

Secondary 1 Training Program of the Project P.A.T.H.S. in Hong Kong: qualitative evaluation findings

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Abstract

A total of 1177 participants from 45 training workshops joined a 3-day training program of the P.A.T.H.S. Project (Secondary 1 Program) in Hong Kong. At the end of each training workshop, participants were invited to respond to a questionnaire comprising 31 structured items and two open-ended questions which assessed what they had learned and experienced in the training workshop. Qualitative analyses of the participants' responses to the two open-ended questions showed that the participants generally had positive evaluation of the training, although some suggestions for improvements were noted. The present study, which was based on a sizable sample size, reinforced the previous evaluation findings that the Secondary 1 Training Program of the Project P.A.T.H.S. in Hong Kong promoted the knowledge and attitudes of the potential program implementers.

Keywords: Project P.A.T.H.S.; qualitative evaluation; subjective outcome evaluation; training program.

Introduction

The Project P.A.T.H.S. (Positive Adolescent Training through Holistic Social Programs), financially supported by The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust with a total of HK\$750

million as an earmarked grant, is a school-based program aiming to promote positive and holistic youth development in Hong Kong. In contrast to the traditional preventive and remedial approaches to youth work which focus on young people's failures and problems, the positive youth development approach perceives young people as "assets", emphasizing the promotion of social, emotional, spiritual, and mental well-being (1). The project has been implemented in more than 250 secondary schools in Hong Kong since the 2005–2006 school year (2). The project has a two-tier structure designed for junior secondary school students (Secondary 1 to Secondary 3 students). Whereas the Tier 1 Program is a program for all students based on a set of positive youth development constructs (3, 4), the Tier 2 Program is for students having more psychosocial needs. The Tier 1 Program consists of 40 units (totaling 20 teaching hours) for each grade in each school year. The details of this school-based curriculum are described elsewhere (5).

The success of positive youth development programs depends very much on the quality of the program implementers. Research studies show a clear link between staff development and program quality (6–12). Shek and colleagues (13–15) examined the significant factors contributing to the successful implementation of the Project P.A.T.H.S., concluding that "program implementers" was the most important factor. The Project P.A.T.H.S. has consistently emphasized the importance of systematic training for program implementers since its inception. It has been conjectured that the effectiveness and positive evaluation findings associated with the Project P.A.T.H.S. could be partly a result of the quality training program for the potential program implementers (2, 16–23). Unfortunately, a review of the literature shows that there are few studies on the effectiveness of training programs for implementers of positive youth development programs.

The potential participants of the Project P.A.T.H.S. training programs are secondary school teachers and social workers. The Secondary 1 Training Program of the Project P.A.T.H.S. is a 3-day program comprising two parts: background information and teaching methods. Day 1 introduces the background information of the Project, including the vision, theoretical framework, implementation issues, and evaluation methods. Day 2 and Day 3 specifically introduce the Secondary 1 P.A.T.H.S. curriculum and teaching skills. The design of the training program presumes that experiential learning can help provide opportunities for skills demonstration and cultivate proper implementation skills (21, 24). The details of the Secondary 1 Training Program are described elsewhere (2). There were 45 Secondary 1 training workshops conducted between 2006 and 2009. A total of 2001 teachers, social

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Submitted April 10, 2010. Revised June 15, 2010. Accepted June 20, 2010. Previously published online June 27, 2011.

workers, and allied professionals participated in the training programs.

Training for the Secondary 1 program implementers is necessary and important for several reasons. First, adolescents are confronted by the need to re-establish boundaries for themselves in different new environments, and therefore it is commonly noted that a major challenge of adolescence is the one of “identification and role confusion” (25). For Secondary 1 students, these developmental challenges are especially prominent and significant. In Hong Kong, primary schools and secondary schools are usually run by separate administrative units. Most of the Primary 6 students in Hong Kong need to apply for their secondary school places through the Secondary School Places Allocation System. In this Primary 6 to Secondary 1 transition period, students have to leave school contexts that they are familiar with and face new challenges in unfamiliar school environments. For example, students might previously study in coeducation primary schools and then go to boy/girl-only secondary schools or students might have half-day schooling in their primary schools and have full day schooling in their secondary schools. Therefore, one of the key challenges faced by Secondary 1 students is adaptation. Secondary 1 program implementers have to address these psychosocial characteristics and therefore require proper training. Second, the Secondary 1 students are newcomers in schools, but the program activities often require students to talk about personal experience that might not be easy for newcomers. Program implementers, therefore, need to be equipped with appropriate ice-breaking skills and coaching skills. Finally, the curriculum system in Hong Kong is indeed undergoing a large-scale reform. The new system, generally called the 3-3-4 system, is different from the old one in a way that students will receive 3 years of senior secondary education and 4 years of university education (26). Moreover, the two public exams, Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination and Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination, will be merged into one public exam called the Hong Kong Diploma in Secondary Education. The Secondary 1 students in the 2006–2007 academic year (i.e., the beginning year of Project P.A.T.H.S.) are the first crop to graduate under the new system in 2012. During this curriculum reform period, there are lots of pilot initiatives happening in schools, such as expanded school-based assessment, a wider range of extra-curricular activities, and proliferated project-based learning activities. These various new challenges could create pressure for both the students and the teachers. There is a need to boost up the morale of those who implement the program and create a sense of ownership among different stakeholders.

Training is also important in view of some cultural factors. First, research studies generally point out that Chinese teachers or counselors tend to prefer a didactic or top-down approach (27–29), therefore teachers might have difficulties in using an experiential learning approach and adopting a reflective teaching practice. Second, research studies also note that Chinese students are passive and they might not be good at disclosing feelings (30–34), it is therefore important to enable program implementers to attend to their feelings as well as those of the students.

In view of the importance of training for program implementers of the Secondary 1 curriculum, this paper aims to evaluate the training programs based on the comments from the participants of the Secondary 1 training workshops. Consistent with the previous evaluation studies, participants’ comments were analyzed with special reference to their views on: (a) the instructors’ performance; (b) the content of the P.A.T.H.S. curriculum, (c) the contents and formats of the training, and (d) the administration and settings. Common themes emerged from the comments were identified. Different from previous studies which analyzed a single cohort of workshop participants, this study referenced the data from a much larger set of cohorts.

Methods

Data were collected from the Project P.A.T.H.S. training workshops for Secondary 1 program implementers held in 2006–2009 (totaling 45 workshops having the same training activities). At the end of a training workshop, participants were invited to respond to a questionnaire to indicate what they had learned and experienced in the training workshop. The evaluation questionnaire consists of scale-based questions and two open-ended questions. The scale-based questions aim to assess participants’ satisfaction towards the training program and the open-ended questions aim to explore: (a) the things that the participants appreciated most, and (b) aspects of the program that required improvement (19). As the quantitative evaluation based on the scale-based questions is reported elsewhere (18), this paper particularly focuses on the qualitative analysis of the data from the two open-ended questions.

Data analysis

In view of the intrinsic constraints of qualitative evaluation, certain principles of data analyses were generally upheld (35). First, the sources of the data were clearly presented. Second, the potential biases in the study were addressed. Third, to maintain consistency of data analyses, an inter-rater reliability check was conducted. Fourth, to fulfill the requirement of the audit trail, the raw data and the analyzed data are available for auditing.

The primary unit of analysis was a “meaningful unit” instead of a whole sentence. For example, a statement noting “the curriculum was well-designed and the instructors were enthusiastic” would be broken down into two meaningful units, namely, “the curriculum was well-designed” and “the instructors were enthusiastic”. The “meaningful units” were further classified and coded based on two major attributes, namely “the nature of the comment” and “the domain of the comment”. There were two possible values associated with the nature of the comment: (a) positive value – meaningful units reflecting positive perception and appreciation of the program, and (b) negative value – meaningful units reflecting negative perception and criticisms of the program. There are five possible categories associated with “domain of the comment”, including: (a) instructors’ performance, (b) contents and formats of the training program, (c) comments about the P.A.T.H.S. curriculum, (d) administrative arrangements and settings, and (e) other comments.

As the developer of the Project P.A.T.H.S., the first author was conscious of his own biases concerning the program, and therefore he was not directly involved in the data analysis process. To minimize the influence of potential biases of the researchers, an inter-rater reliability check was performed. After the first rater coded the data,

a second rater coded 50 randomly selected items without knowing the coding done by the first rater. The respective results were compared. After the meaningful units were identified, the attributes associated with the meaningful units were compared and cross-tabulated, serving to reveal any special features that might be worth noting. Moreover, the contents of different sets of meaningful units were further analyzed, aiming to explore any common themes that might be worth noting.

Results

Data were collected from 1177 participants in the Project P.A.T.H.S. training workshops for Secondary 1 trainers held in 2006–2009. There were 2780 meaningful units derived from the questionnaires collected: 1602 of them were derived from the open-ended question inviting participants to note down the things they appreciated, and 1178 of them were derived from the open-ended question inviting participants to note down the things needed to be improved. Interrater reliability tests for the classification of “the domain of the comment” (deciding whether a comment is related to the instructors’ performance, the P.A.T.H.S. curriculum, the training or the administration) were carried out. After the first coder completed the coding, a second coder randomly picked up 50 items rated by the first coder to see how far the selected items were coherently rated by different coders.

It was noted that inter-rater reliability associated with the coding of “the domain of the comment” was 96%. Through comparing and contrasting the attributes associated with the meaningful units, several observations were derived.

First, taken as a whole, there were more positive comments than negative comments. Although participants were invited to address both the areas they appreciated and the areas requiring improvements, most of the participants had written down more positive comments than negative comments. Among all the meaningful units derived from these two open-ended questions ($n=2780$), 58% of them were positive comments and 42% of them noted areas requiring improvements (Table 1).

The second observation was that the comments about instructors’ performance were very positive (Table 1). Among all the meaningful units concerning instructors’ performance ($n=829$), 92% of them were positive comments and only 8% of them noted that there were areas requiring improvements. Table 2 shows the common themes identified from this set of comments, including “passionate and sincere” (37%), “good preparation” (12%), and “good presentation skills” (11%).

Third, the comments on the training contents were less positive than comments on the instructors’ performance. Among all the meaningful units concerning program contents and formats ($n=1409$), 41% of them were positive comments and 59% of them noted that there were areas requiring improvements (Table 1). There are some common themes identified

Table 1 The nature of the comments and the domains of the comments.

Domain	Positive comments		Negative comments		Sum of count	Sum of %
	Count	%	Count	%		
(a) Instructors’ performance	765	92	64	8	829	100
(b) Contents and formats of the training	577	41	832	59	1409	100
(c) P.A.T.H.S. curriculum	40	56	31	44	71	100
(d) Admin and settings	110	34	210	66	320	100
(e) Others	110	73	41	27	151	100
Total	1602	58	1178	42	2780	100

Table 2 Common themes identified from different domains of comments.

Domains	Themes identified from positive comments	Themes identified from negative comments
Instructors’ performance ($n=829$)	“Passionate and sincere” (37%) “Good preparation” (12%) “Good presentation skills” (11%)	(Negative comments in this set do not constitute prominent themes)
Contents and formats of the training ($n=1409$)	“The contents were appropriate” (15%) “Enjoyed experience sharing” (13%) “Enjoyed interactive learning” (7%)	“Training hours were too long” (19%) “Should share more practical skills and experience” (16%)
P.A.T.H.S. curriculum ($n=71$)	“The contents were comprehensive and rich” (11%) “Appreciated the intention and intelligence of curriculum designers” (7%)	“It is better to address diverse students’ needs in real contexts” (10%)
Admin and settings ($n=320$)	“Refreshment was good” (19%)	“Rooms did not fit the activities” (29%) “Venue locations were not convenient” (10%)
Others ($n=151$)	“Participants’ involvement did contribute to the training program” (27%) “Training assistants performed well” (21%)	(Negative comments in this set do not constitute prominent themes)

from this set of comments (Table 2), such as “the contents were appropriate” (15%), “enjoyed experience sharing” (13%), “enjoyed interactive learning” (7%), “training hours were too long” (19%), “should share more practical skills and experience” (16%).

The fourth observation was that the comments on the P.A.T.H.S. curriculum were generally positive. Among all the meaningful units concerning the P.A.T.H.S. curriculum ($n=71$), 56% of them were positive comments and 44% of them noted that there were areas requiring improvements (Table 1). There were some common themes identified from this set of comments (Table 2), such as “the contents were comprehensive and rich” (11%), “appreciated the intention and intelligence of curriculum designers” (7%), “it is better to address diverse students’ needs in real contexts” (10%).

The fifth observation was that the comments indicated that the physical settings of the training venues might require improvements. Among all the meaningful units concerning administration and settings ($n=320$), 34% of them were positive comments and 66% of them noted that there were areas requiring improvements (Table 1). Most of the negative comments were about the training venues. Table 2 shows the common themes identified in this set of meaningful units, including “refreshment was good” (19%), “rooms did not fit the activities” (29%), “venue locations were not convenient” (10%).

There were 151 meaningful units that were classified as “others”. Most of them were positive comments and only 27% of them indicated areas requiring improvement (Table 1). There were some common themes identified from this set of comments (Table 2), such as “Participants’ involvement did contribute to the training program” (27%) and “Training assistants performed well” (21%).

Discussion

The findings of this study showed that most of the participants had positive perceptions of the training program. Among all the meaningful units derived from the two open-ended questions, 58% of them were positive comments and 42% of them noted areas requiring improvements. These figures were generally in line with the results of previous quantitative evaluations (18) and qualitative evaluations (19) of the training programs for program implementers. However, it is noteworthy that the proportion of positive responses was just slightly higher than the proportion of negative responses. There are two possible explanations for this observation. First, those who joined the Secondary 1 Training Program might not have any experience with positive youth development programs in the past. Therefore, unfamiliarity with the program could lead to a more critical appraisal of the program. Second, the potential program implementers might want to learn more skills. However, in the Secondary 1 program, although adequate skills are covered, the focus is also placed on attitudes and values.

It is particularly worth noting that among all the meaningful units concerning instructors’ performance, 92% of them

were positive comments and only 8% noted areas requiring improvements (Table 1). Moreover, in the entire set of positive comments collected, most of them (765 responses out of 1602 responses) were about instructors’ performance. Other elements such as training contents, the P.A.T.H.S. curriculum, and administration matters occupied a lesser proportion in the entire set of positive comments (Table 1). These figures partly suggested that the instructors, compared with other elements in the training workshops, were particularly appreciated by the participants. Because instructors’ attitudes and teaching skills significantly affect trainees’ beliefs, perceptions, and behaviors (19, 36, 37), it is conjectured that the training workshops did provide a proper and solid foundation for the P.A.T.H.S. Project. This observation was in line with the results of the evaluations of the training programs for program implementers (18, 19, 38).

Although the comments on the program contents generally indicated that there were areas requiring improvements (Table 1), it should be noted that the quantitative evaluation findings for the Secondary 1 Program were basically positive (18) and participants also obviously pointed out the areas they appreciated, such as “the contents were appropriate”, “enjoyed experience sharing”, and “enjoyed interactive learning” (Table 2). As noted in the introduction part of this article, research studies note that Chinese teachers or counselors might tend to prefer a didactic approach and that Chinese students are passive (27–33), but the findings of this study seem to help eliminate much of these concerns. The positive comments from the participants provide further support for the use of experiential learning and interactive teaching activities such as role plays, games, and personal sharing.

It is worth noting that the most commonly noted comment – “training hours were too long” (Table 2) – might be partly related to the historical context in 2006. As noted in the introduction part of this article, the curriculum system in Hong Kong just started a large-scale reform, and there were a range of pilot initiatives simultaneously implemented in schools, creating new challenges for teachers. Under these circumstances, “time” was probably a prime concern for most of the teachers. It is very understandable that teachers might see any intensive training “problematic”. In fact, the findings also partly go in line with this conjecture. Among the 45 workshops, 7 of them (2006 workshop A01, 2006 workshop J2B, 2006 workshop J3B, 2006 workshop L1B, 2006 workshop L3B, 2006 workshop M4, and 2006 workshop U1) had relatively a lower number of positive comments (Table 3). All of them were conducted in the first half of 2006 – the beginning year of the whole project. For workshops conducted afterward, positive comments consistently outnumbered negative comments in consecutive years (2007, 2008, and 2009).

Similar to other qualitative evaluation studies, there are several limitations of the present study. First, only qualitative findings are presented in this study. However, it should be noted that the findings of this study are consistent with those quantitative findings based on the scale-based questions (18). Second, the utilization of subjective

Table 3 Comments from different training workshops in different years.

Class code	Positive comments, %	Negative comments, %	Total, %
2006 workshop A01	33	67	100.00
2006 workshop A02	75	25	100.00
2006 workshop J01	72	28	100.00
2006 workshop 2A	51	49	100.00
2006 workshop J2B	42	58	100.00
2006 workshop J3A	75	25	100.00
2006 workshop J3B	45	55	100.00
2006 workshop J4A	67	33	100.00
2006 workshop J4B	56	44	100.00
2006 workshop L1A	72	28	100.00
2006 workshop L1B	37	63	100.00
2006 workshop L2	59	41	100.00
2006 workshop L3A	53	47	100.00
2006 workshop L3B	45	55	100.00
2006 workshop L4	80	20	100.00
2006 workshop L5A	59	41	100.00
2006 workshop L5B	54	46	100.00
2006 workshop M1	58	42	100.00
2006 workshop M2	69	31	100.00
2006 workshop M3	60	40	100.00
2006 workshop M4	41	59	100.00
2006 workshop U1	48	52	100.00
2006 workshop U2	55	45	100.00
2006 workshop U3	58	42	100.00
2006 workshop Y1	71	29	100.00
2006 workshop Y2	57	43	100.00
2006 workshop Y3	50	50	100.00
2006 workshop Y4	57	43	100.00
2007 workshop A01	77	23	100.00
2007 workshop A02	86	14	100.00
2007 workshop A03	70	30	100.00
2007 workshop A04	59	41	100.00
2007 workshop A05	71	29	100.00
2007 workshop A06	56	44	100.00
2007 workshop A07	78	22	100.00
2007 workshop A08	60	40	100.00
2007 workshop A09	63	37	100.00
2007 workshop A10	60	40	100.00
2008 workshop A01	59	41	100.00
2008 workshop A02	62	38	100.00
2008 workshop A03	57	43	100.00
2008 workshop A04	56	44	100.00
2008 workshop A05	57	43	100.00
2008 workshop A06	66	34	100.00
2009 workshop AC01	69	31	100.00
Total	58	42	100.00

outcome evaluation has been criticized as biased and unable to reflect the real behavioral changes of the program participants. Yet different evaluation studies of the training programs do help triangulate the findings. Third, there are possible alternative explanations for the findings of this study. One possible alternative explanation is a “beauty on the beholder side” hypothesis. As the workers are the stakeholders and they are personally involved in implementing the program, they tend to view the program and their own performance in a more favorable light. However, it should be noted that negative comments were

in fact identified, and the details of the comments show that the participants did not one-sidedly or blindly respond to the open-ended questions. Another alternative explanation is that the participants might give positive evaluation because of “demand characteristics” – some cues that make participants aware of how they are expected to behave – and therefore they consciously acted in a favorable manner. However, this explanation can be largely dismissed because the participants were actually encouraged to give their views in a balanced manner – they were invited to respond to two separate questions, one asking them to note

down the things they appreciated and the other asking them to note down the things needed to be improved.

There are several strengths of the present study that are worth noting. First, a respectable sample size was used in the study. In fact, there are few published studies on positive youth development training programs that have such a sizable sample. Second, several aspects of subjective outcome were considered, including participants' views on the program, instructors' performance, and administrative arrangements. Third, although there are many positive youth development programs in the West, there are very few published evaluation studies on related training programs. Using a subjective outcome evaluation approach to examine perceived effectiveness, this paper presents a pioneer scientific study of a training program for potential program implementers of a positive youth development program in Chinese communities.

To conclude, this qualitative study provides further evidence to prove the effectiveness of the Project P.A.T.H.S. training programs. Of course, further scientific investigation would be required to help explore the ways in which these findings about the training programs are related to the positive outcomes of the Project P.A.T.H.S. (39–41).

Acknowledgements

The preparation for this paper and the Project P.A.T.H.S. were financially supported by the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust.

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