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Adolescent Females With Communication Disorders Involved in Violence: Educators' Opinions

Judy K. Montgomery, Dixie Sanger, Barbara J. Moore-Brown,
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Abstract

This study focused on increasing the awareness of educational leaders about the relationship between students with communication disorders and violence. A review of selected research on adolescent females with language problems residing in a correctional facility served to support a survey study and extend discussions about the need for educational leadership within this population. Ninety-six speech-language pathologists, special educators, and teachers were surveyed about their training and knowledge on the role of communication in violence. Findings suggested the majority of participants agreed on the importance of planning prevention programs. However, they did not receive training and were uncertain about providing services to students with communication disorders. Implications are provided for administrators and other school leaders to consider when planning programs.

During the past ten years, violence has been described as “epidemic” and has permeated many aspects of our lives not only in large urban cities but also in small towns throughout the United States (Mercy & Rosenberg 1998; Moore, 1994). One aspect affected by violence is education. Challenges involving violent acts are an on-going concern for administrators attempting to address academic, behavioral, and social needs of children and adolescents. Educators often discuss prevention, intervention, and social policy when examining issues pertaining to violence and education. However, their concerns frequently center on safe schools, firearms, drugs, and youth gangs (Flannery & Huff, 1999), rather than on the connection among language problems, poor communication behaviors, and violence in school settings. Educators' views on the role of communication and violence for students with communication disorders are not known.

Over a period of more than 30 years, research has documented the prevalence and types of communication disorders of children and youth involved in violence. For example, a number of researchers have cited the incidence of communication problems (24% - 84%) among juvenile delinquents (Cozad & Rousey, 1966; Taylor, 1969). Interestingly, despite the increase in statistics on girls arrested for violent crimes (Mann, 1984), until 1997 few studies focused on the communication behaviors of female teenagers in correctional facilities. Since that time, an ethnographic study of 78 female incarcerated delinquents revealed that 22% ($n = 17/78$) displayed language problems (Sanger, Creswell, Dworak, & Schultz, 2000). More recently, research has reported that as many as 19% ($n = 13/67$) of female teenagers residing in a correctional facility were potential candidates for language services (Sanger, Moore-Brown, Magnuson, & Svoboda, 2001; Sanger, Moore-Brown, Montgomery, Rezac, & Keller, 2003). However, it is not known if administrators and general or special educators are aware of findings such as these. It is unclear whether sufficient numbers of educators understand how a student's language and communication skills may serve as one of many factors relating to violence.

Program planning for students with communication problems who are involved in violence often does not account for these disabilities.

It has been found that programs for children involved in violence focus on more obvious behavioral concerns rather than language challenges (Sanger et al., 2001). Programs in schools may also include information about social skills training but fail to include sufficient strategies to address important language components such as vocabulary, figurative language, or conversational skills. If educators are unaware of the important role that language and communication have in violence, are they prepared to refer children and adolescents for language testing? Hence, if students are not referred and identified for language services, are some of our children “falling through the cracks” and being overlooked for special services?

This paper will review selected research that addresses the links between students with language and communication disorders and violence. Qualitative information will focus on how females residing in a correctional facility describe their learning experiences in school. Additionally, preliminary survey findings of special educators and speech-language pathologists (SLPs) regarding their training and knowledge of the role of communication and violence will be provided. Information will support the need for additional educational leadership in addressing the needs of young women who are in trouble with the law.

Responsibilities of Administrators

School personnel and administrators are those who must take the lead on how to design programs to deal with the behaviors that disrupt the educational environment and prevent learning. In designing such programs, the conflicts of implementing strict discipline programs while attempting to design prevention opportunities for students presents challenges (Evans, 2000; Skiba & Peterson, 2000). Removal of students, through such disciplinary measures as suspension and expulsion, continue to be presented as immediate responses designed to provide a safe school environment (Bush, 2001). Although necessary for dealing with violent and destructive situations (CCBD & CASE, 1999), such actions typically are not effective in teaching appropriate skills to troubled or troublesome youth (Hyman & Snook, 2000; Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Townsend, 2000). Increasingly, school-wide prevention programs are being promoted to advance pro-active, systematic approaches toward building safe schools (Dwyer, Osher & Hoffman, 2000; Elias et al., 1997; ERIC/OSEP Special Project, 1997; Lockyer & Eastin, 2000; Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Sprague & Walker, 2000; U.S. Department of Education/Office of Special Education Programs, 1999; Viadero, 2001).

Educators have additional responsibilities for dealing with students who are receiving special education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997) and who may be having disciplinary and/or behavioral difficulties (CCBD & CASE, 1999; Moore-Brown & Montgomery, 2001; Smith, 2000; Yell, Katsiyannis, Bradley, & Rozalski, 2000). As part of these requirements, the Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams must conduct a manifestation determination whenever a removal or change of placement is being considered as a result of behavioral problems. Teams are not only required to assess the student’s ability to control his/her behavior, but also to assess the student’s ability to understand the consequences of his/her actions (Smith, 2000). Once these determinations are made, the IEP team must design a behavior intervention plan (BIP) designed to support the student’s difficult behavior. The purpose of the behavior intervention plan is to teach the student appropriate behavior, so that the student is able to access his/her education in the least restrictive environment (Moore-Brown & Montgomery,

2001). While information is being increasingly provided on how to implement effective intervention programs (Scheuermann & Evans, 1999; *The Special Edge*, 2001; *The Special Educator*, 2001), the skills and abilities the IEP team members need in making these decisions and designing programs lie at the heart of successful implementation of IDEA requirements. When Smith (2000) reviewed cases that challenged the implementation of the requirements, results indicated that significant training and leadership needs existed in terms of professional practice in this area.

As prevention programs direct educators toward the teaching and building of social skills, educators may be wise to turn their attentions to the underlying abilities needed to develop such skills. One area indicated for closer examination is the relationship between communication skills and violent behavior (Moore-Brown & Montgomery, 2001; Sanger, Moore-Brown, & Alt, 2000; Sprague & Walker, 2000; Townsend, 2000). While recent literature reviews provide compelling evidence that a concomitant relationship exists between children with language disorders and those identified with emotional and behavioral disorders (Benner, Nelson, & Epstein, 2002), this information has not been extended to include violence. In this study, violence will pertain to behaviors and actions that include the use of multiple forms of threats or intentional harm to individuals. Violence can also involve threats and physical force intended to harm property (Van Hasselt & Hersen, 1999).

Language and Communication Connection to Violence

Though language and communication directly relate to behavior and learning in school, perhaps it is not entirely clear how this connection could be extended to relate to children involved in violent acts. It has been established that language relates to behavior and emotional development (Benner et al., 2002; Gallagher, 1999) as well as reading (Kamhi & Catts, 1989; Wallach & Butler, 1994) and academic performance (Whitmire, 2000). However, how language and communication relate to children involved in violence may not be as evident to administrators, special educators, or SLPs. If these specialists are not aware of this connection, then it is highly unlikely that school site staff, including principals, assistant principals, deans, counselors and teachers, will look to these issues as potentially underlying some of the complications which lead students to disciplinary problems.

According to studies discussed earlier, female adolescents who were incarcerated reportedly had problems with comprehending and expressing language and were at risk for meeting the academic challenges in their school. Researchers indicated that many of the participants were unable to express a synonym for words such as "penalty" or "justify." Moreover, the youth were not certain how to define words such as "no vacancy" or "flammable." Additionally, interviews revealed remarks such as, "I feel stupid when I don't know a word in reading; I don't understand what I read" (Sanger et al., 2001).

In another study, 13 adolescent girls with language problems were asked how they would describe their learning experiences in school prior to admittance to the correctional facility. All had been convicted of one or more misdemeanors or felony offenses. Their histories of violence included assault, theft, first degree sexual assault, breaking and entering, terroristic threats, and other types of criminal mischief. Their responses supported the need for educational leadership to guide the planning of programs of young women. Girls in trouble with the law commented, "Subjects I'm bad at would be math and spelling and writing." "I had troubles with school, like with understanding teachers." "I didn't read, I don't like reading." "Teachers would help me, but

they would not give that extra time I needed.” “I was very impatient and couldn’t sit there and listen to them [teachers].” “School problems started in junior high and high school.” “School was boring because it wasn’t interesting to me.” “In science they used big words I’ve never heard of before.” “I know how to read, but I feel stupid when I don’t know one word.” Many of the 13 participants spoke about how they felt about their interactions in school. Their comments also contained descriptions of their violent behavior as well as oppositional attitudes toward school. Qualitative findings suggested these young women expressed problems listening, thinking, speaking, and reading (Sanger et al., 2003).

Listening to the voices of young women residing in a correctional facility raises questions about whether educators are sufficiently considering how language disorders impact troubled females. Educators need to be aware that some of these girls could benefit from language services. If communication is a possible area of need, then student study teams (SSTs) and IEP team members must all be aware of this potential. If students do require services through the speech and language program, SLPs must have a clear understanding, along with their administrators and other team members, of the areas of concern and how the need might be identified and how services might be most appropriately provided (Campbell, 2001; Kahn, 2001). School-based SLPs may be challenged to develop appropriate service delivery models for those students with communication disorders who have been involved in violence. Likewise, administrators are expected to find the resources to serve students who are in lock-up programs or residential settings. They must also help determine when troubled youth can return to school for portions of the day and how SLP services can be maintained (Moore-Brown & Montgomery, 2001).

If services for communication disorders should also be considered for students involved in violence, then one consideration is to understand the perceptions of educators toward communication and violence. If educators, including specialists, do not see the need to look at communication skills as part of students’ needs, then intervention and/or prevention activities will not likely be addressed in this area. This information is needed because special educators’ views may affect how interdisciplinary teams plan the most effective programs in school settings.

Administrators, who are viewed as leaders in schools, need to know if their specialist team members are sufficiently trained to plan and implement programs for children with communication problems involved in violence. The purposes of this article are to extend the discussions on communication and violence. It will highlight studies which focus on young women with communication disorders involved in violence. Additionally, this study will report survey results on the opinions of special educators and speech-language pathologists about the role of communication in violence, their training in these areas, and suggest implications for administrators and other school leaders.

Survey Research on the Role of Communication in Violence

Two of the authors co-presented two separate seminars from 1 and 1/2 hours to 3 hours in length on, “Advancing the Discussion on Communication and Violence Issues.” One presentation was conducted at the 2000 American Speech-Language-Hearing Annual Convention and was attended by 55 students and professionals primarily working in the field of communication disorders. The second seminar was conducted the same year with 41 special educators who worked in a southern urban school district. Information on communication and

violence was presented at both seminars with specific topics focusing on findings from research studies on female incarcerated adolescents who were potential candidates for language services. This information pertained to identification, assessment, and intervention of children and adolescents in school settings.

Audience participants were invited to complete a survey containing eight demographic questions pertaining to background information about respondents. Survey items also addressed respondents' experiences with issues concerning communication and violence. In addition, 14 questions about the role of communication in violence served as the basis for data collection (see Appendix). Questions related to identification of students for language services, participation on multidisciplinary teams, and provision of services.

The demographic/background questions were in a multiple-choice format and the opinion questions were in Likert-type scale format. All Likert-type items were accompanied by a 5-point scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The midpoint of the scale corresponded with a response of "uncertain." Overall means computed for each 5-point Likert-type scale item provided a general indication of agreement or disagreement with a survey statement. Arbitrary cutoffs were set for interpreting the strength of agreement/disagreement with the survey items. Means ranging from 1.00 to 2.49 were interpreted as agreement with a given statement, means ranging from 2.50 to 3.50 were interpreted as neutral or uncertain responses, and means ranging from 3.51 to 5.00 were interpreted as disagreement with a survey statement.

Results and Discussions

A total of 96 participants, who represented 15 states and worked primarily in urban locations, completed the questionnaire form. The states (CA, CO, FL, GA, ID, IL, KY, LA, MD, MA, NE, NJ, NY, VT, and WI) represented geographical regions throughout the United States. Fifty-five percent of respondents were speech-language pathologists; worked in school, university, or private settings; and were employed 5 years or less. The remaining individuals included special educators and classroom teachers with an average work experience of 6 years in school settings.

Survey respondents provided opinions about their background training related to communication and violence. The majority (62%; $n = 59/96$) indicated they did not receive specific training on this topic even though approximately one-half (52%) of them served students involved in violence in the past year. Although most (61%) reported they felt qualified to be a part of a multidisciplinary team, many (62%) expressed uncertainty about providing assessment services for students with communication disorders who were involved in violence. The majority of respondents (60%) indicated they did not feel qualified to provide treatment services for students with communication disorders who are involved in violence. These findings suggest that while SLPs and educators can function on a team, additional training would be beneficial in areas of assessment and intervention.

It was encouraging to find that means computed from responses to 5-point Likert-type items revealed SLPs and educators agree it is important they are involved in educational planning of prevention programs ($M = 1.66$; $SD = 0.69$). It was less optimistic to learn they are not sufficiently trained to provide services for youth with communication problems who are involved in violence. For example, respondents disagreed ($M = 3.82$; $SD = 0.90$) with statements suggesting they are sufficiently trained to provide services for students with communication problems who are involved in violence. In particular, they did not feel they had sufficient

training in behavior management. Their responses ($M = 3.70$; $SD = 0.94$) suggested the connection and impact of communication in violence is not sufficiently understood by SLPs and/or other educators in school settings ($M = 3.60$; $SD = 1.01$).

Responses to statements about the challenges of identifying children for language services who have been involved in violence suggest study respondents agree that students are not consistently referred to SLPs, but instead are viewed as behavioral problems ($M = 1.91$; $SD = 0.80$). Further, they agreed with the statement that children are assessed for language services but often do not qualify ($M = 2.27$; $SD = 0.89$) for such services. Survey respondents felt some children are not assessed because language services are considered less important ($M = 2.44$; $SD = 0.98$) when school administrators are prioritizing all the problems they may encounter.

Respondents' views about educators providing adequate services for children with communication disorders involved with violence yielded uncertain responses ($M = 3.45$; $SD = 0.95$), even though they acknowledged that language intervention could positively impact learning. Perhaps information from the seminar presentations addressed the important role of language in learning, and how many children involved in violence struggle with language and communication problems. Given this line of consideration, it is possible that study participants questioned whether their programs were sufficiently addressing the language and communication needs of children involved in violence.

Previous research findings from incarcerated teenage girls with communication problems suggest that these young women could have benefited from services to help them meet the curricular demands of school (Sanger et al., 2001; Sanger et al., 2003). Yet, the present survey findings present questions about whether educators realize that some students may need intervention services to understand statements such as, "The test was like Greek to me," and "She thinks she is a top dog." Other vocabulary such as "humble," "eliminate," "hypothesize," and "numeration," also may not be understood. Therefore, language services may be needed to help children and youth with language disorders understand figurative language and advanced vocabulary in upper grade level texts such as middle school and beyond.

The need for educational leadership regarding girls in trouble with the law is more apparent in consideration of recent research findings that suggests that teenage girls do not perceive themselves as having problems with their own performance of conversational interactions. Though qualitative research indicates that they display oppositional interactions (Sanger, Creswell et al., 2000; Sanger et al., 2003), teenage girls may not be aware of the consequences associated with these patterns of communication (Sanger, Coufal, Scheffler, & Searcey, in press). Research suggests educational leadership is needed to help establish intervention services focusing on metapragmatic awareness skills. Teenagers need to realize the consequences for their inappropriate interactional behaviors in a variety of academic and social settings (Sanger et al., in press). Without leaders in education who understand the role of language and communication in violence, problems facing many young girls in our society will not be sufficiently addressed and potential talents of girls in trouble with the law will remain unnoticed.

Though researchers have documented school failure is a strong predictor of delinquency (Goldstein & Conoley, 1997), less is known about the relationship between language, learning, and delinquency. More educators in leadership roles need to understand that children with language problems are challenged by the increasing demands of the school curriculum. As the chasm increases between ability and expectations, at-risk students with language problems experience greater frustration as they fall behind their peers. Potentially, truancy, asocial

behaviors and other problematic behaviors result because of the lack of language skills needed to succeed in school (Davis, Sanger, & Morris-Friehe, 1991). Though this line of reasoning is likely to be understood by SLPs, there is not compelling research suggesting this information is understood by school personnel in leadership positions.

Limitations of the Survey Study

Several limitations may prevent firm conclusions to be drawn from the present data and need to be considered when interpreting study findings. Since all survey participants attended a seminar prior to completion of the questionnaires, it is not known how SLPs and educators who have not received information on communication and violence would respond to questionnaire items. Also, this sample was somewhat unique in that all participants who attended the two seminars were self-selected and therefore interested in knowing more information on communication and violence. It is not known how study participants selected from a large random sample would respond. Despite study limitations, however, the findings are important and should be considered in understanding how SLPs and other educators view the role of communication in violence.

Though findings are considered preliminary, they can serve as the basis to support national survey studies to examine the opinions of educators, administrators, and SLPs toward communication and violence. Until additional information from this group of leaders is obtained, programs for female teenagers similar to those in this study may lack critical information.

Implications for Administrators

Though school crime and violence are topics often discussed with educators, researchers acknowledged that educators seldom fully understood the complexity of issues surrounding violence (Kenney, 1998). We would propose that a student's communication skill is one puzzle piece that is too often omitted in discussing topics related to school violence. Hence, it is believed that critical information is omitted in planning intervention programs in schools. This line of reasoning has been supported from researchers who have found that, too often, the needs of teenage females are not sufficiently addressed in planning programs for youth in trouble with the law (Chesney-Lind, 2001). Students may indeed have unidentified language and communication disorders that contribute to their involvement in violence. If students are inadequately assessed and served, then they may not receive the federally mandated free and appropriate public education (FAPE). Because respondents' views were less than positive on some items referring to serving children with communication problems who were involved in violence, the findings provide important pilot data for administrators to consider for planning appropriate responses to school violence, continuing education, and programmatic decisions for children. Administrators are encouraged to work with their staff to:

1. Use the survey in Appendix to seek opinions and attitudes from SLPs and other educational staff.
2. Discuss survey results and compare to this 16-state survey data.
3. Provide continuing education on the topic of language and communication disorders and students' involvement in violence.

4. Routinely assess language abilities of students considered for manifestation documentation reviews following a suspension or expulsion.
5. Provide language and communication intervention services to students involved in violence when it is indicated.
6. Include an assessment of students' language and communication abilities in violence prevention programs.
7. Train SLPs, school psychologists and other special educators *as a team* to consider language and communication interventions when adolescents are involved in violence.
8. Urge special educators to consider the language demands used in designing prevention and other behavioral intervention programs.

Conclusion

Opinions and views of educators and administrators, as well as SLPs, within a school district need to be further surveyed. Obtaining this type of information from a large pool of participants is warranted based on the present study findings. Appropriate assessment and intervention services for students involved in violent acts are more likely to occur if professionals, particularly those in leadership positions, provide information on the links between students with communication disorders and violence. In order to provide helpful suggestions to a group of young women, these professionals will need more education about these connections.

The consequences of school violence are far-reaching and deeply disturbing. The present study findings suggest that some young women in trouble with the law are struggling with educational challenges which also include communication and language problems. Administrators and other school leaders need to be able to recognize these types of findings and, in turn, use every resource that may prove effective in dealing with these issues. In summary, study findings lend support for leaders implementing policy who are dealing with a growing population of adolescents with communication problems involved in violence.

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Appendix A
THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN VIOLENCE
 Sample (n = 96)

The following statements are generalizations about children and adolescents who have communication problems and are involved in violence. Although the information refers to children, you can generalize the statements to also include adolescents. Please indicate the strength of your agreement or disagreement with each statement as a generalization. If you are uncertain or do not have sufficient information to provide an opinion about a given statement, mark "Uncertain."

SA = Strongly Agree
 A = Agree
 U = Uncertain

D = Disagree
 SD = Strongly Disagree

- M = 1.38 SD = 0.58 1. Violence in school settings is increasingly a concern of educators.
- M = 1.95 SD = 1.05 2. During the past five years, I have been more concerned about addressing the needs of children on my caseload who are involved in violence.
- M = 3.70 SD = 0.94 3. The role of communication in violence is sufficiently understood by educators.
- M = 3.60 SD = 1.01 4. In my present job setting, professionals including teachers, principals, and other special educators are aware of the role of communication in violence.
- M = 3.82 SD = 0.90 5. Educators are sufficiently trained to provide services for students with communication disorders who are involved in violence.
- M = 3.83 SD = 0.94 6. Educators have adequate training in behavior management to address the needs of children with communication disorders who are involved in violence.
- M = 3.64 SD = 0.94 7. Educators' knowledge about multicultural issues is sufficient to address the needs of children with communication disorders who are involved in violence.
8. It is challenging to identify children for language services who have been involved in violence because:
- M = 2.13 SD = 0.85 a. many students do not follow rules to politely interact in conversations. Therefore, it is difficult to know which students to assess for language and communication disorders.
- M = 1.91 SD = 0.80 b. students are viewed as behavioral problems, learning disabled, etc., but are not consistently referred to the speech-language pathologist.
- M = 2.27 SD = 0.89 c. often students are tested by speech-language pathologists but do not qualify for language services.
- M = 2.44 SD = 0.98 d. they are not referred or assessed for language and communication disorders, because those services are considered low priority. (n = 94)

- M = 1.66 SD = 0.69 9. Educators should be involved with educational efforts to plan prevention programs for children with communication disorders who are involved in violence.
- M = 2.95 SD = 1.21 10. Educators have sufficient background training to collaborate and consult with other team members for children with communication disorders who are involved in violence.
- M = 3.45 SD = 0.95 11. Educators provide adequate services for children with communication disorders who are involved in violence. (n = 77)
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