

Me and My New World

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VALORIZATION

Valorization

This valorization chapter will expand on the social and economic value of the findings presented in this dissertation. First, it will highlight the relevance of the findings for the *target group*, to emphasize the potentialities of the research intervention and its implications for enhancing adolescents' decision-making capacity in personal relationships. Second, our findings describe the extent to which the findings contribute to the promotion of equal relationships among women and men in a conservative *context* and which goes beyond the 'girl schooling' traditional agenda. Third, the chapter expands on the implications of Social Emotional Learning (SEL), as an innovative *approach*, towards not only empowerment and a holistic development of adolescents, but also as a tool that ultimately could help reduce teenage pregnancies – and its economic burden – and health risks of the adolescents, their families, and their communities. For all three of these issues it is recommended that considerations are guided by an evidence-based protocol such as Intervention Mapping (IM; Bartholomew Eldredge et al., 2016).

The target group

Adolescents in Panama were the main target group of this dissertation. The findings presented in this study are highly relevant for this group in particular: Alarming levels of teenage pregnancies, and an increase of HIV infections and (sexual) violence have become imminent barriers for adolescents' health, well-being, and achievement of their potential in life. Therefore, in the absence of comprehensive sexual education, to change the way boys and girls, women and men relate to each other requires a new set of inner capacities which could support them to make better decisions in their personal relationships, whether at home, with (girl-boy)friends, or in school.

Valorization

Therefore, educational transformations are needed, to provide these young people with capacities such as self- concept, self-esteem, critical thinking, emotion management, communication, negotiation, and problem-solving skills. This has been established in research, but was also explicitly recognized by all stakeholder participants in this research project. The stakeholders considered such competences as crucial to adolescent empowerment and development.

Furthermore, the findings of this research project, and the evaluation of the intervention program in particular, highlighted the possibilities to create new spaces where students can explore new ways of thinking, their identities formation, factors influencing their behaviors as boys or girls. Most importantly, these capacities could allow a palette of new behavioral choices and positive decisions, which in turn could enhance their lives, instead of limiting their potential, education and ultimately their quality of life. Educational approaches focusing on the social emotional development of children and young people could bridge the gap between interventions merely focusing on the biological aspects of reproduction – the current situation in Panamanian secondary education – and a broader spectrum of activities to address barriers and facilitating factors that influence adolescents' behavior in their relationships. Specifically, we argue that the combination of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and the promotion of gender equality behavior among boys and girls could thus represent an educational alternative. In this line, the findings also provide insights about the process of adolescents' *agency* development in a conservative and developing context like Panama.

The context

Given the need to promote adolescents' healthier behaviors, the findings of this research project contribute to knowledge about achieving (equality) educational goals, in particular for conservative contexts like Panama. Gender equality educational strategies such as the MANW program offer a methodology that could encourage deeper transformation towards gender equal behavior, as it is based on scientific evidence of SEL and contextualized gender equality promotion strategies. Likewise, the findings provide a broader alternative to the 'girls schooling' approach, which for decades has promoted more girls accessing schools as a way to promote gender equity and equality, but has lacked extensive strategies to eradicate gender inequalities in schools and society at large. Importantly, our findings enhance understanding of the cultural transferability of SEL, in this case to a developing country, and as an educational alternative in the absence of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) in a conservative context.

Furthermore, the findings of this research highlight the importance of utilizing the capabilities approach perspective. This approach enhances our understanding of which capacities are required by adolescents and young people in assessing their levels of agency and self-efficacy towards making better decisions in personal relationships. At the same time, these influence their *beings and doings* (what they are able to do in their own circumstances and their values and priorities) to increase their perspectives of a holistic human development and well-being.

Valorization

The approach

A wealth of scientific evidence has shown the multiple positive outcomes of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) interventions towards the promotion of healthy behaviors and subjective well-being among children and young people. The fact that most results of these interventions have been observed in developed countries, the findings presented in this dissertation are novel, since they highlight the importance of using educational alternatives as SEL to approach the multiple health risks and challenges faced by adolescents in developing countries. Especially when even the terms ‘gender equality’ or ‘sexuality of adolescents’ represent conflictive and taboo topics in conservative contexts, nuanced and innovative approaches are required. The combination of different disciplines during this research project, which included perspectives from behavioral sciences (SEL, socio-cognitive theoretical-based evidence), development studies (Gender and the Capability Approach / Evolving capabilities of children and young people), facilitated the development of the innovative intervention. These perspectives and evidence-based practices were guided through a systemic Intervention Mapping Approach (IM), and as such allowed us a wider innovative perspective to approach and encourage behavioral changes.