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A stakeholder-collaborative evaluation of intervention for students with greater psychosocial needs

Daniel T.L. Shek[1–5,*] and Lu Yu[1]

[1] Department of Applied Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, P R China
[2] Public Policy Research Institute, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, P R China
[3] Kiang Wu Nursing College of Macau, Macau, P R China
[4] Department of Social Work, East China Normal University, Shanghai, P R China
[5] Division of Adolescent Medicine, Department of Pediatrics, Kentucky Children's Hospital, University of Kentucky College of Medicine, Lexington, KY, USA

Abstract

The Tier 2 Program of Project P.A.T.H.S. (Positive Adolescent Training through Holistic Social Programmes) in Hong Kong was designed and implemented by school social workers targeting adolescents with greater psychosocial needs. Based on the responses of 237 participants, 48 program implementers wrote down five conclusions on the program effectiveness in their reports submitted to the funding body. Based on a stakeholder-collaborative approach involving secondary data analyses, results showed that most conclusions were positive regarding participants' perceptions of the program, instructors and their perceived program effectiveness, although there were also conclusions reflecting difficulties encountered and suggestions for improvements. In conjunction with the previous evaluation findings, the present study suggests that the Tier 2 Program was well received by the stakeholders and the program was beneficial to the development of the program participants.

Keywords: adolescents; Hong Kong; positive youth development; Project P.A.T.H.S.; stakeholder-involved evaluation; subjective outcome evaluation.

Introduction

In program evaluation, there is an ever-growing body of literature discussing diverse evaluation approaches and their respective strengths and weaknesses. For example, randomized controlled trials (RCTs) assessing objective outcome behaviors (such as smoking or delinquent behaviors) are usually considered the gold standard test to examine program effects on participants. However, simply using objective outcome evaluation cannot explore the inner world of the respondents, the process of how the individuals change, and important factors that lead to the success or fail of a program (1–3). Moreover, the assumption of a "mechanical and fixed" social reality is questioned. In contrast, subjective outcome evaluation provides researchers and practitioners a comprehensive understanding of the program outcome from the perspectives of program participants and implementers, but such evaluation strategy is often criticized as lacking of credibility and objectivity (4, 5). As such, program evaluators always face the question of how to select an evaluation approach that best fits the particular program implementation context and allows them to answer relevant evaluation questions most effectively.

A recent trend in program evaluation is to increasingly involve different stakeholders in the evaluation process, including program designers, beneficiaries of the program (e.g., the participating students or parents), program workers, such as curriculum instructors, coordinators, administers and other professionals (6–9). Multiple terms have been coined to refer to this stakeholder-involved evaluation strategy, for example, stakeholder-collaborative evaluation, utilization-based evaluation, participatory evaluation, inclusive evaluation and empowerment evaluation (10–13). Despite differences in the degree and nature of stakeholders' involvement in these approaches, they all focus on direct participation of stakeholders in evaluation and are used mainly for four purposes: (a) to determine concerns and problems that stakeholders want to address; (b) to increase the likelihood that evaluation results will be used; (c) to obtain a "reality check" on the utility and feasibility of the evaluation method; and (d) to promote the empowerment of stakeholder groups previously left out of the evaluation process (14–16).

As with other evaluative methods, there are both criticisms and support for the involvement of stakeholders in evaluation. Two most common criticisms are: (a) stakeholders may not have enough knowledge and expertise to conduct evaluation and (b) stakeholder involvement makes the evaluation no longer an objective venture because of biases and role conflicts (17). However, several advantages of stakeholder-involved evaluation are highlighted. For example, Torres and Preskill pointed out that "stakeholder involvement in the evaluation's design and implementation" increases "their buy-in to the evaluation", "their understanding of the evaluation process", and "ultimately their use of the evaluation's findings" (18).

*Corresponding author: Professor Daniel T.L. Shek, PhD, FHKPS, BBS, JP, Chair Professor of Applied Social Sciences, Faculty of Health and Social Sciences, Department of Applied Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Room HJ407, Core H, Hunghom, Hong Kong, P R China
E-mail: daniel.shek@polyu.edu.hk
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Fine et al. (19) suggested that stakeholder participation can improve the quality of an evaluation by helping to guarantee that relevant questions are asked and appropriate measures are selected. Regarding the criticism that stakeholders lack of evaluation knowledge, Levin (20) argued that through training and continuous support provided by the evaluator, stakeholders could learn and develop adequate evaluation skills to successfully conduct evaluations of their own programs. Besides, it is believed that stakeholder-involved evaluation could be tailored to the values and needs of local organizations that implemented the program (20). As Patton suggested, these characteristics made the approach particularly useful for evaluation of programs involving multiple modes and implemented in different sites, especially in the initial stage of implementation (21).

One particular context for evaluation is to assess programs that are built upon the same guidelines but designed by different organizations and implemented in different sites, such as the Tier 2 Program of Project P.A.T.H.S. (Positive Adolescent Training through Holistic Social Programmes) in Hong Kong. Project P.A.T.H.S. is a large-scale positive youth development program initiated by the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust and developed by Shek and colleagues for junior secondary school students (from Secondary 1 to Secondary 3) in Hong Kong (22, 23). It consists of two tiers of programs. The Tier 1 Program adopts a universal prevention strategy targeting all students joining the program regardless of their risk status. The Tier 2 Program takes a selective prevention approach and is specifically designed for students with greater psychosocial needs in different domains. Participants of the Tier 2 Program are students identified by teachers or parents in the Tier 1 Program as having greater psychosocial needs. In view of the diverse needs of the students and to create more flexibility for the program workers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which assist with the overall coordination and implementation of the project have the choice of designing appropriate programs that target the needs of the students based on the positive youth development constructs, goals and objectives proposed in this project (24). This approach can promote flexibility and involvement of the workers in the process.

Since its inception, several commonly used prototypes of the Tier 2 Program have been identified: (a) mentorship programs involving alumni of the schools; (b) mental health promotion programs; (c) adventure-based counseling; (d) parenting programs; (e) service learning programs; and (f) resilience enhancement programs (25). Because of the flexibility of the design of the Tier 2 Program, various programs with different target outcomes are designed and implemented (26). Therefore, it is difficult to conduct standardized objective outcome evaluation across schools.

In view of the diversity of programs for the Tier 2 Program, Shek and colleagues have developed and utilized a flexible strategy to assess the effectiveness of the Tier 2 Program across implementation sites. There are two unique components of the evaluation strategy. First, subjective outcome evaluation based on the program participants is carried out where the program participants are invited to respond to both rating scales and open-ended questions that assess their perceptions of the program content, the instructors' practice and perceived effectiveness of the program to different aspects of student development (27). Second, responsible program practitioners who were involved in the design of the Tier 2 Program are invited to read the subjective outcome evaluation forms completed by program participants after completion of the program, and write down five conclusions regarding the program and its effectiveness in the report submitted to the funding body. Obviously, the conclusions drawn by the program workers not only summarize the subjective outcome evaluated by participants, but also reflect program workers' own reflections on their experiences in carrying out the program. By analyzing these conclusions, areas that need to be improved in further program implementation would be identified and evaluative findings obtained through other methods (e.g., subjective outcome evaluation) can be triangulated. In addition, such a worker-based program evaluative practice may enhance the capacity of the local NGO for evaluation and increase the likelihood that evaluation results will be used.

The present study attempted to examine the evaluation results of secondary data analyses on the conclusions drawn by program workers about the Tier 2 Program and to identify difficulties and problems perceived by program workers in the Experimental Implementation Phase. Based on the findings, practical strategies for the improvement of the program in the program can be generated. Also, the stakeholder-collaborative approach for evaluating a positive youth development program in Hong Kong can also be demonstrated.

Methods

In the 2007/2008 school year, 48 schools joined Project P.A.T.H.S. in the third year of the Experimental Implementation Phase. Within these schools, 2114 participants were involved in the Secondary 3 level of the Tier 2 Program. These students were identified by teachers, parents and/or through self-administered questionnaires as having greater psychosocial needs. The mean number of participants joining the Tier 2 Program per school was 44.04 (range: 6–93 participants). The average number of sessions provided per school (normally 1.5–3 h per session) was 22.77 (range: 10–55 sessions). After the completion of the Tier 2 Program, 1739 participants (with an average of 36.23 participants per school, ranging from 2 to 136) responded to the Subjective Outcome Evaluation Form (form C) developed by the research team (28). The overall response rate was 82.26%.

The Subjective Outcome Evaluation Form (form C) was designed by Shek and Siu (28), with the aim of measuring participants' perceptions of the Tier 2 Program in different aspects. There are seven parts in this evaluation form:

- participants' perceptions of the program, such as program arrangement, quality of service, appropriateness of the program, and interaction among the participants (eight items)
- participants' perceptions of the workers, such as the preparation of the workers, professional attitude and knowledge, and interaction with the participants (eight items)
- participants' perception of the effectiveness of the program, such as promotion of problem-solving skills, behavioral modification and positive change (eight items)

- things that the participants appreciated most (open-ended question)
- opinion about the workers (open-ended question)
- things that the participants learned from the program (open-ended question)
- areas that require improvement (open-ended question).

To facilitate the program evaluation, the research team developed an evaluation manual with standardized instructions for collecting the subjective outcome evaluation data (28). In addition, adequate training was provided to the social workers during the 20-h training workshops on how to collect and analyze the data using form C. Based on the evaluation data collected in each school, the responsible worker in each school was required to complete an evaluation report where the quantitative and qualitative findings based on form C were summarized and described. In the last section of the evaluation report, the responsible program worker in each school was requested to write down five conclusions regarding the program and its effectiveness, to give an overall picture regarding the perceived effectiveness of the Tier 2 Program and also provide an opportunity for the program workers to reflect on the implementation of the program.

The data were analyzed using general qualitative analyses techniques (29) by two research assistants. There were three steps in the data analysis process. First, raw codes were developed for words, phrases and/or sentences that formed meaningful units in each conclusion at the raw responses level. Second, the codes were further combined to reflect higher-order attributes at the category of codes level. For example, the response of "satisfied with the program" at the raw response level could be subsumed under the category of "satisfaction level", which could be further subsumed under the broad theme of "views towards the program". Finally, some coded responses were randomly selected to check for reliability.

In the present qualitative analyses, the authors were not directly involved in the data analyses to avoid possible biases and expectations of the program to be effective. In addition, in order to minimize the possible biases involved, both intra- and inter-rater reliabilities on the coding were calculated. For intra-rater reliability, two research assistants were primarily responsible for coding 20 randomly selected responses without looking at the original codes given. For inter-rater reliability, another two research staff (one with a PhD Degree and one with Masters Degree in Social Work) coded 20 randomly selected responses without knowing the original codes given at the end of the scoring process.

Following the principles of qualitative analyses proposed by Shek et al. (30), the following attributes of the study regarding data collection and analyses were highlighted. First, a general qualitative orientation was adopted. Second, the sources of data (e.g., number of participants) for analyses were described. Third, the issues of biases and ideological preoccupation were addressed. Fourth, inter- and intra-rater reliability information was presented. Fifth, the categorized data were kept by a systematic filing system in order to ensure that the findings are auditable. Finally, possible explanations, including alternative explanations, were considered.

Results

A total of 48 reports on the Tier 2 Program were received. In these reports, one school did not fill in the five conclusions and two schools listed six conclusions. As such, based on the 237 conclusions in the 48 reports, 374 meaningful units were extracted. These raw responses were further categorized into several categories, including views towards the program (Table 1), views towards instructors (Table 2), perceived program effectiveness (Table 3), encountered difficulties and recommendations to the program (Table 4). Regarding the conclusions related to the views towards the program, results in Table 1 show that most of the responses were positive in nature in the areas of satisfaction level, program content, perceived successful factors and others. For example, program implementers noted that "the program is worth continuing" and that they "would recommend the program to others"; the program content was perceived as having "met students' needs" and "provided positive experiences to students". Successful factors in the program implementation process, such as "used outdoor activities", "good relationship with students", and "harmony atmosphere" were also identified. Among the 109 responses, 107 responses were classified as positive (98.17%). The intra-rater agreement percentage of the positivity of coding was 90% and inter-rater agreement percentage was 95%.

For the views towards the instructors, all 47 responses were positive in nature (100%) (Table 2). The intra-rater agreement percentage of the positivity of coding was 100% and inter-rater agreement percentage was 100%. Program instructors were described as "professional", "devoted", "well-prepared for the program", "cared about students", and having "appreciated attitude" and "performance". Participants were also "satisfied with the instructors' delivery strategies".

The responses related to perceived program effectiveness are shown in Table 3. There were a total of 189 meaningful units that could be further categorized into several levels, including societal level, interpersonal level, personal level and others. At the societal level, it was noted that the program enhanced the participants' "social responsibility and participation". At the interpersonal level, the program was concluded as having "improved interpersonal relationship" (general interpersonal competence) and "communication/social skills" (specific interpersonal competence) for the participants; and participants "learned to cooperate with others" (specific interpersonal competence). Perceived program effectiveness in the personal level was noted in seven aspects: positive self-image (e.g., "enhanced self-understanding", "enhanced self-confidence"), ways to face adversity (e.g., "cultivation of resilience" and "enhanced problem-solving skills"), goal setting, behavioral competence (e.g., "promoted self-determination" and "positive impacts on behavior"), cognitive competence (e.g., "enhanced self-reflection"), experiences/exploration (e.g., "explored/developed potentials"), and others (e.g., "strengthened the school bonding" and "benefits to instructors"). All 189 responses were positive (100%). The intra-rater agreement percentage of the positivity of coding was 95% and inter-rater agreement percentage was 90%.

Table 4 shows the program participants' responses on the difficulties encountered in the implementation of the program (n=6) and responses on recommendations to the program (program content and program implementation, n=23). Difficulties encountered mainly included time constraint, unsatisfactory student performance, and the clash of the program with other school activities. There were good suggestions raised by the program workers for improvement in

Table 1 Responses on views towards the program.

Category	Responses	Nature of the response				Total
		Positive	Neutral	Negative	Undecided	
Satisfaction level	Liked the program	2				2
	Satisfied with the program	18				18
	Positive views towards program	3				3
	Positive views towards service quality	2				2
	Satisfied with the arrangement	4				4
	The program was meaningful	2				2
	Program was able to achieve the goals	3				3
	High attendance rate	1				1
	Students' active participation	6				6
	Worth continuing	1				1
	Would join the program again	3				3
	Would recommend the program to others	1				1
	Positive comments	6				6
	Neutral comments		2			2
	Subtotal	52	2	0	0	54
Program content	Met students' needs	9				9
	Provided positive experiences to students	7				7
	Liked and satisfied with the activities	11				11
	Diversified activities	2				2
	Benefited from the experiential learning	1				1
	Other positive comments	9				9
	Subtotal	39	0	0	0	39
Perceived successful factors	Used outdoor activities	1				1
	Good relationship with students	2				2
	Enrollment strategy	1				1
	Grouping strategy	1				1
	Harmony atmosphere	2				2
	Others	7				7
	Subtotal	14	0	0	0	14
Others	Schools' cooperation	1				1
	Others	1				1
	Subtotal	2	0	0	0	2
Total responses		107	2	0	0	109

Table 2 Responses on views towards instructors.

Category	Responses	Nature of the response				Total
		Positive	Neutral	Negative	Undecided	
General appreciation	Positive views towards instructors	1				1
	Appreciated attitude	6				6
	Appreciated performance	16				16
	Subtotal	23	0	0	0	23
Specific appreciation	Satisfied with the instructors' delivery strategies	5				5
	Well prepared for the program	3				3
	Devoted	1				1
	Earnest	1				1
	Professional	10				10
	Cared about students	2				2
	Attitude and performance enhanced students' learning	1				1
	Encouraged students	1				1
	Subtotal	24	0	0	0	24
Total responses		47	0	0	0	47

Table 3 Responses on perceived program effectiveness.

Category	Subcategory	Responses	Nature of the response				Total
			Positive	Neutral	Negative	Undecided	
Societal level	–	Enhanced social responsibility and participation	3				3
		Subtotal	3	0	0	0	3
Interpersonal level	General interpersonal competence	Improved interpersonal relationship	4				4
		Enhanced instructor and student relationships	2				2
		Subtotal	6	0	0	0	6
	Specific interpersonal competence	Improved communication/social skills	12				12
		Learned to cooperate with others	10				10
		Mutual support/trust	2				2
		Appreciated/respected others	4				4
		Subtotal	28	0	0	0	28
Personal level	Positive self-image	Enhanced students' development	12				12
		Positive impacts on students	22				22
		Students' improvements were recognized by others	4				4
		Developed clear and positive identity	3				3
		Enhanced self-understanding	10				10
		Enhanced self-efficacy	7				7
		Enhanced self-confidence	10				10
		Enhanced self-esteem	1				1
		Subtotal	69	0	0	0	69
	Ways to face adversity	Cultivation of resilience	8				8
		Enhanced problem-solving skills	11				11
		Subtotal	19	0	0	0	19
	Goal setting	Promoted beliefs in the future	2				2
		Goal setting	8				8
		Subtotal	10	0	0	0	10
	Behavioral competence	Promoted self-management/self-determination	3				3
		Positive impacts on behavior	2				2
		Enhanced learning motivation/skills	1				1
		Enhanced self-help	3				3
		Enhanced persistence	1				1
		Enhanced leadership skills	1				1
		Enhanced patience	1				1
		Enhanced presentation skills	2				2
		Subtotal	14	0	0	0	14
	Cognitive and emotional competence	Enhanced organizing and analyzing abilities	3				3
		Enhanced emotional management	1				1
		Enhanced self-reflection	8				8
		Subtotal	12	0	0	0	12
	Experience/Exploration	Explored/developed potentials	5				5
		Provided other learning experiences	12				12
		Subtotal	17	0	0	0	17
Others	–	Benefits to instructors	3				3
		Strengthened the school bonding	3				3
		Positive comments	5				5
		Subtotal	11	0	0	0	11
Total responses			189	0	0	0	189

terms of program content and implementation. For example, it was suggested to add more games, outdoor and diversified activities in the program. Interestingly, some recommendations are contradictory. For instance, recommendations to increase or to reduce the number of sessions were both noted. The intra-rater agreement percentage of the categories of code was 100% and inter-rater agreement percentage was 90%.

Table 4 Responses on the encountered difficulties and recommendations to the program.

Category	Subcategory	Responses	Total
Difficulties encountered in program implementation		Time constraint	1
		Students' performance	3
		Clashed with other school activities	1
		Others	1
		Subtotal	6
Recommendation	Content	Make fine adjustment to meet the needs of students	3
		More games	1
		More outdoors activities	2
		More diversified activities	1
		Motivate the students' participation	1
		Increase more competence trainings	3
		Subtotal	11
	Implementation	Reduce the number of sessions	1
		Make fine adjustment on the number of sessions	2
		Make fine adjustment on the recruitment method	1
		Better program design	1
		Better time control	2
		Prolong the number of sessions	1
		Improve the student-instructor ratio	1
		Subtotal	9
	Others	Other recommendations	3
		Subtotal	3
Total responses			29

Discussion

Adopting a stakeholder-collaborative approach, the present study evaluated the Tier 2 Program of Project P.A.T.H.S. at the third year of the Experimental Implementation Phase by qualitatively analyzing program implementers' conclusions regarding the program and its effectiveness based on participants' subjective outcome evaluation reports. Consistent with previous findings obtained through other evaluative methods (e.g., quantitative evaluation findings) (26, 31), the present results showed that conclusions made by the program workers about the Tier 2 Program were generally favorable, which provide evidence for the effectiveness of the program in the experimental stage and support its full implementation among a large sample of Hong Kong adolescents. Potential challenges and difficulties encountered by program workers during program implementation and recommendations were also identified, which would help researchers to make further decisions about the program's ongoing viability and find out ways to improve its overall quality (32).

There are several observations that can be highlighted from the present study. First, positive conclusions about the Tier 2 Program were obtained from program implementers in terms of program content and their general satisfaction level toward the program. Based on participants' responses and their own reflections, program workers identified several factors that they believed contributed to the success of the program implementation, including "using outdoor activities", "good relationship with students", effective "enrollment strategy" and "grouping strategy", and "harmony atmosphere". Regarding the implementation of prevention programs, Greenberg et al. (32) pointed out that, "a great number of questions are either under-researched or have yet to be researched" (p. iv), and generally there are two broad issues: (a) what factors influence the quality of implementation and (b) what is the relationship between quality of implementation and both short- and long-term outcomes. The present study contributes to solving the first issue by identifying several factors perceived by program workers as successful implementation elements of the Tier 2 Program, for example, a high degree of classroom implementation. With regard to the second issue, further studies should be conducted to examine how these factors may influence different outcomes of the program in the short- and long-term.

Second, conclusions drawn by program implementers regarding the instructors were all positive in nature. Instructors were appreciated by the participants for both their attitudes and performance. Specifically, instructors were most frequently perceived as "professional" and "well-prepared for the program" and their delivery strategies of the program were considered satisfactory. This finding supports the sense that program instructors performed effectively in the program implementation and both implementers and participants held favorable views about the instructors. It has long been recognized that program success is fostered by individuals who carry out an initiative with high morale, good communication and a sense of ownership. The support, motivation, and buy-in of implementing staff are critical to the survival a program (33). The professionalism and commitment of instructors shown in the present study are important factors leading to the success of the Tier 2 Program.

Third, program implementers concluded that the program was effective to the participants at different levels,

from personal to interpersonal, and to a broad social level. For example, it was noted that the program promoted the "cultivation of resilience", "improved interpersonal relationship", and "enhanced social responsibility and participation" among participants. Based on the ecological perspective for human development, the interactions between individuals and the social environment have always been emphasized in the design and implementation of Project P.A.T.H.S. The central aim of the project is to promote adolescent development in a holistic manner, which means that different aspects of an individual can achieve positive development as a whole. The present findings suggest that the program does contribute to its participants' integral development. As such, the goal of the project has been basically achieved at least in this Experimental Implementation Phase.

Fourth, in the conclusions, difficulties and problems met by the program workers during the implementation process were identified and accordingly several recommendations were made. Researchers have proposed that stakeholder-involved evaluation would be especially useful when there are questions about implementation difficulties or when information is wanted on stakeholder's knowledge of program goals or their views of the progress. Thorough listening to, and learning from, program beneficiaries, program workers and other stakeholders who know why a program is or is not working is critical to making improvements. In the present study, program workers made some suggestions, such as adapting the number of sessions of the program and the length of time for each session to fit the conditions of local schools, designing more diverse activities and games, and a flexible implementation timetable. These ideas are valuable for improving the implementation quality of the Tier 2 Program in the future and will be carefully taken into account in the Full Implementation Phase.

In addition, while the perceived difficulties and recommendations made by program workers vary from school to school, the involvement of the workers in the evaluation itself empowers program providers to act on the knowledge gained. As Patton suggested, the more these program insiders are involved in the evaluation process, the more likely they are to use the information to improve performance (34). For example, several program workers noted difficulties that students' performances were less than satisfactory. For program practitioners, reflecting on these problems and summarizing them as conclusions in the evaluative reports could be a "change inducing process" (21) with the potential to change the relevant aspects for better in the future. If any measure for improvement is developed based on the evaluation results, program workers would also be more likely to take these measures in their own practice.

Recently, some authors have argued that an evaluation is intrinsically flawed if it is not driven by stakeholders and that intensive stakeholder involvement should be considered a direction for program evaluation in the future. As Fetterman noted (35), "evaluation will be a collaboration…the evaluator will be more of a collaborator and facilitator, rather than an external, distanced expert with no vested interest in the program's future" (p. 381). Obviously, the present study was conducted with the spirit to involve program workers as one of the stakeholder groups in the evaluation process. Specifically, program workers in local organizations who were designer, implementer and coordinator of the program were asked to review the evaluation forms completed by program participants and make conclusions regarding the program implementation and its effectiveness based on these reports. Compared to traditional evaluation method, the active participation of program workers in the evaluation process would result in improving validity, utilization, integration with the decision process and empowerment (7, 9, 36). Given the limited studies regarding use of stakeholder-collaborative evaluation in different Chinese contexts, this study would make a fresh contribution to the literature.

It is noteworthy that stakeholders' participation in the evaluation may be very broad, with a wide array of program staff, beneficiaries, partners and others; or target one or two of these groups. For example, if the purpose is to reveal what hampers program implementation, field staff may need to be involved. If the issues are a program's effect on local communities, the program beneficiaries may be the most appropriate participants. In the present study, only program staff were involved and their participation was limited to reviewing and summarizing participants' evaluation reports. Future research may: (a) include more stakeholder groups, such as participants and their family, in the evaluation; (b) extend the participation of stakeholders to other aspects of the evaluation process, for example, the designing and planning of evaluation strategies and decision-making on the utilization of evaluative findings.

In summary, this study provides further evidence for the effectiveness of the Tier 2 Program of Project P.A.T.H.S. in the Experimental Implementation Phase, which lays a solid foundation for the full implementation of the program in a large sample of Hong Kong adolescents. In conjunction with other evaluation findings showing the effectiveness of the Tier 1 Program in Hong Kong (37–39), the existing research findings suggest that Project P.A.T.H.S. can promote holistic development in the program participants. The present study also demonstrates the use of stakeholder-involved approach to evaluate a large-scale positive youth development program in Hong Kong. It is expected that such an illustration would encourage further employment of this method in evaluating prevention/positive youth development programs in different Chinese contexts.

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