

# Implementation strategy for the school-based sex education program Long Live Love

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## ***Valorization***



## VALORIZATION

The social value and relevance of this dissertation is ultimately to contribute to sexual health promotion of the youth in the Netherlands and internationally. The Netherlands is well known for good quality sex education in schools, and compared to other countries, has lower rates of teen pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STI's). The youth in the Netherlands, however, still face numerous challenges when it comes to sexual health, including undesired sexual interactions, sexual violence, unsafe online interactions and unsafe sex resulting in unwanted teen pregnancies and STI's. The resulting physical, mental, financial and social consequences are difficult for the individual and put a strain on their environment and society at large. Prevention is essential, not only for the quality of life of the youth, but also to minimize the costs and social burden for the society, that are associated with these sexual health issues.

In order to bring about behavioral change and ultimately enhance sexual health among youth, not only is a qualitatively sound and effective program required but successful implementation of the program is also necessary to ensure the program is used and reaches the target group to have impact. Schools provide the ideal setting to reach adolescents with health promotion initiatives and are, next to parents, one of the most important sources of information for the youth on sexual health. The reach and implementation of school-based sex education programs in particular, however, is not optimal, partly due to sexuality being considered a challenging subject by most schools. The extent to which a program is delivered (completeness), however, and the degree to which it is implemented as intended by program developers (fidelity), are especially important for program effectiveness. Non-used health programs are not only a waste of money but also make positive results less likely to be achieved.

In this dissertation, the implementation of the school-based sex education program, Long Live Love (LLL), is central, with a special focus on Web-based coaching to promote the implementation quality of LLL by teachers. The research presented in this dissertation provides insight in factors influencing the implementation process of LLL, and indicated a need to develop different tools to promote each stage of the implementation process, tailored to determinants of that stage. Interpersonal contact, mass media and online approaches were used to address each stage. The implementation strategy was made relevant for experienced and less experienced teachers as well as for innovators and laggards. The means by which the most innovative component of the implementation strategy, namely Web-based e-coaching, was developed, and the outcomes of the evaluation, provide inspiring insights for online means of bringing about behavioral

change in teacher implementation. This is especially relevant in a world of increasing digital technologies, bringing exciting opportunities for innovative ways of teaching and learning.

Although this research was conducted in the Dutch context, the means by which the implementation strategy was developed and the lessons learned are relevant for other contexts and countries. This dissertation highlights the importance of a systematic approach to developing an implementation strategy, in close collaboration with those who deliver the program (teachers) and those who support the delivery of the implementation strategy (Municipal Health Service professionals). This dissertation further exemplifies implementation as a dynamic process: continuous changes within organizations and in the environmental context call for continuous adaptations of the implementation strategy and the LLL program itself to actuality, changing circumstances, the needs and desires of program users and implementers and to the intervention context in order to ensure its continuation. Program developers not only need to anticipate for program implementation during program development but also need to intervene actively in the implementation process.

Successful implementation of school-based sex education programs can be achieved by putting different pieces of the puzzle together:

- a) A well-developed program as a tool, that is compatible with the working methods and preferences of teachers and students;
- b) Support in creating the prerequisite conditions to effectively deliver sex education generally, such as creating a safe classroom environment;
- c) Support in delivering the program with completeness and fidelity, in addition to;
- d) Considering environmental factors that may influence the implementation process such as school-management support, policies and resources. Although absolute completeness and fidelity of school-based (sex) education programs may seem unrealistic due to frequent and sometimes inevitable adaptations, teachers need to be supported regardless, in delivering programs with as much completeness and fidelity as possible, with guidance in delivering principle program components to ensure program effectiveness is preserved. A balance in accommodating teachers and preserving completeness and fidelity is thus required.

Long Live Love is a successful, effective, evidence-based program which is well appreciated by teachers and their students. This dissertation encourages continued investment in national and international implementation of LLL. It also calls for the formation of policies and laws that support the integration and structural embedment of sex education in schools and that reflect the importance that society ought to place on the sexual health of our youth.

This implementation strategy is not only relevant for the youth, teachers, schools and Municipal Health Services, but also for policy makers and the Ministries of Health and Education: without systematically developed programs and sustainable implementation, the impact of public health activities will not reach their optimal potential. Nationally and world-wide, the youth have the right to appropriate and thorough sex education. A sexually healthy and empowered youth is a happy one who can perform better in school, with fewer drop-outs and contribute meaningfully to society. Successful implementation of systematically developed qualitatively sound sexual health promotion programs is an important means of prevention and contribution to the positive sexual health of the youth, accompanied by the provision of services, policies, and laws that enable, facilitate, reinforce and promote positive sexual health behaviors in the youth and have positive public health impact.