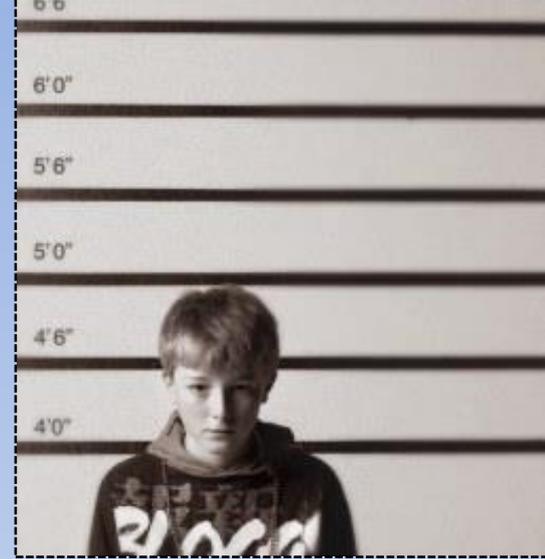


# Oral language skills and the incarcerated young offender – Links with patterns of offending and early life risk



Pamela Snow

School of Psychology & Psychiatry, Monash University  
Australia

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MONASH University

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- Participants in our studies

# In today's presentation



- Factors that promote Oral Language Competence (OLC) in early life
- Why does OLC matter across the lifespan?
- Our research on OLC in high-risk young males
- What do these findings mean for the young person at-risk in the early years / already in the justice system?

# Oral language competence?

- Everyday speaking and listening skills
- Auditory processing and comprehension
- Expressive language skills – semantics (vocabulary) , syntax (grammar), pragmatics (use)
- Socially and culturally determined rules and practices
- Important in facilitating the transition to literacy in the early school years, but not just literacy's 'Hand Maiden'

# Language: Surface and hidden meanings

▶ Similes



▶ Metaphor



▶ Idiom



▶ Jokes



▶ Sarcasm



# Threats\* to the development of OLC

- Neglect – esp socio-emotional
- Abuse
- Parental MH problems e.g. depression, substance abuse
- Social disadvantage / low SES / chaotic family
- Developmental disabilities
- Male gender
- Sensory deficits
- Inadequate / interrupted education – b/c language continues to emerge / evolve throughout childhood, adolescence and across the adult life-span



**\*Cumulative in nature**

# Our research

- Extends what is known about social skills and learning disabilities in young offenders, but
  - Is specifically concerned with oral language
- Seeks to position OLC more centrally as a protective factor for all young people
- Recognises that level of education is a powerful predictor of health status, social engagement, and economic productivity across the lifespan
- Carried out in Victoria, Australia



# The Victorian context

- Active diversion of youth offenders from custodial sentences
- Unique “Dual Track” system for 17-20 year-olds
- Lowest rate of youth supervision or detention nationally (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2006)
- Fewer indigenous offenders than other States



# TWO KEY STUDIES

1. Community-based young offenders
2. Incarcerated young offenders

# Community Offenders study

(Snow & Powell, 2008)

- n=50 YP on community-based orders
- Mean age\* = 15.8; Mean yrs education = 7.6
- Standardised measures of spoken and receptive language
- A measure of nonverbal IQ
- Data about convictions (violent Vs nonviolent - categorised)
- NB Excluded known Hx of TBI, hearing impairment, major psychiatric diagnoses etc
- **52% LI**

# Community Study: Key findings

- 52% classified as language impaired according to standardised measures
- Difficulties were pervasive across measures
- Language problems not accounted for by low IQ
- Relationship b/w language skills and type of offending unclear
- 50% of those with LI had been identified for early intervention services
- 41% of those with LI had been diagnosed as ADHD

# Custodial Sample

(Snow & Powell, in press)

- n=100
- Mean age = 19.03; Mean Yrs education = 9.8
- Standardised measures of spoken and receptive language
- A measure of nonverbal IQ
- Data about convictions (violent Vs nonviolent - quantified)
- Mental Health measure – to examine links b/w language and MH, in particular depression and anxiety
- Child Protection Hx – Out of Home Care Placement
- No exclusions, but all had to have completed the majority of their schooling in an English-speaking country
- No participants identified as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin

# Measures - 1

## **CELF4 (Australian standardisation)**

- Recalling Sentences
- Formulating Sentences
- Word Classes (Receptive)
- Word Definitions
- Core Language Score

## **Test of Language Competence – Expanded Edition**

- Ambiguous Sentences
- Listening Comprehension
- Figurative Language

**[Narrative Discourse – analysis pending]**

# Measures - 2

## Kaufman Brief Intelligence Test – 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.

- Matrices – for estimate of NV IQ

## Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS)

## Cormier-Lang Crime Index (CLCI)

- Violent Offending
- Non-Violent Offending
- Total Offending scales

# Measures - 3

## Self-Report on

- Early intervention
- ADHD Diagnosis
- Level of education
- Further training
- Child Protection History – Out of Home Care Placement
- Alcohol and other drug use
- TBI, Hearing Impairment, major psychiatric diagnoses

# Operationalising LI in the sample

- n = 50 were identified as LI on the CELF4 (standard score < 2 SDs below the mean)
  - n = 59 scored < 2 SDs below the mean on at least two subtests of the TLC-E
  - A score below this cut-off on 2 of the 3 TLC-E subtests and on the CELF4 Core Language Score was the operational definition of LI
- 46% were identified as LI using this definition.**

# Violent Offending and LI

- History of violence present in 87% of cases
- Quantified using CLCI
- Two subgroups created based on severity median split on CLCI Scales 1 & 2
  - ‘High’ Offending n = 26
  - ‘Not-High’ Offending n = 74

*These subgroups differed on years of education but not on nonverbal IQ*

Measure	High Offending Scores on CLCI Scales 1&2 (n=26)		Not High offending Scores on CLCI Scales 1&2 (n=74)		t	p*	d
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
TLC-E Subtest 1 Ambiguous Sentences Standardised Score	4.2	1.9	4.8	2.5	1.1	.14	.27
TLC-E Subtest 2 Listening Comprehension Standardised Score	4.9	2.6	5.2	2.5	.48	.31	.12
<b>TLC-E Subtest 4 Figurative Language Standardised Score</b>	<b>4.2</b>	<b>2.1</b>	<b>5.6</b>	<b>2.8</b>	<b>2.3</b>	<b>.01</b>	<b>.56</b>
CELF4 Recalling Sentences	4.7	2.9	5.4	3.2	.97	.16	.23
<b>CELF4 Formulating Sentences</b>	<b>3.8</b>	<b>3.3</b>	<b>5.6</b>	<b>3.4</b>	<b>2.3</b>	<b>.012</b>	<b>.53</b>
<b>CELF4 Word Classes (Receptive)</b>	<b>4.0</b>	<b>2.6</b>	<b>6.3</b>	<b>3.1</b>	<b>3.3</b>	<b>.00</b>	<b>.80</b>
<b>CELF4 Word Definitions</b>	<b>5.0</b>	<b>3.8</b>	<b>6.5</b>	<b>4.0</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>.055</b>	<b>.38</b>
<b>CELF4 Core Language Score</b>	<b>63.7</b>	<b>19.9</b>	<b>74.1</b>	<b>19.1</b>	<b>2.4</b>	<b>.01</b>	<b>.53</b>

# Violent Offending and LI cont.

Inspection of the 7 cases of *extremely high scores* (>75<sup>th</sup> percentile) on both the CLCI violent and non-violent offending scales, showed that 5 were in the Language Impaired subgroup.

# Custodial Study: Key findings

- 46% Language Impaired\*
- Significant differences on several language measures between High Offending Group and Non-High Offending Group
- Of the 29 with a history of OHC, 16 (68%) were classified as LI
- No association b/w LI and self-reported MH problems
- Significant correlation between language skills and IQ for the non-LI subgroup, but not for those with LI.
- 62% of those with LI had been identified for early intervention services
- 43% of those with LI had been diagnosed as ADHD
- TBI, psychiatric diagnoses, hearing impairment all occurred with low frequency / overlap with LI

# Limitations / considerations

- Self-selection into the study => bias?
- Operationalisation of LI – were we too conservative?
- MH measure – sensitivity?
- Minimum Data Set – not part of our thinking 10 years ago, but should have been
- Many may have had Child Protection involvement but without OHC placement – this is difficult to assess via self-report
- Many likely to have trauma backgrounds – difficult to capture, but important developmentally
- Community / Custodial offender distinction is somewhat artificial

# Take home messages

- Clinically significant language impairment is present in ~ 50% of young male offenders
- IQ is not an explanatory mechanism
- Early intervention has
  - Not occurred
  - Been inadequate
- Other labels (e.g. ADHD, Conduct Disorder) are likely to be applied
- Early risk (as measured by OHCP) increases vulnerability but is also a missed intervention opportunity
- Undetected LI will make being a witness, suspect or victim more challenging for a young person
- Interpersonal violence instead of prosocial ways of dealing with ambiguity / hostility??

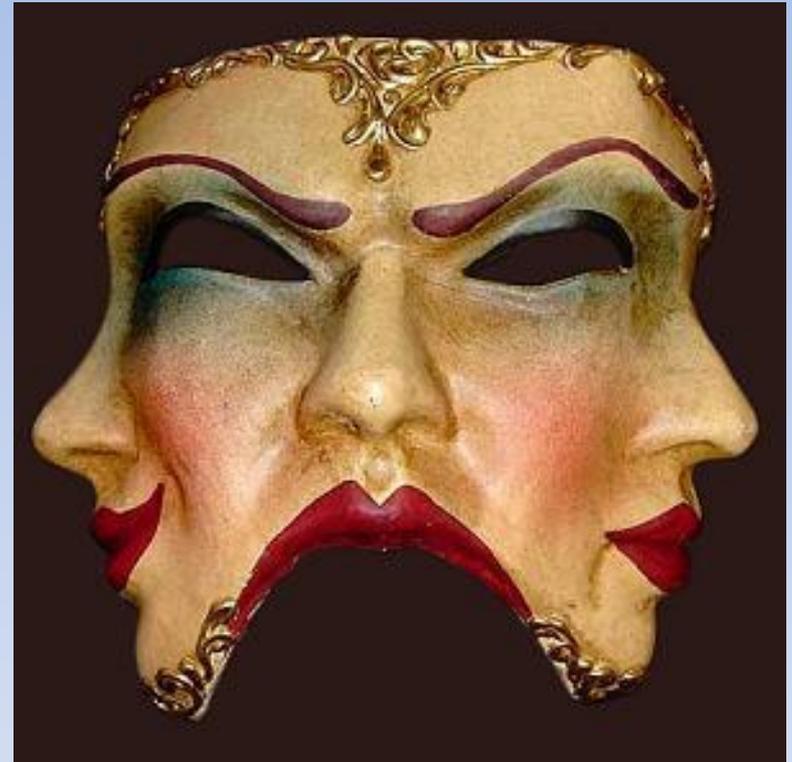


# Language problems are invisible



# Language Impairment may masquerade as

- Rudeness
- Indifference / lack of concern
- Poor motivation to cooperate
- “Yep, nup, dunno, maybe” ...and other minimalist responses
- Suggestibility / Over-compliance



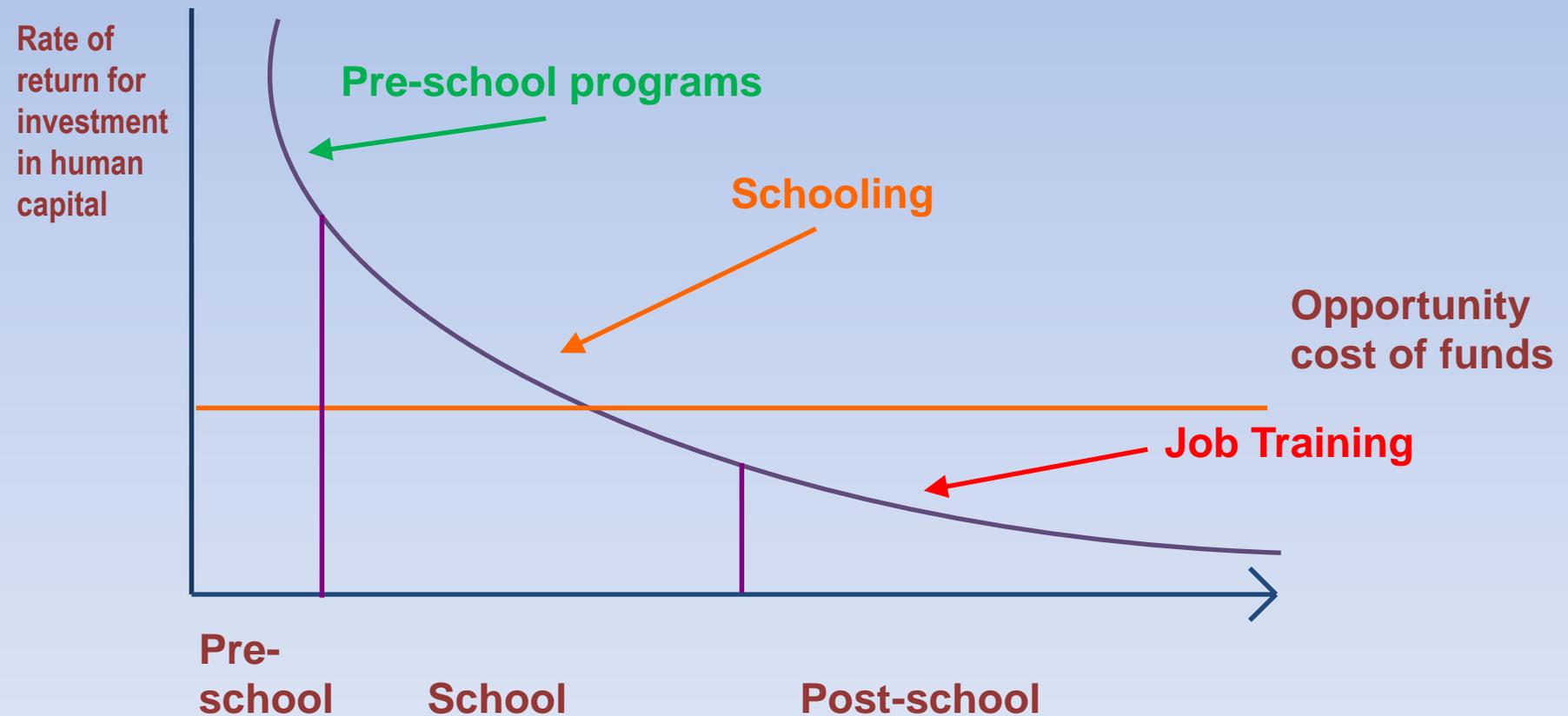
# What does all of this mean for....

- ▶ Early intervention with high-risk boys?
- ▶ **Forensic interviewing of youth offenders?**
- ▶ Counselling of young offenders?
- ▶ **Restorative Justice conferencing?**
- ▶ Mental Health across the lifespan?
  - ▶ Mastery
  - ▶ Optimism / Hope
- ▶ **Delivery of literacy and social skill interventions within the (youth) justice system?**
- ▶ Young people in the Child Protection system?



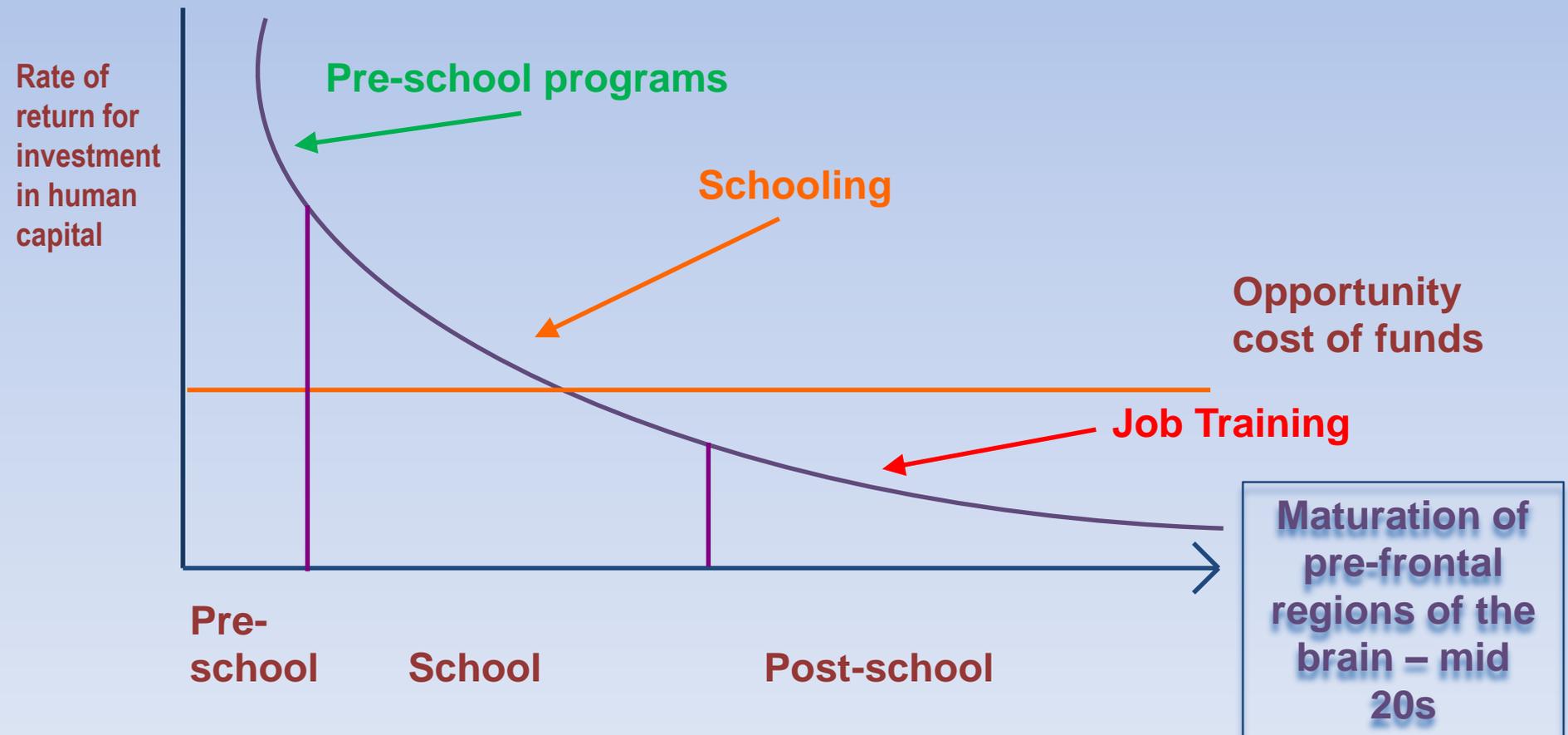
# Rates of return from investment in early childhood

Heckman & Carneiro (2003) Human Capital Policy



# Rates of return from investment in early childhood

Heckman & Carneiro (2003) Human Capital Policy



## Selected Publications

- Snow, P.C. & Powell, M.B. (in press) Oral language competence in incarcerated young offenders: Links with offending severity. *International Journal of Speech Language Pathology*.
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Thank  
you



Further information: [pamela.snow@monash.edu](mailto:pamela.snow@monash.edu)