

Reflection on My Interactions With Student J Within the Framework of Motivational Interviewing

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Abstract

Current pedagogies for supporting academically struggling students mainly include tailoring learning contents to meet their differentiated needs or offering one-on-one interventions to improve their self-management. However, using counseling approach to elicit behavioral change has not been explored much. This case study analyzes my three conversations with an academically struggling student in a rural primary school English class in southwest China within the framework of Motivational Interviewing (MI). The goal is to evoke a behavioral change in the student and help him become more engaged in class. I had been teaching this student named J since Fall 2021. His initial disturbing behaviors (e.g., making noises, sprinkling ink over his desk) in class revealed that he might lack the confidence in learning English, so our interactions focused on making him realize his capacity of learning well and obtaining a sense of achievement through continuous effort. Through MI-embedded conversations, J became less disruptive and more engaged in class. He also became more accepted by his peers and perceived himself more positively. I applied MI strategies of Open-ended Questions, Affirmations, Reflective Listening and Summaries in interacting with J. After each conversation, I reflected on the stages of change that J went through, including his ambivalence and change/sustain talk. Finally, I evaluated my interaction with J centering around MI spirits: partnership, evocation, acceptance and compassion. I concluded about the three factors in cultivating a trustful partnership with an academically struggling student: acceptance, sustained attention and forward-looking approach (shift focus from past frustration to future possibilities).

Keywords: Motivational Interviewing, Primary School Education, Stages of Change

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Introduction to Motivational Interviewing

This paper introduces Motivational Interviewing (MI), a counseling approach, and examines its potential application in evoking preferred behavioral change in educational settings by implementing a case study on an academically struggling student. According to Rollnick and Miller (1995), “Motivational Interviewing is a directive, client-centered counseling style for eliciting behavior change by helping clients to explore and resolve ambivalence” (p. 326). In other words, the core of the MI framework stresses gaining insights into clients’ internal drives and values to guide them through ambivalence to enact behavioral change. This paper provides an overview of MI-related concepts and a case study on how MI techniques might be effectively used with a primary-aged struggling student.

MI Spirits in Classroom Relationship Building

The defining characteristic of MI is a set of essential concepts collectively referred to as MI spirits: partnership, acceptance, compassion, and evocation (Csillik, 2015). These can also be applied to teacher-student interactions in the education context. To establish rapport and a constructive partnership, teachers consider students in need as experts in their prior experiences and set a tone of mutual respect that permeates the entire community. They also believe in the students’ “capacity to develop in a positive direction” and actively convey that belief to the students (Csillik, 2015). Acceptance is about recognizing students’ “absolute worth and potential” as human beings and expressing “accurate empathy” to reinforce positive efforts (Csillik, 2015). Compassion is demonstrated by regarding students in need as equal and competent individuals who can shoulder “the primary responsibility for changing behavior” and bear the consequences (Csillik, 2015). Evocation can be an inspiration in teachers’ work with academically struggling students, in which teachers “roll with resistance” instead of explicitly arguing for a change in their lives (Resnicow & McMaster, 2012).

A Case Study on J Within the Framework of MI

Methodology

This study was to examine the effectiveness of MI with a primary school student in rural China. A qualitative approach was adopted to allow a descriptive, exploratory, and detailed case study on behavioral interventions of the student.

Participant

J was a 9-year-old naughty and outgoing boy in third grade at the time of this study. Before the intervention, I had noticed some of J’s behaviors, such as making weird noises in class or sprinkling ink all over his desk. J’s parents got divorced when J was 2 years old and left their hometown for low-skilled jobs in cities. Being left at home, J suffered from emotional neglect and loneliness.

MI Intervention

All individuals considering change go through the 5 Stages of Change: Precontemplation, Contemplation, Preparation, Action, and Maintenance (Connors et al., 2013). J was first assessed about his Stage of Change. After that, MI strategies of Open-ended Questions,

Affirmations, Reflective Listening, and Summaries (OARS) were applied in the conversations with J to facilitate his growth and elicit his change talk.

Excerpts of MI-Embedded Conversations and Corresponding Analysis

Conversation #1: Background

In my third-grade English class, J diverted other students' attention frequently and never took out his textbook. At first I was surprised and annoyed, yet he refused to apologize and did not realize his misbehavior. We remained in confrontation in the first three weeks. In this period, I actively sought information about J's family background. After knowing his prior experience, I felt his misbehavior more understandable and I decided to give him more patience and attention. In my fourth week of teaching J, he asked me to give him up and neglect him in all future English classes. I refused and told him I would never give him up. He was surprised and gave me a collage as a gift. Then we had a conversation.

Conversation #1: Body

I: "I know you are frustrated by your past learning experiences, but English is a fresh start for you. I want to help you get rid of that frustration and gain confidence. What do you think of it?"

J: "I want to get rid of that frustration. It makes me feel I can do nothing well. But I am not sure how to catch up."

I: "It's nice of you to have the intention to catch up. How about starting from concentrating on my lecture in class? It may be hard to remain focused at first, but we can work on it together."

J: "That's a reasonable starting point. But I get distracted easily."

I: "Why would you become distracted easily?"

J: "Because when I could not understand the materials, I would feel bored and start to do other stuff."

I: "That's a fair observation. What do you think you can do to keep focused in class for, say, 15 minutes?"

J: "I can remind myself to listen in class. 15 minutes should not be too big a challenge for me."

I: "You are doing a good job getting out of your comfort zone and taking the challenge. How about after-class? What might you do to catch up?"

J: "May I come here to finish my homework and review the materials in textbook? But it's hard for me to do so everyday. What if I just play and forget to come?"

I: "I fully understand your concerns about distributing time between studying and playing. I could kindly remind you every afternoon. What else are you concerned?"

J: "I guess that's all I have for now. Please remember to call me in. "

I: "No problem! I am glad to see you thinking over catching up with classmates and figuring out an action plan!"

Conversation #1: Analysis

J's Stage of Change	J's Sustain/Change Talk	OARS Skills Used by the Teacher
Contemplation	"I want to get rid of that frustration. It makes me feel I can do nothing well."	Affirmation: "It's nice of you to have the intention to catch up." Open-ended question: "Why would you become distracted easily?"
Preparation	"I can remind myself to listen in class. 15 minutes should not be too big a challenge for me."	Open-ended question: "What might you do to catch up?" Affirmation: "You are doing a good job getting out of your comfort zone and taking the challenge."
Action	"Please remember to call me in."	Reflective listening: "I fully understand your concerns about distributing time between studying and playing." Affirmation: "I am glad to see you thinking over catching up with classmates and figuring out an action plan!"

Table 1. Analysis of conversation #1

J's intention to change surfaced when I communicated with him about regaining confidence and getting rid of frustration: he was unsatisfied with his past academic performance and wanted to catch up, yet he was unsure how to do it. My invitation to lengthen his focusing time in class and catch up after class ignited his interests, and J decided to move forward and take the initiative to change. Entering the preparation stage, J faced an ambivalence: he wanted to remain engaged in learning, yet he worried that he might not devote as much time to study as to play. With my support, J was assured and determined to take concrete actions to facilitate his academic progress and personal growth.

Conversation #2: Background

Rising from his previous fear of academic failure, J had worked hard on learning English towards the end of the semester. He reacted to my instructions actively and prepared for the final exam. Then somehow, he demonstrated disturbing behaviors and procrastinated on homework. He no longer seemed passionate about seeking my assistance in finishing English homework and reviewing materials covered in class. Having observed these, I had a conversation with J.

Conversation #2: Body

I: “J, you have made great progress in staying focused in class. You’ve also been persistently completing homework and reviewing knowledge points.”

J nodded slightly and smiled in silence.

I: “Just curious, I noticed that recently you did not come to me often for homework support as you previously did, and you seemed a bit absent-minded in class. How do you feel about these?”

J: “I am not confident about my ability to do well in the final exam. You know, I always mess up in the finals. Why don't I give up if it is always the same poor results? It's easier.”

I: “Your past unpleasant experience with final exams makes you doubtful about your efforts.”

J: “Exactly.”

I: “How did you feel when you gave up on yourself in learning in the past?”

J: “I felt helpless because I couldn't do anything well. I vaguely felt there was something wrong, but I could not tell exactly what it was.”

I: “How did you feel when you accomplished something?”

J: “I was fulfilled because I made it. I could achieve something.”

I: “What do you think makes the results different?”

J: “Before, I did not put much effort into learning and did not perform well academically. However, I made progress last time by listening and participating in class.”

I: “You are saying that classroom engagement plays an important role in your academic success.”

J: “Yes, I think so.”

I: “How would you describe the state of being engaged in the classroom?”

J: “Like, follow the instructions in class, understand the learning points in the textbook, and take part in classroom activities.”

I: “Great! And what do you plan to do to get closer to the engagement level?”

J: “Take out my textbook for each class and interact more in class. Maybe also finish the homework on time.”

I: “Awesome. So, you see, you know clearly what you can do to improve your academic performance. What will you do next?”

J: “OK. I'll put more effort into learning English and give it a try for the final exam. I want to prove that I can achieve something. Please kindly remind me to come to your office to finish homework and other stuff in case I forget, will you?”

I: “Sure. I am glad to hear that. I believe your efforts will be rewarded!”

Conversation #2: Analysis

J's Stage of Change	J's Sustain/Change Talk	OARS Skills Used by the Teacher
Precontemplation	"Why don't I give up if it is always the same poor results? It's easier."	Affirmation: "J, you have made great progress in staying focused in class. You've also been persistently completing homework and reviewing knowledge points." Open-ended question: "How do you feel about these?" Reflective listening: "Your past unpleasant experience with final exams makes you doubtful about your efforts."
Contemplation	"I vaguely felt there was something wrong, but I could not tell exactly what it was."	Open-ended question: "How did you feel when you gave up on yourself in learning in the past?" Reflective listening: "You are saying that classroom engagement plays an important role in your academic success."
	"I made progress last time by listening and participating in class."	
Preparation	"I'll put more effort into learning English and give it a try for the final exam."	Affirmation: "You know clearly what you can do to improve your academic performance."
Action	"Please kindly remind me to come to your office to finish homework and other stuff in case I forget, will you?"	Affirmation: "I believe your efforts will be rewarded!"

Table 2. Analysis of conversation #2

At the Precontemplation stage, ambivalence emerged in our conversation: J worried that his hard work would not pay off in the upcoming exam, and he was not sure whether to continue his efforts. I noticed his internal conflict and helped him move forward envisioning his future success instead of focusing on his past frustration. My use of OARS skills in my conversation with J helped him move beyond the Precontemplation stage and start to consider and prepare an action plan to better engage in the class. Through MI-embedded conversations, J was able to focus longer, maintain better posture, and engage more actively in classroom activities. He was gradually accepted by his peers, gained more confidence through learning, and perceived himself more positively.

Conclusion

This paper offers a brief overview of MI-related concepts and discusses MI's potential for application to education with a case study. These demonstrate the universal applicability of MI as a non-confrontational means of inducing client-led changes to resolve internal conflicts of interest under the directional guidance of MI practitioners. The MI approach's flexibility in adapting to different educational settings has earned it promising prospects in creating smoother schooling experiences for struggling students.

When MI is applied to teacher-student interactions in rural settings, some noteworthy points emerge. The main objective of subject teachers is to improve students' academic performance. Yet there are many underlying factors, such as psychological well-being, classroom participation, and peer relations, that may affect students' academic achievements. Being attentive to broader aspects of students' development and taking a holistic approach to students' education in rural China can be challenging. However, it is worthy of trying because an educator is not only there to teach, but also to coach, to mentor, to nurture, and to inspire.

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