

Youth contribution

Our child-led research makes child activists' voices stronger in Brazil

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I am Carlos, 17 years old, a member of the MJPOP group (Children and Youth Monitoring Public Policy group) in Brazil. I am from a poor neighbourhood where children and young people experience violence and discrimination based on race and poverty.

From an early age, I showed my dissatisfaction with the injustice we witnessed on a daily basis and I tried to know what was right and wrong, and what were the ways of claiming my rights and investing in my studies. I knew that through this path I would have more strength to fight against everything that I did not like. My family was very supportive of my activities, and even though we had limited resources, we shared common feelings and an interest in changing our lives for the better. That support was invaluable.

At the age of 12, I was introduced to the MJPOP group where children and adolescents get together to discuss and seek ways to address the problems that blight our community. From then on, I became a child activist who believes in change, and I am using my power and voice to raise awareness of injustice and inequalities with the public. The MJPOP is supported by World Vision and has around 4,000 members from different cities of Brazil. The main goal is to empower children and adolescents to become agents of change in our communities, especially in holding decision-makers accountable.

We meet every week, and we attend workshops, we run campaigns and we have fun. Our group is very stable, so the members stay for many years, and the older ones teach the younger ones. Currently, I am a youth facilitator due to my many years in the group and the experience I have gained.

There were years of working together, attending trainings and carrying out field activities, such as rallies and debates. I also became involved in a child-led research project which is the main focus of this chapter. The research was a revolutionary experience for all the participants of this project. My group decided to carry out research within our peer group to investigate what were the harmful attitudes affecting the lives of children and adolescents in our city. We agreed to explore the issue of discrimination as we realised that racism, LGBTphobia, racial beauty stereotypes and gender inequality are very present in our lives and do not let children and adolescents flourish.

In order to carry out our research, the researchers, aged 13–17, were trained on topics related to research, such as design, methods, ethics and analysis. Then, we conducted 20 interviews and 100 questionnaires with questions on discrimination since this topic triggers a series of other factors that contribute to a more violent culture towards children and adolescents. In addition, we wanted to see how discrimination produces psychological problems, such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and insecurity, as many children mentioned these in previous conversations. We carried out the research in schools, asking students to fill out individual questionnaires covering a range of themes. We wanted to know, for example, if the participants suffered or witnessed some kind of discrimination, and whether these actions took place in their homes, school or community.

while analysing the data, the thing that most caught our attention was that 73% of children and adolescents suffered some form of discrimination at school – a place that should provide a space of comfort, safety and protection. The research also showed us that 39% of children and adolescents suffered or witnessed some discrimination in their own homes. It was also worrying to realise that almost half of the research participants who were victims of discrimination were unable to share their emotions and struggles with others, leading to psychological problems or feelings of revenge. Our study also revealed that 62% of participants did not share their experiences of discrimination with their parents or families, but they did share these with friends and other people. We obtained this information via interviews, and we were touched and worried about the findings. Children face discrimination but they do not share this with their parents or families so as to avoid creating more problems for their family members who also face the same problem of discrimination.

We also discovered that the problem of discrimination affected the adolescent researchers; there were many who were victims of discrimination, either because of their skin colour, type of hair or the simple fact of being girls. This shows that discrimination affects the lives of children and adolescents in Brazil daily, and not everyone ends up with the same opportunities. Therefore, I hope that the findings from our research help bring an end to these different forms of discrimination that affect us. For instance, in our report, we recommended three actions: (a) create public policies to protect minorities from discrimination and harassment and ensure these are implemented; (b) conduct campaigns to change people's mindsets on racial bias; and (c) display examples and cases of positive change to demonstrate that, despite difference, people are of equal value and discrimination can be stopped.

The child-led research methodology was very helpful for engaging with others and building confidence amongst the researchers. It also gave us a space for peer interaction and amusement. By carrying out our research, we realised that the data we collected gave us the opportunity to deepen our knowledge of children's experiences and their needs, and this became our fighting fuel – our energy to make a change. In addition to obtaining data on different forms of discrimination, we wanted to be agents of change and be the light in the other children's lives. For instance, as agents of change, we started recognising and valuing our own identities and life experiences and realised that we are not alone in this cause. Then, we shared these new perspectives with others and more children started feeling more empowered and valued.

I am always grateful for the opportunity to have participated in such significant research. I feel empowered with a strong voice that is hungry for change. I learnt that it is important to share what hurts us because often no one listens to us. Thus, I am confident that when we were interviewing our peers, we became protagonists of our own lives, and we generated a feeling of trust and dialogue that opened opportunities for other children to share their feelings.

I want to recommend that other children and adolescents use the child-led research methodology and I hope it can be used in many countries around the world. It is essential to listen to what children and adolescents have to say. It was crucial for our personal growth, self-esteem and to bury stigmas. This research strengthened our activism sentiment and made us even stronger, as was the goal. We were able to generate statistical data which opened a number of doors. For example, at a personal level, we felt empowered to use methodologies to produce data and evidence, and with our findings, we were able to raise these issues to adults, including decision-makers in a more

credible way. The findings were not based on our feelings and opinions but were built from hundreds of views. Furthermore, we obtained information from our peers, and we had access to them in a way that adults were unlikely to have. As another important change, we took our findings and started fighting discrimination based on our study's results. The data was the proof that we are able to make our voices stronger. The research findings reflect a phrase: violence begets violence. Many children attempt to get revenge against their abusers, so, if we do not have an ending, there will always be a new cycle of violence. Hence, if the problem involves children and adolescents, ask them what affects them, so that we can break this cycle and bring about positive change. If it's about us, look for us, and partner with us!