Applying Ericksonian Language and NLP Principles to Educational Settings

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Ericksonian hypnagogic techniques, NLP principles, and in particular language, are regularly used in a variety of environments. This paper provides the reader with an overview of various techniques used in Ericksonian hypnosis and how to apply these to a range of non-hypnotic situations, principally focused on the child, within an educational context. These languaging techniques might be utilised by those who practise hypnosis as well as others, such as teachers and counsellors, who are not necessarily well versed on hypnotic theory and practice.

Since Anton Mesmer in the 1700s, hypnotherapeutic techniques have been successfully involved in treating a range of physical and psychological problems. Although commonly used in therapy, most people's knowledge of hypnosis comes from stage performances, in which volunteers are often directed in a humorous manner by the presenter (or hypnotist) for the benefit of entertainment. This has led to a considerable mystique surrounding hypnosis, with many assuming that the hypnotist has powerful control over others. Unfortunately, the general public does not generally have similar access to the use of the many creative and usually therapeutic possibilities afforded by the use of hypnosis.

While most non-therapeutic uses of hypnotherapy have led to exposure to certain aspects of trance states in certain susceptible individuals, the focus of
this paper is directed at the application of hypnotic principles, techniques, and language in educational settings. It is argued here that the creative use of the language component of hypnotherapy has potential application for improving student outcomes. Previously, Olidridge (1982) had pointed out that many teachers intuitively and unknowingly engage in many hypnotherapeutic-like techniques, as part of their current teaching practices. Accordingly, the use of hypnosis, without inducing trance or an altered state of consciousness, will be discussed in this paper, as it might be applied by teachers and counsellors when working with children.

While hypnosis often appears to have an aura of magic and power, it is essentially a process in which a hypnotherapist makes a series of suggestions, usually to a client, so that the client's consciousness is altered. This altered state of consciousness is usually characterised by relaxation, focused attention, and a greater receptivity to acceptable changes in behaviour and thought patterns. The trance-like state induced as a result of hypnosis is a natural everyday occurrence, which most people experience spontaneously and routinely, as in daydreaming, or when concentrating on a book or movie (Cowles, 1998). Dispelling further the myths associated with hypnosis, the renowned hypnotherapist Milton H. Erickson considered hypnosis as "essentially no more than a means of asking your [clients] to pay attention to you so that you can offer them some idea which can initiate them into an activation of their own capacities to behave" (1960/1980, p. 315). Consequently, rather than having a magical or mystical quality, the power of hypnosis tends to reside in the client's own healing and creative talents, as encouraged by the hypnotherapist.

Hypnotic-like techniques have been applied to clients in various settings, without inducing a formal trance or state. For instance, hypnotic suggestions and principles have been applied generally in psychotherapy (Barber & Calverly, 1964; Gruenewald, 1971; Otani, 1989a, 1989b), in the management of pain and anxiety disorders (Cannon-Little & Flatt, 1992), for children who have a learning difficulty (Olidridge, 1982; O'Leary, 1985), and in native healing procedures (Krippner, 1994). In this paper, the potential use of hypnosis-like procedures by hypnotists and non-hypnotists will be highlighted in three general ways: first, in behaviour management; second, when building relationships with children; and third, to enhance a child's self-esteem.
BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT

A positive school environment that practises inclusive teaching processes is essential for managing and supporting a wide range of students with diverse needs. However, the individual classroom and the subsequent teacher–student interaction is the area where many teachers have the greatest difficulty with student behaviour problems (Conway, 2002). Table 1 summarises various hypnotic suggestions and techniques and examples of possible teacher or counsellor responses that aim to effect behaviour change in students.

One general principle of hypnosis is positive expectancy, and in particular, conveying this positiveness in directions and general interactions between teachers and students. Rather than use words such as “perhaps,” “maybe,” “can,” or “might,” hypnotherapists employ more positively framed language, a strategy that teachers might also use when directing students. For instance, rather than say to a student, “Perhaps you could listen to your teachers and this might make your homework easier to understand” they could say instead, “When you listen to your teachers, you will find that your homework is easier to understand.” Similarly, instructions need to be phrased as directives rather than requests, so rather than say to a child, “Could you please put your bag away?” a teacher needs to say, “Put your bag away, thanks.” The expectation that a desired and positive result will occur is an important principle in hypnosis and one that is readily transferable to the classroom.

Similarly, hypnotic suggestions are usually directed towards enhancing the positive, rather than eliminating the negative (Oldridge, 1982). For example, when working with an overweight client, O’Leary (1985) reports rarely using the words “weight” or “heavy” and would instead focus on the attractiveness of being slim, or the benefits of exercise. O’Leary summarises, “The goal is the object of attention, rather than focusing on the problems in reaching it” (p. 31). Accordingly, school personnel might also focus on the positive implications for a child of reaching his or her goal and clearly articulate this to the child, rather than the various problems and hurdles that he or she might encounter along the way.

While hypnotherapists expect positive results and exude confidence in their clients, they also consider a behavioural outcome in terms of “successive approximations” of the focal behaviour (Hammond, 1990, p. 13). Successive approximations are immediate steps or actions that, over time, will lead to larger behavioural outcomes. Hammond (1990) suggests that hypnotherapists do this by conveying confidence that their clients will change, and at the same
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time express permissiveness concerning when this will occur. For example, when instructing a client to do something, many hypnotherapists will not expect this desired result immediately, but instead suggest that it will occur at
an ambiguous time in the future, “sooner or later” or “sometimes in the next week, I’m not sure exactly when,” thereby conveying confidence, but without being overly prescriptive. Hammond provides another example of this when he makes the following hypnotic suggestion, “Soon you’ll sense a lightness
starting to develop in that hand. And you can begin to wonder just when you’ll
first sense a twitch and sensation of movement in one of the fingers” (p. 13,
emphasis in the original). Similarly, teachers and counsellors might also
consider a behavioural outcome in terms of intermediate steps, while
simultaneously implying that at some time (maybe now, maybe later) the
student will achieve this. “First you will notice that you can do some of the
four times table and you will notice that some of them, like two times four
and ten times four, are easy, and then you will notice that others are also easy,
like eleven times four, and one times four. And then, soon after, you will be
able to do all of the four times table.” You will note that nothing we have
covered to date in this article (with the exception of Hammond’s quote) is
particularly hypnotic. They are simply positively worded suggestions and
commands and therefore do not need a qualified hypnotherapist to deliver the
messages.

The double bind (a technique used inside as well as outside hypnosis) is
another method employed by hypnotherapists to create positive expectancy, in
this case in an indirect manner. The double bind provides the client with a
choice between two or more alternatives regarding the desired behaviour,
while at the same time creating a bind so that not changing in the desired
direction is not an option. For example, a hypnotherapist might ask a client
who aims to stop smoking, “Are you going to stop smoking cold turkey or
gradually?” In this example, it is assumed that the client will stop smoking; it
is only a question of how. Accordingly, a counsellor might say to a child, “You
can make big changes in this problem, or medium changes, or little changes.
There are so many kinds of changes.” In the same way, a teacher might ask a
student walking around the classroom: “Are you going to sit on your chair, or
on the floor?” so that while providing the child with choice, the teacher
nonetheless implies that walking around the classroom is not an option.

Directions can also be given in an indirect manner, via a contingency
suggestion. Contingent suggestions connect a suggestion given by a
hypnotherapist to ongoing or inevitable behaviour (Hammond, 1990). For
example, a hypnotherapist might say to an anxious client, “When you start talking, you will feel more relaxed.” Here, the client’s expected verbal behaviour when meeting with a therapist (that is, talking) is linked or chained to the desired behaviour (that is, feeling relaxed). Accordingly, teachers might say to a student, “When you sit down at your desk, you will take out your book and start reading.” The teacher needs to identify a behaviour that the student currently engages in, and then chain this behaviour with the desired behaviour the teacher would like to see more of.

Truisms are another hypnotic technique, and consist of fact-orientated statements given to a client that are true and cannot be denied or refuted. It is important that suggestions are based on facts that the client is aware of and understands (Oldridge, 1982). Hammond (1990) describes truisms as statements of fact that most people have experienced so often that they cannot deny them, and reports the use of various phrases such as “Most people ...” “Everyone ...” “You already know ...” “Most of us ...” (p. 29). While true, truisms are effective because of what is not defined by the given facts (Otani, 1989a). For instance, a hypnotherapist might say to a client who wishes to stop smoking, “You don’t want to stop smoking suddenly.” The implicit message here is that the client does, however, want to stop smoking. Consequently, instead of stopping smoking suddenly, the implication is that the client will gradually decrease his or her smoking behaviour. Oldridge (1982) adds that truisms are more effective when made by an authority figure.

To create a truism, Otani (1989a) advises counsellors to first identify the facts relevant to the client and then qualify the information in terms of time, extent, and/or frequency. Applying this to the educational context, a counsellor might say to a student exhibiting challenging behaviours, “You may need to argue with your teacher sometimes,” implying that there will be also be times when the student will not want to argue with his or her teacher. Subsequent discussions could then discuss when it might be appropriate to “argue” with a teacher, and in the way in which such “arguments” might be carried out.

Similar to truisms, another hypnotic technique routinely employed is to create a “yes set.” This involves a series of comments made to the client that are factual or undeniably true and serve to reinforce a client’s mind-set or compliance to accept subsequent suggestions. Teachers and counsellors might also apply the yes-set procedure when attempting to effect behavioural change. For instance, a teacher might ask the child a series of factual
statements and other yes-generating questions such as, "Is it getting hot outside?", "Did your mother drop you off at school today?", "Are you sitting with Tommy?" and so on. This positive yes set serves to enhance the child's motivation to then consider what behaviours need to be targeted and changed, with the next question being: "Do you need to work on how you manage anger?", "Do you think you need to be quieter when the teacher talks in class?" As the excessive use of closed questions might prove intrusive or detrimental to the overall counselling process (Egan, 2002), it is recommended that closed questions used to create a yes set should also be used in conjunction with other basic attending skills such as clarification, paraphrasing, and the reflection of feeling.

The carrot principle (Hammond, 1990) is another way of describing the provision of a reward or positive reinforcement. In hypnosis, clients are encouraged to link their goals with various hypnotic suggestions, and the link is subsequently made in the instruction. Accordingly, rather than use the word "if," which implies that the client might fail to obtain the desired result, hypnotherapists often say, "When [the desired behaviour], then [reward]." This not only provides the client with an incentive towards specific goals, but also implies that the desired result will happen; it is just a matter of when. Accordingly, rather than say to a student, "If you work hard today, you will receive computer time," it is preferable to say, "When you complete the worksheet, you will have some free time on the computer."

Other hypnotic techniques are also readily transferable into educational settings. Hammond (1990) recommends that hypnotherapists begin a session with something that captures or focuses on the client's attention. For instance, a therapist might say, "Something is beginning to happen to one of your hands, but you don't know what it is yet" (Hammond, 1990, p. 42). Similarly, educators might also provide some initial statement to create a sense of curiosity as to what might happen at the end of the lesson or unit. This "opening grabber or motivator" (Onosko & Jorgensen, 1998, p. 78) aims to motivate students to explore further the central questions or themes of a particular unit or lesson. Another technique utilised by many hypnotherapists is to provide the same suggestion or instruction throughout a single session with a client, repeatedly and in a variety of ways, including direct verbal suggestion using synonymous words, phrases, and metaphors. In the same way, teachers might also provide the same instruction or message in a multitude of ways over the course of a lesson. Such strategies are useful for maintaining clearly defined and positive classroom environments.
RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

The importance of building warm and trusting relationships, when working with children, is widely acknowledged in both therapeutic and teaching environments. Here again, the various ways a hypnotherapist might develop rapport with a client has applications for school personnel building effective relationships with children.

When talking to clients, effective hypnotherapists often pace their instructions to reflect what the client is currently doing. For instance, while the hypnotherapist might ask a client to “breathe in and out ... in and out,” his or her instructions will be matched to the actual breath of the client. While the instruction might initially be adjusted to the client’s rate of response, suggestions might then be introduced to accelerate or slow down the speed of the response, according to the desired therapeutic aim (Hammond, 1990, describes this as “leading” the client). Many hypnotherapists’ own speech will reflect the idiosyncratic syntax and style of their clients’ verbalisations. Similarly, teachers and counsellors might identify the manner in which a child understands his or her world and the language he or she uses as an important way to “work with,” rather than “on,” the student and subsequently build a trusting working relationship. In the same way, lesson planning can be directed to the energy and attention levels of students so that more academically focused activities are structured earlier in the day and more action oriented activities later in the school day and school week.

Another important hypnotherapeutic technique, and in particular in the work of Erickson, was to listen carefully to what each client had to say, and to regard each client as an individual rather than a representative of a group (as some teachers/therapists might stereotype certain groups of students or clients). To this end, Erickson strongly urged therapists to listen to both explicit and implicit messages from clients. Erickson stated: “I listen to the meaningfulness of what [clients] describe ... And too many people listen to the problem and they don’t hear what the [client] isn’t saying” (Zeig, 1985, pp. 125-126; emphasis in the original).

Referring to Erickson, Otani (1989a) suggests that there are three factors that need to be considered in order to understand a client’s implicit and explicit messages: content, style of expression, and meaning. Otani (1989a) describes content as what the client verbally expresses. In comparison, the style of expression refers to how the client communicates the content, including non-verbal and paralinguistic details. Finally, meaning entails the message
significant to the client. While explicit messages come from the content, implicit messages might be conveyed in style of expression and meaning (Zeig, 1980). Accordingly, teachers and counsellors might also consider all three factors when counselling children, particularly those with little or impoverished language abilities and with subsequent unclear explicit message-conveying capacities. This means that they will need to listen to what children say, but more importantly, what they don’t say, how they look, and the various non-verbal and paralinguistic details emulating from the child.

**ENHANCING SELF-ESTEEM**

As well as applying hypnotic like principles to behaviour management and rapport building, another potential application is for enhancing children’s self-esteem. The principle of positive expectancy emphasises the expansion of the positive, rather than eliminating the negative (Oldridge, 1982). Consequently, as “a child behaves according to the way he believes himself to be perceived by the important people in his life” (Oldridge, 1982, p. 285), it is important that teacher suggestions and instructions are directed towards improving a child’s self-concept and that the teacher believes in the capability of the individual student in front of him or her.

The principle of positive expectancy particularly applies to children with learning difficulties. Working with children who are struggling at school often requires a fresh and positive attitude on the part of both the teacher and student. O’Leary (1985, p. 32) sums up this point when he argues that “Failure is not always overcome by hard work, but by new innovations and ideas about how to do that work.” In other words, before changes can be made, students may need to see themselves differently and believe that they can become competent readers or students. To this end, O’Leary (1985) advocates the use of creativity and play, as sourced from hypnosis, in the aim of stimulating hope and resiliency.

Pretending to be someone else, for instance, can be useful in that children who have difficulty doing certain things as themselves may instead perform differently when role playing a princess or a king. Describing a child with physical disabilities, O’Leary (1985, p. 32) writes: “As a princess, Gwen is not thinking about what she cannot or does not want to do. Freed from this conflict, her muscles are more responsive and hidden problem solving skills are stimulated. What the Princess learned is retained by the little girl.” O’Leary argues that such an approach does not constitute an attempt at “positive
thinking” or forced cheerfulness, but instead represents an effort to find helpful ideas through considering a situation in a different way. The power of suggestion and role playing helped this student overcome her physical limitations and negativity, and consequently enhanced her capacities and self-esteem.

Oldridge (1982) extends these points when he notes that suggestions for enhancing self-esteem are most effective when made during times of physical relaxation. Accordingly, he advocates the use of guided imagery and other relaxation techniques for both individuals and groups, during which time students might be given various suggestions. Some of these suggestions include an acknowledgment that mistakes might be made but are an indication of effort. Students might also be told that how hard they try will determine how good they feel. Another suggestion is that their bodies will be relaxed but their minds wide awake and ready to work and learn.

In one of the few research studies in this area, Oldridge (1982) investigated the use of hypnotic-like instructions, without the process of inducing trance, for enhancing children’s self-esteem and reading ability. Three groups of remedial readers were compared: one group received hypnotic suggestions designed to reduce anxiety and build self-confidence, another group received the same suggestions but without inducing trance, and the last group received neither suggestion nor hypnosis. The study was conducted for six weeks, during which time all children received a remedial reading course. Oldridge found both experimental groups scored significantly higher on several self-esteem and reading achievement scores than the control group, demonstrating the efficacy of teachers using a variety of non-hypnotic like suggestions. The non-hypnotic like suggestions used in this study are similar to those described above.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Although limited research has been undertaken in the use of hypnotic principles in non-hypnotic settings, it has been argued here that a range of Ericksonian and NLP techniques might be useful in behaviour management, when building relationships with students, and for enhancing children’s self-esteem and confidence. These might include: creating positive expectancy; using the principle of successive approximation; utilising the double bind principle, making use of contingency suggestions; incorporating truisms; creating yes sets; adopting the carrot principle; and of course, focusing attention and repeating suggestions.
While research is required to support the efficacy of such techniques, teachers and counsellors might nonetheless find these techniques useful when working with children in educational settings. We value feedback on your experiments in this regard.

REFERENCES


