Assessing young people in Youth Justice; the development and trialing of an oral communication assessment tool for the use of those working with young people in Youth Justice contexts

Background
The focus on communication needs of young people in contact with the law is of relatively recent date (see Anderson, Hawes & Snow, 2016, for a review). The extent of the problem, usually indicated at around 60% of that population, and the fact that almost none of these young people have ever been in contact with speech-language therapy, shows us that it is unlikely that direct intervention from a specialist will be possible for all. Meanwhile, police, social workers, health workers, educators, restorative justice co-ordinators, lawyers and judges will be interacting with these young people and attempting to manage their communication needs with varying degrees of awareness and success. (Snow & Sanger, 2011; Hayes & Snow, 2013)

Development
The situation prompted a research project at the University of Auckland to develop an oral language assessment tool [OLAT] which could be used by those workers who are not SLTs. It is not a screener, but a criterion-referenced tool designed with the particular oral language comprehension and expression difficulties that have been reported in this context, in mind.

"They kept using big words – so I thought 'what the .... and I just kept saying 'Yeah' to everything "

Design of the OLAT
The OLAT consists of 6 sections covering:

[1] Concepts of Time: e.g. analogue/digital time, day before/day after, concepts of recently, soon & future.

[2] Legal Vocabulary: comprehension & expression of relevant terms e.g. bail, custody, remorse, breach, victim.

[3] Figurative Language: e.g. give us a hand, hit the roof, crack me up, got smashed.

[4] Comprehension of Complex Syntax: involves tag questions & complex information e.g. The police charged him but he didn't do it did he?

[5] Text Level Language: descriptive and explanatory text. Test items use pictures familiar to young people in Aotearoa New Zealand e.g. Why do you reckon people get a tattoo?


“What does ‘guilty’ mean?”

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Trial
The OLAT was trialled on a cohort of young people admitted to secure youth justice facilities in N.Z. Participants were also assessed using 5 subtests from the CELF-4.

The CELF-4 results from a sample of three participants revealed scaled scores between 2 and 6 for most subtests. All young people had significant problems with the formulated sentences subtest [Scaled scores between 3 & 5] while two also had significant issues with understanding spoken paragraphs [Scaled score = 2]. Apart from one scoring in the normal range for the recalling sentences subtest & another for understanding spoken paragraphs, the young people’s scores fell below the normal range as defined by the CELF-4, indicating a significant language disorder.

The OLAT results revealed a pattern of difficulty for all three participants with the comprehension of legal vocabulary, comprehension of complex syntax & expressive syntax tasks. In the text level language tasks, all participants struggled with explanatory text over descriptive text.

These results indicate that for this sample, difficulties indicated on the OLAT are due to a significant language disorder.