Teaching TaeKwon-Do to Students with Mental and/or Physical Limitations

IV Dan Thesis

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I began teaching TaeKwon-Do nearly fifteen years ago as an assistant instructor. After about one year, I began teaching my own class, which was initially intended for children. My first student was a nine year-old girl who was born with a congenital abnormality that caused her left forearm and left lower leg to be shorter than her right forearm and right lower leg. From that time on, it has been only rarely that I have not had at least one student who has had some type of mental or physical limitation, either inborn or due to injury, that made strict adherence to the teaching methods and expectations impossible. Because of that, I have found it necessary to be creative and flexible in my teaching methods to allow each student to reach his or her greatest potential. I believe that this has ultimately allowed me to become a better instructor for students of all abilities. In finding ways to adapt to the needs of my students, I have drawn upon the expertise of other instructors who have had students with extraordinary needs, as well as my own expertise as a special education teacher; I have also conferred with my teaching colleagues when looking for ways to adapt my teaching methods to the needs of my students. I realize that there are those who will say that students who are not capable of performing to a set standard should not be allowed to begin a course of instruction that is as strictly defined as TaeKwon-Do; however, remembering my own difficulties as a student and my own instructor’s accommodations to my difficulties dealing with heat prostration, as well as my training as a special education teacher, cause me to believe that all interested persons should be given the opportunity to at least attempt to learn TaeKwon-Do, and to have that instruction modified in such a fashion that the student, who may or may not reach the general standard, continues to learn and to improve throughout his/her participation in a TaeKwon-Do class. Students who are physically fit and athletic upon entering class often master techniques quickly and easily; however, students who enter class knowing that the activity will prove difficult for them are
often more focused and demonstrate more perseverance than those for whom the physical techniques come easily and quickly. Based on my experiences, I believe that I have learned more about perseverance and indomitable spirit from the more limited students that I have taught than I have from any instructor under whom I have trained.

Over my time as an instructor, I have found that the teaching methodologies that were taught in my special education classes are equally applicable to teaching TaeKwon-Do for students of all ability levels. The key that I have found is to treat each student as an individual, and to modify my instruction to the strengths and weaknesses of each student. Some of the accommodations that I have made for students have included using multiple modalities of instruction, which requires careful attention to whether a student learns best from information presented visually, verbally, kinesthetically (by manipulating the student through a motion), or some combination, as well as whether the student learns best when presented with a broad concept which is then broken down into its component parts, or by being presented with small pieces of information which are then assembled into a unified whole. Many students have strengths in more than one area, and will benefit from instruction presented using multiple methodologies; however, I have had, or currently have, students who have intellectual and/or physical limitations which impose a specific modality of instruction. This can include modifying techniques and/or requirements for students who have a short- or long-term injury to a joint, bone, or muscle, or it can go beyond an injury which should eventually heal to permanent limitations which require anything from minor accommodations for permanent injury to major modification for physical and/or intellectual limitations. The severity and duration of the student’s need must be considered when accommodating or modifying instruction to meet a student’s individual needs and abilities; the student’s own abilities and needs will dictate how
much of this modification is made apparent to the student (and, if appropriate, the parent) at any
given point in instruction. In addition, many of the accommodations and modifications I have
made for students who had specific needs have been proven to have positive benefits for all of
the students in the class at the time, and have, over time, become part of my instructional
repertoire.

It is important to talk to a new student, or, if appropriate, his/her parent(s), when the
student first begins class, in order to obtain information about any injuries or special needs the
student may have that could affect his/her performance or ability to learn. While I have
instructed students such as the girl previously mentioned, or another student with Cerebral Palsy,
not all injuries and limitations are immediately visible; such limitations may be due to injury
incurred prior to the student beginning instruction, and it is important, as an instructor, to
determine if any such injuries exist, what effect such injuries may have in the long- and short-
term, and how long the injury may be expected to persist. Such injuries may include muscle
injuries, torn tendons or ligaments, joint injuries, or any other injury that affects the student’s
ability to perform. In addition, some medical conditions may affect a student’s ability to perform
in class, but will also not be immediately visible; such conditions may include, but are not
limited to, metabolic disorders such as diabetes, biochemical disorders such as attention deficit
disorder, and so on. Also, some parents will enroll their child in a martial arts class in an attempt
to teach the child discipline or to improve an out-of-shape child’s physical condition and/or
interest in physical activity; it is important for instructors to be aware of this, as it can affect how
the student learns, as well as the level of motivation the student brings to class.

Once the instructor has ascertained any special needs a student may have, it is important
to determine what the student is and is not capable of performing when presented with the
standardized curriculum; only once the student has been provided with the same instruction as other students, and has demonstrated how this instruction either is or is not appropriate, can the instructor then determine what, if any, accommodations or modifications need to be made. At this point, it is important to differentiate between an accommodation and a modification. An accommodation is a change in the instructional methodology, or in the standards applied to the student’s performance, which allows a student to demonstrate proficiency in TaeKwon-Do at a standard comparable to that of other students. Examples of accommodations include written or signed directions for students with hearing impairments; breaking instruction into smaller-than-usual segments to accommodate the student’s learning style; observing a diabetic student carefully for signs of low blood sugar; or adjusting or replacing a break for an age or size, or for a student whose career would be in jeopardy if s/he sustained a broken bone (e.g. doctors who might be unable to continue a career if a broken hand healed badly could be allowed to perform an additional foot technique break in place of a hand technique break). A modification is a change in the technique or the standard of performance in such a fashion that the student is no longer demonstrating proficiency in TaeKwon-Do at a standard comparable to other students. Examples of modifications include allowing students to demonstrate partial patterns and receive partial promotions to accommodate the student’s ability to learn; accepting less-coordinated techniques in line drills or patterns for students with physical limitations, such as cerebral palsy or congenital malformation of a limb, that make correct performance of a technique impossible; or omitting certain classes of technique for students who are injured or incapable, for physical reasons, of performing them (e.g. a student with a back injury may be unable to demonstrate jump spinning kicks such as 360° back kick without risking further permanent injury). Some instructors may say that students who are incapable of performing such techniques should not be
allowed to continue to advance to higher ranks within TaeKwon-Do; however, as stated previously, these students are often the most motivated to succeed, and can be the most rewarding to instruct.

Once the instructor has determined the student’s needs and abilities, it is time to determine how to accommodate or modify for that student. For many students, the accommodation can be as simple as explaining a new technique using multiple methods; for example, when introducing a new technique, it should be demonstrated by the instructor, the student should be manipulated through the correct motion, the correct application(s) of the technique should be demonstrated, and the student should be given the opportunity to perform the new technique with sufficient feedback to perform the technique correctly. This is a good instructional methodology for all students; however, some students may need extra attention at one or more points during the sequence for all techniques as they are introduced, or may need to have new techniques introduced at a slower rate, or broken down into more steps, to be able to perform them correctly. For other students, it may be necessary to teach patterns as a single gestalt, or as few as several movements per class, to accommodate the student’s learning speed and/or style. Some students benefit from visual cues to help them to learn patterns; such a cue could be created with a diagram on the wall, or with tape placed on the floor. The same accommodation can be used for students who benefit from tactile feedback by using roughly-textured tape, sufficient for the student to feel with the soles of his/her feet, to help the student learn and remember a new pattern. Some types of equipment that are commonly available in many athletic facilities can be useful for students who have difficulty visualizing stances; for example, a pair of low balance beams can be very useful in teaching students walking stance and L-stance, and how to perform various turns in each, as incorrectly performed turns or steps will
cause the student to fall off the beams, and the visual and tactile feedback provided can help the student learn how to correctly place and move his/her feet. All accommodations of this type, along with many others, can help the student to properly learn and perform TaeKwon-Do techniques at the same standard expected of other students.

Modifications can be more difficult than accommodations, for both the student and the instructor. Some students object to being given different standards than others, especially when those standards are perceived as easier rather than alternate, and such students may attempt to complete techniques that are medically inadvisable, to the detriment of the students’ physical well-being and ability to continue to participate in TaeKwon-Do. Likewise, some instructors feel that, if a student is unable to perform to a certain standard, the student should not be allowed to achieve further rank. While students should not be given a false sense of ability, neither, in my opinion, should they be prevented from learning as much as they can, to the best of their individual abilities, because their best is not sufficient to meet the standard for a particular rank. For students with a physical limitation, due either to injury or to congenital malformation, the student should be expected to perform to the highest standard that the physical limitation will allow. It can be difficult to determine what this standard may be; for many students, continued practice in TaeKwon-Do may expand their abilities to the point that, if allowed ability-based standards during training and testing, their abilities may extend past what was, previously, their best, and ultimately be able to demonstrate techniques at the standard expected of other students. For students for whom this type of ability extension occurs, it can be a life-changing event; even for students who do not reach the same standard expected of other students, there can be an extension of ability that has a significant effect on the student’s mental and physical well-being, especially as related to the student’s self-confidence, as the student sees him/herself improve past
his/her previously perceived limits. Even for students who are not able to reach the same standards as other students in the class, the improvement seen on an individual basis can have a significant positive impact on the student both in and out of the TaeKwon-Do setting, based on the self-confidence gained through learning a skill and improving upon it over time.

The least difficult modifications to make are generally for students who have permanent injuries or congenital malformations that affect a specific body part, such as a limb; the effect of the injury or malformation is usually consistent over time, and the student is generally able to perform techniques correctly with the unimpaired limb. The exception to this is seen when the injury or malformation affects both sides of the body (e.g. the knees, ankles, or hands), the enter of the body (e.g. the back, ribs, or neck), or one side of the body (e.g. one ankle, knee, or elbow). Even so, this type of difficulty is generally consistent in its affect on the student’s performance, and consistent modifications can be made for the student. For example, students with bad knees should not be asked to perform jump kicks, or should be allowed to perform fewer than other students; students with back problems should be watched more carefully when performing movements that require twisting of the injured area, and movements which exacerbate the injury should be re-taught or modified to prevent reinjury; students with a congenital malformation (e.g. one limb shorter than the other, club foot, fused toes or fingers, etc.) should be expected to perform techniques correctly with unimpaired appendages (if any), and allowed to perform the same techniques to the best standard the impairment will allow, while still understanding those techniques as thoroughly as any other student. Metabolic disorders, such as diabetes, hypoglycemia, and related disorders which affect the student’s endurance, also cause consistent and predictable difficulties, and can generally be dealt with in a consistent and predictable fashion, such as checking on the student’s reactions to changes in the pace of class, allowing the
student additional opportunities for water, allowing the student to maintain a slower pace than the rest of the class, and so on.

Physical impairments that make it impossible for students perform techniques to the same standard as other students must be addressed on an individual basis, and are generally more difficult for the instructor to create and implement. The greater the impairment, the more this difficulty can arise. For students with musculoskeletal or neurological problems, such as cerebral palsy, epilepsy, or muscular dystrophy, some movements, or the coordination of some movements, may be impossible for the student to complete to standard; some movements may be completely beyond the student’s physical capabilities. For these students, it may be necessary to allow them to perform the closest approximation of the correct technique that is physically possible, and to modify the performance standard to the students’ physical abilities, with especial attention to the student’s physical coordination. These students should be expected to continue to improve their performance of techniques at each rank level, just as are other students; however, the definition of improvement will need to be modified based on the student’s abilities and perseverance in improvement between one testing and the next. The amount of improvement these students are able to demonstrate is often considerably less than that of their unimpaired peers; it is therefore necessary to provide positive feedback to the student for each improvement shown that expands the student’s abilities, rather than to point out to the student that s/he is not making progress at the same rate as other students. A specific difficulty that often arises with this type of impairment is weakened balance, which can not only cause the student difficulty, but which can place other students in the vicinity at greater risk when completing techniques requiring balance. The use of a ballet barre, if available, or a sturdy folding chair, can
be very useful in such situations; it is possible that students with such impairments may not be able to complete any jumping techniques.

Some students may have cognitive impairments which affect their abilities to participate fully in TaeKwon-Do. Students who have limited cognitive abilities will often require instruction broken into smaller chunks, as well as greater repetition, than other students. It is important to remember that, while such students may not understand everything that is presented in class, they are capable of learning, if more slowly, and are capable of improving what they have learned in the past. Although these students may require a simplified vocabulary, similar to that used with younger students, it is important to address the student as befits his/her physical, rather than mental, age. Small steps and frequent repetition are the keys to instructing students with cognitive impairments; they often respond well to individual attention, and can often be paired with other students who can provide additional instruction and demonstration. If the student who provides this additional instruction is chosen carefully, it can also have the side benefit of providing the assisting student a boost in self-confidence and ability when s/he sees the student s/he has helped improve because of the assistance provided. Students with cognitive impairments also often respond well to multiple modalities of instruction, including, but not necessarily limited to, demonstration, physical manipulation, mirroring of other students, verbal explanations, and/or use of memory aids such as tape on the floor, diagrams on the wall, and verbal prompts. It is also important with these students to be certain that they understand when and how they may use TaeKwon-Do outside of class; with those students who have a greater level of impairment, as with younger children, it may be necessary to provide a specific set of rules in regards to when the skills learned in TaeKwon-Do can and cannot be used. These rules are as much for the safety of the students as anyone the students may encounter; students with
cognitive impairments may be more likely than other students of a similar age to attempt to meet or influence friends and acquaintances by demonstrating newly-learned skills. As these skills may be only partially mastered, may not be sufficiently controlled, or may be applied inappropriately, this could result in injury to the person the student is demonstrating them to; in addition, the student may not understand when it is appropriate to use these skills unless provided with proper guidelines.

Overall, students with mental and/or physical impairments may be more difficult to include in an average class structure, but they can also be more motivated to succeed and more rewarding to instruct. While students with atypical requirements may be difficult to train for those who do not have prior experience with special needs, with a little extra effort, they can provide a positive example for those around them as well as allowing the instructor to experiment with different modes of instruction that can benefit all students.