

# Adopting a Positive Youth Development Program in Macau: Difficulties and challenges

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## 1. Introduction

Macau is a very small city near Hong Kong in South East Asia and famous for its gaming business. Its estimated population was 542,400 in 2010. However, it is a comparatively young city with youth aged between 10 and 24 years contributing 22 percents to the total population (Statistics and Census Services, 2010).

After the return of sovereignty of Macau from Portugal to the People's Republic of China in 1999, and since Macau Government opened the gaming licensure in 2002, both the number of casinos and the revenue generated from the gaming business have increased. The number of casinos has risen from 10 to 20 during the past 10 years and the revenue from the gaming business to 64 percentage of the total revenue of the Government in 2005 (Hong & Ho, 2006). A study was conducted on youth participation in gaming activities by the University of Macau based on a sample of 864 secondary school students. This study showed that 60% of students in Form 3 to Form 6 had participated in gaming activities, of whom 5% might become problem gamblers and 2.66 % become pathological gamblers (Fong, 2003). The Macau Government is also aware of the seriousness of the situation and has planned and implemented some special programs focused on adolescents, particularly with respect to moral education to combat the temptation of the high pay from casinos which may influence the views of the youth when they are doing their career planning in secondary school.

A well structured local program can potentially help adolescents develop a positive growth and be better prepared for future challenges. However, a review of all recent youth studies and programs

for adolescent positive growth and development in Macau showed that there is a lack of theoretically sound and comprehensive programs (Anglican Macau Social Service, 2006; Luk, 2010). With the support from the Education and Youth Affairs Bureau, a well tested, comprehensive Chinese positive youth development program "P.A.T.H.S" developed in Hong Kong (Shek, 2006a; Shek, 2008; Shek et al. 2008; Shek & Ma 2010) has been modified and adopted for use in Macau in the beginning of the year 2009. A local research team was formed by the author and his colleagues to monitor the implementation of the program and evaluate its effectiveness after the completion of the program in one academic year. A briefing session of the program was introduced to all schools. Two secondary schools were invited to participate as pilot schools to run the program for their Secondary One students. Training for teachers and school social workers were also organized both in Hong Kong and Macau. The program had been completed during the academic year 2009 – 2010 and the result was found to be positive, which was published in an international journal (Luk et al., 2011).

This paper reports on the difficulties and challenges of the adaptation of the program in its promotion, training and implementation stages in Macau. Influences from schools, government and social environments are discussed. Some experiences of the teachers and students involved in the project will also be presented.

## 2. Background

Gambling, as a kind of socio-cultural phenomenon, has been practiced in China for several thousand years. As described in the Chinese dictionary "Ci Hai", gambling is defined as "a kind

of inappropriate entertainment. There are different ways such as playing cards, dice using money as bet and the loser has to pay the bet to the winner” (Ci Hai, 1979, p. 3239). When one involves in gambling, s/he can easily develop a habit of taking risk and opportunity to win. For those who lack will power will easily indulge themselves in gambling and become problem gamblers.

The booming of the gaming business becomes a two-edged knife in Macau. On the one hand, it attracts tourists and brings prosperity to the society. On the other, it affects people’s attitude toward whether it is right or wrong to be involved in gambling. In a recent study on the quality of life of Macau people, most of them supported the development of the gaming business, but they commonly had potential worry that it might affect the growth of the younger generation. More than half of the respondents (51.6%) perceived that there would be negative effect on adolescents and 22.2% responded that there would be both positive and negative effects. In order of priority, reasons of perceived negative impacts on youth were: not willing to continue studying, indulging in gambling, encouraging gambling, adolescents may go astray, changing of values, high value for money, no long-term goal but short-sighted career planning, and lowering the quality of adolescents (Macau development strategic research center, 2005). With reference to the specific needs in Macau, it is recommended that education on ideals, will power and personal values should be enhanced. There should be more cooperation between parents, schools and society to promote healthy youth activities so that they can be positively developed and better prepared to resist the temptation of the gambling in the city (Lau, 2006).

However, people working in casinos can usually receive nearly double the pay of those who work in other settings with the same qualification and experience. It attracts quite a number of young people especially those with less motivation to study to be engaged in this industry. The prevailing atmosphere of working in casinos is so heavy that it

affects the traditional Chinese value of studying hard in order to earn more money for a wealthy life. More importantly, the temptation of going astray in casinos is also strong that it is not uncommon to learn from newspapers that some young employees in the gaming business turn to be gamblers themselves and commit suicide due to their inability to pay back loan to the “loan shark”. Therefore, adolescents must be better equipped for their holistic development especially in time of the rapid changing society in Macau. Community also voices increasing concerns about schools enhancing teaching of ideals, will power and personal values so that young people can develop positively and be better prepared to resist the temptation of gambling.

In Macau, there is a 15-year free education system with direct promotion from primary to secondary school without any public examination. There is no public examination either but individual admission examinations after secondary school education for entry into local universities. The total number of schools is 82 with 3,819 primary and secondary school teachers and the overall teacher-student ratio is 1:17.2 (Education & Youth Affairs Bureau, 2010). Since most teachers were educated in Mainland China and Taiwan, teachers are mostly dominant and directive in the Eastern pedagogical culture (Zhang 2007). With the increasing demand from the public to meet the knowledge needed by the changing world and the greater effort for moral education at the same time, teaching is becoming more stressful and teachers are more prone to burnout.

A postal survey conducted by a teacher professional association on 717 school teachers revealed that 61.4% of respondents perceived their work as “exhausted work”. The ranking of difficulties at work listed is lack of learning motivation of students, heavy workload and too many students per class (Macau Chinese Education Association, 2002). Ng (2002) carried out a comparison study about teacher’s time spent on 400 school teachers each in Beijing, Shanghai, Taipei, Hong Kong and Macau. Results showed that both teachers in Hong Kong

and Macau were overloaded, working hours were the double of those of the teachers in three other cities and time spent mostly was in class teaching, preparation for teaching and marking assignments. A study by Liu (2005) showed that when compared with Shanghai, Macau lacked approximately one third of school teachers, suggesting that one school teacher in Macau bore the workload of three teachers as compared with that of their counterparts in Shanghai. A recent study on the exploration of the burnout situation on 138 teachers in two schools found that 26 participants were demonstrating high level of emotional exhaustion coupled with high level of reduced personal accomplishments, which would be problematic to the participants, students and the schools (Luk et al., 2010).

### 3. PATHS program in Macau

Facing the intensification of adolescent problems, a positive youth development program for adolescents was developed by researchers in 5 universities in Hong Kong (Shek & Lam 2006; Shek 2006b). The program is named as Positive Adolescent Training through Holistic Social program (PATHS). The PATHS program consists of 2 Tiers. Tier 1 program is a universal, positive youth development program where students in Secondary 1-3 participate in 10-20 hours of training in the school year at each grade, involving 20-40 teaching units. In Tier 1 program, 15 positive youth development constructs as a holistic growth are included in the 40 teaching units (Shek & Ma 2006). These constructs are named as Bonding (BO), Social Competence (SC), Emotional Competence (EC), Cognitive Competence (CC), Behavioral Competence (BC), Moral Competence (MC), Self-efficacy (SE), Prosocial Norms (PN), Resilience (RE), Self-determination (SD), Spirituality (SP), Clear and Positive Identity (ID or CPI), Beliefs in the future (BF), Prosocial Involvement (PI), and Recognition for Positive Behavior (PB). All these constructs emphasized on helping students to learn and develop their personal autonomy on moral

principles or make independent and critical judgment via a happy, healthy and stimulating teaching and learning process during their time of schooling. Since the culture of Hong Kong and Macau is basically similar with the fact that more than 95% of their population is Chinese, the program has been adopted for use in Macau with minor modifications in some local terminologies while the main content remains unchanged. Two secondary schools, one with a Christian background while the other with no religious background were invited as the pilot schools. Program Tier 1 with 20 teaching units was conducted.

### 4. Difficulties and challenges

During the launching of the program, some difficulties were observed, which might or might not be encountered in Hong Kong though the population is basically also Chinese and the culture seems to be similar. Regarding the promotion of the program, a briefing session of the PATHS program was held and our research team was supported by the Education and Youth Affairs Bureau in sending the posters to all the secondary schools in Macau. All the school principals with one or two teachers were invited to attend a one-and-half-hour briefing session on the program. The staff from the Education Bureau also helped encourage school social workers to attend. However, the attendance of the briefing session was not good with only around 50 participants. There might be several reasons. First, the Education Bureau did not like to give an impression that they forced the school administrators or teachers to attend the meeting since selecting appropriate program was totally under the discretion of the individual schools. Second, since Macau is a small city with many associations, school administrators and teachers have to respond to different social requests from associations such as competitions, training, visits, seminars, social functions etc beyond different academic activities. The school calendar is usually full. Teachers are already too busy to attend some extra meetings. Third, in some schools, they

might have their own program which they perceive as adequate. The challenge will be by individual contact of the school principal since this is the usual ways of communication locally and certainly is the most effective way of communication though time consuming. Out of the individual contact of 5 schools, two principals accepted the offer to be the pilot schools.

With reference to the preparation of the program implementers, a 3-day training was conducted both in Hong Kong and Macau. Twenty teachers and school social workers were trained in Hong Kong and 19 in Macau. Those who went to Hong Kong for training mixed with other participants from different schools in Hong Kong. Those in Macau were mostly social workers related to youth work. From the evaluation form after the 2-day training in Macau, the content of the program was highly regarded, while many participants commended that the trainer was active in presentation and skillful in group leading and that for most of them it was still a long way to be like her. In fact, from a focus group of the students in one school after the completion of the Program, the most negative feedback was inactiveness in presentation and poor discipline in class. As mentioned before, most of the teachers were educated in Mainland China and Taiwan where pedagogical teaching is common. They may not be very active in drawing the attention of a group of Form 1 students. Relating to school social workers, postgraduate training in social work is still under development in Macau. Therefore, they may not be adequately prepared to run a more active interactive class. The challenge lies in how to prepare those program implementers who are not adequately prepared with only 3 days of training with the program. Some personal coaching and extra training may be required.

With regard to the implementation stage, some difficulties were also observed. First, as feedback from one supervisor of a pilot school, this was the first time for the school to use an interactive approach to run a subject for a Secondary One class. Both the teacher and the students were new to this way

of teaching. The teacher found it hard to engage the group while the students were easily distracted and chatted within the small group. Second, in one pilot school, the program was usually run at the last session of the school day when the students were expecting to leave afterwards. Some students might be too tired and had lost motivation to even listen. Third, both schools could only afford a 10-hour content with 20 teaching units due to busy schedule at the school and each unit was within 40 minutes. Last, the space required to form a few small groups was also a problem to both schools since the classrooms of both schools on the whole were quite small. In response to the difficulties during the implementation stage, a good orientation of the program should be given to the students so that they will be prepared to the new ways of teaching. An experienced trainer, initially from Hong Kong, can help for the first one or two sessions so as to set up a model or develop a classroom norm for the program. The frequency of field visits by the research team should also be increased to boost class morale and provide feedback for the program implementers. As far as time for the session is concerned, the most appropriate time for running this program is also needed to be considered. Besides, if more time can be allotted to the program, for example, 20 hours with 40 teaching units, more topics can be covered and more time can be used for discussion and sharing.

## 5. Conclusion

Macau is a small city with strong social ties between man and man, and amongst different associations. Everyone and every association are expected to develop strong social involvement in society. Both teachers and schools are mostly involved with quite a number of social activities in a year. Furthermore, teaching method adopted in secondary school is more prone to Eastern pedagogical approach. Program implementers and students are new to an interactive and responsive approach, which takes time for both of them to adapt. Besides these, training of implementers needs

to be improved. All these are the obstacles that our research team has to face in order to turn the program into a successful one. Nevertheless, difficulties can be viewed as challenges depending on how we perceive them. Having the aim to help our youth become mature adults, our research team and all the program implementers will endeavor to face these challenges.

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