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Quantitative evaluation of the training program of the project P.A.T.H.S. in Hong Kong

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Abstract: A total of 358 participants from 52 schools participated in a 3-day training program of the Project P.A.T.H.S. in Hong Kong. At the end of the training program, the participants were invited to respond to a structured subjective outcome evaluation questionnaire with 31 items. The results showed that scale and sub-scales in the questionnaire were internally consistent. The descriptive findings revealed that most of the respondents had positive perception about the training program and the instructors. The respondents also felt that the training promoted their understanding of the project and encouraged them for self-reflection. The quantitative evaluation findings echo the qualitative evaluation findings suggesting that the training program is effective in promoting the participants' knowledge and attitudes about the program and their reflections about their teaching efficacy and skills.

Keywords: Project P.A.T.H.S., quantitative evaluation, positive youth development, training

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INTRODUCTION

Research findings suggest that adolescent developmental problems become more widespread and complex in Hong Kong in the past few decades (1). To promote holistic development among adolescents in Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust approved an earmarked grant of HK$750 million (HK$400M for the first cycle and HK$350M for the second cycle) to support the development, implementation and evaluation of a positive youth development project in Hong Kong (2). The P.A.T.H.S. Project has two tiers of programs. The Tier 1 Program is a universal positive youth development program where students in Secondary 1 to Secondary 3 participate in a 10-hour or 20-hour program. Before implementing the Tier 1 program, each worker is required to join a 20-hour training program for each grade.

In their systematic review of training programs for positive youth development and prevention programs, Shek and Wai (3) concluded that there were few systematic evaluation studies on training programs for potential program implementers. In particular, there is no published evaluation study on training program related to positive youth development program in different Chinese contexts. Theoretically, it is important to understand the factors influencing training effectiveness and relevance of elements in training programs. Practically, it is important to know the responses of the participants of training

programs and to assess whether additional training programs are needed. Against this background, this paper documents the evaluation findings related to four training workshops carried out in the Experimental Implementation Phase of the P.A.T.H.S. Project.

Subjective outcome evaluation or client satisfaction survey is a commonly used strategy to evaluate intervention programs, including training programs. Although there are many criticisms of this approach, the client satisfaction approach is widely used in many contexts. As pointed out by Royse (4),

> *"despite the generally positive bias and the problems associated with collecting representative samples of clients, there is much to recommend client satisfaction studies as one means of evaluating a program. Because professionals do not experience the agency in the same way as the clients, it is important to ask clients to share their experiences" (4:264-5).*

According to the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (4), stakeholders should be identified (Standard U1) and their views should be taken into account (Standard F2). According to utilization-focused evaluation (5), relevant stakeholders should also be involved in the evaluation process. From the interpretive and constructivist perspectives, as the reality is fluid, it is also important to look at the experiences of program participants.

There are two main approaches in understanding the perceptions of the program participants. First, structured rating scales are commonly used to assess client satisfaction. In fact, there are validated measures of client satisfaction and such measures can generate objective and systematic profiles on the clients' perception of the program. Second, qualitative strategy such as the use of open-ended questions can help to capture the subjective perspectives of the program participants. Although there are arguments for and against the use of quantitative measures of subjective outcome evaluation, the use of structured rating scale is routinely used as an evaluation mechanism in education and welfare services. In the present paper, evaluation findings based on structured rating items are reported to give a picture on the training program in the P.A.T.H.S. Project.

The training program of the Project P.A.T.H.S. has several general objectives:

a) to understand the nature of adolescent development and the related issues, and to cultivate positive attitude to adolescent development;
b) to understand the nature of positive youth development, including its basic concepts, related programs, and research;
c) to familiarize participants with the nature of Project P.A.T.H.S., including its basic philosophy, design, implementation, and evaluation;
d) to understand the content of the Tier 1 Program, including the Core Program and Elective Program;
e) to acquire the attitude, knowledge and skills that are conducive to the successful implementation of the Tier 1 Program; and
f) to establish self-help support network among the program participants.

The Secondary 1 training program is an introductory training program that attempts to familiarize the participants with the background philosophy, rationales, program design, teaching methodology, and evaluation strategies of the P.A.T.H.S. Project.

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURES

In the Experimental Implementation Phase, a total of 52 schools participated in the P.A.T.H.S. Project. Twenty-nine schools adopted the 20-hour full program and 23

adopted the 10-hour core program. From these participating schools, 358 participants registered for four training workshops. Each training workshop provided 12 sessions of training, amounting to 20 hours, held in three days within the same week. The author was one of the trainers teaching Day 1 of the training program. A training manual and a soft copy of the manual were distributed to the program participants in the training workshops.

At the last session of the training program, the participants were invited to write down what they had learned in the training workshop, which was followed by the distribution of a structured evaluation questionnaire to each participant. The questionnaire focuses on the perceptions of the participants of the program content, activities format, program instructors, self performance, and administrative arrangement. The training team of Project P.A.T.H.S. collected the data and then input the data into an EXCEL file, which would automatically compute the frequencies and percentages associated with the different ratings for an item.

Instruments

The Subjective Outcome Evaluation questionnaire of the training program for Project P.A.T.H.S. consists of several parts with 31 close-ended questions and 2 open-ended questions, as follows:

1. Participants' perceptions of the training program, including program objectives, design, activities format, and interaction among the participants (16 items).
2. Participants' perceptions of instructors, including the understanding of the course, teaching skills, and professional attitude (5 items).
3. Participants' perceptions of their own performance, including involvement during program, application of their learning, and having confidence in the project implementation (4 items).
4. Participants' perceptions of the administrative arrangement, such as program enrolment, hospitality, venue, and facilities (6 items).
5. Things that the participants appreciated most (open-ended question).
6. Aspects of the program that require improvement (open-ended question).

The 31-item of the questionnaire was used to assess the participants' satisfaction with the training program and the instructors as well as their own views toward their performance.

RESULTS

Regarding the internal consistency of the subjective outcome evaluation scale, the results showed that the total scale (31 items) and sub-scales on program (16 items), instructors (5 items), participants' own performance (4 items) and administrative arrangement (6 items) were reliable. The alpha values, mean inter-item correlation and item-total correlation coefficients are presented in table 1.

The quantitative findings based on the 31 close-ended questions are presented in this paper. From table 2, it was found that a high proportion of the participants had a positive perception of the program contents and activities formats, including strengthening the participants' understanding of positive youth development (100%), cultivation of participants' positive attitude to adolescent development (99%), promotion of the participants' understanding of the Project P.A.T.H.S. including its basic philosophy, design, implementation, and evaluation (99%), enhancement of participants' understanding of the Tier 1 program (99%), and encouragement of instructors to do their best (99%).

Besides, most of the participants had a positive evaluation of program instructors

Table 1. *Reliability measures of the total scale and subscales of the subjective outcome evaluation scale*

Measure	Mean inter-item correlation	Mean item-total correlation	Alpha
Total (31 items)	.296	.524	.926
Program (16 items)	.385	.590	.907
Instructors (5 items)	.544	.672	.852
Participant's own performance (4 items)	.462	.574	.762
Administrative arrangement (6 items)	.318	.472	.711

(see table 3): 100% of the participants indicated that the instructors showed good professional attitude; 100% of participants perceived that the instructors had good mastery of the curriculum, and that their teaching was clear and easy to understand (99%); there was a positive evaluation of the teaching performance of the instructors (99%). Regarding the performance of the program participants (see table 4), a high proportion of the participants had a positive evaluation of their own performance in the training program, including participating actively during discussion (97%), willing to apply the specific skills and theories learnt from the training program (99%), and having confidence in program implementation after attending the training program (96%). Finally, the participants had good evaluation of the administrative arrangement (see table 5), including the reception provided by the training team (100%) and the assigned workshop (98%).

DISCUSSION

The subjective outcome evaluation findings based on the responses of the potential program implementers in the Project P.A.T.H.S. are presented in this study. Several principles guided the design of the training programs for potential implementers for Project P.A.T.H.S., including the design of the training program around a learning model, teaching knowledge, provision of demonstrations, raising the participants' motivation and self-efficacy, self-reflective skills, and open-mindedness, active participation and open discussion (3). To familiarize the participants, a training manual and a soft copy of the manual were distributed to the program participants in the training workshop. Furthermore, the objectives, theoretical framework, and activities of each session were stated clearly by the instructors at the beginning of the session. These principles were adopted in the training program (3).

The present quantitative findings show that a high proportion of the respondents had positive perceptions of the training program. In addition, all the respondents perceived that the training program strengthened their understanding of positive youth development, including its concept, design, and research. Furthermore, nearly all the participants felt that the training program helped them cultivate a positive attitude to adolescent development and understand the basic philosophy, design, implementation, and evaluation of the Project P.A.T.H.S., as well as the content of the Tier 1 program.

Besides, nearly all the participants agreed that the training program had promoted self-reflection, and they were willing to apply the specific skills and theories learnt from this training program. A review of the literature shows that there

Table 2, p. 1

Table 2, p. 2

Table 3

Table 4

Table 5

is an intimate relationship between self-reflection of workers and their ability to integrate theory with practice (6,7). The observation that the potential program implementers felt confident in implementing the program is also noteworthy as self-efficacy development of teachers was positively related to student achievement (8,9). Since its inception, many evaluation studies support the effectiveness of the P.A.T.H.S. Project (10-15). It is argued that the effectiveness and positive evaluation findings associated with the Project P.A.T.H.S. is partly a result of the quality training program for the potential program implementers.

Although the utilization of subjective outcome evaluation has been criticized as biased and unable to reflect the real behavioral changes in the program participants, this study has several strengths. First, this is the first known published scientific study on the training of potential program implementers in a positive youth development program in different Chinese communities. Second, a respectable sample size was used in the study. Third, this study investigated different aspects of subjective outcome, including views on the program, instructors, self-performance, and overall satisfaction, and all these scales were found to be reliable. As reliability measures are seldom reported in evaluation studies of positive youth development programs in different Chinese contexts, the present study is a significant contribution to the literature. Finally, the quantitative findings are generally consistent with those based on the two open-ended questions and the qualitative evaluation of the training programs, thus producing a triangulated picture of the evaluation findings.

This study has three limitations. First, as the findings are based on the Experimental Phase, it is important to replicate the findings in different populations. Second, as the present findings are based on quantitative data, further integration of the present findings with qualitative findings is desirable. Finally, there are two alternative explanations for the present positive outcomes. First, the participants gave positive evaluation because of demand characteristic (i.e. they consciously act in a favorable manner). However, this explanation can be dismissed because the participants were professionals and were encouraged to give their views in an honest manner. The second alternative explanation is “beauty on the beholder side” hypothesis. As the workers are the stakeholders and are personally involved in implementing the program, they tend to look at the program effect and their own performance in a more favorable light. However, it is noteworthy that negative ratings were in fact observed. Despite these limitations, the present findings are pioneering addition to the Chinese database on positive youth development.

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