meaningful interpersonal relationships through interaction. Van Nijnatten and Stevens (2012) recommend that probation officers should use a clear agenda, allow the YO to introduce one or more topics, ask follow-up questions, show interest in their situation and contributions, provide a conversational space for YO to express themselves, and use humour.

Nature of evidence. Much of the evidence originated from professionals' experience and expertise about what the YJS entails and what strategies are usually supportive for young people with communication difficulties, without basing this directly on original research. Exceptions were Lowe et al. (1974), which compared the effects of two different interview styles, Trotter et al. (2015), which conducted focus groups with youth justice staff working with Aboriginal YOs, and the two studies by van Nijnatten and colleagues (2012; 2015), which used a combination of interviews and conversation analysis to evaluate recorded interactions between probation officers and YOs.

Post-conviction: Offending behaviour/rehabilitative programmes, education and restorative justice

Requirements and Barriers. To participate effectively in the offending behaviour and rehabilitative programmes on offer, intact language skills are essential (Bryan & Gregory, 2013). Such programmes are largely language based (Youth Justice Agency & RCSLT, 2009) with speaking and listening requirements beyond GCSE level (Davies et al., 2004). They require metacognitive abilities (Snow et al., 2016) and tend to emphasise language-based core life skills (Snow et al., 2012; Snow & Powell, 2008) such as behaviour change, involving complex and abstract language (RCSLT, 2018). Consequently, several sources argued that YOs with language disorder may be unable to access verbally mediated therapy (Anderson et al., 2016; Bryan et al., 2007; Lavigne & Rybroek, 2011; Metzger et al., 2018), with as many as 40% likely to have difficulty benefitting from interventions such as anger management and drug rehabilitation (Bryan, 2004). They may also struggle with the verbal content of education programmes required by their court order (Coles & Murray, 2015). Winstanley (2018) found that DLD was the biggest predictor of whether YOs reoffended, providing

strong evidence that the effectiveness of rehabilitative interventions is compromised in those with language disorder.

Communication skills are similarly stretched in restorative justice approaches. Restorative justice conferences or panel meetings require the YO to acknowledge the harm done to the victim, accept responsibility and explain their actions, and develop solutions to address the harm caused (Martin, 2019), in conditions that are challenging and stressful (Lount et al., 2017). The YO is required to listen to and understand complex, emotionally charged narratives from victims (Snow & Sanger, 2011) placing demands on working memory, attention and language processing (Snow et al., 2012; Snow & Sanger, 2011; Winstanley et al., 2019). They have to understand and use vocabulary relating to emotions (Snow et al., 2016), as well as specific concepts such as peer influence or victim awareness (Hopkins et al., 2018). They must answer questions and supply information (Malhotra et al., 2013), and ‘formulate their own ideas into a coherent narrative that is judged as adequate and authentic by the parties affected by the wrongdoing’ (Hayes & Snow, 2013, p.2). To convincingly express remorse or empathy requires considerable pragmatic skill (Lavigne & Rybroek, 2011), as does adopting the appropriate non-verbal behaviour (Snow & Sanger, 2011).

Strategies. Davies et al. (2004) recommend that changes should be made to the language and vocabulary of offending behaviour programmes, though the authors do not specify particular adjustments. Snow and Powell (2012) suggest that counsellors should decrease the verbal load of approaches such as cognitive behavioural therapy by simplifying their own language and using visual support, while the Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice (2018) advise that rehabilitative interventions should routinely use communication supports such as pictures.

Riley and Hayes (2018) offer detailed advice based on observations of restorative justice conferences and follow-up interviews with YOs. They suggest that the facilitator should omit jargon, respond to different cultural communication styles, frame questions so as to encourage input from YOs, allow silences, and phrase wrongdoings so as to situate them away from the YO. More broadly, they recommend that ‘more emphasis should be placed on the facilitators’ language skills in drawing young offenders into conversation’ (ref. p.109) through strategies such as active listening, reflecting back, summarising and using silence, and that rather than expecting YOs to produce a narrative, a framed set of questions to explore cognition and emotions may be more helpful.

Nature of evidence. Inference appears to outweigh evidence in this area; as Snow et al. (2016, p.21) comment, ‘although [the demands of restorative justice conferencing] do not appear to have been empirically studied, they have been the subject of recent speculation in the...literature.’ Studies which use methods other than formal language assessment or expert experience include Riley and Hayes (2018), who used observational methods combined with interviews to study restorative justice conferences, and Winstanley (2018), who used longitudinal data to analyse whether YOs with DLD were more likely to reoffend.

Discussion

Key themes

The first objective of this review was to map the evidence regarding the communication requirements and barriers of routine YJS interactions. Across the grey and academic literature surveyed, there was a clear consensus that language and communication are fundamental to the workings of the YJS, and that young people who have difficulties with language and communication skills are likely to be disadvantaged. Barriers frequently invoked included:

the need to understand abstract concepts and unfamiliar terminology, the demands on attention and working memory, the unlikelihood of misunderstandings being recognised or raised, the centrality of convincing and detailed narratives to arguing one's own case, and the importance of communicating both verbally and non-verbally the appropriate stance or emotions when required. The stressful nature of these situations was frequently highlighted as potentially further compromising communication skills. Authors also repeatedly raised that comprehension difficulties extend beyond the level of words and sentences, and that YOs often have a fundamental difficulty understanding the different roles of YJS professionals and what is expected of them in each situation. This was felt to be exacerbated by the variety and range of situations they encounter, each requiring subtly different communication approaches.

The review's second objective focused on detailing the recommendations for facilitating communication with YOs. The reviewed papers contained an abundance of suggestions on how to improve communication with YOs with D/LD, though few evaluated the effectiveness of the recommendations. Strategies ranged from the very specific, such as using the past tense to ask about previous events (Toolkits - The Advocate's Gateway), to the more general, such as simplifying language and vocabulary (Davies et al., 2004). Generally, the recommendations were broadly consistent across sources, with occasional conflicts (such as whether it is advisable to ask a YO if they agree with a summary and the extent to which closed questions should be used). There was, however, a slight difference of emphasis depending on the source type. Guidance documents for YJS professionals tended to foreground how to present complex information in a comprehensible way, whereas a subset of research studies, particularly those which incorporated YOs' views or those which analysed YJS interactions, also raised the importance of establishing a positive relationship or conducive atmosphere through interaction. Building trust and familiarity by adapting one's broader communication style was argued to be essential to good communication in a range of

contexts, including the courtroom, legal counsel and YOS services (Hopkins et al., 2016; Houwen & Jol, 2017; Lavigne & Rybroek, 2013; Lount et al., 2018; Ministry of Justice, 2011b; Nijnatten & Elk, 2015). The Ministry of Justice (2011), for example, found that judges encouraged participation by asking the YP to introduce their family, while Riley and Hayes (2018) recommended adapting to different cultural communication styles as a way of reducing the perceived barrier between the authority figure and the YP in restorative justice contexts.

A related theme which regularly arose in the literature was the inadvisability of expecting a YP to volunteer when they have not understood (Lavigne & Rybroek, 2011). Despite this being reiterated in multiple professional guidance sources (Disability Matters, 2017; Talbot & McConnell, 2017; Toolkits - The Advocate's Gateway), comments from the judge presiding over the trial considered by O'Mahony (2012, pp.80-81) suggests that understanding of this is variable in practice:

If you don't say that you don't understand we are entitled to assume that you do understand...That is pretty simple with the problems you have. Either you tell us you understand or you don't. I don't see a problem with that.

Given the unlikelihood of repair being initiated by YOs (Snow & Powell, 2004b), the necessity of pre-empting comprehension difficulties by making the language of the YJS accessible was frequently reiterated. In some research papers, however, authors highlighted that this was problematic. Staff were reported to have variable levels of skill in this, explanations often entailed using even more language, and their attempts were often unsuccessful or insufficient (Lavigne & Rybroek, 2013; Metzger et al., 2018; O'Mahony, 2012; Plotnikoff & Woolfson, 2002; Rogers et al., 2016). It may be, therefore, that a more

fundamental shift in the interaction environment of the YJS is required, rather than approaching communication as a transaction of information whose difficulty level can be dialled up or down at will. This was a point alluded to by several studies, with suggestions offered such as using role-play and diagrams (LaVigne & Rybroek, 2011), replacing narratives with a framed set of questions (Riley & Hayes, 2018) and adapting to the communication style of the YO, rather than expecting the reverse (Ministry of Justice, 2011b; Riley & Hayes, 2018). As the judge quoted by Metzger et al. (2018, p. 10) put it, ‘new, fresh and meaningful approaches are required.’

It is worth considering whether insights from the broader literature on supporting adolescents with D/LD can be applied to this field. Research in this area has largely focused on the impact and associated risks of D/LD in this age group (e.g. Kilpatrick et al., 2019) or intervention studies designed to improve language skills (Joffe et al., 2019), with a far smaller number evaluating the effectiveness of language facilitation techniques to improving situation-specific communication (examples include Starling et al., 2012). Moreover, the distinctive nature of YJS interactions casts doubt over the applicability of research into facilitating language in other settings; as LaVigne and Rybroek (2013, p. 86) comment, parts of the YJS represent a ‘tectonic shift’ in how YOs interact with the world, and it would be inadvisable to assume the same strategies would apply in these contexts. Finally, it is important to note that even evidence-based strategies will only go so far in helping to work out what will assist a particular young person with a particular communication task. While more published evidence will help to guide these decisions, professionals may also require support in how to determine the best techniques for the individual.

Landscape of evidence

The final objective of this review was to consider the nature of the evidence underlying the stated requirements, barriers and strategies. In the majority of the research papers surveyed, most of the information about the communication demands of the YJS and accompanying recommendations was found in the Introduction or Discussion sections, rather than the Results. This reflects the fact that relatively few studies applied observational methods to YJS interactions, instead using expert opinion, participant report, measures such as language assessment, or unreferenced sources as the basis for the barriers/recommendations. The voices of YOs themselves were also relatively underrepresented, suggesting that when considered in light of the evidence-based practice model, professional/clinical expertise is predominant in the YJS. Those studies which directly analysed YJS interactions used a variety of methods, including conversation analysis and discourse analysis (Houwen & Jol, 2017; Nijnatten & Elk, 2015; Nijnatten & Stevens, 2012), thematic analysis (Riley & Hayes, 2018) and legal vignettes featuring the author as an intermediary (O'Mahony, 2012). Studies of language skills stood at varying distances from the actual interactions they approximated. Some used standardised language assessments commonly used in clinical practice (e.g. Bryan et al., 2007). Some selected or designed assessments which more closely reflect the demands involved (e.g. narrative and expository discourse measures used by Snow and Powell, 2005, and Hopkins et al., 2018, respectively). Some used replicas of the linguistic tasks in a controlled environment (e.g. Rogers et al. 2016's study of Miranda Rights comprehension). There was also a heavy reliance on a small number of studies, which were regularly referenced as evidence for assertions. For example, several guidance documents and research papers (e.g. Ministry of Justice, 2009; RCSLT, 2017b; Talbot, 2007; Wales Justice Coalition, 2009) commented that 40% of YOs will have difficulty benefiting from verbally mediated interventions, referencing Bryan (2004). Bryan's original observation, however, was made in the context of recommending that rehabilitation provision should be reviewed and was based

on prevalence findings, rather than an examination of these programmes or YOs' performance on them. There is thus a need to supplement quantitative epidemiological studies with feedback from YOs and YJS staff and direct study of interactions.

Limitations

Due to time and resource constraints, this scoping review only included papers available in English and so may have missed valuable sources in other languages. The breadth of the review and the inclusive approach to eligible sources perhaps came at a cost to the depth of analysis. Restricting the search to one disorder or one context may have provided more detailed information, but the decision not to do so was taken for three reasons. Firstly, poor general awareness of language disorder meant the authors felt that including only sources which specified D/LD would narrow the results considerably, omitting useful sources of evidence. Secondly, the barriers and recommendations for more well-known conditions such as autism or TBI may still be relevant to D/LD. Finally, the challenges of conducting research with YOs and the consequently small number of scientific studies necessitated an inclusive, wide-ranging approach. As a scoping review, critical appraisal of sources was not undertaken, but this would be important in future research to inform practice.

Researchers in the field of YJS face numerous obstacles, including a transient population, suspicion of authority and institutional barriers (see James, 2013, for a summary). It is unsurprising, therefore, to find very few studies featuring real YJS interactions, given the highly sensitive nature of these conversations. Those which did draw on observational methods often highlighted evidence which either expanded on or ran counter to standard guidance. For example, van Nijnatten and Elk (2015) found that probation officers' use of closed questions did not necessarily dampen expansiveness, provided the YOs did not feel they were being interrogated. More such studies are vital to understanding how professionals

can improve these interactions, and so it is essential that the systemic issues with conducting this research are addressed.

Conclusion

This scoping review aimed to map all literature regarding a) the communication requirements and barriers of routine YJS interactions; and b) recommendations or strategies to facilitate YOs' communication within these encounters, while considering the nature of the evidence for both. The review found that while there are numerous testaments to the requirements, barriers and strategies, the evidence underpinning these is often difficult to locate or provides only a partial picture of the communication challenges posed by the YJS for those with D/LD. The existence of guidelines and practical resources suggests that there is an appetite among the YJS workforce for developing their communication with YOs, and it is important to ensure any advice is underpinned by good quality evidence. Finding ways to facilitate observational methods is key, so that future research can analyse real YJS interactions and evaluate the recommended strategies for improving communication with YOs. One first step towards this could be for youth offending services which already routinely collect recordings to anonymise these and make them more accessible to researchers.

In terms of policy, there is an emerging argument that 'tinkering' with the language of the YJS is ineffective and insufficient, and instead new approaches are required. Finally, having thoroughly and convincingly established that D/LD is an overrepresented problem in YOs, researchers and professionals alike need to directly study the impact it has on YJS interactions and evaluate ways to minimise this impact.

By highlighting areas where evidence is incomplete or missing, the findings of this review are important for informing future research and practice to promote more equitable justice processes for the large proportion of YOs hampered by communication difficulties.

Acknowledgements

The first author was funded by a National Institute of Health Research (NIHR) Predoctoral Clinical Academic Fellowship (ref. ICA-PCAF-2018-01-102, 2018-2020) to carry out the scoping review, supervised by the third and fourth authors. The second author kindly volunteered her time to perform screening. The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and not those of the NHS, National Institute for Health Research or the Department of Health.

Declaration of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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