

NLP and Teacher Effectiveness: Evidence and Practice

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Pedagogy is a complex area. In recent years researchers have recognised that effective teaching involves more than strategies that create knowledge and understanding. Effectiveness is as much about relationships and interpersonal skills as it is about learning approaches. Highly effective teachers draw on a wide range of skills and techniques, applying them in a personalised way that supports the context of the time - a context that continually changes and shifts. Many studies point to the importance of teacher development in areas such as engagement, values, questioning, positive atmosphere and teacher expectations. As a 'tool-kit' of approaches for developing personal effectiveness, influence and communication neuro-linguistic programming (more frequently referred to these days as just NLP) offers a range of approaches to support existing good practice.

A few years ago if you mentioned NLP in education few people knew what you were talking about. Recently there has been a substantial growth in interest due to the use of NLP within government programmes, as well as emerging recognition of a gap in communication and personal development training for teachers. In terms of our own work, research and the training that we have delivered, the response from teachers has been overwhelmingly positive and suggests that a number of tools from NLP can make a significant contribution to areas of personalisation as well school leadership and classroom effectiveness.

"NLP is highly accessible and of immense practical use. It is innovative in that it does not require a teacher to replace any practice but allows them to improve their effectiveness through a number of techniques. All the techniques are easy to grasp and have high impact on classroom practice and learning." Tony Crisp,
Headteacher, PRU, Tower Hamlets

NLP approaches can be said to fit into four categories:

Outcomes - strategies for self-motivation and the motivation of others

Rapport - approaches for building rapport and influencing others that support notions of *Social Intelligence* as discussed by Daniel Goleman

Flexibility - techniques for enhancing flexibility and awareness of others

Influential Language - Language models from hypnosis and therapy. Much of which is now a standard part of sales and presentation skills training in business and industry

There are also specific techniques to support the exploration of values, challenging of limiting beliefs and training and presentation skills.

“The impact of NLP for teachers goes well beyond actual teaching and learning. For most teachers, managing challenging behaviour in and around class is a key concern. The NLP skills of rapport, re-framing and state-management are highly effective in supporting teachers to effectively manage both themselves and their students. This can have a positive effect throughout the school.” Liz Robinson, Headteacher, Surrey Square Junior School, Southwark.

Like other areas where impact can only easily be measured through serving teacher feedback (e.g. Learning Styles, Emotional Intelligence and Accelerated Learning), NLP has become the subject of many myths and opinions. In part this has been the result of the complex language that surrounded NLP for many years and the fact that for some time there was only a small body of research that could provide a theoretic base for NLP. In recent years, cognitive and cognitive neuroscience views about the relationship between the mind, brain and language (particularly in the areas of attention, automaticity and information processing) can be used to provide a partial theoretical explanation for much of what is taught in NLP. The association of NLP with hypnosis also occasionally raises eyebrows, however, many researchers now recognize that hypnotic-like processes are part of every interaction in which one person engages and influences another. In this context, many NLP techniques simply represent points on a continuum between every day unplanned interactions and the formal hypnotherapy session. Although specific, and methodologically appropriate, research into applied NLP is still in its infancy there is growing academic interest and a number of research projects in education departments and management schools. The first International NLP Research Conference will be held at Surrey University in July.

One area that has found a specific school-based application is *perceptual positions*. This involves adopting three different mental positions to explore a situation: *self*, *other* and *observer* and can be used in conversation, or more formally, by arranging chairs or spaces on the floor and moving between them. Teachers have found this helpful in dealing with bullying and whole school strategies have been developed using it. Approaches like this have led to the association of NLP with the phrase ‘the technology of emotional literacy’.

“Perceptual positions is great to use when helping a child who has bullied understand the effects of their behaviour by experiencing what it feels like to be in the victim’s shoes. It gives opportunities for a child to see their behaviour from someone else’s viewpoint.” Emma Partridge, Inclusion Manager, St Josephs R.C. Primary School, Kensington and Chelsea.

Early research failed to take into account that the effectiveness of NLP is likely to be the result of the application of several approaches at once (rather than isolated techniques) together with the context. In this sense, NLP faces similar methodological challenges to researching effective pedagogy. As with classroom effectiveness, where a series of factors come into play with several needing to be present to ensure high effectiveness (alongside an appropriate application) so it would appear to be with interpersonal and intrapersonal effectiveness. If we take as a benchmark for effectiveness what serving teachers actually say themselves, then feedback from initial research is both positive and strongly suggests a need for further research.

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Training, is an NLP Trainer who, with Henrie Liddiard, has trained over 1,000 teachers and school leaders in NLP over the last 4 years. 'NLP for Teachers: How to be a highly effective teacher' is available from Crown House Publishing. Dr Paul Tosey leads the NLP research programme at Surrey University.