

From experienced to novice: a reflective account on the changing role of front-line implementer to program trainer in Project P.A.T.H.S.

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Abstract

Although training plays an important role in the successful implementation of positive youth development programs, research on training and trainers in this field is grossly neglected. In this paper, a trainer of a positive youth development program in Hong Kong (Project P.A.T.H.S.; Positive Adolescent Training through Holistic Social Programmes) reflected about her transition from the role of a teacher (and program implementer) to the role of a trainer. Based on the reflection, the transformations involved, including self-perception, teaching role and teaching strategies, were highlighted. The issue of how previous experience influenced training in the context of positive youth development was also discussed. It is suggested that involvement of front-line practitioners in the training of positive youth development programs is workable, although systematic training for the novice trainers may be needed.

Keywords: adolescents; Hong Kong; positive youth development; Project P.A.T.H.S.; reflection; training.

Introduction

There is a rising concern about adolescent developmental issues, such as substance abuse, lifestyle issues and mental health problems. To assist adolescents to stride over these

life hurdles along their growth pathways, efforts on promoting healthy adolescent development should be put forth. Programs with the concepts of preventive and positive youth development have emerged in order to facilitate adolescents' well-being. In Hong Kong, funded by The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust, a positive youth development program entitled "P.A.T.H.S. to Adulthood: A Jockey Club Youth Enhancement Scheme" has been launched for junior secondary school students since 2005 (1). The acronym P.A.T.H.S. stands for "Positive Adolescent Training through Holistic Social Programmes". The focus of Project P.A.T.H.S. is on the development of a number of psychosocial skills or qualities in young people, with reference to 15 positive constructs in youth development. The project is a two-tier program. The Tier 1 Program is a universal positive youth development program, with well-designed curricula, in which students in Secondary 1 to Secondary 3 engage with 20 h of training in the school year at each grade (1). The Tier 2 Program is designed for the students with greater psychosocial needs (2). Because of the overwhelming success of the program in the initial phase of implementation (2005–2009), the Trust has funded the project for another cycle (2009–2012).

Professional development by training in-service professionals has been perceived as one of the determining components on the advancement of related professions (3). There is an equal emphasis on training teachers to bring about improvements in teaching and students' academic achievements in the educational realm (4). The advancements and improvements do not come naturally. They are through systematically designed training programs bridging the gap between the prior knowledge of the participants and further developments in the front-line practice. Trainers definitely play crucial roles in complementing already existed structures and elaborating new information in the respective profession.

There are extensive reviews on the effectiveness of the program of Project P.A.T.H.S. in Hong Kong and the project has been well received on its effectiveness (5). One of the major contributors to the effective implementation is the "people" factor, i.e., the program designers, front-line implementers and program trainers. Among the reviews, the roles of the "people" are stressed and valued in contributing to the success of the programs (2). However, attention to the roles of trainers, especially how their previous or on-going work experience contribute to the training, is relatively rare. Training is emphasized as an important component of the project (6) and trainers are the ones who lead the way to the desired direction by making clear the philosophy, program design and the implementation approaches to the potential implementers (2). This ignites the authors' interest to investigate the background of trainers that may influence the training and the participants in the training.

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The first author is drawn to storytelling, i.e., a narrative inquiry in reviewing her changing role. Although the method has been challenged on its objectivity, Connelly and Clandinin (7) denoted that the narrative inquiry has in fact “a long and intellectual history both in and out of education” (p.2). Through reflection on a particular event, the reason why the subject acted in that way could be conceptualized and interpreted. The experiences of Connelly provide readers with an understanding on how various events affected his response and reflection (8).

The first author became a secondary school teacher after graduating with a Bachelor degree in Chinese language and literature. She is currently studying in an EdD program after teaching in a secondary school for 10 years. While employed as a teacher, the author was responsible for implementing the Tier 1 Program of Project P.A.T.H.S. in the school she served for 6 years. Since 2009, the author has participated as a trainer of the Secondary 1, 2, and 3 training programs of Project P.A.T.H.S. Most of the participants of the training programs are teachers and social workers, who are the counterparts of the author. In some sense, the author is undergoing a transition from an experienced front-line implementer to a novice program trainer. This transition stimulates the first author to explore: (a) how one formulates the identity as a “mentor” or “trainer” of front-line practitioners or implementers (teachers and social workers); (b) what challenges and joys this role change brings; and (c) how previous teaching experiences equip one to be a more effective trainer.

Experienced to novice: identity formation

In search of literature the authors found limited studies that investigate the challenges faced by school teachers undertaking this transition. Avalos (9) once commented in his review that the commencement of a novice trainer was no easy task and this stage could be understood as “particular and complex” (p.11). What contributes to the complexity is the changing role of the first author from being a “first-order practitioner” (the implementer) to a “second-order practitioner” (trainer of the implementers) [(10), p.126]. In the school context, the work of the first author was to execute the curriculum with the understanding of the theoretical framework and the philosophy of the project. During the process of training, the first author has to engage the participants with both cognitive and emotional involvement individually and collectively. She is taking up the lecturing position to explain the conceptual framework of the adolescent development and theoretical background of the project as well as facilitating the learning of the participants by providing opportunities for reflections (11). Both roles (the implementer and the trainer), in fact, shared the similarity in the nature of conduction, i.e., teaching. However, educating the educators is termed as “entering into the higher educational settings” and the ones who face this change may “meet considerable challenges” [(12), p.62]. Moving to the higher education setting for novice trainers is often a stressful and difficult process. We agree with Carrillo and Baguley (12) that the extent of the challenge would be heightened if school teachers take up the lecturing position in the higher educational settings.

Zeichner (13) stated that “one’s expertise as a teacher does not necessarily translate into expertise as a mentor of teachers” (p.118). Teaching in a school context contributes to professional credibility among students and colleagues can alleviate the initial insecurity felt by a new trainer. The first author received traditional subject-based (Chinese language) pedagogical training. The training received in the education field has limited relevance to the teaching conducted in higher educational settings. The pedagogical insights or training provided in teacher education remain focused on subject conduction, supplemented with some skill-wise electives like classroom management. Yet the training of Project P.A.T.H.S. focuses on the psychosocial development of adolescents and constructs contributing to the positive youth development (2), which requires the first author’s capacity to examine where the theory stands in terms of conviction and beliefs. The inability of the translation of the expertise might lead the author initially to suffer from the “imposter syndrome”. This syndrome refers to “individuals’ feelings of not being as capable or adequate as others perceive or evaluate them to be” [(14), p.183–84]. This inadequacy led to a sense of isolation. The first author felt isolated from familiar situation to novice.

One of the reasons that contributed to the nervousness of the first author during the transition was insufficient teaching efficacy. In one of the training sessions held this summer, one participant was late to the session by an hour and a half. He rushed to the designated group and explained to the author the reasons why he was late. He said with anger, “I received the morning call from my principal urging me to participate yet I kept on sleeping. Sorry to be late.” This experience explains well the phenomenon suggested by Nir and Bogler (4) that the school principal is “authoritative” and “does not promote the participation of teachers regarding these programs (teachers’ training)” (p. 378). This “urge” from the principal, originally with good intention, may hinder the motivation of the participants and in turn, regrettably, hampers their willingness to be involved and engaged in the training sessions. The dissemination of each worker’s individual learning depends immensely on the collaborative exchange of ideas among the participants in the training. This may rely quite heavily on the trainers to cater for the individual needs of participants and keep motivating the distant participants to involve.

Despite the stress and anxiety brought along by the changing roles, the transition rekindles the first author to explore who she is now. The identity is a combination of personal experiences and the social, cultural and institutional environments (12). Exploration on the formation of professional identity in transitions is crucial in developing skills and expertise in the respective teaching area. Rowe and Sykes (3) denoted that a notable and positive change of educators’ professional identity is the direct function of teachers’ professional self-perception, that is, personal teaching efficacy. There is profound and substantial literature suggesting that there is equally strong evidence that teachers’ self-perceptions interact with and impact on their professional practices (15). Hence, if one “belie(ves) in one’s ability” and “execute(s) the courses of action required to produce given attainments” [(16), p.1], s/he

may experience the capability to produce designated levels of performance.

Previous experience as a precursor for effective training

What strikes the authors to explore how the background of the trainer affects the process of training and the involvement of the participants are the comments given from the potential implementers after training:

“The workshops conducted by you are inspiring. I really appreciate the hard work and preparation you have done for us. I am sure that your students must have benefitted a lot from you and I’m sure they’ll miss you. Wish you good health and a happy life.”

“Florence, I have learnt how to be with my students with care from you.” (translated from Chinese) (17).

Both potential implementers articulated the teaching experience of the first author (“*your students must have benefitted a lot from you*” and “*I have learnt how to be with my students with care from you*”), though the second comment was implicitly expressed. Apart from possessing the vision, professional knowledge and skills, these comments let the authors reflect on how the role of front-line implementer influences and facilitates the cognition and emotional involvements of the participants of the training.

Concerning the effectiveness of conducting professional development for potential implementers of general programs, Tillema (18) highlighted the congruence between participants’ (teachers’) beliefs and trainers’ perceptions about actual front-line practice and importance of teaching in order to facilitate the participants to reflect on what they are learning and to have satisfactory training outcomes. However, new knowledge will only be accepted when it is congruent with the professional’s pre-existing conceptions about teaching. Teaching in secondary school (former experiences) equipped the trainer well with shared professional culture with the participants and such experience might soothe the process (4). The shared environments and cultures provide a common language for the trainer and the participants to communicate effectively and to share their views on the common ground. The communications between the trainer and the participants could facilitate the implementation of the program with fidelity in a consensus manner. Moreover, knowledge about the learners (trainees) allowed the trainer to better match with the expectations and prior knowledge of the trainees, resulting in a more meaningful presentation and better acquisition of the content (18). We may assume that if the trainer possesses front-line experience in teaching P.A.T.H.S. curriculum in schools, the effectiveness of the training would be considerably increased.

In their research, Nir and Bogler (4) identified that the significant degree of intimacy characterizing trainer-trainee interaction was an indispensable component. Hargreaves (19) furthered the notion that a nurturing relationship between trainer and teacher-participants would affect the teachers’

involvement in the professional development process as he depicted the life of school teachers as isolated and largely alone in promoting teachers’ satisfaction with professional development process. Zahorik (20) used the term “privatism” to describe such isolation and loneliness. Participants may prefer a dyadic relationship and a close interaction with the trainers. With common work experiences, the understanding of the authors to the situations encountered by the potential implementers nurtures an affective relationship. This trainer-trainee interaction enables the trainer to better tailor the presentations of materials and put greater attention to the human relationships (4). The article of Jenlink and Kinnuncan-Welsh (21) addressed the role of facilitators in teacher development by case stories written by the facilitators. One of the facilitators reflected on the experience of conducting teacher development and stated “it has given me the skills and ability to not necessarily delegate more, but let other people (the participants) take over the role lead the conversation.....it has given me the opportunity to participate versus always being in the leadership role” (21, p.717). Being a trainer is not delegating what s/he knows, on the contrary, joint insights and collaborative exchange of ideas may shift from individual advancement to collective improvement as for the whole teaching profession. A mutual learning alliance is much more valued in the process.

Self-disclosure is not gaining much appreciation in the Chinese culture as we believe insights transcend naturally from being silent, especially in understanding personal growth. However, in line with vast literature review, “use of self” is perceived as the key to relating teachers and students with a range of emotions in which personal development of students is enforced (22). This relation is stressed in Project P.A.T.H.S. and it is a crucial element of fostering the alliance between the trainers and potential implementers during the training of the project (23). As the first author had been in the teaching profession of the secondary school setting for quite a long time, she understood well the challenges and difficulties of the potential implementers. In addition, to the teaching experience, the first author’s sharing of front-line implementation of the project, either joys or challenges, in school settings encouraged the participants to reflect on the meaning of implementing the project in their schools. As some of the potential implementers may not have a concise conception of executing the project in schools, the author’s front-line experience provided a tangible “toolbox” for potential implementers that might ease their anxieties and nervousness. This shared sentiment kindled the “togetherness” in which the relational exchanges and trust could be nurtured in the process of training. Billow (24) further elaborated this togetherness with the highlight of personal authenticity in which trainers’ real human presence encouraged participants to unveil their feelings in a trustworthy milieu.

Project P.A.T.H.S. is designed and implemented by researchers from five universities in Hong Kong and has been implemented in more than 250 schools in Hong Kong (25). This kind of school-university partnership is treated as one of the most effective mediations to facilitate teachers’ professional development (9). The partnership highlights joint contributions

and aids to bridge the gap between scholastic and institutional research and practical front-line experience. The collaboration between school teachers and university academics is proven, in the literature, to be effective in improving the qualities of teaching, resulting in better learning of students (26, 27). However, the roles of university academics are often viewed as leaders to the trainees. This role is stressed in Avalos' (9) review on ten-year professional development in the teaching profession. As the training schemata are different in university academics and teachers, there are discrepancies in viewing what teaching means to respective parties. The university academics have to develop skills normally and originally developed by classroom teachers. These skills are crucial to communicate effectively with teachers and to share a similar vision on teaching in the practical front-line educational realm. Having developed such skills during her service as a secondary school teacher, the first author is able to communicate effectively with the potential participants in the training. Avalos (9) and other scholars reminded university academics that they had to value teachers as partners rather than "listeners" or "followers". Yet, blurring the roles of university academics/trainers and teachers should be prohibited as the literature suggested. The distinction among these roles is crucial and indispensable. Obviously, the experience of the first author is a good indication that collaboration between academics and front-line teachers is a significant model to be adopted.

While previous experiences in teaching may facilitate the teaching of a trainer, such experiences may also be an obstacle. As the students (i.e., trainees) were teachers and social workers, their expectations and mentalities were very different from secondary school students. Therefore, trainers in positive youth development programs, such as Project P.A.T.H.S. may need to "unlearn" their teaching styles and behavior. This is not easy as change is inevitably stressful and arouses anxiety. Besides, the content of the training program is not quite the same as that in the secondary school curriculum and the "knowledge" disseminated is not merely factual. Moreover, the "attitude" and "values" of the trainees are also other issues of concern. Therefore, it also requires the novice trainer to adjust their teaching pedagogy and teaching skills. Finally, as the teacher-student relationship in secondary schools is quite different from the "trainer-trainee" relationship in Project P.A.T.H.S., the "novice" trainer has to adjust the roles and interaction patterns involved as well.

Concluding reflections

Rogers (28) reviewed his growing pathways and summarized his learning in the first chapter "This is Me" in his well-known book *On Becoming a Person*. The review helped shape Rogers' professional role as a psychotherapist and the learnt experiences acted as "principles" of his belief in psychotherapy. The first author would like to adopt two experiences of Rogers' to conclude what she has learnt from this special transition in her life as follows:

"I find myself more effective when I can listen acceptantly to myself, and can be myself" (28, p.17). The first author has had her novice role as a trainer of Project P.A.T.H.S. for only 2

years. The inexperienced dissemination of the training sessions and inability to translate expertise leads the author to evaluate herself as inadequate and incompetent. Yet, this experience directs the first author to re-consider her role as an "educator". Educators' expertise and professionalism is usually concluded by their pedagogical proficiency and organizational skills (29). However, being professional is not just exhibiting these expertise (23) but also involving reflections on one's experiences. As Reinkraut et al. (30) denoted that "being aware of one's own experience is the hallmark of increasing competence" (p.12), the experience of being "imperfect" arouses the first author to accept one's limitations and this acceptance helps her to be able to grow and change more readily.

"Life, at its best, is a flowing, changing process in which nothing is fixed" (28, p.27). Having been a secondary school teacher for ten years provides the first author with stability and security. Taking up new challenges as a trainer yields anxiety and nervousness. Yet, this is the prime time for the first author to look back to what she has done in implementing the project in a school setting. The role of a trainer provides the first author with an opportunity to have an overview of the philosophy of the project. By sharing the front-line experiences, the first author can review the methodology and strategies used in school settings and her experience is enriched by both the intellectual and relational exchange with the participants. Being "fixed" does bring stability yet may lose the prime opportunity to have reflections on what she has been used to for years.

When considering the changing role of the first author from a front-line implementer to a program trainer, readers may grasp an understanding of what the transition meant to the authors. It enabled the first author to understand how one will be affected by one's past experience and how to develop future professional aspiration. By describing the challenges encountered, the first author develops a sense of professional identity which is formed by previous experience and expertise. By acknowledging one's previous skills and expertise, and valuing who one is and what one has done, the advantages of having previous teaching experience contributes to an easier shift. Although the position of the first author has been changed, her passion for respective discipline, i.e., caring for adolescent development, remains the same.

Another issue that should be examined is how training in a positive youth development program is linked to its effectiveness. As mentioned, available research findings showed that Project P.A.T.H.S. is effective in promoting adolescent holistic development and reducing adolescent risk behavior (31–34). To what extent is the positive evaluation of the program a result of the effectiveness of the training program? From a scientific point of view, it is difficult for us to answer this question, because there is a paucity of research findings surrounding this issue. As such, there is a strong need to understand the nature of training programs in positive youth development and examine the linkage between effectiveness of training program and effectiveness of positive youth development program. Obviously, the present paper is a constructive response.

Finally, it is important to consider the question of whether systematic training should be provided for novice trainers to teach positive youth development programs. In Project P.A.T.H.S., briefing sessions were conducted for the potential trainers of the training programs. Based on the insights gathered in this reflection case, it is suggested that a systematic training program should be designed to help novice trainers to teach in positive youth development programs. The focus of the training program should help novice trainers to work on their self-concepts and transformation in teaching style, skills and conceptions about teaching.

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