# Motivational Interviewing and School Misbehaviour: An evidenced-based approach to working with at-risk adolescents

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**Introduction**

Policy and practice on how best to manage and intervene with persistent misbehaviour at school by older adolescent students remains an ongoing concern for staff in many secondary schools across Australia (Sullivan, Johnson, Owens, & Conway, 2014). Indeed, what even typically constitutes misbehaviour at school varies across time, context and culture (Sun & Shek, 2012a). In Australia school misbehaviour is often categorised as an academic or pastoral care matter and evaluated in terms of seriousness according to school rules and expectations, as well as more broadly against wider societal norms and values (Sun & Shek, 2012b). In the classroom setting, for example, these may include disruptive behaviour, disobedience, talking out of turn, making distracting noises and inappropriate comments, task avoidance or an uncooperative attitude (Landrum, Lingo, & Scott, 2011). Whereas outside of the classroom setting, for example, it may also be used to describe a continuum of anti-social, illegal or criminal behaviour such as truancy, bullying and fighting, verbal and physical aggression, vandalism and stealing, alcohol and tobacco use, as well as violence and possession of a weapon, racism and sexual harassment (Sun & Shek, 2012a).

It is well established that spending time away from the classroom because of suspension or exclusion is associated with low academic attainment, early school departure, and reduced contact with potential pro-social normative influences (Hemphill et al., 2012). Research has reported that when the characteristics of the student, family context, peers, school and community are all accounted for, adolescent students who are frequently suspended from school were 50% more likely to participate in antisocial behaviour and 70% more likely to be involved in a violent altercation in the following 12 months (Hemphill & Hargreaves, 2009). *The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* (LSAC) suggests that while early-onset crime and delinquency is relatively rare, a dip in connectedness with education coincides with increased exposure to criminal or delinquent behaviours during early adolescence and peaks in the mid to late adolescent years (Forrest & Edwards, 2014).

Despite this knowledge, emotive arguments continue to be made for mandated approaches to managing students who repeatedly engage in misbehaviour at school. ‘Zero tolerance’ strategies for example remain popular with schools, staff and parents and emphasise rigid consequences for infractions of school values, norms and rules (Bradshaw, 2015; Gregory &

Cornell, 2009). While a zero tolerance approach purports to send a clear message about unacceptable behaviour, some have asserted that it can increase the risk of arrest and early contact with juvenile justice systems for adolescents (Monahan, VanDerhei, Bechtold, & Cauffman, 2014). Others argue it could equally promote unanticipated iatrogenic outcomes (e.g., an adverse result due to intervention) with students already exhibiting a low sense of connectedness and belonging at school (Osterman, 2000). Research in the Netherlands for instance, found that students aged 12 to 20 years enrolled at schools with a zero tolerance and strong punitive orientation, were less likely to demonstrate pro-social behaviour and more likely to engage in delinquent behaviour, vandalism and engage in further misbehaviour at school (Wissink et al., 2014). Notably, it also reported that these students often identified with the interests of perpetrators of misbehaviour and had a propensity to avoid imposed sanctions, while demonstrating a deficit in empathetic responding and moral internalisation for the impact of their misbehaviour on others (Wissink et al., 2014).

School-wide approaches to preventing misbehaviour and promoting pro-social behaviour are increasingly lauded as underpinning a broad range of positive emotional, social and behavioural outcomes in schools. The *School-Wide Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports* (SWPBIS) framework is one example. It is a three-tiered empirically evidenced systems approach aimed at improving both academic and behavioural outcomes with students (see https://www.pbis.org). It is used in over 23,000 schools in the United States of America, and in Australia has been adopted by education departments and individual schools in several States (e.g., see http://www.pbl.schools.nsw.edu.au; http://behaviour.education.qld.gov.au), as well as the Ministry of Education in New Zealand to underpin its national *Positive Behaviour for Learning* (PB4L) initiative (e.g., http://pb4l.tki.org.nz). Tier 1 of the SWPBIS framework focuses less on intervening directly with individual students and more on the school-wide learning environment and instructional practices, policy and other aspects of a school community. Tier 2 and 3 by comparison, look more at targeted small group interventions and intensive individualised interventions for those students at risk of, or already experiencing challenging behaviours.

Research indicates that school-wide frameworks like the SWPBIS play a crucial role in the promotion of pro-social behaviour and the prevention of misbehaviour like bullying at school, particularly in primary school settings (Crean & Johnson, 2013; Cross et al., 2009; Cross et al., 2012; Salmivalli, Poskiparta, Ahtola, & Haataja, 2013). Despite growing support for school-wide frameworks with primary school populations, a paucity remains in empirical evidence demonstrating the developmental appropriateness and long-term effectiveness of this approach with middle to senior school or older adolescent populations (Bradshaw, 2015; Lawner & Terzian, 2013; Lodge, 2014). Multiple factors may underpin this phenomenon, such as changes in social cognition and in particular increased responsiveness to the peer group during adolescence, as well as developmental growth in cognitive mechanisms such as abstract reasoning and other higher order thinking. Others have suggested that school staff may get overwhelmed by the complex and multifaceted aetiology underpinning the more severe problems that some at-risk adolescents experience (Hong & Espelage, 2012).

Targeted approaches are commonly used to support and intervene with those individual students who persistently engage in misbehaviour at school. Approaches to targeted intervention can vary widely between schools and education sectors. Moreover, the level of targeted intervention is often shaped around the need of a student, the resources available to a

school and the severity of the presenting issue. That said, with issues like truancy, the perpetration of bullying and fighting, verbal and physical aggression, vandalism and stealing, intervention in schools often includes case management involving parents and the development of an *Individual Behaviour Support Plan* (IBSP) combined with some form of counselling and/or small peer-group-based intervention such as a restorative justice process, *Support Group Method*, or the *Method of Share Concern* in the case of bullying (Lodge, 2014). This approach to intervention is regularly built around a wider school system of rewards for demonstrating positive behaviour and sequentially imposed sanctions such as a loss of privileges or the imposition of increased adult supervision for continuation of misbehaviour (Bauman, Rigby & Hoppa, 2008; Hanish et al., 2013; McAdams & Schmidt, 2007; Sherer & Nickerson, 2010). Yet empirical evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of restorative justice and the Method of Share Concern in secondary school settings, for example, is surprisingly thin (Lodge, 2014; Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017). Furthermore, while rewards, sanctions and peer-based intervention aim to facilitate an innate sense of fairness and fulfil the need for social justice, they are contingent on assumptions that a student wants to change his or her behaviour, feels remorse for their actions, and perceives the norms and values of others and the wider society to be right.

There is a need to carefully consider the underlying process of internalisation, that is, the process of integrating the values, norms and attitudes of others into one's own sense of self or identity, as well as how at-risk adolescent students respond to rewards and sanctions in conjunction with counselling intervention at school (Herman, Reinke, Frey, & Shepard, 2014). For some adolescents this process can be perceived as an overtly coercive, judgmental, moralising and shaming experience (Naar-King & Suarez, 2011; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Further, when external contingencies like rewards and sanctions are imposed it is likely they will influence behaviour and promote compliance in the short-term (Deci & Ryan, 1985). However, without nurturing self-efficacy and a belief in one's own ability to solve problems and set meaningful goals (Bandura, 1997), externally imposed contingencies during adolescence can erode important developmental needs such as autonomy, independence, competence and relatedness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Osterman, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan, Lynch, Vansteenkiste, & Deci, 2011). Indeed, it has been argued that rewards and sanctions alone do not explain in an efficacious way *why* humans feel justified engaging in certain behaviours (Resnicow, McMaster, & Rollnick, 2012; Vansteenkiste, Williams, & Resnicow, 2012).

While some adolescents may engage in misbehaviour at school for instrumental purposes (Houghton, Nathan & Taylor, 2012), it is important to keep in mind that others do so in response to inconsistent parenting and low parental warmth, family conflict, abuse and maltreatment, as well as in response to trauma caused by teasing and bullying (Cashmore, 2011; Farrington & Ttofi, 2009; 2011; Wagman Borowsky, Taliaferro & McMorris, 2013). What is more, even though school misbehaviour is often examined in relation to academic outcomes (Krastins, Francis, Field & Carr, 2014), it is important to note it is also associated with increased risk to a wide range of health problems in adulthood. A large-scale longitudinal study in New Zealand, for example, found that frequent participation in bullying behaviour during childhood and early adolescence was associated with higher rates of adjustment difficulties in later life (Gibb, Horwood & Fergusson, 2011). These included anxiety, depression, alcohol dependence, drug use, violent offending, property damage, arrest and conviction (Gibb et al., 2011). Such findings are concerning as when gender, age and ethnicity are controlled for, the victim-bully group

(e.g., those that have been bullied and also bully others) have been associated with an increased risk of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts (Hepburn, Azrael, Molnar & Miller, 2012; Wagman Borowsky et al., 2013).

In short, there is a need for a paradigm shift in how we think about and approach targeted intervention with those adolescent students who are identified as at risk of early disengagement with education, and particularly with those who deliberately and repeatedly engage in misbehaviour while at school (McNamara, 1992, 2001, 2009). Given this circumstance it seems reasonable to consider alternatives that are evidence-based and have demonstrated effective outcomes with equally difficult behavioural, emotional and social problems experienced by adolescents. Hence, this study tries to fill this void by exploring the potential of Motivational Interviewing (MI) as an adjunct to existing counselling approaches that secondary school staff can use to help identify *why* and *how* adolescent students (over 12 years of age) may be more likely to modify or change problematic behaviours.

**What is Motivational Interviewing?**

The most recent definition of MI describes it as a collaborative, yet person-centred and goal-directed style of communication, that aims to elicit and strengthen a person's own reasons and motivation for change (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). With tenets in Rogerian Therapy (Miller & Rose, 2009), MI is a relatively brief and goal driven psychotherapeutic method that emerged from clinical treatment programs for drinking problems in the 1980s (Miller, 1983). Over 25,000 journal articles and more than 200 clinical trials have been published along with meta-analysis and efficacy reviews since its inception (Miller & Rollnick, 2013) and it is often used as an adjunct to Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) and Solutions Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT). While having similar and complementary features to both CBT and SFBT, an enduring aspect of MI is to have the client argue for change rather than the therapist. MI is a flexible and reiterative style of conversation that seeks to meet individuals where they are at (Atkinson & Amesu, 2007; Resnicow & McMaster, 2012). That is, from having no intention to change, to wanting to take action to make changes in their life. The intention is for individuals to feel understood but not judged, and for them to be treated with respect and dignity while they explore potential changes that are meaningful to them.

There is consensus that MI is an empirically established intervention (Lundahl, Kunz, Brownell, Tollefson, & Burke, 2010) that has achieved success in improving treatment outcomes with a wide variety of adolescent issues, behaviours, and psychological and medical conditions including: depression (Brody, 2009), substance abuse, eating disorders and obesity, smoking cessation, sexual risk taking (Erickson, Gerstle, & Feldstein, 2005; Naar-King & Suarez, 2011). MI has been shown to have beneficial effects on academic attainment with middle school students (Strait, McQuillin, Smith & Englund, 2012a; Strait et al., 2012b; Terry, Strait, McQuillin, & Smith, 2013), used to form the basis of peer support (Channon, Marsh, Jenkins, & Robling, 2013) and pastoral care programs (McNamara, 1992, 2001, 2009), as well as a strategy of classroom management across grades K to 12 (Reinke & Herman, 2011). It has also been used as an assessment tool to evaluate the needs of individual students (Atkinson & Amesu, 2007; Atkinson & Woods, 2003; Kittles & Atkinson, 2009) and to promote positive mental health and wellbeing across schools (Frey et al., 2011). While a start has been made (Herman et al., 2014), its application with at-risk adolescents in secondary school contexts is underdeveloped and the current MI framework (Miller & Rollnick, 2013) is not commonly used to address misbehaviour at school.

**Purpose of the Current Paper**

The aim of this paper is to highlight the conceptual and theoretical benefits of MI and how it can be applied to target persistent misbehaviour with at-risk older adolescents in middle and senior school years (over 12 years of age). The type of circumstance where it might be useful to consider MI include (Herman et al., 2014; Miller & Rollnick, 2013; Naar-King & Suarez, 2011):

a) With a disaffected student who deliberately and repeatedly breaks school rules, and is at risk of

early disengagement with education;
b) With a student actively engaged in anti-social behaviour;

c) With a student at risk of or has had contact with juvenile justice systems;

d) With a student who does not see his/her misbehaviour at school as problematic;

e) With a student who is suspicious of help from counsellors/teachers at their school;

f) With a student who shows very little remorse for his/her actions, or interest in the potential

long-term risks associated with persistent misbehaviour at school;
g) With a student who is unconcerned about detentions, suspension or exclusion from schooling;

h) With a student who does not understand why their behaviour keeps bringing them to the

attention of school discipline regimes.

**Considerations Prior to Intervention with Adolescent Students**

Current research indicates that MI should be used with older adolescent students who are at least 12 years of age (Strait et al., 2012a; Strait et al., 2012b; Terry, et al., 2013). We know that some at-risk adolescents are likely to be defensive, hostile or hyper-vigilant to questions by staff about their behaviour at school (Sigman-Grant, 2002). Whereas others may simply not reply or alternatively be highly competent at avoiding interpersonal exchanges about behaviour, or shut down conversations with seemingly uncooperative statements like: *I don't know and I don't care*. Similarly, it might be difficult for at-risk adolescents to articulate their feelings and thoughts about the full impact of what they are experiencing (Snow, 2013). These are all important factors to consider before intervening with any student, as MI is a talking intervention that relies heavily on verbal interchange and often requires meta-cognitive thinking (thinking about one's own thinking).

While students who frequently misbehave at school might be socially alert and 'system savvy', or conversely present with low empathy, they may also be contending with their own exposure to bullying, violence and trauma (Hemphill & Hargreaves, 2009; Quin & Hemphill, 2014). They may have comorbid mental health and/or emotional difficulties (McAdams & Schmidt, 2007). Hence, it is critical to keep in mind that misbehaviour at school is not a random behaviour. Rather, it is the culmination of complex individual capacities, sensitivities and tendencies, and the interactions of these with social factors and environmental contexts (Hong & Espelage, 2012; Jimerson, Swearer, & Espelage, 2010). Therefore, before deciding if and how to intervene, good practice would be to conduct a thorough assessment of the antecedents,

developmental and familial conditions, with close consideration given to the dignity and rights of adolescent students, particularly with regard to the principles of beneficence and non-maleficence (Sigman-Grant, 2002).

**The Spirit of MI**

MI challenges counsellors to reflect on important questions such as: *How do you want students to feel when they are talking with you? Why would they want to change their behaviour? And, what does change really mean for this individual?* Four overarching qualities are argued to capture the spirit of MI and are sometimes reduced to the acronym PACE, these are: (a) *Partnership,* where the counsellor sets aside the expert role and positions self alongside the student; (b) *Acceptance,* where the counsellor supports autonomy, self-worth, and demonstrates understanding; (c) *Compassion,* where the counsellor engages the individual and not just the problem; and (d) *Evocation,* where the counsellor draws ideas and motivation for change from the student (Miller & Rollnick, 2013), see Figure 1.

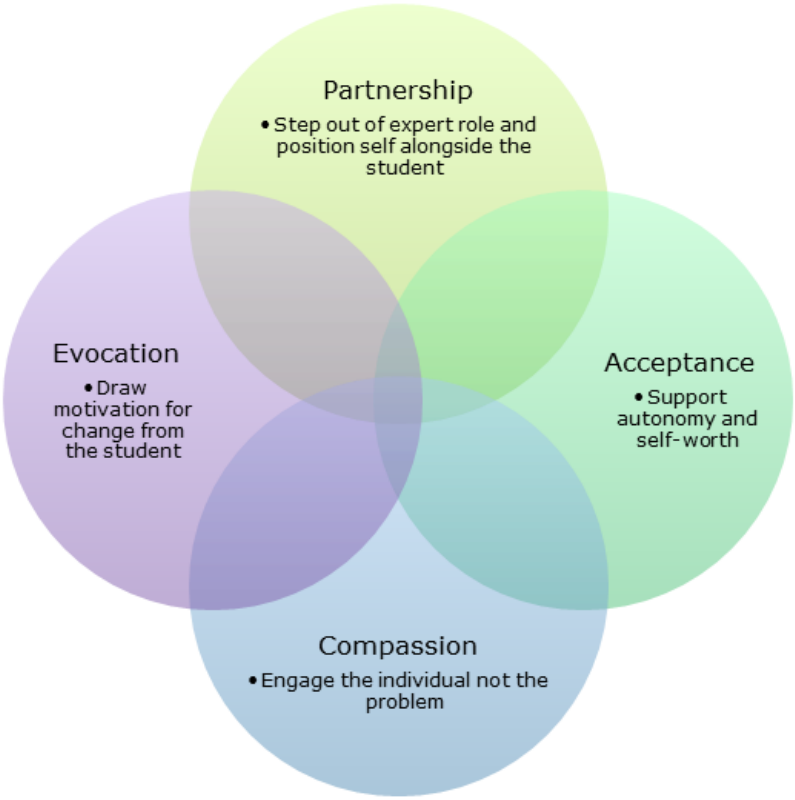


Figure 1. The spirit of MI. Adapted from Miller and Rollnick, 2013.

If we look at the acronym PACE in a little more detail, expressing faith in adolescent students and having respectful curiosity about their perspective is key to building a successful partnership. To this end, while the counsellor may facilitate the structure of a counselling session, it is the student who provides the context and remains the expert on himself or herself (Sigman-Grant, 2002). Central to conveying compassion is the offer of genuine care and concern, rather than just a focus on the problem at hand. Whereas acceptance lies in recognising a student's absolute worth, providing affirmation of their values, strengths and

feelings, and acknowledging their right to make choices and exert agency in their life. Lastly, evocation is the art of drawing out a student's own reasons for change while refraining from advising, arguing, criticising, debating, diagnosing, informing, instructing, lobbying, moralising, threatening, and persuading. Indeed, evocation seeks to build conviction and ownership for change by encouraging an individual's deeper understanding of themselves and what matters to them.

**The Four Processes of Change**

Practitioners of MI recognise that the process of change will take time and can ebb and flow (Resnicow, McMaster, & Rollnick, 2012). Hence, it seeks to establish a non-confrontational and supportive climate in which the student feels comfortable with expressing both the positive and negative aspects of a problem (Westra & Aviram, 2013). The recently revised MI framework suggests that four intervention processes strengthen the likelihood of change, these are: (a) *Engage*, where the counsellor initially separates the individual from the problem and settles into having a helpful conversation and discovering whether they see benefit in working together; (b) *Focus*, where the counsellor invites the student to identify a useful direction and an agenda of topics; (c) *Evoke*, where the counsellor seeks to draw out from students their own reasons about why it might be good to change; and (d) *Planning*, where the counsellor with permission, supports a student to prepare for change, set goals and identifies possible barriers (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). Figure 2 illustrates how this process looks when used with adolescents and misbehaviour at school.

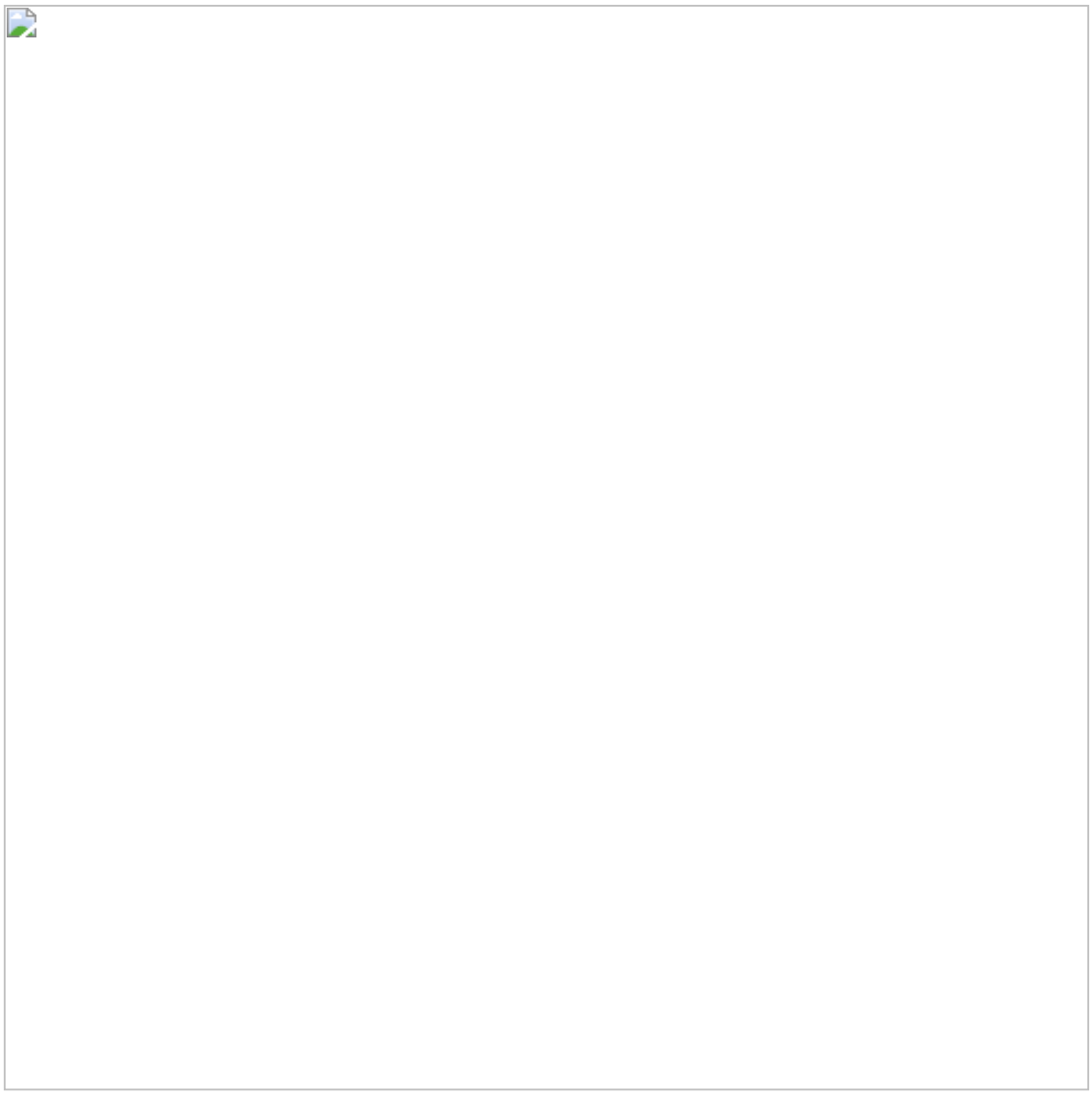

Figure 2. The four process of change applied to school misbehaviour. Adapted from Miller and Rollnick, 2013.

**Client-centred Counselling Skills and OARS**

While the essence of MI lies in its spirit (Resnicow & McMaster, 2012), being skilful during the process of change is critical (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). A core aspect of MI is asking for permission to talk about sensitive topics in an effort to promote both autonomy and respect (Westra & Aviram, 2013). The granting of permission should not be seen as an invitation to give advice, but rather as providing an opportunity to listen and understand from the perspective of the student. To this end, individuals are more likely to accept and act upon change when the conversation style flows around client-centred counselling skills, in particular: (a) asking open questions to establish a flow of communication; (b) providing affirmation of strengths, feelings, thoughts and self-worth; (c) using reflective listening skills such as simple, complex and double sided reflections; and (d) the selective use of summaries (Miller & Moyers, 2006). Conceptualised as the OARS continuum, these four skills help to deepen engagement and lay the foundation for a purposeful conversation about change, while demonstrating that the counsellor has heard, and is trying to understand the student (Miller & Rollnick, 2013).

A skilful MI practitioner will spend less than 40% of the conversation talking. Furthermore, they will use a reflection-question ratio of 2:1, of which more than 50% are complex reflections compared to simple reflections, and more than 70% are open questions compared to closed questions (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). Importantly, the OARS continuum encourages the counsellor to accurately empathise with a student. Accurate empathy has been described as a complex clinical skill that extends well beyond the mere repeating back to a student about what has just been said (Miller & Moyers, 2006). It requires a counsellor to empathetically listen while being psychologically present to the meaning constructed about an experience, which is then relayed back to the student (Resnicow & McMaster, 2012).

**Attending to Ambivalence, Resistance, and Discord**

Rather than instructing, moralising or trying to persuade a student, the spirit of MI encourages counsellors to “pull up alongside them” (Resnicow & McMaster, 2012, p. 4) and explore ambivalence or resistance to change (Miller & Rose, 2015). In terms of school truancy, for example, ambivalence may present in the form of statements such as: *Everyone else does it, so I don’t know what the problem is*. Hence, pulling up alongside students would involve asking questions like: *Tell me from your perspective what happened on those days*? But equally, asking questions like: *How did you feel when you were doing it? What do you like about it*? And, *What do you feel other kids are thinking about you while you are doing it*? The aim of such questioning is to engage with a student while trying to understand the behaviour from their perspective (McNamara, 1992, 2001, 2009).

However, resistance to change is common (Westra & Aviram, 2013). Resistance may include a student arguing against change and defending their current behaviour, or presenting obstacles to change and is often characterised by statements beginning with the ‘yes, but’ mindset (Miller & Rollnick, 2013; Resnicow & McMaster, 2012). MI practitioners view resistance as taking one of two forms, these are: (1) *Sustain Talk*, where the student asserts concern about their context

and personal desire, ability, reason or need to change and even presents benefits for the status quo; and, (2) *Discord*, where the student presents with interpersonal resistance during a conversation to the change process, such as being aggressive and confrontational. The student may also resort to discounting or minimising potential discussion topics, diverting or redirecting the conversation, being non-communicative, or simply saying 'yes' to everything just to speed up the process or please a counsellor (Miller & Rollnick, 2013).

The spirit of MI encourages conversations about behaviour to be more like a 'dance' rather than a 'wrestle' (Miller & Rollnick, 2013), meaning that siding with the negative when it occurs, forms an important aspect of honouring autonomy (e.g., *You don't see what the problem is, as everyone else does it at school*). Nevertheless, several strategies can help to diffuse discord, and if applied to the issue of truancy, may include: (a) showing curiosity (e.g., *It seems like you are unhappy about being here today, if it's okay with you, would you mind telling me about that*?); (b) simple reflections (e.g., *It sounds like* . . .); (c) amplified reflections (e.g., *You would rather be somewhere else than here today*); (d) double-sided reflections connected by 'and' rather than 'but', to empathise with the dilemma experienced by a student but not to construct it as a problem (e.g., *You would rather be somewhere else and you have had to come here today*); (e) shifting or reframing the focus of conversation (e.g., *What's the best use of our time here today*?); and, (f) emphasising autonomy and control over the conversation (e.g., *It is completely up to you, it is your choice*) (Miller & Rollnick, 2013).

A key MI strategy used to evaluating the likelihood of change occurring is to ask a student to rate on a scale how important they think it is that change takes place. A counsellor may ask, for example: *On a scale of 0 to 10, with zero meaning not important and ten meaning very important, how important is it for you to make this change*? Students will probably initially supply a low to mid-range number in response to this question (e.g., two out of 10). Irrespective of the number provided, the value for the counsellor is in the asking of the next two questions: *Why are you at that number* [e.g., two] *and not zero*? Followed by: *What would it take to move up one point to a three*? It is these specific questions, in this sequence, which prompts the student to consider the reasons why change is important, rather than lingering on the reasons why change is not important (Miller & Rollnick, 2013).

**Agenda Setting**

While some students may present with one clear direction and purpose during counselling, others may have several, or may not have identified possible directions yet. To help a student find his or her own reasons for change, it is important for the counsellor to check and confirm, and negotiate where needed, a useful sense of conversation direction that is meaningful to them (Herman et al., 2014). Setting an agenda can help with this focusing process and in the MI spirit may include: (a) eliciting from a student their sense of a useful agenda; (b) seeking permission for the counsellor to contribute thoughts or suggestions to an agenda; (c) creating a menu of options; and then, (d) negotiating the focus together. Once a useful conversation direction forms, recognising and attending to a shift by students towards the possibility of change becomes the emphasis.

**Change Talk and DARN-CATs**

While Sustain Talk defends the current behaviour and obstacles to change, *Change Talk* has been described as any self-expressed argument voiced by an individual for engaging with change (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). For example, Change Talk may include a discussion about the risks and benefits of current behaviour, or the expression of optimism and/or intention to change. Change Talk and Sustain Talk are often characterised as on a continuum (Westra & Aviram, 2013). However, Change Talk can extend between preparatory Change Talk and mobilising Change Talk (Miller & Rose, 2009). Preparatory Change Talk pivots around why change might be beneficial, that is: (a) desire (e.g., *I want to . . .*); (b) ability (e.g., *I could . . .*); (c) reason (e.g., *I would probably . . .*); (d) need (e.g., *I have to . . .*); and, (e) commitment (e.g., *I will . . .*). Whereas mobilising Change Talk tends to reflect a commitment to how change can be achieved and considered in terms of: (a) activation (e.g., *I know I'm ready to . . .*); and, (b) taking steps (e.g., *This week I . . .*). Collectively, these are often reduced to the acronym *DARN-CATs* and when applied to fighting behaviour at school, for example, it might look like the following.
See Figure 3.

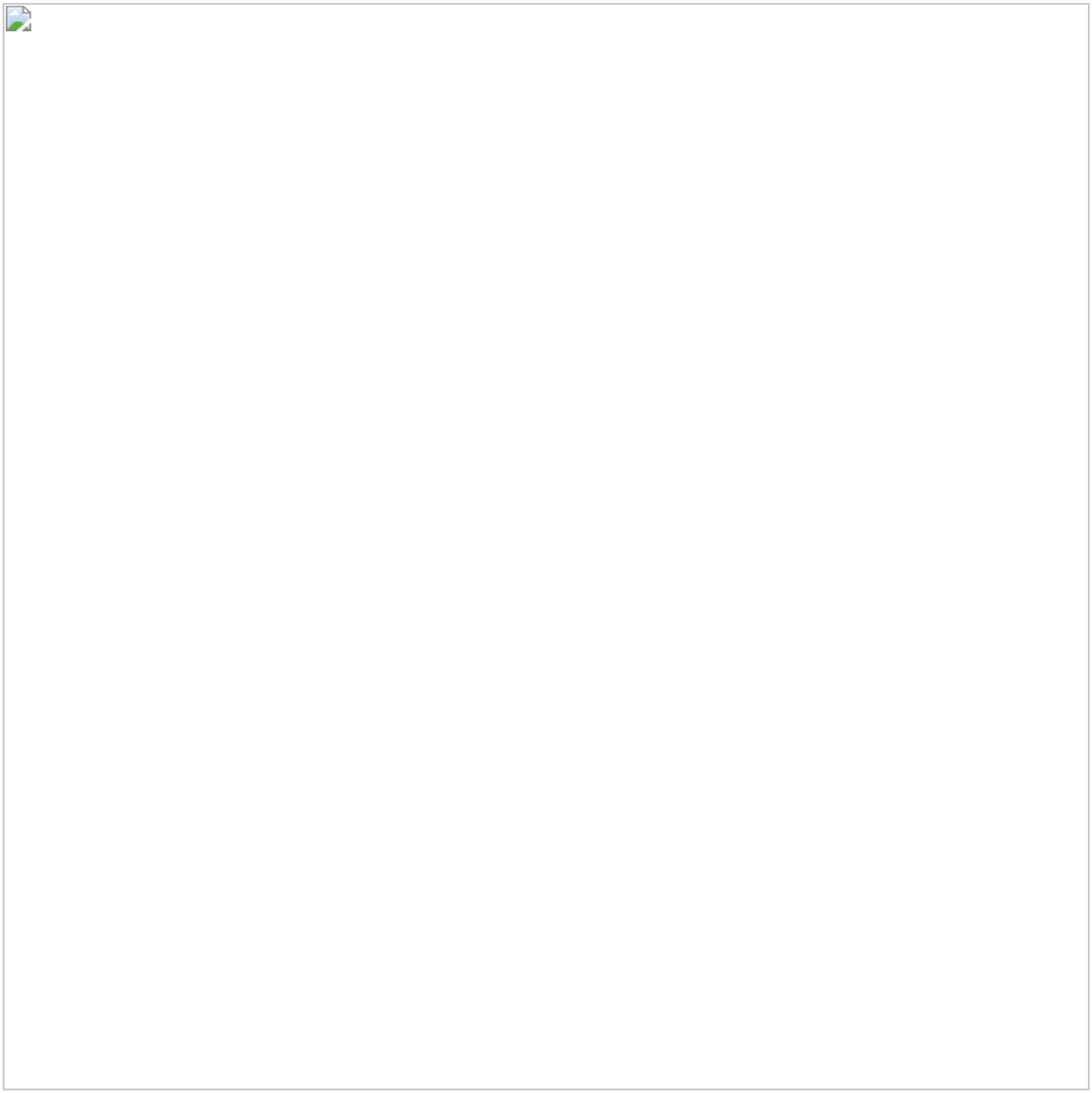

Figure 3: DARN-CATs applied to fighting behaviour at school.

The DARN-CATs continuum does not represent an exhaustive list of preparatory and mobilising Change Talk. It does, however, offer a useful framework for evaluating motivation for change (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). One risk with trying to elicit Change Talk is that students may re-engage with Sustain Talk. The DARN CATs continuum can again be used to better understand Sustain Talk and internalised core beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, cognitions, perceptions, and situational triggers that might continue to anchor a maladaptive behaviour for a student. When applied to fighting behaviour at school, for example, Figure 4 illustrates different student responses that are Sustain Talk.

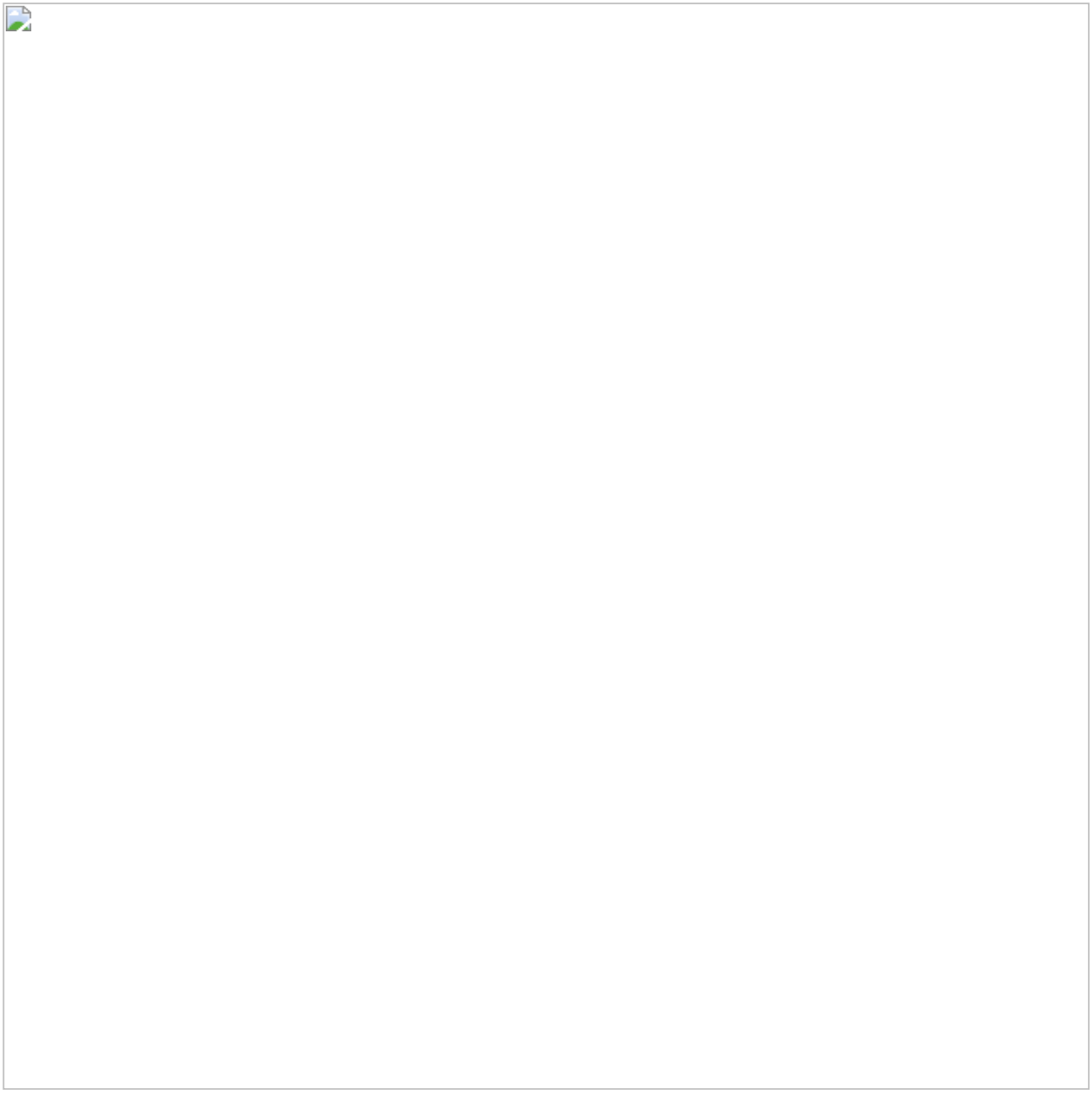

Figure 4: The DARN CATs continuum applied to Sustain Talk for fighting behaviour at school.

**Change Talk, Eliciting Commitment and Building Motivation to Change**

It is the ratio between Change Talk and Sustain Talk that MI practitioners assert as the real driving mechanism of change taking place for a client (Miller & Rose, 2009). Hence, counsellors need to listen hard for Change Talk and to reinforce it when it occurs (Vansteenkiste et al., 2012). During this time, MI encourages counsellors to illuminate for students how a current behaviour might be at odds with other values and hopes (e.g., *How might this change help you with . . . [insert specific value or hope that student has identified as important to them]*). Actual change in behaviour occurs when individuals perceive a significant discrepancy forming between important core beliefs, cognitions, personal goals or values and the status quo (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). That is, how does the behaviour fit within a student's self-perception, belief and value systems, as well as how they see their future selves and who they really want to be? Strategies to promote and reinforce Change Talk are sometimes reduced to the acronym *EARS*, and include: (a) elaboration, such as asking a student for more details, or for examples; (b) affirmation, acknowledging their efforts and benefits; (c) reflection, reinforcing Change Talk through simple or complex reflections; and, (d) summarising Change Talk along the way.

Eliciting a commitment to change may require further strategies such as asking more evoking questions (e.g., *How would you like things to be different?*), getting students to look back and look forward in their life (e.g., *If you continue on without making any change to how you deal with things, what do you think might happen in a year's time?*) and the use of decisional balance activities (e.g., the listing of pros/benefits and cons/costs about making a change and not making a change) (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). It is important to keep in mind that decisional balance exercises have been found to strengthen the commitment of individuals that have already made up their mind to change, however they may decrease commitment to change with individuals that are ambivalent (Miller & Rose, 2015). Similarly, that evocation (e.g., drawing ideas and motivation from a student) has been found to promote change with ambivalent individuals, but may deter change when a person has already made a decision to change (Miller & Rose, 2015). To evaluate confidence about making change, the counsellor can once again ask a student to rate on a scale their perceived confidence that change will take place. For example: *On a scale of 0 to 10, with zero meaning not confident and ten meaning very confident, how confident are you that this change will take place?* Again, the value for the counsellor is in the asking of the next two questions: *Why are you at that number and not zero?* And, if needed: *What would it take to move up one point?*

**Supporting a Plan to Change**

Sometimes referred to as moving from the 'why' to 'how' phase (Resnicow et al., 2012), the process of supporting individuals to prepare for change forms a pivotal aspect of MI, and identifying the right time to plan for change involves looking for signs of readiness (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). Signals that a student is ready for change may include: (a) a significant reduction in ambivalence and resistance; (b) an increase in the volume and frequency of Change Talk statements mirrored by a reduction in Sustain Talk; (c) the sharing and verbalising of examples of tentative steps towards change; (d) the use of more action-orientated talk; (e) the exploration of what change might entail; and, (f) the appearance of questions about what change would be like (Resnicow et al., 2012). The counsellor can evaluate readiness for change by once again asking a student to rate on a scale their perceived readiness that change will take place. MI urges counsellors not see readiness and planning for change as the final step of intervention with a student, but rather as the first steps in shifting from a general state of intent, to consolidating a commitment to action change (Miller & Rollnick, 2013).

According to MI practitioners (Miller & Moyers, 2006), a distinct risk at this point is for the counsellor to relapse into imposing advice or to unconsciously take control over the planning process by exerting authority or expertise. It is the student who has to actually carry out planned behaviour change, therefore it is critical that they develop the change plan. The formation of a change plan may be gradual (Miller & Rollnick, 2013), however its goals need to be realistic, specific and meaningful to the student. A number of steps can help this process, including: (a) exploring possible goal options; (b) reviewing importance, confidence, and/or readiness; (c) identifying resources and wider support networks; (d) discussing potential challenges without undermining motivation; and, (e) reaffirming commitment to change (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). In the context of misbehaviour at school, this process may be broached with statements like: *It sounds like you have thought about a lot of reasons to stop, if it is ok with you, I'd like to talk about some of those reasons, and explore ways that will make this change happen for you*. Goals can initially be as simple as counting backwards from 10 to zero and walking away during the heat of the moment, nevertheless the overall aim is to transition from building motivation for change, to goal setting and planning to action change (Resnicow & McMaster, 2012).

Acknowledging what a student may already know or may have already thought about is more likely to heighten the development of an achievable change plan (Westra & Aviram, 2013). A useful strategy to consider at this point, is the *Elicit-Provide-Elicit (EPE)* approach which first asks the counsellor to elicit from a student their current understanding of and desire for information (e.g., *What is your understanding of . . . ?*). To then reflect and affirm what they know by asking (e.g., *What would you like to know more about?*). The counsellor then provides new information in a neutral and non-preferential way and gives choices about how much and the mode of information delivery (e.g., *Those are some good reasons to stop swearing at school, if it's ok with you, I'd like to share some benefits other students have experienced*). By eliciting from the student their response or reaction to this new information (e.g., *How does that match with what you previously thought?*), the EPE strategy helps to minimise the risk of extraneous information being brought into a conversation, while enabling the student to process information and prioritise what is meaningful for them (Vansteenkiste et al., 2012).

**Summary**

Whilst far from exhaustive, this paper has identified why it is incumbent upon us, as counsellors, mental health practitioners, educators and school communities, to reflect on how we engage with older adolescent students who are repeatedly disciplined, or frequently suspended or excluded for misbehaviour while at school. It is acknowledged that MI is not suitable for use with all students and that it is not a panacea for all types of challenging behaviours at school. However, it does offer a compelling evidenced-based approach to supporting at-risk adolescent students to negotiate maladaptive behaviours, while helping them to develop new and deeper understandings about themselves. Some may see this stance as problematic, yet research suggests our current best efforts are failing to provide effective intervention with students who deliberately and frequently engage in misbehaviour at school (Bradshaw, 2015; Hanish et al., 2013; Hunt, 2015; Lawner & Terzian, 2013; Lodge, 2014; Salmivalli, 2010). Moreover, if left unaddressed, misbehaviour at school is associated with a greater likelihood of early disengagement with education, increased risk of anti-social and violent behaviour, as well as adaptive and mental health problems in later life (Gibb et al., 2011; Hemphill & Hargreaves, 2009). Indeed, continual contact with school discipline regimes

arguably conveys the perception to at-risk students that their place is on the fringe of learning environments (Osterman, 2000) and may increase self-sabotaging behaviour such as participation in anti-social activities (Hemphill, et al., 2012) and even the initiation and maintenance of a reputation as a 'bad' student or person (Houghton et al., 2012).

The aim here is to address the research-to-practice gap between the potential of MI and a way of working with disaffected older adolescent students at risk of early disengagement with their education. Again, MI is not presented as a cure-all (Miller & Rollnick, 2009) and young people with comorbid issues are likely to require carefully formulated, multi-modal intervention that include family and school-based support as well as other therapeutic intervention (Sigman-Grant, 2002). However, it does offer a flexible, client-centred but goal-orientated starting point for school counsellors to address the internalisation and externalisation of school misbehaviour (McNamara, 1992, 2001, 2009). In particular, the spirit of MI attends closely to crucial psychological needs during adolescence such as autonomy and independence (Ryan et al., 2011; Vansteenkiste et al., 2012), while core MI skills (e.g., OARS) enable counsellors to explore how certain behaviours might be at odds with core beliefs and values. Indeed, research suggests that feelings of competence and self-efficacy with respect to valued life goals are associated with greater positive affect and wellbeing, and impact on whether individuals become engaged or alienated in the world (Bandura, 1997; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 1985, Osterman, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In sum, MI seeks to encourage ownership of behaviour and conviction to change by purposefully evoking a certain form of dialogue (e.g., Change Talk) in an effort to strengthen commitment to change (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). It also offers both a philosophy and a framework for establishing a purposeful and goal-orientated counselling relationship. Instead of depending on external contingencies to just *manage* behaviour with students who are perhaps ambivalent or resistant to change, MI explicitly recognizes that some students might not initially be ready to change (Cryer & Atkinson, 2015). Further, it emphasises the importance of intrinsic motivation to behaviour change and the benefits of engaging this by eliciting awareness about one's own core beliefs and values. It is these distinctive features of MI, but particularly the focus on intrinsic motivation, that suggest it has the potential to play a significantly greater role in improving the way misbehaviour at school is both understood and addressed, while promoting better outcomes with older adolescent students otherwise considered as at-risk for early disengagement with education (Frey et al., 2011).

**Further Considerations for Schools**

There are several relational and technical components of MI that have not been touched upon in this paper and should be carefully considered by school staff. While the spirit of MI, process of change, and even the core skills may be simple to understand, MI is not easily practiced with skilfulness (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). Baseline proficiency in MI requires ongoing training, context specific practice, the provision of systematic feedback and supervision over time (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). Similarly, when considering using MI there should be a commitment by staff and schools to work closely with families, or if family is absent, other relevant significant adults. Notwithstanding this, there is now the well-established *Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers* (MINT) that offers detailed information about professional development and ongoing mentoring in MI, as well as recommended research, books and training manuals, and advertises both national and international conferences on MI (http://www.motivationalinterviewing.org).

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

Funding: This manuscript received no funding or research grant.

Ethical approval: This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

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