

Old School: Tried and tested, but is it better?

A comparison of traditional Taekwon-Do versus modern teaching styles

Samantha Young

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Taekwon-Do has historically been developed and shaped by the military origins of General Choi Hong Hi and his training in previous martial arts. But in a much broader sense, especially in comparison to other East Asian martial arts such as Karate, there is a distinct feature of discipline and hierarchy. These particular features are typical of many martial arts, and among many other benefits, instils respect for our seniors, elders, and instructors. However, as children make up a considerable portion of students in a Taekwon-Do class, it seems important to recognise that how we teach them may differ greatly to how we teach older students.

During recent times, in many primary schools there is a noticeable shift toward a more modern and less formal approach to teaching. From casual observation, classes are taught in a more open setting with a greater degree of informality; for example, a student may even address their teacher by their first name. With learning spaces becoming larger, interactive technology replacing desks and homework being set through online activities; the education system is changing beyond what we have come to recognise as the 'traditional' way. It begs the question, how does this modern approach to teaching impact the way we teach children during Taekwon-Do lessons?

At *prima facie*, the fundamental origins of Taekwon-Do appear to entirely contradict the new wave of modern teaching styles found in our schools. The question is not a straightforward and simple one to answer. It cannot, even briefly, be tackled entirely in the brevity of this essay. However, the aim of this essay is to begin by exploring the benefits of these conflicting teaching styles and how they might be applied in the context of Taekwon-Do.

## 1.1 – Traditional Martial Arts and its benefits

To excel in school, as well as other domains of life, several skills are key such as creativity, self-regulation, or flexibility. These skills give us the ability to think outside the box and problem solve, or retain several pieces of information and be able to manipulate them – the way we would an advanced math problem (more on this later). However, one particular skill that we can associate with Taekwon-Do is that of self-regulation. Self-regulation is identified as a process of altering one's thoughts and behaviours in order to produce optimum results (Lakes & Hoyt, 2004). One well-known task is that of delay gratification; Mischel and colleagues presented children with a small reward (a marshmallow, or sometimes a cookie or pretzel) which they were able to eat immediately, or were offered the choice of two rewards if they waited for fifteen minutes. A majority of the children attempted to wait for the second, larger reward, compared to the minority that ate the reward immediately. But perhaps the most interesting findings were from the follow up studies on the children around ten years after the initial experiment. Mischel, Shoda, and Peake (1988) suggest that those who were successful at delaying gratification in the original experiment, had greater outcomes in later life, i.e., better SAT scores. This would suggest that developing self-regulation in children is important for more successful outcomes in later child development.

Lakes and Hoyt (2004) suggest that traditional martial arts training promotes values that are likely to develop self-regulation. This is due to the values that underpin oriental culture and influenced the development of traditional martial arts. As training emphasises character development and discipline, we see an increase in self-esteem, concentration and self-awareness of mental and physical capacities. Although, it is important to note, that due to attrition – students leaving before they achieve their black belt – the gains measured could be purely coincidental because we are simply measuring the traits seen in our black belts and those that 'stick with it'.

To address this issue, Lakes and Hoyt set up an experiment within an elementary school. They provided a martial arts class or a standard P.E class to two hundred students over a four month period and independent observers measured the children on a series of tasks, whether they were considered distracted or focused, if they gave up or persevered, etc. As they anticipated, children in the martial arts condition showed increased scores in cognitive and affective (emotional) domains as well as a reduction in problem behaviours over those in the P.E condition, and the greatest gains were seen in boys over girls.

Further, Trulson (1986) conducted a similar study using boys who had been determined 'juvenile delinquents' as the positive effects of martial arts training are usually greater within these populations. However Trulson compared traditional martial arts to martial arts that were more sports oriented, lacking the philosophical values. As expected, traditional martial arts training appeared to increase the boys' self-esteem and social ability, as well as reduce anxiety and aggressiveness. Conversely, boys in the martial arts as sports condition showed greater tendency toward delinquent behaviour, increased aggression and a decrease in self-esteem and social ability.

What these studies suggest is that martial arts training, if traditional and philosophical values are emphasised, are effective ways to improve children's focus and inhibitory control. As Fuller (Lakes & Hoyt, 2004) posits, perhaps the longevity of traditional martial arts

programmes is partly due to its propensity to act as a formalised system of human potential training. Or put simply, martial arts has continued to thrive over the years because it shows us what we can achieve.

## 1.2 – The new wave; modern teaching philosophies

In comparison to what we have previously established with ‘traditional’ martial arts and its emphasis on values such as discipline and self-regulation, we will now look at more modern teaching ideas and how this might affect children’s learning and development. How teachers’ teach is a longstanding subject of study, purely because of the enormous impact that it can have on the gains a child makes in school (Wayne & Youngs, 2003). The same can be said for Taekwon-Do, an ideal instructor could be described as one that can inspire and keep their students interested.

Within the education sphere, there is a vast array of different philosophies that place emphasis on different skills. From our traditional idea of education which is primarily content-based and teacher-centric, there is now a shift toward what is termed ‘deeper learning’. This refers to higher-order skills such as analytical reasoning, critical thinking and problem solving. Essentially, skills that are deemed as invaluable in a rapidly changing environment; computer literacy in the integration of technology into modern life, or interpersonal skills and critical thinking in the face of an ever-changing economic and job climate. As education essentially prepares our children for their future careers and aspirations, it seems logical that previous teaching methods that could be considered somewhat ‘old fashioned’ need to undergo a reform in order to ensure that we are preparing the next generation as best we can. Although some of these concepts are by no means ‘new’, arguably with the rapid rise of the technology era, we can see a noticeable shift away from our traditional methods – particularly in public schools.

With regards to Taekwon-Do, our philosophies of respecting our instructors and seniors and our distinct hierarchy seems at odds with the notion that students guide their own learning and the student and teacher working closely together – for example, calling an instructor ‘John’, instead of ‘Mr Smith’. The notion of students guiding their own learning, reflects the idea that a student is responsible for being able to communicate what they need in order to achieve specific goals. This requires the ability to clearly communicate amongst peers and with teachers, the intention being that over time students attain the skills to be self-motivated, independent with instilled values. The teachers are therefore a personification of the school curriculum and to provide guidance where necessary. This is in deep contrast to the values attained through Taekwon-Do in which the student-instructor relationship is an important part of the Taekwon-Do journey. The values that are promoted within the school curriculum are also found within Taekwon-Do, however the approach in which students are taught these skills differ.

The student within Taekwon-Do is guided under the mentorship of the instructor, skills are taught in early ranks and facilitated as the student progresses. Self-motivation, independency and instilled values become part of the student. The instructor however, continues to provide mentorship and knowledge with the student guiding them into voicing their needs to achieve specific goals. This ties into the distinction between the instructor and the student, a boundary that is perhaps somewhat more liberal in today’s modern schools. There is a sense of community and bonding within the Dojang but it is important to remember that as a martial art, there remains that element of hierarchy – bowing to your instructor and seniors. To strip away these titles, such as sir or ma’am, would be to veer away from our values of respect.

Another key feature seen in alternative education programmes is the lack of emphasis on high test scores and grades. Alternative education has taken a step away from an emphasis on formalised testing to broaden education to include skill based subjects. This is exhibited through the reforming of the senior high school student system NCEA. Students are as a result rewarded in the form of ‘credits’ needed to pass the level of certificate denoting the achievement. This has the benefit of allowing students who are not academically focused to achieve credits through skill based courses instead e.g. trade subjects. Essentially the focus is to prepare the student for the ‘real world’ with the higher order learning skills mentioned earlier, grades and test scores are considerably less important.

Comparatively, Taekwon-Do has a very clear grading system, where a certain standard must be achieved before a student can obtain their next belt. Students are rewarded for achieving by being promoted through the ranks. The syllabus is subsequently broken down even further into measureable and achievable goals. This is reflected in our introduction of the mini-kids syllabus which breaks down the white belt to yellow belt (most commonly only until yellow stripe) syllabus for children. However there is an expectation that a student needs to be proficient (to an extent) at all skills in Taekwon-Do which is both content-heavy and needs to be practically applied. While a critical thinking and skills based model might work with regards to education because of its applicability toward a wide range of subjects, this may not work within our martial art. As we are a martial art and the idea be that we can strike an opponent down with a single blow, it could be considered foolish to give students a false sense of security if they have not attained a high enough level of proficiency.

### Concluding thoughts

In conclusion, we have explored a few benefits traditional martial arts have, in terms of improving inhibitory control and regulating behaviours. We have also explored the benefits to shifting toward alternative education ideas and how critical thinking and a learner-responsible model is likely to inspire students to train better. The difficulty now, as it probably always has been, is finding a way to take the best of both models and utilise them in such a way that we can help students critically engage and be inspired by Taekwon-Do. For example, *why* a technique finishes at a certain height, instead of them rote learning that a forefist middle punch finishes at shoulder height. Not only would this help students retain the information for longer, but would keep them inspired and interested to continue training.

Taekwon-Do is a very content-heavy martial art, in terms of learning our fundamental moves, and then learning to apply those techniques in simulated and real life situations. To pursue a more traditional line of thought and rote learn all of our theory and technique application does cut an imposing task. To teach our students from the very beginning to question why and to engage with the intricacies of the art could make it easier for the beginning student to learn.

What sets traditional martial arts apart from other sports is our Do – our art, history and philosophies of respecting our elders, and creating peace. As research has suggested, this discipline helps children develop more focus and regulate their own behaviour by means of considering such questions as ‘what am I doing right now?’, or ‘what should I be doing right now?’. In this respect, it would seem counter-intuitive to draw away from these values, even disrespectful in a sense, and move toward a more modern and student-driven learning approach.

Overall, I believe it has been invaluable exploring the subtle differences in how children are learning compared to how we teach Taekwon-Do. It highlights some changes that I can make in my own teaching in order to teach children more effectively. More research can always be performed in the areas of education and the benefits of traditional martial arts training, and perhaps even explored in future essays. But as a brief foray into this subject, I believe that this essay has highlighted some ideas that many instructors can think about and utilise in their own Dojangs.

## References

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