

Exercising agency on the periphery

Brazilian children and young people's understanding of agency and choice within contexts of inequality

Patricio Cuevas-Parra

INTRODUCTION

There is a wealth of evidence that children and young people's social identities have an impact on how they experience vulnerabilities and inequalities. This, in turn, determines and shapes their assigned and accepted roles, functions and social standings and defines their opportunities to participate in public life on an equal basis (Holloway, 2014; Mayall, 2000; Punch, 2003; Skelton, 2008; Tisdall, 2017; Van Blerk, 2013). In order to explore these complexities, this paper analyses the experiences of children and young people in Northeast Brazil who participated in a social movement contesting exclusion, violence and discrimination. These children and young people referred to themselves as 'citizens from the periphery and out of situation or marginality'. They sought to equip themselves with the tools, resources and knowledge to break the uneven distribution of power and influence within their community. Our research explores how they perceive rights, agency and choice within their lives at the urban peripheries.

PARTICIPATION RIGHTS, SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND IDENTITY FACTORS

Although the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) changed the way in which children and young people's participation is viewed, making it culturally and socially desirable and appropriate (Archard, 2004), Tisdall (2017) argues that it has been difficult to implement fully, since the convention does not recognise the right to vote or grant self-determination or autonomy. Moreover, scholars argue that embracing a universal children and young people's right to participation without looking at how understandings of childhood and youth vary across the Global South might have an undesirable impact on how children and young people's lives are defined (Hanson, 2016; Konstantoni, 2012; Van Blerk, 2008; van Daalen et al., 2016). Within this landscape, social structures and identity factors need to be taken into account to determine children and young people's ability to participate against a backdrop of complex and multiple worldviews that coincide, intersect or conflict with each other (Prout, 2011). Likewise, chances to participate are also determined by structural power disparities and inequalities that often conflict with the participation rights framework outlined in the UNCRC, constraining children and young people's ability to partake in collective decision-making (Pincock and Jones, 2020). Poverty intersects with other social identities such as gender and race to exacerbate inequalities and limit opportunities for participation due to social withdrawal, school dropout (to join the labour market) and child marriage (Morrow, 2013).

As a result of these tensions, participation, power, social categories and structures are constantly evolving and either enable or restrict opportunities for children and young people to exercise voice and agency (Evans and Holt, 2011). These intersecting factors are also not static but are shaped and reshaped by children and young people themselves and their relations with others as they challenge power and hierarchical systems. Hence, spaces of expression and contestation are brokered and formed by children and young people's interactions with each other within these spaces, as well as by their interactions with adults (James and James, 2001). From this perspective, there are no universally standard forms of participation; instead, there are multiple forms of engagement constructed by the different interactions that children and young people have with each other and their environments.

Interactions, relationships, environments, play and school experiences all have an impact on children and young people's life choices and chances to participate. Hence, social structures and hierarchies intersect with social identities to define children and young people's place within any given social

context and relationship (Davis, 2008). Over the years, multiple disciplines have studied how these components intersect and shape people's identities and social positioning. Scholars have identified social categories that affect children and young people's everyday lives and demonstrated how these are embedded into inequalities and uneven power relationships (e.g., Davis, 2008; Ecklund, 2012; Ravnø, 2009; Thorne, 2004). These social categories do not work in isolation; they are intertwined and inextricably dependent on each other within the social construction of children and young people's identities (Konstantoni and Emejulu, 2017).

Furthermore, children and young people's participation is intrinsically connected to agency and power. For instance, drawing on Foucault's (1977) understanding of power as a form both of social control and of resistance, children and young people's opportunities to exercise agency are limited by intergenerational power disparities. Moreover, and as already mentioned, not all children and young people have similar opportunities to exercise agency; this is determined by a plethora of factors, including gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status (Alanen, 2016; Ecklund, 2012; Konstantoni, 2012). Some children and young people are better placed than others to exercise power and challenge social structures that limit their voices. This raises the question of how to connect children and young people's agency and voice with their opportunities to participate on an equal basis given the heterogeneity of childhood and youth, especially given that different social categories (related to inequality, stigma and stereotyping) are often rendered invisible due to the tendency to focus on children and young people as a homogeneous group (see also Thorne, 2004).

CONTEXT

More than half of Brazil's 60 million children and young people live below the poverty line. Excluded from mainstream society (Rizzini, 2011), they face severe challenges in terms of inequality, social justice and social mobility, based on their ethnicity, race and socio-economic status (Scalon and de Oliveira, 2020). The country's Northeast region is particularly poor and is badly impacted by unemployment, challenges in the provision of education, uncertain climate conditions and fluctuating markets (Soares, 2016). The region's Afro-descendant population is considered particularly vulnerable due to poverty, stigmatisation and discrimination and structural practices that perpetuate racial disparities and inequalities (Da Silva and Dos Santos, 2015).

Despite high levels of stigma and poverty, a group of children and young people in the Northeast region have engaged in a community-based project

(supported by World Vision), Youth Public Policy Monitoring (Monitoramento Jovem de Políticas Públicas – MJPOP in Portuguese), to contest discrimination and inequalities. MJPOP aims to equip children and young people with the skills and tools to demand their rights and hold duty-bearers to account (Rodrigues, 2018). It primarily uses the Citizen Voice and Action methodology, inspired by the World Bank’s social accountability approaches. This article draws on research with children and young people who participated in MJPOP.

METHODS

This case study employed data from a research project in Brazil with 39 children and young people (21 girls and 18 boys), aged 12–17 years, who were members of MJPOP. The project sought to understand whether their social identity categories were linked to agency, voice and inequality. All participants were considered to be living in poverty and from marginalised and predominantly Afro-descendant neighbourhoods; most identified themselves as black or ‘mulatto’ (mixed race), with a few identifying as white. MJPOP facilitators helped with study participant recruitment.

We addressed two research questions: (1) What are the social identities that enable children and young people to have equal opportunities for positive and meaningful participation and interaction with their peers and society as a whole?; and (2) How do children and young people construct a sense of identity and deal with social exclusion and marginalisation?

The project used qualitative data collection methods, including interviews and focus groups, to support the inclusion of participants’ views and allow for exploration and interpretation of relevant issues (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). Ethical approval was obtained from the School of Education and Sport’s Ethics sub-committee at the University of Edinburgh. In accordance with the principles of meaningful participation in research, participants were asked to give their written consent and the research team ensured that participation was free, voluntary and informed (Powell et al., 2019). For participants younger than 18, consent was obtained from their parents/carers. All personal information was anonymised, and identifiers were removed from the notes to ensure confidentiality. In this paper, participants are identified only by gender and age; any names used have been changed to ensure anonymity.

Focus groups and semi-structured interviews were conducted in a conversational style to ensure that participants were comfortable sharing their perceptions and views (Morgan, 2012). Sessions were conducted in Portuguese and English, in a local community centre, using an interpreter. The

sessions were audio-recorded, as agreed by participants, and the recordings were transcribed in Portuguese and then translated into English.

The data was then organised into themes, categories and codes using thematic analysis. The study participants were involved in the research design, data analysis and unpacking findings. They provided feedback and recommendations to make the process clearer, more agile and more accurate.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the data identified two critical themes: (1) the centrality of children and young people's experiences in perceiving their rights, agency and choice in the context of their lives in marginalised urban areas; and (2) the significance of the intersection between children and young people's social identities and power disparities in everyday life. We now discuss these findings in more detail.

Children and young people's experiences in perceiving their rights, agency and choice

The study participants indicated that their perceptions of rights, agency and opportunities to participate were informed by their personal lives in the impoverished neighbourhoods where they lived, which they considered to be places of exclusion, violence, abuse and discrimination. Most participants identified themselves – in their own words – as 'marginalised people from the peripheries' (the outskirts of urban areas). They also noted that 'non-peripheral people' often hold strong stereotypes about life in poor neighbourhoods, judging people on the basis of their physical appearance, skin colour and ethnic features, language and access to economic resources (see also Moura and Cerdeira, 2021; Penglase, 2014). One participant explained how:

During the slavery time, white people dominated the black people, and they thought that a black person could not be a free person. After all these years, this mentality remains in our country. There is too much discrimination, especially for people who live on the peripheries.

(Antonia, girl, aged 13)

Antonia and her peers concurred that this colonial perspective of superiority/inferiority based on skin colour and African physical features was still very much present in Brazilian society. When reflecting further on how these deep-rooted perspectives have impacted their lives, especially their right to participate, children and young people pointed out that ever since they were very young, they realised they had been born with fewer opportunities than

other children and were at greater risk of being left behind. A 17-year-old boy reflected on this view, which was commonly expressed:

Fear is so powerful and impedes children from living their lives. We limit our own participation only because we are scared of being abused or discriminated against.

(Thiago, boy, aged 17)

Most participants asserted that they were reminded on a daily basis that they were not part of mainstream society due to the recurring tendency to be labelled as people from the peripheries. Although violence and poverty were daily problems in their lives, they noted that stereotypes associated with people living in poor neighbourhoods tended to blame them for these problems. Yet they believed they were, instead, victims of structural inequalities that were extremely difficult to overcome due to stereotyping, racism and marginalisation. Reflecting this narrative, a common feature among participants was the view that rights are for privileged people while poor people and black people are sidelined and excluded. Luciano, aged 14, said, 'The people being discriminated against feel like they have less rights than others; they feel undermined'. Despite the difficulties they faced in realising their right to participate, study participants argued that they want to confront prejudice and prevalent views of poor people as law-breakers, drug-dealers and trouble-makers, as well as challenging stereotypes that portray girls from the peripheries as sexually available to men, disempowered and having no future.

When asked how they were able to develop the ability to exercise agency within this restrictive environment, participants collectively replied that agency was connected to recognising themselves as having the ability to achieve a dream or an outcome, and they discovered this power by engaging with others to make a change. By acting together as a group, they developed both the confidence to express their views and the trust to make things happen. One 14-year-old boy shared his view, which was echoed by most participants:

I changed and learnt about myself and my potential. But first it was necessary to accept myself as I am, to love myself. Then, I got the resources to fight discrimination and preconceptions, and my strength to stand tall and say what I want to say. This was a process we did together as a group and this keeps us together.

(Gustavo, boy, aged 14)

That account is consistent with a commonly cited position, which recognises that agency exists in every person and each person can exercise agency to

some degree based on their will (see also Drydyk, 2013; Edmonds, 2019; Gallagher, 2019). However, agency does not exist as a simple dimension; it is influenced by multiple external structures, such as patriarchy, capitalism and socialism. Hence, the individual and the social are inseparable components that influence each other. As such, children and young people's identities intersect with systems and structures that can enable or restrict their ability to achieve agency (see also Weissman, 2020). Nonetheless, they recognised that they were able to challenge the oppressive social structures perpetuating their marginalisation through their interactions with others and through collective actions. One 17-year-old girl noted that:

We could be more powerful if we can change our reality, and one of the actions we have been taking is to promote our rights and to mobilise society to fight with us hand-by-hand in pursuit of these changes.

(Juliana, girl, aged 17)

This suggests that a person's agency is not fixed; it relies on the economic, cultural and social resources available to that person within a particular context. In our research project, participants' understanding of agency signalled that their ability to exercise agency was relational and contextual, affected by both the oppression of the past and a promising present that shaped their perceptions of their self and their abilities to change unfair situations. This account is consistent with the position that agency and choice are intertwined concepts, as children and young people are independent and knowledgeable agents who can recognise their abilities to create social change and choose to use their agency to address injustice and discrimination through their direct and collective actions. Participants agreed that recognition of their own competencies led to better opportunities to participate and achieve positive outcomes; however, they concurred that this process is relational and situational, as emancipation and gaining a space to participate are affected by external factors, such as power relationships, exclusionary practices, systemic vulnerabilities and social inequalities.

How children and young people's social identities intersect with power disparities

Study participants were asked about the impact of their social identities on their ability to participate in social change. They identified gender, race, ethnicity and socio-economic status (among others) as particularly significant constraints to realising their participation rights, exercising agency and making choices (for similar findings, see also Cuevas-Parra, 2022). For instance, participants argued that they were not a homogenous group, as each person

had diverse experiences and was affected by social inequalities in different ways, with some having more opportunities to participate than others. One 14-year-old girl explained that:

We are all poor, but we are all different too. For example, we girls suffer more from machismo, but boys suffer more from police violence. White children have more opportunities than black children, even though they can be as poor as us. And the LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender] children are the ones that are more discriminated against and humiliated in public.

(Cleo, girl, aged 14)

Within this context, it appears critical to simultaneously consider both understandings of individual circumstances and the social structures that shape how different categories of identity are interconnected and also how these are determined by the contexts and situations that form children and young people's everyday lives. As the 14-year-old girl argued, the different social identities do not stand alone as they are embedded in inequalities, systemic discriminatory beliefs and uneven power relations.

However, despite their different life experiences, participants cited the things that unite them; in particular, they all reported facing discrimination and exclusion on the grounds of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual identity and socio-economic status. Furthermore, they shared a strong conviction that other people in their communities were even more disadvantaged than they were and, as such, they wanted to help support other children and young people through their activism.

Reflecting this, one 16-year-old boy offered a view that was supported by most participants:

We were raised on the belief that we were less valuable than others due to our skin colour, race, size, type of hair and so on, but we realised that we can change that if we accept ourselves and we become activists... I mean, we are activists based on our own colour and poverty, and we are not alone, we are together with others who feel the same as us... We moved away from depression and isolation because we are together in this battle. It is hard, but we are doing it for all young people, not just for us.

(Junior, boy, aged 16)

That description considered that children and young people have multiple identities, and how those identities intersect can exacerbate vulnerabilities. However, as participants stated, when given the right tools, knowledge and support, children and young people can deconstruct their own perceptions and challenge the positions culturally assigned to them within society at

large. They were able to understand and challenge social inequalities associated with their identities and question oppression and power relations. Participants concurred that these new understandings enabled them to believe in their abilities and confront traditional attitudes and practices that oppressed and marginalised them. This process started as an awareness session in their project, but then became their mantra to symbolise strength and hope. However, deconstructing their own views did not mean that society and unfair practices also changed; participants changed, but other people remained the same. Is this a failure? Participants argued no, since change is a long journey that started with them, but may occur later within society at large. Thus, they considered that their personal changes united them in gaining more participatory spaces and encouraged them to continue being active in MJPOP.

Despite this sense of unity and support, there was nonetheless a clear difference between participants' views on the roles of girls and boys in society. What was striking from the interviews and focus groups was that few boys understood girls' fight for gender equality. However, all the girls expressed their support for boys to oppose race-based violence that affects black males disproportionately. Max, aged 17, noted, 'For example, a black boy has less opportunities than a white girl. This means that race is more important than gender regarding the prejudices and inequalities among us'. Responding to this statement, girls expressed their deep concern about boys' struggles but also demanded more openness from boys about their challenges. One 16-year-old girl said, 'Guys do not experience the machismo as we do every day, so they do not empathise with our problems. Seriously, being a girl, black and poor is a tragedy in our life'.

Our findings show that social norms and values around gender, race and socio-economic status make it harder for girls to meaningfully exercise agency and to participate equally with boys. Girls argued that their struggles were intensified by intersecting identities, such as gender, race/ethnicity and social class. One 14-year-old concluded bluntly that, 'If a girl is white and rich, she is safe'. From that perspective, race and socio-economic status can either marginalise girls who are already left behind or give already privileged girls better chances to thrive and flourish. However, it can be argued that most females, regardless of race and socio-economic status, are at risk of violence, discrimination and uneven opportunities.

CONCLUSION

Our research indicates that social identities, contexts and power structures are critical factors that shape children and young people's experiences of participation in social change initiatives. The data suggests that children and

young people's participation and agency are mediated by their sense of identity, way of thinking, peer relationships and ability to transform the structures that shape their lives. However, opportunities for participation and agency are also shaped by place, time and socio-cultural structures.

The research evidenced how race, gender and socio-economic status (among other identities) intersect with practices and attitudes that restrict opportunities for children and young people to engage in social life and bring about change. Thus, these social categories need to be taken into account in order to unpack agency and choice within specific social contexts. Data from this research also supports the imperative of recognising and addressing these intersectional differences whilst developing policy and legislation in order to secure meaningful, ethical and safe participation of children and young people in public and private spaces. Equally, interventions and programming can benefit from shifting their focus beyond children and young people's marginalisation and towards enhancing strategies to strengthen accountability mechanisms and civic participation.

REFERENCES

- Alanen, L. (2016) 'Intersectionality and other challenges to theorizing childhood' *Childhood* 23(2). (<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0907568216631055>, accessed 20 December 2021)
- Archard, D. (2004) *Children: rights and childhood*, 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
- Cuevas-Parra, P. (2022) 'Multi-dimensional lens to article 12 of the UNCRC: a model to enhance children's participation' *Children's Geographies*. (doi: 10.1080/14733285.2022.2071598)
- Da Silva, R. and Dos Santos, R. (2015) Discriminação múltipla: a violência sofrida por jovens negros pobres no Brasil, discriminação interseccional e a performatividade [Multiple Discrimination: Violence suffered by poor black youth in Brazil, intersectional discrimination and performativity]. Seminário Internacional Demandas Sociais e Políticas Públicas na Sociedade Contemporânea, Universidade de Santa Cruz do Sul. (<https://online.unisc.br/acadnet/anais/index.php/sidssp/article/view/13153>)
- Davis, K. (2008) 'Intersectionality as buzzword: a sociology of science perspective on what makes a feminist theory successful' *Feminist Theory* 9(1): 67–85. (doi: 10.1177/1464700108086364)
- Drydyk, J. (2013) 'Empowerment, agency, and power' *Journal of Global Ethics* 9(3): 249–262. (doi: 10.1080/17449626.2013.818374)
- Ecklund, K. (2012) 'Intersectionality of identity in children: a case study' *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 43(3): 256–264. (doi: 10.1037/a0028654)
- Edmonds, R. (2019) 'Making children's "agency" visible: towards the localisation of a concept in theory and practice' *Global Studies of Childhood* 9(3): 200–211. (doi: 10.1177/2043610619860994)
- Evans, R. and Holt, L. (2011) 'Diverse spaces of childhood and youth: gender and other socio-cultural differences' *Children's Geographies* 9(3–4): 277–284. (doi: 10.1080/14733285.2011.595902)
- Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison*. London: Allen Lane.
- Gallagher, M. (2019) 'Rethinking children's agency: power, assemblages, freedom and materiality' *Global Studies of Childhood* 9(3): 188–199. (doi: 10.1177/2043610619860993)

- Hanson, K. (2016) 'Children's participation and agency when they don't "do the right thing"' *Childhood* 23(4): 471–475. (doi: 10.1177/0907568216669222)
- Holloway, S.L. (2014) 'Changing children's geographies' *Children's Geographies* 12(4): 377–392. (doi: 10.1080/14733285.2014.930414)
- James, A. and James, A.L. (2001) 'Childhood: toward a theory of continuity and change' *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 575: 25–37.
- Konstantoni, K. (2012) 'Children's peer relationships and social identities: exploring cases of young children's agency and complex interdependencies from the Minority World' *Children's Geographies* 10(3): 337–346. (doi: 10.1080/14733285.2012.693382)
- Konstantoni, K. and Emejulu, A. (2017) 'When intersectionality met childhood studies: the dilemmas of a travelling concept' *Children's Geographies* 15(1): 6–22. (doi: 10.1080/14733285.2016.1249824)
- Marshall, C. and Rossman, G.B. (2006) *Designing qualitative research*, 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Mayall, B. (2000) 'The sociology of childhood in relation to children's rights' *The International Journal of Children's Rights* 8: 243–259.
- Morgan, D.L. (2012) 'Focus groups and social interaction' in J.F. Gubrium, J.A. Holstein, A.B. Marvasti and K.D. McKinney (eds.) *The Sage handbook of interview research: the complexity of the craft*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Morrow, V. (2013) 'Troubling transitions? Young people's experiences of growing up in poverty in rural Andhra Pradesh, India' *Journal of Youth Studies* 16(1): 86–100. (doi: 10.1080/13676261.2012.704986)
- Moura, T. and Cerdeira, L. (2021) 'Re-thinking gender, activism and choices. Cultures of equality emerging from urban peripheries' *Frontiers in Sociology* 6: 637564.
- Penglas, R.B. (2014) *Living with insecurity in a Brazilian favela: urban violence and daily life*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Pincock, K. and Jones, N. (2020) 'Challenging power dynamics and eliciting marginalized adolescent voices through qualitative methods' *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 19. (doi: 10.1177/1609406920958895)
- Powell, M.A., Graham, A., McArthur, M., Moore, T., Chalmers, J. and Taplin, S. (2019) 'Children's participation in research on sensitive topics: addressing concerns of decision-makers' *Children's Geographies* 18(3): 325–338. (doi: 10.1080/14733285.2019.1639623)
- Prout, A. (2011) 'Taking a step away from modernity: reconsidering the new sociology of childhood' *Global Studies of Childhood* 1(1): 4–14. (doi: 10.2304/gsch.2011.1.1.4)
- Punch, S. (2003) 'Childhoods in the majority world: miniature adults or tribal children?' *Sociology* 37(2): 277–295. (doi: 10.1177/0038038503037002004)
- Ravnø, C.I. (2009) *Intersectional discrimination against children: discrimination against Romani children and anti-discrimination measures to address child trafficking*. Innocenti Working Paper. Florence: UNICEF, Innocenti Research Centre. (www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/iwp_2009_11.pdf)
- Rizzini, I. (2011) 'The promise of citizenship for Brazilian children: what has changed?' *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 633(1): 66–79. (doi: 10.1177/0002716210383950)
- Rodrigues, E. (2018) *MJPOP Skola: monitoring of public policies carried out by adolescents and young people in full-time school José Carvalho*. Fortaleza, Brazil: World Vision Brazil.
- Scalon, C. and de Oliveira, P.P. (2020) 'Inequality and social justice in Latin America: youth's perception and values' in X. Bada and L. Rivera-Sánchez (eds.) *The Oxford handbook of the sociology of Latin America*. London and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Skelton, T. (2008) 'Research with children and young people: exploring the tensions between ethics, competence and participation' *Children's Geographies* 6(1): 21–36. (doi: 10.1080/14733280701791876)

- Soares, S. (2016) *Poverty profile: the rural North and Northeast of Brazil*. Research brief. Brasilia: International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth. (https://ipcig.org/pub/eng/PRB50_Poverty_profile_the_rural_North_Northeast_regions_of_Brazil.pdf)
- Thorne, B. (2004) 'Editorial: theorizing age and other differences' *Childhood* 11(4): 403–408. (doi: 10.1177/0907568204047103)
- Tisdall, E.K.M. (2017) 'Conceptualising children and young people's participation: examining vulnerability, social accountability and co-production' *The International Journal of Human Rights* 21(1): 59–75. (doi: 10.1080/13642987.2016.1248125)
- Van Blerk, L. (2008) 'Poverty, migration and sex work: youth transitions in Ethiopia' *Area* 40(2): 245–253. (doi: 10.1111/j.1475–4762.2008.00799.x)
- Van Blerk, L. (2013) 'New street geographies: the impact of urban governance on the mobilities of Cape Town's street youth' *Urban Studies* 50(3): 556–573. (doi: 10.1177/0042098012468895)
- van Daalen, E., Hanson, K. and Nieuwenhuys, O. (2016) 'Children's rights as living rights' *The International Journal of Children's Rights* 24(4): 803–825. (doi: 10.1163/15718182-02404006)
- Weissman, D. (2020) *Agency: moral identity and free will*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers.