YOUNG PEOPLE’S PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC SPACES ON BEHALF OF THEIR RIGHTS

Irene Rizzini
Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
(PUC-Rio)
irizzini.pucrio.ciespi@gmail.com

Introduction

The rights of children and adolescents to participate in decision making by taking part in public spaces such as forums and councils is contained in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Brazilian Statute on the Child and the Adolescent (1990). A recent mandate issued by the Brazilian Children's Rights Council emphasizes the importance of appointing young people to the these federally mandated councils which operate at the federal, state and municipal levels in Brazil. The author analyzes the opportunities and challenges of such participation and youth’s perspectives on such activities through the first experience of young people participating in the Children's Rights Council of the city of Volta Redonda in the state of Rio de Janeiro.

While young people’s participation in decision making processes has been challenging, recently there has been an increase in interest in their participation. Along with the Brazilian legislation, an academic literature developed about the importance of respecting the voices and ideas of children and adolescents as active agents and viewed as ‘sujeitos de direitos’ (subjects of rights) (James, 2009; Acero; Ayala, 2011; Rizzini; Tisdall, 2012; Nascimento, 2014. Despite this growing interest, the notion of the importance of children’s voices and their actual participation has remained largely rhetorical.

Despite the Brazilian actions and debates, again, there was little child participation in practice. But Brazil has a unique vehicle for child participation. The Brazilian Constitution of 1989 laid special emphasis on citizen participation in public decision making. One outcome of that emphasis was the legal mandate for the existence of Rights Councils on a variety of major subject areas at the municipal, state and federal levels.

In 2013, the national Children’s Rights Council, CONANDA, promulgated guidelines that children and youth become actively engaged in local Councils as members, but with little impact. In 2017, however, in 2017, a new resolution came into effect mandating youth membership of the Councils. The author presents a preliminary analysis of a study about young people’s participation in the first Brazilian children’s Rights Council to officially appoint young people as council representatives.1

Defining child participation

In Brazil, as in most Latin American countries young people’s active participation is often called protagonism, to emphasize their place and role in society as proactive and their having autonomy, a sense of agency (Rizzini, 2018). The definition of protagonism is the active support of an idea or a cause particularly pleading for or advocating for something. The Paraguayan educator, Bordenave (2002) saw participation as a necessary condition for being human. For him, “participation in a living collective….is the only way to learn the praxis of the group. It appears that the only way to learn how to participate is by participating” (Rizzini, Caldeira et al, 2002, p. 74). In fact, the recent albeit inconsistent practice of participation has not been accompanied by the development of theory.

Some writers pointed out that there were a great variety of activities encompassed by the term. The usage reflected diversified power structures, objectives and results (Sinclair, 2004; Tisdall &
Prout, 2006). Descriptions ignored the diversity of forms of participation and tended not to consider the relevant social, political and historical contexts. In short, the existing theories have serious analytical problems (Ruiz-Casares; Collins; Tisdall; Grove, 2017).

Note that the terms child participation and youth participation are used interchangeably. In Brazil, adolescence is used as a formal age category (12 to 18) and is differentiated from youth which could extend to young people up to the age of 29.

The young councilors interviewed in this study had their own take on the word, one of them comparing participation with protagonism:
Participation is you have to go, you are obliged to go to the conference at school. Protaganism is that you have a genuine interest in political involvement in your life and that you want to participate.

But it is also based on rights. Asked about the meaning of protagonism, one young woman put it as follows:
‘It is that they don’t talk about you without you. They don’t talk about me without me. They act about me with me.’ That makes it something of a motto.

The young people clearly distinguished between genuine and make-believe participation the latter of which they labelled ‘decorative’ or coffee with milk (café-com-leite) participation.

About the study
The Brazilian study is part of a larger project (Monitoring the participation of young people in child protection) carried out by the International and Canadian Child Rights Partnership (ICCRP). The ICCRP includes academic institutions, international and national non-government organizations (NGOs), independent provincial human rights institutions, and research institutes in five countries, Brazil, Canada, China, South Africa, and the UK.2 The Brazilian study’s objective is to monitor the quality of participation of young people in the Children and Adolescents’ Rights Council of Volta Redonda and to analyze the impacts of such participation in relation to their protection and rights.

This study involved a group of 14 young people between the ages of 15 and 22 who either were or had been youth members of the Volta Redonda Council.

2 The ICCRP is comprised of research team members from Ryerson University (Canada), International Institute for Child Rights and Development (Canada), Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, CIESPI/PUC-Rio (Brazil), University of Cape Town (South Africa), the University of Edinburgh (UK), McGill University (Canada), and Lakehead University (Canada).

What are the advantages of participation?
The key advantage of youth participation in forums making decisions about young people is that those forums get first-hand information about how young people see their lives. This provides a critical perspective on the issues the forums are debating. Youth participation also has an impact on the young people. One young man said:

And they [the parents] observed and said “wow, this forum has changed my son”
It changed who I was, it changed how I thought, and it made me who I am.

This recognition of participation as a formative experience was a common theme. As one adult councilor put it, participation primarily impacts the young people; their identity, self-esteem, and empowerment.

The majority of the former counselors of the Volta Redonda Council felt that they were well listened to especially in comparison with the early days when it was only with the intervention of the Council president that they got a hearing. And in the process, they learned how to get attention. The young people’s concerns and actions

This group of young people were or are connected to the local Children’s Rights Council, a connection and a selection factor which would shape their interests. Those interests were nonetheless broad and included such topics as the right to contraception, freedom from sexual violence, the murder of black youth which they termed the genocide of black youth, violence against children and adolescents, bullying, and a recent upswing in the number of youth suicides. The Volta Redonda youth were particularly concerned about the murder of an adolescent and public securities lack of response.

There is no public safety. People said why weren’t these young people at home. If they had been at home this would not have happened. And the mayor at that time called a public meeting, an open meeting, a public audience on the theme, ‘public safety, children and youth’. And guess what? they did not invite the Children’s Rights Council or the Rights Forum.

The substantive concerns were therefore accompanied by a concern about the lack of consultation with young people. Despite not being invited, the young people

organized, sought out proposals to increase the safety of young people without harming their right to come and go as they chose, and delivered their proposals to the city. They continued to organize an event on the day of the young man’s death including marches and a seminar to which they invited a Council member and the chief of police. He remarked that he learned many things with the young people that he was not aware of.

Challenges

The Volta Redonda young people were aware that youth participation in their city was an isolated case. That in their view meant that the Councils were far from democratic.

While the young people in Volta Redonda did get listened to it was not always easy to get attention.

You are sitting there with your hand up. Two hours? But unfortunately, people begin to speak and we see them turning their backs to us preparing to talk to their colleague by their side. And so you are basically speaking to the wall. They are not engaging with you when they are looking at someone else.

Some young people do remain participants past the age limit but recruiting new youthful participants was a challenge. It was particularly difficult to recruit people at younger ages. They also reported the difficulty to get access to private schools making it impossible to recruit
wealthier youth. One participant said he had been on the phone with the director of a private school for three hours to get permission to invite students to a conference only to be turned down.

When asked about what they thought was necessary to make their participation more effective, the young people pointed out that they should also be present in other Rights Councils in the key areas of health and in education, areas which were vital to their well-being.

Final remark

This preliminary analysis shows that the official acceptance of youth participation can occur, can deliver young people’s perspective to critical debates and decisions and is an important learning experience for the youth. But the regular participation of children and youth in decisions that affect them has a long way to go.

The study demonstrates the embryo of official youth participation which did not exist in the past as our study participants take their place in an official body on human rights. As our study continues, we will learn more about the reality of their participation.

References


