

## Qualitative evaluation of the Project P.A.T.H.S.: findings based on focus groups

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to document the experiences of program implementers of the Project P.A.T.H.S. in Hong Kong. Thirteen program implementers from three schools were invited to participate in three focus groups to discuss their views on the Tier 1 Program (Secondary Three Level) of the project. All program implementers regarded the program as beneficial to the program participants in different psychosocial domains, particularly interpersonal and personal levels. The program implementers also perceived the program positively and positive metaphors were used to represent the program. Consistent with the previous research findings, the present study provides evidence that support the effectiveness of the Tier 1 Program of the Project P.A.T.H.S. in promoting holistic development in Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong.

**Keywords:** focus group; positive youth development program; program implementers; qualitative evaluation.

### Introduction

In Hong Kong there is an increasing concern about the problem behaviors of contemporary youth due to a steady rise in youth participation in and severity of high-risk behaviors such as school violence, suicidal behavior, tobacco use, and drug use (1). To put these problems in context, for instance, a recent local study with community samples which investigated deliberate self-harm (DSH) amongst secondary school students aged between 14 and 20 found that the lifetime

prevalence of self-harming behavior was 8.8%, and annual prevalence was 5.5% (2). Youth workers, youth development experts, social workers, program funders, program implementers, and researchers who study adolescent development have increasingly come to believe that being problem-free is not fully prepared. One needs knowledge, skills, and many other personal and social assets for both well-being during adolescence and a successful transition to adulthood. Therefore a more holistic view of assisting adolescents to achieve their full potential is gaining greater credence in the world of policy and practice.

Wong (3) criticized that “over the past 10 years, schools have been putting a great deal of emphasis on academic results and less on life education” in Hong Kong (p. 544). However, although more attempts have been addressed to adolescent problems through prevention interventions and positive youth development programs, such programs are generally not well-developed. A recent initiative by a team of researchers from five local universities has been a major breakthrough as they have developed a multi-year universal positive youth development program funded by The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust to promote holistic adolescent development in the territory. The Project P.A.T.H.S. (Positive Adolescent Training through Holistic Social Programmes) is a pioneering whole-person program to promote positive youth development among adolescents in Hong Kong. It is composed of two tiers (Tier 1 and Tier 2) of programs. The Tier 1 Program is a universal program for junior secondary students, using a set of multi-year curricula developed by the research team comprising scholars from different disciplines, whereas the Tier 2 Program is a selective program to cater for students with greater psychosocial needs.

The Tier 1 Program of the Project P.A.T.H.S. was systematically designed based on sound theories and research findings (4, 5). It is a youth development program using an evidence-based approach with rigorous evaluation on the effectiveness of the Tier 1 Program in which triangulations by data sources (e.g., school principals, social work agency administrators, workers and participants), methods (objective outcome evaluation, subjective outcome evaluation, qualitative evaluation and process evaluation), researchers (intra-rater and inter-rater reliability checking), and data types (quantitative data and qualitative data) have been carried out. The effectiveness of the Tier 1 Program is confirmed in a wide range of evaluation studies (6–9).

In the process of program evaluation, client satisfaction with services is recognized to be an important outcome, and therefore, clients' perspectives become the primary focus in the program evaluation. Comparatively speaking, the viewpoint of the program implementer about the program

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is not adequately explored. There are several justifications for including the views of the program implementers. First, "personnel, consciously or unconsciously, influence the effectiveness of prevention program, it is important to assess their perceptions when evaluating a specific program to provide insight into the context in which the program operates" [(10), p. 219]. Second, the utilization-focused evaluation paradigm, the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (11) showed that different stakeholders should be identified (Standard U1) and their views should be taken into account (Standard F2). Third, the implementers have better skills and experiences than the program participants in judging the quality of the program designed, and hence are in a better position to assess the effectiveness of the program.

Part of the difficulty in evaluating programs lies with the selection of an appropriate evaluation methodology. Reviews of the literature showed that there is a remarkable surge of interest in using focus groups in program evaluation in western countries. For example, Nabors and colleagues (12, 13) used focus groups for an assessment of program needs, strengths and weaknesses, and to gain ideas for future program development. However, little has been documented about the use of focus groups in program evaluation in the Asian context. Twinn (14) criticized that "focus groups appear to have been used quite extensively with populations of black and Hispanic ethnic origins" (p. 655) because this methodology has been originally developed for Anglo-Celtic populations (15).

The focus group method has been successfully used to assess client satisfaction and quality assurance (16) in a variety of fields. It also has become a popular method in program evaluation in many research contexts, such as health settings (17). Focus group offers many potential advantages. Its advantages of being cost-effective and time-effective make it a good method to gather information. Morgan (18) noted that a focus group of eight people may generate ideas more than eight individual interviews. Clearly, the strength of the focus group method is that it brings clients together to discuss their perceptions about the services which they have received. This allows for interaction between group members, that stimulates thoughts and recall of experiences. Focus groups can be particularly helpful for the discovery of service problems, and suggestions for fixing those problems (19). Moreover, the data drawn from focus group interviews can be used to compare data gathered from other research methods, i.e., to use focus groups for triangulation (20). Along the same line, Connors and Franklin (21) provide a strong argument for the use of a qualitative methodology. They stressed that qualitative methodologies may address some concerns about surveys that result in inflated satisfaction scores, as clients are more critical when qualitative methodologies are used, and they have more freedom to express their concerns about all aspects of care in a way that is impossible with many studies. Therefore, qualitative methods are invaluable in providing depth to the exploration of people satisfaction that is not possible with quantitative surveys. As Merriam (22) stressed, "the product of a qualitative study is richly descriptive" (p. 8).

Despite the fact that there are several lines of evidence that support the effectiveness of the Tier 1 Program, the ex-

isting evidence is based primarily on quantitative measures. As research findings showed that informants had positive perceptions towards the program when it is implemented at Secondary 1 and Secondary 2 levels [e.g., (23), (24)], it is worth examining whether similar positive outcomes can be obtained for the program in the Experimental Phase in the Secondary 3 level. Thus, this paper aims to present and discuss the qualitative data gathered from focus group interviews with program implementers of the Experimental Implementation Phase of the project in 2007–2008 in the Secondary 3 level.

## Methods

### Participants

A total of 48 schools joined the Experimental Implementation Phase of the Project P.A.T.H.S. of the Secondary 3 level. Among them, 19 schools adopted the 20-h Full Program and the remaining 29 schools joined the 10-h Core Program. In the sampling process, four randomly selected schools that joined the full program were invited to participate in the focus group interviews. When a school declined the invitation, another school replaced it immediately. However, due to time and other constraints, three focus group interviews with the program implementers with one group for each school were eventually carried out. The three focus groups consisted of eight teachers and five social workers in total. All the three schools integrated the Tier 1 Program into their formal curriculum (e.g., Life Education and Civic Education). The average number of classes per school was 5.33.

### Procedures

All focus group interviews were jointly conducted by two trained staff, with one of them being a registered social worker. Informants' consent was obtained prior to the study. During the interviews, the implementers were asked about their views and perceptions of the program. The interview guide is presented in Table 1 based on Principle 3 (i.e., a detailed description of the data collection procedures) suggested by Shek et al. (25). The interview questions were designed with reference to the CIPP model (26) and previous research (27). Group dynamics as a distinct feature of focus group interviews was noticed. Only those who had training in social group work and/or substantial group work experience were selected as interviewers. The interviewers, being the facilitators in the interview process, were conscious of encouraging the informants to express views of different natures, including both positive and negative views. They were also conscious of being open to accommodate both positive and negative experiences expressed by the informants.

### Data analyses

The interviews were audio recorded and the content of which was fully transcribed by student helpers and checked for accuracy by two trained research assistants. To enhance triangulation in the coding process, another two research assistants, who did not participate in the data collection, were involved in the data analyses of the narratives. The unit of analysis was a meaningful unit instead of a statement. For instance, the statement that a program was "interesting and relaxing" was broken down into two meaningful units or attributes, namely, "interesting" and "relaxing". However, descriptions with the same meaning (e.g., "good quality" and "high quality") were grouped into the same attribute category.

**Table 1** Interview guide for the focus group interviews involving the implementers.

- 
- A. Context evaluation
- How much do you know about “Positive Youth Development Programs” (e.g., “Life Skills Education”)? What is your overall impression of these programs?
  - Have you taught programs that are similar to the Project P.A.T.H.S. before?
  - If yes, how effective do you feel they are?
  - From your perspective, what are the differences between the Project P.A.T.H.S. and other similar programs?
  - Do you agree with the vision of the Project P.A.T.H.S.? Why?
- B. Input evaluation
- What kind of effects do you feel that the implementation of the Project P.A.T.H.S. have on the school’s normal operation?
  - If the school incorporates the Project P.A.T.H.S. curriculum into the normal curriculum (e.g., Life Education, Integrated Humanities, etc.), from your perspective, what are the advantages and disadvantages of this arrangement?
  - If the school does not incorporate the Project P.A.T.H.S. curriculum into the normal curriculum (e.g., homeroom, extra-curricular activities, etc.), do you feel that this arrangement is successful?
  - To accommodate the implementation of the Project P.A.T.H.S., did the school make special arrangements?
  - Do you feel that the principal and administrative staff support the implementation of the Project P.A.T.H.S. at your school? Why or Why not?
  - Do you feel that the training you received is adequate for you to carry out the program requirements?
- C. Process evaluation
1. General impression of the program
    - What is your overall impression of the program? What are your feelings?
    - All in all, did you enjoy leading the program?
    - Regarding the program, what has given you a lasting impression?
    - While implementing the program, did you have any unforgettable experiences?
  2. Comments on the program content
    - Regarding the program, what are the things you like? And what are the things you dislike?
    - What are your views on the different units and content of the program?
    - Which units do you like the most? Why?
    - From your recollection, are there any activities that aroused students’ interest to participate in the program?
  3. Comments on the program implementation
    - While implementing the program, did you encounter any difficulties?
    - Do you feel that the program implementation was successful?
    - To what degree/extent did you follow the program curriculum manuals? Why?
    - What are your thoughts on the students’ responses to the program?
- D. Product evaluation
1. Evaluation of the general effectiveness of the program
    - Do you feel that the program is beneficial to the development of adolescents?
    - Have you noticed any changes in students after their participation in the program? If yes, what are the changes? (free elicitation)
    - If you noticed changes in students, what do you think are the factors that have caused such changes?
    - If you have not noticed changes in students, what do you think are the factors that have caused students not to change?
  2. Evaluation of the specific effectiveness of the program
    - Do you think that the program can promote students’ self-confidence/ability to face the future?
    - Do you think that the program can enhance students’ abilities in different areas?

Optional questions

    - Do you think that the program can enhance students’ spirituality aspect?
    - Do you think that the program can promote the students’ bonding with family, teachers and friends?
    - Do you think that the program can establish students’ compassion and care for others?
    - Do you think that the program can promote students’ participation and care for the society?
    - Do you think that the program can promote students’ sense of responsibility to the society, family, teachers and peers?
  3. The program’s impact on the instructor
    - Do you feel you have gained something by leading this program? And have you lost something?
    - If you have the opportunity in future, do you wish to lead similar programs again?
  4. Other comments
    - If you are invited to use three descriptive words to describe the program, what are the three words that you would use?
    - If you are invited to use one incident, object/thing or feeling (e.g., indigestion, enjoyment, child at heart, etc.) to describe the program, how would you describe the program?
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The present coding system was developed after much consideration of the raw data and several preliminary analyses. After initial coding, the positivity nature of the codes was determined, with four possibilities (positive code, negative code, neutral code and undecided code).

To enhance the reliability of the coding on the positivity nature of the raw codes, both intra- and inter-rater reliability were carried out. For the inter-rater reliability, the two research assistants who involved in the coding process recoded a number of randomly selected raw codes

on their positivity at the end of the scoring process. For the inter-rater reliability, another two research staff who did not involve in the coding process coded the randomly selected codes without knowing the original codes given.

Shek et al. (25) argued for the importance of discussing the ideological biases and preoccupations of the researchers in a qualitative evaluation report (Principle 4). As program developers, the authors might have the preoccupation that the implemented program was good and it was beneficial to the students. Additionally, the researchers might have the tendency to focus on positive evidence rather than negative evidence. Thus, several safeguards against the subtle influence of such ideological biases and preoccupations were included in the present study (Principle 5). To begin with, the researchers were conscious of the existence of ideological preoccupations (e.g., positive youth development programs are beneficial to adolescents), and conducted data collection and analyses in a disciplined manner. Second, both inter- and intra-rater reliability checks on the coding were carried out (Principle 6). Third, multiple researchers and research assistants were involved in the data collection and analysis processes (Principle 7). Fourth, the first author was conscious of the importance and development of audit trails (Principle 9). The audio files, transcriptions, and steps involved in the development of coding system were properly documented and systematically organized.

## Results

In this paper, qualitative findings on the following three areas are presented: (1) descriptors that were used by the informants to describe the program, (2) metaphors (i.e., incidents, objects, or feelings) that were used by the informants to depict the program, and (3) implementers' perceptions of the benefits of the program to students.

The descriptors that the informants used to describe the program were shown in Table 2. There were 20 raw descriptors which could be further categorized into 15 categories. Among these descriptors, nine (45%) were positive responses

**Table 2** Descriptors used by the implementers to describe the program (S3).

| Responses             | Nature of the response |         |          |           | Total |
|-----------------------|------------------------|---------|----------|-----------|-------|
|                       | Positive               | Neutral | Negative | Undecided |       |
| Good elements         | 1                      |         |          |           |       |
| Flexible              | 1                      |         |          |           |       |
| Interesting           | 1                      |         |          |           |       |
| Relaxing              | 2                      |         |          |           |       |
| Happy                 | 1                      |         |          |           |       |
| Diversified           | 1                      |         |          |           |       |
| Respectful            | 1                      |         |          |           |       |
| Gained something      | 1                      |         |          |           |       |
| Depends on individual |                        | 1       |          |           |       |
| Task-oriented         |                        | 1       |          |           |       |
| So so                 |                        | 3       |          |           |       |
| Unrealistic           |                        |         | 1        |           |       |
| Difficult             |                        |         | 2        |           |       |
| Painful               |                        |         | 2        |           |       |
| Not interested        |                        |         | 1        |           |       |
| Total responses       | 9                      | 5       | 6        | 0         | 20    |

and five (25%) could be classified as neutral responses. Ten randomly selected raw descriptors were used for reliability tests. The intra-rater agreement percentages calculated on the positivity of the coding from these descriptors were 95% and 100%, respectively. The inter-rater agreement percentages calculated on the positivity of the coding were 100% and 80%, respectively.

Six metaphors, namely chicken rib, supplement, chicken essence, bank book, cash box and wealth, were used by the informants to depict the program (Table 3). Five (83%) were regarded as positive metaphors while one was coded as neutral. Reliability tests showed that the intra-rater agreement percentages calculated on the positivity of the coding from these metaphors were 100% and 80%, respectively, whereas the inter-rater agreement percentages calculated on the positivity of the coding were 100% and 100%.

Regarding the perceived benefits of the program to the program participants, 53 meaningful responses were extracted from the raw data involving 25 attributes categorized into benefits at a general level, societal level, familial level, interpersonal level and personal level (Table 4). The findings showed that all 53 responses (100%) were regarded as positive responses. Reliability tests showed that the intra-rater agreement percentages calculated on the positivity of the coding from these perceived program benefits were 95% and 85%, respectively, whereas the inter-rater agreement percentages calculated on the positivity of the coding were 95% and 90%.

## Discussion

There is a paucity of research findings on the effectiveness of positive youth development programs, with the exception of the Project P.A.T.H.S., in different Chinese contexts. In order to fill this gap in the existing literature, this paper presents the results of a qualitative evaluation focused on the effectiveness of the Tier 1 Program based on focus group interviews with program implementers. In contrast to quantitative methodology, rich data emerging from focus group interviews offered clear evidence to program funders that program implementers are very positive towards the program.

Two salient conclusions can be drawn from the present study. First, the program was primarily perceived in a positive manner (Tables 2 and 3). Although negative comments about the program were also recorded (e.g., unrealistic, dif-

**Table 3** Metaphors used by the implementers to represent the program (S3).

| Metaphors<br>(in English) | Nature of the response |         |          |           | Total |
|---------------------------|------------------------|---------|----------|-----------|-------|
|                           | Positive               | Neutral | Negative | Undecided |       |
| Chicken rib               |                        | 1       |          |           | 1     |
| Supplement                | 1                      |         |          |           | 1     |
| Chicken essence           | 1                      |         |          |           | 1     |
| Bank book                 | 1                      |         |          |           | 1     |
| Cash box                  | 1                      |         |          |           | 1     |
| Wealth                    | 1                      |         |          |           | 1     |
| Total responses           | 5                      | 1       | 0        | 0         | 6     |

difficult, painful, and uninteresting), this was not the dominant view and the program was in fact perceived to be fruitful and interesting. The findings based on the metaphors also showed that most of the responses were very positive in nature. One of the common perspectives was that a majority of program implementers perceived the program as a "health supplement" which again confirmed that the program was beneficial to adolescents and helped to strengthen them.

Second, it is clear from these data that the program had a substantially important impact on interpersonal and personal levels amongst secondary school students. Approximately four-fifths of the implementers perceived the program to be beneficial to students (Table 4). On the personal level, many implementers reported that this program strengthened the positive self-image of students and enhanced their understanding of the purpose of life. All these are crucial in the

**Table 4** Benefits of the Tier 1 Program perceived by the implementers (S3).

| Category            | Subcategory                        | Responses  | Nature of the Response |         |          |           | Total |
|---------------------|------------------------------------|--|------------------------|---------|----------|-----------|-------|
|                     |                                    |  | Positive               | Neutral | Negative | Undecided |       |
| General             |                                    | The content is practical                                       | 2                      |         |          |           | 2     |
|                     |                                    | Subtotal   | 2                      | 0       | 0        | 0         | 2     |
| Societal level      |                                    | Enhanced understanding of one's country                        | 1                      |         |          |           | 1     |
|                     |                                    | Increased awareness of citizen's responsibility                | 1                      |         |          |           | 1     |
|                     |                                    | Subtotal   | 2                      | 0       | 0        | 0         | 2     |
| Familial level      |                                    | Improved communication and relationship with parents           | 3                      |         |          |           | 3     |
|                     |                                    | Subtotal   | 3                      | 0       | 0        | 0         | 3     |
| Interpersonal level |                                    | Learned to handle love relationship                            | 3                      |         |          |           | 3     |
|                     |                                    | Enhanced instructor's understanding towards students           | 2                      |         |          |           | 2     |
|                     |                                    | Improved communication and relationship among teachers/workers | 5                      |         |          |           | 5     |
|                     |                                    | Knew how to respect/treat others                               | 3                      |         |          |           | 3     |
|                     |                                    | Improved interpersonal relationship                            | 1                      |         |          |           | 1     |
|                     |                                    | Subtotal   | 14                     | 0       | 0        | 0         | 14    |
| Personal level      | Positive self-image                | Enhanced self-understanding                                    | 1                      |         |          |           | 1     |
|                     |                                    | Enhanced self-confidence                                       | 1                      |         |          |           | 1     |
|                     |                                    | Broadened horizon  | 2                      |         |          |           | 2     |
|                     |                                    | Enhanced personal growth                                       | 3                      |         |          |           | 3     |
|                     |                                    | Provided sense of success                                      | 1                      |         |          |           | 1     |
|                     |                                    | Became more active   | 1                      |         |          |           | 1     |
|                     |                                    | Subtotal   | 9                      | 0       | 0        | 0         | 9     |
|                     | Spirituality                       | Increased understanding purpose of life                        | 5                      |         |          |           | 5     |
|                     |                                    | Improved morality/spirituality                                 | 3                      |         |          |           | 3     |
|                     |                                    | Enhanced understanding of life meaning                         | 1                      |         |          |           | 1     |
|                     |                                    | Subtotal   | 9                      | 0       | 0        | 0         | 9     |
|                     | Study                              | Increased understanding of the study path in the future        | 3                      |         |          |           | 3     |
|                     |                                    | Improved concentration/attention in class                      | 1                      |         |          |           | 1     |
|                     |                                    | Subtotal   | 4                      | 0       | 0        | 0         | 4     |
|                     | Ways to face adversity             | Learned how to seek help                                       | 1                      |         |          |           | 1     |
|                     |                                    | Improved resilience  | 1                      |         |          |           | 1     |
|                     |                                    | Subtotal   | 2                      | 0       | 0        | 0         | 2     |
|                     | Cognitive and emotional competence | Enhanced self-reflection                                       | 4                      |         |          |           | 4     |
|                     |                                    | Enhanced critical thinking                                     | 3                      |         |          |           | 3     |
|                     |                                    | Enhanced ability in handling emotions                          | 1                      |         |          |           | 1     |
|                     |                                    | Subtotal   | 8                      | 0       | 0        | 0         | 8     |
| Total responses     |                                    | Total  | 53                     | 0       | 0        | 0         | 53    |

adolescent development. Numerous research studies have shown that individuals with high self-esteem will adopt active coping strategies focused on problems, whereas individuals with a low self-esteem will use passive-avoidant coping styles focused on emotions (28). However, others have showed that low-esteem is related to mental health problems such as depression (29), anxiety and poor coping strategies (30).

On the interpersonal level, many instructors perceived that this program did not only strengthen students' social skills, but also enhanced their relationships with students. The significant improvement in interpersonal relationships may be attributed to the suggested teaching strategies for Secondary 3 curriculum. Collaborative learning such as group work which helps to enhance student learning and social skills is often implemented. In addition, teachers are also encouraged to self-disclose by sharing information about themselves, telling personal stories, and conveying their personal beliefs. A recent study by Mazer et al. (31) explored the impact of teacher self-disclosure on Facebook on student motivation, affective learning and classroom climate; the results confirmed that teacher self-disclosure has a positive influence on all these variables. On the whole, these positive findings are generally consistent with the objective outcome evaluation findings (32) that the students changed in a positive direction in various developmental domains. Based on the principle of triangulation, the present study echoed the previous quantitative and qualitative evaluation findings that the Tier 1 Program was effective in promoting the holistic youth development among the program participants (33).

According to Shek et al. (25), it is imperative to find alternative explanations in the interpretations of qualitative evaluation findings (Principle 10). Fortunately, although there are several alternative explanations of the findings, they can be partially dismissed. First, although the findings can be explained in terms of demand characteristics, this explanation was not likely because the implementers were encouraged to voice their views freely, and negative voices were in fact heard. Second, although it can be argued that the favorable findings were due to ideological biases of the researchers, several safeguards (e.g., intra- and inter-rater reliability as well as disciplined data analyses and interpretations) were used to reduce biases in the data collection and analysis process. In addition, it may be argued that the perceived benefits are due to other youth enhancement programs. However, this argument can be partially dismissed as implementers in the focus group interviews were specifically asked about the program effects of the Project P.A.T.H.S. only.

Nevertheless, the present study suffers from several limitations. First, as the number of schools and implementers that participated in the study is relatively small, it would be interesting if more schools joined the research study. It would also be helpful if more schools and implementers stratified according to school types (e.g., different academic and socio-economical background) could be recruited. However, it is noteworthy that the number of schools and focus groups are not on the low side. Second, only a one-shot interview was conducted for each focus group, and thus it would be illuminating if regular and on-going qualitative evaluation data

could be collected in each school. Third, in addition to focus groups, in-depth individual interviews would enable the researchers to understand the inner worlds and subjective experiences of the program implementers. Finally, although 11 principles proposed by Shek et al. (25) were upheld in this study, peer checking and member checking (Principle 8) were not carried out in this study due to time and manpower constraints. Despite the aforementioned limitations, the current study provides additional qualitative evaluation findings that support the positive nature of the Project P.A.T.H.S., and further confirm its effectiveness in promoting holistic youth development among Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong.

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