

Bridging the gap between language and behavioural difficulties in adolescents at risk of exclusion

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Abstract

The Bridge Project is a novel, narrative discourse and emotional literacy intervention for adolescents with co-occurring language and behavioural difficulties who are at high risk of exclusion (temporary or permanent removal from school). Young people who experience disciplinary exclusions are highly likely to have language and social communication needs which include difficulties producing coherent narratives and identifying and describing complex emotions. This may contribute to emotional and behavioural problems and present barriers to engaging with talking therapies and restorative practices implemented by schools or mental health services.

Despite this, very few studies have explored the feasibility or impact of language intervention on young people at risk of exclusion. A pilot study conducted across three schools found that 31 (75.6%) out of 41 students aged 11-15 years, with behavioural difficulties identified by their school as being at high risk of exclusion, had significant receptive and expressive language difficulties. Analysis of discourse features revealed that students' fictional and personal narratives included few evaluative comments such as causal explanations or insights into protagonists' or their own motivations, or mental and cognitive states. Students also frequently omitted important macrostructural elements such as resolutions and internal responses when telling stories.

Despite implementation challenges arising from temporary exclusions and student absence, preliminary effectiveness data indicates that following 10 weeks of intervention delivered by a speech and language therapist or a trained and coached teaching assistant, students produced longer, more detailed and coherent narratives. The number and proportion of evaluative comments increased with significantly greater use of causal explanations. The overall structure of students' narratives improved, in addition to small increases in morphological and syntactic complexity. Further significant improvements were observed in standardised expressive sentence and receptive discourse measures.

Despite the well documented co-occurrence of language and behavioural difficulties there is a current gap in the literature concerning evidence-based interventions which address these needs, particularly for older children. This study is an important step towards identifying effective approaches to support the functional language skills of adolescents who are at risk of exclusion.