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What we learned from the insiders: A qualitative evaluation of a community-based positive youth development program in Chinese contexts

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Abstract: The purposes of the study were to assess whether a community-based program was effective in promoting adolescents' development and explore what factors were associated with the program effects. A total of 406 junior secondary students (Secondary 1-3) from five schools participated in a positive youth development program across three years (2013-2015). Seven focus group interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data from the program implementers, program participants and their parents/caretakers ($N=46$). Results showed that the program was effective in promoting adolescents' self-competence, beliefs in the future, problem solving skills and interpersonal relationship. Factors that accounted for these changes included the presence of a positive and supportive atmosphere and the presence of a collaborative and experiential learning environment. This study provides evidence on the positive impact of a positive youth development (PYD) program and helps identify factors that facilitate the implementation of PYD programs.

Keywords: Community-based youth program, positive youth development, Chinese secondary school students, Project P.A.T.H.S., youth at-risk

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Introduction

In the first half of the 2016-17 academic year, 19 students committed suicide in six months' time (1). While such tragedies alarmed Hong Kong and we are mourning over their passing, it is crucial for us to think what young people have to face during their adolescent years and what schools, teachers, parents, and stakeholders could offer in order to promote adolescent development.

Developmentally, adolescence is a challenging period in which individuals face several developmental needs and changes when moving toward adulthood. First, when children enter puberty, the hormones controlling physical development are activated and most children develop primary and secondary sex characteristics. Along with hormonal changes, the development within an individual may give rise to intense experiences of rage, fear, aggression (including those toward oneself), excitement and sexual attraction (2). Inevitably, mood disturbance is brought about by biological changes.

Second, along with the biological changes, adolescents also face cognitive changes. During pre-adolescence, young people struggle to assume control that is previously held by their parents/ caretakers but they are not yet fully capable of striking a balance between their own needs and others' needs. During middle to late adolescence, young people learn to distance themselves and start to align their needs with others' within social reality. In post-adolescence, young people further restructure the sense of self and others, producing a self that is more connected and integrated with the society (3).

Third, from the social perspective, materialistic orientation and egocentrism are commonly regarded as attributes of Hong Kong adolescents, which indeed create a certain negative image of them (4,5). From the economic perspective, Hong Kong is an international city where adolescents are nurtured with material prosperity. Culturally speaking, Chinese parents' concept of success is equivalent to material possession or social status and such conceptions are imprinted in youngsters' mind. Taking family structure into consideration, a declining trend of the average household size from 3.9 in 1981 to 2.9 in 2015 was observed (6,7). To a certain extent, a smaller family size may contribute to egocentrism in adolescents.

Lastly, for the adolescents who are receiving schooling, most of them feel stressed when their parents strongly emphasize high academic achievement. For those who are going to join the labor force, they may also live under pressure when job-hunting gets tough, which would, in turn, lead to a loss of hope, low self-esteem, and a decrease in overall life satisfaction (8).

The abovementioned challenges increase tension and negativity within adolescents. Indeed, adolescents can develop in a healthy manner when they receive support from adults and are equipped with the skills required to cope with these developmental challenges (9). Recently, the positive youth development approach emphasized individuals' assets and strengths, such as intrapersonal and interpersonal qualities (10). Prior research demonstrated the effectiveness of

this program in Western (11,12) and Chinese (13) contexts. However, few studies have examined the perception and benefits of the youth development programs from the perspectives of parents and caregivers. Multiple perspectives for studying the impact of youth programs are important in understanding the outcomes of the program and improving the rigor of research in intervention contexts. As such, this study attempted to fill this research gap with particular reference to whether the positive youth development program designed under the community-based P.A.T.H.S. Project has achieved the outcomes in the target recipients.

To help adolescents develop in a holistic manner, The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust initiated a project entitled “P.A.T.H.S. to Adulthood: A Jockey Club Youth Enhancement Scheme” (Project P.A.T.H.S.) in 2004. A two-tier positive youth development program was designed and has been implemented for junior secondary school students in Hong Kong since 2005. The Tier 1 programs are universal positive youth development programs whereas the Tier 2 programs are selective programs for students with greater psychosocial needs (13,14). The Tier 2 programs of the Project P.A.T.H.S. are mainly out-of-school programs that allow students to step outside their comfort zone, to safely explore independence, peer relationships, and leadership, and to form long-lasting relationships with adults outside their families (15).

The Tier 2 programs that students join are classified as providing opportunities for prosocial involvement as the activities allow them to actively participate, make a positive contribution and experience positive social exchanges (13). These programs also provide participants with opportunities to develop personal abilities and skills, and hopefully these would enable adolescents to be more confident and capable of tackling difficulties when they develop life goals with hope, optimism, and better problem-focused coping skills. To date, studies of positive youth development programs are mostly quantitative (e.g., 16,17). Researchers argued for the importance of adopting a qualitative approach to study the effectiveness of positive youth development programs (18,19). This method allows for a better understanding of the impacts and changes in youths after their participation in such programs (20) and it has been used in other contexts, such as community substance abuse treatments (21) and after-school programs for disadvantaged girls (22). Through active listening and good preparation for the interviews, researchers serve as “miners” to understand the target respondents’ real world (23,24), which may sometimes be difficult to capture using the quantitative method.

Given the paucity of qualitative research studies examining the impact of positive youth development programs, this study utilized focus group interviews to assess the outcomes of a community-based youth program based on the perceptions of program implementers, program participants, and their parents/caretakers. In particular, we explored whether the program was effective in promoting adolescents’ development. Besides, we identify factors that might contribute to the possible changes in the program participants.

Methods

A total of 406 junior secondary school students (Secondary 1-3, equivalent to Grade 7-9) from five schools participated in the Tier 2 programs across three years (2013: $N=131$; 2014: $N=145$; 2015: $N=130$, Table 1). Program implementers (social workers and class teachers) conducted a total of 261 sessions (total number of hours: 726.5) over the past three years.

Table 2 presents different outside school activities/sessions implemented across junior secondary years. In general, students were introduced to different outdoor activities, such as hiking, leadership camps and volunteer service, which focused on developing their problem-solving and interpersonal skills. Through the integration of the adventure based learning

components and the provision of active learning opportunities, students realized their full potential and achieved positive changes in their life.

In this study, focus group interviews were conducted to assess the program outcomes based on the impressions of multiple sources (program implementers, program participants and the parents/caretakers of the participants, see Table 3). Three semi-structured interview guides were designed: one for program implementers (see Table 4), one for program participants (see Table 5) and one for program participants' parents/caretakers (see Table 6). The interview guides included questions related to their perceptions (e.g., did you notice any changes about yourself (your students/child) after participating in this program?), the impact (e.g., do you think this program has strengthened your (your students'/child's) self-competence?), and overall impression of the program (e.g., how would you describe your (your students'/child's) experiences after participating in this program?). The interviews were conducted by the first and third authors, who had been teaching for over ten years and practiced in social work for more than ten years, respectively. Both conducted more than 50 interviews in the past five years.

Purposive sampling of the interviewees was adopted for choosing program implementers (25). The engagement of multiple key informants allowed capturing relevant issues and aspects of the program perceived by different stakeholders (26). Before the semi-structured interviews were conducted, all participants had been asked to sign an informed consent form. Ethical approval was given by the university review board. Seven focus group interviews with a total of 46 participants were conducted between October 2013 and July 2015. Each interview lasted for around 60 minutes (see Table 3).

All interviews were conducted in Cantonese and were recorded using a portable audio recorder. The data were transcribed in verbatim and thematically analyzed. Codes and themes were identified by using constant comparative method (27), the method of analytic induction (25), and principles of grounded theory (open, thematic coding and constant comparison) (28). Member checking and peer-debriefing were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. Emerging codes were discussed using themes relevant to the positive youth development literature (10,29). Finally, a consensus was reached among the three co-authors (Cecilia Ma, Jackie Law, and Moon Law).

Results

In terms of intrapersonal qualities, students reported that after the program, they were more confident about themselves. The following narratives illustrated this theme:

“At the beginning of the task, I didn't think I could make it happen. Interestingly, when I started doing it bit by bit, I got to know myself more. Now, I believe I can make things happen whenever I am confident.” (A student from Focus Group 3, Wave 2, 2014)

“I am more confident than before... Many of my classmates and I were shy about speaking in front of a group of people until the day we went to the elderly center. We had to sing a song in front of the elderly.” (A student from Focus Group 6, Wave 3, 2015)

The most common benefits that were mentioned in several focus group interviews were participants' beliefs in the future. Many of them commented that they learned to be more optimistic and believe that failure can be overcome.

"We suffered a setback when we first held the fundraising event. In the first few days, we only collected a hundred bucks and our morale was low. But we didn't give up. We encouraged each other and decided to ask our friends to call us. Then, our morale soared as the funds, from a hundred to two hundred and then to four hundred and so on. I valued the transition from failure to success. I developed a sense of achievement when I realized that I could successfully cope with the difficulty ahead of me." (A student from Focus Group 3, Wave 2, 2014)

"Throughout the activities, I learned that when I faced a challenge or difficulty, I could not give up right away but give it a try. In future, I will apply this thinking to my studies. For example, when I see a long article and don't want to read, I would make an effort to read it. I believe if I can make it, I will gain a great sense of achievement." (A student from Focus Group 2, Wave 1, 2014)

Another major theme raised by the interviewees was an improvement of the program participants' interpersonal and social skills. The participants described the importance of effective communications and expressed the value of collaborations with others.

"I think my communications skills improved. At the beginning, we didn't know each other and were too shy to speak to each other. Since we formed a group, we first had to know every member's name, and then we had to name our group and make up our own pose. To be perfect, we had to have very good communications." (A student from Focus Group 6, Wave 3, 2015)

"Throughout this year, I've learned that sometimes I can't solve a problem on my own but I can get some classmates to face and solve the challenges together." (A student from Focus Group 3, Wave 2, 2014)

One of the notable changes reported by the teachers and parents/caretakers was an improvement of social skills. They described that the participants began to realize the importance of building positive relationships with others, increased awareness of the issues around them and learned to express their concerns to others, even to strangers.

"Last time when we visited an elderly man, who was living alone, we waited for almost two minutes at the door. It turned out that he walked slowly from his bed whereas it may just take us two to three seconds. I learned that we have to be patient with the elderly and have more understanding. We should never think that they are useless." (A student from Focus Group 2, Wave 1, 2014)

"I learned to be punctual after visiting the elderly center. It was a cold day when we visited them. Old people are particularly vulnerable to the flu. So I don't want them to fall sick when they were expecting us. That's why we have to be punctual." (A student from Focus Group 6, Wave 3, 2015)

Teachers' and parents' feedback in the focus group interviews were very encouraging in the sense that they recognized the positive changes in students.

"My daughter had no sense of hierarchy. She always called me and her brother 'meow meow' like a cat. But after she joined this program, she seems to have some respect for authority. She no longer calls me 'meow meow' but mom. She has some respect for me after all." (A parent from Focus Group 7, Wave 3, 2015).

When asked what would be the driving force to help them tackle the difficulties in the activities and finally lead to having positive changes in them, one of the students said,

"Encouragement from people around me is a driving force to overcome the difficulties." (A student from Focus Group 3, Wave 2, 2014)

Students reported that the program created an atmosphere that allowed them to reflect on themselves. This new environment encouraged students to work with others and realized that they were dependent on each other. They learned the importance of creating a positive, mutually understanding, respectful, peer-supporting, and cooperative atmosphere.

"One thing that was very good on this trip to Qingyuan is that they shared a room with a classmate. It's not easy to share a room. No matter whether you like that classmate or not, you would still have to share with him. As they spent time together, he would have learned some skills anyway. It is not possible to just leave the other one alone. And the students were from different schools. This helped sharpen their communication skills." (A parent from Focus Group 4, Wave 2, 2014)

"We walked in pairs on a mountain in the dark one night, with one having his eyes blindfolded. My teammate and I had to trust in each other very much; otherwise, we might have fallen off the mountain. We were dependent on each other so we had to trust each other." (A student from Focus Group 2, Wave 1, 2014)

Sometimes, the smiles or feedback from the service recipients would also be the driving force for the young people:

"It's very encouraging when I see the elderly having a big smile after we taught them handicrafts. It feels good when I help people." (A student from Focus Group 2, Wave 1, 2014)

A final observation from the teachers and social workers is that Tier 2 programs provided a unique context out of the traditional classroom where the ideology of teachers' and students' roles prevailed. The Tier 2 programs, which were usually held out of the classroom, allowed the students to learn through experience and the teachers to not only focus on students' academics but their whole-person development. Through the experiential learning programs, the teachers reckoned that this type of learning opens up an opportunity for them to understand their students and to interact with the students in a friendly manner.

“The kids behaved very differently inside and outside the classroom. Inside the classroom, no matter how many times I asked them questions, they seldom responded. But now, outside the classroom, a kid came and asked me if I needed a hat because it was a hot and sunny day. Last time when we paid a visit to an elderly center, I saw them having a good chat with the elderly. They were very curious and asked the elderly a lot of questions about their lives like their everyday life or the funny things of keeping a dog. Is it our education system that suppresses our kids’ curiosity or motivation in school? They seemed weird in the class but they are active and energetic outside the school. Indeed, I find them lovelier outside the school.” (A teacher from Focus Group 5, Wave 2, 2014)

“We know that adolescents need recognition and the sense of achievement. When we designed the programs, we allowed the students to gradually take up more responsibilities. We also allowed them to make mistakes. We did not put ‘discipline’ a high priority, which was different from the classroom setting. So, during the process, the kids were more willing to step outside their comfort zone and try new things. What’s important is how we coach them. In fact, their mistakes are the opportunities for us to start the conversation with them and allow them to stay with us with a new perspective on us.” (A social worker from Focus Group 1, Wave 1, 2013)

Discussion

Adolescents are facing various challenges, both internally and externally, every day. Increasingly the communities are recognizing the need for youth development programs that concentrate on early prevention and identifying adolescents’ needs and strengths. Positive youth development programs are launched to empower the adolescents to tackle the difficulties they face. The purpose of the present study was to explore how a community-based positive youth program helped adolescents to promote their development based on the perceptions from multiple sources. We sought to fill the research gap by assessing whether the program was effective in promoting adolescents’ development and what were the factors contributing to these possible changes.

The results showed many positive impacts in the present youth development program. For example, program participants learned to understand themselves more, became more confident about their competence and were more optimistic about the future. They recognized the importance of persistence and the power of support when facing challenges. These findings confirm the notion of positive youth development about the presence of adults’ support and caring environment to develop adolescents’ strengths and potential (30). Consistent with physical activity studies, students who participated in structured after-school activities, reported positive effects in their psychosocial and behavioral outcomes, such as increased sense of social responsibility, better social relationships and improved competencies (11,31).

Furthermore, key informants (program implementers and parents/caretakers) noted that the students gained an increased awareness of others and strengthened their sense of community and responsibility. These changes can be viewed as “sensitive” indicators that identify the youth development outcomes after their participation in a positive youth development program (32). Previous studies showed that the lack of identity, feelings of powerlessness and poor social connectedness are common risks faced by adolescents (33). Findings in this study indicated that the program was successful in enhancing students’ developmental qualities (e.g., feelings of

competency, positive self-perceptions and increased optimism) and establishing a positive social climate. This social context allows them to feel positive about themselves, develop a sense of empowerment and competence, and perceive a supportive atmosphere. The qualitative data indicated that this learning experience of the students provided a social context which required the students to improve social skills (e.g., team building, conflict management, and cooperation). Indeed, these skills need to be taught within supportive and caring social environments (34,35). Findings of the present study suggest that a warm and empowering atmosphere is important in enhancing adolescents' development.

During the focus group interviews, the students shared their experience on the improvements in both intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects. In terms of intrapersonal qualities, the program participants reported increased self-awareness and self-understanding. Such experiences are beneficial to the development of their self-confidence. Program participants became more confident and skillful at communicating with their peers and expressing their thoughts. They learned the importance of cooperation and team-building and recognized self-discipline. They also learned that things could be solved through conflict management. Moreover, they also used these skills and strategies (e.g., conflict management and peer-learning) to handle daily matters. Lastly, the program participants and implementers noted that the period of participation was relatively short and suggested similar programs should be implemented in the senior secondary school years.

One of the strengths of the present study is that it utilized focus group interviews to understand the impact of the youth development program. This approach "provides a useful way for researchers to learn about the world of others" (24, p. 239) and allows an in-depth examination of a particular phenomenon (32). In particular, the data collected from multiple stakeholders improved the rigor of our findings. The moving out from the academy to the real-world contexts extended the existing literature (36). Lastly, the results from the present study evaluated the impact of the youth program based on the perspectives of multiple sources (i.e., program implementers, program participants and their parents/caretakers).

Focus group is a commonly used method to promote our understanding of a topic among a group of participants. The focus group methodology generates synergy created by the interaction of group members in generating ideas that would be difficult to obtain via individual interviews. However, some limitations of the focus group method should be noted. First, findings of the present study were based solely on Chinese participants. Generalization to other populations should be interpreted with caution. Second, the data were self-reported at one single time point. Other evaluation methods such as in-depth interviews and longitudinal evaluation should be used to examine the achievement of the programs in the long run. Despite the above limitations, the present study has implications for designing and implementing youth programs. It contributes to the literature by extending our understanding of the impact of a PYD program. Given the paucity of rigorous program evaluation data (29), our study can be viewed as a positive response producing a richer line of evidence-based youth program research (37).

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Table 1. Background information of the program implementers, program participants, and their parents/caretakers

	2013	2014	2015
Total number of schools	5	5	5
Total number of program participants	131	145	130
<i>Secondary 1</i>	85	90	130
<i>Secondary 2</i>	30	30	-
<i>Secondary 3</i>	16	25	-
Total number of parents of program participants	80	73	59
<i>Secondary 1</i>	47	52	59
<i>Secondary 2</i>	20	20	-
<i>Secondary 3</i>	13	1	-
Total number of program implementers	12	11	9

Table 2. Background information on the Tier 2 programs

Programs conducted		2013	2014	2015
<i>Secondary 1</i>	Opening ceremony, adventure training camp, volunteer training workshops, volunteer service in Hong Kong, volunteer service in rural area in China, inter-school parent-child activities and award presentation ceremony	58 sessions (in total 173 hours)	49 sessions (in total 145 hours)	78 sessions (in total 213.5 hours)
<i>Secondary 2</i>	Opening ceremony, adventure training camp, inauguration ceremony of volunteer team, volunteer service in Hong Kong and closing ceremony	20 sessions (in total 51 hours)	19 sessions (in total 44 hours)	-
<i>Secondary 3</i>	Opening ceremony, adventure training camp, volunteer training workshops, volunteer service in Hong Kong, inter-school parent-child activities and award presentation ceremony	16 sessions (in total 48 hours)	21 sessions (in total 52 hours)	-

Table 3. Background information of the focus group interviews

	No. of waves	Interview period	Participants
Focus group 1	Wave 1	October 2013	6 social workers
Focus group 2		January 2014	10 program participants
Focus group 3	Wave 2	June 2014	7 program participants
Focus group 4			4 parents
Focus group 5			2 school teachers
Focus group 6	Wave 3	July 2015	10 program participants
Focus group 7			7 parents

Note: Each interview was completed in around 60 minutes.

Table 4. A sample of the interview questions (Program implementers' version)

Evaluation of the General Effectiveness of the Program
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do you feel that the program is beneficial to the development of the adolescents? 2. Have you noticed any changes in the students after participating in the program? If yes, what are the changes? 3. What do you think are the factors that have caused these changes? 4. If you have not noticed any changes in students, what do you think are the factors that hinder the possible changes?
Evaluation of the Specific Effectiveness of the Program
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do you think that the program can develop students' self-confidence or ability to face the future? 2. Do you think that the program can foster students' abilities in different areas, such as spirituality, bonding with family, teachers and peers, compassion for others, a sense of responsibility to the society, family, teachers and peers?

Table 5. A sample of the interview questions (Students' version)

Evaluation of the General Effectiveness of the Program
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Do you feel that the program is beneficial to your personal development?2. Have you noticed any changes after participating in the program? If yes, what are the changes?3. What do you think are the factors that have caused these changes?4. If you have not noticed any changes, what do you think are the factors that hinder the possible changes?
Evaluation of the Specific Effectiveness of the Program
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Do you think that the program can develop your self-confidence or ability to face the future?2. Do you think that the program can foster your abilities in different areas, such as spirituality, bonding with family, teachers and peers, compassion for others, a sense of responsibility to the society, family, teachers and peers?

Table 6. A sample of the interview questions (Parents' version)

Evaluation of the General Effectiveness of the Program
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Do you feel that the program is beneficial to the development of the adolescents?2. Have you noticed any changes in your child after participating in the program? If yes, what are the changes?3. What do you think are the factors that have caused these changes?4. If you have not noticed any changes in your child, what do you think are the factors that hinder the possible changes?
Evaluation of the Specific Effectiveness of the Program
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Do you think that the program can develop your child's self-confidence or ability to face the future?2. Do you think that the program can foster your child's abilities in different areas, such as spirituality, bonding with family, teachers and peers, compassion for others, a sense of responsibility to the society, family, teachers and peers?