The role of program, people, process, policy and place (5Ps) in the implementation of a positive youth development program

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Abstract

There is scant literature about identifying factors contributing to the success of the implementation of programs to help understand the interrelationships among multiple facets of implementation. In this paper, a front-line implementer reviewed the execution practice of Project P.A.T.H.S. (Positive Adolescent Training through Holistic Social Programmes) in her former school in terms of program, people, process, policy and place (5Ps). By examining the factors contributing to the success of the implementation, the authors intend to fill the gap between the research and the practical school-based front-line implementation. Although the program implementation process was examined in researchers' "expert" perspective, it would be helpful if more research employed front-line workers as collaborators and participants in the implementation process to understand what actually happen in the program implementation process.

Introduction

There is a rising concern about adolescent developmental issues, such as substance abuse, unhealthy lifestyle and mental health problems in Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong.

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To assist adolescents to stride over these life hurdles along their growth pathways, systematic effort to promote healthy adolescent development should be made. In Western contexts, programs utilizing concepts of prevention and positive youth development have emerged in order to facilitate adolescents' well-being.

In Hong Kong, funded by The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust, a positive youth development program entitled "P.A.T.H.S. to Adulthood: A Jockey Club Youth Enhancement Scheme" has been launched for junior secondary school students since 2005 (1). The acronym P.A.T.H.S. stands for "Positive Adolescent Training through Holistic Social Programmes". The focus of Project P.A.T.H.S. is to help junior secondary school students develop a number of psychosocial skills or qualities in young people with reference to 15 positive youth development constructs commonly identified in successful positive youth development programs. The project is a two-tier program. The Tier 1 Program is a universal positive youth development program with well-designed curricula, in which students in Secondary 1 to Secondary 3 participate in 20 h of training in the school year at each grade (1). The Tier 2 Program is designed for the students with greater psychosocial needs (2). Because of the overwhelming success of the program in the initial phase of implementation (2005–2009), the Trust has funded the project for another cycle (2009–2012). The effectiveness of Project P.A.T.H.S. has been evaluated extensively, and there are findings supporting its effectiveness (1).

A review of the literature shows that little attention has been given to identifying factors contributing to the success or failure of the implementation of positive youth development programs (2). Theoretically, these factors are crucial to enable researchers to understand the theoretical determinants of program implementation quality. Practically, understanding of process variables which influence program success would help to improve the quality of the program implementation process. Unfortunately, process variables and factors shaping the quality of program implementation are not adequately addressed in the existing studies (3). To fill this research gap, Shek and Sun (4) conducted several case studies to identify factors that influence the quality of program implementation. While the factors contributing to successful implementation are revealing, the findings are solely based on "expert" analyses of the data collected. As there may be a wide gap between research and practice in school-based prevention and positive youth development programs (5), it is important to understand the feelings and thinking of front-line practitioners based on their own personal reflections. As such, the purpose of this paper is to document the personal experiences and reflections of the first author with respect to

the implementation of the Tier 1 Program in a single school. Specifically, this paper studies the first author's reflections on the attributes of effective teaching in carrying out the curriculum of Project P.A.T.H.S. with reference to the framework of invitational education which includes program, people, process, policy and place (5Ps). It was expected that the shared and related analyses would complement research findings based on previous case studies.

Background of the review

The first author was a teacher who had taught in the school under study for 10 years. She also taught the programs of Project P.A.T.H.S. from 2005 to 2010. In this school, the P.A.T.H.S. program was implemented through the Life Education lesson in junior secondary forms where the lessons were integrated into the formal curriculum. Each lesson lasted for 40 min and lessons were carried out throughout the whole academic year. As the P.A.T.H.S. program was related to counseling work in this school (4), the school principal assigned the Guidance teachers with counseling training background to conduct the program and expected the teachers to have the P.A.T.H.S. training before implementation. The teachers assigned to teach the P.A.T.H.S. program formed a team which was directed by the vice-principal (the Student Affairs) and the panel head. In general, the teachers agreed to follow the teaching guidelines as suggested in the curriculum manuals and would only modify the teaching orientations and materials if absolutely necessary (e.g., changes to cater for specific needs of the students and the school). There were regular informal sharing sessions or meetings for the team to discuss matters arising in the lessons on an irregular basis. Starting from the 2009/10 school year, several students from each form were invited to sessions with the Life Education teachers to share what they had learned throughout the year, their perceptions of the program and their feelings about the style of teaching.

Reflections about the program

Researchers have put their research emphases on how program design and ready-made materials could facilitate the implementation process and lessen the work of front-line implementers (4, 6). Shek and Sun (4) argued that the ready-made materials of the project are crucial in qualifying the implementation process. What contributes to the quality of program implementation is that ready-made materials may aid front-line implementers to enhance the self-efficacy, as there is profound and substantial literature to suggest that teachers' self-efficacy interacts with and impacts on their professional practices (7). However, implementation requires the process of teachers' conduction and students' reception. Before implementing a program, it is crucial to understand the needs of the target population (8). Project P.A.T.H.S. is designed as a universal program catering for the universal developmental needs of adolescents. Students' school-based needs have to be carefully assessed. Without the understanding of students' needs, teachers may be doubtful when linking the topics in different constructs even if

they have well-documented and well-designed teaching manuals. In addition, teachers may find it difficult to arrange activities that fit the specific needs of the school and students, and this would impede the implementation quality. The reviewed school utilizes Assessment Program for Affective and Social Outcomes (APASO), an inventory developed by the Hong Kong Education Bureau to assess students' affective and social outcomes (9), to have better understanding of students' needs and concerns. With the assessment of the needs of students, teachers may better grasp students' perceptions on their competences, interpersonal relationships, attitudes toward the school, the concept of quality school life and expectations, and goals for the future. These outcomes are indispensable in aiding teachers to connect the outcomes of the inventory and the constructs of the project. The sequence of the lessons and arrangements of the curricular materials and activities could be coordinated in a more comprehensive and flexible way according to the students' needs. In short, while the ready-made curriculum is good, it is suggested that the psychosocial needs of the student should also be taken into account to see whether adaptation of the program is needed.

Reflections about people

In the meta-analysis conducted by Durlak et al. (10), it was concluded that school staff could conduct successful school-based youth programs and brought significant improvement on students' academic performance and personal growth. There are extensive reviews on the effectiveness of the program of Project P.A.T.H.S. in promoting holistic development in secondary school students in Hong Kong (1). Among the reviews, the roles of the people are stressed and valued in contributing to the success of the programs (11). In the front-line implementation of the project, the vital people include the leading administrative staff, the teachers, and the students in the school contexts. As the "people" are not identical in their thinking, collaboration among the administration and front-line implementers is crucial in sharing successful program implementation.

Extensive literature suggests that effective leadership and planning promotes quality program implementation through ensuring adequate financial, personnel and administrative support (3, 8, 10). It is often the case that principals applied for funding with good intention, and then passed the project to the coordinator and urged the front-line implementers to make progress (8). The urge may hamper the implementation quality as well as teachers' motivation. As such, effective leadership does not only mean providing fiscal support or delegation of manpower. It means more that it should encompass agreement with the vision of the principal and mission of the project as well as genuine understanding of the reasons for implementing the project to students. The principal of the school where the first author taught had participated in the meetings with the co-walkers of Project P.A.T.H.S. and the teachers of Life Education Team before each term commenced. The mission of the project was well explained and the principal could clearly articulate the expectation of effective implementation in the meeting. With a clear understanding

of the project's aims and mission, the principal could help to shape school readiness and build capacity for teachers. The principal provided teachers with assistance and positive incentives in order to facilitate the process and ensure the quality of implementation.

Sobeck et al. (8) commented that one of the most effective strategies for successful implementation is the continuation of encouragement and support to follow through from the school principals, because this helps to prevent mounting resistance from executive staff and ensures long-term commitment to the program. As well as support from the principal, the Life Education team of the reviewed school received plentiful support from the vice-principal. The vice-principal was an important liaison to the team and the team was co-directed with the panel head. The vice-principal was mainly responsible for administrative "chores" like manpower deployment, allocation of resources, and financial arrangements, while the panel head was more responsible for the practical tasks, such as the design of the sequence of the program to cater for students' needs, arrangements of curricular materials and resources, and communication within the team. The active involvement of the vice-principal lessened the administrative burden of the team members and allowed members more time for better preparation.

Researchers highlighted how interpersonal supports, especially the caring teacher-student relationships and engaging teaching approaches, such as proactive and cooperative classroom milieu, produce better implementation quality and hence improve the school performance (10). The interactive and caring teacher-student relationships humanize the classrooms (12), which enhance students' commitment and bonding to school. However, with the education reforms taking place in the past decade, teachers are experiencing intense pressure in pursuing academic high performance in public examinations in Hong Kong. Given time constraints and increased demands from different parties, teachers usually face a dilemma between quality academic work and effective program implementation. Therefore, Sobeck et al. (8) restated that successful implementation depended exclusively on the front-line implementers' genuine belief about the meaning of the new initiative. Teachers are willing to devote time and effort in implementing the program and the sense of ownership is enhanced if they find meaning in the hard work. Obviously, how to help colleagues to understand and own such meaning is an important task to be accomplished.

Shek and Sun (4) acknowledged that students are other key individuals in the program implementation, yet students' voices are often excluded from the initial planning and ongoing program assessments of the positive youth development programs (13). The sharing session with the students of the school under review is an attempt to include students' thoughts and reflections in the planning process. As a result, students are not only receivers but they collaborate with their teachers in the learning process. The message of "togetherness" is important, because it motivates the students to participate and be involved in the program. As there is little research into understanding the views of students before, during and after program implementation, such work should be stepped up in future.

Reflections about the process

Successful youth programs are interactive in nature, with the use of coaching, role play, and structured activities to guide youth toward achievement of specific goals (14). Effective teaching strategies involving direct peer interactions showed stronger effects than programs only using effective content (6). Shek and Sun (4) reported the vitality of interactive and flexible teaching strategies in promoting the implementation quality of Project P.A.T.H.S. In the long-term, exploration and development of interactive and flexible teaching methods is important for the successful implementation of positive youth development programs.

Besides the development of effective teaching techniques, one must be aware of the struggle between the fidelity of the program and adaptations to fit school needs in the front-line implementation process. Fidelity of implementation has been described as the degree to which a program is implemented as intended by the program developers (15) and it contributes to the program implementation quality. The adherence to the designed curriculum was highlighted to be the key process factors of quality implementation. Although some researchers see "fidelity" as strict adherence to the curriculum (16), Ringwalt et al. (17) moved toward a more flexible model that acknowledges the need to tailor programs to the unique needs of school and students. Obviously, flexibility should not mean cutting activities when time is running out, because this would seriously affect the learning outcomes and disconnect the network of information structured by the students. As the developed program content focused on practical knowledge and the program design was evidence based (4), cutting the related activities without any empirical support would influence the breadth of content coverage and time for students to develop the content in greater depth. Therefore, during the adaptation process, the critical elements of effective programs should be first identified and the core issues should not be altered.

Nevertheless, as many teachers may not have sufficient training in prevention and positive youth development concepts to make decisions on how to "include" or "exclude" materials with reference to the specific school context, relevant and more specific professional training is needed. Besides, good preparation for the lessons and prudent time management would enhance program fidelity as well as program implementation quality. As all teachers teaching the program in Project P.A.T.H.S. have received adequate training, they had good understanding of the philosophy, program design, and implementation approach of the project. As such, teachers were familiar with the program and they were able to link the content with prior experiences in order to adhere to the curriculum in a more accurate basis. Brophy (18) asserted that curricular alignment to create a cohesive program is essential to accomplish the instructional purposes and goals. In other words, the program components should be delivered consistently and the implementation should be "authentic" to the program model. This would definitely benefit the implementation of the program. Adherence to curriculum protocols is the key to achieving the intended effects of the designed

curricula. If the critical elements of a curriculum are identified, teacher modifications may be encouraged as long as the key elements of the program are delivered (6). As there is little discussion on program adherence in the education and social work contexts, it is suggested that more research in this area should be carried out in future. In particular, it would be exciting to understand more about the rationales behind "including" or "excluding" certain elements in a program.

Reflections about policy

Clear and supportive school policy is acknowledged as the key in enhancing the quality of the program implementation. Granger (19) affirmed that provision of sufficient resources would result in quality implementation outcomes. The allocation and provision of sufficient resources was crucial in bringing the full impact of the program on students. One of the beneficial resources was the capacity for teachers to discuss and share what they have come across during the implementation process. The school under review provided that capacity by assembling a team of colleagues with sufficient experience and administrative knowledge. Concerted team efforts may lessen the burden on the teachers. In addition, the reviewed school advised the panel head to teach one lesson prior to the normative schedule. This practice was helpful to teachers who were not confident enough for the implementation and execution. The panel head could aid teachers to familiarize with the philosophy and implementation of the program in order to increase their comfort level. This model is ideal for the implementation of positive youth development programs. One implication is that there is a need to organize workshops and training workshops for principals and vice-principals so that a supportive school policy could be devised.

The inclusion of the program to the formal curriculum in the reviewed school offered another capacity essentially for front-line implementers. Greenberg (20) stated in his research that the program would only survive if there is long-term planning and adjustment of the program model to become integrated with other programming already ongoing in schools. The reviewed school arranged that the Life Education lessons were solely for the implementation of the Project P.A.T.H.S. program. As the program was carried out in the normal school timetable, teachers and students were used to timetabling the format of conduction and the habit of having the lessons was developed. This arrangement implies that the school under review has long-term commitment to the program and understands well how the program should be integrated and assimilated into the existing system. This commitment helps to promote the program implementation quality and orient the team members to the same philosophical emphasis of the project.

Reflections about place

The factor "place" in school contexts indicates how the classroom milieu (the micro level) and the school climate (the macro level) facilitate the implementation process and quality of the project. Inside the classroom, the use of self was encouraged and stressed in the implementation of the Project P.A.T.H.S. program. It should be remembered that it may be harmful for teenagers to unveil their genuine, yet vulnerable, feelings to adults if the environment is not sufficiently safe and secure. Researchers highlight that a welcoming and humanized environment becomes the priority for students' revelation of feelings and reflections (12, 21, 22). One basic condition contributing to the humanized and secure environment is the caring teacher-student relationship. Klem and Connell (23) reported that caring and supportive teacher-student relationships nurtured a sense of belonging within students, so they were more engaged in school. As such, teachers' facilitation of a secure classroom atmosphere and dedication to the project are crucial for students' growth in the program.

Sobeck et al. (8) emphasized that successful and effective program implementation depends immensely on having a school climate that is supportive to the program theory and philosophy. As such, principals play an indispensable role in adhering to the program philosophy and disseminating the messages to front-line staff who are not yet with a mandated attitude. With the provision of the capacity and an avenue for creativity and innovations in implementing the project, teachers could demonstrate their expertise after training and students would, in turn, benefit from this open-minded environment and be more willing to share their thoughts and feelings during lessons. Teachers' dedication and students' active involvement would continue to flow when they are given opportunities to be appreciated by principals (4).

Discussion and concluding thoughts

Process evaluation was defined by Scheirer (24) as "the use of empirical data to assess the delivery of programs …. Process evaluation verifies what the program is, and whether or not it is delivered as intended to the targeted recipients and in the intended dosage" (p. 40). Despite the large number of studies examining objective outcomes of adolescent prevention and positive youth development programs (e.g., use of clinical trials), there are relatively fewer studies on process evaluation of such programs. This inadequacy is shown in the comment of Linnan and Steckler (25) that there is "a plethora of reports about interventions that have successful outcomes. A limited number of studies, however, disentangle the factors that ensure successful outcomes, characterize the failure to achieve success, or attempt to document the steps involved in achieving successful implementation of an intervention" (p. 1). Durlak (26) reviewed over 1200 published prevention studies and showed that program implementation findings were reported in <5% of these studies. Similarly, Dane and Schneider (27) showed that roughly one-quarter of the studies under review documented procedures of fidelity. As such, there is a need to understand how positive youth development programs are implemented and what factors account for the success or failure of such programs. Utilizing the 5Ps framework focusing on program, people, process, policy and place, the present paper attempted to understand the related factors based on the teaching experiences of the first author.

From the reflections documented in this paper, it is clear that success of the program implementation relies on different parties to collaborate and cooperate. Why? There are at least two reasons for the collaboration. First, there were sometimes mixed messages about how to prioritize limited class time in achieving good academic results and holistic youth development. Second, school administrative staff, program coordinators, the P.A.T.H.S. team in school and the implementers were not identical in thoughts and means of conduction. As a result, many compromises were needed to implement the program successfully in schools. The compromises did not come from top-down mandates. They depended significantly on principals' comprehension of the project's philosophy and theory and understanding of students' needs and teachers' expertise.

Sy and Glanz argued that the front-line program implementers, as "key agents of change", should be involved in the stages of research (6). This participatory approach may help address the practical front-line program implementation. Front-line program implementers experience the implementation process and understand the implementation's needs and the feasibility of implementing the curriculum in the school settings. As the author is one of the front-line implementers of the reviewed school and is doing a research on the project, the involvement would ensure the better implementation and translation of the practice settings. To date, many evaluation strategies have been used to evaluate the project, including objective outcome evaluation, subjective outcome evaluation, qualitative evaluation, process evaluation, interim evaluation, student product evaluation, and repertory grid technique evaluation (1, 28–33). Although the program implementation process was examined in process evaluation, more research employing front-line workers as collaborators and participants in the evaluation process would be helpful to understand what actually happens in the program implementation process.

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