School Counselors Using Motivational Interviewing.pdf

Robert Pincus, Liberty University
School Counselors Using Motivational Interviewing

Robert Pincus, Corinne Wehby Bridges & Theodore P. Remley


To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15566382.2019.1646083

Published online: 27 Aug 2019.
School Counselors Using Motivational Interviewing

Robert Pincus a, Corinne Wehby Bridges b, and Theodore P. Remley, Jr. c

a Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA, USA; b Walden University, Minneapolis, MN, USA; c University of Holy Cross, New Orleans, LA, USA

ABSTRACT
Counselors have successfully used motivational interviewing with adolescents who struggle with a variety of issues. However, there is little data that has explored the use of motivational interviewing to address academic concerns in schools. This qualitative study explored the experiences of school counselors who have used motivational interviewing to improve student academic performance. The results revealed several themes including defining motivational interviewing in schools and explaining specific techniques. The themes that emerged from this study strengthen existing research and provide current and future school counselors with insight into the potential of using motivational interviewing to improve student academic performance.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 15 May 2019
Accepted 17 July 2019

KEYWORDS
Motivational interviewing; school counselors; academics; motivating students

The role of professional school counselors is to discover the issues that create obstacles for students, to work with teachers to achieve culturally appropriate instruction, and to create a school environment conducive to student learning (Schulz, 2011). Ryan and Deci (2000) suggested that fulfilling students’ needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy improves their motivational drive towards being successful in high school. High school administrators expect professional school counselors to motivate at-risk students to graduate within 4 years, and to improve their schools’ state grades by increasing graduation rates (Blount, 2012).

Kim, Chang, Singh, and Allen (2015) reported students who drop out of school are more likely to face unemployment, low wages, and criminal issues than those who graduate. Protivnak, Mechling, and Smrek (2016) noted low academic performance early in a students’ academic career is a risk for dropout later. Researchers found that at-risk students who were offered positive interventions via school counselors reported it made
a difference in their perceptions of the importance of academics, increased their confidence, and motivated them to complete their schoolwork.

Cushing, Jensen, Miller, and Leffingwell (2014) concluded that there was a noteworthy improvement in various behaviors when adolescents at risk of dropping out of high school were treated with a motivational interviewing (MI) approach. In another study, Jensen et al. (2011) noted a decrease in substance abuse behavior by adolescents who were treated using MI. Gayes and Steele (2014) found the same results and noted that parental participation improved the success rate of positive behavior changes in adolescent clients, and that MI is effective as a brief counseling approach for at risk adolescents (Cushing et al., 2014; Jensen et al., 2011).

Counselors have used MI since the 1980s with clients suffering from substance abuse (Miller, 2009). Currently, MI is used with adolescents who struggle with various mental health issues including substance use and unsafe sexual practices (D’Amico et al., 2015; Dean, Britt, Bell, Stanley, & Collings, 2016). Moreover, MI is a flexible approach to working with individuals on various personal and academic issues. For example, it can be used as part of a counseling intervention with low performing students to boost their self-efficacy (Frey, Sims, & Alvarez, 2013). However, given that the approach is new to the school counseling profession (Strait et al., 2012), few professional school counselors use MI. As a result, there is a dearth of literature related to the perceptions of professional school counselors regarding the use of MI in schools.

**Background**

Miller (1983) designed MI as a type of person-centered counseling that promotes positive changes in the mindset of individuals who abuse substances and helps them reduce dependency on alcohol or drugs. MI involves a client-driven partnership between a client and a counselor via techniques such as reflective listening and empathy to assist the client in choosing positive changes (Miller & Rollnick, 2004). The main concept of MI is the counselor using the “client’s own values, motivations, abilities, and resources” (Miller & Rollnick, 2004, p. 299) to support the client toward achieving positive change.

More recently, MI has been adapted for other populations, and this includes adolescents in school settings. In two studies, mental health counselors (rather than school counselors) used MI in schools in a program designed to improve academic performance (Strait et al., 2012; Terry, Smith, Strait, & McQuillin, 2013). The results showed that the students who attended the motivational counseling groups participated more in classes, had positive academic behaviors, and increased their academic grades (Strait et al., 2012; Terry et al., 2013). Kolbert, Happe, Hyatt-Burkhart,
Crothers, and Capuzzi (2017) noted that MI can be used directly in conjunction with the American School Counselor Association’s (ASCA’s; 2012) National Model as responsive services related to individual counseling, student academic planning, and consultation with parents and teachers. Gutierrez, Foxx, and Kondili (2018) found multiple sessions of MI improved extrinsic motivation of students in an alternative school. The researchers also found that an adult working with an academically struggling student increased the motivation the student to pass classes (Gutierrez et al., 2018).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of school counselors who use MI with middle and high school students. The results from this study could assist current school counselors in understanding how MI can be helpful for at-risk students who have academic or behavioral issues at school. The primary research question which guided this heuristic inquiry was, “What are the lived experiences of middle and high school professional school counselors who have used MI techniques when counseling their student clients?”

**Method**

This was a heuristic phenomenological qualitative study that allows a passionate researcher to use personal experiences on a topic to expand knowledge to fill gaps in the literature while keeping an open mind for new ideas (Haertl, 2014). A researcher’s personal connection with the topic under investigation is a strength of heuristic inquiry, which allows researchers to use their understanding of a topic to further study a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1990). Therefore, heuristic inquiry was the most appropriate choice for this research project because I (the primary investigator) used MI in my own school counseling practice. Reflexivity in qualitative research requires the researcher to reflect on the data collected and reflexive knowledge occurs when the researcher explores the impact his or her presence has on the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). During the time of this study, I had a personal connection to the topic as a practicing school counselor, which required that as I completed the study, I used extensive self-examination and personal learning, which is possible through heuristic frameworks but not through other research approaches.

**Data collection**

**Participant recruitment**

A criterion sampling strategy was used to identify nine professional school counselors using MI techniques with student clients (Patton, 2015). Participants were initially contacted through the ASCA Scene discussion
board pages for high school and middle school professional school counselors. In this forum, I clarified the research purpose and criteria and provided institutional review board approval information. Potential participants responded to the ASCA Scene invitations and initiated contact with me.

**Number of participants**

The individuals who responded included 10 potential participants, however one of the initial individuals who volunteered was a social worker instead of a professional school counselor, and, as a result, was ineligible to participate in the study. Therefore the study participants included nine school counselors. Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) suggested using five to 10 participants in a qualitative study to ensure collecting varied rich unbiased descriptions. All participants in this study used MI in their counseling program with individuals or groups for academic or behavioral support.

**Demographics**

The study included six high school counselors, one middle school counselor, and two counselors serving grades 6–12 on one campus. Five of the school counselors had between 1–5 years of experience, two had 6–10 years of experience, and two had more than 10 years of experience in the profession. Three counselors were from the Midwest, two were from the Southeast, two from the Northwest, and one each from both the Northeast and Southwest. There were five counselors from rural schools, three from suburban schools, and one from an urban environment.

**Positionality**

*Positionality* refers to the role of the researcher in the community, the organization, or the participant group in relation to the social and political context of the study (Hopkins, Regehr, & Pratt, 2017) At the time of this study, Robert Pincus was a school counselor at a public high school. Corinne Wehby Bridges and Theodore P. Remley, Jr. were counselor educators in Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related Educational Programs accredited doctoral programs. My knowledge and understanding of the MI theory was based on successfully working with students struggling with academics, behavior, and truancy to assist them on the path to graduation.
Interviews

I began phenomenological interviews with the goal of reaching data saturation (Miles et al., 2014) and used Zoom video conferencing to conduct and record the audio of the interviews. I secured a private location for all interviews; either recording from a private school office or private home office. The participants were either in their school offices or home environments during the interviews. During the recruitment process, I informed participants that the semistructured interviews would last 60 min with the possibility of a follow-up meeting if additional information or more detail was needed. Data saturation was achieved when participant interviews repeated data from previous interviews and no new information emerged (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Miles et al., 2014). I asked the following questions during each interview:

1. Please tell me about your school’s level (high school, middle school), location, (urban, rural, and suburban), student socioeconomic status, number of students and counselors, and your number of years of experience as a counselor.
2. How would you describe your counseling program?
3. What counseling techniques do you use with students?
4. How often do you use MI compared to other approaches?
5. Is MI the main counseling approach you use with students?
6. Do you use MI with group or individual counseling or both?
7. How did you learn about MI?
8. What is the extent of your training in using MI?
9. What are the specific techniques of MI you use with students?
10. Which techniques do you find work best with your students?
11. What techniques do you find do not work with your students?
12. Do you perceive MI assisting in improving grades?
13. Do you believe MI is a viable approach to use with students?

Evidence of trustworthiness

I used five activities to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of this study. I sent transcripts to participants, reported positive and negative aspects of using MI, bracketed, and used rich detailed descriptions of the interviews to help stakeholders get a better sense of professional school counselors’ experiences when using MI with their student clients. In addition, I used triangulation to compare literature review results with the interview data.

First, I engaged in member checking and sent an interview transcript to the participants to ensure the transcript accurately represented their thoughts, and I requested additional feedback regarding new ideas or any necessary corrections (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Miles et al., 2014). I received
responses from five of the participants stating the transcripts accurately stated their ideas about MI. Their ideas included negative and positive views on MI, which I included to establish credibility. In this study, triangulation involved confirming participant responses with articles from the literature review that had similar results to this study (Patton, 2015). For example, Rollnick, Kaplan, and Rutschman (2016) noted that students are more successful when teachers and mental health counselors support students’ resistance to change versus trying to force a change in behavior.

**Data analysis**

Once I collected and transcribed the data, I immersed myself by reading the transcripts several times. In addition, I read the transcripts while playing the recordings to ensure the accuracy of the transcriptions. Next, I organized the data for analysis using NVivo software. I organized the transcribed data by the questions that were asked of the participants during the interviews, and then looked for similarities and differences in the statements of the interviewed professional school counselors (Miles et al., 2014). Through this process, I identified eight specific themes, which were organized into 32 subtheme statements based on similarities or differences in the participants’ responses. I then reorganized the data into eight codes that were condensed into four themes.

**Results**

In this study, I identified four themes, however in this article I will be discussing the first two themes identified in the research: *defining MI in schools* and *explaining specific techniques*. Within these themes the school counselor participants in this study defined MI and described the specific approaches they perceive are effective with their students.

**Defining MI in schools**

Miller and Rollnick (2013) noted there are four steps in the MI process in engaging, focusing, evoking, and planning and stated for MI to be successful, school counselors must build trusting relationships with their client. Participants in this study discussed the tenets of MI and how they fit in the school setting. Most of the school counselors also emphasized the use of open questions, reflections and paraphrases, statements of affirmation, and summarizations when using MI with students (Iarussi, Tyler, Crawford, & Crawford, 2019). One school counselor reflected on person-centered counseling, “I just listen. I reflect and let them tell their story and show that I care about them.” For the counseling sessions to be successful,
participants discussed using positive strength-based affirmations. In addition, the participants recommended using active reflections through restating, but not reinterpreting the clients’ thoughts. The open-ended questions allowed for pausing, reflecting, and paraphrasing during the sessions with students. One participant remarked that the founders of MI suggested a 2:1 ratio using open-ended questions twice as often as other types of questions (Can et al., 2016). Other participants actively used reflection for creating change talk when using MI. One school counselor used questions such as, “How important is this change to you?” and “How confident are you to make this change?” In addition, the school counselors reported that summarizing the students’ comments allowed their clients to make corrections and to allow their personal stories to be told.

School counselors also reported they use the evoking step in MI to assist secondary school students by showing them choices for prospective careers. One counselor referenced a student who was planning to work for a family member after high school but was intrigued about higher education after participating in a guidance lesson on community colleges. The counselor used change talk to help the student understand he had a better chance at reaching his goals (to earn more money and have a big family) with some type of postsecondary education. According to participants, evoking or change talk can empower students by allowing them to make their own choices for current and future actions in their lives.

In the evoking phase, school counselor participants reported some students experienced discord or resistance towards making any changes. Several participants noted that they make certain that students know that change is optional. They reported that students sometimes decided to make changes weeks after they said they did not want to change. The counselors suggested supporting students when they decide not to make any changes at the time of the session.

The participants in this study said that they combined the students’ long- and short-term goals to design action plans. The school counselors discussed goals with students regarding academic, career, and personal/social future desires. However, several counselors suggested that the action plans should be short-term, covering the essentials students will do to reach their goals. The counselors said that they collaborate with students to compose detailed steps in their action plans. One participant noted that all humans are goal-orientated, which allowed students to consider changes in their lives to reach their final goals. Another participant emphasized that students must make their own choices—not parents, teachers, or counselors—or they will not follow up on successfully completing their goals. Several of the school counselor participants stressed that a student writing down their goals was preferable to just discussing an action plan.
**Specific MI techniques in schools**

Participants offered details about how they used specific techniques with students. For example, one participant noted that, like many middle and high school counselors, he must meet with every failing student. The counselor said the students know why he is calling them to the office and reported that many times they come in with the attitude that they are *bad people* because they are failing a class. He said,

> I can use MI to say, “Hey I care about you. I just want you to think through what you want.” So I’ll often use this question, “What if it wasn’t up to me, wasn’t up to your teacher, wasn’t up to your parents? None of us were involved. It was just up to you. What would you want as a GPA? What would you want to make in this class?” Or whatever the scenario is and giving students autonomy to actually make that decision for themselves. It is a new thought to them. Most of them are busy trying to fulfill adult expectations, or shirk them, duck under them, and sort of hide. So when I put it back on them and say, “What do you want?” they give an answer and every single time it was higher than what they had in the class right now, at least in the scenario where I’m calling them down. So then I can say, “Okay so you want a C and you have an F. What would it take to get to a C?” And they know, so they start rattling them off. “Okay. Why do you want a C instead of an F?” They say, “Oh, here are all the reasons.”

Interestingly, most participants in this study stated they choose not to ask permission before sharing information with their student client, even though asking permission is a tenet of MI (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). One participant stated that asking permission to share information is a last resort and would be used only if the school counselor believed a student was making a poor decision. The school counselors who did ask for permission believed that this is another aspect of MI empowering the student. The counselors noted the importance of collaborating on a plan with the students, but not giving advice. The participants suggested students would more likely follow through on an action plan of their choice versus one that an adult was forcing them to complete.

One school counselor asks students to write their action plans on a whiteboard to make it easier to discuss together using what is known as *the two roads technique*. The counselor allows students to discover their needed changes visually:

> I have a whiteboard in my office. I draw that out with the students, “Here’s where you are, where are you thinking of going in the future and how are you going to get there. What’s that road called to you? What are your next steps?” I’ll ask students what are the top 3–5 reasons that they are thinking about doing this and I have them write it up on the board. And I’ll say, “Put those in order from most important to the least important.” I’ll have them do that as a way to get them to tangibly interact with this idea of change they are considering.
The same counselor noted how he has artistic students draw their goals on the whiteboard instead of writing their goals in sentence:

I have more artistic students draw on my whiteboard, “So what would that look like?” They will actually draw “Here is me, here is me doing this change, here is what it would look like if it were real life,” and they’ll draw it out. Or maybe they will do some sort of mind mapping or something like that. Where it’s not just writing words, but it’s actually doing something visual that connects to them. And we just see what comes out of their brains. It’s pretty beautiful stuff a lot of times.

In recognizing the right of students’ right not to change, counselors allow the counseling relationship to stay positive, which could result in students coming back to counselors to help them change in the future. This nonjudgmental approach strengthens the relationship between counselors and students. One participant noted,

A staple of MI is building relationships and that’s really important to me because in the end I can’t make kids change and I don’t want to make kids change, but I do want to have a good relationship with them, so that maybe in six months they decide they are ready to change and they’ll come back to me and say, “Now, Okay I’m ready.” And I’ve had that happen. Where I’ve talked to students about their drug addiction or failing classes or whatever and we’ll have a good conversation about it but they don’t change for a while and that’s Okay. I tell them that up front. “I care about you the same no matter what you do, no matter what you decide and if you fail. Let’s say you decide you want to get your grades up and you don’t do it, there’s no shame. There’s no shame allowed in my office. So you just come back here we’ll talk about it again, because I care about you the same no matter what.”

Another participant said that she has found it difficult to allow a student to acknowledge he or she does not want to change, and then let the student leave the office without trying to create change talk. The counselor believed that she was not completely doing her job according to ASCA standards (ASCA, 2012).

**Discussion**

The results of this study confirmed the existing literature regarding the use of MI with adolescents (Miles et al., 2014; Miller & Rollnick, 2013; Rollnick et al., 2016; Strait et al., 2012). The professional school counselors participating in this study perceived MI as effective when working with students (Strait et al., 2012; Terry et al., 2013). All the counselors stated MI was an integral part of their school counseling program. One of the helpful techniques with MI is evoking change talk, which the participants believed allows students to scrutinize the reasons they are failing and make changes that can lead to eventual improvement which aligned with Miller and Rollnick (2013). Eight of the participants spoke about moving from building a relationship with student clients to leading them toward change talk. The counselors noted that students who benefitted from MI agreed that
their current actions did not facilitate their future career goals, or even their goals of graduating from high school which had been stated by several researchers (Miller & Rollnick, 2013; Strait et al., 2012). Four participants stated using evoking techniques was a key to collaborating on an action plan for student clients. This confirmed Miller and Rollnick’s (2013) findings that evoking was an effective approach for counselors to begin collaborating with student clients to help them reach their desired goals. Conversations about discrepancies between counselors and students often led to collaboration on a student-led action plan. However, based on the interview data, many of the counselors I interviewed rarely use direct discrepancies with student clients as a MI technique. Instead, the school counselors noted the differences between students’ words and actions to develop change talk towards an action plan.

**Implications for counselors**

Previous studies found that mental health counselors effectively used MI in schools for improving student clients’ academic progress (Rollnick et al., 2016; Strait et al., 2012). The themes that emerged in this study provided insight into the perceptions of professional school counselors regarding the effectiveness of MI and revealed some of the techniques they have used that they consider having been successful with student clients. The goal of MI is to empower students to reach their personal goals (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). In reaching those goals, students could create positive social change on several levels including individual, family, organizational, and societal/policy.

Despite the empowering aspect of MI, the participants believed there were some limitations to MI with students. Two of the professional school counselors noted that using MI for behavioral issues creates the need for several sessions, which could overwhelm a counselor with a high caseload. In addition, the ASCA Code of Ethics calls for counselors to “practice within their competence level and develop professional competence through training and supervision” (ASCA, 2012, p. A.7.h). For instance, traditional mental health counselors can schedule multiple weekly sessions to better handle behavioral issues (e.g., cutting). However, several participants suggested behavioral issues in schools could be from past trauma and abuse, which is beyond the scope of a typical school counselor. Several participants stated that MI is best suited for academic issues rather than behavioral issues in the school setting.

**Limitations and recommendations for future research**

In any qualitative phenomenological study, there are limitations. Although I collected information from nine professional school counselors for this study, the criteria may have limited others from contributing. In using only
the ASCA Scene to recruit participants I might have missed out on counselors using MI who are not members of ASCA. Future studies could include school counselors who are members of different organizations. Another limitation is only interviews were used to gather data. Future research could explore either quantitative or mixed methods studies to determine whether students improve academically after receiving counseling that utilizes MI techniques.

**Conclusion**

In closing, the school counselors interviewed for this study preferred establishing relationships initially using person-centered counseling techniques, and then using MI techniques to assist students in reaching their announced goals. The participants believed MI works best in helping students with academic issues. The school counselors emphasized MI is a way of empowering students, therefore creating their personal buy-in to improve academically. MI could assist in increasing academic standing and improving high school graduation rates. The societal change in any counseling approach that increases graduation rates, such as MI, could allow better career opportunities through post-secondary education after students graduate, from high school.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**Notes on contributors**

**Dr. Robert Pincus**, LSC, is a full-time core faculty member in the Department of Counselor Education and Family Studies teaching school counselors at Liberty University. Dr. Pincus was a school counselor for 10 years where he used the motivational interviewing techniques which led him to present and publish on the topic.

**Dr. Corinne Wehby Bridges**, LPC, NCC, is a full-time core faculty member of the Counselor Education and Supervision PhD program at Walden University. In addition to teaching, Dr. Bridges serves as a qualitative research expert and mentors doctoral candidates throughout the dissertation process and has experience presenting and publishing on issues relevant to the field of counseling, and serves as an editorial reviewer for the *Journal of Sexology and Sexual Wellness: Research, Practice, and Education.*

**Theodore P. Remley, Jr.**, PhD, is a professor of Counseling at the University of Holy Cross in New Orleans, Louisiana. He holds a PhD from the University of Florida and a law degree from Catholic University. He has authored textbooks and numerous journal articles in the areas of law and ethics in counseling.
References


