

Qualitative evaluation of the Secondary 3 Training Program of the Project P.A.T.H.S. in Hong Kong

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Abstract

A total of 907 participants from 31 training workshops joined a 3-day training program of the P.A.T.H.S. Project (Secondary 3 Program) in Hong Kong. At the end of a training workshop, participants were invited to respond to a questionnaire assessing what they had learned and experienced in the training workshop, with 31 structured items and two open-ended questions. Qualitative analyses of the participants' responses to the two open-ended questions showed that the participants generally had positive evaluation of the instructors, intervention program, and the training program, although some suggestions for improvements were noted. In conjunction with the quantitative evaluation findings and the previous evaluation findings, the present study provides support for the effectiveness of the training program for Secondary 3 Program for the potential program implementers.

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

Introduction

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", highlighting the promotion

of social, emotional, spiritual, and mental well-being (1). 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. The program has been implemented in more than 250 secondary schools in Hong Kong since the 2005–2006 school year (2). The Project P.A.T.H.S. is a two-tier program designed for junior secondary school students (Secondary 1 to Secondary 3 students). The Tier 1 Program is a program for all students based on a set of positive youth development constructs (3, 4), and 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 (6–8). Some of the studies particularly indicated that the provision of both pre-service training and in-service training were essential for effective program implementation (9–12). Shek and colleagues (13–15) also examined the significant factors contributing to the successful implementation of the Project P.A.T.H.S., concluding that "people" (i.e., 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 as a result of the quality training program for the potential program implementers (2, 16–23).

The potential participants of the Project P.A.T.H.S. training programs are secondary school teachers and social workers. The Secondary 3 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 3 P.A.T.H.S. Curriculum, including the contents, classroom management strategies, teaching skills, educational theories, and reflection exercises. A Participant Kit containing all necessary curriculum materials was distributed to the participants in the workshops. The details of the Secondary 3 Training Program are described elsewhere (20).

Training for the Secondary 3 program implementers is necessary and important for several reasons. First,

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because the program has been implemented for 2 years (i.e., Secondary 1 and Secondary 2), the students participants might probably have experience in the P.A.T.H.S. activities in their previous school years. That means they might have higher expectation on the program and might easily get bored by any repeating elements. Obviously, program implementers have to face these challenges. By the same token, experienced program implementers might have higher expectations on their training. Therefore, training for Secondary 3 program implementers must be designed to address these inherent features. Second, as the Secondary 3 Curriculum of the Project P.A.T.H.S. emphasizes the importance of the program implementers' self-disclosure and their use of self, the training programs play an important role in enabling potential program implementers to acquire related skills. Third, in contrast to Secondary 1 and Secondary 2 students, Secondary 3 students are more autonomous. With greater maturity and having more experience in various types of interpersonal relationships, they might have crucial responses to the program materials. At the same time, Secondary 3 students have more resources to better understand themselves and they are more demanding. Program implementers, therefore, should acquire skills to deal with these characteristics.

Finally, compared to Secondary 1 and Secondary 2, Secondary 3 is a school year that students are particularly required to better understand themselves and face uncertainties because compulsory education in Hong Kong only lasts up to Secondary 3 in Hong Kong. Before the implementation of the New Senior Secondary Curriculum in 2009 in Hong Kong (24), Secondary 3 students of grammar schools were required to choose their Secondary 4 streams, such as "Science", "Arts", and "Commercial", depending on the school policy. Since the 2009–2010 school year, with the implementation of the New Senior Secondary Curriculum structure, the streaming has become less significant and all students are given the opportunity to receive 3 years of senior secondary education (i.e., Secondary 4 to Secondary 6). However, there are still some schools that are unable to provide sufficient Secondary 4 places to accommodate all their own Secondary 3 students. Allocation of post-Secondary 3 places is based on students' performance, such as the internal assessments of schools and the interviews offered by other schools (25). As such, program implementers should acquire proper skills to help students better take care of themselves and handle difficulties. For example, on Day 2 of the training program, the participants go through specific teaching units related to the constructs of "Resilience" and "Self-Efficacy" (20).

In view of the importance of training for implementers of the Secondary 3 Curriculum, this paper aims to evaluate the training program based on the comments from the participants of the Secondary 3 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.

Methods

Data were collected from the Project P.A.T.H.S. training workshops for Secondary 3 program implementers held in 2007–2009 (totaling 907 participants from 31 workshops having the same structure). At the end of a training workshop, participants were invited to respond to a questionnaire to indicate what they 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, 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). Because 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 observed (26). 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 provided us with suitable references and the instructors were passionate" would be broken down into two meaningful units, namely, "the curriculum provided us with suitable references" and "the instructors were passionate". 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

There were 907 participants (secondary school teachers and social workers) registered for the Project P.A.T.H.S. training workshops for Secondary 3 trainers held in 2007–2009. There

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	462	99	5	1	467	100
(b) Contents and formats of the training	288	65	158	35	446	100
(c) P.A.T.H.S. curriculum	10	56	8	44	18	100
(d) Admin and settings	10	13	66	87	76	100
(e) Others	59	75	20	25	79	100
Total	829	76	257	24	1086	100

were 1086 meaningful units derived from the two open-ended questions in the questionnaires. Inter-rater reliability tests for the classification of "the domain of the comment" (deciding whether a comment is related to instructors' performance, P.A.T.H.S. curriculum, training, or administration) were further 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 98%.

Through comparing and contrasting the meaningful units, several observations were derived from the data. First, 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. There were altogether 1086 meaningful units derived from these two open-ended questions. Among them, 76% (829/1086) were from the question asking about what the participants appreciated (i.e., positive comments), only 24% (257/1086) of them were from the question asking about what the program needed to be improved (i.e., negative comments) (Table 1). This positive tendency was consistently recorded in different workshops in consecutive years (Table 2).

The second observation was that the comments about instructors' performance were very positive (Table 1). Among all the meaningful units concerning instructors' performance (n=467), 99% of them were positive comments and only 1% of them noted that there were areas requiring improvements. From Table 3, it was noted that some common themes identified from this set of comments included "the instructors were passionate and sincere" (23%), "good presentation skills" (16%), "instructors' personal sharing" (15%), and "good preparation" (13%).

Third, the comments on the training contents were generally positive in nature. Among all the meaningful units concerning program contents and formats (n=446), 65% of them were positive comments and 35% of them noted that there were areas requiring improvements (Table 1). From Table 3, there were some common themes identified from this set of comments, such as "enjoy experience sharing" (13%), "reflective" (15%), "the training hours were too long" (10%), and "there should be more practical skills sessions" (4%).

The fourth observation was that there were some comments about the P.A.T.H.S. Curriculum. Among all the meaningful

units concerning the P.A.T.H.S. Curriculum (n=18), 56% of them were positive comments and 44% of them were related to areas requiring improvements (Table 1). The topics of these meaningful units were relatively scattered, but there was a suggestion (17%) that the curriculum should address diverse students' needs (Table 2).

Regarding comments on the administration arrangements, it was found that only very few participants made comments on this aspect of the training program. Among all the meaningful units concerning administration and settings (n=76),

Table 2 Comments given by participants in different training workshops in different years.

Class code	Positive comments, %	Negative comments, %	Total, %
2007 (Workshop 1)	86	14	100
2007 (Workshop 2)	82	18	100
2007 (Workshop 3)	70	30	100
2007 (Workshop 4)	89	11	100
2008 (Workshop 1)	74	26	100
2008 (Workshop 2)	96	4	100
2008 (Workshop 3)	56	44	100
2008 (Workshop 4)	90	10	100
2008 (Workshop 5)	86	14	100
2008 (Workshop 6)	83	17	100
2008 (Workshop 7)	93	7	100
2008 (Workshop 8)	76	24	100
2008 (Workshop 9)	75	25	100
2008 (Workshop 10)	85	15	100
2008 (Workshop 11)	72	28	100
2008 (Workshop 12)	69	31	100
2008 (Workshop 13)	80	20	100
2008 (Workshop 14)	80	20	100
2008 (Workshop 15)	85	15	100
2008 (Workshop 16)	82	18	100
2008 (Workshop 17)	78	22	100
2008 (Workshop 18)	64	36	100
2008 (Workshop 19)	71	29	100
2008 (Workshop 20)	76	24	100
2008 (Workshop 21)	63	37	100
2008 (Workshop 22)	63	37	100
2008 (Workshop 23)	50	50	100
2009 (Workshop 1)	87	13	100
2009 (Workshop 2)	79	21	100
2009 (Workshop 3)	69	31	100
2009 (Workshop 4)	75	25	100
Total	76	24	100

10% of them were positive comments and 86% of them noted that there were areas requiring improvements. From Table 3, some of the themes identified in this set of meaningful units included “the venue locations were not convenient” (13%), “the rooms do not fit the activities” (8%), and “air conditioning problems” (8%).

There were 79 meaningful units which could be classified as “others”. Most of them were positive comments and only 25% of them indicated areas requiring improvements (Table 1). There were some common themes identified from this set of comments (Table 3), such as “the training assistants performed well” (30%) and “the participants’ involvement did contribute to the training program” (13%).

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, 76% of them were positive comments and only 24% of them noted areas requiring improvements. This observation is generally in line with the results of previous quantitative evaluations (18) and qualitative evaluations (19) of the training programs for program implementers.

It is particularly worth noting that among all the meaningful units concerning instructors’ performance, 99% of them were positive comments and only 1% noted areas requiring improvements (Table 1). Moreover, in the entire set of positive comments collected, most of them (462 responses out of 829 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 suggest 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, 27, 28), it is conjectured that the training workshops did provide a proper and solid foundation for the P.A.T.H.S. Project.

Instead of using a didactic teaching approach, the training program focused on experiential learning as well as reflective practice with the use of a wide range of teaching activities including role plays, games, group sharing, and performance feedback (20). Apparently, these training contents were well received by the participants. Among all the meaningful units concerning the contents and formats of the training, 65% of them were positive comments and only 35% noted areas requiring improvements (Table 1). Participants’ appreciation of the training contents and formats partly supports the presumption that experiential learning can help provide opportunities for skills demonstration and cultivate proper implementation skills (29).

There are three strengths of the present study. 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, this is a pioneer scientific study utilizing a subjective outcome evaluation approach to examine the perceived effectiveness of a positive youth development program. Actually, although there are many positive youth development programs in the West, there are very few published evaluation studies on related training programs.

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 is noteworthy that the findings of this study are consistent with those quantitative findings based on the scale-based questions (18). Second, the utilization of subjective outcome evaluation has been criticized as biased and unable to reflect the real behavioral changes of the program participants. Nevertheless, various evaluation studies of the Project P.A.T.H.S. do help

Table 3 Common themes identified from different domains of comments.

Domains	Themes identified from positive comments	Themes identified from negative comments
Instructors’ performance (n=467)	Passionate and sincere 23% (109/467) Good presentation skills 16% (76/467) Instructors’ personal sharing 15% (68/467) Good preparation 13% (60/467)	(Negative comments in this set do not constitute prominent themes)
Contents and formats of the training (n=446)	Enjoy experience sharing 13% (59/446) Reflective 15% (68/446) Appropriate contents 5% (24/446)	Training hours were too long 10% (45/446) There should be more practical skills sessions 4% (17/446) Better to shorten theoretical part 2% (11/446)
P.A.T.H.S. curriculum (n=18)	(Positive comments in this set do not constitute prominent themes)	The curriculum should address diverse students’ needs 17% (3/18)
Admin and settings (n=76)	(Positive comments in this set do not constitute prominent themes)	The venue locations were not convenient 13% (10/76) The rooms do not fit the activities 11% (8/76) Air conditioning problems 8% (6/76)
Others (n=79)	Training assistants performed well 30% (24/79) Participants’ involvement did contribute to the training program 13% (10/79)	(Negative comments in this set do not constitute prominent themes)

triangulate the findings and help examine the sustainability of the effects of the training program.

Third, there are possible alternative explanations for the findings of this study. First, 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. Another 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 and constructive suggestions were in fact identified. In addition, the participants did not one-sidedly or blindly respond to the open-ended questions. Despite these limitations, this qualitative study provides further evidence to prove the effectiveness of the Project P.A.T.H.S. training programs. Of course, to better understand the ways in which these findings about the training programs are related to the positive outcomes of the Project P.A.T.H.S. (30–33), further scientific investigation is required.

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