

Barriers in promoting childhood participation in Chilean public policies

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Scientific article

Material original autorizado para su primera publicación en el Journal de Ciencias Sociales, Revista Académica de la Facultad de Ciencias Sociales de la Universidad de Palermo.

Received: 2025-09-09

Accepted: 2025-10-15

Abstract: This research examines the main barriers to promoting childhood participation in Chilean policymaking through qualitative and participative research methods such as the Mosaic Approach, in which children, adolescents, and professionals were the participants; and semi-structured interviews with adolescents involved in the policymaking, experts and policymakers. This study found that the main barriers to promoting childhood participation are the gap between the children's rights approach fundamentals and their implementation; the instrumentalization of child participation in public programmes; public policies and institutionality issues to implement children's rights; deficiencies in knowledge and training for professionals; lack of proper methodologies and official data to promote childhood participation; and specific barriers for children and adolescents. Many of these barriers have been found in international contexts. Therefore, it is important to generate awareness and create new guidelines to promote children's participation in Chile's policymaking process.

Keywords: child participation; child rights; public policies; barriers.

Barreras para promover la participación infantil en las políticas públicas chilenas

Resumen: Esta investigación examina las principales barreras para promover la participación infantil en la formulación de políticas públicas chilenas a través de métodos de investigación cualitativos y participativos como el Enfoque Mosaico, en el que participaron niños/as, adolescentes y profesionales; y entrevistas semiestructuradas con adolescentes involucrados

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en la formulación de políticas, expertos y formuladores de políticas. Este estudio encontró que las principales barreras para promover la participación infantil son la brecha entre los fundamentos del enfoque de los derechos de la niñez y su implementación; la instrumentalización de la participación infantil en programas públicos; políticas públicas y problemas de institucionalidad para implementar los derechos de la niñez; deficiencias en el conocimiento y la capacitación de los profesionales; falta de metodologías adecuadas y datos oficiales para promover la participación infantil; y barreras específicas para niños, niñas y adolescentes. Muchas de estas barreras se han encontrado en contextos internacionales. Por lo tanto, es importante generar conciencia y crear nuevas directrices para promover la participación infantil en el proceso de formulación de políticas públicas de Chile.

Palabras clave: participación infantil; derechos de la infancia; políticas públicas, barreras.

1. Introduction

Participative dynamics are different in each context as culture and sociopolitical patterns play an important role in the implementation of children's rights, especially participation ones. Improved outcomes for different children will only be achieved through understanding the contextual and structural issues (Johnson, 2010). The predominant current discourse in childhood participation has been focused on privileged societies, without appreciating the complexities and obstacles of applying participatory rights across different realities (Duramy & Gal, 2020).

The idealised image of a child whose parents protect, has access to adequate nutrition and education, is appropriately clothed, enjoys leisure time, and is shielded from harmful labour does not always reflect children's reality (Duramy & Gal, 2020). In developing countries, children would not be able to enjoy leisure time in their everyday life because they need to contribute to family survival by doing household chores, preparing, and selling food in the streets, or working in the fields (Duramy & Gal, 2020). Given the structural inequalities in the current global order, civilizing projects have led to double-sided patronization of children, parents, and states, where children become objects for outside political intervention, while adults become targets constantly blamed for children's suffering (Valentin & Meinert, 2009).

This reality is related to some articles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989). The idea is that the standard of living will depend on the parent's conditions; therefore, if they have enough resources to protect children's rights, the intervention of the state should be reduced to the necessary cases. Nonetheless, in contexts where the family does not cover the minimum conditions of welfare, the government should function as a grantor for the proper mechanisms for the participation of children. The ideal context in which states can guarantee children's rights protection, with proper mechanisms for

their participation to complain against violating their rights, is not a global reality (Lansdown, 2011). If the state does not cover the minimum conditions of welfare, this could be a significant issue in promoting children's rights to participation.

Implementing children's rights could be more challenging in developing countries, such as Latin American ones, living in the middle of structural inequalities which demand special consideration in their analysis frameworks to understand the barriers to implement children's rights. The Latin American region presents a mix of cultures thanks to colonization processes and deep unequal societies (Bachelet, 2024; Contreras & Ferreira, 2025) which have generated specific manifestations of childhood participation demanding such an examination. This study considers the Chilean reality given that the country has been experiencing a significant change in recent years.

The first part of the paper presents the Chilean background as state of knowledge. Second, the theory perspective is included. Then methodology is outlined. Subsequently, the results and discussion focus on key barriers and issues found to promote children and adolescents' participation in the Chilean policymaking, considering evidence highlighted by other studies. Finally, the conclusions section addresses the challenges to foster children and adolescent's participation in Chile and study's limitations, conclusions and proposed future research directions.

1.1. Contextualizing childhood participation in Chile

Chile is a prosperous country in Latin America (Statista Research Department, 2023); however, it is one of the most unequal in the OECD (2020). The stark inequalities and cost of living in Chile have generated discord in its population, which exploded in October 2019 with the increase in public transport fares. Although adults felt nonconformity with this measure, young people's protests and manifestations influenced the Chilean population (Jara-Osorio, 2023). A poor response from the government, with serious attacks against the students, activated a national reaction against the government (Chilean Universities, 2020). The social pressure compelled to most political sectors in Chile to sign a peace agreement which established a national referendum to ask for the necessity of a new constitution (Waissbluth, 2020). More than two-thirds of the citizenships agreed to change the Chilean constitution (Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales -CEPC, 2024).

Different national referendums occurred in Chile during the last years; the most important were the new constitutional proposals. The first constitutional proposal was voted on 4 September 2022, and the second on 17 December 2023; however, both proposals were rejected (CEPC, 2024). Until now, there is no consensus on the idea of approving a new constitution in the country, which demonstrates the difficulties regarding citizenship participation in Chile. Nevertheless, this process opened a debate related to citizen

participation, especially regards children and adolescents' participation. Despite they were protagonists of the social revolution, they were not included in any formal step of this process.

Including children and adolescents' voice in public policies has not been an easy task in Chile because formal spaces of participation and citizenship have been historically limited. The ratification of the UNCRC in 1990 has been focused on the material well-being of children but not on the participation rights (Díaz-Bórquez et al., 2018). The establishment of the neoliberal model in the dictatorship affected the political participative process as citizenship participation was discredited. Its repercussions have caused citizenship discontent during the democratic governments, which is reflected in low community participation and a low level of trust (Valdivieso, 2007).

Additionally, an adult-centric and patriarchal culture has been diagnosed as a barrier to children's participation in Chile (Ombudsman for Children, 2022). Nonetheless, through young people's movements, children and adolescents have sought access to the public sphere (Díaz-Bórquez et al., 2018). Since 2006, young people have been engaged in protests and manifestations for different demands and necessities, especially related to educational reforms. Fifteen years of student movements have shown their capacity to install significant debates in Chile. However, this role has not been recognised to create formal mechanisms for political participation (Morales, 2020).

The Chilean childhood policies have not been completely ensured the social rights of children and adolescents (Ombudsman for Children, 2020). To improve the childhood policies institutions the National Service for Children (NSC) has been divided in two independent services: Child Protection Service and Youth Social Reintegration Service (EDUCACION 2020, 2020a). The first one depends on the Ministry of Social Development and Family and the second one on the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights of Chile (National Youth Social Reintegration Service, 2023).

Many studies and reports have showed the Chilean child protection system deficiencies (Chilean Investigative Police report, 2018; Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2015; National Council for Children, 2016). Chile presents a clear shortcoming in ensuring children's participation rights, as no official mechanisms exist to involve them in shaping childhood policies (Ombudsman for Children, 2020). The United Nations (2018) reported on how the violation of children's rights in the centres administered by the Chilean State evolved. Regarding article 12, the report established that children did not have access to a public defender or a judge with which to speak; there was an absence of clear and well-known protocols on the possibility of expressing complaints or denouncing rights violations in the centres and each child was not guaranteed the opportunity to be heard and to express their opinion in the decisions of the centre which affected them (UN, 2018). The Network of

Childhood and Youth NGOs Chile (2014) indicated that in Chile there is a permanent violation of the principle of participation and the right to express an opinion.

The violation of articles number 34 regarding protection against sexual exploitation and abuse, and 37 concerning protections against torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment were the most serious. This report emphasised that the Chilean state had violated seventeen articles of the UNCRC, concluding that, in Chile, the state had committed a grave and systematic violation of children's rights (UN, 2018). Due to this complex context, the Chilean childhood institutionality has been adopting important changes. In 2022 the Chilean Government ratified the Law of Guarantees of Children's Rights which promotes a system of guarantees and protection of the exercise of children's rights in the country (Ministry of Social Development and Family of Chile, 2015). This law was an important achievement as Chile was the only country in Latin America without an integral childhood protection code.

Despite these efforts, there are deficiencies in the Chilean children's protection rights system until now. Children and young people demand changes in the childhood services. This was manifested in the social outbreak in 2019. During this process, young people went to the streets to demand a deep change in the NSC to protect their rights (Waissbluth, 2020). Children's rights to participate have had different challenges in its implementation. They require a change of logics and perspectives in all people, especially adults.

Different scholars (Díaz-Bórquez et al., (2018); Mundaca and Flores (2024); Lay-Lisboa and Montañés Serrano (2018)) provided key findings into the implementation of participation rights in Chile; however, their focus has been limited to specific areas of the Chilean childhood system, without addressing the implementation of participation rights from a systemic perspective that comprehends the various policies and institutions responsible for children's rights in Chile. Moreover, most of these initiatives have overlooked the perspectives of children and adolescents.

Based on the research question: what barriers and issues could be examined related to the form in which children and adolescents participate in the public policymaking process in Chile? This paper presents the main barriers and issues found on the implementation of participation rights Chile. Considering different perspectives from experts, policymakers, professionals who have been involved in the childhood participation field and children and adolescents who live in Chile.

1.2. Theoretical perspective: barriers to promote children's participation

Children's rights to participation could face different impediments to be implemented in societies. Historical, cultural, political, and academic influence of constructions of childhood could be important barriers to implement children's rights to participate (Tisdall & Cuevas-

Parra, 2021). Childhood is a construction which should be understood as a cultural, historical, and political expression of certain knowledge and practices of control fragmenting childhood and adolescence experiences (Llobet and Villalta, 2019). Therefore, if children are structurally in a position of dependence - biologically and economically - in relation to adults, then participation cannot avoid the problem of power relations and how these are organized in the social structure which influences children's participation in societies (Pavez-Soto and Sepúlveda, 2019).

Adult-centric perspectives are obstacles to promote children's rights to participation. Many times, adults think that children and adolescents are not ready to participate, signifying their own characteristics as deficiencies, from this perspective, a deficit model of childhood prevails, representing a risk for making their capabilities invisible and denying the importance of spaces which facilitate the development of their faculties in different areas of their lives (Morales, 2022). This causes discrimination towards young children in different matters; for instance, their language skills might still not be sufficient for addressing international events (Templeton et al., 2023). Additionally, a predominant legal discourse, based on an adult, paternalistic language, could mean a barrier as infantile forms of expression could not be considered significant forms of language (McMellon & Tisdall, 2020). The problem would not be the language and expression of children, but rather adults' inability to understand and validate their language (Lay-Lisboa, S. & Montañés Serrano, 2018).

Sometimes, there is a lack of knowledge and a proper preparation around childhood participation in adults working with children/youth, and adults would try to promote children's participation from their own perspective, excluding the ones children have in the selection of mechanisms to participate and in the decision-making process (Tisdall, 2016). Accordingly, children's participation could be limited to adult practices. Polkki et al., (2012) found that practitioners' knowledge and skills are important to promoting participatory practices. In fact, these may not be enough if procedural barriers like high caseloads are not addressed within organizations (Cudjoe & Abdullah, 2018).

The role of policymakers and practitioners is significant to promote children's participation. Studies have shown that certain groups of children and adolescents tend to be excluded from participation in local councils. These include children coming from disempowered families (Collins et al., 2016; Wyness, 2006, 2009), those tending to be critical of adults (Pavlovic, 2001), or those who are less academically and socially successful (Collins et al., 2016). Inequalities, poverty, and general disadvantages could be important barriers for children's participation.

2. Methodology

This research project considers a Qualitative approach as the investigator can access the social actor's perception, generally oriented to the discovery of unknown aspects, offering the possibility of generating deeper data oriented to the meaning in the social phenomena to study (Hernández et al. 2010). The selection of the sample was theoretical and at convenience (Sandoval Casilimas, 1996). There are differentiated criteria to select children and adolescents, and adults in this study.

2.1. Children and adolescent inclusion criteria

Territorial diversity: Metropolitan Region (MR) and Coquimbo Region (CR) were selected based on the number of local districts and population size, which could present different barriers to promote children's participation in the Chilean policymaking.

Childhood participation performance: identification of notable examples of child participation in the selected regions, which had child-focused organizations registered with the Ombudsman for Children.

Sociodemographic heterogeneity: La Florida and Ñuñoa were two municipalities selected in MR, and in CR were La Serena and Vicuña. All the local governments were chosen based on census population, level of rurality, average schooling, communal poverty and ethnicity.

Local Office for Children (LOC): in each region one municipality had to be implemented the LOC. La Florida and La Serena were executing the LOC project.

Age criteria:

- The children's group included participants aged 8–13, based on the Ministry of Education of Chile (2017), which sets the minimum school entry age at six. Children aged eight and above were considered capable of understanding the researcher's questions.

- The adolescents' group comprised participants aged 14 to under 18, in line with Law 20,084 of the Chilean Adolescent Penal System (National Congress of Chile, 2011), which recognises adolescents in this age range as having discernment capacity and only considers them adults at 18. Based on those criteria child and adolescent participants of this study are indicated in table 1.

Table 1. Child and adolescent participants

Social Actor	Children		Adolescents		
	Male	Female	Male	Female	LGBTQIA+
Children and adolescents without involvement a Public Programme	3	3	4	3	1
Children and adolescents that participate in a public programme ²	2	2	2	0	0
Participants of Advisory Councils for Children and Adolescents	1	3	1	3	0
Members of the National Advisory Council for children and adolescents of the NSC	0	0	1	0	0
Members of the Advisory Council of the Ombudsman	0	0	0	1	0
Total by participant profile	6	8	8	7	1
Total participants	14 Children		16 Adolescents		

Source: prepared by the author.

2.2. Adults inclusion criteria

Table 2 presents details on adult participants of this study. The main criterion considered for adults' selection are:

- Experts engaged in the childhood participation debate, identified through their publications, involvement in projects or programs, and public presentations on the topic.
- Policymakers with extensive experience in Chilean childhood policies, identified through institutional recommendations, to illustrate key priorities in public policymaking.
- Professionals from institutions within the Chilean childhood system who directly worked with the children and adolescents in the sample.

² Public programmes considered were the National Service for Children, Chile Grows with You; or other programmes implemented by the local governments.

Table 2. Adult participants

Social Actor	Criteria	Participants
Experts	UNICEF	1
	Childhood and Adolescence Observatory	2
	The Ombudsman for Children	2
	Nucleus of Interdisciplinary Studies on Childhood	1
	Childhood Notebooks	1
	World Vision	1
	Mobilizing Ourselves Movement	1
	Chilean Association for the United Nations	1
Policymakers	Ministry of Social Development of the Government of Chile	4
	Ministry of Justice and Human Rights of the Government of Chile.	1
Professionals	NSC	1
	Entities collaborating with the NSC	2
	Chile Grows with you Subsystem	2
	Other programmes implemented by the local governments	12
Total		32

Source: prepared by the author.

2.3. Methods

Participative methods were selected for this research such as the Semi-Structured Interviews (SSI) and the Mosaic Approach Method (MAM). This decision refers to comprehending, from a critical perspective, the complexity of the phenomenon studied. This study followed the ethical guidelines of the ethical subcommittee of Loughborough University.

- **Semi-Structured Interviews**

The SSI enabled the researcher to gather extensive information, providing the opportunity to clarify responses and explore questions in greater depth during the process

(Valles, 1999). Policymakers, experts and adolescents involved in the policymaking process³ were interviewed. Since the fieldwork was carried out during the pandemic, from February to August 2022, interviews were conducted either online or in person, depending on the participants' preferences and the restrictions established by the Chilean government.

- **Mosaic Approach Method (MAM)**

The MAM considers observation, interviewing, and the introduction of participatory tools as artistic resources. From the perspective of Clark (2005) the field of childhood participation provokes varied responses and encompasses a wide range of viewpoints. The MAM had two stages in the study. The first step was to gather material in the workshops with children, adolescents and some practitioners through varied methods, especially using drawings and conversations in the general group. The materials available for participants were artistic tools and materials as graphite pencils, coloured pencils, markers, erasers, paper, colour paper, round tip scissors, glue stick, and pads for painting or drawing, and clay in adolescents' workshops.

Two Mosaic Approach workshops were held in each region; one workshop was conducted with children aged 8–13 years and one with adolescents aged 14–18. Some professionals participated in the workshops, according to the agreement with all institutions, children and adolescents. The second stage consisted of semi-structured interviews with professionals, where the workshop outcomes were discussed.

Data collected through the SSI and MAM was analysed based on the Grounded Theory procedure. The Grounded Theory purpose is to combine coding and analysis to generate theory in a more systematic way, through the explicit use of coding and analysis procedures (Valles, 1999). Through this method, thematic analysis was conducted using the NVIVO 13, which is a software for qualitative data analysis. NVIVO allows the researcher to organise, analyse and visualise their data, finding the patterns it contains (QSR International, 2025); therefore, this software helped to create themes and subthemes during the analysis process.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Discrimination by age

The age prejudice is substantial to be considered as, historically, social policies have not considered children as persons with a voice. Rather, children have been seen as objects of concern (Hallet & Prout, 2004), or of knowledge.

³ These participants could be part of the Advisory Council of the Ombudsman or the National Advisory Council for children and adolescents of the NSC.

The discrimination by age was found in two variants. On the one hand, young children are usually not invited to participate in policymaking or even in their families or communities. The younger the participants are, they are more likely to be discriminated by adults, especially in participative initiatives. As Adolescent 2 illustrated:

“The ages that are less taken into account are boys from 12 to 13 years old down... boys from 14 and 15 years old, according to most adults, have other criteria, have another opinion, they're more prepared to participate and those are the majority of organisers of these spaces or those in charge of taking children and adolescents to international spaces... child participation in Chile exists, but maybe not for small children, but for more adolescents and the older you are, the more they take you into account ... child participation in Chile is very closed.”

This opinion was reinforced by participants of Mosaic Approach workshops with adolescents, being it possible to think this is a common issue to face when initiatives want to promote children's participation in the policymaking, especially in early years. As adolescents of Coquimbo Region Mosaic Approach reflected:

“Participant 7: When you are a kid you are not considered on several occasions.

Moderator: do you think that there's more participation when we grow up?

Participant 7: Yes, because in my case, when I was little, no, they didn't take me into account in several things and now that I grew up, they began to take me more into account. When I was little, they excluded me from the conversation.”

On the other hand, adolescents mentioned that when they are close to adulthood, they are less considered than before because approaching the legal age means that they will soon be part of adult group, therefore, they are not attractive as adolescents' representatives. Adolescent 2 indicated *“the more you grow up, also the spaces in which you can participate diminish, because you approach more, like, a legal age, so to speak, then the older you are the less spaces you have.”*

3.2. Language barriers

This study found that language barriers are an important theme to consider within child's perspectives as this could be a powerful participative disabler because children/adolescent could be marginalised if they cannot participate in the same conversation with adults. As Policymaker 3 illustrates:

“The requirement of orality is sometimes a very strong barrier to child participation in Chile, in addition to the fact that there is usually a language delay, and the figures are quite high, more, very strong in the most vulnerable environments.”

The adult language is one of the difficulties in recognising children as active subjects and their opinions as valid. This has its origin in the predominant legal discourse, which is

based on an adult, paternalistic language, without considering that infantile forms of expression are also significant forms of language as their opinions explained in simple words, or their drawings, games among others could give valuable information to understand what they need or not.

The problem would not be the language and expression of children, but rather the inability of adults to understand, decode and validate their language, expecting that children and young people behave and communicate as the same adult style since the adult world would not be obliged to facilitate children's participation. In this sense, Professional 6 indicated:

"It's very focused on teenagers, it's like they're more part of the opinion. More than children, for example, 5-year-old children who can also perfectly give an opinion or point of view, they are not very considered in the programmes."

The limited consideration of children and adolescents in public programmes is a barrier to promote their participation since only a part of the childhood has access to initiatives in which they can express their opinions. The discrimination towards young children is identified in the research of Templeton et al. (2023) who indicate that language skills might still not be sufficient for addressing international events, being it problematic that the voice of young children has been focus of delegitimization and less considered in participative instances.

3.3. Relying on the same participants to represent adolescents

The selection of certain children and adolescents from privileged groups could be a barrier to promote childhood participation as the same participants are considered by different public initiatives, which restricts the space to listen to the diversity of children and adolescents' opinions. As Adolescent 2 mentioned:

"It's very difficult to have access to what child participation is... there are applications to councils of other people who are not from the NSC and maybe you want to apply, but they leave you out simply because they already have the boys sorted a year ago" (Adolescent 2).

The scarce access to participative instances for children and youth is an issue to promote children's participation in the policymaking since if they do not have enough spaces to participate, it is difficult they will be able to exercise this right. Expert 5 mentioned:

"[Ombudsman for Children Council Adolescents] are in all the circuits of power, they are the same that are in the old councils of NSC, they are the same that are in the Council of the Undersecretariat. So, you say, what representation do they have of what happens to adolescents?"

The same adolescents are the representatives of all the adolescent population, which is a limitation to give space to other adolescents who want to participate. In this study was very difficult to have access to this adolescents' group, perhaps they are very busy or tired of participating in different initiatives without interest in participating in new ones.

There is not guaranty that this group of adolescents who are participating in the main councils within the public policymaking represent the necessities and opinions of all children and adolescents in Chile. This is a significant gap in the exercise of childhood participation since more children and adolescents should be able to represent this group of the society. Related to this, in the study of Templeton et al. (2023, p. 792) an adult participant noted: "I think the problem of representativeness of these children [is that] I don't know on the behalf of whom they are speaking... Another point [is] why [do] we decide that they are leaders. I have no idea. Because, maybe, we need to have [a] kind of criteria to make sure."

Additionally, study participants mentioned that usually, institutions work with certain groups of children who are more successful in academic terms or who are more popular in their institutions. As Professional 16 indicated:

"[Institutions work] with children, who are more exemplary... those in the Student Centres... these are children who will always participate, but what happens with the isolated child? What happens with the child who can't participate due to a personality issue and doesn't like it... but who, if given the opportunity, could participate?"

There are significant examples about the invisibility of children and adolescents in Chile, one of them are the Advisory Councils for Children and Adolescents. This councils are a good idea to contribute to the materialization of the right to participate for children and adolescents in Chile. Nonetheless, their implementation has been weak, as Expert 2 indicated:

"This participation still has some sort of consultative mean ... we have been talking with several children who participate in consultative councils and the first thing that we notice is also disappointment because... it has a functional use... the ones who study or require participation of children come for advice and finish their research, then many times they don't even return to the children with a format by which they could clearly understand the results of such research."

The opinion of children and adolescents has been used to collect information, but they do not influence any decision of those instances, which is an important issue to promote their participation. Certain groups of children and adolescents tend to be excluded from participation in local councils, such as: children coming from disempowered families (Collins et al., 2016; Wyness, 2006, 2009), those tending to be critical of adults (Pavlovic, 2001), or who are less academically or socially successful (Collins et al., 2016).

3.4. Deficiency of training among professionals

The deficiency of training among professionals who are involved in Chilean childhood policies is a barrier to promote children's participation. Participants referred that in different levels of public programmes the knowledge around children's rights, and their implementation is scarce, especially around participation rights because there are not enough resources and importance around this children's right in the public policies in the country. As Professional 15 said:

"The issue of participation becomes a declaration of good intentions when formulating public policy, but few tools are provided... we have the task of training the teams... but you don't go beyond providing tools so the professional who is in the field knows how to make changes to this... it remains to give it a spin, as to how we can effectively implement a participatory approach to intervention with adolescents, we do not have instruments."

The limited preparation of childhood policies human resources has gone to the detriment of the design and implementation of public programs to promote childhood participation. This is a problem identified by professionals, who try to conduct public programmes with some coherency, usually facing important issues in their implementation. Professional 17 referred:

"The programmes come from ministries that do not work with children either, they do not have a 'Boys and Girls Council' to create the programmes, so they come from the adult world, and the feeling that we have here -from the people who work in the field- is that the people who send the paper, is like they send the standards of how one has to work, they don't know what it's like to work in the field."

This issue is significant as Polkki et al., (2012) found that practitioners' knowledge and skills are important to promoting participatory practices. In fact, these may not be enough if procedural barriers like high caseloads are not addressed within organizations (Cudjoe & Abdullah, 2018).

3.5. Failings in intervention and evaluation methodologies

This study found limited and inadequate methodologies to promote children and adolescents' participation in the design, implementation, and evaluation of public programmes. This was illustrated by Expert 10:

"These well-known academic counterparts... many times [work] from the adult centred point of view... conductive interviews, focus group, but it has been difficult to explore other methodologies that are adapted to children and adolescents' realities... that's the main challenge [about] children's participation in research... policies, education, whether incidental or protagonist... in which they are protagonists of what they are doing, more than recipients or whoever gives the information to us."

The deficiency of proper methodologies was faced in *public policymaker teams* who try to promote children's participation in public programmes, but they do not know how to do it. They improvise methodologies which lack sense and coherency. This was witnessed by Expert 6:

"I was invited to give a talk for a technical team in the government... a presentation about participation within public policy... one team was formed by researchers that were developing the quantitative part of research, and second, they were a focus [sic] on events... 'circus', 'cinema'... they were two extreme things, nothing in the middle... there is no expertise to understand the topic."

The lack of knowledge and expertise of the childhood system professionals impacts in the design and implementation of programmes, considering improper methodologies which finally generates less promotion of children's participation.

3.6. Scarcity of official data

The second effect of the lack of knowledge around children's rights, especially participation rights, is the scarcity of official data to know the reality of Chilean childhood. The state does not have enough information to understand the reality of children and young people, which is an issue to create coherent social interventions that contribute to children's participation from participants' perspectives. As Expert 1 mentioned:

"The lack of knowledge... is a problem and if one analyses the data, we have on participation... it is very little... there is no data on what is happening in that level... [there are] institutional, legal and knowledge production level obstacles."

The Chilean state should consider the lack of childhood information within its priorities since with the last events during the social outbreak and the presence of young people in protests and manifestations, they obviously have something to say about the country. Nonetheless, from the perspective of Expert 7 this is a deficient area:

"This state hasn't been able to find the ways and the motivations for children's participation, and that is reflected in the issue of what the level of participation that corresponds to children in public policies is... the main issue that has been observed is that there was a very important level of children and adolescents' participation and that it hasn't been possible to collect official data."

The Chilean state does not have proper information to understand children's participation in the country, which is an issue to create coherent social interventions which contribute to children and adolescents' lives. Therefore, childhood research improvement is required to have better data in the country, with children and adolescents as collaborators

from the beginning of the research process, giving ideas, and implementing as co-researchers the studies.

3.7. Misunderstanding of child's rights protection in Chile

Participants referred that the current public policies in Chile emphasise two different poles. A prevalent protectionist mindset within childhood policies has hindered the implementation of children's rights protection in the country. This paternalistic role of the state also hinders children's participation in the policymaking. In Chile, the children's rights approach has an excessive emphasis on protection which fails to recognize their agency and hampers their ability to participate in public policies that impact on their lives. Expert 2 indicated:

“One (problem) has to do with design... I think there has been no political will to think about effective participation processes for boys and girls... even in contexts of “progressive” politicians... The idea of objects of protection is very strong and I think the antinomy of participation and protection is very transversal.”

The imbalance in protection rights in Chile has invisibilised the child's position in the society which is a problem for children's participation in the Chilean policymaking. Children are considered only to give them protection but not to understand their perspectives and include them in decision-making processes.

The other pole is a not comprehensive protection policy for children and adolescents which marginalises groups of the Chilean population. Results indicate that public policies are focused on the Chilean vulnerable population. Expert 4 mentioned:

“There is no comprehensive protection policy for children... focused policy continues to be the north of public policy with an extreme neoliberal model and carelessness... of the State with respect to its role as guarantor of rights... The State is not a guarantor of rights, but it provides resources for working with and for the most marginalized groups, including boys and girls. Therefore, public policy in Chile is a policy that does not account for the human rights of all the children and adolescents who live in Chile.”

There is not an understanding of the universal condition of children's rights. Instead, childhood policies are assumed as programmes for a vulnerable children/adolescents' group. The state has not comprehended the subject of rights condition of all the population under 18 years old. As Expert 8 mentioned:

“[Childhood policies] are very focused on the violated childhood, as the state arrives late and when it arrives, there are still many failures.... most children are left without a public policy and especially if we are talking about participation, there is none.”

The centralized attention in vulnerable population by the childhood policies has been a lack in the Chilean system since a sectoral logic continues to prevail, hindering the universality and integrity of policies (Larraín, 2011). In countries with large inequalities and scarce resources, such as Chile, the coverage of state programmes is focused on specific segments of the population or on specific problems to direct the available resources to the neediest groups (Gaitán, 2006). The UN (2010) indicated that Chilean policies for the protection of children can continue to improve in time, although those efforts will always be partial if a comprehensive policy which conceives children as subjects of rights is not structured.

3.8. Authorities' resistance to promoting childhood participation

Authorities' resistance to promote childhood participation was another barrier identified by participants. Many participants have witnessed how good policies' ideas are not implemented because authorities did not support them. The concern about the loss of power could be linked to the resistance from authorities to promote the children's participation in the country. From the perspective of some policymakers, historically, the consideration of children's perspectives by the authority has been difficult:

"I had a chance to talk to the minister because there weren't millions to participate... so [I proposed]: why don't they include boys, girls, and young people [in the survey], then, they bombarded me from all fronts, the response was 'Why do you want to bring us one more political problem? If we already interact with the original people to organize the survey, with adults it is a huge political problem and you want to bring us one more problem,' that was the answer" (Policymaker 5).

Policymakers involved in the promotion of children's participation in the Chilean policymaking face many difficulties to consider children's voice in public policies. This situation could be explained by an adult-centric perspective, where adults are concerned around the idea of losing power if children and adolescent have more protagonism in the policymaking process. Bennett-Woodhouse (2003) indicate that adults may be one of the most significant barriers to children's participation, as taking children seriously, creating spaces and opportunities for their meaningful participation, and treating them as bone fide equals at high-level events, is still very much underdeveloped. Political and cultural reasons could be more powerful than academic and technical fundamentals to include children's participation in the policymaking.

4. Conclusions

There are many barriers and issues that should be considered to promote children's participation in Chile to improve the child protection system. This research discovered that

there are mistakes in Chilean protection policies which lead to overprotection of the childhood condition, but, contradictorily, lack of comprehensive policies, leaving different children and adolescent cohorts unprotected, neglecting the universal notion of children's rights and the right to participate. Second, deficiencies in professional knowledge about children's rights approach, participative methodologies, and childhood data further hamper effective participation. Third, the instrumentalization of childhood participation reflects tokenism and consultative approaches as children and adolescents are invited to participate without genuine influence in decision-making processes. Finally, systemic barriers such as age discrimination, language, and sociopolitical factors hinder the involvement of children and young people in policymaking. Paying attention to and tackling these challenges are crucial to promoting meaningful participatory practices and encouraging children's participation rights in Chile.

The discursive recognition of children's participation in the Chilean childhood policy must be materialized, requiring political and institutional support to create structural conditions for the expression of children's and adolescents' opinions. The Chilean State should include in the policymaking process correct mechanisms to promote the effective exercise of participation rights.

This study was conducted in the midst of an uncertain environment in Chile, characterized by the COVID-19 pandemic context, a changing scenario in Chilean reality regarding the design of a new constitution, the beginning of President Gabriel Boric's presidential period (March 2022), and the implementation of a new childhood institutionality. All these factors generated challenges in obtaining support from public institutions. Consequently, the networking process was longer and more demanding than expected. Other limitations refer to the study design, as it was focused on two Chilean regions (out of a total of 16) and four local governments (out of a total of 346), which limited its generalizability to the broader national context.

More studies that listen to and show different perspectives on childhood participation should be implemented in Chile, including perspectives of experts, policymakers, professionals involved in the childhood participation field and especially giving voice to children and adolescents to build recommendations for the Chilean childhood system. Historically, social policies have not considered children as persons with a voice. All of this should be based on a systemic perspective to rearticulate the different levels of governments, institutions and social actors that are part of the childhood system based on the necessity to consider the perspectives of children and adolescents as protagonists in policymaking at the centre of the system.

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