

InSpire Guidance-Based Martial Arts Program: A Self-Esteem Intervention for At-Risk Elementary and Middle School Students

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Introduction

The InSpire Program was implemented in a Grades 4–12 alternative school in Pennsylvania with a population of at-risk students who engage in violence and who have been the subject of bullying. InSpire stands for the main tenets and student goals of the program: integrating self-control, perseverance, integrity, responsibility and excellence. To achieve these objectives, students were given alternative methods to conceptualize conflict, express differences, and solve problems. The InSpire Program provides students with access to the language of nonviolent confrontation as well as enabling them to view conflict as a process with multiple potential outcomes. This type of instruction can result in better adaptation to conflict and the development of more socially acceptable ways of expressing and solving differences.

Students at risk realize their potential more fully through learning the traditional discipline of martial arts in a contemporary educational setting. The rich history and strong values imparted by learning the Do (the Way) are combined with physical exercise, communications training, and guidance support, thereby simultaneously developing students' minds, bodies, and spirits. The initial student goals of the program included the following:

- Increased self-esteem and confidence in interpersonal

relationships

- Decreased depression
- Improved conflict resolution skills
- Enhanced critical thinking skills
- Better relationships with parents and authority figures
- Improved impulse control
- Broadened perspective on the roles of communications and power in relationships

The program also supported the school's goals by working to decrease incidences of violence, increase student focus, and decrease absenteeism.

The InSpire Program used a combination of physical discipline; guidance support; psychological, cognitive, and behavioral techniques; curriculum integration, and family groups to meet the goals mentioned above. The program integrated the noncompetitive, noncontact martial arts curriculum into the school day for a weekly 40-minute session. The classroom curriculum focused on the different ethical tenets of the martial arts such as self-control, perseverance, integrity, responsibility, and excellence. The program provided the teachers a context within which to describe appropriate behavior in the classroom. At the elementary level, the teacher created a key system. The students decided which key they wanted to strive for: self-control, perseverance, integrity, responsibility or excellence. If their behavior matched the tenet, they were awarded a key that was displayed in the classroom.

In addition, the guidance curriculum formed a value-added link between guidance objectives and the reinforcement of positive classroom behavior. Finally, the family group created an opportunity for all InSpire students and their families to participate in improving the dynamics of their family relationships.

Martial Arts Class

The martial arts portion of the class included meditation and visualizations followed by physical exercise consisting of

noncompetitive, noncontact traditional martial arts forms practice (a series of choreographed moves) and self-defense techniques. The program followed a belt-level progression, giving students the ability to work toward a macro goal, such as becoming a black belt, and micro goals, such as getting a stripe for knowing their form, which would lead toward black belt. This goal-based focus kept students interested and taught them the values of perseverance, self-control, and personal victory. In addition, students were required to wear the InSpire uniform, which consisted of a t-shirt with the tenets on the back, martial arts pants, and a belt for which they had to test. Each student received an academic achievement award patch on their uniform pants, which helped link the lessons learned in the martial arts class to their regular class. The classroom teachers could recommend a star for outstanding academic achievement or any other outstanding work done by the student a week prior to the class. The student with the most stars became the high rank in class.

Sensei

The key to the program was the martial arts instructor who conducted the classes. Research indicates that the relationship with the sensei becomes significant for students. The sensei becomes the trusted authority figure who teaches, models, and reinforces many of the core values these students are lacking (Tremlow & Sacco, 1998). In addition, the sensei becomes part of the school interdisciplinary team for the student. The relationship with the sensei provides an additional motivation for the students to come to school and continue in school.

Philosophy

The design of the InSpire Program was based on the best elements of existing school-based martial arts programs with consideration that the program needed to be flexible enough to meet the needs of the at-risk population while fitting into an existing school structure. In addition, because the martial arts experience affects one physically,

mentally, and emotionally, it was important to create a program that was linked to character education and guidance objectives, thereby heavily involving the school counselors. Each martial arts session presented an opportunity for students to behave as they usually do, get immediate feedback, and learn to make choices about future behavior. These microcosmic experiences were processed either immediately after the martial arts session or at their next group session which helped the students discuss different ways of approaching the next martial arts class. For example, the martial arts classes created many conflicting feelings in the students about themselves and about their relationship to authority, which the counselor could help them process immediately. Afterward, students were able to work through any conflicting feelings in their next martial arts class. Although the goals of the program were similar to many developmental guidance goals, the true purpose of the program was to help the students develop coping mechanisms within a unique learning environment that forced them to face the obstacles that were preventing them from being successful in life.

Research was conducted using the Multiscore Depression Inventory (MDI; Berndt, 1986) and the Multidimensional Self Concept Scale (MSCS; Braken, 1994) at both the beginning and end of the program. Preliminary results showed an increase in participating students' overall self-concept and a decrease in key depression subscales. Although quantitative data did not yield significant results, this does not mean that a program such as InSpire cannot have an impact on decreasing depression and increasing self-esteem in at-risk students. Qualitative reports indicated positive differences in which students handled both in-school and out-of-school challenges.

In each martial arts class, the students were reminded about the tenets and how they could be used in different situations. The tenet of self-control was given the most emphasis by the sensei and the group counseling lessons. It became clear that the students began to internalize this tenet in many cases. For example, in one case an elementary student was confronted by a bully at his local YMCA and instead of responding by hitting the bully or engaging in a verbal sparring match, the student remembered what his sensei told the class

to do and he got the help of a teacher. He reported this to his mother by saying, “I didn’t hit the boy because Mr. Kanabay (the sensei) told us to have self-control and to get help.”

Another example of a student internalizing the tenets was during the rank ceremony at which the students demonstrated their martial arts skills in front of the entire school, district administrators, and parents and then were promoted to their next belt level. One middle school student had not tested for his orange belt because of misbehavior that led to the consequence of missing the testing session. He told the sensei that he took full responsibility for missing the testings and that he wanted to test at the rank ceremony. The sensei was reluctant because of the added pressure of the audience and certain possibility of the student failing. However, the student convinced him, using verbal persuasion, and, passed. The student had demonstrated the tenets of both responsibility and perseverance in this case.

Discussion

There have been a number of school-based martial arts programs implemented across the country with positive results (Edelman, 1994; Glanz, 1994; Pirie, 1999; Shafii & Shafii, 2001; Smith, Tremlow & Sacco, 1998; Trulson, 1986; Zivinet, 2001). It is not clear why the trend has not increased. One reason may be that the term “martial arts” conjures up images of violent *Matrix*-like martial arts. Because many school administrators may not be familiar with the research about martial arts programs lowering violent and aggressive behavior in adolescents and increasing self-esteem, they might think these programs would have the opposite effect. Finally, in an administrator’s mind, the perceived increased liability might be too daunting to include a martial arts program in their schools.

Counselors can play a role by educating themselves about the different types of programs so they can articulate the benefits to school administrators. The counselor can support the program as facilitator and martial arts teacher supervisor to ensure that the program will support the children holistically, adding a strong basis in counseling

psychology. Perhaps if a school counselor or psychologist were to endorse a martial arts curriculum, it would have more credibility with the administration, dispelling the myth that the program might be too violent.

For martial arts programs to proliferate in school systems, there should be further research measuring the awareness of administrators and their potential resistance to implementing such a program. An appropriately designed education program addressing resistance and dispelling myths for counselors and administrators could follow.

Finally, research should be completed about the effects of a martial arts program on girls. In the InSpire Program, there were only three actively participating girls at the middle school level. A guidance-based martial arts program should be tested on girls only, beginning in elementary school and continuing through high school, to see if studying the martial arts consistently through the years could reduce issues connected to poor self-esteem, depression, unwanted pregnancy, abuse (such as cutting) and eating disorders. Research should also be conducted to see whether it would be more beneficial to have all-female martial arts classes, providing a relational based and supportive atmosphere, or whether it would be better for girls to be in a co-ed environment, where they and their male counterparts can learn to interact constructively.

Summary

The purpose of implementing the InSpire Program was to see if a guidance-based martial arts program for at-risk elementary and middle school students could increase their levels of self-esteem and self-control and decrease their levels of depression. The research was conducted at an alternative school in Pennsylvania where students were in an emotional support program. The program utilized a traditional martial arts approach that was linked to character education and guidance objectives and supported by classroom curriculum and family group meetings for students involved. Although the preliminary results of the program showed an increase in participating students' overall self-concept and a decrease in key depression subscales, the

statistical analysis did not show significant changes. However, qualitative reports indicated positive differences in which students handled both in-school and out-of-school challenges.

Conclusion

The InSpire Program should be replicated in additional alternative settings as well as in mainstream schools and with a larger sample size than used in this study. More programs like this one that use the martial arts in schools through an integrated and flexible approach should be pursued on a larger scale because it not only provides children with a unique physical outlet, but also contributes to their emotional and spiritual development. The program is both cost effective and easy to implement, and the school can choose to use such a program to fulfill a student's physical education requirements.

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