

Principle of progressive autonomy, participation, and recognition of agency. Substantive citizenship in the transition from childhood to adolescence

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Abstract: It is necessary to talk about children's and adolescents' education for citizenship beyond the vindication of spaces for citizen action. It is necessary to incorporate the principle of progressive autonomy highlighted by the Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989 in terms of 'evolving capacities', from the knowledge of their rights and their exercise. This article aims to analyse the concept of substantive citizenship of children and adolescents based on their right to participation and from the recognition of their agency, as well as the promotion of and respect for the principle of progressive autonomy. Based on a participatory narrative research with a socio-critical perspective, 23 discussion groups were carried out with 210 young people between 15 and 19 years old in five Iberoamerican cities: Barcelona, Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Madrid and Sao Paulo. From the content analysis of their contributions, three dimensions emerge: to know oneself as a subject of rights from the knowledge of these rights, the importance of intergenerational relations in recognising progressive autonomy, and the incidence of age in the development of their autonomy. As conclusions, it should be noted that young people in the five cities know their rights and recognise that family, school and social media favour their recognition as subjects of rights

and responsibilities. It also reveals that age is a limiting element and a fundamental factor for the development of substantive citizenship.

Keywords: progressive autonomy; agency; substantive citizenship; participation; youth.

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1. Introduction

The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child states that persons under the age of 18 should exercise their rights in accordance with their evolving capacities. This evolution of capacities has been referred to as the principle of progressive autonomy, which arises from the recognition of the agency of children and adolescents, that is, from the recognition of their capacity for autonomous action, as well as from the recognition of their substantive citizenship, their condition as subjects of rights, and agents of change (Carmona Luque, 2011). The right to participation is constituted as a safeguard for the exercise of rights by children and adolescents, so the child-adolescent-adult and child-adolescent-environment relationship are key elements to be analysed.

The article is part of two research projects¹ that have involved young people between 15 and 19 years old from five cities in four Iberoamerican countries: Barcelona, Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Madrid, and Sao Paulo, who were invited to participate in discussion groups to address the issue of their participatory opportunities and experiences in the environments in which they take part. This article aims to analyse the concept of substantive citizenship of children and adolescents based on their right to participation and from the recognition of their agency, as well as the promotion of and respect for the principle of progressive autonomy. At this point, it is necessary to define what is meant by childhood and adolescence. According to the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, a child is any person under 18. As for the concept of adolescence, although it 'has particular connotations in particular cultural and social contexts' (Actions for the Rights of Children, 2001, p. 4), it is described as the stage of development between puberty and adulthood. The adolescents who took part in this research recounted their experiences of transition from childhood to adolescence, in a collective-introspective process, concerning their opportunities to participate in various contexts within the framework of the focus groups that were held.

The article has been structured as follows: firstly, we provide a theoretical conceptualisation of the article key elements; secondly, we present the objectives and the methodological framework; thirdly, we outline the results obtained; and fourthly and finally, we share the conclusions and draw some recommendations.

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2. The principle of progressive autonomy of children and adolescents

The principle of progressive autonomy of children was already highlighted by the Polish pedagogue Janusz Korczak who introduced the idea of children's protagonism and the principle of autonomy, which should be at the centre of pedagogical work and which was based on the responsibility of children for their decisions (Urdaneta Carruyo & Dairy Salcedo, 2014). Today, the origin of this principle is situated in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (hereafter, the Convention) (Landsown, 2005; Etchebehere Arenas, 2012; Uriarte, 2013; Díaz Arce, 2020) expressed as children's evolving capacities. This principle appears for the first time in Article 5 of the Convention, in which we read:

States Parties shall respect the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents or, where applicable, the members of the extended family or community as provided for by local custom, legal guardians or other persons legally responsible for the child, to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate direction and guidance in the exercise by the child of the rights recognised in the present Convention. (UN, 1989, Art. 5)

According to Gómez de la Torre Vargas (2018), what stems from Article 5 is precisely the principle of progressive autonomy through which children and adolescents are recognised as subjects of law whose wills, interests and desires must be heard, attended to and taken into account. In this way, a legal instrument is established, the Convention, which entails a change of paradigm regarding the conception of childhood (Díaz Arce, 2020), overcoming, in the words of Uriarte (2013) 'the rule of the irregular situation that considered young people as incapable' (p. 151), and, as expressed by Etchebehere Arenas (2012), moving 'from the conception of the child as an object of protection to the conception of the child as a bearer and subject of rights' (p. 48).

The Convention states that this exercise of rights is progressive, linked to the evolution of the child's capacities. Landsown (2005) highlights the need to analyse this evolution of capacities not from the traditional, stage-by-stage and universal approach, but from the understanding that 'children live in diverse environments and cultures and are faced with different life experiences, acquire competencies at different ages, and their acquisition varies according to circumstances' (p. 19). Therefore, and according to the same author, the principle of progressive autonomy stipulates that whereas children require special protection and should therefore be freed from adult responsibilities, they should also be recognised as protagonists of their own lives and be granted greater autonomy in the exercise of their rights (Landsown, 2005).

2.1. The principle of progressive autonomy: co-responsibility between adults, children and adolescents

One of the elements to be analysed here is the shift from the concept of 'evolving capacities' to the 'principle of progressive autonomy'. Díaz Arce (2020) informs us that, as defined by Dworkin (1984), a principle is a legal standard that emerges as a requirement 'of justice, equity or some other dimension of morality' (p. 73). Therefore, when we speak of principles, we refer to axioms whose fulfilment does not only come from a legalistic perspective but from shared values that constitute a social and a cultural norm. Considering this perspective, promoting and respecting the principle of progressive autonomy becomes a matter of concern for adults, institutions, and society as a whole. In this sense, Gómez de la Torre Vargas (2018) stresses that the development of this progressive autonomy on the part of children and adolescents is, to a large extent, the responsibility of adults who must act as their mentors so that they gradually come to know and exercise their rights. Hence, the principle of progressive autonomy requires that adults accompany children and adolescents to acquire specific skills and competences that could not otherwise be learnt (González Coto, 2012).

On the other hand, the principle of progressive autonomy has a political element and a moral one. The Chilean *Observatorio Niñez y Adolescencia* (2020, October 28) reports that 'as a political trait of self-government, it requires sufficient freedom and independence to have the will to take a stand or form an opinion'. In this respect, Díaz Bórquez *et al.* (2019) state that thanks to this development of progressive autonomy, children and adolescents gradually become sovereign in their choices, opinions, proposals, decisions and contributions, and gradually acquire the capacity to assume greater responsibilities. And, in the same line of thought regarding the capacity to govern oneself and become sovereign in one's own thinking and acting, Landsown (2005) asserts that 'as children acquire enhanced competencies, there is a reduced need for direction and a greater capacity to take responsibility for decisions affecting their lives' (p. ix).

2.2. The right to participation and its close link to the articulation of progressive autonomy

The principle of progressive autonomy requires certain conditions and elements in order to be articulated. On the one hand, as expressed by the Chilean *Observatorio Niñez y Adolescencia* (2020, October 28), children and adolescents must have access to information, spaces for participation and be entitled to make decisions on matters of their interest. On the other hand, Díaz Bórquez *et al.* (2019) point out that this principle is developed in two main dimensions: i) the capacity of children to participate, and ii) the spaces and possibilities that children have to participate; therefore, 'progressive autonomy is only possible through participation, that is to say, in a context in which children's capacity to participate is strengthened and at the same time opportunities to participate are generated' (Díaz Bórquez *et al.*, 2019, p. 7).

In the same line of reasoning, Landsown (2005) notes the interrelationship between Article 5 of the Convention, mentioned in previous paragraphs, and Article 12.1, which establishes:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. (ONU, 1989, art. 12.1)

This article is the landmark in terms of the paradigm shift around the social representation of children: 'it requires a recognition of children as active agents, entitled to participate in decisions that affect their lives' (Landsown, 2005, p. 4). The article also asserts that such participation can take place in a variety of ways and that these should not be limited to verbal language so that even the youngest children or those with difficulties have the means to express their views. This is because it is a substantive right, that is, a right that allows them to participate in a real and effective way in those matters that affect and are in the interest of children and adolescents, an essential condition for the exercise of progressive autonomy (Díaz Bórquez *et al.*, 2019).

We end this section by endorsing the observation made by the Chilean *Observatorio Niñez y Adolescencia* (2020, October 28) regarding the relational nature of the progressive autonomy of children and adolescents and the asymmetrical nature of the relations established between adults and children. For this reason, in the following section we will highlight the urgent need to recognise children's human agency so that this autonomy can become effective.

3. Recognition of the children's agency: a core right

Etymologically, the term agency comes from the Latin *agentia* and means 'the ability to take action or to choose what action to take' (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). It is a concept that has been widely analysed from different approaches, whether philosophical, sociological, neuropsychological, developmental psychology, cognitive psychology, etc. It is now also associated with childhood studies, as mentioned earlier, and more recently with studies of children's rights.

Sen (1997, 2001) relates the concept of agency to the capacity for human action. Human action was already analysed by Aristotle, who defined it as an activity oriented to an end -which according to Aristotle, it was none other than excellence- which implies freedom of choice (Zavala Berbena & Castañeda Figueiras, 2014). According to Sen, the agent, that is, the human being who exercises their agency, is free to act because they know what they want and the means to achieve their goals (Pávez Soto & Sepúlveda Kattan, 2019). In this sense, Gallagher (2006) argues that to enable agency there must be an intention, there must be a sense of agency. Moreover, Bratman (2007) states that when we exercise our agency, we do so based on self-determination, self-government and autonomy. On the other hand, Edmonds (2019) reminds us that agency is not owned but exercised in those processes that involve decision-making and action.

A fundamental element of human agency is its relational aspect; in other words, its exercise depends on the recognition of other people within the relationship (Thomas, 2007; Edmonds, 2019; Sutterlüty & Tisdall, 2019; Estard *et al.*, 2021). In short, no one can exercise their agency without a network of relationships and resources that legitimise and enable it. This is illustrated by González Coto (2012) in relating the 'negative labelling (...) systematically made' (p. 5) that women's and children's groups have historically suffered, being excluded from decision-making in public and private affairs. Nevertheless, women's liberation movements have made significant progress -although much remains to be done- and steps are being taken towards the recognition of children as capable (Sutterlüty & Tisdall, 2019) within the generational order (Liebel, 2018) of asymmetric power between adults and children's collectives (Mühlbacher & Sutterlüty, 2019).

In line with the abovementioned, it is worth noting a component that limits the exercise of agency by any minoritised group, children and adolescents in this case: the limiting beliefs (Rodríguez-Moriche & Vallejo-Jiménez, 2019), namely, underestimating the capacities and competencies of such people which leads to an illegitimate resistance when it comes to allowing or inviting them to participate (Valentine, 2011). This causes those collectives that suffer the consequences of such limiting beliefs to perceive themselves as incapable under the influence of the other's limiting view. Only since the recognition of their human agency, children and adolescents constitutively 'gain an autonomous capacity to act in interplay with others' (Mead, 1934, quoted by Mühlbacher & Sutterlüty, 2019, p. 256). For this reason, authors such as Liebel (2018) emphasise the need to include the recognition of the agency of children and adolescents as a right with a balancing function of power; a right that has to do not only with the recognition of capabilities, 'but with the creation of material conditions to be able to use these capabilities' (Liebel, 2018, p. 621). As the author Berry Mayall (2002), quoted by Pávez Soto & Sepúlveda Kattan (2019, p. 201), said: 'girls and boys possess the knowledge and resources for action, as well as the reflective capacity of the agent'.

4. Children's participation: a pathway to democratic education and the formation of an active and substantive citizenship

Citizenship in its most original sense implies a relationship between an individual and a political community by virtue of which the individual is a full member of that community and acquires, in turn, certain obligations towards it. But there are different ways of understanding this relationship and the rights and obligations it entails. We would like to highlight two meanings to situate in one of them the conception of the citizenship of children that we envisage. We refer to the meaning of citizenship from a neoliberal perspective and to the meaning of active citizenship from a radical democratic perspective. From the neoliberal perspective, the ideal citizenship is that which is depoliticised, whereas, from a radical democratic perspective, the ideal citizenship is that which is linked to processes of political participation.

According to neoliberalism, citizenship is limited to exercising a series of civil and political rights and entails a set of obligations and responsibilities towards oneself and others rather than social rights. This individualistic conception completes its

position with a sense of responsibility towards others as the best means to assume a set of community obligations and thus to refine its 'civic selfishness' (Benedicto & Moran, 2002, p. 31). In this sense, the neoliberal perspective shares a perception of active citizenship as a user of civil and political rights with conservative and traditional positions that promote collaborative citizenship with the community, ignoring in both cases political interests and the defence of social rights as an exercise of active citizenship.

At the opposite pole is the position that holds that citizenship rests and is built on the leading role of civil society in public affairs. From this second point of view, the rupture between civil and political rights and social rights that the neoliberal and conservative vision entail is not acceptable since without the latter, for example, education, social welfare and health, it is difficult for citizens to 'enjoy rights such as political participation or have sufficient tools to claim their individual rights' (Martínez & Payá, 2007, p. 50).

The citizenship we strive for is an active grassroots citizenship based on a model of participatory democracy, and not just a representative one, which is capable of deepening the values of democracy, namely those that make us freer and more equal. And, in order to deepen this citizenship, it is necessary to promote it from childhood onwards in the certainty that girls and boys possess the necessary competence to choose and make decisions, as well as the capacity to commit themselves to social transformation, equality and equity. Therefore, we propose a childhood citizenship that assumes that children have rights not because they are granted 'adult' citizenship, but because, as indicated above, they are bearers and subjects of rights (Etchebehere Arenas, 2012).

Children build progressive autonomy in situations of interdependence and even heteronomy. Hence the relevance of the adult population and the demand for responsibility in the way they accompany children in situations of citizen learning and participation. It is crucial to support them by promoting spaces of authentic participation in which they are recognised as part of the citizenry and where they know and perceive that each person has rights.

The relevance of participation in general, and children's participation in particular, does not lie in the mere fact of participating. Instead, participation is the means -the way of learning- that allows a better appreciation of some of the central values of democracy and the formation of active citizens involved and committed to enhancing these values. In the field of values, we learn not those that are enunciated but those present in the social practices surrounding the learning situations we experience.

Theorists of situated learning and cognition, recalling positions already developed by Dewey at the beginning of the 20th century, maintain that knowledge is part and product of the activity, the context and the culture in which it is developed and used (Gros, 2008), and learning is a process of enculturation through which we integrate ourselves into a community or a culture of social practices. Hence the importance of the conditions of the environment for learning in general, particularly for the learning of participating to be that of authentic participation. For this, the spaces for participation must meet the appropriate conditions to favour emancipatory processes that allow critical thinking and behaviour, promote transformation and improvement of their environments and life contexts, and foster progress from levels

of consultative participation to projective and meta-participation levels. We cannot forget that one of the main obstacles to consolidate progressive levels of autonomy in childhood is the limiting belief (Rodríguez-Moriche & Vallejo-Jiménez, 2019) -especially manifested by the adult population- about their capacities to participate. If participation is not authentic, it becomes an excellent resource that inhibit interest in participation and immunise against future participation.

By recognising and promoting children's participation, we contribute to the development of their communication skills, which are the citizens' skills par excellence (Martínez & Hoyos-Vásquez, 2006). Furthermore, by promoting spaces for the expression and defence of their particular interests, we are helping them to form an opinion, to confront it and discuss it with others, to put themselves in the place and the discourse of the other, to recognise the difference between the particular and the common good and also to accept vulnerability and interdependence in community life and decision-making.

But for participation to be genuine, we must facilitate its practice, enable children to promote change, defend their rights by making them effective, not just accepting the rules but changing and improving them. When conditions are conducive to learning authentic participation, we promote substantive citizenship (Quiroga, 2000): active, based on responsibility towards others, the care of others and oneself, and a commitment to achieving a more just and democratic society.

5. Aim

Within the framework of the Smart Citizens for Participatory Cities project (SMART01/2017), which aimed to study the gap between young people's civic experience in formal education spaces and their life in the civic environment, progressive autonomy was studied. More specifically, it aimed to investigate how their participatory experience and sense of citizenship had evolved in the transition from childhood to adolescence to explore the elements that shape and accompany the development of progressive autonomy.

6. Method

6.1. Participants

The participants were 210 adolescents from five Iberoamerican cities: Barcelona (BCN), Buenos Aires (Bs.As.), Mexico City (CDMX), Madrid (MAD) and São Paulo (GRU). The ages of these young people ranged from 15 to 19 years old. The sampling was deliberate and intentional (Rodríguez *et al.*, 1999), and the criterion of heterogeneity was central to the research. Therefore, in each city, the educational context's diversity was guaranteed to collect the plurality of realities of the adolescents, so they had to be from different neighbourhoods of the city with diverse idiosyncrasies. Likewise, the ownership of the educational institutions had to reflect the reality of the country.

Table 1. Sample characterisation for each Iberoamerican city

City	No. of participants	Age range	No. of Schools' ownerships	No. of Discussion groups
Madrid	43	15-17 yrs.	4 public, private, private subsidised	4
Buenos Aires	30	15-17 yrs.	4 public, private	4
São Pablo	42	16-18 yrs.	5 public	6
Ciudad de México	30	15-19 yrs.	3 public	3
Barcelona	65	15 y 17 yrs.	6 public, private subsidised	6

Source: Own elaboration

Each research group informed the participants about the purpose of the research and the procedure of the fieldwork. The participation of the students was voluntary and aleatory (in terms of their social participation profile). Those students who agreed to participate signed the informed consent, as did their legal guardians. All the research groups were committed to the return of the information obtained.

6.2. Data collection technique

The technique used was discussion groups (Boddy, 2005; Onwuegbuzie *et al.*, 2011) to explore the perceptions and meanings that young people had about their participatory experience. The discussion groups had between 6 and 12 participants each and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. In the configuration of each group, the gender variable was taken into account.

The questions that opened the exploration of their representations around the evolution of their participation were

- Have your participatory experiences changed in the transition from childhood to adolescence? How have they changed?
- Did you know that people of any age have a number of civil rights, such as the right to be heard, freedom of expression, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, freedom of association, etc.?
- How long have you been aware of these rights?

The information was recorded on audio and video, transcribing the voices textually, which Gibbs (2007) describes as verbatim with dialect.

6.4. Data analysis technique

The selected data analysis technique was content analysis. The transcripts of the different discussion groups were categorised and coded according to thematic criteria, assigning them different content units (Massot *et al.*, 2009). This was initially made using an open coding system (Strauss, 1987) and was agreed upon by researchers. The qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti was used to categorise and code the information.

7. Results and discussion

We now share the categories and dimensions that emerged from their narratives in the debates that took place in the five Iberoamerican cities.

Table 2. Emerging Dimensions and Categories

Dimensions	Categories
Being aware of being subject to rights starts with the knowledge of these	Life moments in which they acknowledge themselves as subjects of rights
	Settings in which they acknowledge themselves as subjects of rights
The articulation of the principle of progressive autonomy: a matter of intergenerational relationships	Not feeling listened to and having few spaces to participate
	From organised adult participation in primary school to the progressive achievement of autonomy in secondary school
The age dimension and its progress: the principle of progressive autonomy	As people age, they gain knowledge and skills: self-perception
	As a result of growing older, one approaches other interests or concerns which are more situated within a socio-historical moment
	The older they are, the more they feel able to denounce the violation of rights
	Political participation: the differentiating factor

Source: Own elaboration

8. To be aware of being subject to rights starts with the knowledge of these

In all of the discussion groups (DGs), participants expressed their awareness of having rights. Some of the rights mentioned were to have adequate housing, education, health, protection, etc., highlighting the rights to freedom of expression and being heard.

Their responses revealed that adults did not always allow them to exercise these rights, as well as the fact that, even when they did have them, they were not always respected or able to exercise them: 'it is one thing to have the right to your opinion and another to have your opinion taken into account' (CDMX).

8.1. *Life moments in which they acknowledge themselves as subjects of rights*

As for the moment they become aware of being subjects of rights there were some differences in the different DGs. It is interesting to note here a significant point made in BCN: 'it is one thing when you know you have rights and another when you exercise them'.

These differences can be grouped into three positionings:

i) They do not establish a specific moment in which they have acquired consciousness or a specific age.

They consider that this acquisition depends primarily on personal and life experiences and the maturity that accompanies them. It is a progressive process.

'Little by little you are seeing it, you are learning, and you see that a time comes when you decide for yourself when the decision-making process has reached your life; it is not the same as when you are a child when decisions are made for you, that now you say, OK, now I have to decide, you know? (...). Nor is there any age. It depends on each one, the life experience you've had' (1DG_MAD).

ii) They establish an approximate moment linked to academic courses or age.

In general, there is agreement on the fact that it was in the last years of Primary Education and the first years of Secondary Education when the rights of the child were dealt with in class or as content in some subjects. The age at which they consider they were informed of their rights ranges from 10 to 15 years.

'A: Well, probably earlier, but when we talk about the rights of the child, I think it was at the beginning of ESO² in philosophy. I think that we did know that we had rights, but we didn't really know what.

² In Spain, *Educación Secundaria Obligatoria* [Compulsory Secondary Education].

B: I think it was fifth or sixth [of primary education] because we had citizenship, and we dealt with children's rights. So, I think it was before secondary' (2DG_BCN)

From this perspective, it appears that they get to know themselves as they grow up, that they differentiate between good and evil, that they know what is good for them and what is not. It is worth noting that in more than one DG, they reported that they believed they did not have rights until the age of 18.

iii) It is linked to the human condition.

In the DGs carried out in MAD and BCN, the youth had a 'universal vision' of rights. Rights such as freedom of expression are so instilled and naturalised that they feel they can exercise them freely, to the extent that they do not see it as a right but as something inherent to the human condition.

'B: You don't see it as a written right.

A: It is something normalised.

C: You don't see it as a law; you see it as something that you have within you and that you can do.

E: You have always felt free and then discovered that ah! Well, there is a right that, besides me feeling that way, so...

D: Yes, it is something that should be like that, and in addition it is stipulated.

A: Yes, you already take it for granted...' (2DG_MAD)

8.2. *Settings in which they acknowledge themselves as subjects of rights*

Regarding the spaces that they consider have favoured the acquisition and/or recognition of these rights, the following are identified:

i) The family.

This is the most relevant and fundamental educational space for the recognition of their rights. Parents are the agents from whom they receive the most objective information regarding the recognition of rights. Some young people admit that their families have always instilled in them that they have rights, while others perceive that families now involve their children more in the exercise of rights than in their childhood. Another aspect that emerges is that, sometimes, at home they can make more decisions than at school, and this causes them to appreciate that the main space in which they learn and exercise their rights is the family space. The adolescents in Bs.As. recognise this environment as a source of initial contact with processes linked to politics. In most cities, adolescents admit to having attended demonstrations with their parents. However, there are also young people expressing how their families prevent them from exercising certain rights, such as the right to demonstrate.

‘Because it is what it instils in you and what the family passes on to you. If the family does not support... when you are young, the family is the base.’
(2DG_Bs.As.)

This was also evident in the DGs held in GRU, although in an opposed direction. The family was perceived as a space of tension and limited freedom through which they learnt to fight for their rights, to claim them.

ii) The school and the educational practices that take place within it.

The school is also highly significant as a space for learning about one’s rights. It is so in a generic way as an institution, but some subjects or initiatives that are developed and/or the relationship with teachers are also identified. It is in this space where they indicate that they have also known their duties and obligations. In relation to the subjects that informed them of their rights, these are social sciences, culture and ethical values, philosophy and citizenship. In MAD and BCN, a significant practice emerges, such as Service Learning. However, the children in MAD consider the subjects in which rights are mentioned to be few or even non-existent, with more significant reference to existing duties than to acquired rights.

‘When we enter school there, they already give us an education and make us aware of what our rights and obligations are.’ (3DG_CDMX)

Beyond the curricular content, in most groups arises the idea that it is in their relationship with teachers that they become aware of being subjects of rights. In this sense, we find the intentionality of the teaching activity, the incorporation of participatory methodologies of a deliberative nature, and the attention they receive from the teacher, which can be guided by a vertical-hierarchical and a rather undemocratic relationship that may even violate certain fundamental rights, or as a horizontal-type relationship in which the teacher respects their rights.

iii) Social media.

This is a channel for accessing information and discovering movements in defence of certain rights, as well as for the promotion of initiatives for the defence of the rights of particular groups. It is a contemporary milieu in which information circulates very quickly and is far-reaching. However, the adolescents also make it clear that not all the information is accurate in these channels, and they need to be able to form their own opinion.

‘In the networks I find more information than I would like to know. As I said, I am more focused on feminism, and there I find people with different opinions, but who are more knowledgeable, and it is interesting’. (4DG_Bs.As.)

9. The articulation of the principle of progressive autonomy: a matter of intergenerational relationships

To be considered as minors handicaps their possibilities of participation. This factor is much more evident in the child stage than in the adolescent stage since they feel capable of claiming their right to participate in adolescence. During childhood, opportunities are organised from outside. They are of a symbolic and instructive nature, such as a visit to the City Council. In contrast, in adolescence, opportunities are associated with participation in the school, which is legislated and organised with reference to students' rights. In the urban environment, they claim that they do not have many opportunities to participate because of their status as minors.

'A: (...) we are not yet of legal age and they [the adults] do not consider our opinion as valid because we are not of legal age.

B: When they want, we are grown-ups and when they the adults don't, we are not.' (1DG_BCN)

9.1. Not feeling listened to and having few spaces to participate

There is a significant coincidence among informants in all cities that they do not feel heard. They claim that spaces for participation are scarce and not very effective (MAD, CDMX, BCN). They feel relegated and hardly taken into account in social, political and school decisions (CDMX, BCN). They assert that they are not given opportunities to participate and get involved (MAD). They feel that they have no space to express their opinions and that adults do not consider them. Young people ask for greater involvement in terms of being heard and creating spaces for participation and dialogue (Bs.As., CDMX).

'We are 16 years old; we are aware; and we want to do things, but if you [the adults] don't give us the opportunity to do so, we can't do it.' (4DG_MAD)

There is a certain drop in participation in the five municipalities because they do not feel considered, nor do they feel listened to or free, and therefore their motivation decreases. They choose to repress, withdraw and stay away. The abuse of power by adults, especially by teachers, has inhibited their willingness to participate. In the DGs in Bs.As., it is not explicitly mentioned as a decrease in participation. However, the importance of the support of the other adult (teacher or family) in order to be willing to participate is shown. In the specific case of BCN, one boy expressed that his sense of solidarity had diminished as he grew up.

'Yes, when I was a child, I was more supportive than I am now. When I was little, I was the typical schoolboy who said 'bring things you don't use' or 'bring money for the children of the Congo' and I was always like 'yes, mother, give

me' but for some reasons, I am less and less supportive, and the truth is that this should be sorted out.' (4DG_BCN)

9.2. *From organised adult participation in primary school to the progressive achievement of autonomy in secondary school*

School participation is organised in all five cities. Participation within high school is mainly exercised from a representative point of view through class representatives in all the groups. Representatives, in turn, may belong to committees, although the effectiveness of these is not recognised, and it is felt that they are not taken into account. Other organisational structures that are mentioned in the different DGs are, on the one hand, those regulated by the legislation or by the schools themselves, with functions of monitoring, control, evaluation and mediation of the relations between teachers and students: the social participation council (CDMX), school council (BCN, MAD and GRU), course councils and evaluation boards (BCN, MAD), class/series councils (GRU), and, on the other hand, those forms of organisation and free and autonomous action by students whose functions are to defend their interests as a group: student centres (Bs.As.) and student unions -representatives and representatives' meetings- (MAD and BCN).

Entering high school implies a collective process of opening up and socialisation: confrontations with school authorities and teachers, conflict between peers, relations with other young people from different schools. However, several refer to their participation during primary school visits to political institutions (Bs.As., MAD and BCN). This process is what they see as the transition, the move from a more protected environment to one where they must interact with other people, most of whom were unknown until recently. They also have to adapt to another institution, new colleagues and teachers. Some comments show this greater independence from the family: 'We have to be more independent.' (3DG_Bs.As.)

10. **The age dimension and its progress: the principle of progressive autonomy**

Apart from indicating which spaces and relationships are relevant to learning about their rights, they also recognise their role in acquiring them. In this respect, the importance of their maturity in becoming aware of these rights, as well as progressively building their own opinion on them, are underlined:

'It may depend on the person because they may teach them to you at school, but they don't respect them, they don't count until you become aware of them, and then you realise that I have this right, and in this case they are not implementing it or they are respecting it, and it depends on how every person develops.' (3DG_CDMX)

The categories associated with this dimension relate to those achievements that young people recognise in the transition from childhood to adolescence, these being: a greater self-awareness, the capacity for reflection and subjective positioning about current issues, an increase, in the face of the violation of rights either first-hand or towards other equals, in the ability to claim and defend their rights; and their political participation.

10.1. As people age, they gain knowledge and skills: self-perception

Young informants perceive that there are differences in how they participate depending on their age. According to them, as they grow older, they gain knowledge, understanding and the ability to participate by giving their opinion, protesting, and undertaking solidarity actions. For example, at GRU, the adolescents drew attention to the fact that having greater knowledge enabled them to assert their voice among adults. Similarly, in BCN and Bs.As., they considered that as they grew older, they gained argumentative capacity.

‘Researcher: [Referring to a previous comment] When you are little you don’t know anything.

A: You do know, but you are not so aware of what you are doing.

B: To give an opinion.’ (3DG_BCN).

As they become older, the options to participate are widened, and they enjoy greater facilities because they feel more independent and can make their own decisions. They also express that, when they were younger, they did not have as much understanding, and they were not aware of their actions. Therefore, they associate having more freedom with gaining responsibility, especially with their own choices and doings.

‘It is only when you have more freedom that you become aware of all the responsibility you have. I think that parents overprotect us a lot and are responsible for children not believing that they are responsible for their actions.’ (4DG_BCN)

10.2. As a result of growing older, one approaches other interests or concerns which are more situated within a sociohistorical moment

The DGs of Bs.As. also point out that new topics are emerging to address participation in high school, and cite as examples comprehensive sex education, situations of discrimination, dress codes, structural problems in buildings, etc. These issues were unthinkable in primary school. This situation means that the different actors in the institution are constantly rethinking the intergenerational links between students and teachers. In the DGs of BCN, the opportunity to debate current issues was seen as school participation, meaning that a differentiating element had to do with the emergence of core issues during the adolescence that was not relevant

to either adults or children. As a proposal, CDMX's teenagers suggested that they should organise debate groups to discuss issues of their interest. This suggests that these spaces do not exist broadly and naturally speaking.

'The interest or concern for specific contemporary issues and sociohistorical events that they experience, especially during adolescence, defines them and provides them with opportunities to participate.' (Bs.As., BCN)

'(...) And the context we are living in (...) the same for feminism. Perhaps before, it was very inferior to the fact that there was a certain amount of machismo, and it was like we let it go, as if nothing happened at all. Now it is much more noticeable. (...) Machismo was naturalised before'. (4DG_Bs.As.)

10.3. *The older they are, the more they feel able to denounce the violation of rights*

Some contributions in the DGs evidence the use and claim of the compliance of their rights. They have internalised the competence of defending rights (meta-participation). In some way, their contributions show that if they know their rights, they can use them, incorporate them into their daily lives, claim them, and act accordingly.

They recognise the value of knowing their rights as soon as possible because it allows them to vindicate the fulfilment of these rights. They also explain that it is a strength but that it is sometimes misinterpreted.

'A: I believe that lately it is more within everyone's reach to know their rights, from the youngest children, as they begin to stress them more because, for example, I have seen several cases in which they used to beat their children, now they beat them and the children say you can't beat me because human rights protect me, as the youngest children already know all those parts that have positive aspects although they also have some aspects that are exceeded or understood in a different way.' (3DG_CDMX)

The adolescents of Bs.As. perceive primary school as a moment of ignorance and even vulnerability in front of adults, situations of mistreatment or moments in which children feel exposed by teachers in front of their classmates. According to them, being older would bring the possibility of rebelling against a situation of discrimination or mistreatment, since it grants a worth that before is not possessed:

'When you are a child in that situation you repress yourself, when you are older some of you may rebel.' (4DG_Bs.As.)

In the Bs.As. report, some social differences are noted that seem to imply, at least in the groups involved, that young people from popular sectors live this transition by emphasising situations of abuse or vulnerability to which they may react or rebel, while in the upper sectors the emphasis is on the need to show autonomy. We understand that both processes imply a sense of growth. However, it is necessary

to highlight the differences in the experiences they go through and the attributes that seem to feel demanded (and put into play) in each situation. In CDMX, in one of the DGs, the description of noncompliance with rights by teachers to children also emerged.

‘(...) last year this teacher, I’m sure many of you know him because of that [laughs] uh, we were all sitting on the good bench in, each in his place and he would come and do you like that and well, once he would go into the room and he would touch everyone’s belly, the teacher would touch them, and well I came angry that day and well he didn’t do anything to me because I think I might have almost hit him [laughs].’ (2DG_CDMX)

10.4. Political participation: the differentiating factor

Political participation in adolescents from high school is much more present in Bs.As. and GRU than in MAD, BCN and CDMX. This is because in Argentina and Brazil high schools are spaces for political exercise, whereas in Spain it is a subject relegated to the more private and outside the school sphere. In BCN and MAD, political participation organised by students is limited to attending demonstrations. One explanation for these differences could be the age of the vote. In Argentina and Brazil, voting is voluntary at the age of 16, and from the age of 18 it is mandatory. In relation to political participation, CDMX states that they feel that their lack of participation is due to their lack of experience in these matters, the scarcity of information they have about what is happening in their environment where they live in particular and in the country in general and that they have few mechanisms to intervene.

11. Final considerations

In light of the results, similarities and divergences emerge regarding the opportunities and participatory experiences of young people that could be linked to elements of a social and cultural nature in each country. In terms of similarities, there is a shared sense of not being sufficiently heard or considered because of age, because of the limiting beliefs of adults towards people considered minors. Likewise, spaces for real and transformative participation are scarce in all countries, and adults highly direct them in general terms. On the other hand, the family emerges as an agent that educates and promotes participation, either from accompaniment or opposition, the latter being the particular Brazilian case.

In terms of divergences, participation of a political nature, in the defence and vindication of rights, whether in the public or private sphere, acquires greater significance than in other countries, in Argentina and Brazil. For their part, young Mexicans feel their rights are most violated and seem to feel less listened to and taken into account. As for Spain, certain rights are perceived as inherent to the

human being, even assuming that if they were not named, they would still be there, such is the case of the right to freedom of expression. But, on the other hand, in Spain, political participation is scarce, and young people seem to be waiting for the organisation or legitimising action of the adult to exercise their rights, being more proactive in words than in concrete actions.

12. Conclusions and recommendations

The contributions in the different discussion groups made it possible to delve deeper into three dimensions of analysis that suggest the characterisation of the spaces and experiences of participation in which the participants are involved. Based on the analysis and discussion of the results, the subsequent reflections are provided as a conclusion.

- To be heard, to know their rights and have their opinion effectively considered are determining factors for recognising children as subjects of rights. However, organised participation by adults is not accompanied, in the eyes of adolescents, by the expected effectiveness for not taking their opinions sufficiently into account. Family, school and social media are spaces they experience as patients, agents and observers of rights and obligations. In these environments, they potentially recognise themselves as subjects of rights, where they discover and learn them.
- In the development of a progressive autonomy of children and adolescents, the lack of spaces for substantive participation in their immediate environment and the low recognition of their agency to express their opinions are factors that contribute to the decrease of their participatory interest or spirit of solidarity. As they grow in age, and even though they are growing in maturity, their interest in contributing ideas, having initiatives, formulating proposals and proposing solutions decreases. This may explain the factor of the growing disaffection for social and political participation of which they so much speak. It does not seem that the educational ecosystem surrounding children and adolescents naturally promotes participation.
- According to the principle of progressive autonomy or evolution of faculties (CDN, 1989), the critical moments for such recognition are the last years of primary education and the first of secondary education, which depends on their personal experiences and maturity. Entry into secondary school is a turning point in asserting their rights and the increase in the awareness of one's own interests, the sense of participation, and especially that of involvement. The confrontation with school authorities and teachers, the conflicts among equals and schools, and feeling independent and emancipated mark the beginning of the exercise of substantive citizenship by adolescents. This feeling of independence has to do with acquiring greater responsibilities, with a certain self-recognition as agents capable of directing their own lives.

- Claiming the fulfilment of rights and denouncing situations of mistreatment or vulnerability are examples of substantive citizenship among adolescents of popular sectors. Demonstrating autonomy is the case for adolescents from better-off sectors. Socially controversial issues such as comprehensive sex education, dress codes, and political events, among others, are focal points that promote interest and encourage participation from secondary education onwards. They gain a better understanding of themselves in secondary school, and participation can occur in an autonomous and self-managed manner based on these interests being discovered.
- The differences between countries suggest that an earlier incorporation into political life -having the right to vote- and into the world of higher education may be a determining variable in the transition from a reflexive perception of citizenship and the awareness and internalisation of rights to a more active and implicit perception that involves planning and ultimately recognising the capacity for action.

Based on these reflections, some proposals seeking to favour and increase the development of a substantive citizenship of children and adolescents within their educational ecosystem are formulated.

- Accompanying the adult's organised participation with active listening, effective recognition of rights and acceptance of opinions and proposals is a positive catalyst for the participation of children and adolescents.
- Activating their proposals and, when these are not viable, informing them about the reasons why, generates confidence and is a positive catalyst of agency and participation.
- Intensifying actions that promote spaces and times for children's participation at the end of primary and secondary school is a strategic decision to promote the progressive autonomy of children.
- Acting from the educational ecosystem in which children and adolescents participate, favouring their presence in city actions, promoting the exercise of 'micro-citizenship', and fostering spaces of expression and creativity contribute to the recognition of agency and the condition of children and adolescents as valid interlocutors.
- Advancing the legal age to elect and vote is a stimulus that promotes greater interest and involvement of children and adolescents in the exercise of substantive citizenship.

Finally, the limitations and strengths of the study are outlined. The most notable limitation is not having analysed the data from a gender perspective, differentiating between the experiences lived and felt by the boys and girls. In addition, individual in-depth interviews could have been carried out to delve deeper into those cases that provided more significant data. On another note, the study's strengths are, in

the first place, counting on the narratives of a total of 210 adolescents from their first-person voices and experiences. Besides, international perspective allows a broader understanding of the phenomenon from the particularities of each context.

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