

EDITORIAL

Training of potential program implementers of the project P.A.T.H.S. in Hong Kong

There are worrying trends and phenomena related to the development of adolescents in Hong Kong. To promote holistic development among adolescents in Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust approved HK\$400 million to launch a project entitled “*P.A.T.H.S. to Adulthood: A Jockey Club Youth Enhancement Scheme*” in 2005. The word *P.A.T.H.S.* denotes Positive Adolescent Training through Holistic Social Programs. In view of the positive evaluation of the project (1-3), the Trust injected an additional grant of HK\$350 million to support the project for another cycle from 2009 to 2012. The Trust invited academics of five universities in Hong Kong to form a Research Team with The Hong Kong Polytechnic University as the lead institution to develop a multi-year universal positive youth development program to promote holistic adolescent development in Hong Kong. Besides developing the program, the Research Team also provides training for teachers and social workers who implement the program and carries out longitudinal evaluation of the project.

The Tier 1 Program of the project is a curricular-based program to be implemented at the Secondary 1 to Secondary 3 levels (Grade 7 to Grade 9). For each Secondary 1 to Secondary 3 program, potential program implementers (mainly teachers and social workers) receive 20 hours of training before implementing the program in their schools. Generally speaking, there are 3 days of training at each grade. On Day 1, the conceptual foundation, program philosophy, curriculum issues, and evaluation methods

are introduced. On Day 2 and Day 3, the training program covers teaching units in the curriculum, as well as the ways by which the program can be successfully implemented (e.g., program implementers acquire knowledge and skills on debriefing skills and reflective practice). In the training program, the potential program implementers are encouraged to reflect on their motivation to teach the program and identification with the program philosophy. The implementers are also empowered to carry out experiential learning activities that are quite foreign to Chinese teachers. The training programs are designed according to the principles proposed in Shek and Wai (4).

Why do we have to spend so much time and resources on training in the Project P.A.T.H.S.? There are at least three reasons why well-conceived training programs should be designed for potential program implementers. First, there are research findings showing that there is an intimate relationship between staff training and the quality of program implementation. In the context of positive youth development, it is particularly important for the program implementers to follow the curriculum with high program adherence and fidelity. Unfortunately, some studies showed that the adherence rates in some of the positive youth development programs were low. For example, in a study of the factors associated with fidelity in substance use prevention curriculum guides, Ringwalt et al (5) found that one-fifth of the workers implementing the program did not use the curriculum guide at all and only 15% of them followed very closely. Second, training program is a

process through which the potential implementers are empowered and motivated. As self-efficacy of the workers is very important, training program serves as a vehicle to empower the potential workers and strengthen their motivation. Finally, if the workers do not understand the philosophy of the program and do not have vision and passion about young people, then the developed programs will not be implemented as intended. Therefore, touching the 'hearts' of the workers is important. As pointed out by Buckley and Caple (6), training constitutes planned and systematic effort through which the knowledge, skills, and attitude of the program participants are developed and modified, which will eventually lead to effective performance in the planned program. As such, systematic training for program implementers in the context of positive youth development is indispensable. Through systematic training, the potential implementers can acquire a thorough understanding of the programs and will be empowered and gain the passion and vision of the program.

Furthermore, successful training can minimize the chances of committing a type III error (i.e., concluding that the prevention program is ineffective for the wrong reason). In other words, while the program results display no preventive effects, the failure is due to lack of training for implementers and failure in implementation rather than deficiencies of the program curriculum. As pointed out by Borden (7),

“the lack of comprehensive educational opportunities leaves the field without professionals and volunteers who are soundly grounded in its theory, research, and best practices. The fragmentation of educational opportunities prevents youth development professionals from acquiring the necessary educational foundations

and the skills to create quality youth development programs that promote the positive development of young people. We can no longer afford to have youth development professionals who are forced to use only their best instincts and guesswork at what makes a difference in the lives of young people” (7:7).

Despite the importance of training for potential program implementers in positive youth development programs, documentation on the training programs for program implementers in the related programs is surprisingly thin (3). Essentially, the answers to the following questions are not clear:

1. What are the designs and philosophies of training programs underlying different positive youth development programs?
2. What are the curriculum content and structure in the training programs underlying different positive youth development programs?
3. How are the training programs implemented in different positive youth development programs?
4. What are the evaluation findings for the training programs for different positive youth development programs?
5. What lessons can be learned from the training programs for different positive youth development programs?

Against the above background, this special issue contains several papers documenting the training programs for the Project P.A.T.H.S. in Hong Kong. This special issue has several unique features.

- First, the design, philosophy, curriculum and content of the training program for the Project P.A.T.H.S. are described.
- Second, the evaluation findings of the training programs are presented. The related papers are important because

evaluation findings in positive youth development programs are seldom described in the literature.

- Finally, this special issue is the first known scientific publication to document training programs related to positive youth development programs in different Chinese communities.

Our modest wish is that this special issue constitutes a wake-up call to stimulate more attempts to document training programs on positive youth development programs in both the Chinese and international contexts.

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