


Beyond adult centrism: intergenerational action in defense of the rights of children and adolescents

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Abstract: This article discusses Latin American perspectives on children and youth participation in defense of their rights in intergenerational spaces. The text begins by presenting a conceptual analysis focusing on recent trends in the region's academic literature, followed by empirical research in which young and adult counselors reflect on their experiences working in one of the Children's Rights Councils in Brazil. The analysis highlights three concepts that often appear in the Latin American bibliographic corpus on the field: protagonism, citizen participation and adult-centrism, as well as their uses by young counselors. The article presents a critical and innovative perspective by demonstrating that despite adult-centrism highlighted in Latin American research, the protagonic role of young activists has the potential to destabilize unequal intergenerational power relations in public decision-making arenas and to reshape these relations in more equal terms.

Keywords: children and adolescent's rights; protagonism; citizen participation; adult-centrism; intergenerational action.

^{PT} Para além do adultocentrismo: atuação intergeracional em defesa dos direitos de crianças e adolescentes

Resumo: Este artigo discute perspectivas latino-americanas sobre a participação infantil e juvenil na defesa dos seus direitos em espaços de atuação intergeracional. Parte-se de uma análise conceitual com foco sobre a produção acadêmica da região e de uma pesquisa empírica na qual conselheiros jovens e adultos refletem sobre suas experiências de atuação em um dos Conselhos de Direitos da Criança e do Adolescente no Brasil. Os conceitos de protagonismo, participação cidadã e adultocentrismo são particularmente discutidos por se destacarem na literatura estudada, assim como sua aplicação à medida em que são apropriados pelos jovens conselheiros. O artigo apresenta uma perspectiva crítica e inovadora ao demonstrar que, apesar do adultocentrismo ressaltado nas pesquisas latino-americanas, o papel protagônico dos jovens ativistas tem o potencial de desestabilizar as relações desiguais de poder entre gerações nos espaços nos quais atuam e de remodelar essas relações de forma mais igualitária.

Palavras-chave: direitos de crianças e adolescentes; protagonismo; participação cidadã; adultocentrismo; atuação intergeracional.

^{ES} Más allá del adultocentrismo: acción intergeneracional en defensa de los derechos de niños, niñas y adolescentes

Resumen: Este artículo discute las perspectivas latinoamericanas sobre el protagonismo infantil y juvenil en la defensa de sus derechos en espacios de acción intergeneracional. Analiza las tendencias recientes en la literatura académica de la región y examina empíricamente la experiencia entre consejeros jóvenes y adultos sobre sus experiencias de trabajo en uno de los Consejos de Derechos de Niños/Niñas e Adolescentes en Brasil. Se discuten particularmente los conceptos de protagonismo, participación ciudadana y adultocentrismo porque se destacan en la literatura estudiada, así como su aplicación al ser apropiados por los jóvenes consejeros. El artículo presenta una perspectiva crítica e innovadora al demostrar que, a pesar del adultocentrismo resaltado en las investigaciones latinoamericanas, el papel protagónico de los jóvenes activistas tiene el potencial de

desestabilizar las relaciones de poder desiguales entre generaciones en los espacios de toma de decisiones públicas y de remodelar esas relaciones de forma más igualitaria.

Palabras clave: derechos de niños/niñas y adolescentes; protagonismo; participación ciudadana; adultocentrismo; acción intergeneracional.

Summary: 1. Introduction; 2. Conceptual and contextual background; 3. Methodological and analytical contributions; 3.1 Conceptual research: review of Latin American academic production; 3.2 Empirical research: the experience of young counselors as protagonists; 3.3 Conceptual and empirical correlations; 4. Protagonism: young activists in action in the defense of rights; 5. Youth and citizen participation; 6. Adult-centrism: who decides what is best for children? 7. Conclusions; 8. References.

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1. Introduction

In this article, we analyze distinct Latin American perspectives on child and youth participation in the defense of their rights in spaces of intergenerational initiatives¹. Latin America has a long tradition of social struggles against anti-democratic forces, and as part of this history, key concepts have been forged in academic literature, public policy discourses, and social movements. Regional approaches highlight concepts such as rights, participation, and protagonism to strategically advance towards a political agenda that recognizes children and adolescents as citizens², incorporating terminologies present in global debates and translating ideas and principles into emancipatory instruments of political action (Earls, 2011; Pavez-Soto, 2012; Cussianovich, 2013; Earls and Carlson, 2020).

In research and advocacy, the demand for the participation of children and adolescents has been a characteristic of Latin American progressive traditions, especially since the ratification of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Verazzi and Benes, 1998). Its importance is recognized despite critiques regarding the universalization of the notion of “childhood”, as it fostered new discourses and practices on childhood at the international level as a means to defend the prioritization of children in national and local political agendas (Quennerstedt *et al.*, 2018; Imoh and Okyere, 2020). The idea of a “global childhood” is particularly contested with regard to children from a wide diversity of so-called “vulnerable” socioeconomic, cultural and ethnic-racial backgrounds.

With regard to Latin America, we would like to emphasize that the epistemic experiences and policies in childhood studies produce knowledge in a collaborative and socially engaged way, involving intellectuals, activists, and policymakers, which result in relevant contributions (Haddad, 2002; Abers *et al.*, 2018;). However, although often anchored in authors and ideas from the so-called Global North, Latin American studies on child and youth participation offer relevant contributions that only tangentially and infrequently reach the “global” circuits of childhood research agendas.

The review of the Latin American academic production on child and youth participation in the last two decades indicates that the concepts of protagonism, citizen participation and adult centrism stand out. These terms are also often used by the young population about their participation in social movements, and in the public spheres of decision-making.

Based on the discussion of the meanings, definitions and practical applications of these three concepts we argue that despite the adult-centrism highlighted in Latin American research (Duarte, 2012; Cussianovich, 2013; Lay-Lisboa *et al.*, 2022; Petropoulos, 2023), the leading role of young activists has the potential to destabilize and reshape unequal intergenerational power relations in the spaces in which they operate. We reflect on how Latin American decolonial perspectives can challenge North-centered global studies of childhood (Escobar, 2003; Castro-Gómez, 2005; Mignolo, 2012;), from a decolonial perspective, contesting international development agendas (De Castro, 2020; Faulkner and Nyamutata, 2020; Collins *et al.*, 2021).

The article is divided into three parts. The first addresses the conceptual and contextual dimension of child and youth participation and protagonism in Latin America. In the second part, we discuss the methodologies used in the conceptual and empirical research, covering the review of the Latin American academic

¹ It is worth briefly explaining the use of terminology referring to the age group. Although the main focus of our research was adolescent activists (from 12 to 18 years old according to the Statute of the Child and Adolescent), their participation trajectories may have started in childhood and often extend after the age of 18. Another point to highlight is that the terms childhood/child, adolescence/adolescent and youth/youth are often used indiscriminately in the literature surveyed.

² I have tried to avoid, as far as possible, the generalization of gender by using only masculine or feminine, although I recognize that this does not solve the issue of the complexity of gender diversity, seeking to contemplate the contestation of binarism, including in the scope of decolonial studies.

literature from 2005 to 2023. It includes also the analysis of the experience of protagonism of young councilors in one of the Municipal Children's Rights Councils in the state of Rio de Janeiro from 2018 to 2020. Finally, we analyze the production of conceptual and empirical data from this study relating to the experiences of activism and intergenerational actions based on the concepts of protagonism, citizen participation and adult centrism.

Thus, with the aim of contributing to the international field of Childhood Studies³, the article proposes a critical reflection interconnecting knowledge from the researched theoretical production, and from the narratives of young and adult counselors who interact in participatory decision-making spaces, enriching the debate on the conceptual, cultural and epistemic diversity on child and youth participation and its intergenerational challenges.

2. Conceptual and contextual background

The focus on the participation and protagonism of young people in public policies in Brazil and internationally is relatively recent. Legal and institutional development on the subject over the past three decades has been accompanied by new academic interests, such as leadership, agency, and child and youth activism (Corona and Morfín, 2001; Vanobbergen, 2015; Caputo, 2017). However, theories on social and political participation, which often seek to be universal, tend to ignore the reality of how participation occurs in different social, political, and historical contexts, and thus remain issues that require analytical deepening (Ruiz-Casares *et al.*, 2017). These theories also tend to disregard the diversity of conceptualizations and practical configurations that occur outside the dichotomy between adult and child power. Also, they ignore the coexistence of multiple forms of participation in the same environment, or of changes in the nature of participation over time and in different locations.

Although there is a large gap between theoretical production and the reality of child and youth participation (Naker *et al.*, 2007; Figueiredo and Rizzini, 2024), the social and political activism of this group has received significant attention, especially on issues related to the environment, such as climate change and other threats to the sustainability of the planet (O'Brien *et al.*, 2018; Ojala and Bengtsson, 2019). Thus, we believe it is important to seek theoretical references that recognize children, adolescents and young people as active subjects of rights and political actors (Escobar, 2003; Castro-Gómez, 2005; Mignolo, 2012; Cussianovich, 2013; De Castro, 2020; Faulkner and Nyamutata, 2020; Collins *et al.*, 2021).

2.1. Contributions that challenge the “conventional” logic that divides Global South/Global North

A critique that has emerged in recent years and that could be considered as part of the movement to decolonize knowledge refers to a supposed “Global North” as producer of theories and a “Global South”, which is limited to carrying out empirical work (Balagopalan, 2019; Soares *et al.*, 2023). This logic also applies to the production of knowledge in the field of Childhood Studies and Children's Rights (Collins *et al.*, 2021).

Several theoretical contributions have challenged the claims of universality contained in the abstract image of the subject of rights (Assy, 2018; Douzinas, 2000;), particularly seen through the Eurocentric lens of international legal instruments and developmental theories (Escobar, 2003; Mignolo, 2012). Ontological premises of a universalizing nature dilute the relevance of conditioning factors such as race, gender, class, age and place, as Spivak (1994) points out. On the other hand, inclusive humanitarian interventions, which recognize these specificities, play an important historical role in global struggles based on the principles of freedom and emancipation (Santos, 2021).

The “child” in the conventional international framework corresponds to the modern individual *in development* but still immature, as “an abstract and generalized child as if all children, irrespective of age, gender, culture, social class, race, and other particularities, shared an essential set of immutable characteristics and needs” (Tabak, 2020, p.47). In contrast, children in the so-called “Global South”, often only characterized as poor and vulnerable, require urgent international attention and intervention, having no say in adult decisions about their lives and future. These children are attributed threatening traits that mark poor, racialized, marginalized, and criminalized subaltern groups that cannot speak (Spivak, 1994), but that attract analytical-academic, welfare, and political interests (Rizzini Ansari, 2024). As objects of study and intervention, they continuously reactivate Eurocentric patterns of “global” knowledge production about their peripheral contexts (Connell, 2013), as well as the definition of the “best interest of the child” established in the 1959 Declaration of the Rights of the Child (Tabak, 2020). According to this perception, it seems unlikely that children, adolescents and young people, especially those outside the Western and Northern hemisphere, will be able to claim their participation and protagonism in decision-making processes (and that they could open new horizons for the next generations). It also seems unthinkable that they should, or can, have a constructive role beyond their local contexts, that is the family, the school and the community.

With regard to child and youth participation, despite the vast production over the last three decades, there is a huge gap between the rhetoric about its importance and the resistance in practice. In addition to the obstacles to the social and political participation of the child and youth population, constantly pointed out in Latin American research, we can cite as an example the still unsuccessful efforts to make their right to participate in policy deliberation spaces within the scope of Children's Rights Councils in Brazil (Figueiredo,

³ Internationally called Childhood Studies. See in this regard: Sarmento and Gouvea, 2008; Qvortrup *et al.*, 2009.

2024)⁴. In addition, despite the constant references to laws and public policies that advocate the right to participation, paternalistic and infantilizing attitudes are observed that weaken child and youth protagonism.

Despite the limitations of participatory roles, especially of children in society in general, one cannot fail to recognize the important impact of the adoption of the rights framework after the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, from the end of the 1980s, and the adoption of international documents (such as the Convention) in several countries (Guzmán, 2017), including in Latin America incorporating principles such as equal rights, to debates and practices in the processes of struggle and political resistance in the region.

The political history of Latin America is characterized by violent forms of domination, authoritarianism and oppression, but also by inventive forms of resistance to colonialism, imperialism and persistent anti-democratic interventions. The assimilation of foreign and hegemonic ideologies is contradicted by a culture of resistance and successive struggles for emancipation (Galeano, 1997; Mignolo, 2012; Quijano, 2000;).

With regard to Latin American studies on childhood, although strongly influenced by the theoretical references of the North, they are beginning to recognize and benefit from the academic circuits of the South (Powell *et al.*, 2023; Soares *et al.*, 2023). An example that unites researchers, students, professionals and activists from different areas of knowledge from Portuguese-speaking countries are the Luso-Brazilian conferences, an initiative led by the University of Minho in Portugal and Brazilian universities, which brings together researchers from Portuguese and Spanish backgrounds (Sarmiento *et al.*, 2007; Barbosa and Soares, 2019).

3. Methodological and analytical contributions

The qualitative, conceptual and empirical research carried out in this study had the following methodological design: (i) a systematic review of Latin American research published in scientific journals, and (ii) field study that involved participatory, intergenerational meetings, interviews and focus groups with adolescents, young people and adult counselors (including former counselors) working within the scope of the Municipal Council for the Rights of the Child of Volta Redonda (CMDCA/VR), in the state of Rio de Janeiro.

The research was carried out within the scope of the project *Monitoring Child Participation Processes in Policies and Child Protection Programs*, as part of the International and Canadian Child Rights Partnership (ICCRP) network. Case studies with similar objectives were simultaneously developed in South Africa, Canada, Scotland and China. It should be added that other developments of this project allowed us to remain in contact with some of the young people and adults who participated in the research up to the present, enriching the analyses we share in this text.

3.1. Conceptual research: review of Latin American academic production

The survey of academic production included articles published in the last two decades, between 2005 and 2023, using several descriptors related to the participation of children and adolescents in Latin America, in order to understand the development of conceptualization and theorization that occurred in the region⁵. The sources were regional bibliographic information systems and electronic journal portals, including Scielo Brasil, CAPES Journal Portal, WorldCat, Google Scholar, Latindex CLASE, REDLAMYC and IIN (Instituto Interamericano del Niño).

After several reviews to select the articles that corresponded to the objective of the research, a bibliographic database was established, which currently has 254 articles in Portuguese and 189 in Spanish, a total of 443 academic publications available to the general public (www.ciespi.org.br). The processes of coding and analysis of the data collected involved reading of all the selected articles, systematization of the content and, subsequently, its organization based on the predominant themes. Among the objectives that guided the analysis: 1) To understand the contribution of the theoretical and methodological production to the collective knowledge of the region, including its limits and possibilities; and 2) Identify potential gaps, as well as new problems, trends, approaches, and research methodologies. Based on this review, we chose to deepen the analysis of the concepts of protagonism, citizen participation and adult centrism, central in this article as political tools in local experiences of participation, activism and policy-making for children, adolescents and young people in the region and, particularly, in Brazil.

It is worth highlighting some limitations inherent to this type of research. One of them is to access to publications. This is an even more complex issue when searches are carried out in different countries that use different methodologies, which are not always compatible with each other. Even considering the limitations inherent to this type of research, we consider that the review and analysis undertaken offered a good sample of what has been produced, thought and discussed on the theme of child and youth participation in Brazil and in other Latin American countries.

3.2. Empirical research: the experience of young counselors as protagonists

⁴ Provided for by the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (ECA), the Councils for the Rights of Children and Adolescents are deliberative bodies responsible for ensuring priority for childhood and adolescence. They are responsible for determining the municipal child rights policies, training Child Guardianship counselors, and supervising the Child Fund. Available at: <https://livedetrabalhoainfantil.org.br/conteudos-formativos/glossario/conselho-de-direitos/>. Accessed on June 10, 2024.

⁵ Successive searches were carried out in the aforementioned databases using the descriptors "participation", "protagonism", "monitoring", "evaluation" and "protection", combined with the words "childhood or child", "adolescence", "youth or young people". For more information, access the bibliographic database CIESPI/PUC-Rio: Available at: https://ciespi.org.br/basesp_bibliograficas-1047.

The field research focused on the experience of intergenerational participation involving adolescents, young people and adults working within the scope of the Children's Rights Councils, from May to October 2024. The objective was to learn about their trajectories of participation, as well as the processes and dynamics of intergenerational participation in public spaces intended for the discussion of rights and the deliberation of policies aimed at children and adolescents. To this end, we used a multifaceted methodology which included: 2 participatory intergenerational meetings, 3 exploratory interviews, 5 in-depth interviews and 3 focus groups. In total, the research had the participation of 42 people, 27 young people and 15 adults.

The exploratory interviews constituted our first approach to the field and served as a basis for designing the complete study. Three youth and adult actors with extensive experience were selected: a young leader of the Rio Youth Forum, an adult former president of the Municipal Council for the Rights of the Child of the State of Rio de Janeiro, and an adult project coordinator of an NGO based in Rio de Janeiro that involves young activists. Based on these interviews we learned about the unique experience of Volta Redonda, in the state of Rio de Janeiro, whose Council for the Rights of the Child of the city of Volta Redonda (CMDCA/VR) had taken the initiative to officially incorporate adolescents as active counselors for several years. Also, in Volta Redonda we had the opportunity to interview adolescents and young people who make up the South Fluminense Youth Forum in Action (FJSFA), a collective created and led by young people to discuss public policies and rights related to children and young people.

Following the interviews, we held two participatory intergenerational meetings lasting 3 hours each. The proposal was to bring together participants from different generations, selected for having significant experience of participation with children, adolescents and young people. In this stage, we had 26 participants (16 adolescents and young people aged 13 to 24 years and 10 adults aged 29 to 73 years). Finally, we researched the specific experience of Volta Redonda, involving actors from the Council for the Rights of the Child (CMDCA/VR) and the Youth Forum of the South Fluminense in Action (FJSFA), with a total of 13 participants: 10 adolescents and young people (15 to 22 years old) and 3 adults (50 to 60 years old). This experience comprised 3 in-depth individual interviews with young people (18 to 22 years old), 2 interviews with the former President of the Council, a focus group with 3 adult counselors and 2 focus groups with 8 young people (15 to 18 years old). The objective of these interviews was to understand the perspectives of young and adult counselors and former counselors in relation to their participation, challenging and promising aspects of intergenerational relationships, as well as their perspectives on the impacts of their participation.

3.3. Conceptual and empirical correlations

We proceeded to discuss the results of the analyses undertaken, articulating the production of conceptual and empirical data from the present study, connecting the experiences of activism and intergenerational initiatives to the concepts of protagonism, citizen participation and adult centrism.

The conceptual and empirical correlations reveal a clear connection between the idea of children, adolescents and young people as political subjects and are expressed in the roles of protagonism they adopt to defend their rights. This connection is demonstrated in concrete examples of how the experience of participation provided a sense of belonging and citizenship in relation to a collectivity, with the potential to transform social reality (Cuevas-Parra, 2021). A 22-year-old young woman described her feelings as a member of the Council since she was 15 years old as: *"I started to see myself as [a person] who has rights. This is very important, it made me feel part of society."* Several Latin American authors analyze the participation of young people in public and political life, combined with the development of a growing sense of belonging as young citizens (Pérez *et al.*, 2008; Luna and Folgueiras, 2014). These factors lead to greater involvement in their communities and cultures (Cussianovich, 2013).

The broader Latin American literature on social engagement and participation is characterized by an emphasis on advocacy and direct action to promote social change. Some examples of social movements that register the active participation of young people can be cited, such as the Landless Rural Workers Movement, La Via Campesina and various indigenous movements (Gohn, 2012; Ramos and de Aquino, 2019). Other studies have shown a similar political emphasis on the participation of children, adolescents, and young people in the defense of human rights of marginalized and oppressed groups, as in the case of Chile (Montoni, 2019), Mexico (Montoya *et al.*, 2018) and Brazil (Koerich, 2017). An international survey of 75 young activists from the cities of Rio de Janeiro, Chicago and Mexico City showed the transformative effects on their life trajectories by early political and social experiences. The study identified that a significant number of young people began their work in spaces such as schools and social and community organizations. These experiences allowed them to later participate in political activism focused on human rights. A key factor that contributed to the performance of these young people in their first experiences was the support of adults capable of listening to and respecting their ideas, including parents and teachers (Torres *et al.*, 2013).

4. Protagonism: young activists in action in the defense of rights

"Don't talk about me without me!" The young councilors of Volta Redonda proudly used this expression to affirm their protagonism and determination not to have their voices intermediated by third parties (Almeida *et al.*, 2023). The concept of child and youth protagonism is closely related to that of participation, and to the perception of young people as proactive, with competences and autonomy (Corona and Morfin, 2001; Ballesteros, 2016; Ochoa, 2019). Several Latin American authors also refer to the term protagonism to highlight the proactive roles of the child and youth population in school spaces, in the communities in which

they live and with families, as well as in social movements and councils (Cussiánovich and Figueroa, 2009; Cussianovich, 2013; Pavelic and Salinas, 2014; Peña-Ochoa *et al.*, 2014).

In the present research, the narratives of young councilors often referred to the leading role in the creation of the Forum (FJSFA), and the active role played in the space of the Rights Council (CMDCA/VR). They define the Forum as a space that belongs to them, and they can decide who will participate. Adults only participate when invited. A young man (18 years old) told how they gained visibility in the municipality: *"Thanks to our persistent and continuous work, like the ants, Volta Redonda has the first Council that includes adolescents with the right to voice and vote"*.

The narratives demonstrated how participating in the Council and at the Forum allowed them to gain experience and greater awareness of their protagonism: *"It changed who I was, how I thought and made me see who I really am,"* said a 17-year-old. This transformative experience was noticeable in other accounts, where young counselors described how they "discovered" new capacities and confidence in themselves, with personal and social gains fostered by collective engagement with other young activists, and more equal participation with adults. Two teenagers, recently appointed as councilors (16 years old), were enthusiastic about their participation in the Council: *"It's fantastic to be a teenager and to be in a place where only young people are talked about. But it's not easy – you have to learn a lot of new things and words."*

The literature review showed that the concept of protagonism often highlights the competence and autonomy of children and adolescents (Cussiánovich, 2013; Alfageme *et al.*, 2003). According to Souza, the child is seen as "powerful, capable of creating ways of communicating and relating to the world from an early age, as well as being able to participate autonomously in learning processes" (2018, p. 195), based in a study on protagonism in early childhood education in the Brazilian Amazon.

However, when discussing competencies and autonomy of children, adolescents and young people, it is necessary not to generalize or romanticize their participation (Abebe, 2019). The young councilors interviewed referred to the actions in which they participated as mobilization, movement and struggle. When asked if they thought their participation had made a difference, the answer was: *"Yes, our participation made a difference. We always heard that teenagers didn't know anything, but little by little we gained confidence."* A 17-year-old counselor linked competence to the growing awareness of his power of transformation: *"We understood that we had a great responsibility and that we were capable of facing it. We understand that we have power in our voices."* Some also claimed to have information that adults were unaware of. For example, a 22-year-old young woman, and former councilor, active in the city's Youth Secretariat, said: *"The teacher came to me and asked: could you give a lecture on the rights of the child? Because what I know is so little."*

The concept of protagonism, based in the literature and in the perception of the young people consulted, refers to a feeling of empowerment and appropriation of knowledge in which they express themselves based on their own experiences. Protagonism also appears related to the development of the exercise of citizenship; to participate as a citizen (Pérez *et al.*, 2008; Huerta, 2009). There are examples of how young people have used their power in interacting with the adult counsellors when they disagreed about a certain issue and had a better suggestion to propose: *"So, if I had a voice and saw adults discussing something, I could say – NO, that's not the best way to do it. I know, as a young man, that it won't work; We could do it differently"*. It was not only a matter of providing a youthful perspective, but also of occupying a space in "adult environments". An 18-year-old mentioned an episode in which young members of the Council helped monitor the budget and showed adults that spending was over the limit: *"We learn that adults also make mistakes. It's not just adults who say we made mistakes; We can do this too when they make mistakes"*. Participation of young people in spaces of intergenerational action can enrich the decision-making process, but they also have the potential to destabilize the position of power of adults, especially when they see their authority threatened. That is why we affirm that the leading role of young activists can help to reshape these relationships in a more egalitarian way.

However, on several occasions, young people expressed their disappointment with the lack of openness of adults, a point frequently raised in the international literature about the challenges of establishing egalitarian relationships between adults and children in participatory spaces, where social relationships and interactions occur separating individuals and groups according to age (Blanchet-Cohen and Rainbow, 2006; Taft, 2015; McMellon and Tisdall, 2020). Latin American authors also refer to a "pseudo-protagonism" or paternalistic leadership, which involves attitudes where adults assume the condition of spokespersons and end up intimidating and silencing young people (López and Moreira., 2013).

5. Youth and citizen participation

The concept of citizen participation refers to the social participation and engagement of children and adolescents as citizens. Participation is understood as central to the development of a sense of citizenship. In the Latin American literature, citizen participation emphasizes the link between participation as a right, and children and adolescents as subjects of rights (Estrada *et al.*, 2000; Acosta and Pineda, 2007; Corvera, 2018; Lay-Lisboa *et al.*, 2018). They are, therefore, seen as political actors who are part of a collectivity and have the opportunity and the right to be heard (Trevisan, 2011). The notion of "active citizenship" places greater emphasis on the movement towards social change or "transformation of realities" (Oraisón and Pérez, 2006; Pavez-Soto, 2012; Cussyanovich, 2013).

Therefore, citizen participation is fundamental to the exercise of active citizenship. It presupposes the development of awareness about the importance of collective action (Rizzini *et al.*, 2007) and engagement in collective democratic spaces from an early age (Dip and Tebet, 2019). These are aspects that we observed

in our study in which the discourse on rights appeared strongly linked to the transformative experiences of young counselors. They emphasized their self-perception as subjects of rights and political actors, with testimonies such as that of a young 15-year-old counselor: *"I was able to understand that there are rights; that you can be protected by the law,"* and say, *"Wait—that's my right too..." I can also fight; I can stop hurting myself – no matter what age I am. I am; I have rights!"*

Therefore, citizenship is consolidated through affirmation of young people's protagonism, as something that can be developed and exercised through active participation. In a study on child protagonism and building of citizenship in Brazil, Pérez *et al.* (2008) highlight the importance of reflecting on child and youth citizenship beyond the legal status of rights, stating that the exercise of citizenship should be a continuous learning process based on everyday experiences.

The former president of the Council of Volta Redonda and mentor of the young councilors sums up this idea well by explaining the process by which young people mature in their participation experiences. She uses the expression 'citizen maturity' to show how young councilors start to position themselves as citizens, aware of their role in defending rights: *"It's very different when they start... then they change. It's not just maturity due to age. They develop a "citizen maturity". I want to, I can."* A 17-year-old counselor expressed what it is like to be a citizen, reaffirming his knowledge built from the lived experiences of being young in today's world: *"We understood that we were citizens; and that sometimes we understand the issues related to children much better than the adults who were there".*

Participation as a right has a strong connection with the concepts of democracy, protagonism and citizenship, as Gallego-Henao (2015) points out, when reflecting on the views of adults about child participation in Colombia. According to a report by the Inter-American Children's Institute/OAS, in Uruguay, the participation of children is a way to contest and overcome paternalistic attitudes (Giorgi, 2010). The emphasis on citizen participation interlinked with child and youth participation in the strengthening of democracy leads us to a critical review of Latin American and international literature and practices, in general. Here we refer to traditional practices, often referred to as "protectionism", in which children and adolescents are seen as passive recipients of protection, and their perspectives are devalued or disregarded (Bubadué *et al.*, 2016; Collins *et al.*, 2021; Jamieson *et al.*, 2022).

The concept and practices of citizen participation imply emancipatory political-pedagogical processes that should include the recognition of young actors as lawfully able to participate in public and political life, rather than incomplete beings who are in transition to adulthood. And, as we postulate in this article, the leading role of young activists has the potential to destabilize unequal power relations between generations in the spaces in which they operate and to reshape these relations in a more egalitarian way.

Next, how the concept of adult centrism can be understood, based on our research.

6. Adult-centrism: who decides what is best for children?

Obstacles to the participation of children and adolescents are frequently addressed in the Latin American literature (Pérez *et al.*, 2008; López and Moreira., 2013; Taft, 2015; McMellon and Tisdall, 2020). Most conclude that despite the rhetoric about having a voice and being accepted in certain spaces to participate, ultimately adults make all the decisions and ignore their opinions and recommendations.

There are exceptions, but the authors invariably draw attention to situations that are still predominantly adult-centric. It is in this imbalance of power that the issue of intergenerational relationships emerges, portraying adults' perceptions of children and adolescents as being inexperienced and immature (Acero and Ayala, 2011; Contreras and Pérez, 2011; Gallego-Henao and Gutiérrez-Suárez, 2015). Studies that analyze intergenerational relationships highlight the apparently "natural" power of adults over younger people, even in spaces intended for younger people, such as: the need to share power and responsibility in decision-making processes (Figueroa-Grenett, 2017); the role of NGOs in promoting child and youth participation, and the understanding of children and adolescents as subjects and agents (Peña-Ochoa *et al.*, 2014).

In the intergenerational participatory meetings held in our research we discussed experiences of participation in decision-making spaces with children, young people and adults. At times, we have observed that tensions have arisen caused by a kind of hierarchy between generations among such heterogeneous groups, especially in the face of attempts by younger people to open spaces to defend their positions.

When reflecting on the intergenerational experience in the Municipal Council for the Rights of Children and Adolescents, young, adult and adult participants made several observations related to adult centrism. The young counselors referred to adult-centered views in a variety of ways: *"There are many adults who think our opinion is worthless,"* said a 16-year-old. They often hear from adults that they are becoming abusive or rude when they express their views, as another 16-year-old girl reported hearing: *"You haven't lived yet; you have no experience; You don't know how things really work. There are things you only learn with age."*

Another example is when adults disqualify young people, stigmatizing them as "aborrescentes", a pejorative expression that merges two words: 'adolescent' and 'who annoys', meaning someone who bothers them. *"They think that the adolescent does not know how to do anything right; that I have no opinion"*, shared a 16-year-old.

When asked to explain these adult-centered views and attitudes, young Counselors reported feeling that they pose a threat to adults simply because they are younger. A 16-year-old girl reported,

They do it... because their youth has passed... Many people are afraid of how powerful children are getting. Every time they think of children and adolescents, it is as if they have no power. But this view changed a lot after the child began to have a voice.

Even so, the research showed us that the experience of these young women and men proved to be transformative, both for them and for the adults involved in the process. The adolescents reported not only that they felt strengthened, and strengthened as young citizens, but also that the institutional culture and the attitudes of adults in the Council were modified. Several young people and adults stated that the dynamics of the meetings in the Council changed as adolescents began to participate as counselors. Everyone had to adapt. It was a challenging process in which they felt that they had to deal with pre-existing biases and learn to listen to and respect each other's opinions.

In addition to being transformative, the co-participation experience can lead to other interesting developments. This was found in a broader study under the *International and Canadian Partnership on the Rights of the Child* (ICCRP), involving participation experiences in Brazil, Canada, China and South Africa. In this study, a kind of 'cascade effect' was observed, in which the experiences of participation lived by children and adolescents transcended the spaces in which they worked to several other spheres, such as the family, the school and social spaces (Jamieson *et al.*, 2022).

7. Conclusions

The article analyzed the concepts of protagonism, citizen participation and adult centrism in Latin American literature to discuss child and youth activism in intergenerational spaces of decision-making on the rights of children and adolescents in Brazil. The research, of a qualitative nature, used a multifaceted methodology focusing on the intergenerational dynamics that occurred in the context of a Council for the Rights of Children and Adolescents in Brazil. The uses and appropriations of these concepts, often re-signified in activism practices, proved to be powerful in triggering transformative processes for young citizens, as well as for adults involved in intergenerational relationships.

The research allowed us to reflect on theoretical and practical trends that reveal the importance of situated or localized knowledge. That is the knowledge of young people who position themselves and express themselves based on their own experiences as protagonists capable of articulating their perspectives and their own "best interests". Based on the perceptions of adolescents, young people and adults who participated in the research, as well as in the Latin American literature, we emphasized the connection between participation as a right and children and adolescents as subjects of rights in a process of construction and maturation of citizenship. These elements are crucial for the strengthening of democracy in a region historically affected by democratic impermanence and built under hegemonic colonial power structures.

The young activists spoke about the challenges they face in combating adult-centric and paternalistic attitudes, which are often disrespectful of the knowledge of young people and their rights as citizens. However, as we demonstrated in our study, despite the challenges there are important potentials in the interconnection between generations. However, those potentials require participants from different generations to be willing and open to collaborating, negotiating and making the necessary adjustments so that they recognize differences and the best way to work together. We hope that the present research can contribute to knowledge in its theoretical and practical dimensions, particularly in terms of the construction of more promising intergenerational interactions, honoring the leading role of children and young activists.

We reflect on how Latin American political traditions of struggles for emancipation can be seen as playing an important role for youth activism, as they allow for new points of view, uses, adaptations, and translations of concepts in the international field of Childhood Studies which are strongly Eurocentric. Regional and local perspectives enrich the international debate on the diversity of conceptualizations about childhood, countering the dominant trends in international development agendas from a decolonial perspective.

Latin American studies on child and youth participation offer relevant contributions but they hardly reach the international circuits of research agendas on childhood. In this article, we emphasized the Latin American epistemic-political experience in Childhood Studies as a field of collaborative and socially engaged knowledge production among intellectuals, activists, and policymakers. The diffuse and more flexible borders, which separate and at the same time bring together theory, local experiences and public policies are perhaps the main factors that contribute to the epistemic culture of the region, a characteristic that is little understood and that could be better explored as a significant contribution to more diversified international exchanges in the scope of Childhood Studies.

8. References

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