Motivational interviewing
Conversations for change in schools

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Motivational interviewing (MI) is a counselling style originally developed to support problem drinkers\(^1\). It is based on the assumption that a person might not recognise a problem with their behaviour, or be reluctant to change it. It also recognises that there might be reasons why someone engages in behaviour which is viewed by others as problematic. For example, a student’s aggressive behaviour may lead to attention and improve peer status.

In schools, concerns are often expressed by a member of staff or a parent, rather than the student. When this happens, often schools put a behaviour plan in place, but if the student is not concerned, or does not feel ready or able to make changes, this may be unsuccessful.

A useful framework for understanding change, known as the Model of Stages of Change\(^2\,^3\), was developed around the same time as MI first started to gain recognition, about 35 years ago. This model proposes that people can be at different stages when thinking about changing behaviour. Imagine a smoker who has no intention of giving up cigarettes and how futile telling them to give up, or referring them to a stop-smoking service, would be. In the same way, if a student is not yet ready to take action in relation to a particular behaviour, an intervention or contract is unlikely to result in prolonged and meaningful change.

So how might I support a student who does not seem ready for change?

One of the most important aspects of MI is empathy\(^4\) – that is to imagine what it would be like to stand in the student’s shoes and to try to make a change. Time should be taken to develop rapport first, before working with the student to talk about what aspects of school (if any) they might need support with. Then it is a case of exploring possibilities for change, including how confident the student feels about achieving it. In my experience, often students are highly motivated, but do not think that change is achievable. Only when these elements have been covered, and the student has expressed some desire for change, should planning for change take place\(^5\).
There are four skills of MI which are useful within helping conversations:

1. **Open questions** – try and ask questions which do not require a specific answer (typically ‘Yes’ or ‘No). Questions like “What has helped in the past?” or “What do you think we should do next?” help to involve the student in problem-solving.

2. **Affirmations** – essentially offering specific praise which will be meaningful to the student. This could be in relation to skills and strengths (“that was enormously kind of you to help that other student who was struggling”); values (“you’re a really good friend”); or efforts (“it’s great that you’ve managed to stay in all your lessons today – that took real persistence”).

3. **Reflections** – Ideally, rather than asking lots of questions, it is better to try and listen to the student and try to reflect back what you are hearing, for example: “it sounds like you’re having a really tough time at the moment” or “I hear that you are trying to work harder in geography, but managing to keep a good relationship with the teacher is not always easy”.

4. **Summaries** – This involves pulling together key bits of information, to allow the student to think about the current situation and explore change. Here’s an example: “you’re wondering whether to truant less. It gives you chance to hang out with your friends and miss lessons you don’t like, but you’re also thinking about your future and that the better you do in your exams, the more choices you’ll have later in life.”
My research in MI

My research in MI has explored how effective the approach is for working with both older and younger students\(^6\,^7\). I have also helped develop practitioner protocols for professionals who want to develop their skills in using the approach, which can be found here [https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/79e42a_f02596bfc83f4738b4d5f9d326294599.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/79e42a_f02596bfc83f4738b4d5f9d326294599.pdf). Currently I am involved in research looking at how useful MI is in conversations with other adults (parents and teachers) and how it can help college students engage with their education, and avoid dropping out of their courses.

How do I find out more?

If this sounds interesting, there is fantastic, free online training available at [https://learning.bmj.com/learning/module-intro/motivational-interviewing.html?moduleId=10051582](https://learning.bmj.com/learning/module-intro/motivational-interviewing.html?moduleId=10051582). Although it is not specific to school-based practice, it gives a great insight into the approach and you even get a certificate at the end! Perhaps you could complete it individually and then arrange to discuss with colleagues any implications for practice.

There are also resources on the Manchester Motivational Interviewing Network website [www.mmin.co.uk](http://www.mmin.co.uk). The network also hosts meetings and offers training, and you can sign up via the website to find out more.

References