



Conversations about Change

It really all depends on how the teachers and students interact.

—*A student, in answer to the question
“What is a good school?”*

Motivational interviewing (MI) focuses on improving motivation to change, and it does this through conversation. This book is about how the conversation skills you already have can be refined to inspire change in classrooms, corridors, and cafeterias. It’s about how to improve student motivation, behavior and growth.¹ It’s also about how you can enjoy your conversations, be more efficient, conserve your energy, and have a greater impact. In the end, it’s about how well-known principles of good education can be realized through more effective conversation.

Attending to student behavior is no easy task. For example, in the United States, one recent year (2006) saw 7% of students suspended at least once, amounting to 3.3 million youth (Losen, 2011). In another analysis over a million students walked out of their school before graduating, never to return (Datiri, 2013). At the milder end of the spectrum, efforts to improve performance are often based on the idea that with

¹ This book focuses on primary and secondary schools. However, it’s a fairly short step into the world of higher education. The style and techniques of MI will endure across settings even if the content of the conversations might be a little different.

sufficient pressure and reinforcement, student motivation will improve. Loud encouragement, and often coercion, is the norm.

MI offers an alternative strategy. It has been refined over the last 30 years to produce a strengths-based vehicle for you to support students in finding their own routes to change (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). It can be useful whether you are a teacher, administrator, counselor, or coach. MI offers tools for responding effectively to situations like these:

A 9-year-old student is downhearted, struggling with a math problem and says, “I just don’t get it, I never do.”

A girl of 12 ambles casually into the classroom, late again. You ask why and the reply is “Dunno.”

You are discussing progress with a 15-year-old student and her father, and he says, “This kind of performance is unacceptable. She’s just not applying herself like she should.”

The conversations that unfold in the above scenarios will all focus on change, whether in behavior, motivation, or learning. If you could wave a magic wand, you would make students instantly motivated and ready to change their attitudes or behavior. Instead, such change takes effort, both yours and the student’s. What would you say next in each of the above conversations?

The Righting Reflex

A common response in situations like those above is to use what we call the “righting reflex.” It’s a well-intentioned inclination to fix the problem for the person. It works sometimes, like when a student asks for advice. It’s essential too when you need to provide information, address something quickly, or when students have no choice but to follow the rules. But for lifting a student’s motivation to change, it’s not very successful. Here’s what the righting reflex could look like in each of those three scenarios:

The student who says, “I just don’t get it, I never do” might hear something like, “If you sit down and really concentrate you will find a way to solve this, and your grade will improve.”

The girl who says “Dunno” when asked why she is late might be met with, “Well, that’s twice this week and the next step will be detention, so make sure you are on time.”

And the father and daughter might hear, “Have you thought about staying after school each day and going for extra help?”

Trying to lift motivation with the righting reflex takes effort and time on your part. So how do students respond? One can predict a defensive reaction, with the word “but” appearing soon, either out loud or more quietly. If the conversation were a dance, then surely some toes are being stepped on.

The righting reflex: an inclination to fix the problem for the student.

Ambivalence

A student’s ambivalence about change is often close to the surface of the exchanges we’ve been discussing. One part of the student’s mind might want to change, hearing all the reasons *for* it; another part hears the opposite, reasons *against* change. Ambivalence is a very common and normal human experience, characterized by a sort of internal mental chatter: “Should I change, or keep things the same?”; “I want to”; “I’m not sure”; “I’m getting there”; “It’s not worth it”; and so on, back and forth. If motivation—the incentive and enthusiasm—is the drive to do something, the voices in favor fuel it, and those against hold it back.

When the righting reflex meets with ambivalence in the student, the conversation takes an unfortunate turn. What students hear from you is the case for change, one side of the ambivalence they feel; their response is quite predictably to voice the other side, to defend the status quo. For example:

The student struggling with math might say or think, “Yes, but . . . I’ve tried and it never works.”

The girl who is late might say, “Yes, OK,” and think to herself, “I don’t like this place, so why should I bother?”

And the daughter of the annoyed father might say, “But I don’t want to.”

It seems like the harder you try to instill motivation, the more students resist. You and the student feel stuck. It’s like a dance that’s going wrong, and your head hurts trying to find the next clever move.

In each of the above examples, the student is saying why change is *not* a good idea. That's a signal worth noting. It would make much more sense if the student, not you, were to make the case for change. MI is designed to do just this.

There's an inclination in all of us to provide solutions, toughen up, talk straight, or tighten disciplinary boundaries. Students, particularly those who are not doing

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so well, often hear this forceful language of reward and punishment. One teacher described it as a traffic light system: Green means, "Go here, yes that's right, well done, you will get good grades and do well in

life," while Red means, "No, stop, don't go there, you'll get punished and . . ." The effect on student motivation of repeatedly hearing "do this, do that" messages might well be a negative one (DeCharmes, 1968; Chirkov & Ryan, 2001; Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Holbein, 2005; Valerand & Bissonnette, 1992). Put bluntly, it's very hard to instill motivation in someone else. We like a decision to change to come from within us, not from outside pressure. Children are no different.

It's hard to instill motivation in someone else.

When they reply with a shrug of the shoulders, or a more strident expression of why they won't or can't change, what's next?

What MI Is

MI is a style with a set of skills used to have a conversation in which the student voices the case for change, what we call "change talk." Change is more likely to occur because it comes from students as an expression of what they want or need.

Rather than hearing you make the case for change, the students hear themselves make it, and this experience makes it easier for them to resolve their ambivalence and make a decision to change. They take charge of the decision making. A new world opens up, their motivation improves, and, bit by bit, conversation by conversation, better outcomes are seen. The more you show respect for the unique potential and strengths of students to change, the more likely they will be to do just that. You will recognize this approach in the principles of student-centered teaching practice, with children of all ages. MI merely

provides the conversational tools for doing this, even in very tough situations.

The energy that drives change comes from within students themselves, with you as their support and guide, working with their strengths and aspirations. MI is founded on the conviction that students *can* change. This involves a shift in your conversation style, from instilling to eliciting, acting more like a guide than an instructor, and is the foundation for all that follows in this book.

MI is a style for having a conversation in which the student voices the case for change.

Is MI easy to learn? Yes and no. The style of conversation involved can feel a little different than that you are used to. Learning requires practice. When you start to settle into the style, and feel pleased about your progress, you can find things moving quite quickly.

What MI Is Not

MI is not a panacea, but merely a way of having a constructive conversation. Forces outside of your control, like students' friendships and their home life, often hold sway over them and prevent your best efforts from having an impact. It would be unrealistic to elevate MI beyond its place, but in its place it can be a powerful tool, or, as one colleague put it, "a powerful ingredient in the fuel that drives good practice" (David Olds, personal communication).

Using MI need not be time-consuming, and it is not a form of counseling in which you passively absorb whatever someone says.

MI is not a behavior change technique, trick, or strategy done *on* or *to* students, but rather something done *with* them, or on their behalf. It's certainly not a way of getting someone to do something he or she would not otherwise want to do. It's best not viewed as a behavior management technique, but as a way of helping someone make decisions. MI is something practiced with students to help them see the paths in front of them and choose those leading to positive growth and fulfillment. It's not just for troubled students, though it will certainly help them; it's something that can and has been used to inform conversations in all corners of school life.

MI is practiced with students; it's not done to or on them.

MI in Schools

The underlying style and techniques of MI can be used in a class with a group of students as well as with individuals. MI can also be adjusted to take into account the developmental age of a child. The way we relate to students of any age can affect their motivation to change. MI, with its emphasis on supporting autonomy, is certainly well suited to adolescents. It is also the case that young children, with their lively imaginations, would benefit from a warm and accepting approach that allows them to consider their own reasons for change. Guidelines for helping younger children are highlighted in Part II.

Our experience with students, and with MI in other settings like health care, is that MI crosses cultural boundaries with little difficulty. One overview of research suggests that, in the United States, it is more effective when used with minority populations, primarily Hispanic and African American communities (Hettema, Steele, & Miller, 2005).

MI is compatible with good teaching practice, where one person takes the role of helping another move from indecision to action, from feeling stuck to feeling more motivated to change.

The overlap between MI and conversations in schools are striking:

- The word “education” is derived from the Latin verb *ducere*, “to lead or guide,” which points to the value of a teacher who “draws forth” learning from students. MI focuses on the conversation techniques for exactly this “drawing forth,” to enhance motivation to change. We call it evoking, a refinement of what has been called a Socratic style of education.
- Experience in the classroom, supported by evidence, tells us that students learn best when they actively participate and willingly take responsibility for their own behavior and learning, supported by skillful teaching techniques. This is easier said than done. Students often seem ambivalent about participating and taking responsibility for themselves or downright opposed to the idea. MI provides the tools for encouraging participation, resolving ambivalence, and helping students to verbalize their own routes to change.
- There is solid evidence that giving students specific, accurate, and positive feedback increases motivation. “Affirmation” is a highly tuned way of doing just this and a core skill in MI.
- Respecting and encouraging autonomy is a part of MI and is supported by educational research. Students perform better on

tests, and feel more competent and motivated to learn, when teachers actively support their autonomy.

- Teachers routinely ask open questions. In MI, open questions are followed by the use of further skills like reflective listening that encourage more discussion. If open questions are like knocking on a door, the other skills help you walk inside with greater ease.

It's worth noting here that Carl Rogers, who conducted pioneering work on education, is the same person who developed client-centered counseling, upon which we based our account of MI. Listening sits at the center of Rogers's last book, *A Way of Being* (1980), and the work of some of his students, such as Thomas Gordon (2003). Understanding what listening really means, and how it can be used, is one of the main threads running through this book. Our hope is that MI will provide you with the tools you need to use listening and other skills creatively, and with a productive focus on change. Motivation to change is clearly influenced by rewards, punishment, test scores, and so on, but the internally driven aspirations of the student are powerful, and your conversations, informed by MI skills like listening, can help students to tap their aspirations.

The Evidence

The wider research literature on MI beyond the school environment includes over 200 controlled trials and evidence for efficacy in a wide range of settings (Miller & Rollnick, 2013), including successful applications with adolescents (Naar-King & Suarez, 2011). Generally, MI's school-based applications have either been student-focused, designed to directly help those with a particular change problem, or consultative, where MI is used to help an educator or parent adopt a strategy when working with a student(s) (Strait, McQuillon, Terry, & Smith, 2014). In the most recent review of MI applications among school students, Snape and Atkinson (2016) classified 8 out of 11 studies as "best evidence," 3 were randomized trials, and all but one study yielded positive findings.

Many of the studies on MI in schools have looked to improve student health. School nurses have utilized MI to address complex problems such as obesity (Bonde, Bentsen, & Hindhede, 2014) and asthma (Blaakman, Cohen, Fagnano, & Halterman, 2014), as well

as to help students increase their physical activity (Robbins, Pfeiffer, Maier, LaDrig, & Berg-Smith, 2012; Robbins, Pfeiffer, Wesolek, & Lo, 2013). Studies have also shown promising outcomes when using a school-based MI approach to help students decrease drug or alcohol use (Barnett et al., 2014; Hall, Stewart, Arger, Athenour, & Effinger, 2014; Hamilton, O'Connell, & Cross, 2004).

Research on the use of MI for academic and behavioral improvement is also growing. For instance, two randomized controlled trials showed that even a single MI counseling session (50 minutes with a trained provider) for middle school students (typically ages 11 to 13) led to improvements in class participation, academic behavior, and higher math grades (Strait et al., 2012; Terry, Smith, Strait, & McQuillin, 2013). Another randomized trial found that two group sessions based on MI led to better math, science, and history grades than for students attending a single session of MI (Terry, Strait, McQuillin, & Smith, 2014). One pilot study has looked at truancy and found that a hybrid intervention of MI and other methods was successful among adolescents ages 16 and 17 (Enea & Dafinoiu, 2009). Encouraging research is also underway to explore how school consultants can use MI to aid teachers and parents to adopt effective strategies to help students improve their learning and behavior (Herman, Frey, Shephard, & Reinke, 2013).

We have supported MI training in at least 47 languages worldwide. The interest is there, and colleagues in countries like Estonia, Wales, and Poland are looking at adaptation in school to everyday teaching practice.

MI is complementary to whatever else you do to encourage change in students. In fact, most of the above applications are examples of MI *in combination with* one or more other interventions. This is consistent with how MI is often used in other settings and with other age groups.

Relationship

Promoting change has relationship at its heart, and motivation to change is the everyday challenge faced by all who wish to make things better for students. As the quotation that opened this chapter put it, “It really all depends on how the teachers and students interact.” The next chapter provides a more detailed overview of MI, and acts as a map for the chapters to follow.