Journal of Communication Disorders 56 (2015) 8–18

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Communication Disorders

Reactions of teachers versus non-teachers toward people who stutter

Jian Li [a,*], Hayley S. Arnold [b]

[a] Evaluation and Measurement, Kent State University, United States
[b] Speech Pathology and Audiology, Kent State University, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 11 September 2014
Received in revised form 4 February 2015
Accepted 8 May 2015
Available online 28 May 2015

Keywords:
Stuttering
Teachers
Gender
Reactions
Attitudes

ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this study was to assess whether kindergarten through twelfth grade teachers differ from people in non-teaching occupations in their reactions to people who stutter (PWS). Taking differences in age and education into account, we compared reactions to PWS between 263 teachers and 1336 non-teachers in the United States based on their responses on the Public Opinion Survey on Human Attributes-Stuttering (POSHA-S, St. Louis, 2012). Findings indicated that teachers use a greater number and variety of information sources about PWS than the general public and that male teachers do so even more than female teachers. With regard to the other POSHA-S components, accommodating/helping, knowledge/experience, and sympathy/social distancing of PWS, teachers' responses were not significantly different from their non-teaching counterparts. Regardless of occupation, women reported reactions to PWS that are considered more accommodating and helpful to PWS than the reported reactions of men.

Learning outcomes: Readers should be able to: (1) identify the challenges that students who stutter encounter in the K-12 school setting, (2) identify recommended ways teachers can react to their students who stutter, (3) summarize findings regarding teachers' reactions to people who stutter (PWS), and (4) identify key variables that are associated with reactions to PWS.

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1. Introduction

Stuttering, a disorder characterized by disruption of the "rhythm" or fluency of speech by repetitions or blockages (Bloodstein & Bernstein Ratner, 2008), can have a negative impact on the affected person's educational, occupational, and social experiences (Yaruss & Quesal, 2004). The degree of disability the person experiences – that is, how much stuttering results in limitations of functioning within society – can be, in part, influenced by how listeners have reacted to the person who stutters (Gabel, Hughes, & Daniels, 2008; Klein & Hood, 2004; Yaruss & Quesal, 2004).

Children's functioning in society includes primarily educational and social experiences, which are often centered on their lives at school. Retrospective reports from people who stutter (PWS) indicate that school experiences are often stressful (Corcoran & Stewart, 1998; Crichton-Smith, 2002; Daniels, Gabel, & Hughes, 2012; Hayhow, Cray, & Enderby, 2002; Klompas & Ross, 2004). When asked to indicate how stuttering has affected educational and occupational life experiences, 81% of PWS

* Corresponding author at: Evaluation and Measurement, 316 White Hall, Kent State University, Kent, OH 44242-0001, United States.
E-mail address: jli42@kent.edu (J. Li).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jcomdis.2015.05.003
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from a self-help group in Great Britain were able to give examples of the impact stuttering had on their school experiences (Hayhow et al., 2002). Examples of stressful school experiences for PWS reported across several studies particularly relate to being teased or bullied, negative experiences when speaking in front of class, and having limited opportunities to participate in classroom speaking tasks (Corcoran & Stewart, 1998; Crichton-Smith, 2002; Daniels et al., 2012; Hayhow et al., 2002; Klompas & Ross, 2004). Many of these problems appear to result from a complex interplay between the child's internal reactions to his or her stuttering experiences (e.g., Blood, Blood, Maloney, Meyer, & Qualls, 2007; De Nil & Brutten, 1991; Logan & Yaruss, 1999; Murphy, Yaruss, & Quesal, 2007; Vanryckeghem & Brutten, 1996, 1997), peer reactions to the child's differences (Blood & Blood, 2004; Blood et al., 2007; Davis, Howell, & Cooke, 2002; Evans, Healey, Kawai, & Rowland, 2008; Langevin, 2009; Langevin & Narasimha Prasad, 2012; Murphy, Yaruss, & Quesal, 2007), and educational speaking requirements such as speaking in front of groups and participating in class discussions.

The stress of speaking aloud in an unsupportive class environment or being bullied or rejected by peers may result in long-term consequences that restrict the potential for a child who stutters to succeed in society (O'Brian, Jones, Packman, Menzies, & Onslow, 2011). Children who stutter experience bullying and peer rejection at a higher rate than their typically fluent peers (Blood & Blood, 2004; Blood et al., 2007; Davis et al., 2002; Evans et al., 2008; Langevin, 2009). This has long-term implications because bullying and peer rejection are associated with psychological distress in adulthood (Lev-Wiesel, Nuttman-Shwartz, & Sternberg, 2006) with 42% of PWS, who were bullied as children, reporting long-term negative effects, particularly on personal relationships (Hugh-Jones & Smith, 1999). These stressful school experiences may also help to explain why greater severity of stuttering is associated with lower educational attainment (O'Brian, Jones, Packman, Menzies, & Onslow, 2011).

Teachers in the kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12) setting may be able to assist in mitigating the stressful effects these school experiences may have on their students who stutter. When educated about bullying and given concrete classroom intervention strategies, teachers can effectively increase the positive feelings peers have about a classmate who stutters (Langevin, 1997, 2000; Langevin & Narasimha Prasad, 2012). Although there are no empirical studies that have assessed the effectiveness of various methods teachers can use to help improve students' own internal reactions to stuttering, clinical leaders in speech-language pathology have combined their clinical experience, expertise, knowledge of research-validated counseling principles and knowledge of factors that impact stuttering to provide teachers guidance. For example, teachers can be supportive participants in their students' therapy activities aimed at desensitization to speech tasks (Murphy et al., 2007a). Teachers can also model a nonchalant and accepting demeanor in moments when children stutter (Logan & Yaruss, 1999; Scott, 2009). Advice from these experts also suggests that teachers can increase successful classroom participation of students who stutter with a variety of strategies, including allowing these students to choose when they give a presentation (i.e., beginning, middle, or end of the class order), refraining from filling in students' words when they are stuck, and focusing on the message content conveyed, rather than how fluent that message was (Scott, 2009). Although empirical study is needed to assess the effectiveness of these techniques in improving the school experiences of children who stutter, expert-recommended practices indicate that K-12 teacher reactions to stuttering are important.

In order to better understand the types of reactions that teachers may have to PWS, we adopted the framework of the Public Opinion Survey of Human Attributes-Stuttering (POSHA-S) (St. Louis, 2005, 2011a, 2011b, 2013; St. Louis, Reichel, Yaruss, & Lubker, 2009), in which reactions to PWS include four components: knowledge/experience, knowledge source, accommodating/helping, and sympathy/social distancing (details regarding these components are in the Method section). Although there is a scant amount of research investigating teachers' reactions to PWS, we review studies aimed at assessing teachers' attitudes toward PWS, which appear relevant to some of the components in the POSHA-S framework.

Rather than assessing the accuracy of knowledge about PWS, the two knowledge components of the POSHA-S assess ways people acquire knowledge about PWS. The knowledge/experience component assesses respondents' familiarity with PWS through personal relationships and perception of their own extent of knowledge about stuttering. The knowledge source component assesses the number and variety of sources from which respondents have learned about PWS such as TV, print, internet, school, medical professionals, and personal experience through family and friends. Previous work indicates that a large proportion (63–87%) of teachers report some degree of familiarity with individuals who stutter (Lass et al., 1992, 1994; Ruscello, Lass, Schmitt, & Pannbacker, 1994; Yeakle & Cooper, 1986). However, only about half of US teachers have stuttering knowledge acquired through formal or informal study (Lass et al., 1992, 1994; Ruscello et al., 1994; Yeakle & Cooper, 1986). One problem with this body of literature is that it was conducted in the 1980s and 1990s, prior to widespread use of the internet as a knowledge source. Another problem is that the prior literature does not assess how teachers' number of knowledge sources or degree of experiential knowledge compares to those of the general public. Therefore, it is not known how these components of knowledge acquisition for teachers fit within the current societal context.

When considering the accommodating/helping component of the POSHA-S framework, there is little that can be gleaned from the literature regarding teacher attitudes. Some surveys of teachers and personal reports from PWS indicate that although many teachers encourage their students who stutter to take part in speaking tasks, a small but significant number of teachers may have been limiting these students' classroom participation (Crowe & Walton, 1981; Glickman, 2010; Hayhow et al., 2002; Yeakle & Cooper, 1986). As with what is known about teachers' knowledge source and experiential knowledge, the literature addressing teachers' reported accommodating/helping behaviors is based on events that may have occurred many years prior to the publication of the study. For example, the average age of PWS respondents in Hayhow et al. (2002) was 38. Thus, the average participant was in secondary school in the 1980s, the same time period that the survey studies reporting teachers' self-reported self-reactions to PWS were published (Crowe & Walton, 1981; Yeakle & Cooper, 1986). Teacher reactions to PWS may

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