

Transcript: Mindfulness Teaching Practices: Implementing the Integra Mindfulness Martial Arts Program in the Trillium Lakelands District School Board (Part II)

[Music]

[Narrator:] If you're enrolled in the learning strategies course at Haliburton Highlands Secondary School, it wouldn't be out of the ordinary for your class to consist of challenging yoga, guided meditation, and fast-paced kickboxing. After all, two of five days a week, this is actually the case.

Haliburton Highlands, which is part of the Trillium Lakelands District School Board or TLDSB, is the first to offer Mindfulness Martial Arts -- a program developed by The Integra Program at the Child Development Institute. The school offers Mindfulness Martial Arts, or, MMA, for credit as part of the Learning Strategies course.

Through the Integra program's research partnerships with Ryerson, McMaster and the University of Toronto, as well as studies done by Dr. Karen Milligan, the program was developed by Integra for students with learning disabilities and self-regulation disorders. It integrates elements of mindfulness, cognitive behaviour therapy and martial arts training to promote mental health and physical wellness, as well addresses challenges with emotional regulation.

[Jennifer Paton:] In a stressful situation, they start learning that they have a choice about how they respond - and they start practicing making those choices and analyzing how they responded to things. And that makes all the difference to students who were just completely reactive before, who might say, "I can't do it" or "I won't do it" or they're storming out of the classroom or their shutting down -- they now have some tools to make different choices.

[Narrator:] Haliburton is also home to the mental health agency, Point in Time. It was the unique partnership with TLDSB, Point in Time and Integra that brought MMA to these students.

[Larry Hope:] When I was approached about this, it was very clear to me that there would be tremendous benefits for our young people. But not only that, we felt that it would be an excellent opportunity really for our school community and our broader community to be working together.

[Marg Cox:] Through that partnership, what ended up happening and evolving was we had some training put on by Integra really targeted to help us understand more about learning disabilities and the interplay with mental health.

[Narrator:] The course is taught by Martin, a teacher from TLDSB and Linda, a social worker from Point in Time. It's open to all students.

In order to qualify as Integra MMA instructors, both Martin and Linda made numerous trips to



Integra to receive formal training. Today, that teamwork continues as they help students better regulate their emotions and develop skills to overcome everyday challenges.

[Martin Gage:] I have the martial arts education background and interest in mindfulness, and she has sort of a different perspective, because she's from a mental health background so you know, putting both of our minds together and seeing kids and their needs in different ways has really been helpful.

[Narrator:] For two periods each week students are in the martial arts training room, also known as the dojo. The class starts with yoga -- students hold difficult poses while Martin makes the connection between overcoming these poses with overcoming everyday challenges.

The students then move onto guided meditation -- practicing being aware and accepting of their emotions. To facilitate this, they learn about mindful moments and mindful self-talk.

[Shelly:] If you have a mindful moment, you're basically just going through all the feelings and just kind of labelling them - so like these are the things I'm feeling, and it's okay to feel these things...just go with it. And like, we learn these things called self-talk, so when we're in a problem or situation or we're upset, we tend to kind of just like keep those things inside and kind of just hang on, and we can't let go it's just like - grr.. but with the self-talk, one of them is "let it go", so you kind of just relax, and just breathe through it, and just let it go.

[Martin:] "Everything changes" is another huge one, it's sort of a growth mindset thing, you know, knowing that you as an individual even if you have a learning disability you can actually change. Knowing that you get better at martial arts, knowing that you can get better at focusing, knowing that you can get better at math, knowing that you can get better at English, is a really important attitude to have if you're going to get better.

[Martin:] Jab, cross, hook.

[Narrator:] The Integra MMA lesson ends with the martial arts component, a combination of muay thai kickboxing and jiu jitsu ground grappling. The students, especially those with learning disabilities, thrive in this environment -- they feel safe and supported taking calculated risks -- something they may avoid in other social settings.

[Linda Mintz:] The MMA especially brought down the stigmatization of having an LD because you know we're all in the dojo together, it's a respect thing, it's no judgement so it's a place where they now can be, where they're not...don't feel judged and they fit.

[Narrator:] The remaining three periods of the week, students are in the classroom -- spending extra time on their other courses.

[Martin:] It's in the learning strategies course that allows you to work on whatever skills or needs they have individually. So they're all on individual programs. They're all supposed to be working on what they need to be working on, english development, math development, assignments for other class, my assignments, so there's a lot of choice. And they get to work on the things they need to



work on next. And so, there's sort of like that levelling system, where you're giving them what they need instead of what you need to teach based on the curriculum for that course -- it's a lot more open.

[Narrator:] Teachers and administrators develop a partnership with Martin and Linda, ensuring continuity and giving students the best chance at success. The language commonly heard in the dojo starts to seep into the classroom.

--Sun!

--Chi!

--Si Chi!

--[Inaudible]

[Shelly:] I got the whole chart done, but the questions after it -- I'm like... "What?" My brain just kind of went out, it just didn't want to come back. So like I didn't know what to do, and I started panicking. Put up my hand up for my teacher Miss Close to come over, she told me "What have you learned in MMA? Why don't you do those kinds of things?" and stuff like that so I just look at her and I'm like "What? Huh? Okay..." And I just kind of started thinking and I'm like, 'what about the mindful moments, the meditation, and the like whole tensing up and letting go kinds of things?' And I sat there and did that for about 5 minutes, but to me it felt like an hour. And then I just kind of opened my eyes and I see the paper and I looked at it and I'm like "Okay, I feel stupid. Now I get it." It was just adding two numbers together and that was it and there's the answer and so I got it, and I'm like, "yes!"

[Martin:] If they're running away or they're procrastinating for something, I can tell them they're in flight, or talk to them about whether they're in flight and come up with the skillful means to deal with it so I have that language to deal with them, which other people would have too if they knew they were in the program.

[David Waito:] And so being able to work together to try to figure out what's gonna work best or what supports need to be in place for those students, it was - I guess it just shed a really different light on the individual, right? Sometimes the classroom behaviour seems strange, and when in isolation, but we might have a better picture of helping understand why when we see the outside piece as well.

[Narrator:] Over a 20 week semester, students experience greater emotional regulation, improved focus and more confidence. They now walk bravely into experiences they'd normally avoid.

Everyone sees the start of an incredible transformation.

[David:] We had an individual who you know had a blow up in a classroom, and came down and was...we were talking it through and he was able to articulate that there was just such a small little space of time between when he felt a certain way to when he behaved and he was trying to articulate, 'how do I spread that time?' and he realized that's what the mindfulness moment was for



him right, 'I forgot to take that mindful moment.' And so the space shrunk and I wasn't able to kind of gain control of that behaviour.'

[Jennifer:] When you're teaching in a subject that a lot of kids already have barriers to when they come in, or they've got emotional reactions to, a program that helps them understand their emotional reactions and control them makes all the difference, to being able to then learn how to use a formula, or collect like terms or something else that I have to get them to do.

[Marg:] The students that have participated in the program have learned the skills around self-regulation, and self-control and mindfulness that have allowed them to have that executive functioning, have them to be their own air traffic control centre, so that they're better able to manage both emotions and interactions with other people.

[Narrator:] Unlike at Integra, not all students in this MMA class have learning disabilities. As is usually the case, what's necessary for some students, is often good for all.

[Jennifer:] To be a successful adult, you need to be able to control your temper, control your reactions to situations.

[David:] I think on the whole, right our culture -- it encourages a lot of immediacy and a lot of like, you know we constantly look for that immediate feedback and there's sometimes isn't the same encouragement of some more in-depth reflection or heightened awareness of what we do on a day-to-day basis. We can all do better with improving our lives when we stop and reflect on what we're doing and be more aware of those things.

[Linda:] I was a control freak, a total control freak and now I just let it go. My husband doesn't put something where I think he should put it, where I would want it put. I can let that go, I really can. I'm stressed out at being interviewed...it's not my forte, but it's okay, you know. So it's done wonders to my job as far as anxiety and controlling.

[Narrator:] The biggest challenge now is a matter of scaling. Now that the program has been running successfully for three years, they're looking to expand it to other schools within the TLDSB.

[Larry:] We were overwhelmed with the number of our staff members who came forward to say "We'd really like to participate in this. How do we engage in the training? How do we bring this into our school?" So at this point we are looking at an expansion of mindful martial arts into our elementary and secondary schools across the district.

[Narrator:] What started off as a way to capture the attention of students not interested in receiving help, has transformed into a life-changing experience for all those involved.



[Marg:] People always don't want to come and talk about their feelings, people don't want to always seek counselling but actually what we found by delivering this program is that we've had the same kind of results we would as if people were attending counselling.

[Linda:] I think it just takes the dedication but it doesn't -- any teacher could do it or a social worker.

[Jennifer:] I think it makes for a calmer school as certain students have a place to learn the tools that they need to learn that's not in our curriculum. I think we're lucky, lucky, lucky.

[Narrator:] For more information on supporting students with learning disabilities through Integra Mindfulness Martial Arts, visit LD@School.ca. Additionally, you can contact Trish McKeough at the Integra Program of the Child Development Institute directly.

