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Can motivational interviewing be a helpful professional tool? Investigating teachers' experiences

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ABSTRACT

Background: Motivational interviewing (MI) is a collaborative communication style used to enhance behaviour change, and there is increasing support for using MI in schools. However, little is known about school-based MI from a teacher perspective and how MI is applied by teachers in their daily work. Understanding teachers' use and experiences of MI could provide valuable information for future school development and teacher education.

Purpose: This study aimed to explore teachers' experiences and perceptions of applying MI in Swedish compulsory schools (grades 1–9; 7–15 years).

Methods: Interviews were conducted with 13 teachers, who taught different subjects in grades 4–9 (10–15 years). The teachers were from five schools in five different municipalities. They all had received a three- or four-day intensive training programme in MI. A qualitative content analysis approach was used to analyse the data.

Findings: Our analysis indicated that teachers perceived MI to be a useful method that provided concrete tools to apply in their daily work. The teachers thought that MI facilitated their relational work, and helped them to become more guiding and autonomy-supportive than before. Hence, the teachers expressed a wish that MI should be included in teacher education. In addition, some teachers felt that MI could be effective in conflict management, to respond to pupils with challenging behaviour and to strengthen pupils' motivation, as well as in conversations with parents. However, teachers considered that lack of time was an obstacle to the application of MI in school and noted that MI requires ongoing training and continuity in order to be effective.

Conclusions: This small-scale study draws attention to MI's potential as a supportive tool. Further research is needed to determine how far it may help teachers in a range of educational settings as they seek to foster collaborative relationships in school and facilitate relational work with their pupils.

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Introduction

In recent decades, research has increasingly shown the significance of supportive relationships between teachers and pupils, and explored how these relationships affect pupils' school motivation, wellbeing and social development (Cornelius-White 2007; Hattie

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2009). The teacher's ability to create a trusting environment is of great importance for pupils' learning (Bingham and Sidorkin 2004). However, teachers often lack professional opportunities for learning about the relational aspects involved in teaching (Sabol and Pianta 2012). Previous studies indicate that general education teachers often feel that they have not received sufficient training during teacher education to consider themselves capable of teaching pupils with challenging behaviour. Indeed, to respond to such pupils might be regarded as something teachers had to learn through time and experience (Westling 2010). Studies have also suggested that relational work is perceived by both experienced *and* newly qualified teachers as one of the most difficult parts of the teaching profession (Frelin 2010).

In seeking to develop and strengthen teachers' relational approaches and knowledge, and so to try to support pupils' motivation, interest in applying motivational interviewing (MI) in schools has increased (Frey et al. 2011; Rollnick, Kaplan, and Rutschman 2016; Strait et al. 2014). Motivational interviewing (Miller and Rollnick 2012b) is a collaborative communication style used to motivate people to change behaviour. It attaches great importance to strengthening the individual's own motivation and confidence in their own ability. The approach is also respectful of the individual's autonomy (i.e. emphasising the individual's personal responsibility and freedom of choice in initiating and maintaining behaviour change), and fosters collaborative relationships.

MI was originally developed through experience in clinical practice, primarily to treat alcohol abuse, and has not been derived from previous psychological theories (Miller and Rollnick 2012b). However, scholars have suggested that Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci and Ryan 1985) may be a valuable theory for explaining the effects of MI (Deci and Ryan 2012; Miller and Stephen Rollnick 2012a). Autonomy is central to both SDT and MI, and there are similarities in respect of how to approach people: both are person-centred, supportive and non-judgemental (Deci and Ryan 2012). Both MI and SDT focus on the individual's own responsibilities and resources to make significant behavioural changes. MI has growing research support and is used around the world, most notably in health care and health promotion (Lundahl et al. 2013, 2010; Rubak et al. 2005).

More recently, there is increasing support for using MI in schools (Rollnick, Kaplan, and Rutschman 2016; Strait et al. 2014). However, more needs to be known about school-based MI from a teacher perspective and how MI is applied by teachers in their daily work, because understanding teachers' use and experiences of MI could provide valuable information for future school development and teacher education. With this need in mind, the present study sought to explore teachers' experiences and perceptions of applying MI in Swedish compulsory schools (i.e. grades 4–9; 10–15 years). Before presenting details of our study, in the section below we contextualise our work with reference to MI more broadly, and consider what is known about MI in school settings.

Background

MI principles

Although an in-depth discussion of MI is beyond the scope of the current paper, in this section we seek to situate our study by briefly outlining the main ideas and principles that underpin MI, with reference to the MI literature. MI is based on an approach called *the MI*

spirit, four *central processes* and four *core MI skills*, which together form the fundamental principles of MI. The *MI spirit* is an important aspect of MI, and is based on four components: partnership, compassion, evocation of change talk and acceptance (Miller and Rollnick 2012b). The first component, partnership, means that MI is communicated in interaction with someone – not against or to anyone. The second component, compassion, means that the MI practitioner should actively try to facilitate the individual's well-being. The third component, evocation, refers to the MI practitioner's belief that the motivation and potential for change already lies within the individual. The core of MI is evoking change talk (i.e. the individual's own statements of need, ability, desire or reasons for change). The last component, acceptance, emphasises empathy and acceptance of the individual's autonomy. When working with MI, the practitioner avoids giving direct advice or attempts at persuasion, as it can create resistance. Instead, the MI practitioner asks for permission to inform, which shows respect for the individual's autonomy (Miller and Rollnick 2012b).

MI is also based on *four central processes* that build on each other: engagement, focusing, evoking change talk, and planning for change (Miller and Rollnick 2012b). The engagement process refers to creating a relationship and collaboration with the individual, and learning about their goals and values. The focusing process directs the conversation in a specific direction, based on the individual's will or need for behaviour change. The evocation process refers to evoking the individual's motivation for change. The final process, planning for change, aims to increase the individual's motivation to set goals and formulate a concrete plan for achieving the goal. Planning for change is an optional process (i.e. it is not always needed for behaviour change to occur) (Miller and Rollnick 2012b). Creating an empathetic relationship by using four *core MI skills* is central in MI; open-ended questions, affirmations, reflections and summaries (OARS). Affirmations strengthen engagement and the individual's self-efficacy, by showing genuine appreciation for something the individual does (Miller and Rollnick 2012b); they have an important function in eliciting change talk from the individual (Apodaca et al. 2016). Open-ended questions allow the individual to provide more detailed answers, and make it easier for the MI practitioner to understand what the individual is experiencing and feeling. Reflections are a central part of the MI skills and are statements that reflect what the individual has said, which is a way for the MI practitioner to show empathy and active listening, and also to strengthen change talk (i.e. by reflecting back) (Miller and Rollnick 2012b). Previous research has shown that behaviour change is promoted by facilitating a conversation, so that individuals can verbalise their own arguments for change (Miller and Rose 2009). Summaries work in the same way as reflections, although summaries are longer and can give an overview of the conversation.

MI in school settings

More recently, there is increasing support for using MI in schools, where MI has been applied in two different ways: student-focused school-based MI and consultative school-based MI (Rollnick, Kaplan, and Rutschman 2016; Strait et al. 2014). Previous studies have shown that student-focused MI can be effective in promoting students' motivation for learning, behaviour and to improve students' school outcomes (Cryer and Atkinson 2015; Snape and Atkinson 2016; Strait et al. 2012b; Terry et al. 2014). The consultative type of MI

has been used to enhance teachers' motivation to adopt and implement school-based interventions designed to promote students' academic achievement or prevent challenging behaviour (Frey et al. 2011, 2013). However, there is insufficient knowledge about school-based MI from a teacher perspective and how MI is applied by teachers in their daily work. Although Snape and Atkinson (2016) suggest that MI is an effective intervention for use in schools, they indicate that previous research on MI in school has not been able to specify which elements of MI contribute to its effectiveness.

Purpose

Against this backdrop, the aim of the present study was to contribute to understanding of school-based MI from a teacher perspective, by exploring teachers' experiences and perceptions of applying MI in Swedish compulsory schools (grades 1–9; 7–15 years). Four specific research questions were formulated. First, what are teachers' experiences and perceptions of applying MI in compulsory schools? Second, which MI skills and strategies do teachers who are trained in MI use to promote pupils' motivation for learning? Third, in what situations do teachers feel that MI is useful? Fourth, when can it be difficult to use MI in school?

Method

Ethical considerations

After receiving ethical approval by the ethics committee at Karlstad University (ref. 2019/578), we invited teachers to participate in the study. We carefully followed the guidelines of the Swedish Research Council during the whole study. The first contact was made, via email, to school principals. The principals were from randomly selected compulsory schools in the region that had teachers who had participated in MI training. Principals passed on an information letter to teachers, and they were asked to contact the first author if they were interested in taking part in the study. The letter provided information about the purpose of the study, approximate length of the interview, audio recording, how data would be processed, the voluntary nature of the study and the right to withdraw consent at any time. Written informed consent was obtained before the interviews and the volunteers were informed that their participation would be confidential. When reporting the data, data were anonymised (e.g. names were replaced with numbers).

Participants

Participants were selected through purposeful sampling (Patton 2014). The criteria for inclusion were that the teachers in compulsory schools (grades 1–9; pupil ages 7–15 years) should previously have taken part in a training programme in MI within their profession, and that they had applied MI in school. Thirteen teachers (five men and eight women) from five schools in five different municipalities participated in the study. The teachers' teaching experience varied from 4 to 27 years (mean: 18 years), and the majority were experienced teachers. They were aged between 29 and 60 years, and they taught in different subjects in grades 4–9 (pupil ages 10–15 years). They all had received a three or

four-day intensive training programme in MI, delivered by a member of the Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers (MINT). There was variation in the teachers' experience of applying MI, as some had less than one year of experience and some had applied MI for over 10 years (mean: three years). It is rather unusual in Sweden for teachers to have any kind of MI training; therefore, the MI training undertaken by the participants was not specifically for school settings. Instead, they had received MI training with a focus on health care, social services or substance abuse care.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were deemed an appropriate way to collect data that would be analysed qualitatively, in order to address the study's aims. An interview guide with open-ended questions concerning the teachers' experiences and perceptions of applying MI was used, including three thematic areas: motivation, application of MI, and relational work. The questions focused on the teachers' view of motivation in school, their experience of applying MI in school, and their view of the relational work in school. The interviews were conducted in Swedish by the first author. They took place at the participants' schools, in an appropriate space chosen by the participants. All interviews were audio-recorded (mean length: 49 minutes) and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

An inductive qualitative content analysis, as described by Graneheim and Lundman (2004), was applied to analyse the data. First, the analysis process began with the transcribed interviews being read carefully several times to get an overall picture of the content. The data were subsequently imported into qualitative data analysis software (NVivo-11), which was used to support the analysis. Second, the text was organised into meaning units – i.e. text segments relevant to the purpose of the study. Third, the meaning units were condensed, and given codes that briefly described the content. Codes with similar conceptual meanings were compared, and subsequently grouped into subcategories and more abstract categories. The interpretation of the transcribed interviews was carried out on two different levels of interpretation: manifest and latent interpretation. The interpretation focused mainly on the manifest content, which meant that the clear and obvious aspects of the text were interpreted. There were also elements of latent interpretation, which meant that an interpretation of the underlying message was also made (Graneheim and Lundman 2004). During the analysis process, a critical friend procedure was used (Smith and McGannon 2018), in which the second author asked questions during the analysis and promoted alternative explanations. The first and second authors discussed different interpretation possibilities. Following this phase, the preliminary list of categories and subcategories was discussed by all three authors. When conflicting interpretations arose in terms of the emergence of categories and subcategories, discussions grounded in the material led to mutual understanding between all three authors.

Findings

Our analysis allowed us to gain insights into the teachers' experiences and perceptions of applying motivational interviewing (MI) in their schools, helping us to address our research questions. Four main thematic categories were identified through the analysis: *Change of conversation style*, *Application of central MI skills*, *Perceived benefits of MI in school*, and *Perceived challenges of MI in school*. The first category contains four subcategories, which describe how the teachers felt they had changed their approach and their conversation style after the MI training. The second category contains three subcategories, which illustrate how teachers applied the central skills and strategies in MI. The third category contains five subcategories, which describe the teachers' experiences of using MI and in what situations they applied MI in school. The last category contains two subcategories, which illustrate the challenges teachers experienced in applying MI. It is important to note that the teachers' recounts about how they applied MI referred to a broad spectrum of everyday conversations with their pupils and not only individual conversations with a pupil (i.e. it included experiences when teaching in the classroom, during development talks, and also in the corridors during breaks, etc.). In the sections below, the four categories and their corresponding subcategories are presented in detail in order to build a picture of the teachers' perceptions and experiences. Where relevant, anonymised, translated quotations from the data are included to illuminate and illustrate main points.

Change of conversation style

Analysis of the teachers' recounts suggested that they felt they moved away from a teaching style that could be described as controlling. They perceived that through MI and the MI spirit, they were able to create their own guiding and autonomy-supportive conversation style. The teachers also observed that MI had given them more patience and more awareness of how to treat and talk to pupils.

MI spirit as a new approach: The teachers described how they embraced the MI spirit as a new approach. They felt that it enabled them to treat pupils in a new way, based on increased respect and confidence in the pupils' abilities. As one teacher noted, 'For me, MI has been a cornerstone in what approach I should have when I meet my pupils'. The teachers emphasised their observation that MI was about establishing collaboration with the pupils; they believed that MI could contribute to a more respectful climate in the classroom. By adopting this new approach, the teachers felt that they could convey that the solutions were within the pupils themselves. They thought that it made them more prone to show understanding of pupils' integrity and limitations. Moreover, the teachers highlighted their view that MI was about listening actively and building trust. Further, the analysis showed that being non-judgemental was also considered to be a central part of the MI spirit.

Moving away from a 'controlling' teaching style: Findings reflect that teachers sometimes find it difficult to find the balance between guiding and controlling, as they are in a position of power as teachers. According to our analysis, one of the things that most of the teachers appeared to find difficult to change was resisting the 'righting reflex' (i.e.

the urge to constantly offer the pupils solutions and advice). Prior to the training, the teachers were used to telling the pupils how to do things: they felt that the MI training had made them realise that they needed to listen more to the pupils' own ideas and suggestions. They pointed out the importance of giving the pupils time to think for themselves. Indeed, as one teacher noted, changing into a new teaching style requires hard work:

Like I was before, when I thought I had all the solutions and was very quick to tell what I thought would be good . . . I have had to work hard to avoid that, because you want to save the whole world and you think that you have all the solutions.

The teachers felt that it was difficult not to give good advice out of pure habit and goodwill, as they wanted to lead the pupils on the right path and to see them succeed. Participants pointed out that moving away from a 'controlling' style of teaching and resisting the 'righting reflex' requires an awareness and insight into teachers' own way of talking and teaching.

MI provides awareness and patience: It was evident from the analysis that the teachers considered that MI provided them with a greater awareness of their way of talking and listening to pupils. They felt that MI helped them to become more patient and accepting of the idea that conversations and behaviour change take time. One teacher placed particular emphasis on this:

The big thing is that you have had to learn, and accept, that change takes time and I have to be patient. That is the big thing for me, which is the difference from before.

The teachers said that MI had made them more aware of the way they formulated questions when talking to pupils, aligning with central parts in MI (i.e. asking permission to raise certain issues or make suggestions, in order to show respect for pupils' autonomy).

Creating an individual style: The teachers described how they added MI as part of their way of talking, making use of the MI skills that they experienced in ways that suited them. Consequently, several teachers felt that they had created their own personal style of MI. Some teachers pointed out that they recognised parts of MI, or that MI was not something completely new, because they had attended other conversational courses before. One teacher felt that MI represented a special, added extra to previous conversation skills: 'I saw MI as a cherry on top of what I actually already have'. Some teachers experienced MI as a mixture of conversational techniques which they could combine with other conversational styles and methods.

Application of central MI skills

According to our analysis, the teachers considered that OARS (open-ended questions, affirmations, reflections and summaries) could helpfully be used as a tool. Some teachers regarded motivation scales to be a concrete strategy for exploring how important a change was considered by the pupil. The findings suggested that teachers felt the need to adapt MI when working with pupils with autism spectrum condition (ASC); for example, by using more visual methods with those pupils.

OARS as a tool: The teachers described OARS as useful and effective conversational tools. They reported that it felt good to have OARS as a 'template' which they could apply in different situations; they observed that MI gave the conversations more structure. One teacher said that MI had provided particular tools when talking to pupils:

I think I have been strengthened in how I work with education, motivation or change talk.
I think that I probably have worked in a similar way before, but now I have more specific tools.

It appeared in the interviews that there was variation in the teachers' experience of applying MI, in the sense that some teachers used more MI skills (OARS) than others did. The majority of the teachers thought that affirmations and open-ended questions were the most important tools when working with pupils. Several teachers also felt that they could reach the pupil they were talking to in a different way through open-ended questions. Affirmation of pupils was considered a central part of teachers' work, as affirmations make the pupils feel seen and listened to. They highlighted the importance of affirming the pupils more often, and one teacher believed that affirmations strengthened pupils' self-esteem. Many teachers used reflections, but not all were aware that it was reflections they were using. It seemed as though some teachers did not always distinguish fully between an affirmation and a reflection, or that some mixed up affirmations with reflections, which is visible in this comment:

I believe a lot in OARS. To affirm someone, it is so cool! Just watch when you affirm someone 'You are angry' 'You think this is difficult' and you can see how he or she relaxes.

In this quotation, the teacher talks about using reflections that reflect the pupils' feeling, rather than an affirmation as was believed. Summaries were considered by several teachers to be an important part of the conversation in order to confirm that they had understood the pupil correctly.

Motivation scales as a concrete strategy: Several teachers used scaling tools, referred to as motivation scales, in their individual meetings with pupils. They used the scales both to explore pupils' motivation, and to explore how important a change was considered to be by the pupil. The idea here is that it may be easier for the pupil to put a number on their experience of motivation than to try to describe how important the change is considered to be. Motivation scales were perceived by teachers to be a concrete and effective strategy for creating a conversation that was focused on change, as this quotation suggests:

When I talk to individual pupils, then I can use scales 'Where are you now?, What needs to happen for you to get there?, How can we change your school day so that can happen?'

There was a suggestion in the data that teachers' use of motivation scales might help pupils to see obstacles and opportunities in a more visual manner.

Adapting MI when working with autistic pupils: Some teachers worked with pupils with autism spectrum condition (ASC) and felt that they often had to adapt MI in order to be clearer with these pupils. Asking for permission to raise certain issues was considered important when working with pupils with ASC. One teacher pointed out that it was important to summarise what you had said, in order to repeat parts of the conversation with the pupil. Teachers observed that they often worked more visually, with paper and pencil, with autistic pupils. One teacher used MI strategies such as motivation scales visually, instead of open-ended questions which, it was felt, could

be perceived as confusing for pupils with ASC. On the other hand, another teacher commented that it is important to be patient and wait for pupils with ASC when asking an open-ended question, so that the pupil has time to process the question:

When you reformulate the question then you cause problems for this child. Because they are sitting there thinking, trying to come up with an answer. If I ask the question in other words or in a slightly different nuance, then that process starts all over again for them.

Findings made it clear that teachers felt they had to adapt their approach and MI skills based on the pupils' individual needs.

Perceived benefits of MI in school

The teachers in our study perceived that MI aided their daily work, and that MI could strengthen the pupils' motivation and awareness of their own situation. They said that they used MI to manage conflicts and respond to pupils with challenging behaviour, and that they considered MI a useful method in terms of contact with parents.

MI facilitating teachers' daily work: The teachers described MI as a method that facilitated their work, and almost everyone said that MI had become an important aspect when meeting with their pupils. Several teachers pointed out that knowledge of MI had made it easier for them to have development talks with pupils. They considered MI as an effective method that could have direct impact:

I love MI, I think it is great! I think it is a conversation technique that works directly, you have an effect directly. To just adjust a small little thing and have such a big impact on a conversation or on a relationship, that is really cool.

Some teachers felt that MI was energy-saving, on the grounds that they did not need to have all the answers and solutions. Several teachers thought it was good to have some guidelines for how to respond and talk to the pupils in different situations, and they considered that MI gave them a helpful framework for this. Moreover, some noted that MI helped them to keep the conversations shorter, so that the interactions became more effective and rewarding. Most of the teachers believed that MI could be applied in all contexts in the school environment, and one teacher suggested that MI should be a cornerstone in school. Several teachers observed that MI has given them and their colleagues a common language around motivational work in school.

Building good relationships and relational skills: The teachers talked a great deal about the importance of creating a good relationship with the pupils, as this was considered the most central part of teaching. In teachers' relational work with the pupils, MI was thought to be a useful tool:

I think relationships are the absolutely most important tool I have in my profession. When I am building relationships with pupils, it [MI] is one of the tools in the toolbox.

Several participants said that teachers need to have a good ability to create relationships with their pupils: it was considered as a skill or a competence needed in the teaching profession. This sentiment is reflected in the following comment: 'You do not get that far here in the school world without relational competence'. The teachers considered that MI training should be included in teacher education, as they felt that MI had provided them

with concrete relational skills and competences which facilitated their relational work with their pupils. It was evident from the analysis that teachers believed that MI provided relational skills that they wished they had acquired earlier in their profession.

Strengthening pupils' motivation and awareness: The teachers described how they often used MI to help pupils make conscious choices. MI was perceived to be a tool to help pupils to see their situation from a different point of view. The teachers said that, through MI, they could get the pupils themselves to express what the benefits of potential change could be, and that they often applied open-ended questions to help the pupils to see new opportunities. In addition, MI was perceived as effective in eliciting pupils' intrinsic motivation, and as a tool to help teachers to discover what motivates each pupil:

You take out your tools and then you explore the opportunities together. Then MI is a really good tool. I think it will become more and more important, because I think we need more teachers who have this view.

One teacher observed that MI could be a good method to apply with pupils who often truant from school, in order to get them to start reflecting and understanding the benefits of going to school. Another teacher thought that MI worked best with slightly older pupils who appeared to be tired of school, as they can reflect on their school situation in a way that was different from younger pupils' reflection. In all, it was evident from the findings that the teachers considered that MI could help teachers to strengthen pupils' motivation and awareness of the opportunities and obstacles that exist.

Responding to pupils with challenging behaviour: Several teachers noted that they often applied MI in conflict management: they felt that MI taught them to act more calmly than before. In several interviews, teachers explained that they often applied MI with pupils who had emotional outbursts, as the approach in MI helped them calm the pupil. The teachers used open-ended questions to get the pupils to shift focus in those situations. They thought that MI was a good way to be able to discuss with the pupils afterwards how they might be able to learn strategies rather than end up in these same emotional states again. However, some teachers felt that they could not apply MI at all in these situations. Some teachers considered that it took awareness and determination to apply the MI spirit and not to respond to anger with anger in situations where, for example, a pupil might be lying on the floor screaming. One teacher felt that MI helped in retaining a professional approach in difficult situations, and that MI provided helpful guidance with respect to how to respond to pupils with challenging behaviour. However, findings suggested, too, that teachers sometimes needed to deviate from MI to be able to handle certain situations at school. For example, some teachers felt that they had to adopt a more controlling and authoritarian leadership style in situations where pupils were mean to each other, fought or behaved badly in different ways.

Contact with parents: In their daily work, teachers often had contact with pupils' parents, and they commented that they frequently applied MI in these conversations. Most of them pointed out that it was important to create trust and to build a good relationship with the parents; they said, too, that it was important to ask permission to talk about sensitive issues with them. In several interviews, teachers highlighted the belief that MI could help them to create a collaboration with parents. Teachers described how, if they had received information that the pupil was not feeling well at home or did not receive enough support from home, they could apply MI to enable the raising of difficult questions with parents about

how the pupil felt at home. Further, some teachers said that knowledge of MI gave them confidence and a source of support in conversations with angry parents. For example, some teachers thought that reflections were very effective in conversations with angry parents, and that they could convey understanding by reflecting the parent's feeling.

In all, our findings suggest that the teachers we interviewed considered that MI could be a useful tool in helping to manage and respond to parents' feelings in a respectful way. Several teachers felt that open-ended questions were facilitative in conversations with parents, to make them feel involved and create conditions for a constructive conversation.

Perceived challenges of MI in school

The teachers considered that MI required ongoing training and continuity. Lack of time was perceived as an obstacle to the implementation and application of MI in school.

The need for ongoing training: Findings highlight that it takes both time and commitment to learn and apply a new communication method. The teachers noted that some MI skills were more difficult to learn than others; some said that they found it difficult to formulate open-ended questions and some found it difficult to notice pupils' change talk. Learning to apply a new way of talking was regarded as difficult:

That structure, it is a special strategy how to do the conversation. I thought it was difficult in the beginning to ask the right questions, those open-ended questions.

The teachers commented on the importance of context-specific MI training as a way of making it easier to learn how to apply MI. They believed that the school needed to set aside time for continuous MI training in their work teams, in order to keep their knowledge alive.

Lack of time as an obstacle: Findings indicated that a major challenge in working with MI in school was the lack of time. The teachers we interviewed said that they found it difficult to have enough time to fully learn MI. Some felt that it could sometimes be difficult to have time to sit down and listen to the pupils. However, it was apparent that they tried their best to find that time, as illustrated by the following quotation:

Finding the time to listen to what the pupils are really thinking and saying. Because there is a high tempo in school, and sometimes there is a short time between lessons and sometimes a lot happens. To invest time in listening to the pupils, I think that is the most difficult thing.

Overall, it was clear from the analysis that the teachers perceived it as challenging to have time and space to practice their new communication skills, in order to maintain the MI spirit at school.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to explore teachers' experiences and perceptions of applying motivational interviewing (MI) in Swedish compulsory schools. Our analysis was based on the views of thirteen teachers from five schools in five different municipalities, who had varied experience of applying MI in school. Overall, these teachers considered that MI could be useful in many different situations in the everyday life of schools, representing a communication method that can support both teachers and pupils. The

current study provides an insight into how fundamental MI principles (i.e. the MI spirit, the central processes and the core MI skills) were used by the teachers, which of the specific MI skills they perceived to be useful, and under what circumstances they found them useful or not. It was evident that MI was mostly considered to be an effective tool to apply in the classroom; furthermore, the teachers thought that MI facilitated relational work with their pupils. They believed affirmations and open-ended questions to be the most important tools when working with pupils. When pupils feel seen, validated and treated with empathy, they grow on a personal level and their self-efficacy increases (Rollnick, Kaplan, and Rutschman 2016). This, in turn, can increase the desire to learn, as indicated in previous research by Cryer and Atkinson (2015). Studies have also suggested that pupils who receive autonomy support from their teacher evidence positive effects, both academically and developmentally, through greater engagement in school, increased intrinsic motivation, better school results and increased wellbeing (Cheon, Reeve, and Moon 2012). Findings in the current study reflect that MI may help teachers change their teaching style – from what was regarded as a controlling style to a more guiding and autonomy-supportive teaching style.

Cryer and Atkinson (2015) suggested that MI can be used with pupils from the age of 10. Several teachers in this current study taught in the 4th to the 6th grade (10 to 12 – year-old pupils) and experienced MI as useful. However, Strait et al. (2012a) cautioned that there might be limitations in applying MI to younger children, given the cognitive and neurodevelopmental demands of the MI process. Children’s self-control, planning, self-awareness and goalsetting are functional but not totally mature until after adolescence (Nelson et al. 2005; Strait et al. 2012a). This suggests that MI may not be as effective for pupils younger than 12 years, which was a sentiment reflected in a statement made by one of the teachers in the current study, who felt that MI worked best with slightly older pupils. At the same time, findings indicate that MI could help teachers to strengthen pupils’ motivation and awareness of the opportunities and obstacles that exist, regardless of pupils’ ages.

The majority of the teachers in our study felt that MI could help them to respond to pupils with challenging behaviour. By applying this approach, which places emphasis on pupils’ strengths and their own motivation for life in school, these teachers believed that they could save both time and energy. However, not all teachers felt that they could apply MI to help them with situations in which pupils had challenging behaviour. It should be remembered, though, that (as detailed in the Method section), none of the teachers in this study had attended MI training which was specifically tailored to teachers working in school. If the MI training had been designed for those working in school settings, it might have made a difference. Small et al. (2014) emphasise the importance of context-specific MI training, as it facilitates skill development. However, they point out that translating MI training to school settings can be challenging due to the limited time teachers may have for professional development (Small et al. 2014). It is therefore noteworthy that, in the current study, lack of time was perceived as an obstacle to the application of MI.

Some of the teachers commented that they needed to adapt MI and combine it with visual methods when working with pupils with ASC. This notion of modifying MI when necessary resonates in a wider sense with Frielink and Embregts (2013) study, which draws attention to the need to adapt MI in certain situations: in Frielink and Embregts’

case, with individuals who have intellectual disability and challenging behaviour. They recommend increased time to answer open-ended questions, and emphasise the importance of using clear and concrete language.

The current study increases awareness that MI could have potential to help teachers to develop a collaboration with pupils' parents. According to Herman et al. (2014), affirmations and reflections are important tools for creating a relationship and collaboration with parents. Our findings suggest that reflections may help teachers to manage and respond to parents' feelings in a respectful way, and create conditions for a constructive conversation. The teachers pointed out the need for MI and conversation methodology in teacher education, as they considered that MI had provided them with relational skills that they wished they had acquired earlier in their profession. Sabol and Pianta (2012) suggest that teacher education may be a particularly important place for relational training, and they emphasise that professional development that provides teachers with relational knowledge and skills has been shown to improve the quality of teacher-pupil relationships (Sabol and Pianta 2012).

According to Miller and Rollnick (2012b), learning MI is an ongoing process which demands more than just knowledge. Findings highlight that it takes both time and commitment to learn and apply MI, and it requires an awareness of and insight into teachers' own way of talking and teaching, in order to resist 'the righting reflex' and abandon a teaching style that can be described as controlling. In order to develop teachers' use of MI, it seems to be of great importance to consider how motivated the teachers are to learn the method. Another factor that appears to have a big impact on motivation is teachers' self-efficacy, which means teachers' beliefs in their own capability to complete a task, and their beliefs in their own abilities to plan and organise activities required to attain given goals (Bandura 1997). Previous research has shown that teachers' self-efficacy affects teachers' commitment and teaching behaviours (Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2007). If the teachers have a strong belief in their own ability to learn MI, it will likely increase their motivation to want to learn more and develop their MI skills. Teachers' sense of self-efficacy has also been shown to affect pupils' motivation and achievement (Bandura 1997), and teachers' self-efficacy also increases teachers' persistence in working with pupils with challenging behaviour (Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2007). Autonomy is important, too, when learning MI: teachers need to feel that they can decide for themselves what conversation style they want to apply. It is interesting to note that, in the current study, several teachers explained that they had created their own personal style of MI, using the MI skills that suited them. Moreover, our study reminds that it is not always easy to understand and apply all the skills in MI, and that MI should not be regarded as the only tool teachers need to motivate their pupils. The teachers in this study emphasised that they tended to combine MI with their own conversation style and with other methods that they learned during their professional career.

Limitations and suggestions for further research

The current study is small in scope and inevitably has limitations. Our analysis of teachers' experiences and perceptions of applying MI in schools is based on a small qualitative sample: generalisation is not intended. Instead, we sought to enable transferability of messages by providing sufficient contextual details (e.g. interview

quotations, background of participants) for readers to reflect and make connections with their own context (Smith 2018). It is important to recognise that our study did not include observations of actual pupil-teacher interactions – rather, it focused on the teachers' own perceptions of the situations. Observations would be a good additional method to use, as this would help to evaluate in a different way how far the teachers had become more autonomy-supportive in their way of teaching. It is necessary, as well, to bear in mind that the teachers who participated in the study were people who were all positive about MI in school. They were willing to put both time and commitment into learning MI. It is likely, therefore, that these teachers probably already had a strong interest in relational and motivational work in school, prior to their MI training.

Most previous studies of school-based MI have been carried out with middle and high school students. Consequently, it might be helpful for future research to focus more on school-based MI for younger pupils. Moreover, there is a lack of research into MI-based interventions where elementary teachers have been specifically trained in MI in order to strengthen their ability to motivate their pupils. It would be interesting to understand what effects such an MI-based intervention could have on pupils' intrinsic motivation to learn, and of pupils' experiences of autonomy support in the classroom.

Conclusions

Our small-scale study offers insights into teachers' perceptions of applying MI in school. The teachers in our study considered that MI facilitated their professional practices: it was perceived to be a useful method in school, providing them with 'tools' to apply in their daily work. The teachers felt that MI was effective in developing talks with pupils, in conflict management, in responding to pupils with challenging behaviour, and in conversations with parents and colleagues. Findings suggest that MI may help teachers move towards a more guiding and autonomy-supportive teaching style which supports pupils' motivation for learning. Perhaps most importantly, the teachers in this study thought that MI training should be included in teacher education, as they felt that it had provided them with concrete relational skills that were professionally useful to them. These findings point towards further directions that research could profitably take in order to better understand MI's enabling potential in a range of educational settings.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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