

EMOTIONAL SKILLS FOR A LIFE PROJECT WITH WELL-BEING

ZENEIDA ROCÍO CEBALLOS VILLADA

Universidad Nacional Abierta y a Distancia, (Colombia)

zeneida.cebалlos@unad.edu.co

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2688-6423>

DIANNE SOPHIA ARAUJO ROMERO

Universidad Nacional Abierta y a Distancia, (Colombia)

dianne.araujo@unad.edu.co

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4452-0986>

JACQUELINE VERA MARTÍNEZ

Universidad Nacional Abierta y a Distancia, (Colombia)

jacqueline.martínez@unad.edu.co

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7146-3227>

DORA SILVANA VELASCO HURTADO

Universidad Nacional Abierta y a Distancia, (Colombia)

dora.velasco@unad.edu.co

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9065-6761>

Abstract

Rural adolescents in the Colombian Andean region face significant challenges marked by inequality of opportunities for their educational and personal development, which are, in addition, exacerbated by poverty, large digital gaps, geographical isolation, and fundamentally, limited emotional skills. To address this issue, the action research “life skills for adolescents in strengthening the life project from the rural identity” used as a central strategy, the Social Laboratory of Entrepreneurship, an experiential space in adolescents, the development of entrepreneurial skills including the analysis of their contexts and the strengthening of community links for the design, critical evaluation of their proposals and management strategies for the

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implementation of enterprises that respond to territorial needs. The project was developed with adolescents in the ninth, tenth and eleventh grades of two rural educational institutions, one in the department of Cauca and the other in the department of Nariño, Colombia. The study demonstrated the practical connection between emotional skills and the life project, highlighting the relevance of recognition, regulation and adequate expression of emotions for the construction of life projects with wellbeing.

Key words: Emotional skills, life project, well-being, entrepreneurship.

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Introduction

The integral development of adolescents is based, among others, on their emotional skills, which favor not only important and necessary processes such as decision making, the construction of healthy interpersonal relationships and learning, but also enable an effective response to conflict situations and the adequate management of stress, favoring the overcoming of adverse circumstances and the satisfactory fulfillment of goals (Bauz et al., 2024).

On the other hand, although Colombia's rural areas have been the object of important public policies to strengthen the countryside and mitigate the damage of marginalization and inequality, they still face important challenges that have persisted over time. High poverty rates, malnutrition, and of course, large gaps in access to education continue to affect Colombian territories (Burgos-Ayala and Rodríguez, 2021). In addition, the aging trend of the countryside underscores the importance of working with the adolescent population; a population that faces the transition to adulthood characterized by a fragmented trajectory, which frequently requires alternating study, work and domestic activities due to economic conditions; which increases uncertainty regarding their future (Varón, 2022). This complex reality, in which poor emotional skills play a determining role, increases the risk of dropping out of school and threatens the construction of a meaningful life project for rural adolescents.

In this context, it is observed that a large part of the adolescent population considers life project options outside their communities, manifesting negative emotions towards their environments; therefore, the research project placed special emphasis on strengthening rural identity, understanding it as a foundation for young people to relate in a purposeful way with their territory, without ignoring that the construction of a life project does not depend only on individual will and skills, but also on the real opportunities that are available (Medan, 2012). In conclusion, the research focused on the development of emotional skills, the exploration of available options for access to higher education, the strengthening of rural identity and entrepreneurship.

Objectives

This extended summary aims to highlight the importance of emotional skills in the construction of a life project in wellbeing for rural adolescents in the Andean region of Colombia; This reflection is carried out in the framework of a qualitative research whose purpose was to enhance life skills in adolescent students in a municipal educational institution in the village of La Rejoya (Popayán, Cauca) and in a municipal educational institution in the village of San Antonio de Padua (Buesaco, Nariño), which allow the strengthening of the life project from the rural identity through a laboratory of social entrepreneurship.

Development

In rural areas of South America, communities establish strong links with their traditions and worldview that reflect love and attachment to the land, and satisfaction in agricultural activities that are constituted as social and cultural practices. However, adolescents in these regions, particularly in the departments of southwestern Colombia, are exposed to multiple processes of social, educational, labor, political and cultural exclusion (Cotrado et al., 2019) that are intensified by the internal armed conflict of more than 60 years; a situation that has generated in them, a perception of security and an uncertain future, also contributing to school dropout, confirming that adolescence is socioculturally constructed from conceptions, representations and demands that each community makes about what adulthood is and the transition to it (Valsiner, 2000), which implies then, a co-responsibility of the educational contexts in the necessary development and strengthening of life skills.

The research adopted a qualitative methodology, characterized by being inductive and flexible (Cadena-Iñiguez et al., 2017) that allowed a deep understanding of the information. It was framed in a critical social approach that sought to transform the structures of social relations, and propose solutions to the problems from the action - reflection of the community (Alvarado & García, 2008). The method used was action research, which is consistent with the paradigm and approach, as it allows linking the study of problems in context, with social action programs (Vidal & Rivera, 2007), posed as a process of successive spiral steps that allows simultaneous research and intervention (Montero & León, 2002).

The participants in the study were educational communities in the La Rejoya de Popayán (Cauca) and San Antonio villages in the municipality of Buesaco (Nariño). The work unit consisted of ninth, tenth and eleventh grade students. Two main research techniques were used: the Metaplan used for the diagnostic phase, and the Social Laboratory of Entrepreneurship as a strategy for psychosocial intervention. The latter technique introduced participants to social entrepreneurship, in tools to implement initiatives that seek to solve problems in their social environment (Gómez, 2019). The study welcomed the ethical considerations established in the ethical and deontological code of the psychologist in Colombia, in addition to complying

with national and international guidelines for research, including the application of principles of confidentiality of information, beneficence, informed consent and the manifestation of no conflict of interest.

Analysis and explanation

Research highlights that emotional skills are fundamental to face life with greater well-being; numerous studies have demonstrated the positive relationship between emotional skills and other variables that determine a good life (Sánchez-López, 2015). Despite this relevance, the development of these competencies has not been a priority in rural contexts. Therefore, to address this gap, the present study explored the life projects and rural identity of adolescents allowing to recognize the status of emotional skills, defined from perspectives such as Goleman (1995), Mayer and Salovey (1997) and Bisquerra and Mateos (2019) as the ability to identify, understand, express, regulate and manage one's own and others' emotions.

The findings revealed important limitations in these skills described below, from the hierarchy proposed by Bisquerra and Perez (2007):

Initially, there is an opportunity to work on emotional awareness, understood as the ability to identify one's own emotions and the emotions of others; in this regard, adolescents do not have an emotional repertoire that facilitates the naming of their emotions, nor do they manage to recognize the interaction and influence existing between their thoughts, their emotions and their behavior; this difficulty requires special interest because the identified shortcomings reduce their possibilities of seeking support in situations that may overcome their coping resources generating stagnation in their life projects.

Secondly, there is evidence of difficulty in emotional regulation, a competence directly related to the awareness of emotions; a relationship that is explained by the fact that it is not possible to manage that which is not recognized. On this second level of emotional skills, the authors include adequate emotional expression, the ability to cope with adverse situations and self-management of positive emotions so as not to stagnate in negative emotional states. In this sense, the study highlights the need to intervene on this deficiency in the participants as it compromises the resilience of young people and affects their ability to deal effectively with the multiple challenges they face and which have already been mentioned above.

A third skill is emotional autonomy, which is located at the highest level of the hierarchy and involves the application of concepts such as self-esteem, emotional self-efficacy, positive attitude and responsibility (Bisquerra and Mateo, 2019); of course, it is the most affected skill in the study population, which is demonstrated by the identification of unrealistic goals that,

coupled with low perseverance, lead to the early abandonment of any action that could lead to a more hopeful future.

Based on the limitations encountered and understanding that emotional skills develop progressively, from the most basic to the most complex, an action plan was designed with individual and collective activities in a journey that began with an intrapersonal exploration and then expanded to the emotional world of others; the interventions were developed within the framework of the Social Laboratory of Entrepreneurship with elements of Desing Thinking, the methodology included various playful and pedagogical actions that integrated play, meaningful learning and community participation. Among the strategies used were the emotional gymkhana and treasure hunt, large-scale board games, cinema forum, tools for vocational orientation, university fair, ideation, prototyping and evaluation of entrepreneurship projects with a community approach, with the proposal of adolescents to respond to territorial needs, which received feedback from the community and experts in entrepreneurship. The methodology had a significant closure through an experiential visit to an agroecological enterprise successfully developed by a community with similar conditions to the populations participating in the research, an action recognized for its high impact in strengthening skills and knowledge management (Muñoz, 2008).

With the intervention, significant progress was achieved in the development of the first level of emotional skills, emotional awareness was nurtured with the expansion of the emotional repertoire, and recognizing, in addition to the denominations, the intensity and reciprocal influence with thought and behavior, in full harmony with the postulates of Goleman (1995) related to emotional intelligence. Furthermore, in relation to the life project from the rural identity, spaces were created where students were able to visualize options to build their future without abandoning their roots, but rather recognizing their transformative potential and their role as agents of change for the creation of fairer communities (Murillo and Hernández-Castilla, 2014); of course the impact was also reflected in the well-being of adolescents, by providing them with tools that favor the construction of more stable relationships based on empathy and assertive communication. Likewise, the experience strengthened the perception of a more hopeful future by allowing the participants to recognize their own abilities as valuable resources to transform their realities. This process positioned them as protagonists in the creation of a favorable environment for their community, granting them a sense of purpose along with a positive connection between their life project and their territory (Ryff, 2017).

Conclusions

The findings of this experience demonstrate the fundamental role played by emotional skills in the well-being of rural adolescents. It especially highlights the need to continue strengthening emotional regulation and emotional autonomy, key competencies that act as protective factors

in the face of adversity. In this sense, any intervention in emotional education becomes a gateway to resilience to effectively face the adversities and challenges faced by rural populations.

The implementation of the Social Laboratory of Entrepreneurship was consolidated as a significant strategy that favors the positive reconnection between adolescents and their territories, by promoting a less condemnatory and more compassionate view of rural areas, which allows them to position themselves as leaders with the capacity to transform their environments, identifying opportunities in the midst of difficulties and managing to design realistic, viable and contextualized proposals for entrepreneurship. In this sense, rural identity also strengthens the students' wellbeing by reinforcing their sense of belonging, their mastery of their surroundings and their purpose in life.

The research promoted scenarios and tools that, from the articulation between emotional education, rural identity and social entrepreneurship, opened the panorama for the construction of life projects coherent with their skills and resources and connected with the potentialities of their contexts, increasing hope and optimism and generating more resilient projects that enhance the flourishing of young people and rural communities.

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