

MARTIAL ARTS PEDAGOGY

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Martial arts training as a method of modifying attitudes and behaviours in the classroom

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Introduction

Teaching, as we all know, is not the easiest thing in the world. However, whatever difficulties we might occasionally experience as martial arts instructors is as nothing when compared to what some school teachers have to put up with. Being a teacher in a modern school can be an extremely stressful profession, one that can eventually take its toll upon a person's mental and physical well-being. The attitudes and behaviours encountered by modern day teachers are often insulting and threatening, with some even resulting in personal violence. This is largely due to a minority of students behaving in a completely unacceptable manner towards their teachers, peer-groups and even the wider local community, due to them having what is called “Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties” or EBD.

This paper will share some important observations I have made regarding the positive effect martial arts training can exert upon “troublesome” or “difficult” children and young people. It will recount how I noticed that regular training can dramatically increase not only the health and fitness of pupils, but also boost their levels of confidence and self esteem, inner discipline, and important social abilities such as interpersonal skills and teamwork, etc. All of which serves in reducing some of the more classical traits of EBD.

Naturally, because of these improvements,

they also aided in the students overall academic performance by instilling a strong sense of self-worth, discipline and respect in the individual, helping to reduce instances of disruptive behaviour such as bullying and so aiding teachers in maintaining control in the classroom during their mainstream schooling.

Background

I have been involved with the martial arts for over forty years, and education and training for the past thirty. During that considerable period of time, I have taught all types of things to all types of people and I still enjoy the tremendous buzz I get whenever I see my students learning and achieving. I first taught in a Special Educational Needs setting way back in the early 1980's when I had the privilege of working with Students with Learning Disabilities (Autism/Down's Syndrome) and found the task to be both challenging and rewarding. I later underwent special training to become better at what I was doing (yes, for any responsible teacher CPD has always been there: We didn't have to wait to be told to update our training and qualifications. Back then, we just did it!) with the City Literary Institute in London, and pursued this specialism for several years, both in the UK and elsewhere.

Then, in 1999, I began teaching some special classes for children and young people with

Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties. These pupils attended a local special school, and their PE Teacher had contacted me to see if such a venture might be possible. Naturally, I jumped at the chance and commenced giving lessons to them very shortly thereafter.

An eye opening experience

The classes were to take place at a martial arts club in a town neighbouring their school, this meant that the pupils would have to be “bussed” in for their training and, on more than one occasion, the class had to be postponed due to some sort of disturbance that took place on the minibus during the short trip between their school and the training venue which was literally only a scant few miles away! In other words: So frequent and serious was the disruptive behaviour of this group that, sometimes, they never even managed to make it to the class!

I also had an interesting time when they did actually turn up to the venue: I was initially subjected to an almost constant stream of verbal abuse, had my instructions completely ignored and, during one seemingly quite subdued training session, wherein I was lulled into a very false sense of security, one bright young fellow thought he would take it upon himself to try and set light to the building by making use of the toilet rolls in the Gents conveniences! So, you can take it from me that these classes can be extremely eventful, to say the least.

Yet, it must be remembered that this disruptive (and, at times, even destructive) behaviour is not deliberately directed at any particular person or object. Rather, it is a symptom of a deeply troubled human being, an expression of the anguish and turmoil they feel deep inside of themselves for a whole variety of different and extremely complex reasons. Therefore, it should be perceived as being a very loud cry for help and attention. If an instructor wishing to work with this type of group is unable to accept this, and begins taking the abuse that will be hurled at them in a personal way, then they will actually end up playing the students game rather than encouraging them to play theirs. Consequently, no one will end up getting anywhere.

Be that as it may, “forewarned is forearmed” as they say and, as I had been informed that this group was known to consist entirely of pupils with EBD, this is precisely how I expected them to behave, and had prepared myself accordingly.

I found that the old, reliable tools worked best: I completely ignored the negative behaviour (in this sort of situation, you simply must be prepared

to endure a certain amount of abuse and negativity, and allow it to wash off you like water from a ducks back. It would be very foolish, especially at the early stages, to challenge and confront every little thing, as you would end up filling up the whole lesson in this way and nothing concrete or positive would be achieved) while ensuring that I noticed and praised the positive. Now, at this early stage, there was precious little “positive”, I can tell you. Therefore, I had to lower my sites somewhat and become a lot more realistic as to what could actually be taught, learnt and achieved in these preliminary sessions.

I made sure I noticed and praised the very smallest of things: A posture that was sloppy but at least attempted, a kick that was done badly, but tried, a break-fall that made far more noise than sense, but was executed on cue, etc. I praised these small things not just because I wanted to encourage them, but because I had come to realise that, to them, they were not “small things” at all. Quite the opposite in fact: They were making a very real effort to listen, observe, imitate, and practice: To learn, in other words. And this was a very big thing for them to do.

I also had to be very careful as to how and when I praised them. Members of this group possess their own strict sub-culture, wherein the respect of their peers is absolutely everything. Consequently, getting any sort of praise from any sort of teacher is not looked upon as being the coolest thing in the world and, if given in too obvious a way, it can seriously damage their “Street-cred” and even compromise their position in the pecking order. From a teacher’s point of view, praise given at the wrong time and/or in the wrong way can actually end up encouraging rivalry, jealousy and bullying, and we need to always be mindful of this when dealing with such groups. A simple nod or a wink in the right place will normally suffice. It is best to try and completely avoid acknowledging anyone as a “teacher’s pet” so don’t over do it.

The same can be said about the person you use to help you in class: DON’T! Instead, try and use everyone in the group at different times and for different things (the bow, the warm up, helping you to demonstrate a technique, etc.) This helps maintain motivation and enthusiasm while also avoiding causing too much friction amongst the group. You should also be prepared for a student you choose to help to occasionally decline your kind offer, in no uncertain terms! If and when this should happen, then maintain your composure and choose someone else (while keeping your fingers firmly crossed)

It was by recognising and appreciating these often extremely tiny positives that could so easily

have gone completely unnoticed, that I gradually began to establish a more positive rapport with these students. Building upon this smallest of foundations, I gradually began to notice a slight, almost imperceptible, change in the way this group behaved.

They began lining up by themselves, even though they would still fidget, talk and mess around. They would listen to what I was saying, even if they sometimes looked completely bored with the whole thing, and started to genuinely make an effort to learn, remember and practice the techniques, even if they did still swear at each other (and me) on the odd occasion.

To help this continue in this trend, I ensured that I never spent too long upon one thing. We would practice solo kicking and/or striking techniques for about five minutes, then change to practicing a throwing technique for the next few minutes, then break-aways, etc.

By the fourth week of lessons, things had improved so much that I even introduced an element of weaponry (in the form of foam-rubber safety nunchaku) and this went down very well indeed.

From that point on, the group became very self-regulating: They all made an effort to behave, listen and learn and, if anyone started to get a little too disruptive the rest of the group would ask them (perhaps not always in the politest of ways) to shut up and behave. Even more surprisingly, the person would normally just come out with something like “oh yeah, okay!” whereas, a few weeks earlier, there would have probably been a physical encounter.

By the end of the term, this group was finally ready for their grading exam. Despite everyone’s reservations, they had managed to modify and regulate their attitudes and behaviour to such an extent that they had learnt just as much as any of the other mainstream groups I was teaching of a similar age and ability.

Yes, they were still hyper-active and, again yes, there was still the occasional lapse in concentration. The difference was that the students themselves had, by now, made the conscious decision to not mess about so much and to try to pay attention when they were shown something. Yes, I had used every trick I knew (and even learned a few more) to help them reach these conclusions and make this decision but, in the end, it was their hard work that had finally paid off.

As we all know: When a person achieves well in one area, it often has a knock-on effect upon other areas of their life. And this, according to the feedback I received from this groups school teachers, proved no exception. I was told that they

had become a lot less disruptive in class, and, while they were still far from what you might call “perfect”, it was noticed that they seemed to be “trying harder”, and were achieving more because of this.

Unfortunately, due to both budget-constraints and the school having to relocate to another building, and also to certain changes in my own situation, these classes were discontinued after only a couple of terms. This was disappointing not only for the students themselves, but also for the fact that any form of serious, localised research could not be conducted.

The reasons for a young person developing and demonstrating the symptoms of EBD are both numerous and complex, and so lay well outside the parameters of this paper. We do, however know that EBD often manifests itself in Antisocial Behaviour and aggression, and it is important that any instructor considering such work understand a little about these.

Recent research into aggression has managed to identify a variety of traits and indicators. Among these are the following:

- Impulsiveness
- Short attention span
- Hyperactivity
- Anxiousness
- Depression
- Low levels of confidence and self esteem
- Troubled relationships with family members
- Paranoia.

Some of the above traits might well be inherited (nature) while others will be the products of the persons social environment (nurture). Other important influences could be the type, frequency and intensity of some form of personal abuse, and the misuse of certain substances, etc. For example, it has been proved that violence and cruelty can leave a very real “scar” upon the brain chemistry itself, with the person typically having quite low levels of serotonin (a neurotransmitter that inhibits aggression). Therefore, a young person who has (again, for example) suffered abuse is often very quick to anger.

To help them, teachers need a patient, respectful appreciation regarding this complex predicament, and to develop the skills necessary to have a positive impact while at the same time establishing firm boundaries around aggressive behaviour without the pitfalls of punishment, shame and humiliation. After all, most of these children will have been through an extremely hard time, so there is no need for us to add to their distress any further. We are there to help, not to hinder.

As far as the martial arts instruction goes: A training environment should be established wherein

opportunities for learning and achievement are provided within a climate of encouragement and recognition of progress. These young pupils require intense educational interventions, but any form of improvement should not be expected to manifest themselves overnight: It has taken a sustained period of time to cause the young persons behaviour to deteriorate to such an extreme extent, and it will most probably take an equal amount of time to begin to modify it in a more positive way. Martial arts can play a vital role in this intervention as it allows these students to begin expressing themselves in a more positive way through providing an outlet for their more negative behaviours, channeling their energies and emotions into something that is enjoyable, meaningful and worthwhile.

In my own opinion, the study and practice of the martial arts tends to differ quite dramatically from other sorts of physical activities in that their influence upon children and young people with EBD, simply because they are structured in a very different way, with both short and very long-term targets of achievement already identified and put in place.

- respect
- discipline
- confidence
- self esteem
- interpersonal skills
- teamwork
- lengthened attention span
- acceptance of authority
- control of stress levels
- anticipation of next grade
- eventually achieving the black belt (or equivalent).

In short, it would seem that they are an absolutely excellent tool for encouraging both cognitive and behavioural modification.

CONCLUSION

In addition to the above, I have also taught a variety of special educational needs in mainstream college subjects, and have taught a martial arts class in a hostel for young ex-offenders recovering from substance abuse conditions which experiences, if included here, would mean this becoming a thesis rather than a short research paper. Therefore, I have chosen to limit myself to the most relevant situation and experience befitting this conference.

This paper is based upon my own personal experiences and observations and, as such, must be viewed and evaluated as being purely anecdotal. While there has been some far more serious research

projects conducted concerning this area, it has been somewhat sporadic in nature. However, what empirical evidence does exist would seem to serve in backing up my own opinion: That martial arts are, indeed, a very powerful and important tool in aiding these youngsters to improve themselves and achieve far more than they would otherwise.

One thing we do certainly know is this: Positive interventions at the earliest possible opportunity is the key to realising good outcomes for children and young people with any kind of emotional and behavioural difficulties. The government (in the UK at least) is, at last, beginning to lend more support to the structures that bring together various agencies such as education, social services and the NHS, etc in a model of positive intervention, the common goal of which is to help and support young people. I believe that martial arts training also has a lot to offer and, in my opinion, should be included as an integral part of this initiative.

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NOTE: In addition to the above, I would highly recommend Prof. Edward De Bono's work to any type of teacher, particularly "Six Thinking Hats", which is always readily available in several formats, both new and used.

Sztuki walki jako metody modyfikowania postaw i zachowania na zajęciach

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja specjalna, zarządzanie grupą, terapeutyczne sztuki walki, problemy behawioralne i emocjonalne, ADHD

Streszczenie

Praca stanowi pełną anegdot osobistą relację i opis doświadczeń z 45-letniej pracy autora w dziedzinie nauczania sztuk walki i sportów walki. Autor dzieli się spostrzeżeniami i radami przydatnymi w czasie pracy z grupami „trudnymi” (byli skazańcy czy narkomani wychodzący z nałogu, agresywna młodzież) lub wymagającymi szczególnej troski (dzieci i młodzież z autyzmem, zespołem Downa czy ADHD). Sztuki walki dla takich osób mogą mieć charakter terapeutyczny, mogą być sposobem na zmianę agresywnego czy anty-społecznego zachowania czy nastawienia, wspomóc zniwelowanie problemów emocjonalnych. Według autora celem zajęć sztuk walki jest nie tylko podniesienie poziomu sprawności fizycznej, zdrowia, ale przede wszystkim wzmocnienie pewności siebie, wewnętrznej dyscypliny, umiejętności interpersonalnych i pracy zespołowej. Rezultaty długo- i krótkoterminowe po zajęciach ze sztuk walki obejmują także: wzrost koncentracji, zaakceptowanie przepisów i władzy instruktora, kontrolę poziomu stresu, a także motywację do pracy nad sobą, osiągnięcie wyższych wyników - nie tylko tych związanych ze sportem.

Rady autora dotyczące zarządzania grupą mogą być cennym źródłem inspiracji dla trenerów i nauczycieli.