Young Warriors: Improving Emotion Regulation in Children with Learning Disabilities and Mental Health Issues (LDMH)

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Outline

1. Background on LDs and mental health (LDMH)
2. Integra Young Warriors Program
3. Study Design and Methodology
4. Quantitative Results
5. Qualitative Results
6. Research Conclusions
7. Next Steps in Program Development
What are LDs?

- Average to above average intelligence *(smart!)*
- Specific impairments in one or more of the psychological processes related to learning
- Unique - No two LDs are the same!
- Lifelong – changes with different developmental stages

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Emotion Regulation

- Ability to manage emotions in order to meet goals, complete tasks, and control behaviours
- Recovering from disappointment or challenging situations to move forward confidently and positively
- Under-regulation (meltdowns, 0-100 quickly) versus over-regulation (freezes, withdrawal)
How Do LDs Affect Mental Health?

• Persons with LDs are 2-3 times more likely to experience mental health issues (Wilson et al, 2009)

• Higher rates of school-related stress (Sparks & Lovett, 2009); school drop out (Reddy, 2006)

• Higher rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Svetaz, Ireland, & Blum, 2000)

• Peer victimization and bullying (Baumeister, Storch & Geffken 2008; Mishna, 2003)

• Social rejection (Bryan, Burstein & Ergul, 2004)

• 75% have difficulties with social relationships (Kavale & Forness, 1996)
Primary Impact:
Common Neurological Processes

Learning

Mental Health

Information Processing
Executive Functioning
Emotion Regulation

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Secondary Impact of LDs on Mental Health

Experience of Repeated Failure

Lower Sense of Mastery

Anxiety about meeting expectations

Frustration

Patterns of Experiential Avoidance

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- Children with LDs and self-regulation difficulties (e.g., tantrums/explosive, poor impulse control, hyperactive) represent a particularly challenging population to treat.

- Therapeutic Mindfulness Martial Arts group program for 9-11 year old tweens with emotion regulation as a key skill deficit and challenge.
Integra Young Warriors

1. Emerged as the result of a response to unmet need: to help boys with LDs and other diagnoses (ASD, ADHD, anxiety).

2. Integra YW was developed based on a practical integration of various modalities (Mindfulness, Martial Arts, Yoga) and evidence-informed therapeutic practices (CBT, DBT, and Drama Therapy).

3. Tested and revised from explicit and implicit feedback from our clients and their parents.
Building it around what they need and want...

Our goals are not imposed. Since the beginning, we’ve been asking kids and parents what they want and building the program up from that:

1. FOCUS
2. CALM
3. MASTER ANGER
4. STRENGTH
5. SELF-DEFENCE
6. FLEXIBILITY
7. BELT + RECOGNITION
8. FUN!!!
The HOOK: A Peaceful Martial Arts

A way to defeat someone stronger and bigger than you, by using their power against them.

Fun to learn, frustrating to master.

Teaches them interpersonal skills:
  – Taking in feedback.
  – Accepting things as they are.
  – Responding with respect.
  – Working with others.
  – Asserting one’s boundaries.
The MILLIEU: “The Integra Dojo”

The “Ki” logo is our symbol for both “Ki” or “Chi”, the element of “life force” and vitality in traditional Eastern martial arts, as well as, for “Klub Integra,” the inclusive and accepting community we create together.

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Key Features of Program

• In collaboration with each student-client, we **assess** and **adapt** program components to each child’s level of ability, taking their learning disability and styles into account.

• **Practice at home, school and beyond the dojo** is consistently encouraged, tracked, and rewarded.

• Every 75 minute class has a 15 minute **parent-child experiential component** to consolidate learning and encourage a dialogue with the “Sensei” (Instructor) and families.

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Research Design

• Mixed-methods study with quantitative and qualitative components; 3 waves
• Quantitative component: Pre/post design with a waitlist control group
• Pre/post measures of ER, mindfulness, and mastery
• 42 treatment group children and their parents and to 34 matched waitlist controls
Measures

- Temperament in Middle Childhood Questionnaire (Simonds & Rothbart, 2004), 6 subscales selected, 58 items:
  - Inhibitory Control
  - Attention Focusing
  - Soothability
  - Impulsivity
  - Activation Control
  - Anger/Frustration
Qualitative Interviews

Parents:

• Do you think the program had an impact on your son?

• What was your son’s goal for the program? Was he successful in achieving his goal? Which aspect(s) of the Young Warriors program helped him to achieve his goal?

• Did you learn anything about your son throughout his participation in the program?

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Qualitative Interviews

YWs:

• What do you think is the most important part of the program?
• Do you think you reached your goal?
• Have you noticed any changes in yourself now that you have completed the program?

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Qualitative Analyses

- Thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) methodology, also drawing on consensual qualitative research methodology
- Codes developed based on reading and re-reading of transcripts; themes were then developed
  - Transcripts considered unit of analysis
- 4 parent interviews & 4 child interviews

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Sample Goals Identified Pre-Treatment

• Parents:
  – better impulse control; confident/empowered; control anger and actions and feel accepted; pay attention/focus

• YWs:
  – how to defend myself; focus with my mind, learn how to defend myself; be calm; work on my temper; work on listening better
What the Research Says:

- Results of a 2-year long waitlist-control mixed-methods study on Integra YW, including 3 waves of YW participants, show that parents reported significant:
  - **Increases** in their child’s **ability to self-soothe** \( (p = .012) \)
  - **Decreases** in their child’s level of **anger and frustration** \( (p = .049) \)

AND... **High level of engagement**: average of 18 (out of 20) classes/wave.
Soothability

Mean Parent Ratings on Soothability at Pre- and Post-Treatment

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Anger/Frustration

Mean Parent Ratings on Anger/Frustration at Pre- and Post-Treatment

![Bar chart showing mean parent ratings on Anger/Frustration at Pre- and Post-Treatment. The chart compares Waitlist and Treatment groups. The ratings are higher for the Treatment group at Post compared to Pre.]

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Qualitative Research Findings

• Changes in emotion regulation
• Process of mastery/rising to the challenge (physical challenge, tests, client-centred/individually tailored, scaffolding)
• Belonging and connectedness
• Learning and retention of therapeutic skills in self regulation
Changes in Emotion Regulation

“...taught me tricks to calm myself, and, that, I can control myself. And to remember what to do when I get into situations where I’m... angry”
Challenge and Mastery

- **YW about tests:** “They weren’t too hard and they weren’t too easy well- they weren’t like the extreme hard that you’ll never be able to beat and they weren’t like this easy easy one that you can just beat with the flick of your finger.”

- **Another YW about tests:** “Because, they were things that I already knew, and I’d get to show them, and show how well I could do them.”
Interpersonal Benefits and Learning Coping Strategies

• I: Would you recommend Young Warriors to other kids?
• YW: nods his head yes
• I: Yes. And why do you say yes?
• YW: ...If you have trouble focusing or like if it’s harder for you maybe to make friends or something, come and do it ‘cause it’s fun. ... you know that it’s like working and stuff but you still get the fun aspect of it.
• I: So it’s hard work –
• YW: But like-
• I: - but it’s still fun.
• YW: Yeah. And sometimes you just forget because you might be talking to your friend or something.
Research Conclusions

• Results suggest that Integra YW is effective in targeting specific aspects of emotion regulation

• Qualitative results highlight the importance of the program being delivered in an engaging and developmentally appropriate manner
Next Steps in Program Development

1. **WORKSHOPS** for teachers or clinical staff.

2. **COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS** to bring Integra YW and/or MMA to schools/agencies.
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