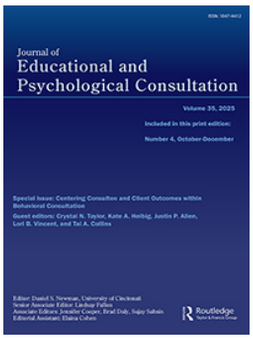

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Motivational interviewing applications in educational consultation: introduction to the special issue

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ABSTRACT

Motivational interviewing is a promising implementation technique for addressing gaps in translational school-based research and practice. In fact, the field of education is the first to apply motivational interviewing within the context of implementation science; specifically, motivational interviewing can be viewed as a technique to optimize implementation of existing evidence-based practices in the context of a consultation relationship. In this introduction to the special issue on motivational interviewing, we highlight the significance of motivational interviewing as related to the school consultation process, summarize applications of motivational interviewing in education research, and briefly describe the seven articles included in this special issue. Priorities for future research are also discussed.

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Though education research has received increased attention and achieved greater rigor over the last two decades, schools' use and adequate implementation of evidence-based interventions and practices, hereafter referred to as evidence-based practices (EBPs), is still lacking (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). This observation is discouraging since it was nearly two decades ago that a seminal review by Fixsen et al. (2005) set the course for improving implementation science in education research. At the time, they found that despite significant knowledge regarding what intervention approaches work to solve major social problems, our ability to effectively adopt and apply effective practices with fidelity was inadequate. This gap is best described as an issue of translation, whereby interventions are developed, tested, and shown to be effective but do not translate into real-world settings (Spoth et al., 2013).

Implementation science focuses on factors related to translation, including dissemination, adoption, high-fidelity implementation, and sustained use (Pas et al., 2021). As described by Fixsen et al. (2005), successful translation of EBPs is propelled by the presence of competency drivers (e.g., strategies and methods for selecting staff, training, coaching, and monitoring fidelity), organizational drivers (e.g., institutional supports such as policies, procedures, data

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systems, and feedback loops), and leadership drivers (e.g., technical and adaptive skills).

Motivational interviewing (MI) has been introduced as a possible implementation technique to address gaps in translational school-based research and practice (Frey et al., 2013b; Herman et al., 2021; Pas et al., 2021; Reinke et al., 2026). MI originated in the field of addiction and has been developed and refined over the past several decades by Bill Miller and Steve Rollnick (Miller, 1983, 2023; Miller & Rollnick, 2002, 2012). MI was founded on the science that shows that how one interacts with people has significant effects on motivation that leads to better change outcomes. MI has an emphasis on empowerment, or "affirming clients' own strengths, motivations, resourcefulness, and autonomy" (Miller & Rollnick, 2023, p. ix).

MI involves the task of evoking and reinforcing change talk, strategic and directive use of client-centered therapy strategies, and activating commitment (Miller & Rollnick, 2023). The logic behind the MI approach is that there is a causal association between how we talk about change and how we act (Frey et al., 2021). Specifically, increased consultee talk in favor of change, or change talk, predicts behavioral change. On the other hand, consultee talk arguing against change or for maintaining current behaviors, also called sustain talk, predicts behavioral maintenance. Thus, the tasks and strategies associated with MI are structured to strategically explore and encourage talk about change.

In MI practice, the consultant provides compassionate attention to the consultee while keenly listening for change and growth (Miller & Rollnick, 2023). The goal of the consultant is to acknowledge sustain talk and ambivalence in the context of a supportive relationship, while encouraging the consultee to express their commitment to behavior change—so long as is it consistent with the consultee's values and goals—in greater depth, strength, and frequency (Amrhein et al., 2003). Supporting this resolution of ambivalence is done by intentionally and strategically utilizing MI-consistent skills (i.e., open-ended questions, affirmations, reflections, and summaries: OARS). MI-inconsistent behavior consists of confrontation (e.g., lecturing, shaming, coaxing, arguing) and persuasion (e.g., being overly directive with the participant or offering advice without permission) and is to be avoided. There are four tasks in MI: *engaging, focusing, evoking*, and *planning*. The strategies associated with the first two tasks build heavily on other counseling approaches; whereas, evoking is uniquely MI.

Frey et al. (2022) note that the field of education is the first to apply MI within the context of implementation science or as an approach to optimize implementation of existing EBPs (Larson et al., 2021; Pas et al., 2021). Use of MI within the context of the four MI tasks (i.e., engaging, focusing, evoking, and planning) relates directly to competency drivers within the implementation science literature. Competency drivers include the offering of support and guidance to school-based implementers who may not want to, may not have

the knowledge or skills to, or may not feel they have time to engage with identified programming (Domitrovich et al., 2008) and are essential for ensuring that an intervention or practice is implemented as intended—referred to as *implementation fidelity* (Pas & Bradshaw, 2015). MI can also be viewed as an implementation technique related to organizational drivers, although the relevance to these drivers is more limited. Specifically, because MI practice places a premium on values, it can be effective for increasing buy-in among educators tasked with implementing a given EBP. In this respect, MI might be useful in the process of getting information about EBPs to large numbers of educators (i.e., *dissemination)* and getting them to commit to and initiate use of EBPs (i.e., *adoption*; Brownson et al., 2017).

There are two reasons MI has garnered attention in consultation research and practice in recent years. First, the evidence base for the approach is impressive. MI is recognized as an important intervention across multiple fields (e.g., child welfare, education, health, behavioral health, mental health, social work) and has been applied to address numerous problems, including alcohol use, smoking cessation, illicit drug use, sexually transmitted infections, unplanned pregnancy, HIV, diet, heart disease, exercise, obesity, oral health, depression, ineffective parenting practices, school dropout, academic failure, and challenging behavior or social-emotional development (Miller & Rollnick, 2012; Sanci et al., 2015). Second, MI offers a comprehensive framework that is sorely needed to advance the consultation literature (Reinke et al., 2026). Specifically, the application of MI can be operationalized beyond procedural integrity; it is associated with a skill set that is observable, which permits the creation of robust and replicable training systems and observations of fidelity that address quality in addition to dosage and adherence. Additionally, the theoretical and empirical support suggests that how a consultee talks about change is an indicator of their motivation and predictive of future behavior; as such, talk about change is a powerful potential mechanism to improve our understanding of why and when coaching is effective. This, in turn, would have dramatic implications for broadly impacting the translation of school-based EBPs in practice, including dissemination, adoption, high-fidelity implementation, and sustained use of the strategies and interventions that are known to improve student academic and behavioral functioning.

Rationale and current state of MI research in schools

Despite the promise and increasing popularity of MI as an implementation technique in school settings, there is still much to learn about the use of MI in education research. Small et al.'s (2025) recent review of MI applications in school settings provides the most comprehensive description to date of the prevalence and type of MI outcome studies in the education literature, with particular attention to training strategies and fidelity monitoring approaches

in use in school-based research; the review also includes a detailed account of the characteristics of the professionals who are implementing MI-based interventions in school settings, the recipients of these interventions, and the targets of behavior change. In doing so, the review adds to previous reviews of MI in schools to date (Snape & Atkinson, 2015; Woods et al., 2014) and provides empirical data to support the conclusions of several school-based syntheses on MI applications in schools with regard to MI training and fidelity of implementation (Frey et al., 2017, 2021, 2023; Herman et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2014; Reinke et al., 2026). Small et al. (2025) identified 62 articles from eight countries via a multistep search and review process conducted iteratively between February 2020 and April 2023; to be included, articles needed to (a) be peer-reviewed; (b) be school-based; and (c) describe the use of MI as a primary intervention strategy. The results indicated that most articles meeting these criteria were published since 2012. Regarding MI training, less than one-third of the articles in the review contained information on the trainer's qualifications. The most frequent target behavior was social-emotional, behavioral, or related difficulties. Although most studies indicated that they collected or monitored at least one dimension of fidelity (71%), fewer authors reported fidelity data in their manuscript (56.5%) and fewer yet (43.5%) collected or monitored MI quality. Thus, even though MI was a theorized active ingredient in all the studies, only 33 studies collected or monitored MI-specific fidelity and only 27 of the 62 study papers included a report of MI-specific fidelity data. The broad absence of MI fidelity data among existing MI-related studies, as noted in this review, calls into question how effective MI is within educational setting and the extent to which effects can be attributed to MI or other intervention components.

Summary of articles in the special issue

In this special issue, we have assembled several articles that describe indirect applications of MI in educational settings. Indirect applications occur within the context of a consultation relationship in which the focus of the behavior outcome is the student or students (Frey et al., 2013; Herman et al., 2021) yet the teacher or parent is the recipient of consultation and the proximal target of the intervention. We prioritized MI applications in educational settings that (a) provided complete and accurate reporting of how MI is used in the context of school-based consultation, including full descriptions of the training methods and models used, and (b) included documentation of MI skill as a component of fidelity using valid and reliable measures. To the extent that these components were included, we also encouraged authors to examine student outcomes.

Owens et al. (this issue) explored the extent to which MI use and proficiency differed for trained consultants across the two consultation conditions: one

with MI (C + MI) and one without (C only). They found significant differentiation of MI proficiency benchmarks between the two consultation conditions with the condition using MI demonstrating greater MI proficiency. All consultants ($N = 9$) were able to meet *Fair* (referred to as basic in the article) proficiency benchmarks on global MI technical and percent complex reflection scores, with eight consultants meeting *Good* (referred to as advanced) proficiency. With regard to MI relational scores, 89% met the *fair* proficiency benchmarks and 33% met the *good* proficiency benchmark. However, they found no significant associations between MI proficiency and teacher-rated working alliance scores. The study demonstrates that trained consultants can meet MI proficiency benchmarks in practice and can differentiate the use of MI with the implication that consultants can apply and withhold consultation strategies to match the teacher's strengths and needs.

Frey et al. (this issue) conducted a feasibility study to evaluate the fidelity, satisfaction, and impact of an MI skills training for instructional support personnel (ISP). Thirty-one ISP were randomized to coaching with MI skills (C-MI) or coaching with business-as-usual skills (C-BAU) conditions. ISP in both conditions received training in a four-step coaching model designed to impact instructional practices with teachers. Participants in the C-MI condition also received skills-based training in MI. Following training, trainees in both conditions implemented the coaching model with up to two teachers. Training fidelity and satisfaction with the training were high in both conditions. As hypothesized, ISP who received the MI skills training had higher posttest scores on indicators of consultation efficacy and MI competency. Further, ISP who received the MI skills training met established thresholds of MI proficiency (i.e., skill while implementing the CBP procedures with teachers) at statistically higher rates than trainees in the C-BAU condition. The findings suggest that this training approach results in high demonstrated MI competence and self-efficacy. The study is an important step toward establishing replicable procedures to effectively train ISP to use MI skills as an implementation technique within a coaching relationship.

Reinke et al. (this issue) examined MI proficiency data from 114 audio-recorded conversations with 44 unique teachers and eight natural implementors (i.e., school-based mental health providers) who employed the CCU intervention. Mean summary scores and the percentage of the sample that reached proficiency thresholds at the overall (i.e., all recorded sessions), coach-level, and session-level (e.g., first interview session, second session) were reported. Results indicate that the fair proficiency threshold was reached in most sessions and by most coaches and that the good proficiency threshold was reached less frequently. Further, results suggest that MI proficiency varied by session with a higher percentage of coaches reaching proficiency in the first session than subsequent sessions. Relational MI skills were stronger than technical MI skills; use of complex reflections (CRs) was the strongest area

of MI skill and reflections-to-question ratio (R : Q) was the lowest. The study suggests that natural implementers who have some prior exposure to MI can be trained to deliver basic levels of MI skills with modest support in the context of a structured intervention consultation framework.

Chilenski et al. (this issue) provide an MI application with a group (i.e., community coalition) in the context of technical assistance. Although not a school-based application, the Coalition Check-Up (CoCU), is a systems-level application at the organizational level; specifically, it involves a four-step TA model to support community coalition members to implement practices with fidelity. It was included in the special issue because it is a novel MI application and has implications for school-based technical support. Chilenski et al.'s study examines implementation fidelity of the CoCU TA model, including its dosage and adherence to utilizing the data-informed tools. Further, the authors investigate the degree to which MI skills were integrated into TA provider–coalition member/leader interactions. Thirty-two coalitions were involved in this study. All coalitions received the CoCU TA. Data from meeting recordings was coded for MI skill. The authors conclude that contact between TA providers and their respective coalition leaders and coalition members occurred less often than planned, CCU data-informed tools were used regularly, and TA provider interactions were consistent with the use of MI. With regard to MI skill, the fair proficiency threshold was exceeded for the technical global summary score for the majority of the 60 audio-recordings analyzed; whereas, this threshold was exceeded for the relational global score on less than one-third of the recordings. The good proficiency threshold was infrequently exceeded. Finally, there were very few instances of MI-inconsistent behaviors recorded for the TA providers. This study presents a novel application of the use of MI, adding to the literature that demonstrates MI's applicability in a wide range of contexts.

Pas et al. (this issue) provide, to our knowledge, the first study examining the utility of artificial intelligence to improve MI-informed coaching and consultation with teachers. Specifically, the authors examined the extent to which machine learning can accurately code MI skill and teacher commitment language. Results suggest that if conversation is segmented into utterances, or predefined units of speech, machine learning is a promising approach to identifying MI skills that occur frequently. This could revolutionize how we monitor MI fidelity and train and supervise school-based coaches.

Hails et al. (this issue) report on the focuses of an online version of the family check-up (FCU), which is an evidence-based parent intervention grounded in the MI approach. Similar to school-based teacher consultation, the FCU is an indirect consultation model. The FCU has been offered in school settings and now has an online version. In this article, the authors describe how the COACH, an observational tool designed to assess fidelity for the in-person version of the FCU, fits with the online coaching model. They

analyzed 134 online coaching sessions from a larger study for caregivers of early childhood students. Additionally, Hails et al. document that fidelity to the online model, including MI skill utilization—as assessed by the adapted COACH—were consistently associated with higher caregiver engagement. The study provides preliminary support for the use of the adapted COACH in the context of digital interventions.

Hugh et al. (this issue) evaluated the promise of a preimplementation strategy to encourage the adoption of EBPs in schools. MI is one component of this preimplementation strategy. They describe the content adherence to the beliefs and attitudes for successful implementation in schools (BASIS) strategy in a study involving 47 schools to better understand elements of the model that could lead to improved fidelity. They found that the comprehensive nature of BASIS produced high overall fidelity across sites with minimal training and support needed. Additionally, they reported fairly high levels of fidelity variation within and across sessions that provide insights for future studies and program improvements. The study provides ideas for MI-informed preimplementation work that may help support fidelity to EBPs in schools.

Discussion

The seven articles in the special issue make unique contributions to the literature base regarding the use of MI in school-based consultation and also share some similarities. For example, four of the seven papers in the special issue utilized the Motivational Interviewing Treatment Integrity Code (MITI), including MITI manual thresholds, to evaluate MI skill: Frey et al. (this issue), Reinke et al. (this issue), Owens et al. (this issue), and Chilenski et al. (this issue). Because, Frey et al. (this issue), Reinke et al. (this issue), and Owens et al. (this issue) utilized the MITI to assess MI skills in the context of a teacher consultation relationship, there are a few similarities and differences that are interesting to note. The participant characteristics, study purposes and designs, and interventions in each of these studies are unique, so direct comparisons require cautious interpretation. One interesting finding is that the fair proficiency threshold did not discriminate between trained and untrained (e.g., Frey et al., this issue) or MI and no-MI (e.g., Owens et al., this issue) for the two studies that had a counterfactual condition. Specifically, in both counterfactual groups, the mean summary scores across all audio-recordings met the fair threshold for the technical global and CR summary scores; the fair threshold was also met for the R : Q ratio in the Owens et al. (this issue) study. The findings across all three studies indicated most of the audio-recordings and coaches met the fair threshold, although it is unclear whether this is a significant metric. In contrast, the good threshold was more elusive and may be a more appropriate standard to discriminate between MI quality. For example, the mean score in all three studies fell below the good

threshold for the relational global, technical global, and R : Q indicators; the average CR summary score, also in all three studies, exceeded the good threshold. Examination of the coach-level data indicated that a very small percentage of coaches exceeded the relational global, technical global, and R : Q good threshold.

Together, the seven articles in the special issue build on existing literature (see Frey et al., 2013a; Herman et al., 2021; Pas et al., 2021; Reinke et al., 2026) establishing MI as an implementation technique to address gaps in translational school-based research and practice. It is also responsive to Small et al.'s (2025) call for MI research in educational contexts to document MI skill using valid and reliable measurement tools. Finally, the issue expands MI research in educational consultation by addressing the role of AI.

Future research

Although this special issue represents a significant contribution to the literature base regarding MI applications in educational consultation, there are several areas that should be prioritized in future research. First, and at the broadest level, researchers who describe MI as an implementation technique, aspect of fidelity, or other critical component of their consultation-based interventions should measure MI skill using valid and reliable measures. As demonstrated in several articles in this special issue, utilizing the MITI, in general, and the summary scores associated with it is particularly valuable since a few studies have now been completed that provide comparison data (Small et al., 2021, Frey et al., this issue; Reinke et al., this issue; Owens et al., this issue, Chilenski et al., this issue). With new and replication studies, a clearer picture will emerge regarding (a) the MI skills that can be expected of professionals with different characteristics and training backgrounds who have not been formally trained to use MI and (b) the amount and type of training required to equip consultants with the skills to reach established MI proficiency benchmark thresholds.

Second, additional research is needed to better understand which aspects of MI skill and how much skill (i.e., proficiency thresholds) is needed to impact desired outcomes; while the MITI has proficiency benchmark thresholds, they were developed in the context of substance-abuse intervention and are not empirically validated. An important step in this regard would be to determine whether the good proficiency threshold, across one or more domains, produces more-favorable outcomes than the fair threshold. As noted in the comparison across studies in the special issue that used similar metrics, most consultants were able to reach the fair thresholds even with modest MI training and support. On the one hand, if fair thresholds are sufficient to reach desired outcomes for intervention supports delivered in a structure consultation framework, then research can focus on the minimal level of

structure and support systems that are needed for consultants to reach this level of proficiency. On the other hand, if good thresholds are needed to achieve optimal outcomes, then future research and intervention innovations will need to focus on strengthening training and supervision resources to ensure that more consultants are able to attain this threshold.

A third area of future research involves the availability of measurement options. Although we acknowledge that the MITI is considered a gold standard for evaluating MI proficiency in the context of consultation research, it is resource intensive. Additional measures of MI proficiency and fidelity with attention toward school-based consultation may be warranted. Next, future research is needed for improving our understanding of how the underlying mechanisms of change associated with MI works within the consultant–consultee relationship. For example, research that enhances our understanding of the relationship between MI skill, teacher/parent commitment language, teacher/parent behavior change, and student behavior will advance the field significantly. Although unaddressed in this special issue, a final important consideration for future research is the cost and cost-effectiveness of MI skills training as well as the cost effectiveness of various consultation models (Barrett & Bagasrawala, 2026); comparing standard coaching procedures to standard coaching with MI skills as an implementation technique would be a valuable contribution to the literature. This line of research will need to parallel the previously mentioned focus on determining minimal levels of MI proficiency needed to reach desired consultee outcomes.

Conclusion

MI is a promising implementation technique for addressing gaps in translational school-based research and practice. While MI applications in educational settings have expanded in recent years, gaps in our knowledge remain—particularly regarding how it is operationalized and how MI skill is measured. This special issue includes seven articles that can improve our understanding of how MI can be used within the context of consultative relationships, how professionals can be trained, how MI skills can be measured, and how MI skills can be optimized in an efficient training and support system to achieve the strongest results. We have also highlighted the importance of measuring MI skill with valid and reliable measures, improving our understanding of what level of MI skill (i.e., proficiency thresholds) is needed to impact desired outcomes and creating more practical and efficient measures to assess MI skill as important areas of future research.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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