

Giving voice to children and adolescents in Chile

Lessons from the participatory research Mosaic approach

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INTRODUCTION

Chile has been undergoing socio-political, economic, and cultural transformations over recent decades, which have put the country on a path towards constitutional change. Young people have been driving these changes, leading demonstrations, and calling for a new socio-political structure, resulting in the necessity for a new constitution to replace the one that was introduced by the Pinochet dictatorship.² After many protests, the Agreement for Peace and a New Constitution was established, providing for a national referendum asking voters if they wanted the constitution to be replaced (Waissbluth, 2020). The proposal for a new constitution included ratification of children's rights and a system to protect children. On 25 October 2020, almost 80% of voters in the national referendum voted for a new constitution. However, just two years later, on 4 September 2022, the same proposal for a new constitution was rejected by almost 62% of voters. Although the reasons for this

volte-face are complex, it appears that Chileans were not completely satisfied with the process and results of the constitutional convention.

One of the areas of the existing constitution that is most in need of updating is childhood and the rights of children. There is a need for a new institutional structure and new legislation to reflect current debates on the position of children and adolescents in Chilean society, especially around the idea of being social subjects and protagonists of the processes in which they are subjects of intervention. This demand is fundamental in order to address serious violations of children's rights, including the right to participation.

This chapter presents findings from qualitative research³ using the Mosaic approach conducted with children and adolescents. Research was undertaken to ask them what childhood participation is for them and how they want to participate in it in the districts of La Florida and Ñuñoa (Metropolitan region), and La Serena and Vicuña (Coquimbo region) between March and August 2022. The Mosaic research method brings together a range of methods for listening to young children about their lives recognising that the need to make space for the 'other', and to listen to them, is an ethical issue. The chapter reflects on the use of the Mosaic method as a tool for researching their agency, voice, and participation and indicates how facilitators of this participatory approach could use it to further promote civic engagement of children and adolescents, especially those from the most marginalised groups in society.

BACKGROUND

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was ratified by Chile's democratic government in 1990. Although efforts have been made to implement its provisions, numerous shortcomings around children's rights remain, as well as the paradigmatic change that implies the recognition of children as rights-holders, which is especially weak (Uranga, 2011).

Despite Chile being a high-income country, it is one of the most unequal among a group of 30 of the world's wealthiest nations.⁴ The stark inequalities and rising cost of living contributed to the social discord and protests that erupted in October 2019, sparked by a hike in the cost of public transport.⁵ Even though adults felt nonconformity with this measure, the youth -through their protests- started a Chilean society revolution that influenced a large part of the population, which, understanding the necessity for a socio-political and economic shift, approved the constitutional change in October 2020.

Although adolescents were involved in these protests, they did not participate in the national referendum for the establishment of a new constitution, reflecting their limited ability to participate in society and lack of willingness on the part of institutions to comply with international standards and provisions that would foster effective participation of children and young people (Ombudsman for Children, 2020). The Ombudsman for Children did, however, promote the inclusion of children's and adolescents' voices within the constitutional change process,⁶ and the final constitution proposal included an article (No 26)⁷ ratifying children's rights and a system of comprehensive protection of guarantees of the rights of children and adolescents, outlining the specific responsibilities of the state to uphold those rights.

Given that the constitutional proposal was rejected at the second vote (in September 2022), supporting the voice and agency of children and adolescents is more important than ever, particularly with regard to public policies that affect their lives. The innovative Mosaic approach aims to support their voice and agency by creating space to talk about children's participation.

METHODS AND SAMPLE

The study used two methods: the Mosaic approach and semi-structured interviews. The last ones have been pertinent to indagate the perception of policymakers, experts in children's participation, and children/adolescents with experience in formal instances of the public policy-making process.⁸ The Mosaic approach combines observation, interviews, and participatory tools such as artistic and visual resources, implemented in person with children and adolescents and with professionals who work with them. The method gives equal protagonism to the opinions, perceptions, and observations of children, adolescents, and professionals (Clark, 2005). It offers an alternative model to relationships that have been built in the adult-centric context of Chile and especially in the policy-making process. At times, the researcher's role was to create spaces and opportunities for listening, while at other times, the role was more of an intermediary, relaying different perspectives among different groups and individuals. The method offered a horizontal space to reflect and share opinions in a variety of contexts and realities.

Even though the researcher could have chosen other participatory group techniques (such as focus group discussions), the Mosaic approach was considered a more appropriate tool through which to comprehend participants' perceptions, opinions, and feelings. The use of artistic or visual resources also allows a relaxed and friendly atmosphere, enabling participants to express themselves through different communication channels. It also offered a way

to hold the attention of children and young people, which other research techniques may have not done.

In terms of the research sampling strategy, two Mosaic approach workshops were held in each region, one with children aged 8–13 years and one with adolescents aged 14–18. In both regions the children's workshop was implemented before the adolescents' since for children, it is easier than adolescents to attend activities early morning.

To reflect the diversity of children's realities in Chile and to hear a variety of voices, the sample included children and adolescents who had participated in public programmes and those who had not,⁹ and those who had taken part in local government advisory councils.¹⁰ The researcher selected participants based on five criteria: (1) territorial representation;¹¹ (2) strong experience of or performance in children's participation;¹² (3) sociodemographic heterogeneity;¹³ (4) presence (or not) of the Local Office for Children;¹⁴ and (5) age criteria (as already explained).

Finally, professionals who are working in the Chilean childhood system were selected from the same programs in which children and young people were involved. In this sense, professionals were considered in the Mosaic approach method if they were intervening with children and adolescents selected in the sample. In total, 12 professionals were interviewed in the Metropolitan region and 5 in Coquimbo.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Mosaic approach: the participatory experience

All the participants valued the opportunity of participating in the Mosaic approach workshops. They reported that they felt comfortable, respected, and meaningfully listened to, which was not a common experience for them – especially for participants from more vulnerable or remote neighbourhoods. They said that such opportunities should be extended because they offer a space to talk, to express opinions and feelings in a context of trust and respect, to meet other people and exchange opinions, and to learn more about other people's realities. As one participant from the Coquimbo region said, 'It has been interesting, I liked it because of the atmosphere that was created, that each one gave their opinions and we got to know each other'.

Even though the participants did not know each other before the workshops, they were able to engage in friendly and honest conversation. In the Metropolitan region, one interviewee said he had never talked 'from the soul' with the adolescents taking part in the soccer school they ran, indicating that this instance had been important to him for listening to children and

adolescents and treating them seriously. In this sense, in all the workshops, participants were respectful although they did not always agree with each other's views on children's participation.

One contentious conversation concerned children's and adolescents' place in society. In the Coquimbo region, some participants held conservative opinions, indicating that they did not have the knowledge and capacity to say how they should participate. As one participant explained, 'I mean, it's possible we're wrong because as you have travelled and worked on things we haven't, things we're just studying, it can go wrong... because we can say something wrong or that isn't right'. However, participants with more progressive views, from the same region, said that they had the right to participate as they wanted, according to their interests and necessities, emphasising that their opinion was no less important because they were not adults. One participant gave their view:

I think there should be spaces for participation because I don't think it's correct to underestimate children. There are many children who are interested and start seeking information on what they are interested in and that is something that adults should also give guidance on in some cases.

Nevertheless, when the conversation turned to having the right to vote – which has been a significant debate within the recent constitutional change process – those participants from the Coquimbo region who held more progressive views said that this was such an important responsibility that it would be better if only adults had that right now. As one participant explained:

I think not [adolescents should not be able to vote], because voting is something highly influenceable. For me, younger people start sharing reasons on social media, for example, and some will usually believe in those reasons... and they will vote with no consciousness – at least some, not the majority.

Another participant disagreed, arguing that adolescents should be able to vote: 'I agree because I listen to many young people to see what their opinion about presidents is, and because they like this topic and that can still influence the country in some way'.

Consequently, it was interesting to identify a variety of opinions among children and adolescents in Chile. This suggests there is no one way to promote their participation, and for this reason, it is relevant to ask them how they want to participate, since they will most probably have different interests and ideas. Participants from the Metropolitan region mentioned that some young people had tried to bring about changes in the country, by taking part in the protests and social unrest in 2019. However, from their perspective, this group of young people was a small group of adolescents within all the

young population of the country being necessary to improve the channels through which young people can participate in Chilean society. As one adolescent in the Metropolitan region explained:

Those young people who protest for different reasons, for changing the constitution, changing coexistence in their community, eliminating violence, guns... they are not all, they are a few... and yes, it is super important, we have to listen to young people, to children.

At the end of the sessions, some participants were really interested in the workshop and the study, asking the researcher why she had decided to implement this kind of research, and wondering if they could themselves do something like that in their lives, in the present or in their future adulthood. In this sense, participants started to feel interested in these kinds of activities and imagined that they could do something like this in their lives, promoting their civic engagement through the implementation of this research method.

The second stage of implementing the Mosaic approach involved semi-structured interviews with professionals who work with children and adolescents in the public programmes. The interviews were conducted with professionals who had been involved in the Mosaic approach workshops, although some were conducted with professionals who had not been able to attend the workshops. The researcher shared the drawings created by participants in the workshops and explained the main points that had been discussed (for those who had not been able to attend).

In general terms, all the professionals appreciated the Mosaic approach technique, since the participatory research gave them the opportunity to listen to children and adolescents within an authentic atmosphere, which was often not possible when implementing the public programmes, as they must follow guidelines that usually constrain such spaces for listening and reflection. All the professionals agreed with the perspectives and opinions given by participants in the workshops, emphasising the need for more activities like the Mosaic approach workshops in order to promote children's participation in Chile. As one interviewee from the Metropolitan area said, the country needs more 'participatory spaces where adolescents can really express their opinion and that it is really paid attention to or that it has an impact. I think we lack instances like this'.

CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION THROUGH THE MOSAIC APPROACH: CHALLENGES AND NEW DISCUSSIONS

Discussing what children's participation is – based on consideration of different perspectives of children, young people, and professionals involved in implementing child-related policies in Chile – brings a variety of opinions

that should be noted. On the one hand, children were less likely to talk about participation in their daily and public life; they understood the term more in relation to games, sports, or other activities in their neighbourhoods. On the other hand, adolescents were more able to reflect on participation in community and public life and were critical of the limited options for them to participate in Chile. They suggested that they needed more spaces in which their voices could be heard and considered in the decisions made by others that affect their daily lives. Some professionals also noted that there are differences in talking about participation with children and adolescents, as the conceptualisation of participation would most likely differ according to children's and adolescents' levels of maturity and life stage.

One should note that this type of argument could sometimes translate into a lack of consideration of children's opinions, since the adult-centric perspective suggests that they may not be mature enough to have reasonable or informed views, and for that reason, it is not necessary to consider children's opinions. However, it is important to mention that for this study, it was quite a challenge to find participants aged 8–13 years who were involved in formal mechanisms of participation in the public policy-making process. In Chile, formal mechanisms for participation are centred on adolescents and young people aged 14–18 years old, and it is usually the same 'select group' who is involved in those opportunities.

Thus, the implementation of the Mosaic approach has been an interesting exercise to allow meaningful dialogue among children and adolescents who have not necessarily been part of the public policy-making process, but who have opinions they want to be considered by those who make decisions that affect their lives. Through this technique, it has been possible to contribute to the implementation of a protagonist participation process (Schibotto, 1990; Cussiánovich and Márquez, 2002), which has marked the debate over the rights of children in the southern hemisphere. Alfageme, Cantos, and Martínez (2003) emphasised that protagonism is a concept that reveals the human being as a competent being, for whom the leading role of competence is necessary to nourish the development of the capacity for initiative to be included in the community, in the culture, and to constitute their personal and social identities. This also evokes the need for spaces in which boys and girls can exercise collaboration with other social actors to develop their sense of belonging (Liebel, 2007).

Consequently, Voltarelli (2018) states that in order to stimulate the practices associated with promoting children's participation and agency, and child protagonism in South America, it is necessary to overcome the thoughts rooted in adult centrism (Vergara et al., 2015) and to redefine the relationships of subordination and dependency that have historically occurred with children. Furthermore, to promote children's participation in Latin American

countries, it is essential to consider the inequalities that are present in this context. Under those circumstances, the right to participation is also a fight against discrimination, social segregation, and subordination, among other elements that configure and limit the possibility of children's participation in society (Ospina-Alvarado, 2013).

All these are important factors to consider when centring the debate on children's participation in the Global South, since the predominant current discourse has been focused on Western or privileged societies, without appreciating and addressing the complexities and obstacles of a purposeful and valid application of participatory rights across different realities. Therefore, it is necessary to reframe not only the notion but also the practice of child participation (Duramy and Gal, 2020). The necessity to consider the complexity and interplay of values and interests in local decision-making and everyday social processes is intelligible (Percy-Smith, 2006). There is a risk that ethical guidelines around children's participation developed in the Global North are imposed on the Global South without due consideration of context or alternative approaches (Abebe and Bessell, 2014).

Thus, an understanding of the feasibility and specific meaning of the right to participation for children in developing countries is dependent upon familiarity with children's actual circumstances. Empirical research examining the lived experiences of children in various localities in the Global South is still scant (Duramy and Gal, 2020), and the implementation of a Western concept of children's participation in non-Western societies is complex. The current notion of children's participation in the Global South, influenced by Western culture, should therefore be expanded to incorporate the lived experiences and understandings of children in the South, as well as their opportunities for meaningful participation in their everyday lives, which are still not yet heard within a horizontal and meaningful social space.

In recent years, Latin American countries have been remarkable for the modifications in childhood legislation, with new concepts in social policies, educational reforms, and incipient initiatives for the political and social participation of children. Nonetheless, institutions and practices linked to childhood participation and agency of children are still based on policies and ingrained ways of thinking in an adult-centric approach. In this sense, the challenge of the exercise of childhood participation is related to the extension of democracy, understanding that it could guarantee their rights and promote democratic leading participatory experiences and for this reason the comprehension of children and adolescents' participative experience requires to open the dialogue according to their own experience in a determined local

context and culture since these dimensions are definitory in the nature of the participatory experience.

CONCLUSIONS

Using the Mosaic approach with children and adolescents and the professionals who work with them in two regions of Chile has highlighted that children's participation in public policy-making is not just a matter for children and adolescents, but it also affects all the dimensions that surround the participative experience. Meaningful participation of children and adolescents demands a systemic change in which adults must adapt their behaviours and allow the participatory experience to develop according to the needs and expectations of all those involved, particularly the children and young people. For this reason, implementing the Mosaic participatory research with children and young people could be a challenging exercise, since it continuously demands innovation, taking people out of their comfort zone, and calling for a redistribution of power in which decisions that affect children's and adolescents' lives must be made with them and not for them based on a collaborative approach. This can be challenging, particularly for the adults involved, and especially if they believe they have more knowledge, power, and rights than children and adolescents.

This change in awareness which is required of adults is sometimes difficult to achieve. Nonetheless, it is vital in order to promote a cultural change, step by step, to give voice to children, adolescents, and young people, whose views and voices have largely been ignored so far. Also, using the Mosaic approach can contribute to concepts such as protagonist participation, which demands acceptance that children and young people should be able to develop their capacities and be included in the community, in their culture, and thus able to constitute their personal and social identities.

The issues discussed in this chapter, about children's and young people's participation, voice, and agency, could be extended to different areas of life in which children's participation should be valid and valued – for instance, in families, schools, and in government processes at the local, regional, and central levels. All these institutions have different realities, needs, expectations, and rules, but to implement participatory experiences such as the Mosaic approach, in which children and young people are genuinely influential, demands that adults are willing to share power and change processes. It also demands that other systems and styles emerge to reorder relationships, based on the judgements and styles that children and young people have, allowing more intergenerational discussions and exchange of opinions among the many actors involved in the participatory experience.

NOTES

- 1 Social Worker from the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile. Paulina studied for a master's degree in Public and Social Policies in Pompeu Fabra University, in collaboration with Johns Hopkins University. Currently, she is a PhD Candidate in Social and Policy Studies at Loughborough University.
- 2 Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship was a military government from 1973 to 1990. In 1990, a democratic government was re-established in Chile.
- 3 This study has been conducted thanks to the National Research and Development Agency at the Chilean Ministry of Science, Technology, Knowledge, and Innovation and with funding from Loughborough University. It has been conducted according to the Loughborough University Ethics Review Sub-Committee guidelines and with the support of the National Minors Service of Chile, Chile Grows with You Subsystem of Chile, and local governments of La Florida, La Serena, Ñuñoa, and Vicuña.
- 4 See OECD (2020).
- 5 See Waissbluth (2020).
- 6 The Ombudsman has put forward some recommendations for the constitutional process to attend to the views of children and adolescents. It worked with the international non-governmental organisation, World Vision, on a public awareness campaign called Girls and Boys Vote Too.
- 7 See Propuesta Constitución Política de La República de Chile [Prop. Const]. 2022.
- 8 This method considered children and adolescents who are members of the Advisory Council of the Ombudsman for Children, who represent organisations of children and adolescents, and civil society, and members of the National Advisory Council for Children and Adolescents of the National Minors Service of Chile.
- 9 In the case of children, participants of the Chile Grows with You (Chile Crece Contigo) child protection subsystem were invited to participate, and in the case of adolescents, participants from the National Minors Service, which oversees the juvenile justice system.
- 10 These local councils are a mechanism for integrating children's views in the design and implementation of public policies, which have been part of the Children and Adolescent Rights Protection Offices. They have been implemented in some localities of Chile.
- 11 Two regions of the country (Metropolitan and Coquimbo) are differentiated by the number of population and number of local districts. These criteria helped to understand the heterogeneity of organisational scales in public administration and cross-sectoral action that could influence childhood participation in Chile.
- 12 Recognition of interesting practices in childhood participation in selected regions. Furthermore, these regions must have childhood organisations that are registered with the Ombudsman for Children. In the Metropolitan region and Coquimbo, there are offices of the Ombudsman of Children and children/adolescents' organisations have been registered.
- 13 Two municipalities per region were chosen based on the population size and socioeconomic conditions, such as census population, level of rurality, average schooling attainment, and poverty levels. Municipalities considered were La Florida and Ñuñoa (Metropolitan region) and La Serena and Vicuña (Coquimbo).
- 14 This institution oversees promoting rights, preventing risky situations and violations, and protecting the rights of children and adolescents in Chile. So far it has been implemented as a pilot initiative, since it was pending the approval of the Law Project that creates the System of Guarantees and Comprehensive Protection of the rights of children and adolescents. However, this Law was ratified on 15th March of the year 2022, which means that these offices should be implemented in all the local districts of Chile. The pilot project has been developed in 10 regions throughout the country, in 12 districts: Alto Hospicio, Aysén, Cauquenes, Colina, Concepción, La Florida, La Serena, Nueva Imperial, Quillón, Requínoa, San Felipe, and Santiago.

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