

Implementation of a positive youth development program by class teachers in a Chinese context

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Abstract

This paper reports the findings of a case study in which a curriculum-based positive youth development program (Project P.A.T.H.S.) was implemented by the class teachers in a school. School-related factors which contributed to the success of program implementation were identified in the study. Results showed that factors facilitating the program implementation were closely related to the “5Ps” model (i.e., program, people, process, policy and place). While all the above factors contributed to the success of program implementation, the “people” factor was identified as the most crucial factor. Overall, both the students and program implementers perceived the program to be effective in promoting holistic development in the program participants.

Keywords: adolescence; case study; class teachers; positive youth development; Project P.A.T.H.S.

Introduction

According to Adalbjarnardottir (1), “the challenge of the 21st century is to cultivate basic human values in our youth, such as respect and care, and trust and fairness, both for their own wellbeing and that of societies around the world” (p. 757). In the rapidly changing societal and economic conditions of Hong Kong, some adolescent developmental issues, such as substance abuse, adolescent delinquency,

youth unemployment, youth mental health problems and youth poverty deserve our attention (2). One of the feasible responses to these issues is to promote psychosocial competence and developmental assets of adolescents. This is obviously a call for an asset-based and development-orientated program for our young people. Hence, a pioneering positive youth development (PYD) program entitled “P.A.T.H.S. to Adulthood: A Jockey Club Youth Enhancement Scheme” was initiated by The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust in 2005, with a grant of HK\$400 million. Project P.A.T.H.S. (Positive Adolescent Training through Holistic Social Programmes) is a holistic positive youth development program for junior secondary students in Hong Kong. The program consists of two tiers of program. The Tier 1 Program is a universal program (i.e., for all Secondary 1 to Secondary 3 students in participating schools) while the Tier 2 Program is particularly designed for students with greater psychosocial needs. The Tier 1 Program was designed by the Project P.A.T.H.S. research team, whereas the content of the Tier 2 Program was developed and tailor-made by the schools and social work agencies with reference to the specific needs of respective schools. In addition, a 20-h training program was offered to the implementers of the participating schools. The training covered the program rationales (especially the concept of PYD), administrative and evaluation issues, program content of the Tier 1 Program, and implementation techniques.

In 2000, a comprehensive education reform which covering the curriculum design, assessment mechanisms, and the admission systems in different levels of education was launched in Hong Kong (3). The education reform emphasizes the importance of personal growth, moral development and critical thinking competence, moving away from the traditional focus of academic performance. The transformation also matches the holistic developmental approach of Project P.A.T.H.S., as one of the major goals of education reform is to nurture the next generation with all-round development (4). Under this reform, teachers are expected and required to play an increasingly important role in the process, in which the teaching practice is quite different from traditional methods. In addition, teachers both inside and outside the classroom are obliged to change their role, in order to achieve realistic academic output. Yuen (5) reviewed relevant literature in other Chinese communities (e.g., Shanghai, Guangzhou and Taiwan) and concluded that class teachers were expected to play multifaceted roles in supporting students’ personal holistic growth in schools. However, with such a demanding reform environment, there is tremendous stress on teachers (6). As a result, some class teachers may be reluctant to implement the new positive youth development program,

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especially when they regard it as additional work upon their regular but heavy duties, even though they find that the rationale of the program (i.e., emphasizing the holistic development of students) is in line with their beliefs and roles. For this reason, it is important to understand and identify the factors which are conducive to the successful implementation of Project P.A.T.H.S. Furthermore, successful experience should be shared in order to provide program implementers with more practical ideas and effective strategies for running the positive youth development program and boost their morale.

Regarding Project P.A.T.H.S., diverse evaluation strategies, such as objective outcome evaluation (7), subjective outcome evaluation from students and instructors' feedback (8–10), students and instructors' focus group interviews (11, 12), and process evaluation (13) have been employed to examine the effectiveness of the project since its inception. It is noteworthy that the consistent positive evaluation results have shown that Project P.A.T.H.S. is conducive to positive development in the participants. Nevertheless, there are few studies examining program implementation from the implementers' perspectives among these evaluation studies. Apparently, there is a need to further understand the quality of program implementation and to investigate the factors facilitating and hindering program implementation as faced by the participating schools. In addition, although teachers play a key role in program implementation, there is very little research on teachers' experiences of implementation of positive youth development programs in different contexts (1). As such, the present case study was conducted to fill this research gap.

Yin (14) pointed out that case study is an empirical inquiry to investigate contemporary phenomenon within a specific real-life context. In fact, case study is also a research method that is commonly employed in different fields of research in Hong Kong. For instance, Twinn and Lee (15) explored the practice of health education in acute care settings in Hong Kong. Regarding the social welfare issues, Ng et al. (16) examined the interaction between different components of informal support, such as living arrangements, geographical proximity and the quality of relationships between potential caregivers and receivers in a newly developing district of Hong Kong. Hong Kong Christian Service (17) also employed the case study method as a part of its research study to explore the experience of victims, abusers and volunteers, and help professionals involved in, elder abuse cases. However, with particular reference to Asia, there are very few research studies examining positive youth development programs using the case study approach. In Project P.A.T.H.S., several case studies were conducted to examine different aspects of successful program implementation. These aspects include successful school-related factors (18), policy factors at a macro level (19), the relations between successful implementation and schools in higher and lower academic achievers (20, 21), the relations between successful implementation between positive school and classroom environment (22), implementation schools with religion background (23), and program incorporation into school formal curriculum (24).

Using cross-case analyses, Shek and Sun (25) examined the factors that influenced the process and quality of program implementation of Project P.A.T.H.S. Five aspects of factors, namely, program, people, process, policy, and place ("5Ps") were identified as determinants of program implementation quality. In this case study, the "5Ps" model was adopted as a framework to analyze the positive factors which facilitate the class teachers to implement the Tier 1 Program with positive results.

Methods

A total of 173 schools participated in Project P.A.T.H.S. (Secondary 3 curriculum) in the Full Implementation Phase in the 2009/10 academic year. Four schools demonstrating quality administration and implementation were invited to participate in the study. For each school, an invitation letter with the details of the purposes and procedures of the research was sent to the principal, seeking consent for the school's participation. The present case study was based on one of the schools participating in the study. An individual interview with the school coordinator and a group interview with the class teachers were conducted by trained and experienced social workers. Prior to the interviews, consent from all informants was sought, and confidentiality as well as anonymity of the data collected was emphasized. The interviews were conducted in Cantonese, which is the mother tongue of the interviewers and interviewees.

Instruments

A specific self-developed, semi-structured interview guide was designed to collect the data. There were three parts in each interview guide:

- respondents' perceptions of the school administrative arrangement, including preparation, support within the school and from the social work agency and program evaluation
- respondents' perceptions of the program implementation process, such as teaching process and techniques, and student assessment
- respondents' overall perceptions of program effectiveness and program success.

In addition, the school coordinator was required to complete a questionnaire about the background information of the school which included the basic information of the school, instructors, program implementation and the implementation process.

Data analyses

The interviews were recorded and the recordings were transcribed by trained student helpers. The transcriptions were checked by the interviewers and the second author to ensure accuracy. Preliminary data analyses were done by the second author. Descriptive thematic analysis was adopted in the data analysis process (26). It consists of five stages: (a) to familiarize the data by re-reading the transcription and listening to recordings; (b) to identify the thematic framework; (c) coding; (d) charting (presenting the transcripts' details of codes by theme or case); and (e) interpretation. The authors had no direct connection with the informant school, so avoiding possible personal biases and preoccupations that might affect the data interpretation.

Results

Information on the school characteristics is summarized in Table 1. The school adopted the 20-h full program of Project P.A.T.H.S. and its content was incorporated into the formal curricula of ‘Moral and Civic Education’ and ‘Whole Person Education’. All the instructors of the Tier 1 Program were class teachers and all of them had completed the P.A.T.H.S.

training for instructors. The class teachers also followed the same cohort of students from Secondary 1 to Secondary 3.

School administrative arrangements and related issues

The findings on the school administrative arrangements and related issues could be categorized into four areas: (a) support

Table 1 Summary of the characteristics of the school (school K).

I. Basic information about the school	
a) Total number of S3 students (number of S3 classes)	190 (five classes)
b) Class teacher system	Single class teacher system
c) Participation in life education program organized by other organizations	Yes
d) Number of uniform/social and voluntary service groups in school	One
e) Small groups, workshops and seminars specifically arranged for S3 students	1. Peer counseling program 2. Anti-smoking program 3. Anti-drugs program 4. Internet addiction prevention program 5. Anti-bullying program
II. Basic information about Tier 1 Program participation	
a) Hours	20-h full program
b) Mode	Other (13 sessions, 1.5 h per session)
c) Program arrangement	Formal curriculum: 1. Moral and Civic Education (50%) 2. Whole Person Education (50%) The curricula of “Moral and Civic Education” and “Whole Person Education” were revised to facilitate the program implementation.
d) Rationales of the program arrangement	Cantonese
e) Medium of instruction	NA
f) Consolidation session	Yes
g) Beginning session	Yes
h) Conclusion session	NA
i) Supplementary activity	No
j) Other activities	No
k) Student assessment on P.A.T.H.S. Program	Yes
l) Has joined Experimental Implementation Phase	Yes
III. Information about the instructors conducting the Tier 1 Program	
a) Number of instructors conducting Tier 1 Program	Five teachers, one school social worker and one teaching assistant
b) Number of instructors joined P.A.T.H.S. training	Six teachers (including the school coordinator)
IV. Basic information about Tier 1 Program implementation	
a) Number and content of preparation meeting(s)	About two preparation meetings were held to discuss the implementation aims, arrangement, and related matters
b) Number of instructors conducting Tier 1 Program in each class	One teacher
c) Person responsible for preparing the teaching materials, and the way of preparation	The social worker and the teaching assistant were responsible to prepare some teaching materials, while teachers took the main role in teaching the Tier 1 Program
d) Number and content of evaluation meeting(s)	One evaluation meeting was held to review and evaluate the students’ performance, the arrangement of classes and related teaching experiences
e) Cooperation between the school and social work agency	The social worker was responsible for the Tier 2 Program, while the teacher took the main role in teaching the Tier 1 Program
f) Role of teacher in Tier 1 Program Implementation	1. Teaching the program 2. Monitoring classroom discipline 3. Coordinating the program related matters 4. Following-up
g) Role of social worker in Tier 1 Program Implementation	1. Preparing teaching materials 2. Following-up

for the program and its rationales, (b) program arrangement, and its perceived advantages, (c) manpower deployment; and (d) support within school and from social work agency.

Support for the program and its rationales Both the school coordinator and teachers agreed to the program rationales and supported the project implementation. The school coordinator particularly appreciated the comprehensiveness and wide coverage of the program which could meet junior secondary students' needs. Although a number of students might not find some of the content to be useful presently, the school coordinator pointed out that she still believed the program was beneficial to students eventually. At the same time, she appreciated the design of a two-tier program that could facilitate positive change in those students with greater psychosocial needs. For the class teachers, they also acknowledged that the Tier 1 Program could enhance the student-teacher relationship, where this kind of harmonious relationship was persistently valued in the school culture.

Program arrangement and its perceived advantages

The program was incorporated into existing curricula (i.e., 'Moral and Civic Education' and 'Whole Person Education') which were consistently taught by class teachers. There were some advantages for both teachers and students with such an arrangement. For the teachers, they could have better readiness to implement the Tier 1 Program since it was incorporated into existing school curricula and subjects which the teachers were used to teaching. The school coordinator pointed out that:

"...the class teachers have taught the 'Moral and Civic Education' and 'Whole Person Education' and coordinated all related assemblies and seminars for years. Therefore, the colleagues are ready and they feel comfortable to implement the Tier 1 Program by themselves."

For the students, since the program was arranged as a part of the formal curriculum, the students perceived and participated in the program in a more serious manner. Furthermore, as the program was incorporated into existing curricula, most of the Tier 1 Program could be arranged in normal school time rather than requesting students to stay after school. This arrangement avoided inducing any negative feelings. Here is the school coordinator's narrative:

"...the advantage of this arrangement is that students do not think they are retained (to join the Tier 1 Program) as punishment...they feel 'OK' (comfortable) about the arrangement. We used to organize similar seminars after school, but students showed resistance.... So, I think incorporating P.A.T.H.S. into formal curriculum is good for students' learning."

In addition, the school coordinator revealed that good planning and preparation also promoted the psychological preparation of the teachers. She revealed:

"...we held several meetings to discuss with other colleagues. For example, for the Secondary 2 program, we

could decide which colleagues would support and assist in the Tier 2 Program (e.g., overnight camp or day-camp program) in the meeting. We could also plan the schedule according to colleagues' indicated preferences. We planned the program in the earlier stage, so the colleagues can have better psychological preparation ... and they are more willing to take up the tasks."

Manpower deployment Several observations could be highlighted from the findings. First, the division of labor was clear. The social work agency and teaching assistant helped prepare the materials, while the class teachers focused on teaching the program, monitoring classroom discipline, coordinating the related program matters, and following up with the students' needs. Second, for manpower deployment, student-teacher relationship was observed as one of the important selection criteria, in order to identify suitable program implementers. Third, the job allocation was based on teachers' work experience, preference and strengths. For example, regarding the job allocation of the Tier 2 Program, experienced teachers were designated to be responsible for some "complicated programs", such as overnight camp, and teachers with less experience would be responsible for "simpler activities". Fourth, specific tasks were assigned to teachers openly, so that all teachers involved could clearly understand their roles and have a greater sense of involvement in the program. Fifth, there was a constructive collaboration between the social workers and teachers involved. At the Secondary 1 and Secondary 2 levels, the Tier 1 Program was conducted by social workers while the teachers played an auxiliary role during the lessons. This kind of collaboration enhanced teachers' competence and confidence to carry out the Tier 1 Program at Secondary 3 level. As the school coordinator revealed:

"... At the same time, I hope that our teachers can have time to learn how to conduct the program by observing the social workers ... For the new colleagues, we sent two of them to join the P.A.T.H.S. training each year. We planned that all teachers should receive training. When they teach the Secondary 3 program, they can be competent to teach the Tier 1 Program. So, in the first year, we arranged the teachers to observe and learn how to teach. That's good for them as they can have time to learn."

Sixth, all interviewees agreed that the teachers, especially the class teachers, were in a proper position to implement the Tier 1 Program at the Secondary 3 level. It was because the class teachers were better acquainted with the students than were the social workers. Since the social workers had less time to get to know the students, it was hard for them to understand the students' characters fully in the early stage. To solve this problem, the school invited the social workers to teach several lessons. As such, the social workers could get to know the students through their contact in the Tier 1 Program. This arrangement could facilitate them to build good relationships with the students before they participated in the Tier 2 Program.

Support within school and from social work agency

The teachers and school coordinator recognized the support within school and from the social work agency. The teachers appreciated that the school had injected enormous resources for program implementation, especially hiring a “teaching assistant”. Regarding the collaboration with the social work agency, as shown by the narrative of the school coordinator, she felt that they collaborated quite well with the social work agency and gained sufficient support from them. Their working relationship was very positive.

School coordinator: “the social work agency is so good. They are willing to cooperate with us. Personally, I do appreciate the social work agency very much.”

Implementation characteristics in the school

The findings of the implementation characteristics could be categorized into three main themes: (a) teaching techniques; (b) difficulties encountered and solutions; and (c) advice for the next year of implementation.

Teaching techniques The teachers revealed some effective teaching techniques that they had used. These included “use of self-disclosure”, “showing signs of vitality”, “recognition for positive behavior”, “using ‘competition’ as a method of learning” and “using role-play” etc. Furthermore, according to the teachers’ implementation experience, they identified some “ideal qualities” of P.A.T.H.S. instructors, including having a positive mindset, being able to respond to students quickly, speaking precisely and concisely, frequently using novel ways to teach, and adducing proper and real-life examples to facilitate students to reflect.

Difficulties encountered and solutions There were some difficulties encountered at different stages of implementation. At the preparation stage, the school coordinator revealed that the teachers were too busy and hence quite reluctant to take the training course. In the teaching stage, the teachers reflected they had to spend more time to prepare the teaching materials. The teachers also revealed that they had to take time to prepare themselves for teaching the program and adjust their teaching styles. Furthermore, because of the tight school timetable, part of the Tier 1 Program had been implemented after school. They also found the classroom not spacious enough. During the class, the teachers found it was difficult to handle over-passive or over-active students. They also mentioned that it was difficult for a single teacher to take care of all students during the Tier 1 Program. Two solutions were then suggested by the informants. First, to solve the problem of the tight school timetable, the school coordinator worked with other parties to improve administrative arrangements, such as re-scheduling the Tier 1 Program and implementing it within the regular school time. Second, regarding the varied student characteristics, the teachers opted to amend some of the teaching materials in order to draw students’ attention and arouse their learning motivation.

Advice for the next year of implementation Although there was no co-teaching last year, it was very interesting that all of the interviewed teachers perceived co-teaching positively and proposed it to be implemented in the future. Two formats of co-teaching were proposed, either involving two class teachers to conduct the program concurrently or co-teaching with the social worker(s). In addition, the teachers proposed to swap class teachers to teach the Tier 1 Program in order to enrich students’ perspective and promote teachers’ self-awareness. One of the teachers revealed that:

“I wish there is more cooperation with others in the implementation. Since I have taught those students for a long time, I might not be aware of my personal bias and something I might have neglected and missed. It will be better if other instructors can provide supplementary viewpoints for me and the students.”

Perceived program effectiveness, program success and overall impression

Both the school coordinator and teachers recognized the effectiveness of the program. They observed some positive changes in their students, such as having better conflict resolution skills, enhancing ability for self-reflection and being more willing to consider teachers’ advice. In fact, a teacher expressed that although some of the students might not have immediate positive behavioral change, they perceived that the students’ ability in differentiating “what is right and wrong” was enhanced.

Both the school coordinator and teachers perceived the program to be successful since they observed that some students had certain degree of positive changes. They also thought the program could open students’ mind and enhance their self-awareness. Meanwhile, they perceived the program to be fruitful as it was also beneficial to teachers’ professional growth.

The informants were invited to express their overall impression on Project P.A.T.H.S. with a metaphor. The informants used “baby” (having infinite possibility for positive outcome), “hearing aid” (disseminating positive values), “alpenstock” (providing supports for students), and “sky” (comprehensiveness of the program content) to represent the program, respectively. These metaphors suggest that their impression on the program was consistently positive.

Discussion

As previously mentioned, there are few case studies examining factors that facilitate the program implementation by class teachers. The present case study serves as a good supplement to the literature and it could be a good reference for future implementation of the program. Results showed that several positive attributes were conducive to program success. With reference to the framework of the “5Ps” model (i.e., program, people, process, policy and place), the factors facilitating the implementation are outlined in the following sections.

Program: integration with school's formal curriculum and teachers' positive impression on the program

As revealed in the interviews, the Tier 1 Program was successfully incorporated into two formal school subjects. Since the class teachers were used to teach those two subjects for years, they could have better readiness for implementing the new program. During the implementation process, all classes were arranged strategically. The class teachers also endeavored to enrich the teaching materials and transplant the program in a dedicated manner. In addition, the teachers recognized the comprehensiveness of the program and believed that the program was beneficial to students. All these positive impressions or perceptions of Project P.A.T.H.S. laid a good foundation and exerted a significant influence on effective program implementation. This echoed the findings of Domitrovich and Greenberg (27).

People: dedicated staff in different levels

In general, school personnel of different levels agreed to the rationales of the program and showed great support to the program implementation. On the management level, although senior colleagues were not directly involved in the program implementation, they could influence the administrative policies that affected and facilitated the actual program execution. Their views on the program were also crucial. In this school, the principal was supportive and he took the initiative to participate in project P.A.T.H.S. According to the school coordinator, other management staff also offered help in incorporating the program in the school time systematically.

The school coordinator created a good environment for program implementation and played a significant role in coordination. Based on the interview, the coordinator shared different effective strategies on program planning and preparation. This provided enough time for the teachers to prepare themselves for the program implementation. In addition, the school coordinator also ensured that class teachers' work preferences and work experience were taken into account in the planning process. At the same time, the tasks were allocated amongst them through a freely negotiable way. These arrangements enhanced teachers' sense of ownership of the program. Referring to the findings of a previous study (20), greater sense of ownership was conducive to successful program implementation in Project P.A.T.H.S.

Since all the class teachers were front-line implementers of the Tier 1 Program, they were playing an important role in delivery of the program. For this reason, all of them had received training and spent substantial time in observing how to implement the Tier 1 Program at the Secondary 1 and Secondary 2 levels. They also made certain effort to adapt themselves to the program and supplement teaching materials to arouse students' learning motivation. Based on the interviews, the teachers showed many reflections and much professional growth in the process of implementation. Teachers were indeed passionate. Lam (20) suggested that the "people factor" can be regarded as a golden rule of program

implementation. Definitely, their willingness had positively influenced the implementation quality.

Process: collaborative relationship with social work agency and student-centered implementation process

As indicated in the findings, the collaborative relationship between the social work agency and school was positive. The school coordinator acknowledged and appreciated the social work agency explicitly in the interview. Lee (28) suggested that smooth cooperation between school and social work agency could facilitate quality implementation. In the present case study, the social work agency provided sufficient support that contributed to the program success.

Another observation is that student interests and harmonious student-teacher relationship were highly emphasized. Such characteristics suggest that the implementation process was student-centered, which created a positive classroom atmosphere. Pianta and Allen suggested that better classroom atmosphere was positively related to program effectiveness (29). Hence, this "process factor" contributes to the successful implementation.

Policy: sufficient administrative support

Shek et al. (18) suggested that adequate administrative support and a transparent decision-making process were conducive to positive program implementation. In this study, several observations related to this aspect could be highlighted. First, the Tier 1 Program was incorporated into the formal curriculum and its implementation was arranged within the school time. Second, front-line teachers were involved in the program planning process. Third, prior planning and evaluation meetings were held so that the coordinator and the class teachers were able to share their opinions openly, which helped to promote a greater sense of ownership and involvement. Referring to the previous evaluation studies of Project P.A.T.H.S. (20, 21), these kinds of arrangements were the crucial factors for successful program implementation.

Place: positive school climate

With reference to the "factors facilitating the implementation process" proposed by Shek and Sun (30), seven factors were proposed. These factors could be found in the physical domain and non-physical domain. Physical domain refers to factors, such as having sufficient hardware equipment, physical proximity for teachers' communication etc. The non-physical domain refers to the invisible environmental factors, such as dedicated school culture and good support within school. In this case study, the teachers revealed that there were some constraints in physical settings. For example, the classroom was not spacious enough for activities. Nevertheless, in terms of non-physical setting, the implementation environment was still positive. Not only was a dedicated and positive school culture with an open discussion channel developed, but teachers' preferences for job allocation were also taken into account. Good student-teacher relationships were frequently

acknowledged. All these positive factors contributed to program success and obviously made a difference. As a result, the deficits of physical setting did not cause too much negative impact to the program.

Conclusions

Ozer (31) suggested that the “contextual factors” in school-based prevention programs, such as teachers’ perception on the program, classroom climate and school policy have to be studied as they influence program implementation and its effectiveness. The present case study explored the contextual factors which facilitated the implementation of positive youth development programs by class teachers. While all the above “5Ps” contributed to the success of program implementation, the “people” factor was identified as the most crucial factor. In addition, echoing the findings of Shek et al. (23), the present findings illustrated the feasibility of incorporating the Tier 1 Program into the existing subjects and the formal curriculum. In addition, this case study illustrated that it is desirable for class teachers to implement the program. Therefore, incorporation of the program into formal curriculum and implementation by class teachers can be regarded as a viable solution to make the program sustainable even without additional funding support.

Conceptually, this study enhances our understanding of the successful implementation factors with reference to the “5Ps”. These factors were strongly interrelated and mutually influencing. For example, the support of the school coordinator and teachers for the program rationales (i.e., “people” factor) led to some further action and special arrangements (i.e., “policy” factor) that facilitated program implementation (i.e., “process” factor). In future studies, it is suggested that the inter-relationships among the “5Ps” need to be further examined. Furthermore, in view of the positive impact of Project P.A.T.H.S. (9, 10, 32–37), it would be both theoretically and practically important to look at the possible contribution of the positive training effects on the positive program effects.

There are several limitations of this study. First, only one exemplary school was selected in a non-random manner. As such, the generalization power of the study may be limited. However, it is noteworthy that the present findings are consistent with those reported in the previous studies. Second, as only teachers were interviewed, contributions from other stakeholders, such as school social work agency workers may not be directly covered in this study. It would be important to understand the views of other stakeholders in future. Third, for the present case, only the class teachers of Secondary 3 were interviewed. As there may have differences between Secondary 3 students and Secondary 1 or Secondary 2 students, there is a need to understand the views of other teachers teaching the Secondary 1 and Secondary 2 programs in the future.

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