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Qualitative evaluation of Project P.A.T.H.S. in Hong Kong: focus groups based on Secondary 3 program implementers

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Abstract

Ten focus groups comprising 42 program implementers recruited from 10 schools were conducted to evaluate the Tier 1 Program (Secondary 3) of Project P.A.T.H.S. (Positive Adolescent Training through Holistic Social Programs) in the 2008/09 school year. Results showed that a majority of the program implementers used positive descriptors and metaphors to represent the program and they perceived that the program benefited the program participants in various psychosocial domains. In conjunction with the previous research findings, the present study provides further support for the effectiveness of the Tier 1 Program of Project P.A.T.H.S.

Keywords: focus group; positive youth development; project implementers; Project P.A.T.H.S.; qualitative evaluation.

Introduction

Project P.A.T.H.S. (Positive Adolescent Training through Holistic Social Programmes) is financially supported by The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust with HK$400 million and HK$350 million grants in the initial phase and extension phase, respectively. It is a school-based program aiming to promote positive and holistic development of junior secondary school students in Hong Kong. In contrast to the traditional preventive and remedial approaches to youth work which focus on young people's failures and problems, this positive youth development (PYD) approach regards young people as "assets", emphasizing the promotion of social, emotional, spiritual and mental well-being (1). The project has been implemented in more than 250 secondary schools in Hong Kong since the 2005/06 school year. The project has a two-tier structure designed for junior secondary school students (Secondary 1 to Secondary 3 students). While the Tier 1 Program is a curriculum-based program designed for junior secondary school students based on a set of positive youth development constructs (2, 3), the Tier 2 Program is developed for students having greater psychosocial needs. The Tier 1 Program consists of 40 units for each grade of the junior secondary school year, with 20 h per grade. The details of this school-based curriculum are described elsewhere (4). Based on the principle of triangulation, the project has been evaluated using different strategies involving different stakeholders at different times (5–11).

Previous evaluation studies have investigated the views of the program implementers who implemented Project P.A.T.H.S. at Secondary 1 and Secondary 2 levels. However, as there are relatively few evaluation studies on positive youth development programs designed for Secondary 3 level, this study explored the views of Secondary 3 program implementers of the Tier 1 Program in the 2008/09 school year. Compared to Secondary 1 and Secondary 2 years, Secondary 3 (Grade 9) is a time when students face many uncertainties. Besides physical and psychosocial changes, Secondary 3 students also face stress arising from change in the education system in Hong Kong. Before the implementation of New Senior Secondary Curriculum in 2009 (12), Secondary 3 students were required to choose their Secondary 4 streams, such as "Science", "Arts" and "Commerce", depending on their preferences and school policy. Since the 2009/10 school year, with the implementation of the New Senior Secondary Curriculum structure, streaming has become less significant and all students are given the opportunities to receive 3 years of senior secondary education (i.e., Secondary 4 to Secondary 6). However, there are still some schools that are unable to provide sufficient Secondary 4 places to accommodate all their own Secondary 3 students; allocation of post-Secondary 3 places is based on students' performance, such as the internal assessments of schools and interviews offered by other schools (13). Therefore, Secondary 3 students will still face uncertainties and stress, which should be properly addressed in the school context. With specific reference to Project P.A.T.H.S., curriculum units related to the constructs of Resilience and Self-efficacy are specially strengthened at Secondary 3 level (14, 15).

In this study, a focus group method was adopted to understand the views of the program implementers on the Secondary 3 program. Focus groups "bring together several participants

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to discuss a topic of mutual interest to themselves and the researcher" (p. 253, 16). There are at least two widely recognized advantages noted by many researchers. First, focus group members can have a sort of "synergy" or "common language" to describe similar experiences, thus producing data and insights that would be less accessible in questionnaires or individual interviews (16, 17). In the case of program evaluation, program implementers would have some common experiences and languages that might help them enrich their sharing. Second, focus groups provide an opportunity to explore complex feelings and topics in a relatively short period of time (18, 19). As a research tool, focus group methodology is used in various evaluation studies of Project P.A.T.H.S., including studies based on student participants (8, 20, 21) and program implementers (22, 23).

In the focus group studies of Project P.A.T.H.S., researchers asked program participants to use metaphors to describe the program effects. A metaphor is "a way of describing something by comparing it with something else which has some of the same qualities" (24). For example, if we want to say that someone is very brave, we might say that they have a lion's heart. Ricoeur (25) stated that "metaphor constitutes a displacement and an extension of the meaning of words; its explanation is grounded in a theory of substitution" (p. 1). Patton (26) noted that metaphors function as a creative strategy enabling researchers to interpret data and present findings. The use of metaphors is increasingly common in qualitative research (27–29). Metaphors allow focus group participants to make use of their imaginative space, enabling them to work out a less rigid and yet articulate account of their experiences. Through metaphors, the views of the informants can be indirectly understood.

Obviously, credibility of data collection, analyses and interpretations is an important issue to be addressed in qualitative evaluation research. In response to the common problems intrinsic to qualitative evaluation studies, Shek et al. (30) suggested a set of principles that should be upheld in a qualitative evaluation study. For example, an explicit statement of the philosophical base of the study, discussion of biases of the researchers, and a clear statement of the limitations of the study should be spelled out in the study. In this study, all those suggested principles were upheld as far as possible.

Methods

In 2008, 167 schools joined Project P.A.T.H.S. in the Full Implementation Phase, of which 63 adopted the full program (i.e., 20-h program involving 40 units) and 104 adopted the 10-h core program. In this study, seven schools joining the full program and three schools joining the core program were randomly selected and invited to participate in the focus group interviews.

A total of 42 program implementers, who were teachers or social workers delivering the P.A.T.H.S. curriculum in classrooms, participated in 10 focus group interviews. The number of informants in each focus group ranged between two and six. Although only 6% of the participating schools were selected for this study, the random sampling helped enhance the representativeness of the data.

All focus group interviews were conducted by two trained colleagues, with at least one having a doctoral degree. Interviewers were reminded to encourage the informants to talk frankly about their perceptions of the program, including both positive and negative views. They were also conscious of the importance of adopting an open attitude to both positive and negative views expressed by the informants. The broad interview guide of the focus group interviews conducted is presented in Table 1. The interview questions were designed with reference to the CIPP model (context, input, process and product) (31) and previous research studies (32). The interviews were recorded and transcribed by student helpers and checked by a research assistant and four trained helpers.

Data analysis

General qualitative analysis techniques were used in this study. First, the unit of analysis was a meaningful unit instead of a statement. For example, the statement that "the program was meaningful and the instructors were very responsible" would be broken down into two meaningful units, namely, "the program was meaningful" and "the instructors were very responsible". This applied to the coding of: (a) the descriptors in the focus group members' utterances; (b) the perceived benefits for the students noted by the focus group members; and (c) the metaphors noted by the focus group members.

Second, the positivity nature of the codes was determined, with four possibilities after initial coding. The four possible natures were: (a) positive – meaningful units reflecting positive perception and appreciation of the program; (b) negative – meaningful units reflecting negative perception and criticisms of the program; (c) neutral – meaningful units which consist of both positive and negative nature; (d) undecided – meaningful units, but the nature of these could not be decided by the coders. The content of those meaningful units were further interpreted and analyzed, and significant themes were identified.

Third, to qualify the reliability of the coding, both intra-rater and inter-rater reliability checks were carried out. For intra-rater reliability, two research colleagues (one with a degree in Psychology and one with a master's degree) who had been involved in the coding individually coded 20 randomly selected responses for each question. For inter-rater reliability, another two research colleagues (one with a degree in Psychology and one with a doctoral degree) who had not been involved in the data collection and analyses, coded 20 randomly selected responses for each question without knowing the original codes given at the end of the scoring process with reference to the finalized codes. All the related data, including transcriptions and tapes, were stored for audit trails.

Results

Among all the meaningful units derived from the descriptors used by the focus group participants (n=68), 69% of them were classified as positive responses (Table 2). The most common positive descriptors were, for example, "inspiring", "fruitful", "reflective", "relaxing" and "enjoyable". The intra-rater agreement percentages calculated on the positivity of the coding from these descriptors were 95% and 90%, respectively. The inter-rater agreement percentages calculated on the positivity of the coding were 100% and 90%, respectively.

Among all the meaningful units derived from the responses concerning the perceived benefits for the students (n=85), 74% of them were coded as positive responses (Table 3). The most common items were, for example, "enhanced

Table 1 Interview guide for the focus group with program implementers as participants.

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 Project P.A.T.H.S. before?
- If yes, how effective do you feel they are?
- From your perspective, what are the differences between Project P.A.T.H.S. and other similar programs?
- Do you agree with the vision of Project P.A.T.H.S.? Why?

Input evaluation
- What kind of effects do you feel that the implementation of Project P.A.T.H.S. has 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 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 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?

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?

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 society?
   - Do you think that the program can promote students' sense of responsibility to 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?

student-instructor relationship", "enhanced self-reflection", "enhanced critical thinking" and "enhanced moral competence". The intra-rater agreement percentages calculated on the positivity of the coding were 100% and 95%, respectively. The inter-rater agreement percentages calculated on the positivity of the coding were 95% and 85%, respectively.

Table 2 Descriptors used by the focus group participants.

Value judgment reflected Descriptor	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Undecided	Total
Unlimited	1				1
Very useful	1				1
Preventive	1				1
Inspiring	4				4
Necessary	1				1
Important	1				1
Very important	1				1
Fruitful	1				1
Very fruitful	3				3
Meaningful	2				2
Positive	3				3
Effective	2				2
Reflective	1				1
Welcomed	1				1
Developmental	1				1
Relaxing	2				2
Very relaxing	1				1
Happy	2				2
Impressive	1				1
Very good idea	1				1
Satisfied	1				1
Enjoy	2				2
Interesting	1				1
Beneficial	1				1
Constructive	1				1
Comprehensive	1				1
Quite good	1				1
Systematic	1				1
Diversified	1				1
Worthwhile	1				1
Well-suited	1				1
Start	1				1
Ideal	1				1
Very magnificent	1				1
Pleasure comes through toil	1				1
Rational		1			1
Emotional		1			1
Long awaited		1			1
Enormous		1			1
Very academic		1			1
Intensive		1			1
Impoverished			1		1
Very rush			2		2
Trying to win in chaos			1		1
In war			1		1
Harsh			3		3
Very harsh			1		1
Not well-suited			1		1
Inadequate support			1		1
Superficial			1		1
Like water off a duck's back			1		1
Have pains			1		1
Aggressive				1	1
Total, n	47	6	14	1	68
Total, %	69%	9%	21%	1%	100%

Table 3 Perceived benefits mentioned by the focus group participants.

Descriptions	Nature of codes				Total
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Undecided	
General					
Had significant positive impacts	1				1
Some kind of help	14				14
Increased maturity	2				2
Its effectiveness will be shown in the long run	2				2
Unable to observe the changes within a short period of time	2	8	1		11
The effectiveness depends on individual student	1	2			3
Difficult to measure the effectiveness	1	11			12
Interpersonal level					
Enhanced communication and relationship with family	2				2
Enhanced student-instructor relationship/understanding	8				8
Enhanced peer relationship	1				1
Learnt to appreciate, care and respect others	2				2
Cultivated proper views on dating	1				1
Personal level					
Increased the ability and willingness to express themselves	2				2
Enhanced self-efficacy	2				2
Enhanced self-confidence	1				1
General enhancement	1				1
Enhanced self-reflection	9				9
Enhanced critical thinking	5				5
Enhanced moral competence	4				4
Cultivated resilience	1				1
Facilitated goal setting	1				1
Total, n	63	21	1	0	85
Total, %	74%	25%	1%	0%	100%

For the metaphors that were used by the informants to describe the program, there were 12 raw "objects" involving 43 related attributes (Table 4). Analysis of findings showed that nine metaphors (75%) and 21 related attributes (48.84%) could be regarded as positive in nature. The intra-rater agreement percentages calculated on the positivity of the coding from these metaphors were 100% and 90%, respectively. The inter-rater agreement percentages calculated on the positivity of the coding were 90% and 90%, respectively. Most of the metaphors were positive, for example:

> *"Planting a tree: It is unable to observe the changes of the students within a short period of time, the effectiveness will be shown in the long run. Patience and endurance are required."*

Table 4 Metaphors used by the focus group participants.

Metaphors	Number of metaphor and its nature				Total	Number of codes derived from the metaphor and its nature				Total
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Undecided		Positive	Neutral	Negative	Undecided	
Magic box		1			1		4			4
A cup of water	1				1	2		1		3
Saving and spending money	1				1	1	2			3
Kaleidoscope	1				1	2	1	1		4
Seed	2				2	2	1			3
Plasticine	1				1	5				5
Rubik's cube		1			1		3			3
Firework			1		1	2	1	2		5
Planting a tree	1				1	1	3			4
Water	1				1	4	1	1		6
Air	1				1	2	1			3
Total, n	9	2	1	0	12	21	17	5	0	43
Total, %	75.00%	16.67%	8.33%	0.00%	100.00%	48.84%	39.53%	11.63%	0.00%	100.00%

"Saving money: The curriculum is like "putting coins into students' pockets", the knowledge will accumulate and will be useful to them when they face difficulties in future."

"Kaleidoscope: The program can enhance students' critical thinking by broadening their perspectives and enabling them to embrace diversity."

"Water or air: The program is like water or air, which is a vital and fundamental component in our life. The program is useful to the students throughout their lifetime."

Some of the metaphors contained some neutral or negative content which generally suggested that the same curriculum content might not fit all students, for example:

"Plasticine: The program actually has a basic framework, but the program implementers need to adjust it. There are rooms for improvement and modification."

"Magic box: Every time the students would have different reactions toward the same content. Running the curriculum is just like opening a "magic box" that you will never know what will come out."

"Firework: The program is large and beautiful, like "firework", but students may not be able to absorb all the materials. The project is like "firework" – which is instantaneous. The content should be more focused on one or two main themes instead of going through many themes within a short period of time."

Discussion

Program implementers' views on the Tier 1 Program of Project P.A.T.H.S. are reported in this paper. There are several unique features of this study. First, as there are few evaluation studies of Project P.A.T.H.S. in the Secondary 3 program, this is an additional contribution to the Chinese literature. Second, focus group methodology was used which could enable researchers to understand the views of the program implementers. As a research method, focus group methodology has the advantages of flexibility and generation of qualitative data. Third, to enhance the credibility of the findings, various strategies including intra-rater and inter-rater reliability tests were adopted in this study. Finally, as there are few studies examining the views of program implementers, this study attempts to understand the views of program implementers for they are legitimate stakeholders and they are usually trained to have evaluation skills.

Several observations can be highlighted from the findings. First, the program was positively received by the program implementers. The positive comments basically outnumbered negative comments: 69% of the meaningful units from the descriptors were positive (Table 2), 74% of the meaningful units from the perceived benefits for the students were positive (Table 3), 49% of the meaningful units from the metaphors were positive and only 12% were negative (Table 4). A brief analysis on the perceived benefits of the program showed that program implementers perceived the program to be beneficial to students at both an interpersonal level (e.g., "enhanced student-instructor relationship") and a personal level (e.g., "enhanced self-reflection", "enhanced critical thinking") (Table 3). These observations are generally consistent with the objective outcome evaluation findings of Shek (7), which reported that the participating students had positive developments in different psychosocial domains after joining the program.

Although a majority of the responses were positive in nature, some negative comments were made by the participants in the focus groups. For example, some program implementers mentioned that the program was superficial, difficult and chaotic, some of them used negative metaphors to represent their perceptions of the program (e.g., tasteless water), and some of them directly noted that the program was not helpful to the students. There are some possible reasons explaining these apparently negative comments. First, the respondents were in fact encouraged to talk about both positive and negative comments in the focus group interviews, so it is normal to identify negative comments in the dataset. Second, the program implementers were teachers and social workers who were supposedly experts in teaching and counseling, so some of them might feel uneasy to restrain their professional intervention skills and follow a manual-based program. These comments constitute useful pointers for improving the program in the long-term.

As Shek et al. (30) suggested, it is important to consider alternative explanations in the interpretations of findings. There are several possible alternative explanations for the present findings. First, the positive comments can be explained in terms of demand characteristics. However, this is not likely because the informants were encouraged to talk about their views without restriction, and negative comments were in fact generated in the focus groups. Second, the positive comments could be caused by sampling bias. However, this argument is not strong as the schools and program implementers were randomly selected. Third, the positive effects were developed by other youth enhancement programs. However, this argument can be partially dismissed as none of the schools in this study participated in the major youth enhancement programs in Hong Kong. In addition, respondents in the focus group interviews were specifically asked to talk about the program effects of Project P.A.T.H.S.

This evaluation study has some intrinsic limitations. First, focus group strategy has its own constraints. For example, inadequate skills of the moderator might affect the quality of the data collected, and there could be conformity or censoring effects (33, 34). However, as there are different evaluation methods adopted in Project P.A.T.H.S., such as objective outcome evaluation, qualitative evaluation using students' weekly diaries or subjective outcome evaluation (5, 6, 35–39), an integration of these methods can help triangulate

the findings from the focus groups. Second, the researchers might have their potential biases. Since the researchers also participated in the curriculum design, they may have a tendency to pay more attention to positive evidence than negative evidence. Nevertheless, several safeguards against the influence of researchers' biases were employed, for example, inter-rater reliability tests were carried out, and the data processing procedures were carried out in a disciplined manner. In conclusion, notwithstanding these limitations, this study provides further support to the claim that Project P.A.T.H.S. contributes to the holistic development of Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong.

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