

# Philippine Mental Health Association's Youth Life Enrichment Program: An Evaluation of a Preventive Mental Health Program for the Filipino Youth

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## Abstract

This research evaluates the impact of “Lusog Isip ng Kabataan” (LINK) (Mental Health of the Youth) Club, the implementing arm of the Philippine Mental Health Association's Youth Life Enrichment Program (YLEP) among its urban public high school participants during the school year 2013-2014. Respondents were 47 grades 7-10 student members from three school divisions where LINK has been implemented. These students were purposively chosen as they were able to attend at least 80% of the activities for the school year. A 35-item four-point likert scale questionnaire was devised to quantify the participants' responses on how the program impacted them on the following areas: self-awareness/competence; interpersonal relationships; family relationships, and awareness of social issues. Weighted mean average and standard deviation of the responses were computed. To validate the participants' responses, a Focused Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted with 24 guidance counselors and/or values education teachers who accompanied the students to the different activities implemented. With an overall weighted mean of 3.47 (4 being the highest) and a standard deviation of 0.17, this evaluation shows that the LINK mental health club had a positive impact on the student participants of this study. FGD with advisers corroborated with the participants' overall responses.

**Keywords :** mental health, primary prevention, preventive mental health education

## Introduction

The old adage, “An ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure” is still very true, not only in the context of physical illnesses but also insofar as mental health is concerned. The World Health Organization defines mental health as not just the absence of disease, but a state of well-being wherein one realizes his/her own strengths, realizes his/her potentials, can cope with the normal stresses of life, and can contribute to his/her community (2010). Despite such positive definition, the concept of mental health is still highly stigmatized and equated with “mental disorder” or “mental illness”. Therefore, in coming up with mental health programs, the emphasis should be on well-being and competence, rather than on associating mental health with mental illness (ProMenPol, 2009). One way of coming up with more positive mental health programs is to engage in primary prevention activities. Primary prevention is defined as an intervention designed specifically to reduce the future incidence of adjustment problems in currently normal populations, including efforts directed at the promotion of mental health (Durlak & Wells, 1997). An advantage of primary prevention programs, based on a study by Rosenthal & Rubin, is the capacity of these programs to reduce

problems and significantly increase competencies and affected functioning in multiple adjustment domains (in Durlak & Wells, 1997). Despite this finding, there is still a tremendous amount of unmet need, and health disparities which are particularly pronounced for children and youth living in low-income communities, ethnic minority youth, immigrant children, or those with special needs (American Psychological Association, 2013; Morris, Belfer, Daniels, Flisher, Ville, Lora & Saxena, 2011; Boothroyd, Greenbaum, Wang, Kutash, & Friedman, 2011; Wagner, Friend, Bursuck, Kutash, Duchnowski, Sumi, & Epstein, 2006). It is therefore imperative to create programs that cater to the mental health needs of this population in one of the most common settings where they can be found – in schools. The provision of mental health services in schools dates back to the late 1800s, with early providers of these services being “visiting teachers” who were eventually referred to as school social workers (Perfect & Morris, 2011). Since then a number of initiatives had been asserted for schools to provide services that target the mental health needs of the youth (Greenberg, Domitrovich & Bumbarger, 2000; Barrett, Eber & Weist, 2011).

The World Health Organization underscored the importance of preventive mental health

education through the concept of “health promoting school” – that is, education that not only focuses on academics but also on the promotion of positive relationships, bullying prevention, management of strong emotions and the formation of healthy body image (Shute, Slee, Murray-Harvey & Dix, 2012). In the Philippines, there is no known concrete and sustainable government preventive mental health program in the schools. Initiatives on mental health promotion are usually made by private organizations, such as the Philippine Mental Health Association (PMHA) that has been in existence for 63 years. PMHA’s primary advocacy is the promotion of mental health and prevention of mental disorders and the organization tries to achieve this through various programs in schools and communities (PMHA Brochure, 2012). One of PMHA’s preventive mental health programs is the Youth Life Enrichment Program (YLEP). It aims to promote and foster a balanced and well-rounded way of life among the youth by becoming aware of their strengths and weaknesses, knowing themselves better and accepting who they are so they could establish wholesome relationship with others, while also learning the skills of leadership, communication and service.

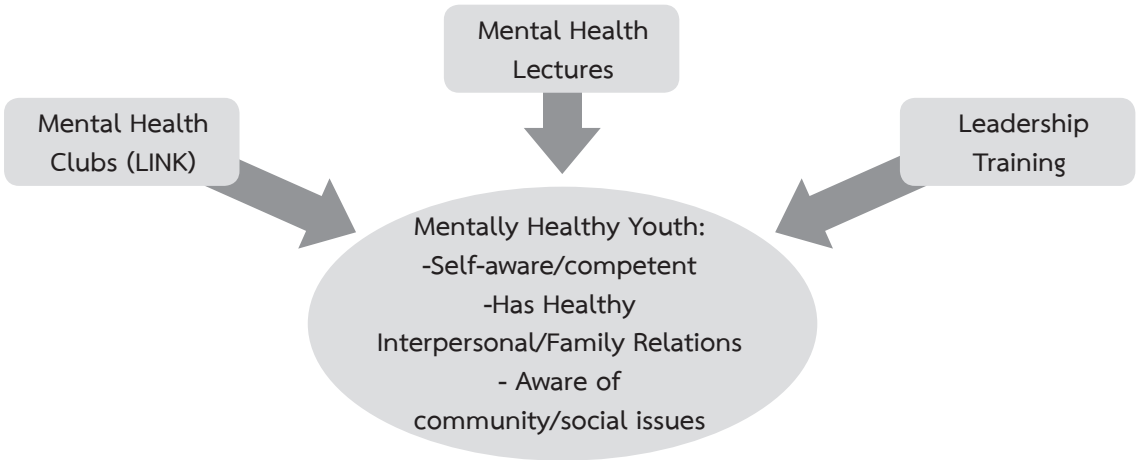


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of PMHA’s Youth Life Enrichment Program

YLEP sees the mentally healthy youth as: self-aware/competent; have healthy relationship with others, including their peers and family; and are aware of community and social issues.

Self-awareness and competence are seen as the capacity to know one's strengths and limitations and being able to do something about them. The competent youth use their strengths to help others and further develop their potentials, while their limitations are accepted, refined and improved. The capacity to engage in healthy interpersonal and family relationships is seen as another characteristic of the mentally healthy youth. This is the ability to develop positive relationships with others through mutual trust, constructive communication patterns and skills in conflict resolution, among others. Awareness of important community and social issues is also an essential characteristic of the mentally healthy youth. Knowing their strengths and limitations, the mentally healthy youth involve themselves in relevant issues affecting them and their environment, and do something about it at even at their level.

YLEP attempts to achieve its goal of developing mentally healthy youth through the program's implementing arm - the *Lusog Isip ng Kabataan* (LINK) (Mental Health of the Youth). LINK is the mental health club formally organized in public secondary schools initially in the cities of Manila, Quezon, Caloocan, and Pasay in 1975. Over the years, only the LINK Clubs in Manila and Quezon City have remained, until the school year 2012-2013 when LINK has been established in Marikina and reorganized in Caloocan City. There are also five key provinces in the Philippines where LINK is being implemented. Activities such as lectures on mental health, monthly meetings, and annual leadership training are conducted to achieve the program's goal of developing mentally healthy youth who can be leaders and advocates for mental health in their own families and

respective communities. For the past school year (June 2013-February 2014), lecture topics included "Self-Awareness," "How to Effectively Handle Emotions," "Coping with Peer Pressure," "Coping with Family Problems," "Leadership" and other mental health topics relevant to the needs of the youth. These topics came out in the Needs Assessment Survey conducted at the beginning of the school year.

## Objectives

This research aims to assess the impact of LINK on the members who have consistently participated in the different activities of this mental health club for the school year 2013-2014, with the end in view of further improving program implementation and creating a baseline data for future researches on primary prevention mental health programs.

## Methods

Participants of this study are Grades 7-10 public school students who are LINK members from three of the four School Divisions where this mental health club is being implemented. From these members, purposive sampling was used with the criteria that they should have participated in at least 80 percent of the meetings conducted during the school year, attended the mental health lectures, and participated in the live-in Youth Leadership Training conducted. From about a hundred active members of the LINK Club, 47 qualified as participants in this study. The evaluation transpired in three different occasions for the three School Divisions, since these School Divisions conduct separate but parallel meetings and activities. One School Division was excluded because there was only one activity conducted at the time of this research.

A 35-item questionnaire was developed based on the four domains/areas that YLEP, through LINK implementation hoped to develop

among the students. These are: (1) self-awareness and competence; (2) interpersonal relationship/competence; (3) relationship with family; and (4) awareness of social issues. On a 4-point Likert scale continuum, participants were asked to rate the items based on their agreement or disagreement with each item (i.e., 1- Strongly Disagree; 2- Disagree; 3- Agree; 4 – Strongly Agree). Aside from the 35 items, follow up open-ended questions were included in the questionnaire to further qualify the participants' quantitative ratings. Questions pertained to the changes that the participants noticed in themselves, in the way they related with others including their respective families, and as a member of their community, after attending the LINK activities. The questionnaire was face validated by three mental health practitioners but has not undergone other validity and reliability measures.

The teachers and/or guidance counselors who accompanied the students during the LINK activities – were also the subjects of the Focused Group Discussion (FGD) to substantiate and validate the participants' responses in the questionnaire. The FGD was conducted in another room while the participants answered the questionnaire in another area. A total of 24 guidance counselors and/or values education teachers participated in the FGD. Weighted mean average was used to determine the degree of agreement/disagreement of the participants to the items clustered under the four domains. The following score classifications had been arbitrarily assigned to classify the participants' ratings: 1.00-1.49: Low; 1.50-2.49: Low Average; 2.50–3.49: High Average; 3.50-4.00: High. Standard deviation for the mean score of each domain was also computed. The FGD with the teachers/guidance counselors were recorded and analyzed based on themes that came out during the actual group discussions.

### ***Limitations of the Study***

While a pre-evaluation was not conducted among the participants before the implementation of the program, a needs assessment questionnaire was given at the beginning of the school year to determine the top mental health concerns/topics that need to be addressed among the student participants of the program. The different activities and lecture topics identified and listed in the previous section are the result of the needs assessment survey conducted. This research is also limited to the evaluation of the program's impact on the student participants after one school year of implementation. Statistically, only the Mean and Standard Deviation were used in the quantitative analysis of the data.

## **Results**

### ***Demographic profile of the student participants***

The most number of participants (40.4%) came from School Division 3, followed by 31.9% from School Division 1, and 27.7% from School Division 2. Most of the participants belong to the 15-16 age range. Thirty-eight percent (38%) of the participants were 16 years old, followed by 36.2% participants who were 15 years old. Seven (14.9%) participants were 14 years old, while there were 2 participants (4.3%) each under the age of 13 and 17 years old. There was one (2.1%) participant who was only 12 years old. Majority of the participants or 61.8% were in Grade 10, while 30% were in Grade 9. There were two (4.3%) participants who were in Grade 7 and another two who were in Grade 8. Thirty or 63.8% of the participants were females while 34% were males. One participant did not indicate the gender in filling up the evaluation questionnaire. Table 1 shows the participants' weighted mean average ratings and the standard deviation of the four domains, and the interpretation of the results.

Table 1: Mean Average Ratings and Standard Deviations for the Four Domains

Domains	Mean	SD
Self-awareness and Competence	3.47	0.63
Interpersonal Relationship	3.50	0.59
Relationship with Family	3.44	0.57
Awareness of Social Issues	3.46	0.57
Overall Weighted Mean Average	3.47	0.17

\*Legend: 1.00-1.49 (Low); 1.50-2.49 (Low Average); 2.50-3.49 (High Average); 3.50-4.00 (High)

Discussion

Table 1 presented the weighted mean average ratings of the clustered items for each of the four domains. Three of the four domains obtained a High Average rating: Self-Awareness/Competence, Family Relationship, and Awareness of Social Issues. The Interpersonal Relationships domain obtained the highest mean average rating of 3.50. The overall mean average rating of 3.47 (high average) suggests that participants tend to agree that the activities of LINK have helped them in the areas of improving their self-awareness, interpersonal as well as family relationships, and their awareness of social issues. All of the mean ratings fell within the High Average to High classification, suggesting a positive impact of the program in general, and the various LINK activities in particular, on the participants.

More specifically, three of the four highest rated items were on the self-awareness domain, and one fell under the interpersonal relationship domain. Highest rated item on self-awareness were: ... I realized the importance of responsibility in my life today and tomorrow (3.72 - High); ... I developed self-awareness (3.70 - High); ...I developed positive values/ moral values (3.68 - High). Under the interpersonal relationship domain, this item got a High (3.68) rating: ... I related better with friends/classmates/teachers. The three lowest rated items are the following: ...I am not afraid to try new things (2.79); ... I became more

appreciative of the role and contribution of parents and siblings in the family (3.02); and, ...I learned how to become independent (3.21). While the ratings of these items still fell within the “High Average” classification, their relatively low mean average ratings as compared to the other items appears to indicate that they see these aspects as areas for improvement. Trying out new things and becoming more independent fall under the Self-awareness/Competence domain, while becoming more appreciative of parents and siblings’ role fall under the Family Relationship domain. While the participants may have developed better self-awareness and competence in some areas, they may generally feel relatively lacking in terms of their capacity to attempt to engage in novel activities, to be adventurous and autonomous. Being young, participants may still feel ambivalent about asserting their independence and being thrill-seekers for possible fear of consequences.

The participants’ appreciation of the contribution of their parents and siblings in the family also received a relatively low rating which may show that family relationship still need to be further integrated in the mental health topics conducted during the LINK lectures and activities.

Students’ Responses to the Open-Ended Questions

A number of participants responded that

they gained a higher level of self-confidence as a result of the LINK activities that they had engaged in. This corroborates with the result of the quantitative ratings wherein they gave high ratings to the items pertaining to the increased awareness of their skills, talents and abilities, as well as development of a higher sense of responsibility. Participants generally noticed that after having attended the activities of LINK, they had become more careful before arriving at decisions and tried to consider the consequences of their actions. This may be a possible reason why the item on trying out new things received a relatively low rating, as the participants may not want to get into something without calculating risks.

Participants also mentioned that they had become more aware and sensitive of other people's feelings. This may be due to the fact that some of the lectures and activities tackled handling emotions, bullying, and dealing with peer pressure. Their responses showed the impact of these lecture topics, because they have developed better empathy towards other people. Being more friendly and sociable were also further developed as a result of the monthly LINK meetings and lectures, as well as other LINK activities that the participants also conduct in their respective schools. One qualitative measure of the impact of LINK on the participants is their willingness to share what they have learned with others who are not able to participate in the program. One student wrote: *"I encouraged my schoolmates to discover their hidden potential using what we learn in every LINK meeting."*

As a member of their respective families, a number of participants responded that they have become closer to the other members of their family, more respectful especially to the elders, and more understanding of each member. One student mentioned that she *"became more understanding, that we don't have enough money or financial capacity to get what I want."* As students, the

participants mostly noticed that they have developed better leadership skills, and have become good role models to other students. One participant mentioned that she has better understood the concept of "healthy competition" because of the activities which did not only teach them leadership, but cooperation and respect for others' opinions. Participants have become more aware of what was going on in their community or immediate environment, as what majority of them answered when asked about this aspect. An activity initiated by PMHA after the devastating monsoon rains in Metro Manila was the psychosocial processing wherein students were grouped and asked to share about their experiences. This appears to have had an impact on the participants as a number of them mentioned about becoming more concerned about the environment, learning that each has a role and responsibility in the society, and seeing the value of following rules and regulations for the betterment of the community.

### ***Focused Group Discussion Results***

The guidance counselors/values education teachers who accompanied the students during the regular monthly meetings and lectures were the subjects of the FGD. This was conducted to substantiate and validate the responses of the student participants. Three questions were asked: (1) What changes (if any) have you noticed in the students after attending the LINK activities; (2) What is/are the effect/s of the partnership between PMHA and your school; and (3) How do you think can your students contribute in the advocacy for mental health.

#### ***1) What changes have you noticed in your students after attending the LINK activities?***

A consistent response among the guidance counselors/teachers was the enhancement of their students' confidence level. One respondent specified this further in terms of her student's



better capacity for public speaking. This further validates the participants' high quantitative ratings to the items pertaining to self-awareness and responses to the open-ended question about the changes they noticed in themselves.

Other aspect that the guidance counselors/teachers noticed in their students include the latter's higher sense of responsibility, better leadership skills, and becoming more friendly and sociable. They also mentioned that their LINK students have become more active, some negative behaviors have been transformed to positive (i.e., "no longer cutting their classes", "there's more eagerness to learn", "from passive members to active leaders"). They noticed that the students showed an increased interest on mental health as well as initiative to advocate for mental health through informal sharing with peers and re-echoing of mental health lectures that they had attended. The students' outlook have also improved, i.e., became more mature, positive, and happy. One respondent specifically mentioned that the members of LINK in her school became more responsible in assisting her in the Guidance Office.

## ***2) What is/are the effect/s of the partnership between PMHA and your school?***

The guidance counselors/teachers gave three prominent responses. First, the partnership between PMHA and their schools led to their students and their own increased awareness about mental health and mental disorders. The lectures conducted helped in correcting their previous misconceptions about mental disorders. Because of this knowledge, they were able to identify other students who may need special interventions and referred them to PMHA for further professional help. Furthermore, they have become aware that referring to PMHA or to other mental health professionals need not happen when a person is already afflicted with serious mental health condition, but instead, during the earlier stages

when there is a better chance for treatment and management of the condition.

The second prominent response of the guidance counselors/teachers is that the students have become mental health advocates as a result of the partnership between PMHA and their school. This also appears to be an offshoot of their improved awareness about mental health and mental disorders. Respondents mentioned that PMHA trained and educated their students, who then, became their respective schools' mental health advocates. With the huge guidance counselor to student ratio (one counselor to more than 1,000 students) in the public schools in the Philippines, PMHA has become the bridge of guidance counselors to reach out to their students through peer facilitation, re-echoing of mental health lectures, and other activities that PMHA taught the LINK members, at least in the areas where the Youth Life Enrichment Program (YLEP) is being implemented. Through this strategy, the development of mental disorders is not only managed through referrals, but more importantly, the promotion of mental health has been strengthened.

Guidance counselors/teachers were also able to invite PMHA mental health professionals to conduct various lectures to their respective schools. This had been another positive result of the partnership between PMHA and the different schools where YLEP is being implemented.

## ***3) How do you think can your students contribute in the advocacy for mental health?***

Guidance counselors/teachers were unanimous in their response that the lectures the students had attended should be re-echoed to their schoolmates so that the latter can also learn more about mental health. Respondents also mentioned that LINK members should be good examples to their schoolmates. More importantly, the LINK members themselves should be able to

apply their learning in their lives so that they can be models of good mental health. In so doing, they will be able to influence others to be mentally healthy and consequently become mental health advocates too.

## Conclusions

The above discussion has pointed to the positive impact of YLEP (Youth Life Enrichment Program) through its implementing arm, the LINK mental health club, on its student members who were the main participants of this study. The evaluation questionnaire yielded high ratings on all the four domains measured, namely, the impact on the participants' self-awareness/competence, interpersonal relationships, family relationship, and awareness of social issues. The responses of the students to the open-ended questions, as well as the guidance counselors/teachers' responses to the conducted FGD likewise validated the quantitative ratings obtained through the evaluation questionnaire. A great majority of the guidance counselors/teachers see the worthiness of the program not only to their students but to themselves as well, since they also learn from the lectures conducted and they benefit from the partnership between PMHA and their respective schools. However, due to the relatively small number of participants and the absence of a pre-evaluation measure, this finding cannot be generalized at this point.

## Recommendations

This study confirms the importance and benefit of primary prevention programs for the youth. However, the limitations stipulated in this

study need to be addressed in future related studies to make the findings more conclusive. Here are some recommendations from this research:

1) Rather than concentrating efforts on the management of specific problematic behaviors in schools and treatment of serious mental health conditions, this study shows that preventive mental health education targeting a larger youth group can be a more potent tool in empowering the youth to become advocates for mental health, thereby promoting well-being and deterring the development of mental disorders.

2) A pre-evaluation instrument to be administered before the implementation of the program whose result will be compared with the evaluation after the program implementation must be conducted.

3) Refining the evaluation tool used in this study can help in further objectifying the results.

4) Efforts to obtain a larger sample can also help in generalizing the results obtained from this study.

5) Replicating the conduct of the evaluation of this program over a period of four consecutive years to determine stability of obtained results is likewise recommended.

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