At-Risk Students and Communication Skill Deficiencies: A Preliminary Study

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Abstract

Early research has explored the relationship between at-risk students and communication apprehension. At-risk students have been found to have high levels of apprehension in a variety of communication settings. However, little attention has been given to exploring at-risk students perceptions of their communication skills and other areas of communication competency beyond general communication apprehension or fear of speaking. This study explores the relationship between at-risk students; self reported levels of communication competence, communication apprehension, and additional areas of communication skills such as self-monitoring and verbal aggressiveness. The results of this study show that at-risk students tend to report having high communication competency levels, while testing very low on communication skill areas. Study implications and suggested areas for future research and curriculum development for teachers are explored.

Keywords: At-Risk students, communication apprehension, communication competencies, self-monitoring

1. Introduction

For over two decades, at-risk students have been studied from a variety of viewpoints ranging from mentoring (Blechman 1992), basic skills (Dixon-Floyd & Johnson 1997), depression (Eacott 2008), speech and language disorders (Thatcher et al., 2008), and living skills (Prince et al., 2010). Communication skills as a topic of concern for at-risk students was specifically highlighted by Mc Whirter et al. (1994) when the author'sargued that low or at-risk students needed to develop five "C's" of competence to help them succeed.

One of the identified "C's" was "communication with others" (p. 190). Wolfe et al. (2003) identified specific communication and conflict resolution skills as a means to reduce dating violence with at-risk youth.

Primary attention to communication skills in at-risk youth began with Chesebro et al. (1992). The authors' discovered that at-risk middle school students were found to have more communication apprehension when speaking in groups and to strangers whencompared to national norms. Rosenfeld et al. (1995) examined the inverse of Chesebro's study by looking at communication apprehension among talented or "gifted" students. The results of the study argued that talented/gifted students had very low apprehension when speaking in groups or with strangers as compared to national norms.

Rosenfeld et al. (1998) expanded upon these earlier studies and looked at the role of supportive communication in middle school at-risk students. The authors' discovered that at-risk students with poor communication skills received poor or very low supportive communication at home. Rosenfeld & Richman (1999) tested the same hypothesis on high school at-risk students and discovered similar results.

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From this review of literature, the relationship between poor communication skills and at-risk students quickly becomes apparent. However, preliminary studies have focused primarily on public speaking and/or speaking in groups or to strangers. Since communication skills are not limited to just these areas, the question is raised if at-risk students struggle with skills in other aspects of communication such as verbal aggression or self-monitoring. This essay will test a group of at-risk high school students to see if at-risk students possess communication skills deficiencies in a broader range of areas.

2. Research Questions

Previous research has revealed that at-risk students tend to score below national norms on communication skills tests in areas such as public speaking or speaking in a group. However, research has revealed that communication competence is a set of skills that anyone can be taught and learned (Fortney et al., 2001). Since at-risk students appear to consistently test below national norms in previous studies for communication apprehension, have at-risk students simply not been taught communication competency skills and do they know they have deficiencies?

Furthermore, if at-risk student communication skill deficiency is due to lack of training, does that lack of training apply to multiple communication areas or just basic public speaking? These questions have led to three research questions that guided the present study:

RQ1: Do at-risk students perceive themselves to possess competent communication skills?
RQ2: Are at-risk students perception of their communication skills supported by different communication skills tests?
RQ3: Do at-risk students struggle in areas of communication competence outside of public speaking and/or speaking in groups?

3. Method

3.1 Sample and Population

29 students were tested at a small public high school in the Pacific Northwest. All 29 students were first year high school students and were identified as at-risk students based upon middle school performances. To qualify as at-risk, each student had less than 80% attendance (meaning they were absent from school for more than 20% of the time or more than 10 days per semester during middle school), had one or more failing grades in a core content class in middle school, and scored below the benchmark on the standardized State test. All 29 students were placed in a specific freshman inquiry class with the intent of trying to keep them from dropping out of school.[2] 15 students were male and 14 were female. 20 students were Caucasian, seven were Hispanic, and one was African American. The average age for the test group was 14.3 years. Collection of data was a blind study. Students were asked to respond to the test questions (different test on different days) as a part of the regular class curriculum but were never told what the questionnaire was testing or what it was about.

3.2 Measurement Instruments

3.2.1 Communication Competence

Communication competence was measured by use of the Communication Competence Test (CCT) (Wiemann, 1977). The CCT is a 36-item, Likert-type questionnaire that yields scores ranging from 36 to 180.[3]

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[2] At-risk students have been identified as more likely to drop out and not finish high school (The Council of Chief States School Officers, 1990).

[3] The CCT requires respondents to state their level of agreement, using a scale of strongly agree, agree, neutral/undecided, disagree, or strongly disagree to 36 statements concerning their feelings about various situations such as "I adapt to changing situations" or "I am a good listener."

The CCT was used because it has long been recognized in the discipline as an accurate way to measure competence. CCT questions were general enough in nature that it was not anticipated to pose interpretation problems for high school students.

3.2.2 Communication Apprehension

Communication apprehension was measured by use of the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24; McCroskey, 1982). The PRCA is a 24-item Likert-type questionnaire that yields score ranging from 24-120.[4] The PRCA-24 was selected because it was the measurement tool used in several previous studies and it is the most widely used measurement of communication apprehension (Levine & McCroskey, 1990).

3.2.3 Verbal Aggression

Since many communication struggles and conflicts can arise from verbal aggressiveness, a verbal aggression test was used to determine if test subjects struggled in communication situations because of being verbally aggressive. Verbal aggression was measured by use of the verbal aggression interpersonal model and measure (VAIM) (Infante & Wigley, 1986).

The VAIM is a 20-item Likert-type questionnaire that yields scores ranging from 20 to 100.[5] The VAIM was selected because of its validity with an Alpha reliability of .81. All statements on the test were read to the students and an interpretation of more sophisticated statements was provided when students did not understand what a statement meant.

3.2.4 Self-Monitor Skills

A key component to successful communication skills is the ability to engage in self-monitoring. A high self-monitoring individual is one who, out of concern for social appropriateness, is particularly sensitive to the expression and self-presentation of others in social situations and uses these cues as guidelines for monitoring his/her own self-presentation (Snyder 1974 p. 528). The self-monitor skills test is a 25-item Likert-type questionnaire that yields score ranging from 0-25. Scores in the range of 0-8 indicate a low self-monitor. Scores in the 9-16 range indicate a moderate self-monitor. Scores in the 17-25 range indicate a high self-monitor. A low or "non" self-monitoring person has little concern for the appropriateness of his/her presentation and expression, pays less attention to the expression of others, and monitors and controls his/her presentation to a lesser extent. His/her presentation and expression appear to be controlled from within by his/her experience rather than by situation and interpersonal specifications of appropriateness (Snyder p. 536). Snyder's (1974) self-monitoring test was used to measure at what level did at-risk students engage in self-monitoring.[6] The self-monitoring scale was used because it is well respected and used in the psychology and communication disciplines and has a test-retest reliability of .83 and a Kuder-Richardson 20 reliability of .70.All statements on the test were read to the students and an interpretation of more sophisticated statements was provided when students did not understand what a statement meant.

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[4] The PRCA-24 requires respondents to state their level of agreement, using a Likert-type response scale of strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, or strongly disagree, to 24 statements concerning their feelings about communication with other people. The statements are grouped in to four settings: (a) group (e.g., "I dislike participating in group discussions"); (b) meeting (e.g., generally, I am nervous when I have to participate in a meeting"); (c) dyadic (e.g., "Ordinarily I am very tense and nervous in conversations"); and (d) public (e.g., "Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while giving a speech").

[5] The VAM requires respondents to state their level of agreement, using a scale of almost never true, rarely true, occasionally true, often true, and almost always true to 20 statements concerning their feelings about how they try to get people to comply with their wishes.

[6] Snyder's self-monitoring test consists of twenty-five questions which require a "yes" or "no" answer. Questions explore areas such as "I find it hard to imitate the behavior of other people," "In a group of people I am rarely the center of attention," and "I am not particularly good at making other people like me."

3.2.5 Machiavellianism

Christie & Geis's (1970) Mach Scale IV was used to test the degree of Machiavellian tendencies in each student. The Mach Scale IV measures the need a person has for control in communication situations.[7]
The Mach Scale IV is a 20-item Likert-type questionnaire that yields score ranging from 20-100. A score in the range of 20-46 indicate a low need for control. A score in the range of 47-73 indicates a moderate need for control. A score in the range of 74-100 indicates a high need for control.

The Mach Scale IV was used to determine if the students had a high or low need for control in communication situations. The test was used to explore if students felt they could control communication situations or if they had given up control of situations perhaps out of frustration due to poor communication skills. All statements on the test were read to the students and an interpretation of more sophisticated statements was provided when students did not understand what a statement meant.

4. Results

4.1 Communication Competence

Analysis of the communication competence responses indicated that the group of at-risk students had a self-reported high perception of their communication skills based on the national norm. The normative mean is 108 while Appendix A shows that the at-risk group scored 132.9 based on scores ranging from 110 to 156 (24.9 points higher than the norm as a group).[8] No student in the at-risk group rated him/herself lower than the national norm.

4.2 Communication Apprehension

Analysis of the PSCA-24 responses indicated that the mean for the total instrument for this group of students was 75.44. The mean is significantly higher than the normative mean of 65.6. Based on the national norms, 76% of the present sample was categorized as having moderate to high communication apprehension.

Examination of the sub-scores on the instrument is consistent with this finding. The normative mean for communication apprehension in groups is 15.4 whereas the present sample scored 18.65 (8% higher). The present sample scored 17.79 for communication apprehension in meetings as compared to the normative mean of 16.4 (1% higher). Interpersonal communication apprehension found the sample group scoring 8% higher with a sample group average score of 17.89 as compared to the normative mean of 14.2   Pubic speaking communication apprehension found a 9% increase over the normative mean of 19.3 with a sample group score of 22.06.

4.3 Verbal Aggression

Analysis of the verbal aggression measure indicated a somewhat normative score for the group of at-risk students. With a test score range between 10-50, the student group mean was 28.6, fairly near the middle of the range. This score indicated that while the students struggle with many other forms of communication apprehension, they do not appear to resort to, nor seek out, verbally aggressive behavior. Individual scores ranged from a low score of 19 to the highest score being 36. Test results indicate the students do not back down from aggression nor do they seek it out despite scoring high on so many communication apprehension areas.

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[7] The Mach Scale IV test requires respondents to state their level of agreement to 20 statements, using a scale of strongly disagree/almost never true, disagree/rarely true, neutral/occasionally true, agree/often true, or strongly agree/almost never true, to 20 statements concerning how well the statement are characteristic or uncharacteristic of the respondent. Questions range form "Honesty is the best policy in all cases," to "Most people are basically good and kind," to "Most men are brave."

[8] See Appendix A for an across-the-board comparison of all 29 subjects in all areas tested.

4.4 Self-Monitor Skills

Analysis of the self-monitoring skills test indicated that the mean for the total score on the instrument for this group of students was 11.31. The normative means for the test indicate a low self-monitor receiving a score between 0-8. Seven test subjects (24%) scored 8 or below indicating the student to be a low self-monitor.

Moderate or average self-monitors receive a score between 9-16. Eighteen of the test subjects (62%) scored in this range indicating that a majority of the at-risk test group is moderate self-monitors. A high self-monitor would receive a score in the 17-25 range. Only four test subjects (14%) scored in this range with the highest score in the entire group being an 18.

No test subject scored higher than 18 indicating that while a few students slightly crossed over into the high self-monitor category, there were no test subjects that tested as a strong high self-monitor. These scores reveal a potential concern that at-risk students may not be able to successfully monitor communication situations.

4.5 Machiavellianism

Analysis of the Mach Scale IV responses indicated a test group mean of 50.89. Test score results from 20-46 indicate a low need for control from the test subject. Eleven of the at-risk students (38%) scored in this range with the lowest score being a 37. A moderate need for control test score would range from 47-73. Eighteen test subjects (62%) scored in this range with the highest score being a 65. This test result appears to indicate that a majority of the at-risk students have only a moderate need for control. No test subjects scored in the high need for control range of 74-100. This is a significant result worth exploration since it means that at-risk students reported little need to be in control.

5. Discussion

My first research question was, "Do at-risk students perceive themselves to possess competent communication skills?" Results of this study suggest the answer to this question is a qualified yes. Not a single student in the test group rated themselves below the normative mean and, as a group, the subjects rated themselves 25 points higher than the normative mean. This suggests a serious problem for at-risk students who possess communication skills deficiencies that could be contributing to their at-risk status. If their skill deficiencies are a factor in being at-risk yet they perceive themselves to be extremely competent communicators, then the false perception of communication skills needs to be rectified.

My second research question was, "Are at-risk students perception of their communication skills supported by different communication skills tests?" Results of this study show the answer to clearly be "no." There is a clear gap between at-risk students perception of their skills and the actual skills they possess. While rating themselves generally as very high competent communicators, the group as a whole consistently tested below normative means. The at-risk student group tested very high for communication apprehension in all four areas of groups, meetings, interpersonal and public speaking. While public speaking tends to be an area of high apprehension in general, exception could be made if that were the only area of apprehension for which the group tested high. However, since the normative means in all four areas tested for high apprehension, the results clearly show that at-risk students actual skills do not match their perception of their abilities.

These findings support the claim from McWhirter et al. (1994) who identified communication at a necessary skill for at-risk students.

My third research question was, "Do at-risk students struggle in areas of communication competence outside of public speaking and/or speaking in groups?" The data obtained from this study indicate a firm "yes." At-risk students were found to be neither high or low on verbal aggression. While this is a positive sign that there is not a great deal of aggression in these students' communication style, they do not indicate that they possess a low aggressive style either.

The test group was found to be low-moderate self-monitors. With self-monitoring being found to be extremely crucial for competent communicators, most of the at-risk students were found to be moderate low to low showing that at-risk students do not possess the skills needed to be able to monitor communication situations appropriately.

A final result worth noting involves the test groups mean for the need for control based on the Mach Scale IV test. At-risk students as a whole appear to have a moderate to low need for control. This may be due to at-risk students coming out of negative home environments where strong communication skills are not taught and they either do not care to fight for control or have possibly given up on trying to control negative environments. Further testing is needed to explore this relationship.

The overall results from this study provide some interesting insights to assist teachers in addressing at-risk students. Since at-risk students seem to clearly perceive themselves to be competent communicators when test results indicated otherwise, these communication deficiencies need to be addressed.

At-risk students appear to need help in developing communication skills in meetings, groups, interpersonal interaction and in public speaking. At-risk students also need to be taught how to be higher self-monitors and be able to better read social and communication cues in different environments and then know how to adapt and respond to those environments.

While having low verbal aggression tendencies is essentially good, using those low tendencies to possibly become passive and/or apathetic is not acceptable of healthy. Teachers need to address instructing at-risk students to have confidence and courage and be able to clearly articulate their concerns and needs. Furthermore, while a low need for control based on the Mach Scale IV test can be a strength when developing communication skills, further testing should be done on at-risk students to discover why this group consistently tested so low.

Have at-risk students lives been filled with so much academic struggle and defeat that they have simply given up trying to control the world around them? Have they become so discouraged that not self-advocating is a normal way of live? Further research would be helpful to explore this relationship.

This study provides numerous areas for future study. This study did not engage in the interpretation of data based on sex. Do male and female at-risk students test differently and have different communication competency struggles? This study also did not allow for ethnicity differences.

The inclusion of socio-economic data would also prove very informative in terms of parent education level of at-risk students, economic profiles, and other demographic data.[9]

Future research should target specific deficiencies in at-risk students and include teaching and training to address those concerns. Fourtney et al. (2001) argue that communication competency can be taught and learned. Therefore, teachers of at-risk students should develop curriculum designed to help address effective tools to being a better high self-monitor. Especially since at-risk students appear to not be aware that they do not do this well (based on evaluating themselves as highly competent in communication). Pre and post-tests would be helpful in all areas of communication apprehension – groups, meetings, interpersonal and public speaking. Since at-risk students appear to consistently be deficient in these areas, providing tools to address these deficiencies could strengthen at-risk students overall skill sets and allow them to better advocate and express their feelings, struggles, and engage the public in a productive manner.

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[9] The school I worked with possessed this data, but was prohibited by law to provide it to me. Future research in this area warrants circumvention of these barriers to explore the influence of socio-economic variables on communication competences for at-risk students.

6. Conclusion

This preliminary study has attempted to target areas of concern for at-risk students regarding communication competencies. Consistent with previous research, this study found that at-risk students struggle with communication skills. Additionally, this study found that students perceptions of their communication skills and their actual communication proficiencies did not match.

Specific areas of skill set strengths for competent communicators such as self-monitoring were found to be problematic areas for at-risk students. By specifically addressing these areas of deficiency in at-risk students, it is hoped that teachers can develop curriculum to move students from being at-risk to being successful not only in school, but in life.

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        291.

Appendix A - Test Results

Subject	Comm ompetency	PRCA24 Groups	PRCA24 Meetings	PRCA24 Inter-personal	PRCA24 Public Spe	PRCA24 Total	Verbal Aggression	Self-Monitor	Mach IV
1	123	18	20	19	22	79	27	11	46
2	142	30	29	26	30	85	38	7	53
3	139	19	18	12	30	79	25	9	56
4	136	20	18	18	19	75	28	8	46
5	151	18	24	24	29	95	34	17	53
6	113	11	12	12	19	54	38	14	51
7	148	13	12	11	13	49	27	9	49
8	121	14	11	12	14	51	19	11	51
9	136	14	14	15	14	57	28	17	48
10	151	19	12	11	12	54	31	12	62
11	124	20	16	23	18	77	30	7	58
12	121	23	19	20	28	90	26	13	66
13	117	22	24	20	24	90	36	9	51
14	110	25	22	24	20	91	29	7	43
15	149	13	15	16	25	69	19	11	44
16	133	18	15	15	19	67	31	16	44
17	136	17	17	16	19	69	25	10	52
18	121	15	17	18	18	68	30	11	57
19	135	17	21	12	30	80	26	8	65
20	156	14	16	12	16	58	31	8	58
21	155	15	6	14	30	65	29	7	37
22	148	18	18	19	24	81	24	18	57
23	124	22	19	27	22	90	24	16	44
24	156	22	19	20	23	84	28	10	43
25	113	28	26	26	28	108	36	10	51
26	117	14	16	18	19	67	29	9	45
27	110	18	16	19	24	77	31	10	62
28	136	24	23	22	26	95	26	15	44
29	135	20	21	18	25	84	25	18	40
Mean	132.96	18.65	17.79	17.89	22.06	75.44	28.6	11.31	50.89
National Norms	108	15.4	16.4	14.2	19.3	65.6	10-50	0-8/9-16	20-46 47 -73 74-100