Promoting character strengths through the Growing up Strong Program: The students' perspective

Programa Creciendo Fuertes para la promoción de fortalezas del carácter: una mirada desde sus estudiantes

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to report on levels of satisfaction, applicability and subjective experience in relation to the Growing Up Strong Program for secondary school students from the perspective of its users. The objectives of the research were to assess the level of satisfaction of student users with the Growing Up Strong Program; to explore the applicability of the learning generated by the program according to its participants; and to learn about their subjective experience of applying the character strengths promoted by the program. The study consisted of a cross-sectional descriptive survey of 590 secondary school students from seven different schools, using a validated data collection instrument. The respondents reported good levels of satisfaction with the Growing Up Strong Program and confirmed the applicability of the learning received in relation to self-regulation, social intelligence, gratitude, courage and open-mindedness in intrapersonal and interpersonal contexts. The results of the study confirm positive levels of user satisfaction, applicability and subjective experiences based on the lessons in positive psychology promoted by the program.

Keywords: character strengths; programs; evaluation; students

Resumen

El propósito de este artículo es comunicar la satisfacción, aplicabilidad y experiencia subjetiva del Programa Creciendo Fuertes desde la mirada de sus usuarios estudiantes de secundaria. Se consideraron los siguientes objetivos de investigación: caracterizar el nivel de la satisfacción de los estudiantes usuarios con respecto al Programa Creciendo Fuertes; explorar la aplicabilidad de los aprendizajes generados según los estudiantes usuarios del mismo; conocer la experiencia subjetiva de los estudiantes con respecto a las fortalezas del carácter promovidas en la forma como reportan haberla aplicado. A nivel metodológico la investigación se encuadra en un estudio descriptivo bajo diseño transversal, con una muestra de 590

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usuarios estudiantes de secundaria de siete instituciones educativas, se implementó un instrumento de recolección de datos con adecuada evidencia de confiabilidad. Como resultados se tienen: adecuados niveles de satisfacción con el Programa Creciendo Fuertes, aplicabilidad de los aprendizajes de las fortalezas del carácter de la autorregulación, inteligencia social, gratitud, valentía y apertura mental en contextos intrapersonal e interpersonal. Se concluye que el programa Creciendo Fuertes muestra evidencias de satisfacción, aplicabilidad y reporte de experiencias subjetivas basadas en los aprendizajes promovidos desde la psicología positiva.

Palabras clave: fortalezas del carácter; programas; evaluación; estudiantes

Positive psychology, known as the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the optimal functioning of people, groups and institutions (Gable & Haidt, 2015), aims to generate a change in psychological research by expanding its application, in not only repairing the worst things in life, but also building better qualities in people (Seligman, 2002). Positive Psychology seeks to complement the traditional forms of psychology, marking its interest in the development of the positive aspects in people's lives (Park, Peterson & Sun, 2013).

In the same way, among the most relevant contributions studied in positive psychology are the Strengths of Character, that is, the classification of the human virtues expressed in strengths, presented in 2004 by Peterson & Seligman, as a product of research in personality traits widely valued in multiple cultures, texts of several types and by writers. The research of these authors provided a list of twenty-four strengths organized into six virtues (see Table 1). Character strengths are described as aspects of the personality that are morally valued, constituting part of the human virtues (Park & Peterson, 2009; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Cultivating character strengths promotes personal development through people's own talents. The pursuit and identification of one's own strengths enables the development of consistent and focused behaviors, allowing people to achieve goals of their interest (Anderson, 2005). These considerations highlight the importance of promoting strengths at an early age.

In that regard, several empirical investigations report that cultivating the character strengths promotes a healthy development on a general level (Blanca, Ferragut, Ortiz-Tallo & Bendayan, 2018; Martínez-Marti & Ruch, 2017; Petkari & Ortiz-Tallo, 2018). They are related to life satisfaction and the perception of happiness (Park & Peterson, 2009; Peterson, Ruch, Beermann, Park & Seligman, 2007). On the other hand, systematic reviews in the general population refer that higher scores in strengths are related to a lower tendency to present problems associated with depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and others (Park, 2004; Ovejero, Cardenal & Ortiz-Tallo, 2016). In the case of teenagers, studies report the presence of a relationship between strengths and happiness and mental health (Reyes & Ferragut, 2016), positive relationships with well-being and the opposite with psychopathology (Giménez, 2010) as well as future well-being (Gillham et al., 2011).

In the last few years, Positive Psychology has focused on research into the positive aspects of people as well as the development of intervention programs that encourage the improvement of these aspects (Salanova & Llorens, 2016), that is, scientific efforts in the promotion of the virtues and character strengths. In this case, positive psychology interventions are intentional activities that aim to build strengths by cultivating positive feelings, behaviors or cognitions (Proctor & Linley, 2013).

In the educational context, positive interventions are receiving more attention, defined as initiatives that are explicitly intended to improve well-being or build skills within the school context, focusing on the development of abilities and strengths (Green & Norrish, 2013). These interventions emphasize the role of schools in preventing and promoting the mental health and well-being of the students (Proctor & Linley, 2013), playing a relevant role not only in reducing negative aspects in the student's life, but also in building resources that mitigate the negative effects of adversity (Park et al., 2013).

Concerning character strengths-based intervention programs, in 2011 the program "Strengths Gym" was presented, designed for the performance of exercises based on character strengths appropriate for each age. All

this through classroom activities, discussions, stories and real world activities, where students could apply the concepts and skills in their own lives. The results on the application of this program report promising results in increasing adolescent well-being and life satisfaction (Proctor et al., 2011; Proctor et al., 2015).

Table 1

List of twenty-four strengths

Virtue	Strengths
Wisdom and Knowledge	1. Creativity: thinking of novel and productive ways to do things 2. Curiosity: taking an interest in all of ongoing experience 3. Open-mindedness: thinking things through and examining them from all sides 4. Love of learning: mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge 5. Perspective: being able to provide wise counsel to others
Courage	6. Honesty: speaking the truth and presenting oneself in a genuine way 7. Bravery: not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain 8. Persistence: finishing what one starts 9. Zest: approaching life with excitement and energy
Humanity	10. Kindness: doing favors and good deeds for others 11. Love: valuing close relations with others 12. Social intelligence: being aware of the motives and feelings of self and others
Justice	13. Fairness: treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice 14. Leadership: organizing group activities and seeing that they happen 15. Teamwork: working well as member of a group or team
Temperance	16. Forgiveness: forgiving those who have done wrong 17. Modesty: letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves 18. Prudence: being careful about one's choices; not saying or doing things that might later be regretted 19. Self-regulation: Regulating what one feels and does
Transcendence	20. Appreciation of beauty and excellence: noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in all domains of life 21. Gratitude: being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen 22. Hope: expecting the best and working to achieve it 23. Humor: liking to laugh and joke; bringing smiles to other people 24. Religiousness: having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of life

Note: Taken from Park & Peterson (2009).

In 2014 a study carried out in an Australian school was presented with the purpose of describing the benefits of a holistic strengths-based approach to improve student well-being. The strengths were incorporated into the classes, curriculum, sports training, training of students in school leadership and tutoring. Benefits were reported in the learning progress and well-being of young students (White & Waters, 2015).

A study is presented in 2015 to examine the effect of a classroom-based strengths intervention on class cohesion, relationships, engagement and well-being, based on the implementation of a six-session program with 9-12-year-old students (N = 193). It is reported that students learned to recognize character strengths by implementing trait-specific goals. In addition, participants in the intervention group scored significantly higher on class cohesion and relatedness need satisfaction, and also reported higher levels of positive affect, classroom participation, autonomy, need for satisfaction, and strengths use (Quinlan, Swain, Cameron, & Vella-Brodrick, 2015).

In synthesis, the background described above demonstrates the importance of positive interventions on adolescent's character strengths - within the school context - thanks to their contributions in aspects such as well-being, satisfaction, learning, classroom participation, autonomy, and others. It is worth noting that these interventions were created to describe the effectiveness of the programs designed, based on their ability to produce positive changes in their participants. However, they do not consider aspects of participants' satisfaction based on the learning and subjective experiences produced as a result of the application of these programs.

From that place, the authors of this research understand the inclusion of the participants' satisfaction in psychological interventions. Now, the evaluation of satisfaction is considered as a dimension of the quality of the interventions, related to specific aspects of the participants' experience, especially in the fulfillment of their expectations about the intervention and personal interaction (Salinas & González, 2006)

Therefore, the evaluation of the quality dimensions of research with interventions should be considered as a relevant aspect for the conduct of studies of high relevance (Jitendra, Burgess & Gajria, 2011). In this regard, the justification for this research lies in the development of studies that consider not only the evaluation of the effectiveness of psychological intervention programs for students, but also the development of knowledge about the perception of quality of their own users. Likewise, the social contribution of this study lies in the expansion of knowledge about how the benefits of psychological intervention programs are applied to the everyday life experiences of its participants.

Furthermore, this study seeks to contribute to the field of educational research from the perspectives of positive psychology applied to education, understood as a range of efforts focused on emotional, character and well-being education. In this respect, Cobo & Garcia (2017) explain that positive education is focused on applying the advances of positive psychology in the educational context, seeking the personal growth of students, but at the same time, of the entire educational community. Indeed, positive education proposes the teaching of well-being through the recognition, identification and implementation of the character strengths as one of the primary strategies that should be used to make viable the integral development of students. Simultaneously, this research seeks to contribute in contextualizing elements of psychological theories in local educational spaces that in turn can be operationalized in systematic psychoeducational efforts in the form of workshops or training programs that could enhance school achievement.

From the above, it is clear that the purpose of this study is to evaluate the level of satisfaction, applicability and subjective experience of the Growing Up Strong program from the perspective of secondary school student users. The following specific objectives were considered: 1) to characterize the level of satisfaction of student users regarding the Growing Up Strong Program; 2) to explore the applicability of the learning generated according to student users in the Growing Up Strong Program; and, 3) to learn about the subjective experience of student users of the Growing Up Strong Program regarding the character strengths promoted in the way they report having applied it.

Brief description of the growing up strong program

Garcia, Soler & Achard (2017) presented the Growing Up Strong Program as an instance of training through workshops based on the promotion of the character strengths classified under the human virtues proposed by Peterson & Seligman (2004), with the purpose of developing a "healthy and strong character" in students through the development of the strengths described in Table 1. In this regard, the program is based on the ideas held by various authors of Positive Psychology as a result of scientific research about what constitutes the "good character".

Consequently, the purpose of the Growing Up Strong Program is to help build good character through the identification, recognition, implementation and internalization of the character strengths that each student presents. In fact, instruments with adequate perception in the scientific literature are used to allow students to know their top five character strengths, in order to implement their use in the daily practice. This step is prior to the beginning of the Growing Up Strong workshops program, the VIA (Virtues in Action) Survey of Character Strengths from the University of Pennsylvania is applied to all students, so that each one discovers their top 5 strengths.

On the operational level, the program is designed for the three years of the Basic Cycle of Secondary Education, consequently the 24 strengths are divided into three academic years given the developmental characteristics and interests of the students, which in an ideal case the age corresponds to adolescence. The program is designed under experiential workshop modalities facilitated by two permanent instructors, who work with the same group throughout the year, and who have been previously trained in positive psychology.

The Growing Up Strong Program is run every two weeks, and each workshop lasts one module - two hours- (approximately eighty minutes). Specifically, it is held in two phases: a) a strength workshop, and 15 days later, b) a strength support workshop. Hence, for each month there are two sessions of workshops with the students.

The year begins with a first workshop called ¨I know myself¨ of an introductory nature, which aims to reflect on the different dimensions of the human being and the responsibility that each person has in directing his or her own life towards the full development of each of these dimensions to achieve fulfillment. From there, the workshops related to the set of strengths selected for each level begin. The organization of the strengths in the program is: For 1st year: Self-regulation, Curiosity, Love of Learning, Social Intelligence, Bravery, Persistence, Humor, and Gratitude; For 2nd year: Teamwork, Kindness, Zest, Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence, Prudence, Modesty, Creativity, and Optimism; For 3rd year: Integrity, Perspective, Open-mindedness, Love, Leadership, Sense of Justice, Forgiveness, and Spirituality.

On a didactic level, the purpose is to present in every workshop the studied strength in a clear, concrete and understandable way according to the age of the students. This is achieved through explanations, examples and dynamic games. Once the students' understanding of the strength has been achieved, the participants proceed to reflect on the benefits of incorporating the daily practice of the strength. They are invited to carry out concrete actions, and set concrete and possible goals, so that the users can take as a homework voluntary purposes as well as write down their objectives, goals and voluntary actions in the activity booklet given to them at the beginning of the program. In summary, the final purpose of the Growing Up Strong Program workshops is the practice of actions by the students, which through gradual practice will be transformed into operational habits suitable for their integral development. Now, in the second phase of the month, called ¨Support workshop¨, a follow up on these purposes will be done, and also a discussion of the benefits of the strength.

Continuing with the description of the Growing Up Strong Program presented by García et al. (2017), in regard to the places used for the workshops, work is done both in classrooms and in multipurpose rooms. The latter encourage work in the workshop mode, allowing the movement of furniture. It is necessary for the workshops to have a screen set up at the front of the room, and if this is not available, the workshop staff will take care of carrying the necessary material (projector, etc.). The workshops are complemented by a Power Point presentation, taking into consideration the ages of the participants and therefore the type of resources to be used to facilitate attention. Some examples are: visual, audiovisual, audible and electronic resources. The different learning styles are considered when planning the workshop and its presentation, too. For this reason, the different workshops include activities that seek to satisfy the different learning styles. When thinking about a workshop, some film or song extracts are also considered, aiming at the students' interests.

As mentioned above, each student is given a booklet at the beginning of the year with activities related to the strengths that will be worked on during the year, and they can also make notes in it. The use of this booklet has several functions, among which are: setting new goals, expressing emotions and feelings, capturing collaborative ideas, developing creativity, and reinforcing concepts.

It is important to highlight that most of the booklet records will remain at an individual level, unless the student decides to share one voluntarily. The booklet remains at the educational institution because students must take responsibility for it and it is also a way to ensure that they will attend the next meeting with that material. Activities that are also in the booklets may include: crossword puzzles, drawing, writing or creation spaces, incomplete definitions, and more.

At the beginning of each workshop of the Growing Up Strong Program, the previous knowledge that the students have about the strength is taken as a starting point. From that point and through different dynamics, didactic efforts are made so that the students build their own knowledge of the strength. Likewise, the students are encouraged to get involved in the subject, using examples that are related to their interests and concerns and that in some way can be projected into a personal situation where the strength in question comes into play. Contextualized learning is also sought so that they have a true apprehension of the strength. The proposed

activities are meant to connect what they have learned to their experiences in daily life, in order to achieve a meaningful learning.

In terms of organizational strategies, different types of grouping are used. Although in many cases group work is preferred because it offers multiple advantages as well as opportunities to begin to practice strengths. Many of the proposed dynamics also require work in collaborative contexts. Sometimes the task involves individual reflection. In these instances, participants are given the choice of whether or not to share their ideas since many times the topics discussed can be moving or of high subjective value to some.

It is worth adding that at the beginning of each workshop a brief three-minute mindfulness exercise is carried out to achieve full awareness of the here and no. Also, to allow students to focus only on the topic at hand. The mindfulness exercise is emphasized in each workshop and they are encouraged to use the mindfulness techniques in their daily lives for situations of lack of control, stress, lack of concentration, etc.

The Growing Up Strong program has been applied in different educational institutions at secondary level in the Oriental Republic of Uruguay, both in its capital Montevideo and in regions of the inner country from 2014 to nowadays. On the other hand, the program has shown adequate evidence of effectiveness on the statistically significant increase in psychological well-being and generalized self-efficacy before and after the program in first year students (see García-Alvarez, Soler & Cobo-Rendón, 2018).

Methods

Participants

Regarding the group of individuals participating in the study, a directed non-probabilistic sample was taken Hernández, Fernández & Baptista (2014), due to the fact that the inclusion criteria for the sampling was based on being a student user of the Growing Up Strong Program, that is, being a student of secondary education. Specifically, of the basic cycle of lower secondary education that corresponds to the first, second and third year, which ideally corresponds to the ages of early adolescence. Therefore, there are 590 users from seven educational institutions between 2016 and 2017, 305 males (51%) and 285 females (49%). In terms of age: 12 years old (109 subjects, 19%), 13 years old (189 subjects, 32%), 14 years old (204 subjects, 35%), 15 years old (88 subjects, 14%), with an average age of 13.45. According to the year of study, there are: 229 participants in first year (39%), 227 in second year (39%) and 134 in third year (22%).

Instruments

To fulfill the objectives of measuring the variables of satisfaction and applicability of the learning generated in the framework of the implementation of the Growing Up Strong Program, a specific questionnaire was developed for the student users, designed in two parts. The first one consists of 12 items of 5 answer options of Likert scale type (1= totally disagree to 5= totally agree). Its reliability level was calculated using the internal consistency index α=.908. The second part was designed to learn about the subjective experience of students concerning how they have applied the learning generated during the course of the program in their lives. Two open-ended questions were asked: What strengths learned in these workshops have you applied in your life? and How have you applied any of the strengths learned in these workshops in your life? A data collection sheet was developed consisting of: informed consent, socio-demographic data, and a questionnaire.

Procedure

For the data collection, the necessary steps were taken with the educational institutions for their authorization and management of informed consents, which included objectives and an explanation of the study to be signed by the parents of the students, users of the program. The principles of anonymity, confidentiality and the use of the data for scientific purposes and for the improvement of the program as a feedback of the process were protected. Once all the ethical procedures had been carried out, data was collected during the last session of the Growing Up Strong Program in each school year using the questionnaire designed

for that purpose, and with the guidance of the workshop leaders themselves. On the other hand, the authors announce that there is no conflict of interests.

Data analysis

The data collected through the instrument described above was transcribed into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 18 (PASW, formerly SPSS 18). Exploratory data analysis was performed, as well as descriptive statistics of the variables in study, then goodness-of-fit tests were performed through Kolmogorov-Smirnov with Lilliefors' significance correction to know their distribution. These results indicated non-normal distribution ($p <$ to 0.05), subsequently the use of non-parametric inferential statistics (Saldaña, 2016) was suggested, namely: Mann Whitney U-test and Kruskal-Wallis test.

Concerning the data related to the open questions, all the answers were transcribed for further analysis. The technique of categorical content analysis was used, organizing the information by using previously established categories, according to Peterson & Seligman's (2004) theory of Virtues and Strengths of Character. In this case, the text was divided into units that allowed them to be included in quantitative categories (strengths, virtues, area of application in life), allowing a thematic analysis to be made (Andréu, 2002).

After the transcription, the information was segmented to be included in the different information units related to the categories defined above. The results present the number of references to the strengths used by the youth, followed by the verbalizations and experiences presented through the different answers based on the life-areas where they reported applying the strengths.

Results and discussion

In accordance with the research objectives related to: characterizing the level of satisfaction of the student users with the Growing Up Strong Program, the mode values that oscillate between 4 and 5 as well as means higher than 3.00. Data that can be interpreted as an adequate level in items oriented to evaluate the satisfaction with the workshops, teaching performance of the workshop participants, content and learning obtained, didactic resources and educational materials, motivation to keep attending as well as to consider the workshops as reflective and interesting spaces. Hence, an adequate level of satisfaction with the learning of the character strengths in the Growing Up Strong program is reported. In terms of gender, no significant differences were found in the items that evaluated satisfaction with the Growing Up Strong Program using the U Mann Whitney test. At a school year level, significant differences were found in the items ¨I would like to continue attending the workshops¨ ($\chi^2(1) = 28,999$, $p < .05$), and ¨I think that the workshop facilitators do a good job in their explanations ¨ ($\chi^2(1) = 10,054$, $p < .05$), on a decreasing order of first, second and third year respectively.

As for the research objective of exploring the applicability of the learning achieved by the student users of the Growing Up Strong Program. First, quantitative results are presented regarding the perception of students regarding the applicability of the character strengths studied and the learning achieved. These are: mode, mean and percentages statistics that refer to the fact that they have been able to apply the character strengths in their daily lives. They consider that the workshops have been useful in getting to know themselves better as well as in getting along better with others, knowing their personal resources in order to know what they can do, and they even perceive positive changes in their way of thinking after the workshops. Although, item 5 referred to ¨I have been able to apply in my life the strengths that I have learned in the workshops¨ showed the lowest mode. Regarding gender, significant differences were found in the item that refers to: ¨I think that the workshops have been useful to know myself better¨ ($z = -2,770$, $p < .05$). As for the school year, significant differences were found in the item ¨I think that the workshops have helped me to get to know myself better and to know what I can do¨ ($\chi^2(1) = 14,354$, $p < .05$), on a decreasing order of first, second and third year respectively.

Continuing with the idea of going deeper into the perception of applicability of the learning achieved, according to the student users of the Growing Up Strong Program, the results related to the research objective of (3) knowing the subjective experience of the Growing Up Strong program student users regarding the

character strengths promoted in the way they report having applied it are presented. The results are taken from the answers to the open-ended questions of What strengths learned in these workshops have you applied in your life?, and How have you applied any of the strengths learned in these workshops in your life? The descriptive analysis of the participants' responses enabled the categorization of information according to the strengths and virtues presented in the workshops. Table 2 describes the references presented in the participants' responses based on which strengths grouped under the corresponding virtues they have applied most in their lives.

Considering the responses of the Growing Up Strong Program participants, the character strengths most used by the youth after the workshops were: the strength of self-regulation, described in impulse control, feelings and behaviors (e.g. S86 "I learned to control myself more, also not to despair and to know how to wait"; S50 "I feel that I can control myself more by not talking..."; S62 "After the self-regulation workshop I stopped fighting with my brother"; S119 "Now I think before I act"; S207 "I have avoided several fights and conflicts by reflecting and thinking about my actions"). Followed by social intelligence, related to the awareness of one's own emotions and those of others, the development of empathy and other social skills (e.g. S1 "It helped me in my relationship with others, in dealing with them"; S39 "Greeting people, trying to be more sociable"; S100 "I learned to understand people, to help them)

The third strength most applied by the youth was gratitude, linked to being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen, (e.g. S34 "When someone is good to me I give thanks...", S45 "It also helped me value more the things I have because everything that life gives us is important"). The fourth most reported strength was bravery, highlighted as the ability to stand up for the point of view that the person feels is right and not to be intimidated by threats, change, difficulty or pain (e.g. S40 "I applied bravery to face a problem..."; S73 "I applied bravery because I encouraged myself to do things I didn't do before and to say no to what is bad for me"; S203 "In my life I learned to be brave, to fight for what I want...")

The fifth most reported strength was open-mindedness, which relates to the willingness to change one's ideas based on new evidence, to think about things and to examine their meanings and implications (e.g. S212 "My way of thinking changed a bit on some things"; S215 "Open-mindedness, I applied it when I had to listen to others"). Based on these results, the development of the strengths related to the virtues of wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity and love, temperance and transcendence can be deduced. Excepting the virtue of justice, which did not provide any data to support its development. In terms of percentage, the most developed virtues are Temperance, which includes strengths that protect against excesses, and Humanity, which is linked to interpersonal strengths involving friendship, affection and relationships with others (see Table 2). Similarly, it is important to note that there were very few reports on the strengths of creativity, love of knowledge, teamwork and love, and no reports on the use of the strengths of fairness, leadership, appreciation of beauty and religiousness.

In general, the participating students highlight two macro categories that describe the aspects of their lives where they use the strengths, these are the social and personal areas. According to the application of strengths in the social area of the students, those who participated in the Growing Up Strong Program workshops proposed three contexts where they apply the strengths in this area, that is, in the relationship with their peers, with members of their community, and with their family. On the whole, they report that the strengths learned have allowed them to interact better with their peers, creating bonds of friendship, support during difficulties, and better relationships in daily life (e.g., S223 "I began to get along better with others and to help when others need it"; S358 "I have applied them to the topics of bullying).

These benefits in social relationships with their peers are also reported when interacting with other people in their community, allowing them to behave better socially after the experience in the workshops. This includes using the rules of courtesy (greeting, giving thanks, asking politely), being kind and supportive of others as well as avoiding conflicts with people of their age and older (e.g. S342 "Give thanks, ask for permission and help others"; S368 "I behave better with people I do not know well"; S387 "I started greeting my neighbor"; S393 "... I give the seat on the bus..."; S437 "I applied being nice to the people at the bus stop";

S326 "I respect adults"). Likewise, some of the reports are more linked to environmental conservation issues (e.g., S289 "Don't throw trash on the ground"; S290 "It doesn't matter if my neighbors don't sweep and clean the sidewalk, I do it anyway"; S386 "Now I save the tickets and throw them in the garbage"; S389 "I don't throw any more papers on the street").

Table 2

Reference of the character strengths applied by the participants

Strengths	Amount	Percentage	Virtue	Amount	Percentage
Creativity	1	0.18			
Curiosity	0	0			
Open-mindedness	22	3.93	Wisdom and Knowledge	26	4.64
Love of learning	1	0.18			
Perspective	2	0.36			
Bravery	28	5			
Persistence	14	2.5	Courage	50	0.27
Honesty	7	1.25			
Zest	1	0.18			
Love	2	0.36			
Kindness	20	3.57	Humanity	115	20.54
Social intelligence	93	16.61			
Teamwork	5	0.89			
Fairness	0	0	Justice	5	0.89
Leadership	0	0			
Forgiveness	13	2.32			
Modesty	3	0.54	Temperance	182	32.50
Prudence	3	0.54			
Self-regulation	163	29.11			
Appreciation of beauty and excellence	0	0			
Gratitude	40	7.14			
Hope	13	2.32	Transcendence	57	10.18
Humor	4	0.71			
Religiousness	0	0			
Did not answered	125	22.32			
Total	560	100			

In the area of family relations, the use of strengths to improve relationships with close relatives such as parents or siblings and with members of the extended family (grandparents, cousins) is reported, highlighting behaviors that seek to improve these relationships (e.g. S61 "It has helped me to get along better with my family"; S112 "I help more at home and relate better with my relatives"; S32 "With my mother because when I do things wrong I tell her the truth, and I used to lie to her"). Proactivity is shown in carrying out activities that involve collaborating at home (S197 "...helping my mother in everything..."; S404 "I help feed the dog, I make the bed..."), in reducing conflicts between siblings (e.g. S62 "After the self-regulation workshop I stopped fighting with my brother") and in being more respectful with the family members (S107 "I applied the strengths to get along better with my cousins"; S349 "I listened respectfully to my grandfather's anecdotes...").

On a personal level, participants reported the application of strengths in different approaches, mainly in the regulation of emotions and impulses (S26 "I learned to control myself and apply the strengths in my life"; S70 "...I have learned not to be so shy"; S186 "I am applying these strengths in my daily life and avoiding fights"; S291 "Take care of my expenses"; S319 "...stop using violence"; S282 "Be able to express with words instead of hurting myself"). In the initiative and pursuit of goals (e.g. S4 "perseverance, keep trying until I succeed"; S73 "I applied courage because I encouraged myself to do things I did not do before...": S155 "It taught me to pursue my dreams and goals...": S205 "I do not give up easily, I fight for what I want, that was what I learned from the workshops"). In the development of self-esteem and self-knowledge (e.g. S90 "... to see my talents"; S111 "Most importantly, to be myself and believe in myself") and as a relevant aspect for personal growth

(e.g. S126 "I improved my way of thinking and I have grown"; S149 "I changed my way of thinking, how I take things and how I react"; "S214 "I learned to ask for forgiveness").

Equally, there are statements associated with academic development (e.g. S47 "I applied a little more love for learning because now I want to learn more and more"; S80 "I made an effort in class to study"; S131 "optimism in study"; S296 "to participate in class"; S428 " during study I dare to ask something I don't understand") and in the use of protective factors that reduce risks (e.g. S143 "It helped me not to use drugs"; S132 "helped me say no to drugs"; S151 "I refused to use drugs"; S536 "I was offered smoking and beer and said no").

However, Rashid et al. (2013) explain that in the scientific literature there is a limited record of psychological interventions aimed at developing character strengths in a comprehensive manner in children and adolescents. There is a greater record of interventions aimed at promoting specific strengths, for example, interventions in gratitude, optimism and hope. Also, they cite the program ¨Strengths Gym¨ by Proctor et al. (2011) as a remarkable background that covers all strengths, but there is no information according to the evaluation from the perspective of the users, even though there is information on its effects on the well-being of participants compared to the control group.

The results found in this study are congruent with those reported by Rashid et al. (2013); this team designed three interventions focused on promoting character strengths in adolescent students called: Signature Strengths. The first intervention was carried out in students with an average age of 11.7 years, which consisted of 8 sessions on character strengths and a specific homework. At the end, the participants reported specific experiences in which they were able to apply their personal strengths, namely: social intelligence for issues related to bullying, expressions of gratitude in family relationships, self-regulation to avoid saying unpleasant things to friends and family, and other experiences. Similarly, in a second intervention carried out by the same researchers, it was found that the degree of enjoyment of the participants was related to how much they perceived they had learned from the same group.

In addition, some research backgrounds have shown that positive psychology interventions in educational contexts based on character strengths and virtues have had a positive impact in areas related to students' social domains, for example: Seligman et al. (2009), Rashid et al. (2013), Proctor (2013) as well as a strong relationship between character strengths and various life domains including personal, social, academic. In fact, character strengths appear to be a predictor of psychological well-being in children and adolescents (Howell, Keyes, & Passmore, 2013). Thus, in adolescence, character strengths have been associated with greater mental health and inversely with psychopathology, (Proctor, 2013; Shimai et al., 2006; Giménez, 2010; Proctor et al. 2011; Proctor, Tweed & Morris, 2016; Weber et al., 2013), considering the different correlates that students report having developed in different life domains from their subjective experience.

Findings on the report of the most developed strengths according to the subjective experience of students are congruent according to the developmental stage (Giménez, Vázquez & Hervás, 2010), since the virtue of humanity and love will allow them the developmental tasks related to autonomy and appropriate relationships with peers, which indeed tend to play an important role in identity formation as well as group topics, pointing out the importance of relationships or bonds for psychological well-being (Seligman, 2011; Ryff, 2014). In the same way, the strengths of the virtue of temperance would help adolescents to cope with the emotions they may experience in the relationships with their peers, their first affective experiences and of course the processes associated with identity formation. Also, in the educational domain self-regulation could help them in their academic tasks. Continuing with the third and most developed virtue, there is transcendence with the strength of gratitude that will have implications in their social and personal areas, such as improving relationships and being grateful for every good thing that comes to them over those that do not.

Continuing with the characteristics of the stages of adolescence, it is expected that the virtue of justice is the least developed in this study, these strengths indicate concern for the common good. Giménez et al. (2010) report that there has been a tendency towards low associationism in adolescents. The same occurs with the virtue of wisdom and knowledge, even though adolescents present cognitive characteristics that allow them to

experience this group of strengths. It seems that in this stage, their social-emotional characteristics make them interested in non-school subjects, which could influence their motivations. Note that open-mindedness was the most reported strength.

Conclusions

According to the research objectives proposed, it is concluded: adequate satisfaction of the student users with the Growing Up Strong Program; applicability of the learning generated in the Growing Up Strong Program framework, specifically they report to have applied the strengths of self-regulation, social intelligence, gratitude, bravery and open-mindedness. Therefore, there is evidence of the development of at least five of the six character virtues proposed, namely: wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity and love, temperance and transcendence, except for the virtue of justice. Based on the subjective experience of the student users of the program, it is concluded that they report having applied them in the social area, specifically in the relationships with their peers, community members and family as well as in the personal area regarding emotional management, goals, self-esteem, self-knowledge and academic development.

The results presented in this article refer to the subjective experience of users of the Growing Up Strong Program about satisfaction, applicability and subjective experience. At this point, the authors share the conclusions made by Rashid et al. (2013) about good practices in the evaluation of psychoeducational interventions aimed at the development of character strengths, concerning the collection of other data that allows different types of triangulations; for example, collecting data about the perception of parents, teachers and even other students in the group about how they value the development of certain strengths - and of course - the correlates of their development, namely in specific behaviors in social, emotional, family or academic areas. Additionally, the idea that in future studies specific interviews can be conducted to learn more about the experience of character strengths in the group of youth is shared by the authors.

The team recommends that for future research designs aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of the Growing Up Strong Program on specific variables, psychopathological variables can be considered such as: anxiety, depressive symptoms, psychological distress as well as considering in the design variables more related to mental health: psychological well-being, satisfaction, psychological adjustment, self-esteem and self-efficacy. This recommendation is based on the fact that these efforts as psychoeducational interventions, such as the Growing Up Strong Program are based on the idea of promoting mental health and psychological well-being, but also as a prevention strategy or protective barriers against the various psychosocial risks that students will be exposed to throughout the life cycle (Bisquerra & Hernandez, 2017; Garcia & Serrano, 2017). It is believed that the results of the research lead to the conclusion that educational institutions could have a transcendental role as spaces that allow the promotion of character strengths for the well-being of students.

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