Perceptions and experiences of participation of children and adolescents in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil[1]

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Abstract: This article draws from research conducted with public and private school children and adolescents in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Our research shows that children not only understand their rights and responsibilities in terms of participation, but are also aware of the ways in which their rights are being ignored and violated. This study was part of an international initiative carried out in six countries aiming to explore children and young people's understanding of citizenship, rights and responsibilities[1].

Key words: children's rights, citizenship, participation, Brazil

Introduction

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNROC), 1989 articulated the idea of children's participation terms of the right to freely express opinions and have them taken into account (Articles, 12, 13), the right of association (Article 15), and of thought, conscience, and religion (Article 14). More broadly, it defined children's rights to cover four main aspects of a child's life: the right to survive, the right to develop, the right to be protected from harm, and the right to participate.[2]

These ideas and language represented a significant shift away from the notion of the child in need of protection to the perception of the child as a "subject of rights", able to express opinions, participate in decision-making and in the process towards increasing democracy and development. In this sense, the Convention represented a global "agreement that children and young people are citizens whose entitlements straddle moral, political and social agendas" (Matthews 2005 1).

Nearly all governments have taken on the responsibility of providing the conditions necessary for children and youth to exercise participation rights. Many programs - both state-led but in particular in the non-governmental sector - aimed at combating poverty and discrimination throughout the globe have sought to involve children and adolescents through the ideal of "participation" (Johnson et al 1998). Equally, there has been a growing global interest in the project of democratic, civic or citizenship education. While the idea of children's participation is gaining universal acceptance, these programs and policies have not given sufficient attention to the fact that each culture constructs the notion of childhood in historically situated ways (Ennew 1986; Reddy 1997; Rizzini 1997, 2000; Szanton-Blanc 1994; Huggins and Mesquita 2000; Leiten 2001; Mikulak 2002; Panter-Brick 2003; Weis & Fine 2000). In order to increase opportunities for truly meaningful participation in culturally responsive ways, we need to know more about how particular cultures and societies and the children who live in them understand and exercise these rights of participation.

A brief review of the literature[3]

There has been growing interest in research and in development programs on young people's participation in public and political action (see for instance Flekkoy and Kaufman 1997). UNICEF's 2003 report 'The State of the World's Children' took 'child participation' as its theme, outlining the benefits of child participation and pointing to a number of successful cases of child participation ranging from local education and development projects, to youth parliaments, young people at the United Nations and young people's media (UNICEF 2003). The report proceeds from a comprehensive, nuanced and vision of children's participation which expands as children grow into young adulthood. It acknowledges that historically children have always participated in life – not just in home and the school but in community, in work, and even in wars:

> "Acknowledged as a multifaceted phenomenon, participation may include a wide range of activities that differ in form and style when children are at different ages: seeking information, expressing the desire to learn even at a very young age, forming views, expressing ideas; taking part in activities and processes; being informed and consulted in decision-making; initiating ideas, processes, proposals and projects; analyzing situations and making choices; respecting others and

being treated with dignity… Put into practice, participation involves adults listening to children – to all their multiple and varied ways of communicating, ensuring their freedom to express themselves and taking their views into account when coming to decisions that affect them (UNICEF 2003, 4-5)" .

In reality, opportunities and mechanisms for children's participation remain limited. For instance, schools have begun to spend more time talking about instead of providing opportunities to do democracy. Citizenship education tends to focus on civic virtues/values and/or moral/character education and avoid deeper discussions about democratic cultures and institutions (Davies 2002; Davies, Gorard et al 2005). It has also shown a tendency to encourage young learners to conform to authority and existing political structures (McCowan 2006). The few viable existing democratic structures for child participation such as school student councils have largely focused on managing limited aspects of school life – little real power or responsibility is given to schools (Davies 1998, 2002; Davies & Kirkpatrick 2000; McLaren 1989).

A study conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) suggests that 14-year-olds in most countries have an understanding of fundamental democratic institutions and values, but frequently this understanding is superficial, and that schools can play an important role in enhancing it (Torney-Purta et al. 2000). Other research on children's understanding of their rights indicates that participation in their everyday living environments as citizens with rights is important to young people (Morrow 1999; Melton & Limber 1993; Melton 2002; Taylor, Smith & Nairn 2001). They appreciate being treated with dignity and respect, and feel that they ought to have a say in matters which affect them. Children wish for input into decisions, rather than to actually make them entirely on their own, according to Morrow (1999). Taylor, Smith et al. (2001) found, comparing secondary school staff and students' perspectives, that students were more likely to emphasize participation rights as most important to them, compared to provision or protection rights. Teachers, however, were equally likely to see participation, provision and protection rights as important to young people.

Scholars have also critiqued the children's rights discourse arguing that it is firstly, an adult discourse and secondly that it is primarily a Eurocentric conception of childhood

and children's rights; developments in western jurisprudence based on western perceptions of childhood played a key role in the drafting of the convention (Ennew 1995).[4] The debate around whether or not children should be allowed to work has been particularly effective in deconstructing ahistorical and decontextualized notions of children's participation, particularly in relation to their corresponding right to education (Kabeer, Nambissan et al 2003)[5]. Advocates for children's right to work as well as education have argued that historically, children have been socialized through various kinds of work responsibilities that could include but were not limited to economic inputs. Different forms of work in both public and private spheres provided children with opportunities to participate in family as well as community life (Reddy 1997; Mickelson 2000).

While popular and legal conceptions of childhood differ globally, it does appear that the more that children are treated and constructed as citizens, the more likely it is that they will actively participate in society. The research literature suggests that children's understanding of their status, rights and responsibilities as citizens is likely to facilitate their participation in society and is therefore fundamental to sustaining a democracy (Flekkoy & Kaufman 1997; Kaufman & Rizzini, 2002; Limber & Kaufman 2002; Melton 2002; Smith et al 2003). Stimulating children's thinking about citizenship and its associated rights and responsibilities, should encourage their support for democratic values, including just laws and tolerance for the rights of others (Melton & Limber 1992). Covell & Howe (2000) showed that 11-12 year-old children who had been exposed to an interactive curriculum about children's rights showed more acceptance of ethnic minorities, native people, homosexuals and people with disabilities, suggesting that children who are aware of their own rights are more supportive of rights for others.

Children's participation in Brazil

The 1990 Brazilian Children's Rights Law (Statute of the Child and the Adolescent) is a remarkable piece of legislation for multiple reasons. Of most relevance to this discussion is the fact that the Statute fundamentally transformed popular and policy discourse on child welfare. It replaced the punitive and "assistentialista"[6] policy language

with the notion of rights and respect. The Statute put forward the ideal that children are citizens- subjects who are entitled to rights ("sujeitos de direitos"). The idea of protection replaced the idea of punishment. The Statute mandated that all members of society – family, community and public authorities – were charged with the duty of protecting the right of all children to live with their families and communities[7]. It also presented a new vision and mechanisms for the reform of the child welfare system, which called for greater participation and input from children and their families and communities. Specifically, the Statute created local-level council structures to expand participation by members of the community and organized civil society on issues concerning children. However limited in their current form, these alternative spaces that seek to create 'democracy from below' provide a form of check and balance in a political system where ability to participate is determined by the candidate's personal wealth, political connections and a media controlled by the elite. In this way, the Statute has created and expanded spaces within existing political and social institutional arrangements in which child- and adult-activists can claim rights for children, expose systemic discrimination and abuse, and hold the state accountable for neglect and violations of rights[8].

The Convention on the Rights of the Child played a defining role in the articulation of language about rights as well as the mechanisms for institutional reform. Along with integrated approaches to the care and protection of children, the Statue recognized education as vital to the full development of the child and preparation for the exercise of citizenship. Schools were envisioned as key spaces for facilitating opportunities for participation by children in the following ways: equality of conditions for access and permanence in school; the right to be respected by their educators; the right to contest criteria of evaluation, together with the right to appeal to higher educational jurisdiction; the right to organize and participate in student entities; and, access to a public school near his/her residence.

In both symbolic and material ways, these legislations represent the victories of a vigorous movement for children's rights in Brazil that has persevered through dictatorships; structural adjustment programs and a persistent societal inclination to deal

punitively with poor children and youth (Dewees & Klees, 1995; Klees, Rizzini et al, 2000). Historically, disadvantaged social groups like indigenous people, Afro-Brazilians and women have been the targets of violence, exclusion and "assistentialismo"[9]. They have been denied the opportunity to speak and participate in policy and political decisions concerning their wellbeing and ways of life (Dias da Silva, 2002; Roland, 2001; Rosemberg, 1993). Thus, these movements, peopled by both grassroots activists and organized civil society, have also had a deeper impact in terms of challenging and transforming hegemonic constructions of children and childhood that seek to regulate and control children from disadvantaged sections of society.

On the whole, however, public policies did little to strengthen and support poor families and communities so that they could raise their children on their own (Castro et al 2003; Pilotti & Rizzini, 1995; Rizzini, Barker, Cassaniga 2002). It must be taken into consideration as well that in Brazil there is a history of unequal education in terms of quality (UNICEF 2004). Until the 1990s many Brazilians did not even have access to primary school. In 2000, only 71% of children completed fifth grade and very few public school students eventually make it into university (Social Watch 2004).

The study

The study of children´s own conceptions of their rights is critical for a number of reasons. First, understanding children´s concepts of their rights is important for setting an agenda for advocacy, because it may illuminate the most critical problems that children perceive in fulfilling their rights. Asking children to describe the extent of their rights and the impediments that they perceive in exercising such rights may be an important first step in determining an agenda for action. The success of efforts to promote children's rights will depend on children's (and adults') attitudes towards and knowledge about rights and citizenship.

Second, this information may be useful in the design of structures and procedures that are necessary to ensure that children perceive that they, in fact, have rights. If children do not believe that their rights will not be enforced, they are unlikely to exercise them.

Third, assessing children's concepts of their rights is an important signal of respect for their personhood. The opportunity to do this kind of research "celeberates cultural diversity and fosters social and political integration of people (McGinn 1996, 342). And finally an understanding of children´s concepts of their rights (and the mechanisms) through which such concepts are formed) may inform efforts to educate children about democratic values.

The context

The study took take place in Rio de Janeiro, renowned as one of the most unequal cities in the world, in order to assess how the political understandings and participation of young people are affected by being differently located in the city through class, race or ethnicity as well as gender and region[10].

Rio has also experienced a flourishing non-governmental sector, with a growing number of organizations and social movements combating inequality, poverty, discrimination and urban violence. In this vibrant climate of experimentation of public action for citizenship and inclusion, focusing on young people's perceptions and participation is especially salient as it is the young who are most affected by inequality. This occurs through the narrowing of possibilities for social mobility but also as a result of the responses some have adopted in defiance of this, most significantly through joining the increasingly powerful drug trafficking gangs who have come to redefine 'public action' in a number of communities. In this context of unabated inequality and rising violence, the issue of how young people from different social backgrounds conceive of and engage in issues of citizenship and public action and how organizations and movements have taken on board these points of view is a particularly timely question.

Children who are out of school at all levels are likely to be poor and/or black or colored[11]. The chronic shortage of funds for primary and secondary education have created conditions of extreme neglect and even violence in urban schools in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo (Abramovay 2003; Abramovay et al 1999; UNESCO 2003; Waiselfisz 2004). There is a chronic shortage of infrastructure, qualified teachers, pedagogical resources and the low levels of learning in relation to the demands of the job market and the youths' expectations that undermine the quality of public education.

In this study, we talked to children and adolescents in public and private schools in the city of Rio de Janeiro to understand how they perceived their rights and responsibilities as young citizens. It is essential that we understand how children perceive and analyze the realities of their learning and living environments. Furthermore, our objective was to put together a transnational body of knowledge that could expand and deepen opportunities for children to understand and exercise their rights.

The study

Our study on children's perceptions of rights and citizenship was part of an international research project coordinated by members of Childwatch International Research Network. The research project was designed to study child and youth perceptions of citizenship, rights and responsibilities as well as their understanding of opportunities for participation and citizen involvement. Locations for the research included Brazil (Rio de Janeiro), South Africa (Cape Town), New Zealand (Dunedin), Palestine (Al Quds), Norway (Trondheim), and the United States (South Carolina). The specific objectives of the study were to: (a) Understand how children and adolescents conceive citizenship and how they participate (or not) in the process and in its construction; (b) Study the conception that children and adolescents have been developing about their rights and responsibilities; (c) Collect information that could be helpful to children and adolescents in comprehending their rights and their participation in the realities of different countries; (d) Stimulate children and adolescents to increase their knowledge on citizen involvement.

A focus group protocol had been developed by the Childwatch Study group. Adaptations to the protocol were made by individual country research teams. These adaptations varied according to particular constraints, such as the amount of time which was available for children to be out of class. The aim of the focus group discussion was to stimulate children to share their understanding and experience in a spontaneous way, using supportive prompts from skilled focus group leaders.

Focus groups were convened for 8 to 9-year-old children and 14 to 15-year-old young people. The focus groups varied in size, but normally had around 10 children. Most groups were single gender groups but a few were mixed. About half of the focus groups were from low socioeconomic status backgrounds and half were from high socioeconomic status backgrounds. In some most cases, two researchers worked together in the focus groups, with one person leading the group and the other making notes. The researchers explored with the participants in the focus groups how they understood citizenship, rights and responsibilities in their own country. Secondly, the focus groups asked children to think about how life and being a citizen could or should be in an imaginary country.

The CIESPI team conducted discussions with thirteen groups of children and youth, which included two groups with both boys and girls as a way to broaden the comparative results. We had in total the participation of approximately 120 young people. We selected three municipal schools that predominantly have students from lower middle class backgrounds and living in the *favelas* (slums). We also included students from two private schools attended by middle class and upper middle class students. Two focus groups each were also conducted with children and adolescents considered marginalized; they were children who lived and/or worked on the streets and the children of the Landless Movement (MST)[12] respectively.

The meaning of rights and responsibilities for children and adolescents in Rio de Janeiro

In our study, children and adolescents were able to clearly articulate the meaning of rights in the context of their day- to- day lives at home and in school. However, one notes that the recognition of rights was always contextual. Also, children and adolescents from different classes showed they do not understand rights in the same way.

One eight-year old girl in a private school defined her rights as "the right to have a good life." Children as young as her were able to specify what that meant and also the ways in which these rights are being ignored and violated. They presented a vivid picture of the anxieties and insecurities of their daily lives and their dreams of a society which provided good schools, adequate food and shelter, and justice and dignity for all. The rights named by our participants reflected their concerns about their physical and emotional wellbeing, their desire to participate and contribute and to live in safety and dignity.

The older children also clearly voiced a need for greater recognition and respect from others and the ability to make choices about their own lives - a need that was too often ignored by their parents and teachers. A 15-year-old girl in private school said, "It means to be able do something, because you have rights. It means to be able to express yourself, to do something." Both children and adolescents articulated the understanding that in part respect depends on one's own actions. For children this meant fulfilling their responsibilities in terms of respecting their elders, doing schoolwork, taking care of their belongings, contributing to the household monetarily and so forth. They also defined adult responsibilities as having to do with working and providing for the family.

In addition to talking about the meaning of individual responsibilities, our participants talked about collective responsibilities. Most of them said that the responsibility of citizens was to work and work hard. Fewer of them talked about their social responsibilities to others, in a collective sense, as, for example, one of the participants in

a focus group said: "The citizen worries about the rights of all other citizens" (14-year-old girl. Private School.)

One boy talked about taking responsibility for the physical environment in terms of the impact of garbage disposal on pollution of the sea. Another boy said that he participated regularly in works of charity like donation campaigns and sponsoring children as surrogate families: "My mother works in a public hospital with children who have AIDS and I help her. I work with the children's families -there are always celebrations there, at Christmas, Easter and we always help. I sort of sponsor one of the boys and each month I give him something, like school material, pencils, a backpack, and toys for him to play with. It's not a responsibility, I'm not obligated to go to the hospital every month" (15-year-old girl. Private School).

Engendered meanings of rights and responsibilities

The gendered division of household labor was reflected in the ways boys and girls talked about their responsibilities within their households. As one 15 year old male public school student put it "That comes from long ago. Women work at home and the men go out to work." The young people had also internalized the sexual politics that dominate adult society. Girls reported that boys placed the responsibility of preventing pregnancy on them and refused to wear condoms despite the risk of sexually transmitted diseases: "There are boys that, when they are going to have sex, say: *You don't need this. It's not good, it hurts*. They have the responsibility of wearing them" (15-year-old adolescent girl. Public School.) Most of the girls preferred to use birth control and ruled out the option of abortion in the eventuality that they became pregnant. Boys had more mixed reactions to abortion: "I think that women should have abortions when they can't support their children after they are born" (14-year-old adolescent. Public School).

In talking about participation, our participants identified not only the political dimensions of participation but the economic and social as well.

Social and economic dimensions of participation

The absence of adequate sanitation in schools, affordable public transportation and housing were referred to repeatedly by children in public schools. The children provided a particularly insightful critique of the new bus card system that had been introduced by the city of Rio de Janeiro to provide free urban transportation for public school students. Public transportation in the city was handed over to private companies in the 1980s. The minimum cost of a one-way bus ticket is between one and two Reais (less than a dollar) and one can spend anywhere between five to ten Reais for the daily commute. The cost of public transportation has had a disproportionate impact on poor families given that many of them earn less than the mandated monthly minimum wage of approximately one hundred US dollars.

The introduction of the bus card system for public school students was intended to ameliorate these costs. However, the student's daily experiences on the bus were a source of embarrassment and frustration rather than support. They are dependant on the good will of the bus driver in order to enjoy this right. But, bus drivers often choose not to stop the bus or place limits on the number of children that can get on the bus: "I'm tired of this bus card. You can only use it every half hour. I take the bus from my house to somewhere nearby, ten minutes away. After I get there, I have to wait another 20 minutes before I can get another bus. Then they tell you to get off the bus" (14-year-old boy. Public School).

Children from low-income families and public schools also experienced the prejudice that is generated in urban consumer oriented societies, where status is equated with purchasing power. Area of residence and clothes were two of the many class markers that are used to distinguish and brand the poor and their children. In the city of Rio de Janeiro, *Zona Sul* or the southern zone houses many beautiful old buildings and the upper- and middle-class. The poor for the most part live in *Zona Norte* – the northern zone and spend time and money commuting to *Zona Sul* for work. However, there are a number of poor families living in the *favelas* that dominate the green hills of Zona Sul. For the most part,

the children in public schools come from poor families living in these favelas. Mainstream media tends to present the favelas as centers of drug-trafficking and crime rather than communities living in extreme poverty. As one of our young participants stated: "Nobody sees that in the favelas there are people trying to help, by doing social projects. Everyone only sees the negative side: robbery, death, kidnapping. That's what gives the favela that image of a place where children grow up to be gangsters. That's because the newspaper only shows these things and doesn't show places that help children, the social center. All you see is robbery and death. If you look at the front page of the newspaper, you'll only see the negative side of the favelas (Public school female adolescent). Another boy added: "They think you don't have rights just because you live in a less privileged place. It's too much inequality" (Mixed group of 14 and 15-year-old adolescents. Public School).

Clothing was also a source of embarrassment and shame for children for low-income families. Children from the public schools talked about having only one pair of pants to wear all week long while their relatively privileged peers come to school with expensive fashion accessories, such as backpacks and tennis shoes. Their experiences reflected prevailing societal assumptions about public school students. The uniform of schools in the state of Rio de Janeiro is an orange t-shirt with the symbol of the local municipal government. Orange is also the color of the city cleaning crew. Some adolescents narrated stories about how they were called "garbage man" by private school students wherever they went.

The prejudiced reactions to these uniforms demonstrate the alienation between social classes in which public school students are not just branded poor but criminal as well. Public school students talked about people responding to them by holding on closer to their belongings, walking away quickly and giving them distrustful looks: "To walk into the mall wearing the uniform is like you're naked. They look at you as if you've just got out of jail (Mixed group of 14 and 15-year-old adolescents. Public School). We also noticed that some of the children and adolescents who felt discriminated against behaved in the same way with other children by making condescending comments towards

someone with bad hair, in a worse financial situation or children that live in the streets. As two boys from private schools said: "We study and they beg on the streets (Eight-year-old); "We have family and they don't (Seven-year-old).

In identifying these problems, the students indicate an understanding of what their entitlements as members of society should be and what are some of the provision rights that they have. Many of the adolescents placed responsibility for these conditions in which rights were easily violated on the government and representatives of government; they felt that the state was not doing what it was supposed to do. A few referred to the responsibility of the citizen to vote and select an appropriate representative. All were skeptical of the politicians that claimed to represent them. These kinds of comments speak to the changing nature of the relationships between the individual and the state, in this case between children and youth and the state. The inability of the state to provide basic services due to economic restructuring creates economic and social inequalities which limit full participation by disadvantaged groups. The observations of our participants reflected an awareness not only of how deeply inadequate their schools are but that these inadequacies are part of a larger systemic neglect and discrimination of poor families and communities.

Political Participation

A space in which we would expect to see students learn the values and behaviors of a truly participatory democracy, the school Student Council, appeared to perform a largely symbolic function. A fourteen year old in public school described his student council as follows: "The Student Council? This is not the type of participation where we discuss issues in order to change things. It is too lazy here. I've never even seen most of the people of the Student Council. It's not the kind of participation with the objective of helping one another to make things better."

These kinds of responses identify the persistent absence of spaces and mechanisms in schools through which children could begin to participate more fully in society.

Furthermore, the children named the extent social practices which work to obstruct and minimize their agency and capabilities on a day to day basis. In the absence of viable alternatives, children and youth are resigned to the position of knowing but silenced observers who are prevented from contributing to decisions that impact their lives. The children repeatedly expressed feelings of powerlessness. Several participants said that though they knew their rights were being violated, they did not know how to claim the rights they felt they were entitled to. They were keenly aware that current political configurations denied them systematic opportunities to speak and represent their own needs and concerns. They were critical of the fact that adults were somehow automatically entitled to rights and authority "just because they are older, studied more or have more money."

Some of the children in private schools felt that those who don't work, don't own a home or regular means of earning an income could not be considered citizens. The idea of having a home or somewhere to live was particularly salient for the children from the Landless Agricultural Workers' Movement (MST) who said that they are constantly teased by their classmates at their schools and by other children on the streets. The children of the MST see themselves as part of a community that is "united in the struggle for one common goal." However, they are a target of jokes because they do not have a house and their claim to the right to land for all is not widely accepted in the Brazilian society. The expression of these values in young children point to the pervasive nature of consumerism and a culture that weighs individuals in terms of appearance, ownership of property and status objects. Here, differences in economic worth get mixed with differences in social worth: "We have good manners and the street kids don't. Our parents pass onto us what they learn in church, in classes and from their parents. This is passed down through generations. They don't do that" (Eight-year-old boy. Private school).

Conclusion

Our informants made it clear that they were aware of their rights and were able to identify many of the factors that lead to some children enjoying more rights than others. Children and adolescents engage with the challenges posed by social differences in as complicated and contradictory ways as adults. As Michelle Fine et al wrote "children and youth are both critics as well as consumers and producers" (2004, 22). Our study revealed several ways in which children internalize and reproduce the discrimination and prejudice that they see all around them.

Our research participants showed an understanding of the persistent contradictions and conflicts in the discourse and practices of childhood and the rights of children. It is clear that children know their rights and responsibilities to some extent, though we found significant disparities within groups and particularly among those from different socio-economic background. In the case of public school children, they are also aware that their rights are systematically ignored and violated. They do not have the same opportunities to learn and grow as their relatively privileged peers. Worse still, they are actively judged and labeled in ways that make them feel disrespected and excluded. These kinds of responses underline the importance of the right to education as a 'multiplier' right. They also underline the complex nature of cultural change. Despite the advances in legislation and rhetoric, the prevailing socio-cultural and political climate in Brazilian society is still one in which adult (parent and teacher, for example) authority is considered absolute.

Last but not the least, these kinds of responses underline the relational and day-to-day practice aspects of rights. The dis-connect between how children and adults view the rights of the former, points to the need to promote rights in less individualistic and more contextualized ways. Scholars from the global south have critiqued the CRC because in seeking to 'redefine' the relationship of the family to the child and of the family to the public sphere, the CRC unsettles "at a very fundamental level the complex historically evolved and socio-culturally specific relationships between (a) the individual and the

group, (b) the child and the family, and of both to wider social structures of clan, tribe, caste, or the state [Raman 2003, 6]."

As the international literature highlights, the more that children are treated and constructed as citizens, the more likely it is that they will actively participate in society. Early opportunities for democratic participation nourish a sense of collective ownership and responsibility as well as skills to solve problems in collaborative ways. Perhaps most importantly, children develop a belief in themselves as actors who have the power to impact the adverse conditions that shape their lives. They develop confidence and learn attitudes and practical lessons about how they can improve the quality of their lives. Conversely, the likelihood of civic engagement is deeply threatened by schools in which children feel powerless, alienated, shameful and angry (Fine et al, 2004).

What is needed are policies that support all children in participating and developing to their full potential – a fundamental right of citizenship that is enshrined in the Brazilian Statute and The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. These policies need to expand opportunities for children and youth to learn and practice democratic behaviors and participate in multiple spheres of public action.

In order for this happen, the UNICEF report on child participation concludes that: "adults must develop new competencies of their own. We must learn how to effectively elicit the views of children and young people and to recognize their multiple voices, the various ways children and young people express themselves, and how to interpret their messages – both verbal and nonverbal. What's more, we must ensure that there is opportunity, time and a safe place for the opinions of children and young people to be heard and given due weight. And we must develop our own capabilities to respond appropriately to the messages and opinions of children and young people" (2003, 2).

The rights-based framework to development and policies for children is not without its problems and it is by no means the only approach to addressing the sweeping social problems that confront us.[13] However, to talk about creating a rights-enabling culture

necessitates a critical examination of social and structural relations of power and privilege. In the case of young people in Brazil, we see that the contradictions in state policy mirror the contradictions in our societies – societies that are still not entirely comfortable with the idea that children have rights and entitlements.

This exploratory study should be seen as a starting point for us to understand the views of children and adolescents on important issues such as the concepts of rights and citizenship, as well as their perceptions about their place in society. We would like to conclude quoting professor Anne Smith, from the Children's Issue Centre in New Zealand and one of the coordinators of the international project, "This study provides a snapshot of children's constructions of citizenship, which tend to be framed within their personal lives rather than from any abstract understanding of democracy and society." The challenge for researchers now is to develop ideas about enriching children's understanding of citizenship, and suggest to teachers, parents and children useful and productive ways of doing so" (2005,8).

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Notes

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[1] The international Childwatch study group included the following key-institutions under the coordination of Anne Smith (Director of the Children's Issues Centre, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand) and Natalie Kaufman (Associate professor and International Studies Professor of the Institute on Family and Neighborhood Life at Clemson University, South Carolina, United States). The other Childwatch institutions that participated in the study at the time (2004-2005) were: the Institute on Child and Youth Research at Western Cape University, Cape Town, South Africa; the Child Research Unit, Center for Development in Primary Health Care, Al Quds University, Palestine; the Norwegian Center for Child Research, Trondheim, Norway and the International Center for Research and Policy on Childhood at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Later on, colleagues from Australia joined the group.

The Brazil team consisted of Irene Rizzini – President of Childwatch International and Director of the International Center for Research and Policy on Childhood at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Luciléia Pereira and Marcelo Princeswal (Principal Researchers), Carla Daniel Sartor (Consultant); Nathercia Lacerda, Isabela Massa and Alexandra Pena, Nisha Thapliyal, Tamo Chattopadhyay (collaborators); Marina Rodriguez de Jesus (intern); Christiano Botafogo (translation)

[2] *Survival rights:* the right to life and to have the most basic needs met (e.g., adequate standard of living, shelter, nutrition, medical treatment). *Development rights:* the rights enabling children to reach their fullest potential (e.g. education, play and leisure, cultural activities, access to information and freedom of thought, conscience and religion). *Participation rights: r*ights that allow children and adolescents to take an active role in their communities (e.g., the freedom to express opinions; to have a say in matters affecting their own lives; to join associations). *Protection rights:* rights that are essential for safeguarding children and adolescents from all forms of abuse, neglect and exploitation (e.g., special care for refugee children; protection against involvement in armed conflict, child labor, sexual exploitation, torture and drug abuse). Retrieved November 6 2006 from http://www.hrea.org/learn/guides/children.html

[3] For the review of the literature we relied mostly on the work by Torres (2003, 2006), from the University of Illinois; Butler (2006, 2006a), from CIESPI; Limber & Kaufman (2002), Taylor, Smith & Nairn (2001), from Childwatch International Research Network..

[4] The discourse of children's rights has emerged out of a specific historical and sociocultural frame which includes the breakdown of the extended family and the nucleation of the family, and of late, even the breakdown of the family (Raman 2000). Goonesekere (1997) writes: "The concept of participation rights involves a value system on the child's personal autonomy that has to be worked out within the convention's perception of the important relationship between the child, the parent and the state [92]." The promotion of children's rights in the nineties was part of a larger push in international development discourse for democracy and citizenship-building. This pressure for southern countries to democratize (eradicate corruption and follow the rule of law) came at the same time as declining levels of political participation and an increase in a host of other socio-economic problems in the industrialized countries calling for greater democracy (McGinn 1996).

[5] The notion of child work is quite distinct from the practice of child labor. Poor and disadvantaged children have always been more vulnerable to exploitative and dangerous work or child labor. Neither work in public or private spaces has protected these children from exploitation and abuse. From a critical alternative perspective, children from marginalized segments of society work and live outside their home, in unsafe and unsanitary public spaces, to support their families instead of going to school, because of structurally rooted social problems such as unemployment, inflation, hunger, debt, wealth inequalities, and an inaccessible and irrelevant formal education system (Huggins 2000). Poor children must participate and indeed compete with adults in the new international and gendered division of labor as an unlimited and unprotected source of cheap and exploitable labor for capitalist markets.

[6] There is not a precise translation from Portuguese into English for the term "assistencialista". By a "política assistencialista" we mean policies aimed at minimal help not designed to develop the full potential of the recipient.

[7] Article 227 of the Brazilian Constitution on children's rights in general and Article 19 of the Statute on the right to live with the family and community ("direito à convivência familiar e comunitária").

[8] A dynamic combination of scholarship and activism has exposed the situated, gendered, and sexualized meaning of categories of adult, adolescent, youth and child and presented a coherent argument for reconceptualizing the relationships and responsibilities of adults and children. Alternative perspectives accept that there are different meanings of 'child' and that 'childhood is experienced differentially (Lowe 1996).

[9] See note 6.

[10] The city of Rio de Janeiro, a large and completely urban setting, is home for an estimated 1,500,000 children - approximately 624,409 children under 6 years of age, another 696,019 children in the age group 7 – 14 years, and 192,559 young persons aged 16 and 17 years old (UNICEF, 2004).

[11] The terms used in Portuguese to describe a person who is a mixture of black and white are *pardo* and *mulato.*
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[12] Landless Agricultural Workers Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra).

[13] For instance, the right to education framework recognizes the current limitations on the abilities of states to meet their full obligations. Thus, the language includes the idea of 'progressive realization' for the right to education beginning with free and compulsory education for all children and over time free and equal secondary education (including vocational training) for all and equal access to free higher education.