Interim evaluation of the Tier 1 Program of Project P.A.T.H.S.: continuation of evidence

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Abstract

An interim evaluation study was conducted to understand the implementation of the Tier 1 Program of Project P.A.T.H.S. (Positive Adolescent Training through Holistic Social Programmes) in the 2008/09 school year. One hundred and twenty-eight schools were randomly selected to provide information on the implementation details of the program via interviews, telephone interviews and self-completed questionnaires. Results showed that a majority of the workers perceived that the students had positive responses to the program and the program was helpful to the students. Program workers' views toward the implementation of the Tier 1 Program were positive across different grades and program implementation modes. In conjunction with previous studies, the present findings suggest that the Tier 1 Program of Project P.A.T.H.S. is well received by different stakeholders.

Keywords: Chinese adolescent; positive youth development; Project P.A.T.H.S.; qualitative evaluation.

Introduction

Positive Adolescent Training through Holistic Social Programmes (P.A.T.H.S.) is a positive youth development program financially supported by The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust to promote holistic adolescent development in Hong Kong. To carry out the project, a research team was formed by academics of five Hong Kong universities, with The Hong Kong Polytechnic University as the lead institution. The project attempts to promote positive youth development in adolescents in Hong Kong and there are two tiers of program in the project. In the Tier 1 Program, students in Secondary 1–3 participate in the program, normally with 20 h of training in the school year at each grade. The curriculum is developed with reference to theories of positive youth development constructs, relevant research findings, and existing programs in both local and foreign contexts. The Tier 2 Program is designed for adolescents with special psychosocial needs which normally provides for about 20% of students who attend the Tier 1 Program (1–3).

To systematically evaluate the outcomes and implementation of the project, various evaluative strategies have been employed to examine the program effects from different sources (4–7). Utilizing the principle of triangulation, various evaluation strategies have been used to evaluate the Tier 1 Program as follows:

1. Objective outcome evaluation: a randomized group trial with 24 experimental schools and 24 control schools recruited initially has been carried out.
2. Subjective outcome evaluation (Tier 1 Program): both students and program implementers are invited to complete subjective outcome evaluation forms after completion of the program.
3. Process evaluation: systematic observations are carried out in randomly selected schools to understand the program implementation details.
4. Interim evaluation: to understand the process of implementation, interim evaluation is conducted by randomly selecting roughly half of the participating schools.
5. Qualitative evaluation (focus groups based on students): focus groups involving students based on schools randomly selected from the participating schools are carried out.
6. Qualitative evaluation (focus groups based on program implementers): focus groups involving instructors based on schools randomly selected from the participating schools are carried out.
7. Qualitative evaluation (in-depth interviews with program implementers): prolonged in-depth interviews with teachers are carried out.
8. Qualitative evaluation (case study based on focus groups): a case study documenting the implementation experience of schools that have incorporated the Tier 1 Program into school formal curriculum is carried out.
9. Qualitative evaluation (student logs): students are invited to reflect their experiences after attending P.A.T.H.S. lessons and application of things learned to real life.

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10. Qualitative evaluation (student products): students' weekly diaries are collected after completion of the program. Students' drawings are also collected to reflect the experiences of the program participants.

11. Management information collected from the co-walker scheme: because the co-walkers conducted classroom observations and completed observation forms, such information can give an overall picture about the implementation details in different schools.

12. Evaluation based on the repertory grid tests: students are randomly selected to complete repertory grid tests that assess their self-identity systems before and after joining the program and perceived changes across years.

Amongst the above-mentioned methods, process evaluation and interim evaluation are two approaches to understanding the implementation process of the program. These are important elements of program evaluation that help researchers monitor program adherence (a key component of program success), create infrastructure that supports the project, evaluate how effectively that process functions, and assess changes in skills, attitudes and knowledge of the participants and the program implementers (8, 9). As Gomby and Larson (10) described, "process evaluation focuses on what services were provided to whom and how. Its purpose is to describe how the program was implemented – who was involved and what problems were experienced. A process evaluation is useful for monitoring program implementation; for identifying changes to make the program operate as planned; and generally, for program improvement" (p. 71).

With specific reference to interim evaluation, it is based on program implementers' comments regarding the whole process of program implementation to gain more understanding of the reactions of the participants and workers to the program. Via both face-to-face interviews and telephone interviews, information in the following areas is collected: (a) program workers' perceptions of the responses of the participants to the program; (b) experiences of the program workers delivering the program; (c) program implementers' perceived helpfulness of the program; (d) program implementers' perceived positive aspects of the program; (e) aspects of the program that require improvement; (f) difficulties encountered during program implementation; and (g) overall evaluation of the program.

Previous interim evaluation findings generally showed that the Tier 1 Program was perceived as helpful to the students and that program workers had positive global evaluation about the program, which suggested the effectiveness of the program (11, 12). However, the interim findings also provided useful information for the refinement of the Tier 1 Program. Based on the suggestions raised by the instructors, some modifications in the program implementation were made. For example, classroom activities for the program were adapted to be more interesting and to cater for the needs of the students. More instructions and PowerPoint slides were provided for program workers to facilitate their teaching (13). Through the co-walkers scheme (14), further support was offered to the teachers and social workers who implemented the Tier 1 Program with ongoing help and guidance.

To accumulate further research findings regarding the quality of program implementation, interim evaluation was carried out to understand the implementation of the Tier 1 Program in Secondary 1 to Secondary 3 levels. As such, the primary purpose of this paper was to report interim evaluation findings on the implementation of the Tier 1 Program for Secondary 1–3 students in the 2008/09 school year, based on a random sample of schools. Second, considering that the program curricula for students in different grades have respective characteristics, interim evaluation findings were compared among different grades. With diverse developmental needs in students at different grades in the junior secondary school year, it is important to raise this question. As two program implementation modes (the 20-h full curriculum and the 10-h core curriculum) were employed in the participated schools, the third purpose of this study was to examine whether programs with different implementation modes were evaluated differently by program workers.

Methods

There were a total of 227 schools joining the Tier 1 Program of Project P.A.T.H.S. in the Full Implementation Phase in the 2008/09 school year, with 562 programs being implemented in different grades. Among the participating schools, 82 schools joining the 20-h full program and 46 schools joining the 10-h core program were randomly selected to participate in the present interim evaluation study. In the selected schools, the instructors of the program (either school teachers or social workers) were invited to participate in face-to-face interviews on a voluntary basis during a school visit. If the respondents were not available for the face-to-face interviews during the school visit, they were invited to participate in telephone interviews. Otherwise, they were asked to fill in a self-administered questionnaire and return it to the research team via e-mail or fax. The respondents included 76 teachers and 52 social workers, of whom 94 were administered face-to-face interviews, 28 participated in telephone interviews and six completed self-administered questionnaires. The random sampling method increased the validity of the findings.

Data collection was conducted between October 2008 and June 2009. Informed consent was first obtained from the respondents who participated in the study in a voluntary manner. The interviews were conducted by six co-walkers, who were registered social workers with substantial working experience. For the interview, a self-constructed semi-structured interview guide with five close-ended questions was used to collect information on the program implementation process. The close-ended questions were:

- Question 1: Perceived degree of student involvement.
- Question 2: Perceived degree of students' liking of the curriculum.
- Question 3: Perceived degree of helpfulness of the curriculum.
- Question 4: Perceived degree of workers' liking of the curriculum.
- Question 5: Perceived degree of workers' overall satisfaction of the curriculum.

After each interview, the interviewees were required to fill in a questionnaire with seven open-ended questions including:

- Question 1: What are the responses of the students to this program?
- Question 2: Do you think this program is beneficial to the students? If yes, what are the benefits?
- Question 3: What are the good aspects of the program?
- Question 4: Which areas of the program require improvement?

- Question 5: Have you encountered any difficulties during the program implementation process? If yes, what problems have you encountered?
- Question 6: What are your perceptions of the "co-walker scheme"?
- Question 7: Do you have other opinions?

It should be noted that while the presence of interviewers may affect the responses of the respondents (e.g., social desirability effect) in face-to-face interviews, it is unlikely to happen in the present study because the interviewers were the co-walkers of the interviewed schools with which a friendly rapport and mutual trust had been built. Also, the major advantage of face-to-face interviews is having the opportunity to clarify any doubts instantly. On the other hand, while telephone interviews and self-administered questionnaires have the problems of psychological distance and inability to observe the non-verbal cues of the respondents, their major advantage is the efficiency in collecting data within time limit. In addition, follow-up calls could be arranged if there was a need to clarify the responses of the respondents. Therefore, these data collection methods basically complemented each other.

Results

The present study focused on reporting the quantitative results of the interim evaluation in the 2008/09 school year and the qualitative findings will be reported elsewhere. First, 91.41% of all respondents reported that students were involved in the program, which included 95%, 90% and 91% of the workers implementing the Secondary 1, Secondary 2 and Secondary 3 programs, respectively (Table 1). Second, for perceived students' liking of the curriculum, positive responses were found in 95% of the Secondary 1 instructors, 95% of the Secondary 2 instructors, and 93% of the Secondary 3 instructors, indicating that on average 92.97% of the program implementers perceived that students liked the curriculum (Table 2). Third, concerning the perceived benefits of the program to the students, 98% of the respondents regarded the Tier 1 Program was helpful to the students (Table 3), including 100% of the Secondary 1 workers, 95% of the Secondary 2 workers and 98% of the Secondary 3 workers.

Fourth, as shown in Table 4, 89% responded that the program workers liked the curriculum. By grade, 95% of Secondary 1 implementers, 95% of the Secondary 2 implementers, and 86% of the Secondary 3 implementers agreed that program instructors have positive feelings towards the program curriculum. The last question was about the program implementers' overall satisfaction of the curriculum. As can be seen in Table 5, 99% of the program implementers

Table 1   Instructors' perceived degree of student involvement.

	Negative response			Positive response			No response	All
	Totally not involved	Not involved	Total	Involved	Totally involved	Total		
S1								
n	0	0		18	1	19	1	20
Percentage	0	0	0	90.00	5.00	95.00	5	100
S2								
n	0	1		18	0	18	1	20
Percentage	0	5.00	5.00	90.00	90.00	90.00	5	100
S3								
n	0	7		74	6	80	1	88
Percentage	0	7.95	7.95	84.09	6.82	90.91	1.14	100
Total								
n	0	8		110	7	117	3	128
Percentage	0	6.25	6.25	85.93	5.47	91.40	2.34	100

Table 2   Instructors' perceived degree of students' liking of the curriculum.

	Negative response			Positive response			No response	All
	Strongly dislike	Dislike	Total	Like	Strongly like	Total		
S1								
n	0	0	0	19	0	19	1	20
Percentage	0	0	0	95.00	0	95.00	5.00	100
S2								
n	0	0	0	19	0	19	1	20
Percentage	0	0	0	95.00	0	95.00	5.00	100
S3								
n	0	6	6	78	3	81	1	88
Percentage	0	6.82	6.82	88.64	3.41	92.05	1.14	100
Total								
n	0	6	6	116	3	119	3	128
Percentage	0	4.69	4.69	90.63	2.34	92.97	2.34	100

Table 3   Instructors' perceived degree of helpfulness of the curriculum to the students.

	Negative response			Positive response				No response	All
	Unhelpful	Not very helpful	Total	Slightly helpful	Helpful	Very helpful	Total		
S1									
n	0	0	0	11	9	0	20	0	20
Percentage	0	0	0	95.00	0	100	100	0	100
S2									
n	0	1	1	12	7	0	19	0	20
Percentage	0	5.00	5.00	60.00	35.00	0	95.00	0	100
S3									
n	0	1	1	43	40	3	86	1	88
Percentage	0	1.14	1.14	48.86	45.45	3.41	97.73	1.14	100
Total									
n	0	2	2	66	56	3	125	1	128
Percentage	0	1.56	1.56	51.56	43.75	2.34	97.66	0.78	100

Table 4   Instructors' perceived degree of workers' liking of the curriculum.

	Negative response			Positive response			No response	All
	Strongly dislike	Dislike	Total	Like	Strongly like	Total		
S1								
n	0	0	0	17	2	19	1	20
Percentage	0	0	0	85.00	10.00	95.00	5.00	100
S2								
n	0	0	0	18	1	19	1	20
Percentage	0	0	0	90.00	5.00	95.00	5.00	100
S3								
n	0	0	0	70	6	76	12	88
Percentage	0	0	0	79.55	6.82	86.36	13.64	100
Total								
n	0	0	0	105	9	114	14	128
Percentage	0	0	0	82.03	7.03	89.06	10.94	100

Table 5   Instructors' perceived degree of workers' overall satisfaction of the curriculum.

	Negative response				Positive response				No response	All
	Very dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Slightly dissatisfied	Total	Slightly satisfied	Satisfied	Very satisfied	Total		
S1										
n	0	0	0	0	3	16	1	20	0	20
Percentage	0	0	0	0	15.00	80.00	5.00	100	0	100
S2										
n	0	0	1	1	5	14	0	0	0	20
Percentage	0	0	5.00	5.00	25.00	30.00	0	95.00	0	100
S3										
n	0	0	0	0	12	75	1	88	0	88
Percentage	0	0	0	0	13.64	85.23	1.14	100	0	100
Total										
n	0	0	1	1	20	105	2	127	0	128
Percentage	0	0	0.78	0.78	15.63	82.03	1.56	99.22	0	100

were satisfied with the curriculum, including 100% of the Secondary 1 instructors, 95% of the Secondary 2 workers and 100% of the Secondary 3 workers.

The second purpose of the present study was to compare program implementers' responses regarding the implementation process among different grades. χ^2-Tests of independence were performed to determine the relations between grade and program workers' responses in different domains. The results showed that the effects of grade were non-significant ($p > 0.05$) on each domain of program workers'

Table 6   Results of χ^2-tests on the effects of grade and program implementation mode on implementers' evaluation.

Dependent variables	Grade				Program implementation mode			
	df	n	χ^2-test	p-Value	df	n	χ^2-test	p-Value
Perceived students' involvement in the program	4	125	3.23	0.52	4	125	3.23	0.52
Perceived students' liking of the program	4	125	4.24	0.38	4	125	4.24	0.38
Perceived helpfulness of the program	6	127	4.13	0.66	6	127	4.13	0.66
Workers' liking of the program	2	114	0.36	0.83	2	114	0.36	0.83
Workers' overall satisfaction about the program	6	128	9.15	0.17	6	128	9.15	0.17

perceptions regarding the implementation process (Table 6). This indicated that program implementers in different grade held similar and positive views toward the Tier 1 Program implementation.

Finally, the effects of program implementation mode (full curriculum vs. core curriculum) on program implementers' evaluation were examined through another set of χ^2-tests. Again, there were no significant differences regarding the implementers' perceptions about programs with different implementation modes. The results of χ^2-tests are summarized in Table 6, suggesting that programs employed the core curriculum and those with full curriculum were implemented with similar qualities in terms of program workers' views.

Discussion

Based on a random sample of 128 schools, interim evaluation findings about the implementation of the Tier 1 Program in the 2008/09 school year are reported. There are several observations based on the present findings. First, the program implementers reported a high degree of student involvement in the program. Second, a majority of the informants across different grades felt that students liked the program. It is noteworthy that a high degree of participant involvement and their positive attitudes are considered key factors affecting project success for positive youth development program. In short, the present findings suggest that the implementation of the Tier 1 Program in the 2008/09 school year was successful based on the stakeholders' views.

Third, almost all implementers in different grades viewed the program as helpful to students' development. Fourth, a majority of the program implementers agreed that program instructors held positive attitudes toward the curriculum. Finally, according to the respondents, program workers' overall satisfaction of the project was on the positive side. These findings indicated that from the program worker's perspective, the program was implemented in a good manner.

Regarding differences among different grades in terms of interim evaluation, the present study showed that there were no significant findings. This result is a little at odds with the subjective outcome evaluation findings based on program implementers' views. In a recent report (15), it was found that while program content was perceived more favorably by Secondary 1 respondents than by Secondary 3 respondents, program workers' evaluation about instructors and the effectiveness of the program did not vary across grade. Shek et al.

(15) proposed that such a grade difference in the perceived program content by program workers may be caused by the age-related characteristics of students and the difficulties of implementing higher-grade curriculum. The present interim evaluation study, however, suggests that despite these factors, the implementations of the Tier 1 Program in different grades were in a satisfactory level. More studies should be carried out to further examine the discrepancy between the interim evaluation findings and subjective outcome evaluation findings, for example to identify possible factors other than the process of implementation that might contribute to implementers' perceptions of program content.

The present study also compared the interim evaluation findings between programs with full curriculum and programs with core curriculum. No significant differences in the evaluation findings were found for programs that adopted different implementation modes. Thus, it seemed that regardless of the mode of curriculum and of the grade in which the program was conducted the project workers generally perceived the program as well implemented. Taken as a whole, the present results strengthened the findings rising from other evaluative studies that the Tier 1 Program was well implemented and beneficial to students' development (16–18) and different stakeholders of the project held positive perceptions about the program.

Despite the positive findings observed, it is noteworthy that there are several possible alternative explanations for the positive findings in this study. First, the findings may be explained in terms of demand characteristics, meaning that participants' responses are unconsciously influenced by their interpretation of the research purpose (19). This explanation, however, is unlikely to be true because the respondents were repeatedly encouraged to express their own views without any restriction. In addition, the informants were encouraged to express in an honest and genuine manner and they were re-assured that the data would be analyzed in an anonymous manner. Second, the positive findings could be because of selection bias. Nonetheless, the participating schools of the present study were randomly selected and thus the explanation of selection bias can be excluded.

In summary, the present study provided interim evaluation findings on the implementation of the Tier 1 Program in the 2008/09 school year among secondary school students in Hong Kong. The findings support the positive nature of Project P.A.T.H.S. and its effectiveness in promoting holistic youth development among Hong Kong adolescents. Based on the principle of triangulation (20), evaluation findings based

on different methods, including subjective outcome evaluation based on both program participants and implementers, qualitative findings and process evaluation suggest that different stakeholders had positive views of the program and they perceived the program to be effective in promoting holistic adolescent development in Chinese students in Hong Kong.

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