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Conception of Integrated High School Students in Rio de Janeiro (Brasil) about Character Strengths and Virtues

*Concepción sobre fortalezas y virtudes
de carácter de estudiantes de secundaria
integrada en Río de Janeiro (Brasil)*

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Abstract

Strengths and virtues are defined as positive characteristics that have moral value. The objective of this research was to investigate the conception of the students of Integrated Technical High School on strengths and virtues, if there is a difference between the conception between female and male students, how they understand the role of strengths and virtues in the choice and performance of the future technical profession and if the perception of the concept differs from the literature. Participated 21 students, 10 girls and 11 boys from the first year of different courses from a Brazilian public educational institution. Two focus groups were held on different dates. The results showed that conceptions brought by the students are related to characteristics responsible for promoting personal and academic goals for current and future situations to their professional career. The data obtained can contribute to actions, expanding the possibilities of applying positive psychology in the school context as a resource favorable to learning and the development of strengths and virtues. Prospective research can investigate the impact of strengths and virtues with constructions related to the concept investigated in the present study with the use of instruments that can collaborate with qualitative data presented.

Keywords: Character strengths, virtues, adolescents, integrated high school.



Resumen

Las fortalezas y virtudes se definen como características positivas que tienen un valor moral. El objetivo fue indagar la concepción de los estudiantes de la Secundaria Técnica Integrada sobre las fortalezas y virtudes, si existe diferencia entre la concepción entre los estudiantes femeninos y masculinos, cómo entienden el papel de las fortalezas y virtudes en la elección y desempeño de las futura profesión técnica y si la percepción del concepto difiere de la literatura. Participaron 21 alumnos, 10 niñas y 11 niños del primer año de

diferentes cursos de una institución educativa pública brasileña. Se realizaron dos grupos focales en fechas diferentes. Los resultados mostraron que las concepciones aportadas por los estudiantes están relacionadas con características responsables de promover metas personales y académicas para situaciones actuales y futuras de su carrera profesional. Los datos obtenidos pueden contribuir a acciones, ampliando las posibilidades de aplicar la psicología positiva en el contexto escolar como recurso favorable al aprendizaje y al desarrollo de fortalezas y virtudes. La investigación prospectiva puede investigar el impacto de las fortalezas y virtudes con construcciones relacionadas al concepto investigado en este estudio con el uso de instrumentos que puedan colaborar con los datos cualitativos presentados.

Palabras clave: Fortalezas, virtudes, adolescentes, bachillerato técnico integrado.

Introduction

Character strengths and virtues are one of the main themes studied in Positive Psychology and are defined as positive characteristics that are morally valued by society. These traits can be expressed through thoughts, feelings and behaviors and are recognized and maintained by human beings for generations, regardless of culture (Reppold et al., 2021; Wagner & Ruch, 2015).

Therefore, in the current scenario of studies, the development of character strengths contributes to health, adaptive processes and the evolution of people towards their greatest potential (Kabakci, 2019; Lottman et al., 2017; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Character strengths are essential for well-being in society as they can prevent problems arising from exposure to challenges and difficulties in everyday life (Park & Peterson, 2006; Toledo et al., 2021). Peterson and Seligman (2004) defined an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural list of 24 character strengths, valued in all contemporary societies. There is a strong convergence of definitions of these constructs over time and intellectual tradition, which can be considered universal (Reppold et al., 2021).

Accordingly, the approach proposed by Peterson and Seligman (2004) establishes a hierarchical structure of strengths and virtues consisting of 24 strengths, at the bottom level, grouped into six broad virtues at the top level (wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence). Wisdom and knowledge characterize the cognitive, which involves skills for acquiring knowledge and is composed of creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning and perspective. Courage is defined by emotional skills involved in the process of achieving goals and encompasses bravery, persistence, integrity and zest. Humanity is about caring and helping. This virtue is composed of love, kindness and social intelligence. Justice refers to community life associated with civic feelings and consists of teamwork, justice and leadership. Temperance protects against excesses and is constituted by forgiveness, modesty/humility, prudence and self-regulation. Finally, transcendence characterizes idealization of connections with the universe and encompasses an appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humor and spirituality.

In this sense, it is important to emphasize the importance of comprehending how strengths and virtues are expressed when considering demographic data such as gender. In a study with university students, Alves and Ambiel (2018) dis-

covered disparities between men and women in terms of character strengths, affections, and professional interests. The female participants showed strengths that were more related to sincerity in the expression of feelings and actions, being more benevolent towards others, with beliefs about life goals and unpleasant emotions, when compared to the male students. A similar result was found by Husain (2021), in which women showed significantly higher levels of wisdom, justice, curiosity, love of learning, social intelligence, leadership and appreciation of beauty and excellence, indicating that they are more virtuous than men.

The similarities and differences between strengths and virtues are present when transferred to the educational scenario. The school is conceived as a positive space. Therefore, the goal of Fundamental Education in Brazil, as outlined in the National Education Guidelines and Bases Law (*Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional* - LDBN 9394/96), is to promote the complete development of students, including the development of skills necessary for active citizenship and qualification for work. Integrated Technical High School Education includes training based on the integration of different dimensions of life, the inseparability between Professional Education and Fundamental Education and the association between general knowledge and specific knowledge (Ramos, 2017).

Integrated Technical High School (*Ensino Médio Técnico Integrado* - EMI) is a training course that involves work, science and culture as fundamental dimensions of life and implies approaching knowledge in its historicity (Ramos, 2017). The author adds that in this modality, teaching contents are not abstractions to be apprehended in an instrumental or formal way, but need to be concrete in relation to the needs and problems existing in the context, which contribute to the development of science and produce new ways of life and culture. The Strengths of character present in the integral proposal for training in EMI do not use the same denomination.

In terms of the school context, studies have been developed aiming to investigate different constructs related to strengths and virtues. However, studies related to EMI were not found, pointing a gap in knowledge, considering that EMI aims to provide training for life and work, which would greatly contribute to training future professionals beyond technical skills. Toledo et al. (2021) investigated associations between character strengths and life purpose with 276 young people, with ages ranging from 14 to 20 years old from high schools located in two Brazilian states. Correlations between character strengths and life purpo-

se were founded, with emphasis on spirituality, optimism, gratitude, generosity and a sense of collectivity, showing the importance of positive individual characteristics for the construction of life projects which can also contribute to professional purpose.

Fonseca et al. (2020) investigated the relationship between academic engagement and character strengths and the influence of the school and gender on academic engagement. The results indicated that the 24 strengths were positively correlated with all school engagement factors. The public school students scored higher in engagement than the private school students. No significant difference was found in relation to sex. The authors concluded that the strengths collaborate to stimulate positive actions and feelings towards learning.

Salcedo and Ye (2020) studied the relationship between students' perception of their own character strengths and their academic performance. The study was based on PERMA (Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Achievement) Theory and 21st century skills and used an instrument based on the original VIA, which was specifically designed for individuals aged 15 to 17 years. Participants were 90 high school students from one school in Thailand. The students were found to have unequal amounts of moderate and high perceptions regarding their strengths. The teamwork strength scored the highest, while leadership scored the lowest. The students' academic performance, in terms of grades, was considered very high. No significant relationship was found between the students' perception of character strengths and their academic performance. The authors suggest that future studies should include more questions that probe strengths to reveal additional data and more comparisons.

It is understood that the EMI objective is to train students for the job market, as well as for life, providing the development of competencies and enriching skills for the future career and personal life. Accordingly, the aim of the study was to investigate the concept of Integrated Technical High School students regarding strengths and virtues, whether there is a difference between the concepts of female and male students, how they understand the role of strengths and virtues in the choice and performance of the future technical profession and whether the perception of the concept differs from what is presented in the literature.

Method

Participants

The study used a convenience sample consisted of two focus groups. This sample type allows to obtain preliminary information or initial insights without seeking statistical representation of the population, without compromising the final results and reliability of the study in question. The criteria for inclusion of the volunteers were students enrolled at the Integrated Technical High School, from different courses, both sex and aged between 14 and 17. The exclusion criterion was students who took the course concurrently, that is, who took secondary and technical education separately, in different school units.

The female focus group consisted of 10 students aged 14 to 17 years ($M=15.00$; $SD=0.81$). Considering the socioeconomic level, two (20.00 %) participants were from level A, two (20.00 %) from B1, three (30.00 %) from B2 and three (30.00 %) from C1, according to the Brazilian Association of (Market) Research Companies (Associação Brasileira de Empresas de Pesquisa [ABEP], 2020). The male focus group consisted of 11 students aged between 15 and 16 years ($M = 15.18$; $SD = 0.40$), one (19.09 %) from socioeconomic level A, two (18.18 %) from B1, five (45.45 %) from B2, two (18.18 %) from C1 and one (9.09 %) from C2.

Procedure

Initially, contact was made with an EMI institution to present the objective of the study to the management, coordination, and people responsible and subsequently the invitation was made to the students. The focus group method was used, which allows access to forms of language, expressions, representations, values, beliefs and prejudices, characteristics shared by a group, generating new concepts through the analysis or problematization of an idea through a dialectical process among the participants (Gatti, 2005). Furthermore, the focus group allows the teenagers express ideas and conceptions through interaction providing quantity and quality of data, without losing the unit of analysis proposed in the study. The focus groups were facilitated by the moderator and the discussions audio recorded. The focus group took place in person at a previously agreed date and time. The groups were held in a suitable room, avoiding any interference in the recording of the statements. The rules of conduct established were that statements should not be overly long, aiming to guarantee everyone's participation, and that there would be no requirement for a consensus of opinion.

The moderator clarified that to start the discussions he would introduce “mottos” with 20 minutes of discussion for each one, covering the proposed concept (What do you understand by strengths and virtues? Can you name strengths and virtues that are present in your training course? Explain whether strengths and virtues are important for the life and training of a technical professional? Give examples of strengths and virtues used by you in your daily life). The focus group lasted approximately one hour and thirty minutes and took place in a single meeting since both focus groups reached theoretical saturation (Ribeiro et al., 2018). At the end, a Sociodemographic Questionnaire was applied to characterize the socioeconomic level of the sample and a certificate of participation was given to the volunteers.

The project was submitted to the Research Ethics Committee of the University under number 5.643.154. All participants were informed of the study aims, their voluntary participation and their right to withdraw their consent and discontinue their participation at any time and stage of the study, in accordance with Resolutions 466/2012 and 510/2016 of the National Health Council. All the volunteers signed a consent form, as did those responsible for the students. The data will be stored on an electronic device until the data is published, preserving the participants' confidentiality.

Data analysis

The analysis of the data obtained was performed using the IRaMuTeQ (*Interface de R pour les Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires*) software. The program allows different forms of statistical analysis of texts, produced from interviews and documents, among other sources. The program identifies and reformats text units, transforming Initial Context Units (ICUs) into Elementary Context Units (ECUs). The Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC) method used by the software classifies the text segments and the set is distributed based on the frequency of the reduced forms (words already lemmatized) (Camargo & Justo, 2018).

The software was chosen because it is believed that it will facilitate the organization and incorporation of data collected from the full transcripts of the Focus Group, followed by their indexing and a lexical analysis (analysis of textual data), since it allows to carry out different forms of statistical analyzes on textual corpus and on tables of individuals, in words, providing a contribution to research in Human and Social Sciences, which make use of symbolic content as

a source of research data (Camargo & Justo, 2018). The software performs two types of analysis: qualitative and quantitative. The first analyzes the words used in the speech and the second presents the frequency using the Chi-square inferential statistical method. If there is no previous category, the software creates it according to the similarity of terms, which are previously found in textual libraries. The corpus is subjected to Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC) and Specificity Analysis (Camargo & Justo, 2018).

The Specificity Analysis formulates a matrix that relates text segments in repeated Chi-Square tests, resulting in a classification in terms of word classes. The Specificity Analysis allows texts to be associated with variables that the researcher wishes to investigate (Camargo & Justo, 2018). The DHC aims to group terms based on their similarity to each other and remove the different terms to another class. In addition, quantitative frequency and Chi-square results are generated, thus allowing the description of each categorical class. The presentation of examples that comprise each word is generated automatically, according to the meaning given in the class, and the researcher is responsible for naming them. Furthermore, the participation of three judges was used to confirm or refute the constructed categories. There was unanimity among all regarding the names given to the classes obtained.

Results

The corpus of the students' group statements, consisting of responses to four guiding questions, was analyzed using IRaMuTeQ, which generated four Initial Context Units (ICUs). A total of 52 Elementary Context Units (ECUs) were analyzed, and from the Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC) of the texts analyzed from the female students' sample 39 (75.00 %) were retained. First, the software divided the corpus into two subcorpora: **Dedication**, composed by classes 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5, related to personal characteristics; and **Assistance**, constituted by class 6 and associating aspects of teaching support and individual abilities, as presented in figure 1.

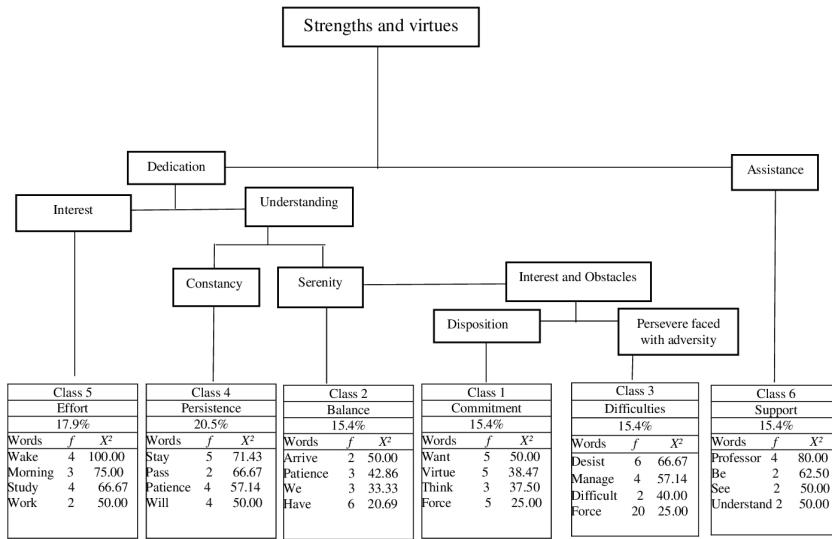


Figure 1. DHC dendrogram of participating female students

In the **Dedication** subcorpus, class 5 **Effort** was found, which was responsible for 17.9 % of the text segments (TSs) and indicates aspects of commitment in carrying out daily activities, such as studying. The components of this class show the concept of the effort to integrate the routine activities of a student's day, as exemplified in the statements "In my training, the effort is waking up early. I always studied in the morning, but I never studied in the morning and afternoon" and "Always keep going and live day to day".

The **Dedication** subcorpus was divided into **Interest** and **Understanding**, with **Understanding** divided into **Constancy** and **Serenity**. Class 4, **Persistence**, was responsible for 20.5% of the TSs and reflects not only the efforts of adolescents to adapt to the full pace of formal education, but also to integrate themselves into a course that requires involvement with a future technical level profession, as exemplified in the reports "There is a lot of material. You have to pay close attention. There is the technical study" and "Not that it is bad, I believe it will be good, that it will improve my ability to talk and to meet people".

Serenity was divided into **Interest** and **Obstacles**, being separated into **Disposition** and **Persevere faced with adversity**. Classes 1, 2 and 3 each contained 15.4% of the TSs. Class 1, **Balance**, and Class 2, **Commitment**, reflect the attempt to start a new stage in life, as in the example statement "I think we have to take advantage of the opportunities that many would like to have had" and "One positive thing. Positive mental effort". Class 3, **Difficulties**, expresses

the desire to give up and the effort to allow oneself to experience new student experiences. "Because you have several subjects and we have to do work and stay up late doing it and wake up the next day" and "But also knowing how to manage school with life, because it's kind of busy in the morning and in the afternoon and there are various tasks. There will be the weekend, but also knowing how to live, like the social side".

Class 6, **Support**, retained 15.4% of the TSs. This class addresses the comprehension of help to continue to persevere when faced with challenges due to new experiences, as exemplified in "Not to be discouraged, regardless of anything, we hope that we still have a lot ahead of us" and "Being with teachers that you already talked to and can help you with the material you've never seen".

The male students' statements followed the same analysis procedure as the group of female students. Four ICUs were generated and a total of 109 ECUs were analyzed and from the DHC of all texts analyzed 77 (70.64 %) were retained from the students' sample. First, the software divided the corpus into two subcorpora: **Internal and external aspects**, composed by classes 1, 2, 3 and 4, and **Innate ability**, constituted by class 5, as presented in figure 2.

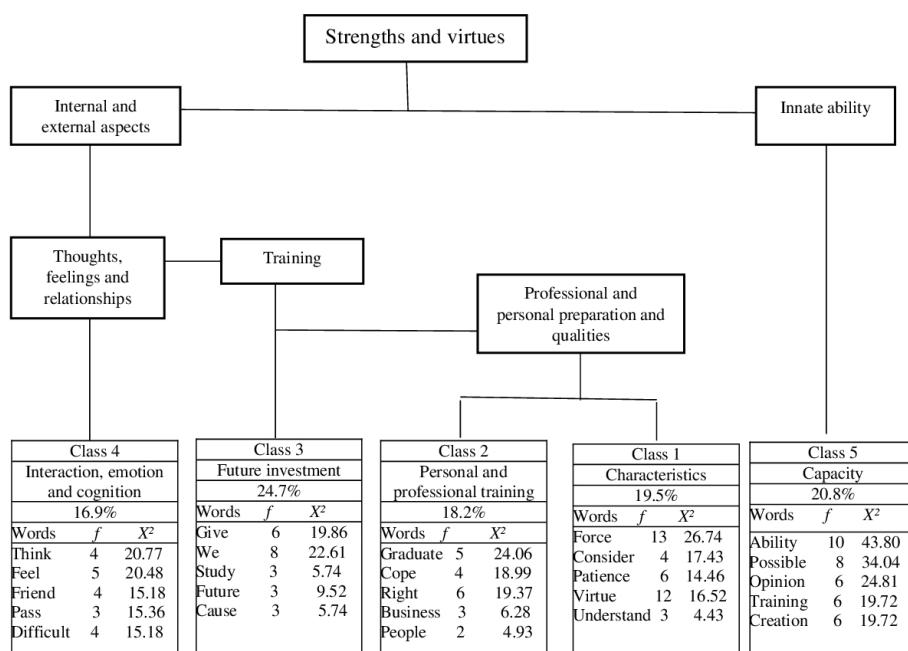


Figure 2. DHC dendrogram of participating male students

The subcorpus **Internal and external aspects** was divided into **Training** and **Thoughts, feelings and relationships**. In the first, class 3 **Future in-**

vestment accounted for 20.7 % of the TSs and indicates aspects related to concerns about the professional future. The elements of this class show the concept of the importance of other people (teachers, family, peers, future professional colleagues and clients) for the future profession, as exemplified in the statement "With awareness and future planning, strength and virtue make up part of the personal life". In the second division, class 4 **Interaction, emotion and cognition** was responsible for 16.9 % of the TSs and reflects the concept of current experiences in the present life and the perspective of the future professional life, exemplified in "A programmer who does not have empathy can go there and say: This is really easy, why are you complaining? Ah! It's very easy for you, since you know everything and studied a lot, you must know everything, I want to make a lot of money on the website. It's not that easy. So I think there has to be empathy on both sides" and "I understand strength as the person's effort to try to do something they want and also to help other people. Helping other people to leverage the person".

Training was divided into **Professional and personal preparation and qualities** and gave rise to class 2, **Personal and professional training**, which retained 18.2 % of the TSs. The class reveals issues related to training, professional and personal future, expressed in the examples "In my opinion, strength is the most important thing possible in your training" and "It's good to be kind at the right time, with the right people. Be respectful toward those you should respect. And know the right time for things, sometimes people, they end up speaking and doing things at the wrong time. At work, for example, in an office people are acting like childhood friends, maybe they have friends, acting against the boss, I think it's a virtue to know when and how to act, because there are people who have trouble with this". Class 1, **Characteristics**, retained 19.5 % of the TSs and covers personal aspects, as in the participants' statements "I see great meaning in my life now and in my life in the future. Why? Here at school we study, we study all morning and afternoon and we leave homework for the night. Homework at home. And creating the strength to do all this homework that you will do is one of your characteristics" and "So, I'm not very patient, if I'm honest, I'm not patient at all I'm very rushed, but I have a lot of willpower and strangely I have a lot of charisma with the people I talk to. When I start talking to someone I already understand what the person likes, what the person doesn't like and so, I don't know, because I've never had another person's point of view in relation to me, but I think I'm a little charismatic".

The **Innate Ability** subcorpus originated class 5 **Capability** with 20.8 % of the TSs. The class reflects internal aspects, ideas related to instruction and constitution, as in the examples “Using strength and virtue to go deeper into the training”, “Everyone has the willpower to wake up early, to have responsibility. For example, on the first day of school. Everyone had the willpower to come here, it was tedious, having to wake up early. But now everyone is getting used to it” and “Strength and virtue, in my opinion, is something that comes from birth and upbringing and are characteristics of the person, they are what make up the good and bad of the person. And it also comes from birth because, in my opinion, each person is at least born with their predefined good and bad characteristics. As if you had already chosen your status”.

Discussion

The present study investigated the concepts of Integrated High School students regarding strengths and virtues, whether there is a difference between the concepts of female and male students, how they understand the role of strengths and virtues in the choice and performance of the future technical profession and whether perception of the concept differs from what is presented in the literature. The results achieved show that the group of female students understood strengths and virtues as dedication and assistance and the group of male students as internal and external aspects and innate abilities. With regard to dedication, the term was highlighted in both groups (**Force, Persistence, Commitment, Future Investment** and **Personal and Professional Training**). For the participating sample, dedicating oneself to academic and personal life is a way of expressing persistence, perseverance and commitment, as an internal strength that allows them to manage everyday situations.

The concept of the term dedication is supported by the definition, which refers to a high level of work that involves feelings of enthusiasm, pride and interest in the task (Fonsêca et al., 2020). According to the authors, dedication is one of the factors of school engagement. In addition to dedication, perseverance is associated with positive behavior in the classroom and academic performance among students (Wagner & Ruch, 2015). Snyder and Lopez (2009) and Lottman et al. (2017) argued that identifying and promoting dominant strengths in early childhood helps students to be more aware of the character strengths they possess, to understand more about themselves and their place in the world and to learn how to apply these strengths in their lives as a possible way to prosper. Strengths

and virtues are characteristics that do not arise spontaneously, but are learned. Providing learning for future technicians to be creative, curious, work as a team, have a love of learning are objectives pertinent to Integrated High School. A possible path for this learning at school may occur through a curricular component throughout the course.

The concept demonstrated by the participants in terms of assistance, concerns the incentive to remain in school and persist in the objectives of completing education and other life goals. Parents and teachers contribute to the acquisition and development of strengths and virtues. Quinlan et al. (2019), through an intervention study with students, with teachers as supporters and encouragers during practices, showed that the levels of positive affection, engagement in class and need for satisfaction (autonomy, competence and relationship) of the students were mediated by changes in teachers' behavior regarding the identification of strengths in themselves and in the students. The development of character strengths in children and adolescents also concerns those who educate them (as parents and teachers), as the development of strengths helps to enhance these characteristics in the child/youth age group (Reppold et al., 2021).

The comprehension of strengths and virtues contributing to the future technical profession (**Future investment** and **Professional and personal training**) was shown by the group of male participants and interest and obstacle (**Commitment** and **Difficulties**) demonstrated by the group of female students. The male participants conceived the investigated construct as a characteristic that drives them towards future perspectives for the benefit of building personal and professional projects. More strengths being present in adolescents and young people has been found to equate to greater perspectives in relation to the future (Husain, 2021; Toledo et al., 2021). The authors state that the role of strengths such as spirituality, gratitude, generosity, honesty, justice and a sense of collectivity, strengths that involve transcendence and care for others, are fundamental for the development and healthy coexistence in the stage of life investigated in the present study.

In terms of the **Commitment** and **Difficulties** classes, it is expected that, faced with the challenges of academic and personal life, character strengths favor healthy aspects (cognitive, social and emotional), even when facing everyday difficulties, as it is common in adolescence to encounter individuals in behavioral and social conflicts. Accordingly, quality education should emphasize not only

curriculum content, but also student socialization, commitment to the community and basic learning, promoting full personal development, including affective, social, ethical and moral dimensions (Fonsêca et al., 2020).

Considering the differences found in the groups of girls and boys regarding the concept of strengths and virtues, the results corroborate studies that suggest that there are differences between the genders (Alves & Ambiel, 2018; Husain, 2021), however, caution should be exercised regarding the generalization of the data obtained. While women have shown higher scores for strengths such as love of learning, ability to love and be loved, kindness, appreciation of beauty, teamwork and gratitude, men more often present courage and bravery, creativity and self-regulation (Seibel et al., 2015).

The concept was restricted to the relevance of strengths and virtues in persistence when faced with difficulties and challenges in the personal and academic life, as well as in the future work environment. This issue may be related to the need for further research, especially with adolescents, into the attributes of people and the different resources of positive environments, such as educational institutions (Salcedo & Ye, 2020; Snyder & Lopez, 2009). Therefore, the result was related to what is defined in the literature (Reppold et al., 2021; Wagner & Ruch, 2015), although the concept was restricted to the supposedly innate characteristics and qualities, essential to achieve the current and future life goals.

The results highlighted concepts related to personal characteristics that drive current and future personal and professional goals. Despite the concepts reflecting an incipient comprehension of the construct, the results showed a relationship with the moral and social value that strengths and virtues present in the lives of the students of the sample.

The school is a positive institution that supports these virtues. The study, based on the students' concepts, presented results that add knowledge about the investigated constructs and contribute to the discussion of fundamental concepts of positive psychology in the educational context. The advancement of knowledge in the educational scenario can establish a connection between health promotion and adequate human development, especially in the life stage investigated in this study. Building strengths in adolescents makes it possible to enhance their capabilities, especially for those who opt for professional training in high school which demands a greater level of autonomy and responsibility from students.

Therefore, it is emphasized that the EMI is based on training students for life and for the future technical profession, which highlights the relevance of implementing knowledge and actions that promote the potentialization of strengths and virtues in the school environment.

In terms of limitations, the investigation could have employed a larger sample from public and private EMI institutions in different cultural contexts. Additionally, future studies should examine how strengths and virtues vary based on factors such as gender and socioeconomic status, as well as investigate the relationship and the impact between these variables and others related employing data collection instruments.

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