

Promotion of positive youth development in mainland China: Tin Ka Ping P.A.T.H.S. Project

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Introduction

Adolescence is a period of transition when adolescents face many challenges in different life domains. Physically, adolescents have to adjust to physical maturation and changes arising from puberty, especially development in sexuality. Psychologically, adolescence is regarded as a period of “storm and stress” with emotional fluctuations and psychosocial stresses. Interpersonally, expansion of social networks and conflict with parents constitute additional social stressors for young people. Spiritually, adolescents encounter existential challenges such as finding the meaning of life and maintaining harmony with oneself, others and the cosmos. Obviously, these challenges constitute risk factors for healthy adolescent development (1).

On top of the above developmental challenges, Chinese adolescents face additional stressors arising from the specific socio-cultural contexts of China. First, Chinese people focus much on academic excellence resulting in a very competitive academic environment for adolescents. Second, as many families have only one child, excessive parental expectations may take place and single child may face loneliness in their development. Third, with rapid urbanization and industrialization, social problems such as divorce and family discord have increased. As a result, mental health issues such as depression and Internet addiction are growing issues in mainland China (2, 3). In view of these challenges, it is necessary to ask how we can help Chinese adolescents to grow in a healthy manner. Obviously, adolescent prevention and positive youth development programs play an important role in protecting Chinese adolescents from these developmental risks (4).

In Hong Kong, with the financial support of the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust, five

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universities worked together to develop a positive youth development program entitled “P.A.T.H.S. to Adulthood” (Project P.A.T.H.S.). In this project, the research team developed curricula-based materials for junior secondary school students, trained the potential program implementers, provided support for the implementation (such as conducting visits and workshops to support the teachers), and conducted evaluation of the program using multiple evaluation methods (5, 6).

Because of the remarkable achievements of the Project P.A.T.H.S. in Hong Kong, Tin Ka Ping Foundation provided funding to transplant the project to China in 2011. As the pilot project from 2011 to 2014 was very successful, we spent one year to consolidate the impact and concentrated on training in 2012-15 academic year. From 2015 to 2018, Tin Ka Ping P.A.T.H.S. Project was implemented in 30+ schools in mainland China. Based on the evaluation data collected, we can conclude that Tin Ka Ping P.A.T.H.S. Project made very positive impact in China (7-9).

Based on the experience from 2011 to 2018, the Foundation decided to move the project to another phase. They decided to launch a new model entitled “Building the Tin’s Homeland Together” in which some experienced teachers and schools would lead new teachers and schools interested in exploring the implementation of the project. Besides, experienced teachers would play a leading role in training and coaching the relatively inexperienced teachers so that synergy and empowerment would happen. As a new initiative (i.e., “Building the Tin’s Homeland Together”), there is a need to ask the question of whether the initiative works or not. Hence, we conducted a qualitative study to learn about the views of the teachers regarding their views on Tin Ka Ping P.A.T.H.S. Project. Also, to help colleagues in the field to understand the background and achievements of Tin Ka Ping P.A.T.H.S. Project, we have added some articles documenting the details of the project. Although we published a journal issue on the Tin Ka Ping P.A.T.H.S. Project in 2018, the articles are in Chinese and teachers were invited to write papers on their perceptions of the impact of the project on the students. Also, the special issue does not cover the latest development of the project (10).

This special issue

There are several papers in this special issue. In the first paper, we outline the history and development of Tin Ka Ping P.A.T.H.S. Program and its achievement. For the pilot studies from 2011 to 2014, we found that students joining the program performed better in the developmental outcomes as compared to the control participants. For the training programs conducted in the project, subjective outcome evaluation findings are also very positive. Finally, we conducted evaluation for the programs launched from 2015 to 2018. Basically, the findings showed that students benefitted from the program. In the second paper, we discuss how Tin Ka Ping P.A.T.H.S. Program is aligned with the education reform taking place in China where holistic development and student-centered intervention are emphasized. In the third paper, we document the publications arising from Tin Ka Ping P.A.T.H.S. Project. This is important because most of the publications are in Chinese. This paper can definitely help non-Chinese speaking colleagues understand what work has been done.

As mentioned, to understand further the views of the teachers regarding the development and impact of Tin Ka Ping P.A.T.H.S. Project, we conducted a qualitative study based on individual interviews with nine teachers of Tin Ka Ping P.A.T.H.S. Program participating in the study. For the fourth paper, we present findings on the perceived benefits of the program to students. Generally speaking, the findings clearly show that the program benefitted the students in different domains, including intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies. These findings corroborated with the findings obtained in Hong Kong and the earlier studies in Tin Ka Ping P.A.T.H.S. Project (11). In the next paper, we present findings on the benefits to the teachers and other stakeholders. Overall speaking, the findings suggest that Tin Ka Ping P.A.T.H.S. Program created many benefits for the teachers. In particular, the program helped teachers to be better teachers and better parents. As not many papers have been written on how positive youth development programs benefit the implementers, the related findings are very valuable. In the final paper, we examined the views of the teachers on the training programs and the related benefits. The findings showed that the teachers were

very positive about the training programs and they found the training programs to be very helpful. These findings are consistent with the previous findings on the value and positive impact of the training programs (12).

In the last paper, we outline our reflections on the Tin Ka Ping P.A.T.H.S. Project. While we appreciate the value of the project and its positive impact on different stakeholders, we raise some “food for thought” regarding the latest initiative on “Building the Tin’s Homeland Together”. While it is a good move to invite the experienced teachers and schools to lead the less experienced teachers and schools which can increase the long-term sustainability of the project, stepping up training for the teachers is a prerequisite for success. Without continuous meaningful “input,” maintenance of the quality of Tin Ka Ping P.A.T.H.S. Program would be a big challenge. Besides, to claim that the “Building the Tin’s Homeland Together” works well, systematic evaluation is indispensable. We have to remind ourselves that evidence-based programs rather than authority-based P.Y.D. programs are needed to promote positive development in young people. We should also bear in mind the famous saying that “the road to hell is always paved with good intention”. Obviously, good intention alone is not enough. We also need good program, training and evidence to provide directions for colleagues who are passionate about the healthy and holistic development of Chinese adolescents in mainland China.

Acknowledgments

Tin Ka Ping P.A.T.H.S. Project was financially supported by Tin Ka Ping Foundation. This special issue is financially supported by Tin Ka Ping Foundation and Wofoo Foundation.

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