

The transformative potential of martial arts: The impact of Taekwon-Do
for adult blackbelt practitioners in nonformal learning spaces

Al Rafuse

April 25, 2022

Dr. Donovan Plumb

GEDU 6130

ABSTRACT

Nonformal learning contexts provide opportunities for participants to acquire knowledge and skills, and also encounter complementary, alternative, or opposing points of view. Taekwon-Do (TKD), is but one example of a rich nonformal learning context. This research explores whether TKD as a nonformal learning context can facilitate a transformative learning experience among adult blackbelt practitioners. Jack Mezirow's 10 phases of perspective transformation was used as a framework to analyze the narrative training experiences of five (5) adult blackbelt TKD practitioners. Findings indicate that participants experienced deep and varied transformative shifts, with implications that extended beyond the training environment to other life domains.

DEDICATION

First, I dedicate this work to my family, Lexi, Silas, and Jolena, who have patiently stood with me for the past 3 years (well, 5 total) while I completed my Master's thesis/degree. It has been a real test of grit for us all. Thank you.

Second, to my children Silas and Lexi, my sincerest wish is that you will discover one of the great pursuits in life, education. Explore, discover, learn, make mistakes, question things, be skeptical, and be open to alternative points of view. Education helps us see and learn in ways we never thought possible. Someday, should you decide to journey along a similar path, may it provide you with revelation, wonder, imagination, and possibility.

Finally, to my fellow adult Taekwon-Do (TKD) blackbelt practitioners, past, present and future: You have inspired me to write this thesis. I have seen TKD do amazing things to people (myself included!), and I needed to understand why.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my friend, colleague, and thesis supervisor, Dr. Donovan Plumb, thank you. Your guidance through this entire process has been supportive and encouraging. I greatly appreciate your willingness to work with me on this idea, along with the constructive feedback and alternative points of view you provided throughout.

To my friend and colleague, Dr. Scott MacPhail, thank you. I am appreciative of the time you invested into our directed study on transformative learning theory, and the many great conversations we had prior to, during, and after. It was our directed study together that helped to kickstart this entire project.

To Master Bill Stoerig, thank you sir for showing me 'true' Taekwon-Do, and helping us back on the path after some trying years.

To all the participants who volunteered for this research project, a heartfelt thank you! It is only because of your willingness to share your stories that any of this is possible.

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CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

Informal and nonformal learning contexts are full of potential to acquire knowledge, and also encounter alternative, complementary, or competing points of view, despite being overshadowed by the benefits of formalized learning environments and outcomes. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development report (OECD) distinguishes the various modes of learning (nonformal, informal, and semi-formal) according to key characteristics: “whether the learning is intentional; or whether it happens as a side effect,” and “whether the activity... has [a] learning objective or not...” (Werquin, 2007, p. 5). In its account the OECD offers the following definitions of nonformal, informal, and semi-formal learning: Nonformal learning can be understood as “work or leisure activities that do not have learning objectives but individuals are aware they are learning. Individuals observe or do things with the intention of becoming more skilled, more knowledgeable and/or more competent” (Werquin, 2007, p. 5). Informal learning can be understood as “activities without learning objectives and without knowing they are learning” (Werquin, 2007, p. 5). Lastly, semi-formal learning can be understood as “activities with learning objectives,” but learning can transpire beyond the learning objectives, and “individuals have the intention of learning about something and, without knowing it, learn also about something else” (Werquin, 2007, p. 5).

An investigation into informal learning, positioned within a formalized learning context, revealed that “informal learning results are associated with more diverse and personal learning gains,” including professional, educational, and social (Peeters, de Backer, Buffel, Kindekens, Struyven, Zhu, & Lombaerts, 2014, p. 186). Participants in a nonformal world affairs education

program described their outcomes as “a complex web of individual and social learning connections” (Yelich Biniecki, 2015, p. 128). Additionally, a semi-formal music instruction program helped to foster adult participants’ capacities for self-reflection, with program impacts that extended into other life domains (Haddon, 2017).

This thesis attempts to highlight and deepen our understanding of nonformal learning contexts. Martial arts is a subset of carefully structured nonformal learning, conducive to supporting a larger transformative learning experience. Taekwon-Do (TKD), is one such example of a nonformal learning context, which can support deep transformative learning, and is used as the milieu in this research.

TKD, is a Korean martial art where practitioners engage in a variety of practices and activities such as kicking, punching, patterns (sequences of prearranged movements), sparring, and self-defence, designed to hone and strengthen the mind and body. Embedded in the philosophical practice of TKD are many ideological, cultural, and historical influences of Korean (Asian) origin designed for the student to learn as they progress through belt ranks. While progress in TKD is largely self-driven through routine practice the collaborative and communicative interactions with peers, students, and instructors within the dojang (space of training) are quintessential for learning, growth, and development.

Practitioners arrive from many unique and diverse backgrounds bringing an abundance of experiences and assumptions from their respective lives. Their learned experiences and assumptions help construct their realities, knowledge, and the self. In some cases, however, the assumptions or epistemological constructs/beliefs of practitioners can be falsely or erroneously

premised, leading to the creation of internalized misperceptions that can have far reaching implications. For adults committed to reaching the rank of blackbelt or beyond, TKD training creates many contexts and opportunities for learning that may challenge one's pre-existing assumptions or beliefs, thereby, leading to profound moments of deep questioning and/or permanent transformation. This thesis provides evidence that **Taekwon-Do (TKD) as a nonformal learning context can elicit deep, and varied transformative learning experiences among adult blackbelt practitioners, which have greater implications for their individual lives, both within, and beyond the context of the dojang.**

Background

This research endeavor is primarily informed by my personal training experiences and involvement with ITF Taekwon-Do, dating back over 15 years. I currently hold the rank of 3rd degree blackbelt but am presently preparing for an examination to 4th degree blackbelt.

In the proceeding pages, this thesis attempts to explore whether TKD as a site of learning can facilitate a transformative learning experience in adult blackbelt practitioners, what those experiences are, if any, and how this transformation has impacted their lives beyond TKD, if applicable. I outline these questions of inquiry both as an adult education researcher and practitioner of the art; someone who identifies as having experienced the phenomena under investigation. The impact of TKD on my life both inside the dojang and out, has been extraordinary. While my personal narrative would provide additional depth and context to this research, my goal is to tell the stories of others.

Through training, I have taught, mentored, and assisted many students, adults particularly, who are learning TKD regardless of whether they reach black belt and beyond or not. It is within the context of teaching, mentoring, and observing adults, that the impetus for this research originated. Adult practitioners arrive in TKD with multifaceted and complex lives, fraught with assumptions, experiences, and knowledge, thereby, impacting how they learn, perceive themselves, others, and the world beyond. At the earliest stages of training many practitioners comment on how ‘transformative’ and ‘impactful’ TKD had been on their lives to that point. While these conversations were rich and insightful, it was difficult to objectify or understand what the full scope of ‘transformative’ was intended to articulate, making it difficult to ascertain the depth of their experience. Anecdotal conversations can be ephemeral, lack structure, and are prone to alter direction without notice, characteristics of everyday discussion. My overall experiences suggested that TKD as a site of learning and personal growth has the potential to result in personal transformation. The purpose of this thesis was to move beyond my informal and intuitive notions to provide additional evidence that TKD supports transformative learning.

Taekwon-Do: A Korean Martial Art

Taekwon-Do (TKD), originating in Korea, is one of the world’s foremost martial art disciplines, with approximately 50 million practitioners in 127 countries (International Taekwon-Do Federation). Literally translated, Taekwon-Do means to “kick or smash with the foot” (Tae), “punch or destroy with the hand or fist” (Kwon), and “an art or way” (Do) (Choi, 1985, p. 21). As a holistic martial art practice TKD encourages the coalescing of physical, mental,

and spiritual domains, or “a way of life” (p. 21). Formally named on April 11, 1955, TKD is based on the life experiences, teachings, and knowledge of General Choi Hong Hi (1985), a Korean General imprisoned during the Japanese occupation of Korea, who recognized the need for a national martial art system “superior in both spirit and technique to Japanese Karate” (p. 38-39).

Techniques in TKD are inspired from other martial art forms including Taek Kyon (Korean) and Karate (Choi, 1985, p. 40). According to Choi (1985), TKD utilizes the full capacity of the human body together with the scientific principles of “Newtonian physics... to generate maximum power” (p. 40) through swift and precise kicks, punches, blocks, and dodges, leading to the “rapid destruction” of an opponent (p. 21).

TKD is further differentiated by two similar but fundamentally different veins, the World Taekwondo Federation (WTF) colloquially known as ‘Olympic style’ TKD, and the International Taekwon-Do Federation (ITF) who practice the art as taught by its founder General Choi Hong Hi. For the purposes of this thesis, TKD content will align with the teachings and techniques as developed by General Choi Hong Hi (ITF style TKD).

Practitioners of TKD mentor, assist, instruct, and/or train alongside juniors and peers throughout the course of everyday practice. One edict of Choi’s (1985) TKD charter notes the importance of dedicating oneself to others to serve as an example to junior peers. While many adult blackbelt practitioners serve as source of knowledge for peers, Ploszaj, Firek, and Czechowski (2020), highlight the importance of the referee as an educator; a trained individual who can build relationships, and respond/support players social, emotional, and cognitive needs (p. 15).

Progress in Taekwon-Do is characterized by a color belt ranking system, which begins with white belt (or 10th gup), up to red belt with black stripe (or 1st gup). Following 1st gup the student is invited to examine for the rank of first dan, or 1st degree blackbelt (Choi, 1985, p. 91). There are nine degree of blackbelt. The average length of time to achieve first dan is approximately 4-6 years, but this timeline can vary. Students who are eligible for examination are expected to demonstrate knowledge on an array of topics, including technical and philosophical, along with material from all previous ranks.

Focus of Current Research

Substantial research has been conducted on the physiological and kinesthetic aspects of TKD (Chang, Lin, Chu, & Chow (2021); Fife, O’Sullivan, & Lee (2018); Moreira, Falco, Menegaldo, Goethel, de Paula, & Gonçalves (2021), while Wasik and Shan (2014) mapped out the kinematics and effectiveness of individual techniques. Despite these discoveries, literature on TKD’s broader transformative implications are largely absent, particularly as it relates to adults. Johnson (2018) notes, that efforts are being organized in the form of conferences to expand “academic discussions on ITF Taekwon-Do” (p.178). Additionally, the existing TKD literature appears to place increased focus on WTF vs. ITF style, and while similar in many respects they are fundamentally different and unique, with ITF emphasizing “both fighting and various crushing techniques and defensive martial arts,” and the WTF placing a, “strong emphasis on sport performance” (Heller, Peric, Dlouha, Kohlikova, Melichna, & Novakova, 1998, p. 243).

Transformative learning theory has been-applied across an array of contexts and disciplines:

however, a gap exists in this area related to sport, and in particular martial arts. While sport pedagogy is an established scholarly discourse, conversation and research in this area does not place adult education at the foreground. Finally, references to sporting or martial arts contexts are rare in the adult education literature.

Martial arts have continued to gain popularity since their inception to the West during the 1950's (Theeboom & De Knop, 1999, p. 146). Currently, a wide array of options exist ranging from, Kung Fu, Tai Chi (China), Karate, Judo, Aikido, Jiu-Jitsu, (Japan), Hapkido, Taekwondo (Korean), Muay Thai (Thailand), and several other lesser known martial arts, Pencak Silat (Indonesia), Viet-vo-dao (Vietnam), Bando (Myanmar), Kalaripayattu (India) (Maliszewski, 1992, as cited in Theeboom & Knop (1999)). The growing prevalence, interest, and diversity of martial art styles in the West has contributed to the commercial success attained by the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), or a mixed martial arts combat sport. Conversely, the UFC contributes to the continued uptake and interest of, mixed, martial arts training. Globally, the UFC continues to attract widespread interest offering alternatives to other popular sporting events (Watanabe, 2015, p. 27). Adults appear to be the largest self-identified fans of this content (ages 18-24, and 35+), which has generated significant ratings success (Brown, Devlin, & Billings, 2013, p. 29).

The present research then aims to contribute knowledge in two contexts. First, in adult education, the research will work to expand knowledge in the ways learning takes place in sports and martial arts. Second, the research will endeavor to enhance knowledge of the ways transformative learning theory can contribute to learning in sporting contexts (particularly in

martial arts contexts). The thesis will use Jack Mezirow's transformative learning theory as a framework to explain the learning experiences of adult TKD black belt practitioners, by describing a real-life and grounded context in which this phenomenon takes place. This research is premised on three research questions: *Does Taekwon-Do, as a nonformal learning environment, facilitate in creating a transformative learning experience? What are the transformative experiences of adult black belt Taekwon-Do practitioners? Finally, how has this transformation impacted other spheres of their lives?*

Beginning with Chapter 2 – Literature Review, the importance of nonformal learning spaces are discussed, along with the pedagogical aims of TKD, followed by a discussion of sports education pedagogy in a martial arts context. Findings from the literature indicate sport, as an example of an informal learning context, can act as a catalyst for personal and social change. This is an important distinction as it conceptualizes the dojang as the primary context of nonformal adult learning in TKD. Finally, the chapter concludes by contextualizing Jack Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, followed by a summary of the theory and its main criticisms.

A qualitative approach for this research was utilized as means to understand participants' unique lived/learned experiences (Chapter 3 – Methodology). As the TKD dojang is a nonformal learning context a constructivist approach best captures the methodological assumptions for this research, which posits that we construct our understanding of the external world. A 17 question, semi-structured interview was used to capture data from five (5) participants, who are actively training within various dojangs around the Halifax Regional Municipality. The chapter concludes with a discussion of bias and study limitations.

In Chapter 4 – Results & Analysis, participants' individual responses were extracted from each transcript and curated for all 17 interview questions. Transcript responses were carefully analyzed using Mezirow's 10 Phases of Perspective Transformation, in order to explain the phenomena under consideration in this research. In the results section of this chapter, each of the three primary thesis questions are addressed in detail. Findings indicate that adult blackbelt TKD practitioners have deep and varied transformative learning experiences, which have greater implications for their individual lives, both within, and beyond the context of the dojang.

In Chapter 5 (Discussion), the three main themes that emerged in the results section are discussed in relation to Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory and the wider literature. Participants experienced critical reflection and self-examination, however, the extent does vary. Next, participants also experienced a combination of incremental and abrupt transformative learning events; two unique streams of transformative learning experiences identified by Mezirow, though the former appears to be most frequently encountered. Lastly, communicative learning, or learning from others, is well identified by each participant and had a substantive impact both on their own learning, but also functioned as a catalyst for their larger transformations.

Finally, this thesis concludes (Chapter 6) with a synopsis of the previous five chapters, followed by a discussion of the findings and implications obtained from this research. Lastly, suggestions for future research endeavors are offered.

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

The aim of this literature review is to highlight the importance of martial arts (TKD) as a nonformal learning context, and the potential such a learning environment can have in facilitating a larger transformative learning experience. Presently, there appears to exist a gap in both adult education and transformative learning literature, exploring martial arts training contexts as sites of nonformal learning, and as spaces which can facilitate a larger personal transformation. Findings from the literature reveal sporting/martial arts, broadly, has the potential to act as a catalyst for personal and/or social change.

Nonformal learning contexts are widespread and provide meaningful opportunities for adults to acquire new knowledge. In particular, a comprehensive review of learning modes within sport coaching (Walker, Thomas, & Driska, 2018) discovered that coaches prefer to learn informally and independently, for example, either communicatively with peers or through independent research efforts. Moreover, Walker, et al. (2018) note that “the current literature on informal learning highlights the importance of social learning (e.g., informal discussions, mentoring, communities of practice)” (p. 703). Adults enrolled in a piano training program (Haddon 2017) were noted to have experienced an increased self-awareness with respect to their learning, and a shift in how practice/performance issues might be constructively reframed. The context under investigation in this research is the martial art of TKD, an example of a nonformal learning environment that provides practitioners with opportunities to gain new knowledge, skills, experiences, and insights, leading to moments of permanent transformation.

Learning in TKD transpires primarily through training in the dojang (place of training) and communication with peers, instructors, and other students, and can be conceptualized as physical techniques, ideas, perspectives, insights, and alternative, competing, and opposing points of view. Martial arts training is more than improving one's physical abilities or becoming technically proficiency with various techniques, it has the potential to impact the mental, psychological, and way of life of its adherents.

The benefits and effects of martial arts on health are well identified in the literature, aligning with Woodward's (2009) assertion that general health, well-being, and psychological health can be improved for all ages through physical and mental aspects of training (p. 40-41). Melhim (2001) reported increased "anaerobic power and capacity" for those in a TKD training program (p. 234). Examining the extant martial arts literature Croom (2014) discovered that martial arts training can influence various facets of "psychological well-being," which include "positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment" (p. 68).

For adults engaged in 'hard' martial arts training, categorized by quick movements used to generate maximum force and impact against a target, researchers discovered a number of positive findings including, improved balance and coordination, cognitive function, and muscular, skeletal, cardiovascular, metabolic, and psychological effects (Origua Rios, Marks, Estevan, & Barnett, 2018). Furthermore, Origua et al. (2018) findings extended to many stages of adulthood, "suggesting that benefits may be obtained regardless of age commencing hard martial arts practice" (p. 1617).

Despite TKD's worldwide popularity, existing literature on the art has focused primarily on the physiological, kinesthetic, and sports medicine realms, particularly within the WTF, whereas significantly less attention has been attributed to the ITF vein of TKD (Heller, et al., 1998, p.243).

Taekwon-Do Pedagogy: Learning Beyond the Physical Training Space of the Dojang

For those unfamiliar with TKD, it could easily be perceived as analogous to other martial arts which focus on self-defence and self-preservation, through displays of technique, strength, and prowess. Teachers of TKD encourage students to augment their physical training with an equivalent part of philosophical learning. Practitioners begin philosophical learning early in their journey through recitation of the student oath (a charter by which to conduct oneself) before the start of each class, and serves as an affirmation (and a commitment) of self-betterment, and championing causes of social justice:

- I shall observe the tenets of Taekwon-Do:
- Courtesy; Integrity; Perseverance; Self-control; Indomitable spirit
- I shall respect my instructor and seniors
- I shall never misuse Taekwon-Do
- I shall be a champion of freedom and justice
- I shall build a more peaceful world (Choi, 1999, p. 368)

While the curriculum/pedagogical focus of each TKD dojang will vary, including the required knowledge a student must possess on the philosophical aspects of the art, Choi's (1985)

desire was to create a holistic, complete martial art system, one that included equal spiritual, mental, and cognitive constituents.

- By developing an upright mind and a strong body, we will acquire the self-confidence to stand on the side of justice at all times
- We shall unite with all men in a common brother-hood, without regard to religion, race, national or ideological boundaries
- We shall dedicate ourselves to building a peaceful human society in which justice, morality, trust and humanism prevail (p. 40-41)

Choi's virtues for Taekwon-Do are derived from Korean history/culture, Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist influences (Johnson, 2017). In particular, the TKD virtue of 'wisdom' might be understood as, discerning the consequences of own's actions (Choi, 1985). Implicitly, the virtue of wisdom suggests that practitioners engage in self-reflection. Though Mezirow is clear on his differentiation between self-reflection and critical self-reflection, having practitioners engage in this exercise serves as a foundational framework towards eventual, critical self-reflection throughout the course of their training.

Johnson (2016) notes the use of Gardner's Multiple Intelligence Theory as a means in which instructors can teach "their art's philosophy of self-cultivation and provide personal guidance to students" (p. 61). Moreover, Johnson (2017) elucidates TKD pedagogical progression as stratified, first as "martial technique," or TKD's "physical skills" (p. 5), then "martial artistry," or TKD as "personal expression" (p. 5), and finally "martial way," or "transcending physical skills into a philosophy" (p. 6), "a means of spirituality" (p. 7), or "as a means of societal improvement"

(p. 7). Wasik (2014), suggests self-defence, education, health and sport, are three interrelated spheres of TKD practice for which training should comprise equal parts.

As a site of learning TKD dojangs provide opportunities for adults to acquire knowledge beyond physical practice, a holistic learning environment encapsulating both mental and spiritual; a vision shared by the founder of TKD. Johnson (2017) echoes these sentiments, noting that a master TKD instructor is not only a master of their craft, but also a “community leader,” and are on “a perpetual journey of self-realization” (p. 9). Findings by Kim, Dattilo, and Heo (2011) reveal, as a leisure activity, TKD practitioners reported “high life satisfaction” and health perceptions (p. 556). Moreover, TKD has the potential to affect the physical self-concept of practitioners (Lim & Kim, 2012).

Teaching is a fundamental component of training within some martial arts, especially for those at black belt in TKD, who may be called upon to instruct or mentor as a requirement of progression and advancement. According to Quennerstedt (2019), focusing on physical education pedagogy can create opportunities for transformative experiences that may include, or involve:

- A pedagogy of meaning – including a focus on meaningful experiences and the process of making new or revised meanings out of experience
- A pedagogy of hesitation – offering time for deliberation and reflection
- A pedagogy of critical inquiry – focusing on the understanding and challenging of taken for granted assumptions about ourselves and others

- A pedagogy of social justice – offering opportunities to change oppressive, unfair and unsustainable physical education practices in school as well as in society (p. 620)

According to Cynarski and Lee-Baron (2014), martial arts philosophies drawn from many historical and contemporary socio-cultural contexts create rich opportunities for “physical education pedagogy” (p. 11). The authors frame several fundamental assumptions when attempting to examine martial arts philosophies, including not to conflate martial arts as simply ‘sport’ (2014). Moreover, they argue that martial arts philosophies tend to “concentrate upon the improvement of the psychophysical personality and the task of becoming a better person in general,” and should be observed/analyzed as “multi-dimensional” and multi-faceted (p. 11). Lastly, Cynarski and Lee-Baron (2014) outline a number of values attributed to martial arts philosophically, including “continuous effort of self-development,” “spiritual refinement and enlightenment,” and a “growing awareness of one’s own weakness,” suggesting that in practice, a person “becomes socially more valuable” (p. 12).

Sport can provide many individual benefits and enhancements; however, it can also be a catalyst for facilitating social and cultural change (Wright, Jacobs, Ressler, & Jung, 2016). Sport development programs have been used to educate participants on “issues such as health, gender equality, and conflict transformation” (Spaaij, Oxford, and Jeanes, 2016, p. 571). Research by Wright et al. (2016), examined the impact of teaching and delivering a sports development program in Belize, which was grounded in Freirean critical pedagogy, aimed to create and promote conditions of social change. The authors discover that “formal instruction, critical

reflection, and empowering exercises, seems to have created conditions for transformative learning” (Wright et al., 2016, p. 15). Similar research conducted by Spaaij, Oxford, and Jeanes (2016) in a Cameroon and Kenyan context note, that “transformative action should not be understood merely as an outcome of critical pedagogy” (p. 584), but within a sports development context that minor changes have the potential to increase in scope and significance.

Fenoglio & Taylor (2014) examined the perspective transformation of youth coaches, who as a result of being introduced to alternative instructional frameworks experienced increased confidence to “self-reflect and think more critically... but also to enact fundamental changes to their own coaching practice” (p. 202). Equally compelling is the transference of this confidence to other spheres of their lives, particularly, “as they assisted others to actualize the transformative journey as well” (p. 202). Aligning with Mezirow’s optimal conditions for rational discourse, the authors discovered that coaches “brought an increased appreciation for learning and an increased openness for future learning of experiences yet unknown” (p. 202).

Contextualizing Transformative Learning Theory

The roots of transformative learning theory are premised on enlightenment assumptions and ideas, which suggest that lives and societies required “profound change” (Lange, 2013, p. 107). Lange asserts that the concept of transformation draws on an array of “modernist” ideas which include: “liberation, freedom, and emancipation – whether for individuals societies or both” (p. 107). Critical theory emerging from the Frankfurt School of thought helped inform “critical pedagogy” in education discourse, which “analyzes schooling through the moral

imperative of creating a more just and democratic society” (p. 108). Transformative learning theory largely extracts ideas from critical theory and critical pedagogy.

In the preface to *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, Jack Mezirow (1991) calls for a “synthesis” to unify theories for how adults learn, citing that existing schools of thought have their own distinct conceptualizations and discourse “for interpreting the phenomenon” (p. xi). Mezirow notes the gap in psychological theory concerned with making meaning, or “how it is construed, validated, and reformulated” (p. xii), in addition to how societal variables might also impact adults’ meaning making. Transformative learning theory draws from an array of discourses including, sociology, philosophy, education, neurobiology, linguistics, religion, and a variety of psychological streams of thought, which include “developmental, cognitive, counseling, and psychoanalytic” (p. xv). Theoretically, Mezirow (1991) draws from and is influenced by a number of theorists including, Jurgen Habermas’ *Theory of Communicative Action*, which establishes the “sociolinguistic theoretical context for transformation theory” (p. 64), Jean Piaget’s concept of “decentration” (p. 147), and Thomas Kuhn’s, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Kitchenham, 2008, p.106).

Mezirow (1991) asserts the impetus for transformative learning theory originated from several formative events throughout his career, beginning with “fostering democratic social action through community development in the United States and abroad,” which facilitated in constructing his identity and “self-image as a social action educator” (p. xvi). For Mezirow, Paulo Freire’s seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and the idea of ‘conscientization’ challenged and rearticulated “premises concerning adult education for social action,” within community

development programming (p. xvi-xvii). Roger Gould contributed to the “psychological dimension” of transformative learning theory through insights gleaned from his psychotherapeutic work of “adult learners... engaged in difficult life transitions” (p. xvii). Mezirow (1991) notes that his spouse, Edee, provided rich insights during her return to post-secondary education, spurring a transformative experience of her own, and provided the basis for a 1975 research study [Mezirow] conducted on working women who returned to college (p. xvii).

Theoretical Framework – Transformative Learning Theory

A central assumption guiding transformative learning theory is grounded in the sociological thought of constructivism, which posits that individuals are central to constructing the meaning of both their realities and experiences through complex human communication (Mezirow, 1991, p. xiii-xiv). Meaning making according to Mezirow is an “interpretation... to construe experience” with learning inherently and intrinsically embedded in the process (p. 11). Moreover, meaning making is dynamic, permeable, and construed through the learners “line of action” (or the volition, purpose, desire, and intentionality of the learner) (p. 14), reflection, perception, symbols, language, memory, and imagination (Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow outlines the learning process as the ability to “schematize... appropriate... remember... validate... and act upon some aspect of our engagement with the environment, other persons, or ourselves” (p. 11). Dialectically, learning creates spaces for new knowledge to be formed through the navigation of experiences, using an existing frame of reference, against prior knowledge structures.

Collectively, we begin to construct meaning early in the socialization process as children, including unquestioned, uncritically assimilated assumptions about the world, which are relatively enduring through adulthood (Mezirow, 1991). Culture's role is significant in this regard by creating contexts and conditions for interpretations which are "fallible and often predicated upon unreliable assumptions" (p. 35). Mezirow notes the potency of culture to learning:

Cultural codes are the tacit regulatory principles that establish power relationships and the nature of appropriate discourse within a given body of knowledge or area of specialization and among such bodies and areas. They also are the principles behind the assumptions implicit in our social norms. (p. 57)

Our experiences are comprised and organized in "meaning perspectives" and "meaning schemes" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 42-43). Mezirow defines a meaning perspective as a "structure of assumptions within which one's past *experience assimilates and transforms new experience*... a habitual frame of reference... for interpreting and evaluating the meaning of experience" (p. 42). Conversely, meaning schemes comprise an array of interrelated schema which represent:

Knowledge, beliefs, value judgements, and feelings that become articulated in an interpretation... the concrete manifestation of our habitual orientation and expectations (meaning perspectives) ... that guide our action." (p. 44)

Meaning perspectives are shaped by epistemic (how knowledge is constructed and validated), sociolinguistic (social, cultural, and communicative construction of knowledge), and psychological (feelings, thoughts, behaviors, and self-concept) perspectives.

The human need to communicate our point of view, feelings, intentions, actions, experiences, norms, and values, to achieve mutual understanding and navigate the world around us is communicative action (Mezirow, 1991). Communication and interaction with others may necessitate the need to validate the authenticity of what is communicated (validity testing), through “rationality,” or utilizing “weighted evidence and supporting arguments – rather than appealing to authority, tradition, or brute force” (p. 65-67). Careful, reasoned, and, “rational assessment of the evidence and arguments” related to validity claims is referred to as “communicative competence” (p. 68-69), which according to Mezirow is a “condition necessary for significant learning in adulthood” (p. 96).

In Jurgen Habermas’ *Theory of Communicative Action*, sociolinguistic learning dimensions are established through the dynamics of communicative action, or “lifeworld, learning, and social interaction” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 69). The lifeworld is the “prestructured world of everyday life,” comprised of “unquestioned assumptions and shared cultural convictions including codes, norms, social practices, psychological patterns of dealing with others, and individual skills” (p. 69). Learning, the second dynamic “involves the transformative nature of the learning process,” which, through critical reflection, and gleaned through speech, positions, and interpretations, can be judged, assessed, validated, and criticized, thereby reducing the power of the lifeworld in the communicative domain (p. 70). The final dimension of communicative action is social

interaction, which functions as a balancing mechanism of “society and social interaction, patterns of material reproduction” for the lifeworld, which may be precipitated through progressive socio-cultural worldviews (p. 71).

Based on Jurgen Habermas’ *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Mezirow (1991) outlines three areas in which human endeavors can produce learning: technical, practical (communicative), and emancipatory (p. 72-73). Technical learning is concerned with “the ways we control and manipulate our environment, including other people” (p. 73). Related to technical learning is “instrumental learning” or hypothesis testing to determine “cause-effect” relationships (p. 73). In transformative learning theory, this provides a means to alter meaning schemes based on results obtained through manipulation and control of our “external reality” (p. 74).

Communicative learning is concerned with understanding “what others mean and to make ourselves understood” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 75). This is particularly impactful in adulthood as we navigate socio-cultural experiences through “understanding, describing, and explaining intentions; values; ideals, moral issues; social, political, philosophical, psychological, or educational concepts; feelings and reasons” (p. 75). We engage in “discursive assessment” with others who we believe are “informed, objective, and rational, to assess reasons that justify problematic beliefs” (Mezirow, 2009, p. 20). In order for participants to fully engage in discourse Mezirow highlights a number of optimal conditions under which this can occur:

- Have accurate and complete information
- Be free from coercion and distorting self-deception
- Be able to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively

- Be open to alternative perspectives
- Be able to become critically reflective upon presuppositions and their consequences
- Have equal opportunity to participate (including the chance to challenge, question, refute, and reflect and to hear others do the same)
- Be able to accept an informed, objective, and rational consensus as a legitimate test of validity (Mezirow, 1991, p. 77-78)

Moreover, participation in these contexts can facilitate critical reflection of one's meaning perspectives, leading to the learning and development of an "advanced meaning perspective," which is:

- More inclusive, discriminating, and integrative of experience
- Based upon full information
- Free from both internal and external coercion
- Open to other perspectives and points of view
- Accepting of others as equal participants in discourse
- Objective and rational in assessing contending arguments and evidence
- Critically reflective of presuppositions and their source and consequences
- Able to accept an informed and rational consensus as the authority for judging conflicting validity claims (p. 77-78)

Emancipatory learning, through “critical self-reflection” will “identify and challenge distorted meaning perspectives” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 87). During moments of critical reflection, we come to see how our past experiences (“history and biography”) have shaped our learning, assumptions, knowledge, and feelings about the world (p. 87). Emancipatory learning releases one from “libidinal, linguistic, epistemic, institutional, or environmental forces that limit our options and our rational control over our lives” (p. 87). These forces contribute to the social, cultural, and psychological constraints which impede adult learning and development, however, through emancipatory learning we are presented with alternative ways of thinking, knowing, and feeling, which contribute towards the development, synthesis, creation, revision, or negation of existing meaning schemes or perspectives (p. 88).

Premise distortions affect adults’ capacities to learn and develop meaning perspectives that are “inclusive, integrative, discriminating, and open to alternative points of view” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 224). These erroneous, unquestioned, uncritical assumptions skew the reality of the learner “in a way that arbitrarily limits what is included, impedes differentiation, lacks permeability or openness to other ways of seeing” (p. 118). Mezirow identifies four areas in which distortions in learning can occur. First, reasoning errors are, fallacies (informal, evidence, relevance, linguistic and strategic) (p. 119-120), “errors in inferential rules or assumptions” (p. 120), heuristics (p. 122), and confirmation biases (p. 123). Second, epistemic distortions, or the nature and construction of how knowledge is created and used (p. 123). Third, sociolinguistic distortions, or those socio-cultural mechanisms, assumptions, ideologies, norms, and language which “shape and limit our perception and understanding,” and “level of consciousness” (p. 130-

131). Lastly, psychological distortions are those which have altered an individual's self-concept, feelings, and behaviors impacting the desired self of adulthood (p. 138).

Critical reflection, the heartbeat of emancipatory learning and by extension transformative learning, is premised on making meaning through three interrelated domains of reflection: content ("description of a problem"), process ("method of our problem solving"), and premise (foundation, or source of idea or problem) (Mezirow, 1991, p. 117). For Mezirow, reflection is "critically assessing the content, process, or premise(s) of our efforts to interpret and give meaning to an experience" (p. 104).

As we encounter new knowledge, insights, and experiences, that our existing meaning perspectives and schemes are unable to reconcile, explain or comprehend, a conflict or "disorienting dilemma" initiates, triggering a process of perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1991, p. 168). In Mezirow's seminal 1975 study of working women returning to post-secondary education, 10 phases of perspective transformation were identified:

- A disorienting dilemma
- Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame
- A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychological assumptions
- Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
- Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
- Planning of a course of action

- Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
- Provisional trying of new roles
- Building of competence and self-competence in new roles and relationships
- A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective (Mezirow, 1991, p. 168-169)

Two phases presented difficulty for participants in this study and were particularly noteworthy. First, exposure to a "critical analysis" of one's existing knowledge and frame of reference and "feelings... about these assumptions" (p. 171). Second, "reflective action," and the stasis induced when attempting to act on new insights; "intellectual understanding" is insufficient and requires "emotional strength and an act of will in order to move forward" (p. 171). Mezirow contends that a "central process of adult development" is perspective transformation (p. 155).

Critiques of Transformative Learning Theory

Despite Transformative Learning Theory's (TLT) prevalent use across a variety of discourses and contexts, it has not been resistant to critics or scrutiny. One of the early criticisms leveraged against TLT by Collard and Law (1989) (as found in Cranton 2016), was Mezirow's use of Jurgen Habermas' theoretical work, upon which TLT is heavily predicated. A grounding tenet in Habermas' work was social change, however, this focus remained largely absent from Mezirow's

early writings and theory development, where “individual transformation preceded social

of black belt, the process and impact of this accomplishment can be profound and transcendent with implications that may extend beyond the dojang (place of training) into other life spheres.

TKD has the capacity to elicit deep and varied transformative experiences by subverting previously learned, deep-rooted assumptions and prior knowledge. With the above in mind, this thesis addresses the following three, interrelated questions: *Does Taekwon-Do, as a nonformal learning environment, facilitate in creating a transformative learning experience? What are the transformative experiences of adult black belt Taekwon-Do practitioners? Finally, how has this transformation impacted other spheres of their lives?*

CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Rationale

Nonformal learning contexts offer adults diverse and rich opportunities to learn new skills, expand knowledge, and potentially challenge their most ardent assumptions. Despite its prevalence, however, nonformal learning environments are not without their own challenges. In particular, Taylor (2006) highlights the voluntary and fluid nature of participation within nonformal learning environments. In this research, however, it is precisely participants' enduring commitment to routine training in Taekwon-Do (TKD) that has created an auspicious context for learning and potential transformation. The context under investigation in this research is the TKD dojang (space of training), an example of a rich, nonformal learning environment where adults can practice, learning techniques, communicate with peers/instructors, and provide mentoring/instruction to peers/juniors.

The epistemological basis for this research is rooted in constructivist assumptions, or the idea "that people build or construct their understanding of the external world" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 16). A "social construction approach," a derivative of constructivism, posits that "people construct their own realities based on their experiences and interpretations"; this epistemological assumption is the critical underpinning required to understand the phenomena under investigation in this research (p. 3).

Practitioners of TKD arrive at the dojang with a complex array of experiences, knowledge, ideas, and beliefs, which are "structures of assumptions and expectations," comprising deep and interconnected "frames of reference" (Mezirow, 2009, p. 22). Frames of reference might include,

“language, cultural cannon, ideology... or paradigms” (p. 22). Additionally, frames of reference “filter sense perceptions, selectively shaping and delimiting perceptions, cognition, and feelings by predisposing our intentions, purposes, and expectations” (p. 22). Frames of reference are fundamental to the current research design; adults are an accumulation of prior experiences, knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions. The richness of an individual’s collected prior experiences before TKD training, and collected experiences after achieving blackbelt in TKD is the focus of data collection efforts, with interview questions designed to elicit these responses.

Adults who have achieved the rank of black belt and beyond, require hundreds and/or thousands of hours of practice, study, and training to attain these ranks. Sustained dedication and practice has the potential for the practitioner to articulate rich insights, technical competency, learned experiences, and develop capacities for critical reflection, beyond which novices (colored belts) may not have had the opportunity to develop. A qualitative approach is necessary, therefore, to accurately capture and assess the lived and learned experiences of adult TKD black belt practitioners. Qualitative inquiry allows us to capture the “thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, and assumptions,” through face-to-face interaction with participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 91).

The dojang, or space of training, is the primary nonformal learning context for most TKD practitioners, and is especially true for adult blackbelt practitioners. Knowledge in the dojang is largely acquired through lecture-based instruction, observation and modelling of peers and instructors, peer-to-group interaction and collaboration, peer-to-peer interaction and collaboration, and peer-to-instructor interaction and collaboration. Informally, participants have

an opportunity to share knowledge, ideas, experiences, and points of view outside the scope of structured classes, and such practice is encouraged to reinforce material and gain a deeper understanding/insight of the concepts/techniques. Mezirow (2009) suggests learning transpires in four ways: “elaborating existing meaning schemes, learning new meaning schemes, transforming meaning schemes, and transforming meaning perspectives” (p. 22).

TKD functions as a hub of communicative learning, a space where one attempts to make understood our positions, feelings, ideas, beliefs, values, and reciprocally, to understand those of others (Mezirow, 1991). This dynamic interplay of communication can create rich contexts for learning through “consensus” building with those persons “who are most informed rational, and objective,” otherwise referred to as “rational discourse” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 75). Conditions of rational discourse can create contexts of learning leading to moments of permanent transformation, and include: an integration of alternate perspectives, environments free from coercion or derision, and the opportunity to engage in critical reflection of one’s firmly entrenched assumptions (Mezirow, 1991).

Transformative learning experiences are an often deeply personal and subjective affair, processed and occurring within the conscious realm of the individual. Mezirow identified 10 distinct phases that one needs to progress through to have experienced a perspective transformation; later transformative learning experience. To accurately capture and assess participants’ experiences, a semi-structured interview which encapsulates the essence of Mezirow’s 10 phases of perspective transformation was utilized.

Fenoglio & Taylor (2014) employed a similar met

experience, both of which are central to this research, though one exception was made (see *Design Limitations*). Age criteria imposed for this research aligns with Statistics Canada's definition of 'adult' (Statistics Canada, 2017).

Ethics clearance to conduct this research was granted on December 7, 2020, from Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU). Following ethical clearance, an email was sent to head instructors/owners of several ITF TKD clubs within the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM), which introduced myself as a researcher/practitioner. It was requested that instructors please share the included letter with their adult blackbelt students who meet the above recruitment criteria. The letter to prospective participants provided an orientation to the study's purpose, requests of participation, informed consent, confidentiality, etc. The full details of this letter can be found in [*APPENDIX A – Research Participation Letter*]. Participants were also given the option to receive a copy of the interview transcript once it was prepared; all participants elected to receive a copy. An additional resource was made available to all participants containing contact information for several local mental health services, should the interview process trigger undue emotion or distress [*APPENDIX C – List of Mental Health Resources*]. The request for participation yielded 5 participants, ranging in age from 25-50 and were comprised of four men and one woman.

Data Collection

Due to the changing epidemiology of COVID-19, and out of an abundance of caution, all data for this research was collected virtually through Microsoft Teams between December 2020

and May 2021. Interviews were conducted live via the Microsoft Teams application and were scheduled at a mutually agreeable time/date by the participants and researcher. Following the interview, a transcript/recording of the session was generated and placed into my Microsoft Stream application, a constituent of the broader Microsoft Office 365 framework. For participants who consented to be part of this research a 17 question semi-structured interview was issued, and was approximately 60-90min in length. Interview questions were designed to replicate the structure of Jack Mezirow's 10 phases of perspective transformation, in order to provide an explanation to the phenomena under consideration. A complete and full listing of interview questions can be found in [*APPENDIX B – Interview Questions*].

As a third dan (currently preparing to examine for fourth dan) adult ITF Taekwon-Do black belt practitioner with over 15 years' experience training, mentoring, and teaching adults, I am uniquely positioned to conduct the interviews in this research. The shared insight, understanding, and experiences, established a sense of trust, rapport, and solidarity, among my adult black belt peers. Although I knew many of the participants in this research personally, having a familiarity with the challenges, trials, and successes, experienced on the road to blackbelt and beyond truly helped facilitate an ease and comfort in the conversations; not otherwise gleaned or understood from someone unfamiliar with TKD and its inherent experiences.

Data Storage

Data obtained from interviews, or digital materials created in relation to this research are stored on secure, password protected cloud applications/storage; OneDrive and Stream, respectively. Both are applications in the Microsoft Office 365 framework located at Mount Saint Vincent University. Confidentiality and data security are of paramount concern, so access to research data/materials of any kind cannot be obtained by anyone without explicit delegate access, administered by the principal investigator. No physical records/data of any kind were kept for this research – all materials used or created for this research are digital in origin.

Data Analysis

Questions for this interview were carefully aligned and structured to follow Jack Mezirow's 10 phases of perspective transformation, a constituent piece of the broader theoretical framework used in this research. The rationale behind this decision was to create a coherent and cogent flow to each participants' individual experiences, journeys, and circumstances, as they progressed through the belt ranks of TKD. Moreover, this approach provided a roadmap of participants' experience, particularly as they recounted prior events and the implications for their current self-perception. Each participants' unique responses were carefully examined in the context of the proposed research questions, thereby generating broader observations of the phenomena under investigation. The limited sample size in this research did not warrant the use of MAXQDA (or comparable application); instead, each interview transcript was analyzed independently, to capture the richness, depth, and nuance of participants' experiences.

Researcher Bias

I acknowledge the presence of bias in this research. First, as an avid practitioner of ITF TKD who has long espoused the art's benefits, I acknowledge that my own passion and enthusiasm may not necessarily be experienced/shared/perceived to the same degree by other practitioners, who may have their own motivations for training. Second, I attest to having experienced a transformative moment(s) as a direct result of my TKD training; an experience not necessarily shared by all practitioners, or one that may not be consciously understood. Third, as a Caucasian male possessing many years of post-secondary education, I recognize my distinct advantages/knowledge/experiences from others of different genders, races, creeds, cultures, and other social backgrounds. Lastly, the ITF TKD scene in Nova Scotia is comparatively small when contrasted with other provinces. Undoubtedly, my rank has created contexts where I have interacted with the very participants I am looking to recruit, some of whom have become close friends and other acquaintances. While established relationships exist between the researcher and some participants, I do not anticipate it obfuscating research results, but rather an opportunity to explore conversations/experiences/ideas, which otherwise may have remained inaccessible without existing rapport.

Design Limitations

The current research contains a number of design limitations which warrant discussion. First, while this research was able to recruit five adult blackbelt TKD practitioners, many

participants originated from the same dojang as the researcher, thus creating a small/limited sample. Second, despite strong recruitment efforts many participants in this research are well known to the researcher, and I suspect some volunteered to participate primarily as a courtesy, and due to our existing relationships. Third, the ITF TKD community in Halifax and Nova Scotia broadly appears heavily politized, with some head instructors not having good relations either amongst themselves, between dojangs, or with practitioners from other clubs. Fourth, Austin's inclusion in this research study is interesting, as technically he met the requirements for participation, however, he did not begin training as an adult but rather a youth – something not anticipated when the call for participation was disseminated. Austin was not known to the researcher prior to this venture. After discussing the purpose of this research with Austin and having an opportunity to connect with him on a personal/practitioner level, it was determined that his inclusion would be worthwhile, and to that end it did not disappoint.

During data collection COVID-19 cases were surging in Halifax and surrounding communities, making face to face interviews a difficult proposition, so Microsoft Teams was utilized to accomplish this task. While effective, this medium created an interview climate that often appeared stilted (to the researcher at least), i.e. some participants did not have a webcam, or the audio was subpar, making it difficult to observe non-verbal cues, and/or presenting some difficulties interpreting the participant.

Moreover, while participants were able to articulate their experiences some appeared unable to fully articulate the depth of their transformation, and in some cases their responses became something of an affirmation of experience. In these instances, the researcher had to interject and

help reframe the question or provide additional explanation, while being cautious/mindful not to be suggestive. Future research endeavors should look to rework the interview questions utilized in this study to more plain language. Finally, as participants have been actively training in TKD for many years and living through their often, self-realized transformation, there could be difficulty understanding when changes or deeper questioning began occurring, and distinctly separating the past self with their current self.

CHAPTER 4 – RESULTS & ANALYSIS

This chapter begins with a presentation of the research results by outlining individual participant responses as obtained from each interview question. Responses to each question were paraphrased or quoted, and then placed under the appropriate interview question heading. Interview questions draw influence and inspiration from Mezirow's 10 phases of perspective transformation, with a full list found in [*APPENDIX B – Interview Questions*]. Finally, the chapter concludes with an analysis of the data, which includes addressing the three overarching research questions.

The results for each interview question are presented in a report style format, along with prefacing rationale, or the reasoning behind why the question was posed, anticipated findings, and/or closing comments/insights related to the data or interview questions. The decision to position the data in this manner is threefold. First, it removed extraneous information obtained from the transcript, thereby providing succinct and clear responses. Second, having each participants' response tailored for the context of each interview question provides a layout conducive to analysis, discussed in detail at the end of this chapter. Third, while broad themes are identified in the analysis section of this chapter the foregrounding information, i.e., interview question responses, are necessary to provide a clear and rich depiction of each participants' experiences.

Results

The opening question [1] was intended to capture demographic information, including the age in which participants commenced training and when they obtained blackbelt. This question was particularly insightful as it revealed a methodological gap in participant recruitment efforts, and also provided a glimpse of how long it took some adults to obtain their blackbelts; on average 4-6 years, though this timeline can vary.

Question 1 - At what age did you begin training in TKD, and at what age did you achieve blackbelt?

The ages of participants varied from 6-41 when starting TKD, and each generally achieved blackbelt within 3-5 years of joining a TKD program.

- Richard was aged 41 when starting TKD and achieved blackbelt at age 45;
- Austin was aged 6 when starting TKD, and achieved blackbelt at age 10; **
- Conrad was aged 38 when starting TKD, and achieved blackbelt at age 41;
- Sonia was aged 36 when starting TKD, and achieved blackbelt at age 40;
- Max was aged 30 when starting TKD, and achieved blackbelt at age 33.

The decision to include Austin's interview in this research study is due to his continued training in TKD, particular through his adult life, in addition to aligning with participant recruitment criteria despite having begun training at an early age. It became evident during Austin's interview that TKD had greatly influenced his perspective during his youth, and while

the implications are beyond the scope of this research, TKD continues to sculpt and inform his thinking, learning, and perspective, through adulthood.

For question [2], participants were encouraged to reflect on their TKD journey, including their motivations for training and the importance of doing so. The idea was to compare these insights for use in later questions when their motivations to continue training may have shifted, providing a now/then snapshot. Commonplace answers were anticipated here, with the expectation that participants would revise their motivations later.

Question 2 - Thinking back, what was your motivation to achieve blackbelt, and why was this decision important to you?

Each participant became intrinsically motivated to pursue blackbelt, whether it was to accomplish a set goal (Conrad), personal challenge (Richard), develop capacities for world level competition (Austin), or as personal commitment towards better physical/mental health (Max). Sonia's motivation to pursue blackbelt originated from a desire earlier in life but believed it "unattainable for some reason," and her commitment to achieving blackbelt was a means to recapture something she had believed lost. This interest became re-ignited when her children began training in the art, and the instructor challenged her to join.

For Conrad, achieving blackbelt was also a means to correct his perceived 'failures', something he could pursue on his own while restoring "a little bit of faith" in himself. Richard desired an activity he could actively participate in with his child, something that could tacitly teach moral and self-defence components; TKD was seen as an "educational opportunity" for Richard's child.

Similar to the preceding question [2], participants were to continue reflecting upon their expectations of what might be learned as a student of TKD. The upcoming question [3] helped form the basis for two discordant streams of expectations among participants by having them recall who they were then vs. now. First, the past self which envisioned TKD as a means to learn kicking/punching/self-defence/physical conditioning, and second, the current self, which outlines other nontangible benefits, many of which are outlined later.

Question 3 - Thinking back before you started TKD, and not including kicking, punching, or self-defence, what did you expect to learn as a student of TKD?

Surprisingly, participants had differing yet related anticipations about what TKD could offer them as students of the art. Conrad steadfastly maintained that self-defence was and continues to be paramount, noting that he experienced a sense of helplessness throughout his schooling years having been bullied. Austin, meanwhile, saw TKD as means to acquire more self-discipline. Max became fascinated with the application of techniques, acquiring de-escalation skills, and a means to improve overall health, though admitted he did not anticipate learning more about himself, which came with time. Richard had expected to gain “physical competence” and deliberately selected TKD for its emphasis on character building/refinement. Having observed her children’s physical progress through the art Sonia’s interest shifted twofold, the first helping her reconceptualize what a martial art could be, and second, it provided a mechanism of focus in which she could concentrate on her own well-being amid demanding vocation/domestic responsibilities.

Participants were asked to continue reflecting on prior experiences in question [4] as it begins to establish a portrait of their training expectations, and of who they were in the early days of their training. Analogous to the previous questions, it was anticipated that responses would continue to remain focused on the tangible benefits of training, with the subsequent question [5] asking participants to unpack their experiences and associated feelings as their capacities began changing.

Question 4 - What benefits did you anticipate as a result of your continued training?

Unsurprisingly, each partici

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Question 5 (A & B) - Throughout your training in TKD did you notice any changes in your physical or mental abilities? Can you describe what changed? Can you describe this experience?

Unanimously, participants were emphatic that TKD had altered their physical and mental abilities, however, the extent and significance vary. When discussing physical changes Conrad admitted, “it’s nothing short of a transformation...,” as he is now able to complete physical tasks that were difficult, if not outright impossible, with his previous level of conditioning. Moreover, Conrad noted the significant shift in his mental abilities, including the way he interacts with others, dealing with difficult life situations, and taking charge of situations when required; “I owe TKD a lot... I might even go so far as to say I owe it my life....” Austin’s goal of international competition necessitated dedicated physical training, but noted that self-discipline, perseverance, and goal setting, gleaned from TKD became foundational building blocks to success in his professional life.

Max confessed that being overweight he struggled with many physical tasks, and his mental change/growth was tethered to his physical progress: “Once I start getting some of the physical results, I started respecting myself a little more, I was more open with my feelings with myself, and it basically reshaped my whole outlook on life.” Additionally, Max attributes positive thinking, open-mindedness, clarity of thought, reduction in anxiety, increased confidence, and altered self-perception, as additional changes to his mental abilities.

Throughout many of the interview questions Richard maintained the importance of continued physical training, and how it impacts many aspects of his daily functioning. Moreover,

Richard noted that increased physical conditioning provided confidence, helping to create a more “comfortable view of the world around me, so that I could do things with less fear and therefore be more prone to be able to respond in a confident meekness as opposed to a terrified weakness.”

Sonia characterized her overall experience as “life changing,” with physical changes creating happiness and healthiness. Despite a self-professed learning disability, Sonia’s attitude on learning had changed as a result of her training; a sense of dread to one of interest and optimism when studying training materials. Reflecting on the total training experience Sonia says, “it transforms your thinking, the way you behave, the way I practiced... this is just who I am now.”

Participants were asked to perform a self-assessment of their growth and development in TKD over the past 3-6 years [question 6]. The importance of posing this question to participants was to gauge how they perceived their own development, anticipating that the responses provided would open additional pathways for discussion, particularly as it relates to any adversity they experienced/encountered.

Question 6 - How would you characterize your growth and development from white belt to black belt?

What became apparent throughout each interview was how radically different each participant characterized their own growth. Beginning with Austin, who portrayed his growth in terms of competitive performance, i.e. his success/ability at international competition was validated through speaking with other athletes who observed his performance. Overcoming training adversity in preparation for international competition, this work ethic began

manifesting into other areas of Austin's life where similar perseverance and grit was required. Austin noted that despite a string of consecutive losses on the global circuit, dedication, hard work, and effort, became learning moments helping him develop what he coined as "emotional maturity," or the ability to reframe competitive loss as a positive.

Conrad's experience, while similar, also overcame challenges and adversity in training, which, manifested into overcoming hurdles in his personal life. Throughout the course of training Conrad discovered a sense of agency around midway to blackbelt, realizing that he could only rely on himself to tackle problems that arose (both inside and outside of the dojang); this nascent agency was a seminal, actualizing moment for Conrad.

Max's personal characterization of growth and development is one of self-questioning and discovery. Similar to Conrad, Max noted how his focus on learning the fundamentals of TKD quickly shifted to pre-existing thoughts, questioning himself both inside and outside of the dojang. Moreover, he became more confident, particularly with his own body image, something that Max admitted to struggling with most of his life. Max also confessed to being more open to criticism, something he struggled with previously, and is better at navigating his emotionality.

Sonia's ability to subvert her self-perceptions is exemplified by the characterization of her development: "I guess its freaking amazing... nothing short of a miracle really." Sonia believed that she had a "shelf life" and that her development in the art has manifested into a different lifestyle, one which she did not believe capable of achieving. Richard's development continued to be characterized by learning techniques correctly in order to maximize safe physical conditioning/practice. Richard noted that early in his training he had a difficult time

conceptualizing himself performing complex techniques, however, as he began to improve felt a great deal of pride and accomplishment – a goal he focused hard to achieve.

For question [7], participants were explicitly asked if they recalled that one seminal moment in TKD which categorically changed their life. It was anticipated that some participants would have that one ‘ah-ha’ moment, but when the majority identified a more protracted experience of deeper questioning and reflection it became a pleasant surprise. This observation is explored in more detail [*Chapter 5 - Transformative Learning Experiences - Incremental and Abrupt*].

Question 7 - Thinking back on your journey from white belt to blackbelt, describe any moments in your training where you began to question former thoughts, beliefs, values, or expectations you might have had about TKD, or life in general?

During a belt grading early in Richard’s training a sparring mishap became a revelatory moment, which profoundly altered his conceptualization of ‘training’. Richard noted that, initially, his expectations of himself were low given his age. Moreover, Richard’s continued conditioning towards blackbelt changed his perception about the art and his abilities. TKD’s focus on character building subverted Richard’s expectations of what he believed the art was, or could be. He noted that elements of the student oath fit with his larger worldview and gave him purpose to continue training.

Austin had a tragic but critical moment early in his training years via a toxic, “emotionally immature” instructor who undermined the value of learning from others, and was inequitable when dealing with students. After shifting to a new dojang Austin remarked that it was a “tectonic shift in my understanding about how Taekwon-Do is taught...” Moreover, the hyper

politized, profit focused landscape of ITF TKD in Halifax fostered a culture of elitism and exclusivity, leading Austin to open his own dojang and encourage his own student's to fully embrace learning from others peers/instructors at different dojangs. For Austin, the negative context of learning and training was "a major shift in my belief."

Conrad admitted to having many misconceptions and preconceived notions about people within martial arts, what TKD was or could be, and his abilities as a practitioner; all assumptions which proved to be "very, very false." Conversely, Max's questioning and doubts began within, noting that he started asking deeper questions of himself and his emotions, something he might not have questioned before. Around halfway to blackbelt, Max observed a large personality shift, and that his general outlook on life changed.

Sonia, at a world level competition early in her training career, in front of judges and competitors from across Canada, experienced a pivotal moment when she asked herself, 'why am I here'? This experience triggered a 'forced reflection', which yielded an entirely new perspective, or one of confidence and belief in herself. This experience, Sonia says, was something she could add to other areas of her life.

Question [8] had two aims, the first, to explore how deeper questioning about expectations around TKD made participants feel, and second, how deeper questioning made them feel in a context beyond TKD. While participants provided a rich account of their experiences within the dojang, the researcher had to interject on a number of occasions to attempt to reframe the question. It was anticipated that a strong response would be provided to the TKD portion of the question, however, more was desired, especially as it related to thoughts outside the dojang.

Despite this concern, the ‘beyond’ aspect of the question is addressed more explicitly in future responses.

Question 8 - Can you describe how the questioning of former thoughts, beliefs, values, or expectations about TKD or even more broadly beyond TKD (life in general) made you feel?

Richard’s response to this question was similar to the previous one believing that, initially, if he opted to discontinue training early through the belt ranks he would not have been surprised by this decision, and that at his age/stage in life he believed that he had limited time to focus on improving his physical conditioning and, therefore, did not want to expend additional time/energy pursuing a goal he could no longer reasonably obtain. Richard indicated that he felt “an abiding sense of reassurance,” with respect to what he thought TKD was. Initially, Richard was concerned that TKD would be aggressive, showy, and largely tailored towards “fight picking,” however, through continued training TKD became an affirmation of what he hoped it would be, one of a “moral foundation.”

Austin was clear that he experienced enormous pride for all his accomplishments, choices, milestones, and achievements in the art, noting that “self-reflection has made me a better person.” While discussing/reflecting on his unsettling shift between TKD clubs, Austin felt “exposed,” noting that, “people get very comfortable in their beliefs, values, and moral system, but I think when a shock like that comes to the system, especially realizing later as an adult, that you know that was wrong.”

Conrad noted feeling shame when reflecting on his previous beliefs and perceptions: “I felt stupid for the things I believed in when I was proven wrong by going to class... I felt like a small

person for having those preconceived notions that I thought I knew what it was all about.” As Conrad began working through these feelings both inside and outside the dojang, he admitted to developing modesty and humility in his daily life; a mindset that is non-judgmental and non-presumptive in nature, whilst also seeking the answers to questions when not known. Moreover, Conrad is averse to emulating the caricature of expert when he does not know the answers to questions; the above changes have permitted him to grow as a person.

Max’s deeper questioning made him feel overly positive – creating an awareness of his mental well-being and how the benefits of training were impacting his life. Max struggled greatly, however, with the “moral dilemma” associated with utilizing a martial art, especially should it be required for self-defence. The idea that his actions could mortally wound another person gave pause to how Max would choose to interact with others, noting that he began to develop a deeper respect for people who were different; attempting not to stereotype, nor introduce his own biases.

Sonia’s revelatory moment at world level competition was laden with emotion, she recounted feeling anxiety, fear, and shame, should she not perform to the perceived expectations others may have for her. After the competition, Sonia had this to say: “Coming home without anything was a huge growth moment for me.”

Question [9] was an oddity. The intent was to get participants thinking/reflecting about their own learning, and if this was challenged or questioned in any way as a result of deeper questioning elsewhere. Truthfully, it was not clear what the responses would be, especially based on the previous question [8], but when participants used training examples to elucidate how their

learning had shifted it was a pleasant discovery. These findings had implications for their experiences beyond the dojang.

Question 9- In what ways, if any, did questioning your former thoughts, beliefs, values, or expectations prompt you to reflect more broadly on your ways of thinking or learning?

Richard's decision to select TKD as a training art was both deliberate and reasoned, an affirmation of how he choose to interpret, consider, and learn:

I was very careful going into selecting the style and the club... I'm a person of faith so putting prayer and careful focus on the right path to choose and not picking the wrong path. So that careful consideration couple with prayer... reaffirmed the approach that I took to find the right style for us, and reassured me that in broader things, and in everything, careful consideration, putting as much logic, rational consideration into decisions that our family makes... then trusting God to place the right thing in front of me at the right time to put in front of the right path, keep me accidentally stepping into the wrong path.

Austin's experience of feeling "exposed" [see question 8], created a sense of conviction to want to learn from, and establish through collaboration with other practitioners, a community of learners. Moreover, Austin noted the "tremendous value" in training and learning together, admitting the growth potential involved with doing so; this philosophy was considered taboo under his previous TKD instructor. Desiring change, Austin created a community of learners with other high-level practitioners as "part of challenging broader beliefs," and to give back to practitioners who were from underprivileged or disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

Conrad confronted many misperceptions and assumptions during his journey to blackbelt, which forged a new perspective on learning. Prior to TKD training Conrad would attempt to solve issues/problems on his own, and would seldom ask or welcome input from others, and would often falsely assume knowledgeability. Conrad now admits his preferred method to learn is by asking questions noting that it has “broadened my horizon tenfold.” Moreover, Conrad observed that people are receptive to this newfound inquisitive nature, and have a desire to impart their knowledge. This approach for Conrad has been tremendously successful, who now admits to using a similar tactic when dealing with others: “it’s been a huge eye opener for me.”

Max noted that his critical thinking capacities improved along with his ability to make better impulse decisions (ability to think on his feet), and more carefully examined the full range of consequences when prompted with decision making. Max also admitted to reflecting more carefully on his actions when dealing with others in the workplace, noting how a poor interaction can have significant and potentially unforeseen consequences.

While continuing to encounter/overcome challenges and questioning throughout her TKD journey, Sonia notes that it’s a source of motivation and confidence builder. Moreover, she notes that reflecting on her choice to compete at world level competition and challenging the idea of ‘not believing you could do anything’ continues to be a guiding moment of learning, both in TKD and beyond:

Put that example towards every other question moment in life and it kind of pushes me through other aspects where I’m questioning, or feeling low in self-

confidence, or is this the right decision?... I actually reflect on it more than I care to say.

Aligning with Mezirow's original intent, question [9A] attempted to discern if deeper questioning facilitated how participants thought about social constructs, particularly institutions and cultures. The responses provided highlighted the need for this question to be reframed in an alternative manner. Responses became fixated on 'TKD', while others, again, skirted the intent of the question. Auspiciously, the answer to this question did reveal itself elsewhere in the interview.

Question 9A – In what ways, if any, did questioning your former thoughts, beliefs, values, or expectations prompt you to reflect more broadly on your ways of thinking about your society or culture (e.g. relationship to others and or social cultural institutions)?

Richard noted that his worldview on people had moved from “archetypal” to “real,” and attributes this shift in thinking, in part, to his time spent training in TKD:

During those 10 years since I've been practicing on and off training, my worldview viewing people is a whole lot less archetypal, and much more real. So, I view people now as people, there are no paragons.

Richard observed that TKD Masters and senior students in particular, would extend “grace” (kindness, compassion, and forgiveness in his words) to others, both in the dojang, and more broadly as human beings. The quality of people training, coupled with their ability to positively impact the world around them, helped to shift Richard's perspective on others. Re-emphasizing the importance of character building which is fostered in TKD, Richard believed that our existing

political systems and relationships are in desperate need of internalizing these characteristics and values if we aim to move forward as a society:

If people feel attacked if they feel we can threaten, they're more likely to respond negatively, but if they feel that mercy and grace is extended to them, then there's greater opportunity to flip two had the love that will permit them to behave in a selfless way, especially when your directing our province or nation.

Austin commented on the diversity of students within his TKD club, particularly those of Muslim origin. Austin's current girlfriend was also an instructor at the club, where he observed great apprehension early on by parents, especially of Muslim boys, who did not feel comfortable with Austin's girlfriend teaching their children; the parents saw the dobok (uniform) top as 'revealing' and 'immodest'. Austin rightly observed that this may be a cultural artifact, however, as trust was established he endeavored to impart the morals and values of TKD training to his students. Over time Austin remarked on the connecting of cultures as a "real success," prompting him to reflect on his teaching practices, and interactions with those of differing backgrounds to his own; Austin's reflections were such that he enjoyed the challenges that came with this and sought out additional opportunities to build connections from those with backgrounds divergent from his own.

Conrad noted that his continued training provided a "new way to deal with others, everything from people to organizations." As his physical conditioning and proficiency in the art improved, he felt more assertive, cognizant, and perceptive, in a way that could not have been achieved otherwise – embracing others thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and expectations. Conrad

admitted how myopic he had been prior to TKD training, shying away from dealing with people, institutions, and organizations. Through continued interaction and collaboration with peers in the dojang, however, Conrad is able to embrace and respect ideas/viewpoints differing from his own, which has influenced or changed his position; prior to training, opposing ideas and viewpoints would be ignored or discredited.

Max, similar to his contemporaries above, noted his training, and work with the general public challenged himself to take the position of the 'other', i.e. those of different backgrounds to his own, while attempting to display patience, understanding, and compassion, in circumstances that previously may have irritated him.

When faced with indecision or self-doubt, Sonia reminds herself of her capabilities, self-professedly, now able to overcome life's challenges as they immerge, particularly with the right mindset: "it's changed my whole learning 100%." Sonia admits this shift in learning has permitted her to connect work and life more effectively by relating her TKD training narrative (building confidence, overcoming adversity, and positive self-talk) to help others create attainable goals, "so that I can empower them to do better." Sonia's expectation in life is how can she positively impact those around her.

Participants had been implicitly answering question [9B] from the outset of the interviews, however, the ask became explicit, primarily to ascertain if having the question repackaged differently would elicit new insights. Participants, however, were quick to discern that they felt this question had already been answered.

Question 9B – In what ways, if any, did questioning your former thoughts, beliefs, values, or expectations prompt you to reflect more broadly on ways of thinking about yourself?

Together with questions 9 and 9A, Richard reflected on his own growth over the past 10 years, attributing it in part to TKD, which continued to enhance deeper capacities for grace, compassion, empathy, and forgiveness, to others. Richard admitted that by reaching blackbelt he was able to correct negative self-talk that might emerge as a result of starting projects, but never seeing them through to completion:

You know the internal dialogue that wants to attack me in the mirror in the morning and say, ‘you know you suck at this’... that I can speak back to that and say ‘no, you know what, you’re wrong’. I finished this, put this in your pipe and smoke it!

In conjunction with question 9A, Conrad confessed to learning how to resolve conflicts and handle difficult individuals more proficiently, tasks he previously admitted to having struggled with. Conrad was astonished TKD could facilitate growth in that area: “it gave you so many benefits outside of the dojang that just made me a better person.” Now able to navigate differences of opinion and perspective more constructively, Conrad was surprised at how his peers contributed to re-shaping his position and outlook on a range of areas, admitting that he unknowingly had been embracing others ideas for years but was not consciously aware. Conrad, unreservedly, noted that TKD was the catalyst for him becoming ‘the person he always strove to be, but didn’t know how to get there’ – this, Conrad admits, is why he owes TKD a great debt.

Max characterized himself as a “pretty negative person” and incredibly closed minded, noting that he was not open to any form of criticism prior to training, and generally was dissatisfied with life. As Max’s capacities for training and self-confidence began developing, however, his outlook shifted positively towards a more open worldview, which viewed constructive criticism as a tool for improvement. Moreover, Max was able to develop capacities for compassion and empathy, noting that he would attempt to understand a person’s unique circumstances.

Austin – addressed as part of 9A.

Sonia – addressed in conjunction with questions 6-9.

For question [10], the focus was shifted away from the participants themselves, to others they may have known who also experienced levels of deeper questioning. It was known that some participants had developed relationships with similar ranked peers, but the extent, however, was not known. As the responses were coming in it was heartening to hear of the comradery, and uplifting nature of these conversations; truly, practitioners encouraged each other to be their best selves, and help dispel negativity and misperception among one another.

Question 10 - Describe experience(s), if any, you have had with other peers who may have expressed similar levels of deep questioning (either their thoughts, beliefs, values, or expectations) during their journey to blackbelt?

Richard explained that his TKD journey, and to a greater extent the answers to many of the questions asked:

Had been colored to some degree by the conversations that I've had with some other people that were testing for blackbelt at the same time... they have, you know, sort of helped me come to the conclusion which I think I've come to, and that it's a personal sport.... But very much a group journey that we build...

Building on the camaraderie experienced while training, Richard remarked on how it was possible to grow and work through similar training hurdles:

I've had conversations with people that are of similar age to me and have similar or greater levels... they voiced similar comments about their own thresholds, that they're willing to push themselves to, you know, achieving a level of accomplishment... having that kind of character surrounding you makes it whole lot easier to give yourself the space to grow at the pace you're ready to grow.

Austin's brother, a high-level TKD competitor himself, became a source of deep questioning, when Austin faced a repeated string of losses while training for high level competition; winning is not how success should be measured, but rather, the interpersonal growth among peers which occurs through the process of training/competing. Austin discovered that other competitors did not seem to judge his competitive performance, instead they held tremendous respect and admiration for the dedication and time invested into training. Now owner and operator of his own dojang, Austin claimed that many parents have communicated to him the impact of TKD [dojang and teaching] on their children.

Conrad forged a strong connection with another woman who was also training towards blackbelt and who also experienced a similar "total transformation," noting they often confided

in one another to overcome many perceived hurdles in their respective lives, both inside/outside the dojang. TKD became a mechanism to address the unique deficiencies each was lacking for various reasons. As Conrad's relationship continued to strengthen with his training peer he noted how TKD was able to propel them through 'dark times', frequently remarking on how powerful/transformational TKD was.

Sonia admitted to having conversations with other adult practitioners all of whom expressed some form of self-doubt and/or questions of ability, 'will I be able to get there', or 'can I do this'. Moreover, Sonia noted that conversations of ambivalence and uncertainty created opportunities to empower one another and share knowledge, ideas, and experiences.

Max recounted the depth of conversation and sharing of experiences as a junior colored belt, then contrasted this mindset against similar dialogue once he obtained blackbelt. Dialogue initially, according to Max, was mainly circumstantial and situational, i.e. what would you do if presented with 'X' scenario [referencing the usage of techniques], which eventually transitioned into a moralistic discussion placing human welfare, accountability, and appropriateness of technique utilization at the forefront of any potential scenarios.

Question [11] sought to understand if deeper questioning resulted in participants trying or experiencing new roles, relationships, or actions, both inside and outside the dojang. The structure of the question, however, produced responses that addressed the former. Despite the focus on TKD, it became clear that relationship/role/action selection was transferrable, with some taking these skills into their professional and personal lives. The discovery concerning the

structure of the interview questions suggested this and others are too lengthy, and have multiple clauses, creating a situation that breeds confusion or misinterpretation.

Question 11 - In what ways, if any, did questioning your thoughts, beliefs, values, or expectations prompt you to explore new/other possible roles, relationships, or actions, both as a practitioner of TKD, and as a person (outside of TKD) more broadly?

As Richard continued to learn and receive “reassurance” in the dojang, he was approached to begin instructing junior classes, a role he could not have imagined otherwise: “Having an opportunity to do that, that was not a role that I wouldn’t have taken if it had not been for the experience in Taekwon-Do, but also the moral position that is demanded from others for the in-classroom situation.”

Austin’s ability to reframe high-level competitive loss was a seminal moment, prompting him to shift attitudes towards learning (through training), relationships with others, and himself:

I feel like when I sort of made that self-discovery that you know this losing, winning, whatever, has nothing to do with my value as a person, it’s about the effort... the fact I was able to realize it makes my relationships healthier... it just makes me a healthier, a person that’s more easily able to develop a relationship with.

Conrad, similar to Richard, noted that he did not anticipate or imagine himself assuming a teaching role within the dojang, despite coming from a family of teachers. While teaching, Conrad continued to receive a positive feedback loop prompting him to explore other teaching

roles outside the dojang: “I think it gave me the opportunity to realize that I was and am very capable of teaching people.”

Similar to

So, by opening those doors and forcing myself to socialize with people that weren't in my inner circle, and I didn't have to explain things to. It definitely formed those new relationships, and it did make me question my role.

After many years of feeling underappreciated and unhappy in his current vocation, Max returned to full time study while simultaneously working fulltime – he attributed this role shift to the positive support and time spent training, noting that unless he changed himself his approach to life could not change either.

Similar to the issue encountered in question [11], participants aligned the intent of this question [12] directly to their TKD experiences, vs. their broader lives. Inferred from the responses to similar questions, it was presume that a response to this question would be a contextual example within the dojang. After some reframing and conversational probes, many were able to begin connecting the examples they provided in TKD to their broader lives – in this instance the actions were deliberate, revealing how aspects of the transformed self were beginning to integrate into other life spheres.

Question 12 - In what ways, if any, did questioning your thoughts, beliefs, values, or expectations prompt you to explore taking different actions you might not otherwise have considered?

Building on Richard's response from question 11, he admitted to pursuing leadership positions, which placed him in a position of decision making, responsible for directing the work of others; positions he could not have envisioned/imagined otherwise.

Austin's unfortunate prior experiences with TKD mentors/instructors was the impetus for him pursuing entrepreneurial opportunities within the context of TKD. Specifically, Austin noted that his love of TKD, stalled training opportunities, and the revelation that we all have something to teach/learn from one another was a seminal moment, spurring a decisive course of action to promote the art to others through various community building efforts (see previous questions), and the establishment of his own TKD school.

Conrad was without hesitation in admitting that training made him a calmer, more serene person, able to resolve conflict without anger or reprisal: "I've applied that in every area of my life." Moreover, his ability to practice calmness throughout his life has helped him develop deeper capacities for self-control, a tenet of TKD he takes very seriously. Conrad's ability to develop a pervasive calmness and self-control has helped him handle things with a new outlook/approach.

In conjunction with interview question responses 9 through 11, Sonia's decision to push through many layers of adversity while training towards blackbelt allowed her to reflect on what 'could have been possible', had she opted to begin training earlier in life; particularly, challenging the perception of "shelf life" she believed with respect to her ability to train effectively. Sonia's realization that she could accomplish anything she set out to do, along with the confidence and agency to competently perform tasks, has now manifested in a parenting shift. Sonia believes that her experiences, shaped by TKD, will help influence the decisions of her children, with dialogue focused on empowerment and building capacities for agency. When discussing action in various

spheres of her life, Sonia says, “everything is doable, and so I probably wouldn’t have talked like that 20 years ago....”

Max reemphasized how private he was concerning innermost thoughts and feelings prior to TKD training, noting that the confidence gleaned through the training process equipped him with the courage to reveal to his family that he had been battling debilitating mental health issues for years – an affliction that, Max admits, had been rampant in his family. Moreover, Max recognized that he had a problem [mental illness] and knew a solution was required. This solution began with an acknowledgement of his own feelings: “I think this was crucial for me.”

In question [13], participants were to consider how deeper questioning may, or may not, have spurred them to grow and change, both inside TKD and beyond. Participants circled around the answer in their responses to previous questions, so it was not evident, at least initially, how they would attempt to frame the answer. Regardless, it was interesting that most took the opportunity to express how their growth had personal implications outside TKD.

Question 13 - In what ways, if any, did questioning your thoughts, beliefs, values, or expectations motivate you to plan a course of action to enable you to develop and grow in new ways both as a practitioner of TKD, and as a person more broadly?

After achieving blackbelt Richard took a short hiatus from training, but upon resuming training his responses to this question and others reflected the continued narrative of maintaining strong, physical conditioning and healthy eating, augmented by his training in TKD. Richard remarked how his commitment to physical training manifested an increased focus on his

spiritual and mental conditioning, noting that he would create additional time for prayer, meditation, and religious text engagement; from sporadic, to near daily.

Austin's openness to learn from others helped him to expand his professional knowledge and skills from an older, more experienced student, while pursuing graduate study. Austin attributes his current successes from this this experience. Moreover, he admits to developing a growth focused mindset, one that freely welcomes and encourages the knowledge and experiences of others, or 'what do other people have to offer me' [non-pretentious].

The growth Conrad experienced as a result of TKD training gave him insight into how he conducts himself: "I never really truly liked the way that I conducted myself in public before my journey began... I was angry a lot... I had a lot of built-up anger," and TKD provided a positive mechanism in which to deal with it. TKD gave Conrad a foundation and platform to "become a better me," after feeling dissatisfied with himself. Others observed this positive shift in Conrad, too: "The way I hold myself, the way I conduct myself it is noticed, and I know that its noticed because I've been actually told by a number of people that I'm not the same person that I once was."

Sonia thought she addressed this question previously, but added that she is preparing herself mentally and physically to test for the rank of fourth degree. Additionally, she would like to compete again at the world level, if not as a competitor, but a mentor and coach for junior students.

Max recounted the personal story of becoming recently reconnected with an estranged family member, unexpectedly diagnosed with terminal cancer. This relative was a self-made,

community focused businessperson, who imparted their philosophical orientation on money, work, and the importance of strong relationships. The impact of this experience on Max was profound: “There’s no way I can put into words what those eight months meant because it was effectively life changing. It has paved the way for everything that’s happened since.” This seminal moment propelled Max into changing careers and returning to university, a decision that he attributes to TKD, as he now began to realize and respect his self-worth.

Participants appeared clear on how TKD had impacted their lives outside of training, but question [14] sought to discover if they possessed the insight required to make any intentions/plans/actions reality. The responses obtained suggested that participants had been engaging in critical reflection, thereby identifying the skills/attitudes required to move past any perceived, or future challenges.

Question 14 - What skills, knowledge, or attitudes, if any, did you think you might need in order to implement your plans to make changes to your thinking, beliefs, values, or expectations?

As part of his continued strength training and commitment to healthy eating, Richard noted that a significant amount of research/education was required to avoid injury and consume foods which contained toxins and other harmful substances. Additionally, Richard explained that moving from a superficial knowledge of TKD, i.e., learning the motions, to the ‘why’ behind the motions has been “revelatory.” An in-depth knowledge of food and physiology became essential to “accomplish the growth my worldview demands of me,” and to “extend grace to myself,” when consuming food that contained little nutritional benefit, or performing exercises that could cause

serious ramifications if performed incorrectly. Richard re-emphasized the integral, intrinsic nature through which moral character and character development guide his everyday actions: “you know, its philosophically foundational, my worldview doesn’t work in the absence of it.”

Austin was clear on the importance of open-mindedness and the ability to critically reflect on past thoughts, decisions, and actions. Additionally, he stressed the importance again of learning from others and how it can position you for success: “Huge attitude changer when you go into every interaction or encounter realizing that you know this person can really help me.”

Conrad was unequivocal that the foundational skills obtained from white belt through black belt were necessary to implement his change plans – everything from physical and mental, to being courteous and kind to others: “I have acquired confidence now that I take with me wherever I go... it’s probably in the top three things I’ve taken away from the art.” Conrad noted the need for open-mindedness and a positive attitude, something he attributes to training with other like-minded peers, noting that they have, “pushed me beyond even my belief in myself,” and “I have been truly amazed by some of their lessons that they’ve taught me.”

Sonia re-emphasized the importance of changing one’s mindset, especially when faced with challenge or adversity. As major goals arise to be accomplished, or challenges emerge, Sonia strives to put all her energy and focus into completing said objectives, noting that by overcoming obstacles and working through difficulty is, ‘black belt mentality’.

Max, analogous to his peers, also placed great importance on maintaining a positive attitude. Max also noted that a degree of risk was required, ‘stepping out of one’s comfort zone’, to accomplish tasks. Consultation with others, including their input and perspective, became

vital as Max sought to make changes in his personal/professional life – skills he attributes to TKD training.

In questions [15 and 15A], responses that deviated from what was provided by participants in the preceding questions [11-14] were not anticipated, however, this question was inclusive to include the assumption of roles broadly, vs. specifying a context, as the aim was to discover if deep questioning perpetuated a shift from former self to newly integrated self. It was fascinating to hear from participants what they could not imagine doing prior to training, such as working with youth, or developing ambitious career capacities.

Question 15 - As a result of changing any thoughts, beliefs, values, or expectations, what new roles did you assume that you may not have seen yourself assuming previously?

Richard thought he addressed this question previously, with respect to his involvement in the dojang as an instructor, and moving into professional roles/contexts he otherwise couldn't have imagined.

Austin saw learning as a reciprocal act regardless of station – something he previously struggled with during high-level competition training, and oppressive training conditions he experienced at other dojangs. Austin prefers to view himself now as a “peer,” rather than a “subordinate,” which is reflective of his desire to build a community of learners, versus an autocratic learning environment.

Conrad never envisioning training youth or junior students, however, now embraces the opportunity, citing that he derives pride and satisfaction when they have a ‘lightbulb moment’,

and can observe their expressions. Over the past decade Conrad received a number of vocational advancements, which he attributes to TKD, and had this to say about a recent promotion:

I never ever thought I could do, but having that attitude and skill set, learning from others, how to embrace challenges, how to overcome hurdles and obstacles... I truly feel that my promotion... is a direct result of my training over the last 10 years in Taekwon-Do.

As Max continued to gain confidence through training he sought out new opportunities with his employer, including supervisory positions. Max expressed how many strategies learned through TKD training were directly relatable when dealing with people in the workplace, causing him to consider his actions more carefully. Additionally, Max noted how taking new roles has allowed him to inform his future career plans, recognizing that his existing vocation was not something he saw long term.

Sonia elected to move on as she thought this question was answered previously.

Question 15A – In what ways, if any, did assuming a new role change how you perceived yourself or your capacities?

The structure of the dojang teaching environment created a model where Richard could ask questions, and build teaching capacities/confidence under the direction of a senior belt. This style of mentorship provided an opportunity for Richard to practice/enhance his teaching, and demonstrate expertise of TKD subject matter in structured and safe way (for both himself and the students), while maintaining standards and quality in the programming. Richard recounted how teaching students in TKD was a motivating and enjoyable experience, where he derived

satisfaction from observing other students' 'ah-ha!' moments, and by demonstrating proficiency in the subject [TKD] matter:

I wouldn't have thought there would be an opportunity for me to be able to do that... I've always enjoyed teaching, obviously... one of my previous professional roles was as an instructor, an adult teacher... Part of what I enjoyed was the light bulb moment for the students, and the other part of what I enjoyed was what it demanded me to know, the material inside out, upside down, and that really made that experience enjoyable and motivating to me personally.

Austin re-emphasized the points articulated expressed in previous questions: the need to develop a growth-oriented mindset by learning from others.

Conrad admitted that he had plenty of doubts but eventually developed a capacity for agency and increased confidence, recognizing that he could only rely on himself when it came to overcoming challenges or difficulties in the dojang or workplace. Conrad also confessed to having mounted his TKD credentials on his office wall as conscious reminder of challenges he overcame to reach that rank, noting that if he can achieve that, he can achieve anything.

Sonia elected to move on as she thought this question was answered previously.

Max confessed to developing and actualizing a deeper capacity for empathy than he initially thought capable, citing that a vocational opportunity placed him in a role which necessitated the development of community relationship building.

The rationale of question [16] was to have participants reflect on their own sense of ability, particularly as they assumed/explored new roles and relations with themselves and others.

Participants were clear on what skills/abilities were required, or needed to be developed, to help them excel in a given context. This affirmation was powerful, many professing to just how much they had changed, or continued to be improved.

Question 16 - As you explored new roles and relationships with others and yourself, what changes, if any, did you experience in your own sense of competence/self-competence?

Richard noted the importance of becoming immersed and knowledgeable in the subject matter imparted to students in the dojang:

You can't get away with being fuzzy about the details. If you are teaching on those details you have to know them cold and hard, and the holes in your knowledge are the gaping, sucking chest wounds when you're standing in front of the class and hear your dumbfounded answer, and not knowing what the right answer is. So that is the absolute primal terror that prevents you from getting yourself caught in that kind of situation, and therefore caused me to really know the material that I was going to be covering for that curriculum.

The need for mastery or knowledgeability in a professional context, and beyond, was evident:

The reality of what that looks like when I'm standing in front of the dojang, then immediately carries over to everything. If I'm doing a business presentation and I know I'm the one that's going to be standing in front of the Board presenting on a new product... it causes me to overprepare, and it also causes me to presuppose

what the questions (answers) might be... It impacts every part of my life where I'm communicating to people.

Austin highlighted the need to be secure and confident in the knowledge, skills, and abilities, one possesses, while maintaining humility and an openness to learn from others – 'you don't know, what you don't know'.

Conrad expressed that strengthening relationships with others was vital to building confidence and reaffirming to himself that he is capable of succeeding, inside and outside the dojang. As Conrad continued to train and improve, the dojang and workplace provided mediums in which these skills could be practiced.

Prior to training, Sonia could not anticipate her future successes in TKD given the prohibitive nature of her existing health conditions. The momentum Sonia experienced after achieving her first belt promotions empowered her, and challenged existing thinking/perceptions. Sonia admitted that after reaching the rank of red belt her sights were 'laser focused' on reaching blackbelt, which completely altered her perceptions about what was possible. Sonia noted the reciprocal relationship with other peers as a source of empowerment and motivation, when confronted with low points in training. The peer support was viewed as formative in building confidence, and could facilitate in providing insights when stuck on a difficult concept or technique. Sonia admitted that TKD was able to help combat her perfectionism through normalizing mistake making: "Taekwon-Do helps beat that out of you in a way...."

As a self-professed introvert, Max confessed that relationships fostered and cultivated through training provided a context in which he felt comfortable and confident enough to, ‘come out of his shell’, and open up to others. Moreover, Max admitted the confidence to develop relationships helped improve his self-image inside and outside the dojang, noting that he can glean a great deal from others through simply listening.

Participants were articulate about the changes they experienced as a result of deep
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down'. Austin believes that he now possesses the perspective and worldview to tackle difficult situations head on, versus reacting emotionally.

Conrad noted that very early in training his feelings, beliefs, and expectations, were challenged, saying this of his experience:

I truly feel that the martial art Taekwon-Do has given me just countless benefits, and all those years ago when I started to question what I truly believed in life, and of people, and of my situation, and when that quickly began to change, I quickly began to adopt new feelings, new strategies, new outlooks, new beliefs...

Sonia expressed ambivalence, wishing she had begun training earlier in life but was cognizant that the experience would have an entirely different perspective/outcome as a young person. Moreover, had Sonia reached these conclusions earlier in life the impact would have been significant on future life choices, something Sonia admits to just understanding now late into her 40s. Overall, Sonia is grateful for the experience, but cites health concerns as her biggest challenge moving forward and is uncertain how long she can continue training. Sonia will continue to strive forward with a 'can-do' attitude, noting that she is attempting to position herself [health wise] for the next 15 years before retirement.

Max identified as someone who thrives on routine, a "creature of habit," so when thoughts and feelings began to change it prompted him to engage in deeper reflection, 'why am I thinking this, I've never thought this way before'. It has been a decidedly positive change, helping him to "excel in my personal life," and provide some clarity on future career prospects, recognizing that his current vocation is misaligned with future ambitions and not living up to his imagined

potential. When speaking on the totality of his TKD experience, he explained: “I can definitely say I wouldn’t have arrived at where I’m at today....”

Question 17A – In what ways, if any, have you integrated these changes in perspective into your life, both as a TKD practitioner and as person, broadly?

Richard reiterated the need for natural body movements which are conducive to remaining healthy, and that effective TKD practice is the direct result of correct physical movements: “Our bodies are designed to work a certain way, and if you’re practicing the art right, your body is moving in exactly that way.” Continued care, compassion, and overall regard for others’ welfare, or “grace,” became a guiding principle for Richard inside and outside of the dojang:

The way that I view others morally and the way I view myself morally, as far as extending mercy and grace, and expecting genuine character out of people tenets of Taekwon-Do, and expecting it not in a demanding way, but in a positive, hopeful, moving them towards a higher goal way, and hoping for the best in who they are and looking for the best in who they are. That is a natural state that I’m designed as a person, as a being, to imbue to others and to myself, that is my natural state of being.

Austin elected to move on as he thought this question was answered previously.

In addition to the previous responses above, Conrad attempted to integrate a positive attitude, learning from others, open-mindedness, humility, confidence, and a growth focused mindset, vis-à-vis learning from previous mistakes.

Sonia elected to move on as she thought this question was answered previously.

Max, in addition to the previous responses above, attempted to integrate a more positive outlook on life, an overall acceptance of his feelings and emotions, establishing/fostering new/existing relationships, taking risks, and self-acceptance.

Question 17B – What do you think the long-term impact of these changes has been or will be?

Richard noted that having experienced the journey to blackbelt he cannot retroactively feel doubt or wonder if this was a goal he could achieve, while conversely, can never disavow its occurrence should he choose not to continue – this is a broader sentiment/affirmation, in which he can maintain accountability in other areas of his life.

Austin was clear that TKD contributed significantly in developing critical reflection, good interpersonal skills, and a capacity to reflect on previous actions regardless of a person's viewpoint. Austin contends these skills would have been challenging to develop without having trained in TKD.

Conrad was clear that TKD contributed to a happier life and is now hopeful for the future, however, should challenges arise he vows to address them head on, without fear. Conrad added that continued TKD training will facilitate mental and physical benefits now and into old age.

Sonia elected to move on as she thought this question was answered previously.

Max was optimistic about his future prospects, noting that he has overcome much inner strife and adversity with respect to self-image and self-worth. Furthermore, motivation, hard work, and commitment to remain steadfast to his goals and ambitions, was gleaned from TKD training and will continue to pave the way forward for future success.

Analysis

While some commonalities of experience were attested across participants, the depth and uniqueness of their transformative experience, including the resultant self-professed changes were decidedly personal. Moreover, the perception at which participants viewed their own depth of transformation was fascinating, with some acutely and intuitively embracing the experience, while others were a bit protracted, or in some instances it became an affirmation of experience and choices. The extent to which participants each claimed a transformative experience is largely contingent upon the complexity, nuance, and aggregation of factors, that have facilitated and contributed to their prior learning experiences, such as social/cultural knowledge and assumptions, and pre-existing knowledge frameworks. As evidenced in the results section above, and subsequent analysis below, the extent to which each participant experienced a transformative event varies considerably.

Thesis Questions

Does Taekwon-Do, as a nonformal learning environment, facilitate in creating a transformative learning experience?

During the interviews and time spent with each participant it was clear that TKD as a site of nonformal learning had created an enduring and impactful change in their lives. Participants' motivations and journey through TKD has been uniquely personal, however, the following observations emerged, and help to characterize the transformative learning experiences of those

involved. Austin's precociousness was on point when he said, "there's a highly personal reflective journey that all martial arts at some point require their highest-level practitioners to take."

The first observation was, *fostering confidence and personal agency – correlated with both dispelling misperceptions of self, and developing positive self-perceptions of one's physical/mental abilities, and/or self-worth/acceptance, both inside and outside the dojang*. Participants subscribed to the belief, initially, that they were perhaps incapable of TKD training, or thriving in a training context, due to perceived barriers and assumptions about age, ability, doubt, and/or uncertainty. The dojang environment provided mentorship, empowerment, camaraderie, and/or positive feedback/reinforcement, which overall contributed to an erosion of accumulated and fortified misperceptions. Taken collectively, the dojang environment contributed to the growth and personal milestones/successes, eventually leading participants towards reframing their own agency, self-worth/acceptance, and/or feelings of increased confidence.

The second observation was, *learning/insight gleaned from others*. Participants acquired much knowledge, insight, perspectives, and experience, from both their peers and other legitimate knowledge holders in TKD. Moreover, participants developed an acute sense of humility along with a proclivity and receptivity towards knowledge acquisition from peers and experts inside, and eventually outside the dojang. Additionally, many participants professed to espousing a growth-oriented mindset, thereby abdicating harmful learning attitudes such as perfectionism and egotism. Participants conceded that they were, A- not the sole purveyors of knowledge, B- would need to integrate and respect the perspectives, experiences, and viewpoints, of others in the dojang to grow and improve, and/or, C- that mistakes and failures were necessary

to grow and succeed, inside and outside the dojang. For some participants, fostering relationships with peers, classmates, and instructors, became an essential component to reifying their transformative experience as it provided a medium to engage in dialectical conversation, leading to new understandings and insights, which likely would have remained distant, or continued to keep existing states of misperceptions entrenched.

The third observation was, *fostering a context for experimentation and change through practice [time commitment], and continued reflection*. As interviews and stories were collected from each participant, it became clear that some transformations were incremental and gradual, i.e., they did not all appear to be sudden and abrupt, or what some coin as the ‘ah-ha!’ moment. Participants arrived at TKD with plenty of prior knowledge and many rigid, if not dogged, assumptions and beliefs not easily changed. In some instances, participants would experience seminal moment(s) which invited conversation for deeper questioning, however, this observation should be treated as an amalgam of the previous two observations points, otherwise it has difficulty existing independently. So, why does this matter? In the researcher’s many years of both practicing, teaching, and mentoring in TKD students, first, need time to, A- learn, practice, and cogitate what’s been taught/discussed, and B- reflect/perform/discuss those experiences, either amongst their peers or through self-reflection. To the point, participants’ interview responses suggest a similar experience to what’s outlined above, that is, they needed time to discern their experiences, reflect on it, then reconcile the disparity between what they originally thought/believed, and what has actually happened to them – this experience is nurtured within

the context of the dojang, through time, reflection, and in conjunction with the previous observations above; this process becomes both tacit and explicit.

Take for example Max, who indicated around the blue belt level that he began to observe a shift in his personality due to the physical and mental benefits of training. For reference, blue belt is almost halfway to blackbelt or about 1.5-2 years' worth of training commitment. Max said it was during this time frame that he began to ask deeper questions of himself. Why was he training? Why did he feel the way he did about himself? What made him continue training and ultimately question many deep-rooted emotions that previously remained inscrutable? This process continued on for years, preceding blue belt and beyond, with the transformative process amplifying and become more comprehensible to Max as time elapsed.

To illustrate a second example take Conrad, who admitted that deeper questioning became integral to the larger transformation experienced, and said this with respect to his previously held misperceptions: "I felt stupid for the things I believed in what I was proven wrong by going to class... I felt like a small person for having those preconceived notions, that I thought I knew what it was all about." Conrad expressed shame and regret for previously holding erroneous assumptions, however, what's implied here and is explicit in his interview, is incremental changes he experienced leading to a transformative moment.

What are the transformative experiences of adult black belt Taekwon-Do practitioners, if any?

As outlined in the participants' interview findings above, transformative experiences of adult black belt TKD practitioners throughout many domains in their lives have been extensive,

increasingly varied, overtly positive, far reaching, and in many cases life changing. The diversity of responses reflects how each participant perceived the breadth of their transformative experience; so, while some similarities exist, so too does uniqueness. After carefully reviewing and analyzing the responses of each participant, the following, broad, transformative experiences appeared shared across participants: *challenging misperceptions of personal ability, agency, and self-worth, adoption of a growth-oriented mindset, integrating alternative points of view, experiences, and insights which originally were divergent from their own, and transference of the previously stated points into their lives beyond a TKD training context.* A high-level synopsis of each participant, which is reflective of the overall observation above follows.

Of each participant interviewed, Richard's experience was perhaps the most difficult to frame. Identifying as a devout Christian, spirituality, prayer, God, and Biblical teachings, frames much of how Richard engages with everyday life. Richard noted his early mind set when beginning TKD:

I was in my forties so I didn't have a whole lot of hopes for what I could accomplish... and the expectations were set reasonably so that I wouldn't get discouraged... the physical growth was paced correctly so that even at my age I could... very reasonably accomplish goals that were set in front of me.

Richard indicated that throughout the 10-years of training in TKD that he fostered an "inclination of grace towards others," and that his choice of "activities" and "emotions" is tied to

his practice of the art. Moreover, Richard added that his “worldview to extend grace and mercy to others has preceded from that choice, from that change... “it’s the way that I’m designed to be.”

Admitting that his worldview on people had moved from “archetypal” to “real,” Richard attributed this shift in thinking, in part, to his time spend training in TKD: “During those 10 years since I’ve been practicing on and off training, my worldview viewing people is a whole lot less archetypal, and much more real. So, I view people now as people, there are no paragons.”

Richard observed that TKD Masters and senior students in particular would extend “grace,” which he attributed to be kindness, compassion, and forgiveness to others, both in the dojang and more broadly as human beings. The quality of people training, coupled with their ability to positively impact the world around them helped to shift Richard’s perspective on others.

Continued care, compassion, and overall regard for others’ welfare, or “grace,” became a guiding principle for Richard inside and outside of the dojang.

Austin’s self-worth as a TKD practitioner was originally measured through competitive success, however, after a string of disappointments he began to reframe loss, changing his perception of himself after including others’ perspectives and insights:

I feel like when I sort of made that self-discovery that you know this losing, winning, whatever, has nothing to do with my value as a person, it’s about the effort... the fact I was able to realize it makes my relationships healthier... it just makes me a healthier, a person that’s more easily able to develop a relationship with.

Austin, having spent many years in an unhealthy TKD training context that attempted to foster elitism and arrogance, had “a major shift in my belief,” prompting him to adopt a learning philosophy, a sentiment he shares amongst his own students. Moreover, Austin freely encourages his students to reciprocally learn from others, regardless of their station in life – a belief he also subscribes to. As he recounts, “it would be such a better world if everybody feels like they can develop and learn something from everybody... that’s one of the best, more important lessons I’ve ever learned from Taekwon-Do.”

Prior to training, Conrad thought as though he had “failed” in many areas of his life, and admitted that he had many misconceptions and preconceived notions about TKD that were “very, very false.” The deep questioning became inherent as part of the larger transformation for Conrad: “I felt stupid for the things I believed in when I was proven wrong by going to class... I felt like a small person for having those preconceived notions that I thought I knew what it was all about.” Unequivocal about the physical benefits received through TKD training, Conrad said, “it’s nothing short of a transformation,” and that, “mentally I am not the same person that I was in September 2011.” Conrad admitted to learning much from both his peers and other experts within the art, noting they have, “pushed me beyond even my belief in myself.” While recounting the depth of his transformation, Conrad says, “I owe TKD a lot... I might even go so far as to say I owe it my life.” To conclude the interview, he summarized his experience as follows:

I truly feel that the martial art Taekwon-Do has given me just countless benefits, and all those years ago when I started to question what I truly believed in life, and

of people, and of my situation, and when that quickly began to change, I quickly began to adopt new feelings, new strategies, new outlooks, new beliefs...

Sonia believed she had a “shelf life” with respect to TKD training, and due to chronic physical afflictions admitted that, “my biggest thoughts were always about would I be able to continue.” Pushing through adversity, however, Sonia described her experience as “life changing,” noting that, “it transforms your thinking, the way you behave, the way I practiced... this is just who I am now.” Stepping into world-level competition at 40 years old was a decisive moment for Sonia, who began to question other areas of her life, no longer seeing boundaries but possibilities:

I put that example towards every other question moment in life, and it kind of pushes me through other aspect where I’m questioning, or feeling low in self-confidence....” Overall, Sonia said this of her experience, “I guess it’s freaking amazing... nothing short of a miracle really.

Max admitted to having an internal struggle with body image, emotions, and mental health issues. Max’s transformative experience began in relation to his increased physical performance (with the mental changes occurring later): “I started respecting myself a little more, I was more open with my feelings with myself, and it basically reshaped my whole outlook on life.” Max’s journey to black belt saw a shift towards developing positive self-worth, noting that overtime his opinion of himself had changed. As Max continued to gain confidence, see physical improvements, and acceptance on his body image, he said, “I thought it was interesting to see what was going on inside my head...,” and that deeper questioning of inner thoughts and

feelings made him feel positive, especially becoming aware of his mental well-being and how many benefits he saw through training. Overall, Max said of his experience, “I can definitely say I wouldn’t have arrived at where I’m at today....”

If adult black belt TKD practitioners have experienced a transformative event, how has it impacted other spheres of their lives?

A recurring theme amongst participants is how their increased confidence now pushes beyond the boundaries of the dojang and into other spheres of their lives. For example, Conrad who admits, “I have acquired confidence now that I take with me wherever I go...,” and others who also notice this decided shift, “the way I hold myself, the way I conduct myself it is noticed, and I know that its noticed because I’ve been actually told by a number of people that I’m not the same person that I once was.” Max, who routinely identified as shy throughout the interview shared similar sentiments, now gaining the confidence to develop new relationships outside the dojang. Conversely, Sonia when faced with indecision or questions of ability in the workplace, draws upon her self-confidence and skills to overcome challenges. Richard now felt confident to navigate anxiety provoking, or possible confrontational situations beyond the dojang, helping him to create a more “comfortable view of the world around me, so that could be things with less fear and therefore be more prone to be able to respond in a confident meekness as opposed to a terrified weakness.”

As a requirement of examination for black belt, TKD practitioners are called upon to either assist other students individually or through group instruction, and/or called upon to instruct

classes in the absence of a senior instructor. As an extension of confidence building, this experience for some participants has galvanized them towards pursuing other employment options they might not have considered. Richard for example, admitted to pursuing leadership positions, which has him responsible for the actions of his team along with directing their work; an opportunity he could not have envisioned/imagined otherwise. Additionally, Richard saw the need for mastery and knowledgeability in the dojang and his professional life; the two are harmonious:

The reality of what that looks like when I'm standing in front of the dojang, then immediately carries over to everything. If I'm doing a business presentation and I know I'm the one that's going to be standing in front of the Board presenting on a new product... it causes me to overprepare, and it also causes me to presuppose what the questions (answers) might be... It impacts every part of my life where I'm communicating to people.

Conrad confessed to having received multiple promotions throughout the course of his training, most recently to a role that:

I never ever thought I could do, but having that attitude and skill set, learning from others, how to embrace challenges, how to overcome hurdles and obstacles... I truly feel that my promotion... is a direct result of my training over the last 10 years in Taekwon-Do.

While assisting colleagues in the workplace now, Conrad applies what he learned in the dojang: “I think it gave me the opportunity to realize that I was and am very capable of teaching people.”

Developing a learning focused attitude/mindset, humility, acceptance/accountability when mistakes or errors are made, open-mindedness (accepts alternative and competing points of view), knowledge and insight (gleaned from training), has served participants well into their lives beyond the dojang. Austin spoke to the impact of this sentiment, which he claims made him more successful, a “huge attitude changer when you go into every interaction, encounter, realizing that you know this person can really help me.” Additionally, while pursuing graduate studies, Austin recounted learning from another peer who was older and more experienced, which helped him to build additional skills and capacities: “I wouldn’t be as knowledgeable or successful...” without that experience. Sonia admitted to being a perfectionist and treating herself poorly when making mistakes, “almost to the point where I would not be able to accept that I was the one making the error.” Furthermore, Sonia contends, “in my old way of thinking I would make a mistake and it would stop me from doing those things because I wouldn’t like to be put in the center of focus where I’m making the error.” Looking towards the future, Sonia is humble in her orientation, citing that it is ‘ok to make mistakes’, and will seek out assistance if uncertain; this applies to home and professional life: “it’s changed my whole learning 100%.”

Conrad said this of himself, prior to TKD training: “I never really truly liked the way that I conducted myself in public before my journey began... I was angry a lot... I had a lot of built-up anger.” The growth experienced through TKD provided a mechanism through which he could constructively channel these emotions, and now identifies as a “calmer, serene person,” able to

resolve conflicts instead of getting angry, to which he has “applied that in every area of my life.” Conrad praised TKD’s impact on life beyond the dojang: “it gave you so many benefits outside the dojang that just made me a better person.” Similarly, Sonia felt that her experiences are now able to help influence the decisions of her children [empowerment], and the advice given has been grounded and shaped by her experiences in TKD, “everything is doable, and so I probably wouldn’t have talked like that 20 years ago....”

Continued care, compassion, and overall regard for others’ welfare, or “grace,” became a guiding principle for Richard inside and outside of the dojang:

The way that I view others morally and the way I view myself morally, as far as extending mercy and grace, and expecting genuine character out of people tenets of Taekwon-Do, and expecting it not in a demanding way, but in a positive, hopeful, moving them towards a higher goal way, and hoping for the best in who they are and looking for the best in who they are... that is my natural state of being.

Chapter 5 – DISCUSSION

After concluding interviews with participants and having an opportunity to review the data, the results gleaned from this research were gratifying and affirming. Knowing that deep and profound transformation is not only possible, but real and substantiated, has provided some closure to years of anecdotal conjecture and reflection among peers and other high-ranking leaders/practitioners of the art. Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory provides a mechanism through which the phenomena under investigation in this research can be understood. Therefore, it can be stated that, **Taekwon-Do (TKD), as a nonformal learning context, can elicit deep and varied transformative learning experiences among adult blackbelt practitioners, which have greater implications for their individual lives, both within, and beyond the context of the dojang.**

Critical Reflection & Self-Examination

Participants experienced some manifestation of a disorienting dilemma, a challenge to their existing knowledge, values, beliefs, and experiences; however, "critical self-reflection" Mezirow (1991, p. 87) contends, is at the heart of transformative learning theory, thereby, providing a critical examination of how prior learning and past events have shaped assumptions, knowledge, experiences, and worldview. TKD can provide many opportunities for critical self-reflection, however, those moments are largely contingent on individuals and their respective learning contexts within the art. Similar observations by Cynarski and Lee-Baron (2014) have discovered

that “continuous self-development,” and “growing awareness of one’s own weakness,” are values attributed to marital arts training (p. 12).

Sonia described her TKD experience as “life changing,” but it was her participation in world level competition early on in her training which produced a seminal moment, that induced reflection: “That actually was the first moment in time that I felt like I reflected back on Taekwon-Do life and put it into my regular life... it was one of the most curious times in my life... it added the extra confidence to my life that I didn’t know I needed.” Additionally, Sonia admitted the experience prompted other moments of deep questioning in her life, [I] “put that example towards every other question moment in life and it kind of pushes me through other aspects where I’m questioning, or feeling low in self-confidence, or is this the right decision... I actually reflect on it more than I can say.” Sonia’s deeper critical reflection prompted a significant shift in many interrelated aspects of her life, including beliefs she once maintained on her age and ability, along with both acquiring new knowledge, perception on making mistakes, and the impacts to her professional and personal lives.

Max embarked upon a critically reflexive journey into his own constructs of identity, feelings, thoughts, and behavior. Once challenged, Max realized that many of his self-constructed beliefs were erroneous, and had created barriers in his life, leading to a protracted period of additional self-questioning and self-discovery. Channon (2012, p. 122), notes that Western men training in ‘Eastern’ martial arts have the “basis” of their “constructions of gender,” influenced through training. Max articulated the great inner turmoil he continued to experience with processing emotions and body image.

Austin espoused and maintained the benefits of continued self-reflection citing that it “made him a better person”; a practice he often engaged in. Through many years of martial arts training and teaching Austin, precociously, observed that reflective practice appears inherent in many traditional martial arts, incumbent on, and spurred by the practitioner: “There’s a highly personal reflective journey that all martial arts at some point require their highest-level practitioners to take..” Similar observations are noted by Sanford and Gill (2019), attempting to understand the essential components of a martial art training experience, they note that students are encouraged to challenging their “sense of self” (p. 37), and to “introspect and self-evaluate” (p. 38).

When speaking on the mental growth experienced Conrad noted that: “I am not the same person that I was in September 2011, hell I’m not even the same person I was five years ago.” Conrad continues to champion critical reflection noting that, “to this day... I’m still challenging myself with new ideas, new beliefs, and I think this is very important that I continue to do that.” It was evident that Conrad’s transformative experience was extensive, that it had deeply impacted nearly all areas of his life:

I truly feel that the martial art Taekwon-Do has given me just countless benefits, and all those years ago when I started to question what I truly believed in life, and of people, and of my situation, and when that quickly began to change, I quickly began to adopt new feelings, new strategies, new outlooks, new beliefs...

Quennerstedt's (2019) investigation into potential transformative experiences that physical education pedagogy can offer, aligns harmoniously with the experiences of participants in this research, in particular:

- A pedagogy of meaning – including a focus on meaningful experiences and the process of making new or revised meanings out of experience
- A pedagogy of hesitation – offering time for deliberation and reflection
- A pedagogy of critical inquiry – focusing on the understanding and challenging of taken for granted assumptions about ourselves and others
- A pedagogy of social justice – offering opportunities to change oppressive, unfair and unsustainable physical education practices in school as well as in society (p. 620)

Transformative Learning Experiences - Incremental and Abrupt

While the majority of participants appeared to have experienced an incremental transformative learning experience, which continued to galvanize and intensify over time, there are those who had sudden, seminal moments (disorienting dilemma), throughout their training journey. These observations align with the two distinct streams of transformative learning experiences Mezirow (2012) identifies: epochal transformations, occur suddenly and abruptly, while incremental transformations occur over a longer period of time, and involve “a progressive series of transformations in related points of view...” (p. 86). Each stream of transformative learning experience is processed uniquely according to Moore (2005) who notes that “although

epochal transformations are more dramatic, they are also typically more painful. Slower, accumulated transformations are actually more common and less austere” (p. 403). A theoretical investigation into the connection of mindfulness research and transformative learning suggests that an incremental transformative learning experience may be “facilitated through mindfulness” (Morris, 2020, p. 59). Mindfulness, Morris contends (2020), “affords the adult an enhanced attention to their own thoughts, feelings, and sensations as they arise in the present moment experience.” (p. 59). For example, Conrad confessed that deeper questioning/critical reflection became an inherent part of a longer process, characterizing his transformation as a ‘journey’, contrasted against a singularity or jarring event. Conrad’s transformative experience continues to be enduring and incremental: “To this day...,” he observes, “I’m still challenging myself with new ideas, new beliefs, and I think it’s very important that I continue to do that.”

Max began observing the physical benefits to TKD training early on, but it took time before he began to critically reflect on existing assumptions noting that, “I thought it was interesting to see what was going on inside my head....” As his commitment to TKD training continued to progress, Max said that his thoughts and feelings began to change, and said this of his experience: “I was like what the heck is going on, like why am I suddenly thinking like this, or this isn’t something I’ve done before.” Once Max began questioning some steadfast assumptions and beliefs, however, he noted that, “as a person broadly, it made me question myself,” admitting that ‘unless you change your approach, you can’t change’.

Similar observations have been corroborated by Cranton (2016), who notes that, “from the transformative stories I hear in my practice and from my own experience, it seems that

transformative learning is more often incremental than epochal” (p. 55-56). While both veins of transformative learning provide deep and meaningful experiences, Brock (2010) argues that, “educators are encouraged not just to celebrate the sudden “a-ha” type of learning but continue to stimulate the more gradual change of framework that occurs over time” (p. 137). Educators do not have to be contextualized as those within the walls of academia, they can also be TKD instructors; experts within their craft.

Communicative Learning – Importance of Learning from Others

Early in a TKD practitioner’s training journey, peer-to-peer and peer-to-instructor relations are established, creating a rich context for learning and growth. Kim et al. (2011) contend that TKD training spaces can serve to establish a “social network” (p. 554). Throughout the course of training, ideas, experiences, beliefs, and knowledge, are shared amongst practitioners in the dojang, formally and informally. According to Mezirow (2009, p. 20), “discursive assessment is that type of dialogue in which we participate with others, whom we believe to be informed, objective, and rational, to assess reasons that justify problematic beliefs.” Though not an exhaustive list, Mezirow (2009) highlights, “democracy, citizenship, justice, and love,” as examples of ‘problematic beliefs’ (p. 20). Discursive assessment, a componu Tc 0.0((-). Disessmete0 (v)143 (v)at2

conceptualization of Mezirow's work, and the influences which ground it contends that,

“transformative learning is a mutually interdependent exp

solutions on his own without asking for assistance, or would attempt to feign expertise by reproducing answers/solutions in other contexts, only to “fail” in multiple ways.

Austin, at multiple junctures throughout the interview was clear on the importance and impact that open-mindedness and a willingness to learn from everyone, regardless of their social station, had on his journey: “it would be such a better world if everybody feels like they can develop and learn something from everybody... that’s one of the best, more important lessons I’ve ever learned from Taekwon-Do.” Fenoglio and Taylor’s (2014) findings of transformative learning theory in youth coaching is reflective of Austin’s insights when he observes, “communication with others also served to reaffirm the transformative change processes and help to establish the new identity of their coaching selves” (p. 201). Furthermore, Austin remarked on how developing capacities for learning and openness had on his life: “huge attitude changer when you go into every interaction, encounter realizing that you know this person can really help me.” Austin’s competitive TKD training and the relationships established, were instrumental in helping Austin shift towards a more positive, growth focused self-orientation:

I feel like when I sort of made that self-discovery that you know this losing, winning, whatever, has nothing to do with my value as a person, it’s about the effort... the fact I was able to realize it makes my relationships healthier... it just makes me a healthier, a person that’s more easily able to develop a relationship with.

Mezirow (2009) writes that an “awareness of the context of ideas and taken-for-granted assumptions, including one’s own” is an ideal condition of discursive assessment (p. 20).

Richard's interaction with both his peers and instructors was instrumental in facilitating a shift in his perception of people, generally: "During those 10 years since I've been practicing on and off training, my worldview viewing people is a whole lot less archetypical, and much more real. So, I view people now as people, there are no paragons."

Transformation Beyond the Dojang

Lukenchuk (2006) offers an autoethnographic account of the intersections, constructs, knowledge, experiences, and perceptions, that weave together their various life spheres, in particular as a martial artist attempting to navigate "seemingly incongruent assumptions" (p. 431). Recounting their experience, Lukenchuk says:

I began my martial arts practice as a mature adult, overloaded with ideas and assumptions, and completely underprepared to deal with vulnerable areas of my body. Emotional insecurity ensued and I often got frustrated with the feelings of being weak and 'naked' in front of more experienced fellow practitioners.

Negative emotions and reactions disappeared as I continued to master rigorous and demanding curriculum in the atmosphere of total respect and acceptance.

Gradually, the practice has become part of my life... (p. 430).

Taekwon-Do, as a site of learning creates spaces for 'incongruent assumptions', thereby having a profound impact on participants' lives beyond the dojang. For example, Conrad revealed his overall discontent with how he perceived himself and the opposition between opposing frames of reference.

Taekwon-Do gave me a good foundation to really question the person that I wanted to become, and I quickly found myself early on my journey, realizing that the person that I was, I didn't want to be that person anymore... I kind of went through a metamorphosis...

Achieving success in the workplace, Conrad attributes this success to his TKD training: "Having that attitude and skill set, learning from others, how to embrace challenges, how to overcome hurdles and obstacles... I truly feel that my promotion... is a direct result of my training over the last 10 years." Additionally, Richard's need for mastery and knowledgeability in a professional context, along with instructing in the dojang, complements Conrad's experiences:

The reality of what that looks like when I'm standing in front of the dojang, then immediately carries over to everything. If I'm doing a business presentation and I know I'm the one that's going to be standing in front of the Board presenting on a new product... it causes me to overprepare, and it also causes me to presuppose what the questions (answers) might be... It impacts every part of my life where I'm communicating to people.

Of additional note, has been Richard's orientation, or re-affirmation, to continue extending compassion and other human virtues. Throughout the 10-year period of training in TKD, Richard fostered an "inclination of grace towards others," and that his choice of "activities" and "emotions" is tied to his practice of the art. Moreover, Richard added that his, "worldview to extend grace and mercy to others has preceded from that choice, from that change... it's the way that I'm designed to be."

Sonia admitted to having challenges with learning and perfectionism, and TKD facilitated a shift in her thinking personally and professionally: “It’s changed my whole learning 100%... that if you bite off in little bits you can learn anything... it helps me connect my work life better... I can make it more attainable and help other kids relate to my story so that I can empower them to do better.” The experiences Sonia shaped from TKD training have been able to influence and empower the decisions of her children. She observes, “everything is doable, and so I probably wouldn’t have talked like that 20 years ago....”

Transformative learning moments initially experienced in one context, such as the one currently under investigation, quickly expand beyond the confines of the dojang; essentially, blurring boundaries. Youth coaches who experienced a similar phenomenon “discovered new-found confidence not only in their ability to self-reflect and think more critically, but also in their ability to enact fundamental- changes to their own coaching practice. This confidence also transferred to other aspects of their personal and professional lives, as they assisted others to actualize the transformative journey as well” (Fenoglio & Taylor, 2014, p. 202). Max, too, was clear on the impacts of training beyond the dojang, noting that it has helped him “excel” in his personal and professional lives: “I can definitely say I wouldn’t have arrived where I’m at today....”

Chapter 6 - CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to examine the transformative potential that nonformal learning contexts can have on adults, specifically, those who actively train in the martial art of Taekwon-Do (TKD), and who have committed to achieving the rank of blackbelt, and beyond, through many years of voluntary and sustained practice. Nonformal learning contexts provide rich environments to acquire knowledge and skills, and offer participants alternative, competing, or oppositional points of view, which, can create conditions that challenge our assumptions. The learning context in TKD primarily involves lecture or seminar-based instruction, communicative learning via instructors, seniors and peers, and solo/partner-based training. Knowledge, ideas, successes and failures, and alternative points of view, are communicatively shared amongst practitioners in the dojang, providing opportunities for growth and creating spaces for critical-reflection, which, can lead to moments of deep and sustained transformation.

TKD is a Korean martial art comprised of patterns (a series of specially sequenced movements), along with striking and self-defence techniques designed to debilitate assailants. Two distinct veins of TKD exist, ITF and WTF, with the former being used in this research. General Choi Hong Hi, the founder of TKD, endeavored to create a complete and holistic martial art system that comprised equal parts physical, mental, and spiritual. Practitioners progress through TKD via belts ranks, and can roughly expect to reach the rank of 1st dan blackbelt in approximately 4-6 years with an appropriate level of training and practice, however, this timeline varies.

Martials arts training, including TKD, provides numerous physical, mental, psychological, and interpersonal benefits. Moreover, TKD training has the potential to provide practitioners with overall life satisfaction and health perceptions (Lim & Kim, 2012). Progression through TKD can be thought of as stratified, first through improving one's technique, then, constructing one's individual concept of martial artistry, and eventual transcendence to a philosophy/spirituality, with the potential for social implications (Johnson, 2017). TKD Masters can be thought of as community leaders, and continuously on a journey of self-improvement (Johnson, 2017).

Physical education pedagogy can create spaces of transformation, through meaning making, hesitation, critical inquiry, and social justice (Quennerstedt, 2019). Moreover, martial arts are an example of physical education pedagogy and should not be conflated as simply 'sport', offering a number of advantageous benefits including, efforts toward self-improvement, enlightenment, and developing capacities for reflection (Cynarski & Lee-Baron, 2014). Sport has the capacity to facilitate social and cultural change (Wright, Jacobs, Ressler, & Jung, 2016), and has been used to educate participants on social justice issues (Spaaij, Oxford, and Jeanes, 2016). Coaches who were introduced to alternative approaches have experienced a transformative shift, which had implications for both their coaching practice and lives beyond (Fenoglio & Taylor, 2014).

Participants' lived knowledge, assumptions, and experiences, are at the foreground of this research. In order to understand the phenomena under investigation, a qualitative methodology was used and is epistemologically situated in constructivist principles. Semi-structured interview

questions aligning with Mezirow's 10 phases of perspective transformation were utilized to capture participants' experiences both prior, during, and after achieving the rank of black belt.

Data captured using the above format was successful in building individual, personal narratives that spanned a number of epochs, providing substantial depth into practitioners' thinking, knowledge, perceptions, and assumptions. While successful, this research has some design limitations, including a small/limited sample, and the politicization of the ITF TKD scene in the province, making it difficult to recruit participants due to schisms and indifferences between various clubs and instructors. Moreover, while participants were able to articulate their experiences, some appeared unable to fully express the depth of their transformation; or an affirmation of experience in some cases. In these instances, the researcher had to interject and help reframe the question or provide additional explanation/context, while being cautious/mindful not to be suggestive or leading. Future research endeavors should look to rework the featured interview questions to plain language. Finally, as participants in this research have been actively training in TKD for many years and have been living through their self-realized transformation, there could be difficulty understanding or recalling when changes began happening, and distinctly separating their past/current self.

This research is centered on three interrelated questions: *Does Taekwon-Do, as a nonformal learning environment, facilitate in creating a transformative learning experience? What are the transformative experiences of adult black belt Taekwon-Do practitioners? Finally, how has this transformation impacted other spheres of their lives?* In response to the first research question, TKD was able to facilitate a transformative learning experience through fostering confidence and

personal agency, while learning and gaining insights/knowledge from instructors/peers. Additionally, the dojang provided a context in which participants could experiment and change through practice [time commitment], and continued reflection. In response to the second research question, transformative experiences of adult blackbelt TKD practitioners were increasingly varied, though can be categorized as, challenging misperceptions of personal ability, agency, and self-worth, adoption of a growth-oriented mindset, integrating alternative points of view, experiences, and insights, which originally were divergent from their own, and transference of the previously stated points into their lives beyond a TKD training context. Lastly, in response to the third research question, participants' transformation into other life spheres beyond TKD was equally varied, including professional advancement, improved relationship building both personally and professionally, and fostering a learning centered mindset which encourages questioning and a willingness/acceptance to make errors and missteps.

Based on the evidence provided above, it substantiates the claim that, **TKD, as a nonformal learning context can elicit deep, and varied transformative learning experiences among adult blackbelt practitioners, which have greater implications for their individual lives, both within, and beyond the context of the dojang.**

The implications of these findings suggest ~~that~~, nonformal learning contexts can provide a mechanism for larger transformative experiences, when conditions such as commitment and intentionality vis-à-vis the participant persist, and the nonformal learning context can explicitly/implicitly challenge participants' existing assumptions and create opportunities to engage in critical reflection. Taylor (2006), notes that voluntary participation is a significant

characteristic of nonformal learning, while Werquin (2007) notes that nonformal learning can be intentional if the goal is “becoming more skilled, more knowledgeable and/or more competent” (p. 5). In the context of this research, participants all demonstrated a level of commitment and intent to their training, particularly in their pursuit of obtaining blackbelt and in some cases multiple degrees of blackbelt. These are not goals which can be accomplished in a short period of time, and there may be some who are not consciously aware of how far they will progress once they begin training, or in other words may join for reasons that are not intrinsically motivated, i.e. “it really got me into shape,” “I learned some cool techniques,” “I only joined because my kids did,” or “I just wanted to try it out.” In the researcher’s experience as a TKD practitioner, those who opt out or decide to discontinue training in the colored belt ranks do not necessarily possess the commitment, intent, and/or the same potential, or receptivity, for a transformative experience as their blackbelt peers.

Future research could utilize these findings to explore the generalizability of this phenomena across a number of contexts. First, a cross comparative study with another martial arts discipline could be undertaken to explore if a similar phenomenon is observed among adults, or is it unique to specific martial art forms. Second, the sample size in this research was limited, future endeavors could include a study which focuses on the transformative experiences of adult women in the martial arts, and/or other minority groups who do not appear well represented, at least in the context in which this research was conducted. Finally, research could be undertaken in any nonformal learning context where commitment and intent are present among participants, with content that implicitly or explicitly challenges existing assumptions, creating

opportunities for critical reflection. Such a venture would provide broader generalizability to this research's findings.

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APPENDIX A - Research Participation Letter

Al Rafuse

Graduate Student, Master of Arts in Education | 3rd Dan ITF Blackbelt

Mount Saint Vincent University

166 Bedford Highway | Halifax, NS, B3M 2J6

E: al.rafuse@msvu.ca

Thesis Supervisor: Dr. Donovan Plumb, Professor of Education

E: Donovan.plumb@msvu.ca

Dear Taekwon-Do Practitioners,

As a TKD practitioner for well over a decade, quickly closing in on the rank of 4th dan, I am excited to write to you, some of whom I know personally, while others we have not yet had the pleasure of meeting. The purpose of connecting with you today is to invite you to participate in research I am conducting for my Master's thesis at Mount Saint Vincent University, under the supervision of Dr. Donovan Plumb.

What is the study?

The Transformative Potential of Martial Arts, is looking to gain an understanding of your learning/learned experiences from your earliest days of training as a white belt, to your current black belt rank. The objective of this research will be to uncover how our spaces of training (dojang, etc.) have contributed to our learning, and how this learning may have facilitated a transformative impact in our lives.

Who is eligible to participate?

Adults between the ages of 25-64 years of age, and who hold the rank of 1st degree blackbelt or higher in ITF style Taekwon-Do are eligible to participate. Participants must have been actively training within the last 12-16 months, unless extenuating circumstances prevail.

What will you be asked to do?

Throughout the course of a 60-minute, semi-structured interview, either in person or online, I will ask about your learning experiences in spaces of TKD and how the knowledge gleaned from your training may have impacted various facets of your life. In-person interviews will be

conducted with you at a space, time, and date, to be determined within the Halifax Regional Municipality. An online interview is also an option, and can also be conducted over Skype, Zoom, etc. at a time and date convenient to you. Each interview session will be digitally recorded for future transcription. Questions will be in English and led by me.

Confidentiality

Protection of your confidential and sensitive information is of the utmost importance and is something I take seriously. All data (interviews) collected and used in my thesis will have identifiable information removed. Your name will not be used. All audio/digital recordings, digital files, and written documentation will be kept strictly confidential. Physical files will be kept in a secure, locked location at Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU), while all digital recordings/files will have identifiable information coded to protect participants. Digital recordings/files will be housed on the researcher's password protected, MSVU, Microsoft OneDrive account. Physical and digital data captured during the interviews will be retained for a maximum of five years, at which point it will be destroyed.

To protect your privacy and sensitive information, you will be required to sign a consent form if you wish to participate.

Consent and the right to withdraw

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to end your participation in this research at any time without penalty or fear of reprisal. Furthermore, you are not required to answer the questions, and are encouraged to only answer those with which you feel comfortable. At any time, you may indicate to the interviewer if you wish to take a break, reschedule, or stop.

If you opt to withdraw your participation after the interview has concluded your data will not be used in the thesis and all physical and digital copies of your interview transcript will be destroyed. You can withdraw from this study up until March 1, 2021 when I anticipate submitting my thesis.

What are the risks to participate?

There is minimal risk involved with this research, however, some questions could evoke uncomfortable experiences, memories, or emotions. You can decide what information you wish to share.

What are the benefits to participate?

While this study does not offer direct benefit, participation provides you an opportunity to express your thoughts, feelings, experiences, and emotions during your training to blackbelt and beyond. The articulation and expression of your experiences may be helpful. It may deepen your

appreciation of your TKD learning and support you as you mentor peers and juniors throughout their own TKD journey, or other areas of their lives.

How will this research be used?

Findings from this research may be used for academic conferences, papers, or presentations. Once completed, this thesis will be published and available through the library at MSVU.

Ethics

The ethical components of this research study have been reviewed by the University Research Ethics Board and complies with Mount Saint Vincent University's Research Ethics Policy.

If you have questions about how this study is being conducted and wish to speak with someone not directly involved in the study, you may contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Board (UREB) c/o MSVU Research Office, at 457-6350 or via e-mail at ethics@msvu.ca.

Who do I contact if I require more information?

If you have any additional questions, or would like more information related to this research study you may contact me, Al Rafuse, by email at al.rafuse@msvu.ca. You may also contact my thesis supervisor, Dr. Donovan Plumb, by email, donovan.plumb@msvu.ca, or the Research Office at MSVU, 902-457-6350, or via email, Brenda.gagne@msvu.ca.

My heartfelt thanks for agreeing to participate in this research. The consent form is located on the following page.

Taekwon!

Consent form for participation in the study: The Transformative Potential of Martial Arts

I have read the information letter and understand the purpose of this study, as well as the risks and benefits of participation. I understand how my interview data (physical and digital) will be captured, used, handled, and made secure. I understand that paraderaae in thinsarde th stua

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APPENDIX B - Interview Questions

1. At what age did you begin training in TKD, and at what age did you achieve blackbelt?
2. Thinking back, what was your motivation to achieve blackbelt?
 - a. Why was this decision important to you?
3. Thinking back before you started TKD, and not including kicking, punching, or self-defence, what did you expect to learn as a student of TKD?
4. What benefits did you anticipate as a result of your continued training?
5. Throughout your training in TKD did you notice any changes in your physical or mental abilities?
 - a. Can you describe what changed?
 - b. Can you describe this experience?
6. How would you characterize your growth and development from white belt to black belt?
7. Thinking back on your journey from white beleb6 (y)(c)8 10 Tw 8 (1 17.232D(a)1 -2 (in)-1 (g)10 (h)

9. In what ways, if any, did questioning your former thoughts, beliefs, values, or expectations prompt you to reflect more broadly on your ways of thinking or learning?
 - a. In what ways, if any, did questioning your former thoughts, beliefs, values, or expectations prompt you to reflect more broadly on your ways of thinking about your society or culture (e.g. relationship to others and or social cultural institutions)?
 - b. In what ways, if any, did questioning your former thoughts, beliefs, values, or expectations prompt you to reflect more broadly on ways of thinking about yourself?
10. Describe experience(s), if any, you have had with other peers who may have expressed similar levels of deep questioning (either their thoughts, beliefs, values, or expectations) during their journey to blackbelt?
11. In what ways, if any, did questioning your thoughts, beliefs, values, or expectations prompt you to explore new/other possible roles, relationships, or actions, both as a practitioner of TKD, and as a person (outside of TKD) more broadly?
12. In what ways, if any, did questioning your thoughts, beliefs, values, or expectations prompt you to explore taking different actions you might not otherwise have considered?

13. In what ways, if any, did questioning your thoughts, beliefs, values, or expectations motivate you to plan a course of action to enable you to develop and grow in new ways both as a practitioner of TKD, and as a person more broadly?
14. What skills, knowledge, or attitudes, if any, did you think you might need in order to implement your plans to make changes to your thinking, beliefs, values, or expectations?
15. As a result of changing any thoughts, beliefs, values, or expectations, what new roles did you assume that you may not have seen yourself assuming previously?
 - a. In what ways, if any, did assuming a new role change how you perceived yourself or your capacities?
16. As you explored new roles and relationships with others and yourself, what changes, if any, did you experience in your own sense of competence/self-competence?
17. Thinking back to when you first realized that your views or perspectives had changed, how do you feel about the change now?
 - a. In what ways, if any, have you integrated these changes in perspective into your life, both as a TKD practitioner and as person, broadly?
 - b. What do you think the long-term impact of these changes has been or will be?

Interview questions (7-17) adapted from Jack Mezirow's 10 phases of Perspective

Transformation (Mezirow, 1991, p. 168-169):

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame

3. A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychological assumptions
4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
6. Planning of a course of action
7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building of competence and self-competence in new roles and relationships
10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective

APPENDIX C - List