Co-research with children: a systematic literature review using the Prisma statement

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Abstract (analytical)

This review examines scientific literature related to the participation of children as co-researchers. The study draws on the Prisma database guidelines and analyzes scientific production between 2019 and 2022. The articles reviewed evidence trends in the roles and names assigned to children in co-research, as well as participatory methodologies that recognize them as subjects of rights and experts regarding their environment who are capable of participating in the co-construction of knowledge with adult researchers. Methodological, ethical and political challenges are also identified that highlight the need for critical reflection on the purpose and implications of child participation in research, the power dynamics involved and the recognition of children's capacities and perspectives.

Palabras clave

Participatory research; childhood; adolescence; co-research; literature review.

Thesaurus

UNESCO Social Sciences Thesaurus.

Coinvestigación con NNA: una revisión sistemática de literatura según las directrices Prisma

Resumen (analítico)

Se realiza una revisión que examina la participación de niños, niñas y adolescentes como coinvestigadores. El estudio se apoya en la declaración para revisión sistemática de literatura Prisma y analiza las producciones científicas entre 2019 y 2022. Los artículos revisados revelan tendencias en los roles y las denominaciones que se asignan a los niños, niñas y adolescentes en la investigación, así como metodologías participativas que los reconocen como sujetos de derechos y expertos de su entorno, capaces de participar en la co-construcción de conocimiento con los adultos investigadores. También se identifican desafíos metodológicos, éticos y políticos que enfatizan la necesidad de una reflexión crítica sobre el propósito y las implicaciones de la participación infantil, las dinámicas de poder involucradas y el reconocimiento de las capacidades y perspectivas de los niños, niñas y adolescentes.

Palabras clave

Investigación participativa; infancia; adolescencia; coinvestigación; revisión de literatura.

Co-investigação com as crianças: uma revisão sistemática Prisma

Resumo (analítico)

É realizada uma revisão sistemática da literatura da categoria co-investigação utilizada em metodologias participativas com crianças e adolescentes, seus papéis e as etapas dos processos investigativos em que intervêm. O estudo é baseado na declaração Prisma, e analisa as produções científicas no período de 2019 a 2022. Os artigos revisados revelam tendências nos papéis atribuídos a crianças e adolescentes nas pesquisas, bem como metodologias participativas que os reconhecem como sujeitos de direitos e especialistas em seu contexto, capazes de participar da co-construção do conhecimento com os adultos pesquisadores. Também são identificados desafios metodológicos, éticos e políticos, que enfatizam a necessidade de reflexão crítica sobre o propósito e as implicações da participação infantil, as dinâmicas de poder envolvidas e o reconhecimento das capacidades e perspectivas das crianças.

Palavras-chave

Pesquisa participante; infância; adolescência; co-investigação; revisão da literatura.

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Introduction

While the lives of children were previously documented in a fragmented manner by travelers, authors and then social scientists, a fundamental political and epistemological shift began in the second half of the twentieth century. This was when people began to talk about the importance of recognizing children's voices, valuing their questioning and interpretations of the social world and, above all, considering them fundamental subjects in research processes and experts on their own lives (Bastien & Holmarsdottir, 2015; Christensen & James, 2008; Horgan, 2017; Kellett, 2010; Liebel, 2007). Although this is not a new debate, it has progressively begun to occupy a more visible place in academic agendas and reflections in Latin America and around the world (Ames & Padawer, 2015; Cavagnoud et al., 2013; Remorini, 2013; Sarcinelli, 2011).

Based on this logic, there have been a number of academic and political circumstances that mobilized this paradigm shift in the field of social research: the call from feminist and subaltern studies on the need to recover the voice of historically silenced subjects such as women and children (Spivak, 1988; Spyrou 2011); the critiques from postmodern studies of the politics of Western representation and the need to decolonize academic practices (Said, 1978; Santos, 2010); the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Lozano-Vicente, 2016; United Nations General Assembly, 1989); the emergence of child-focused curricula: *Childhood Studies*; research focused on articulating the theoretical and practical components proposed by the participatory research and popular education movements in Latin America (Fals-Borda, 1978; Freire, 1968; Milstein & Guerrero, 2021); and reflections on the relevance of strengthening political participation for all citizens, including children and adolescents, in decision making processes and the political development of their countries.

The search for children's perspectives through capturing their voices has been — and continues to be — an inquiry into children's subjectivities by researchers who form part of the interdisciplinary field of Childhood Studies. Spyrou (2016), citing Mazzei and Jackson (2012) and McLure et al. (2010), argues that authenticity can be found in children's

voices, which in turn allow us to learn about the experiences and essence of a person. Thus, it can be assumed that we have access to the authentic and unadulterated self of those who are being studied (Llobet, 2012).

Accessing the voices of children has been primarily considered a methodological (Hill, 2006), political and ethical problem (James, 2007). Tensions regarding children's voices allow the adult world to discuss their value and legitimacy in relation to certain topics and issues when consulting or inviting children to participate in a research project. We support the critical position presented by Szulc (2019), who invites us to understand that the voices of children are not in unison. In her work with Mapuche children, the author offers examples that show how members of this population produce diverse interpretations based on different modes of cultural production. Similarly, and as part of the concept of "children's cultures", the author argues that it is difficult to analyze children's perspectives separately because they are not produced in isolation from other points of view. In order to address these differences, it is necessary to analyze children's cultural production, including both their voices and their silences (Spyrou, 2016). It is also essential to interweave with these voices the set of institutions and social discourses that demarcate the social spaces in which childhoods occur (Llobet, 2012; Szulc, 2019).

Participatory methodologies (Coeli et al., 2021; Di Caudio & Milstein, 2019; Hall et al., 2021; Milstein & Tammarazio, 2018) are characterized by the generation of collective knowledge and reflection achieved through awareness raising (both individual and group), political commitment and effective transformation of realities by the subjects themselves. Participatory approaches promote openness and equity in the exchange of knowledge, experiences, expertise and ideas, providing different perspectives on a phenomenon. Taken to the field of child participation, participatory research approaches imply a more in-depth focus on democratization. These methodologies transcend the recognition of children as valid interlocutors in the construction of knowledge who have the reflexive capacity to communicate their experiences. Participatory research techniques highlight children' positions as subjects of rights within the framework of a true "politicization process" (Shabel, 2014), which does not refer to *childhood* but to the many different childhoods that exist, as well as the multiple ways of living them.

At the heart of this epistemological turn is the need to critically reflect on how to carry out research regarding the issues and settings that affect the lives of children and facilitate "their active role in research, their participation, and their standing as research

subjects" (Esteban et al., 2021, p. 22). While some views of this population's active role in research are more critical than others, Liebel and Markowska (2021) have noted that theoretical discussions generally highlight two dimensions of the problem: studies that focus on ethical-political and epistemological aspects; methodological debates in studies with children as co-researchers. The main theoretical debates on these two dimensions are described below.

What does it politically and ethically mean to conduct co-research with children?

Following the signing of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) and the emergence of the field of Childhood Studies, there was an evident increase in academic training programs and publications with the participation of children as co-researchers, even though there has been very little critical evaluation of what this academic, political and moral promise means and implies (Aitken & Millar, 2002; Alderson & Morrow, 2004; James, 2007; Liebel & Markowska-Manista, 2021; Liebel & Markowska-Manista, 2021). Millar, 2002; Alderson & Morrow, 2004; James, 2007; Liebel & Markowska-Manista, 2021). Co-research and child participation are complex methodological, ethical and political stakes that appear in research studies with different and sometimes conflicting uses. These are concepts that many invoke, "but each person chooses a different content and meaning" (López-Ronda & Pineda, 2013, p. 8).

Liebel and Markowska-Manista (2021) have noted that while the importance of children's participation in scientific research is undeniable, its application in reality is difficult, given that the meaning of this participation can vary in each context and circumstance. For example, Brinck et al. (2022) refer to the roles assumed by research participants as an indicator that determines the quality and levels of participatory processes. This is based on the types of interaction and power relations that occur between adults and children. Their hypothesis is that both adults and children should have the access and freedom to assume a range of roles within a research project, which materialize in *participation zones*, in which the actors have different levels of freedom to engage in a participatory process.

Subsequently, analyzing the ethical-political and epistemological dimension of children's participation in research must include a number of interrelated issues. First, the "child consultation culture" (Aitken & Millar, 2002) does not necessarily imply carrying out research that has any real impact on children's lives and environments. This means

that researchers and institutions need to think about their reasons for involving children in research (Ritterbusch et al., 2020), who will benefit from their voices and participation, and what interests (political, academic, economic, publicity) have contributed to the decision to select children as co-researchers.

Second, it has been suggested that child participation in research is not a technical problem but a political one (Novella, 2012). For example, some children are assumed to be more *suitable* for carrying out research processes and, subsequently, others are usually excluded or discriminated against, including: children with different abilities, infants, children who are linguistically distant from the researcher, and those who have little familiarity with skills and concepts taught in school (drawing, writing, reading), among others.

A third discussion involves the differences between research, political activism and social intervention. In a recent paper, Nieuwenhuys and Hanson (2020) discussed how research with children involves a tension between the possibilities of "influencing and impacting their social world" and "understanding it better". On many occasions, researchers do not know how their work will benefit or contribute to concrete improvements in the living conditions of the children who participate in their investigation. Llobet (2019) suggests that it is essential to recognize the differentiated forms of action between people who carry out research and those who are more focused on realizing interventions in the field of childhood. These roles build their legitimacy differently but reconstruct each other (Llobet, 2019).

Although it is a complex and inconclusive debate that is full of contradictions, Liebel and Markowska-Manista (2021) suggest that research with children should not be limited to "giving them a voice" or involving them as informants. Instead, co-research with children involves sharing their concerns and seeing how the knowledge produced about them can contribute to public debate and strengthen this population's position in any social scenario. In the words of Shier (2015), this approach would achieve transformative research.

Methodological challenges of co-research with children

One of the questions that usually arises is: what is the degree of participation and collaboration that children have in co-research? In recent decades, several researchers (Liebel, 2020; Liebenberg et al., 2020; Milstein & Guerrero, 2021) have proposed that collaborative and participatory research should seek to involve children in the entire

process or, as much as possible, including the formulation of research questions, selection of instruments, fieldwork, analysis of results and the writing process.

Smit et al. (2020) establish four different levels of participation for children in participatory research processes in the educational context, which can occur at any stage: 1) informing: use is made of the information they provide without any other type of interaction, including explanations; 2) consulting: the voices of children are taken into account, specifically their explanations, views, opinions or suggestions; 3) co-research: children actively participate in the research process and the creation of new knowledge; and 4) research: adult researchers and children jointly conduct research, with both participating in decision-making processes and activities.

The shift from considering children as "informants" to seeing them as co-researchers involves recognizing that "they are also experts with skills, abilities and visions that can contribute to research findings" (Liebenberg et al., 2020, p. 2). However, the direction of this collaboration must be a decision made by the participating children and should respond to their interests, dispositions, aptitudes, competencies and the differences that exist in groups and strongly influence research: social origin, class affiliation, gender, age, language skills, academic performance, physical condition, popularity, and others. *De-romanticizing* child participation and collaboration in research also implies accepting that children will often not want to participate in the different stages of a project, even if it is an amazing initiative, because "each human being has very different conditions for producing knowledge, which means that there are asymmetries in these conditions" (Reygadas, 2014, p. 92). This means that it is essential to have clear ethical criteria regarding respect for children who choose not to participate. It is important that they are able to openly disagree with the research activities and the proposed methodological agenda. This is part of recognizing children as research peers.

Finally, another methodological and epistemological discussion critiques the academic rhetoric surrounding *children's voices* and *agency* (James, 2007; Komulainen, 2007; Spyrou, 2018; Warming, 2011). Critics note that a child's voice, from a Western and liberal perspective, has been the most valued communicative resource for research exercises with children. This places other expressions at a second level, including silences, screams, body language, discomfort and crying.

Taking into account the different research stages, Liebenberg et al. (2020) evidence the challenges of recognizing children's voices in data analysis processes as there is usually an insufficient level of their participation as co-researchers. The lack of clear guidelines

and illustrative examples, together with the complexity and exhaustive implications of the process, results in a tendency to exclude children from this research stage or to involve them in a more vertical and authoritarian manner instead of in a participatory way.

It should be added that research work *designed* and *carried out* by children in not just in the minority (compared to research conducted by adults), but is often not sufficiently recognized because it is produced in closed spaces such as schools, community centers and foundations. This type of research is also usually disseminated in restricted circulation formats such as theses, newsletters, institutional journals and pedagogical materials. On other occasions, the work carried out by children is presented as a secondary result of a study with a restricted and marginal meaning or as annexed material, without granting it a central epistemological value. There is also significant theoretical and conceptual dispersion, as definitions of co-research may vary from one case to another. Research with child co-researchers can have different characteristics depending on the text, the type of project and the interests of the researchers.

Critical assessments of the achievements, scope, limitations and possibilities in terms of how research practice is being built and consolidated is a fundamental part of academic work. This article contains a literature review of 57 scientific research articles published during the last three years in different disciplinary fields, accompanied by an analysis of how the commitment to co-research with children is being configured.

This literature review recognizes the way in which knowledge production regarding this practice is being structured by geography, language and disciplinary field. The article also examines how other practitioners have designed their research projects in conceptual, methodological and ethical terms, which is not just stimulating and enlightening for researchers, but is also beneficial for other actors in this field.

This article invites the reader to be realistic and overcome a romanticist view of working with children. The authors seek to promote the understanding that serious and committed co-research requires constant adjustments to one's own research practices, rhythms, timeframes and resources. In the final dissemination stage, researchers present their achievements and reach a final sense of certainty, coherence and tranquility with their work. This literature review attempts to do just the opposite: identify the challenges and questions faced by the authors of these studies while collecting their differentiated understandings of what it means to conduct research with children. With this article, the authors hope to contribute to the accumulation of knowledge, recognize a trajectory of work and identify opportunities that exist to continue building more ethical

and genuine ways of doing research that connect with the interests and concerns of children in the region.

Methods

The interest in conducting this systematic literature review arises from prior research previously carried out by the authors with children and on child participation in different social settings (Aristizábal-García, 2016, 2020, 2021; Aristizábal-García & Pedraza-Gómez, 2023; Giraldo-Cadavid, 2018; Lafaurie-Molina et al. 2021; López-Ordosgoitia, 2019; López-Ordosgoitia & Río, 2020; López-Ordosgoitia et al., 2023; Marinkovic et al., 2022; Vega-Casanova & Lafaurie-Molina, 2013). This prior experience has generated a shared concern about what it means and implies when children are included as co-researchers. Different to a narrative literature review, in which the selection of articles included is a result of the researcher's own interests, the decision to conduct a systematic review and use the Prisma statement provides a protocol that ensures rigor and completeness while minimizing bias. This is particularly important for a topic that has already been examined by researchers.

The literature review was conducted between September and November 2022 and includes research articles published between 2019 and 2022. This process focused on papers about research studies in which children had the role of co-researchers. The intention of the review was to carry out quantitative and qualitative analysis of these articles.

The Prisma statement (*Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses*, Sarkis-Onofre et al., 2021) was used as the basis of the methodology for this literature review. The procedures detailed in the Prisma statement ensure rigor, systematicity and credibility for a review, guaranteeing its quality. The Scopus and Web of Science databases were selected to search for publications in English and Spanish. It was decided to include Google Scholar in order to collect more articles in Spanish due to their low representation in the other two databases. Articles included in the literature review were located through direct consultations of the databases after filtering the initial results.

The methodological process consisted of four stages. The first stage involved the search and location of articles associated with the selected topic. The search descriptors used were *participatory action research* OR *Co-research* AND *child** OR *Adolesc** OR *Teen* OR *You** in both English and Spanish, while also filtering for the defined time period (2019 to 2022). The use of these descriptors identified documents in different languages.

In addition to publications in English and Spanish, we also included those written in Portuguese, given our interest in the Latin American context. The initial search yielded a total of 1088 documents.

In the second stage, selection and screening criteria were applied using the following filters: 1) research articles; 2) open access (*open access* and *free to read*); 3) written in English or Spanish (as mentioned above); and 4) fields of knowledge directly related to Social Sciences (*education; environmental; social work; family studies; art; ecology*). Only papers that contained the results of empirical studies were selected, leaving a total of 187 documents. The article selection process is detailed in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Methodological process for the literature review
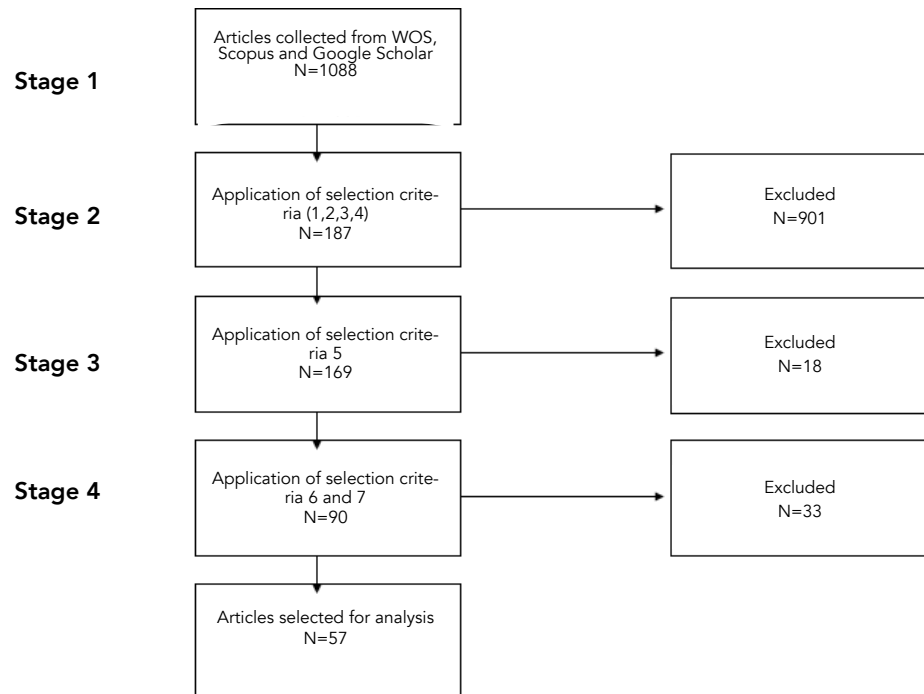
The third stage of the literature review involved filtering articles that were relevant to the specific research topic. The team of authors read the title, keywords and abstract of each article. Duplicates and papers that were not thematically linked to the object of study were eliminated (selection criterion 5). In the fourth stage, the team conducted a detailed reading of 90 papers to ensure their thematic relevance. Two new criteria were incorporated into the review at this stage: 6) papers should be exclusively about research involving children and adolescents; and 7) the age range of child and adolescent partici-

pants should not exceed 18 years. A total of 33 papers were eliminated during the reading of the complete texts.

The analysis took into account both quantitative aspects (year of publication, language, country, area of knowledge, and topics addressed) and qualitative aspects (roles assumed by children in the research process, and stages in which they were involved in the research as participants).

It was found that the authors of the articles reviewed discussed the methodological, ethical and political challenges with involving children as co-researchers, their research methods, techniques used, and finally the methodological, ethical and political challenges with involving children as co-researchers.

For the quantitative analysis, an Excel™ database was created to identify and sort articles into two types of categories. First, data was collected regarding the geographic location and date of the selected articles: year of publication, language and country where the study was conducted. This data was extracted directly from the information provided in the articles. Second, information was added to the database in order to record emerging trends in the group of articles: areas of knowledge (identified through the thematic focus of the journals and the disciplines or fields of study of the authors), thematic interest or focus (of each study) and central terms or concepts for intellectual production, which were reflected in the key words for each of the articles.

The process of analyzing and interpreting the qualitative aspects of the articles was carried out in accordance with the framework analysis suggested by Ritchie and Spencer (1994). The analytical process consisted of the following stages: 1) detailed reading of the articles selected for the literature review; 2) definition of categories for analysis; 3) identification of trends and emerging themes in each of the defined categories; 4) indexing of significant texts; 5) identification of key fragments in the articles to illustrate trends and emerging themes; and 6) mapping of findings in the form of diagrams to facilitate the interpretation of the data by the authors. The socialization and discussion sessions between the authors that occurred before writing the results allowed for adjustments, clarification of findings, and confirmation of the results presented in the following section.

Results

Quantitative aspects

The date of publication was the first selection and classification criterion. As shown in Figure 2, the highest number of articles selected were published in 2020 (22) and 2021 (21), and to a lesser extent 2019 (7) and 2022 (7). It should be noted that the article publication cut-off date was August 2022 for this literature review.

Figure 2

Distribution of articles by year of publication
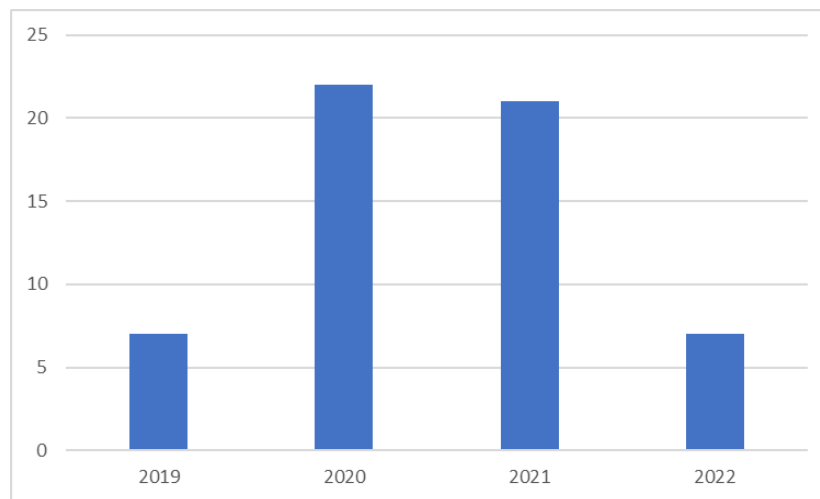
Another aspect analyzed was language, with 44 articles published in English, 11 in Spanish and 2 in Portuguese.

In terms of the country in which the research was carried out, there was a predominance of research from the United States (14), followed by the United Kingdom (10) and the Netherlands (7). There were also international collaborations between different countries (4) and individual studies conducted in Spain (3), Australia (3), nations in the Latin American region and other countries such as Israel and Canada (Figure 3).

Although it is generally academics from inter- and transdisciplinary fields who are interested in conducting research with children, an attempt was made to classify the articles based on the specific areas of knowledge of each study.

Figure 3

Distribution of articles according to the country in which the co-research was carried out
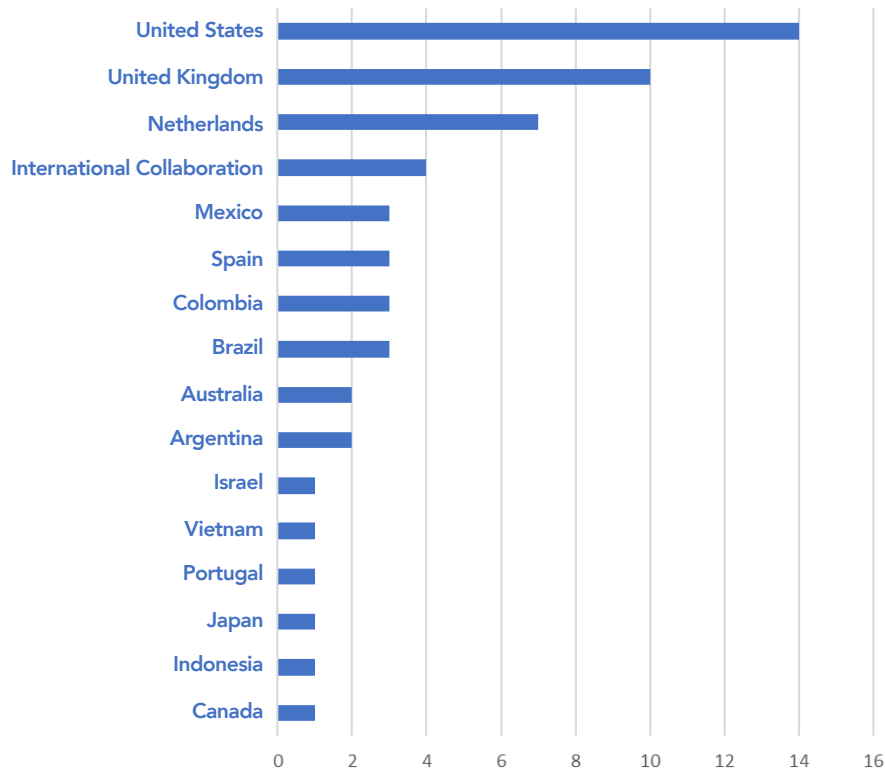

It was identified that most of the research is focused on the field of education (31), 10 articles in the social sciences, 8 in public health, and 6 were associated with environmental studies. One article was in the field of community psychology and another in social work (Figure 4).

**Figure 4**

Papers by area of knowledge
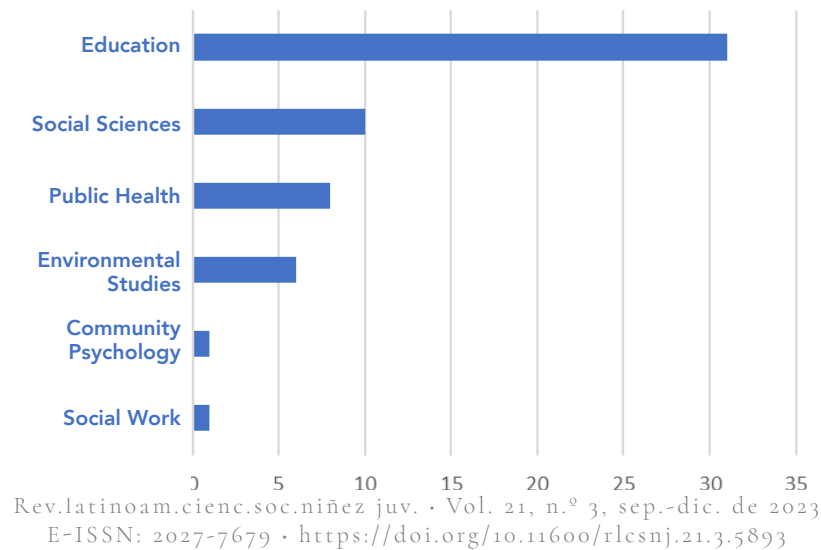
The articles included in this literature review refer to research with children and cover a wide range of scenarios and issues. These studies can't be reduced to a single category. The articles were grouped into areas that correspond to the main objectives of each study. One of the major topics covered in this co-research was the promotion of physical and mental health and well-being for children (13 articles). Participation processes, viewed from children's perspectives, with a focus on rights and school and community environments, was also a predominant theme (12 articles), as well as environmental education processes with an emphasis on climate change and sustainability (10 articles). To a lesser extent, there were also research studies on topics such as literacy and children's reading and writing processes, situations involving discrimination, inclusion mechanisms and prevention of sexual violence. Other less frequent topics included art and rural education (Figure 5).

Figure 5
Subjects covered
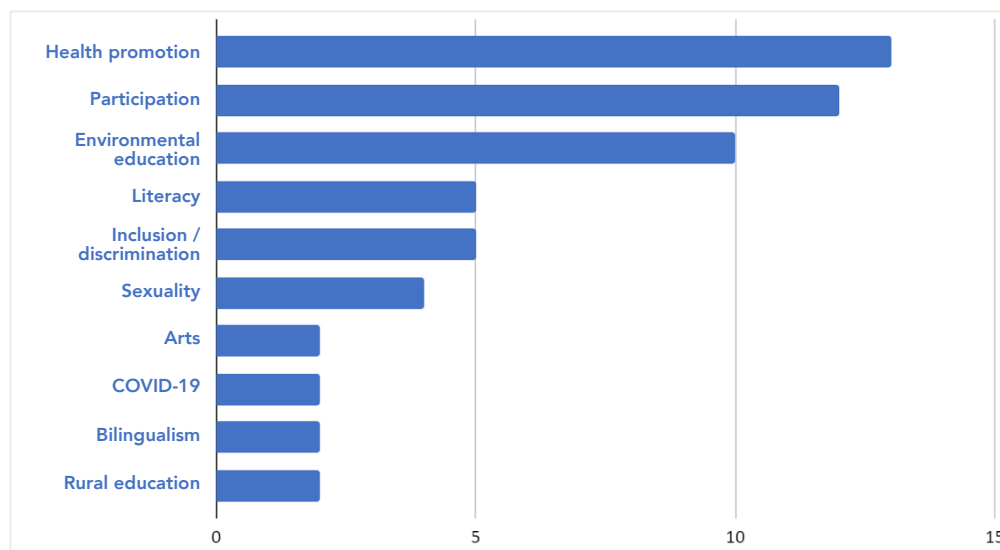
Finally, and as part of the quantitative analysis carried out by the authors, the key words that appeared most frequently in the articles were collected, including analogous terms for each language. As shown in Figure 6, these key words primarily refer to: methods, methodologies and techniques used; the age group of children co-researchers; the school setting; and the most frequently mentioned thematic topics, which were discussed in the previous paragraph.

Figure 6

Most frequent keywords
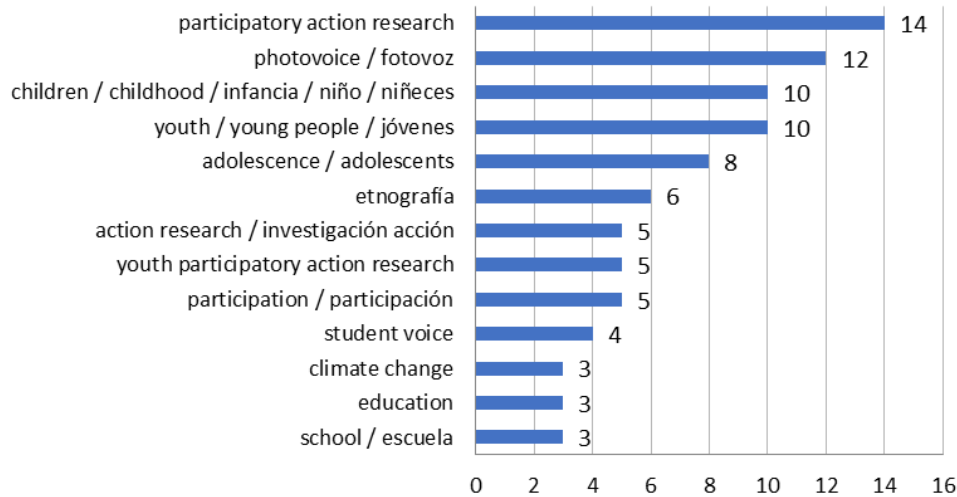
Qualitative aspects

Notion of children as co-researchers

The analysis of the articles included in this literature review highlights the importance of reflecting on what it means to position oneself as a co-researcher in relation to the social and political role of children. A detailed reading of the papers revealed different trends about the way in which authors do or don't reflect on the participation of children as co-researchers.

An initial trend identified by the authors is the mention of children as *active participants* in collaborative scientific research (Arief et al., 2022; Lems et al., 2020; Trott, 2019), in which the status of researcher is reserved for the (adult) authors of the article (Banyard et al., 2022; Crook & Cox, 2022). This differentiation between adult researchers and child participants is also reflected in studies where the latter are referred to as junior researchers (Fine et al., 2021; McGilivray & Mahon, 2021; Wilderink et al., 2021), whose role is described as being *key informants* in the setting where the research takes place using different techniques such as photovoice (Sprague et al., 2021). This distinction is also evident when describing children as students or pupils (Howley et al., 2021).

A second trend is the importance placed on the involvement of children in research processes. This consideration is more focused on the recognition of children as experts on their local environment, as well as on the problems that affect them. This implies that they are mostly recognized as *co-researchers* in their communities and not necessarily co-

researchers in the research study being carried out. This is implicit recognition that their involvement has a greater impact on the settings they inhabit and not such a big effect on the decisions made in the research process. Some of the articles speak of children as co-researchers and *co-creators* of knowledge about their communities (Le & Yu, 2021). Similarly, in educational research, children are positioned as experts regarding their environments and *creators of knowledge* (Dejaynes et al., 2020), which implies a status different to that of students, allowing them to assume other roles in relation to adult researchers and the scenarios they wish to impact with their decisions. Children are considered experts on their own lives and contexts, meaning that their perspectives provide valuable information about the communities they live in and interventions that other entities are interested in implementing (Anselma et al., 2020; Boonekamp et al., 2020). In the papers included in this literature review, children are positioned as significant interlocutors and capable citizens (Esteban et al., 2021) who have the potential to intervene in areas traditionally considered exclusive to adults (Fernández, 2021).

This involvement of children as experts on their lives, contexts and communities poses challenges in terms of their relationships with adults. There are also issues with their role a participants in a research process, where knowledge — not necessarily methodological — can be shared among the different participants. This is the case in the educational context, where the involvement of children as experts invites adults to change the roles they traditionally assume in schools (Halliday et al., 2019). The participatory approach blurs the boundaries between the categories of researcher - researcher and educator - and learner, positioning all of those involved as capable of acquiring and generating knowledge (Trott et al., 2020). However, the recognition of children as knowledgeable about their contexts does not necessarily imply that they have knowledge of the research process, which is why the authors of these articles emphasize the need for guidance or mentoring in order to conduct co-research (Cense et al., 2020).

A final trend, which was evident in several Latin American studies, involves a reflection on the social and political status of children in which they are positioned as agents with their own and unprecedented perspective. These studies consider children as co-researchers and co-producers (Bertolli, 2020), considering them "active agents" (Amba & Schrijver, 2020). These articles position this population as competent intellectuals instead of seeing them as researchers who consider themselves learners (Dantas-Whitney, 2020). In this sense, children are given the power to influence the emergent nature of research (Barley, 2020), meaning that collaboration goes beyond the academic sphere. Links with

otherness are sought through establishing a horizontal relationship based on mutual trust and respect between the adults and children (Nuñez et al., 2021). From this perspective, children are understood as dialogic partners who actively participate in research processes (McMullan & Sutherland, 2020) and are capable of delivering quality research results (Cuevas-Parra, 2020).

Modes of participation for children as co-researchers: roles and steps

The review of the articles reveals four participation modalities in which children are involved as co-researchers in the studies: 1) their participation as part of an educational process; 2) their participation as informants using different participatory techniques; 3) as co-researchers who participate in different stages of the research process in which adults assume a range of roles from leadership to accompaniment; and 4) active participation as co-creators.

The participation of children in formative research processes occurs primarily in educational contexts (Dejaynes & Curmi-Hall, 2019; Halliday et al., 2019; Lems et al., 2020). In this type of project, teachers decide on the focus of the research and invite children to collaborate in a variety of roles, ranging from informants to decision-makers (Paracha et al., 2019). Children participants receive training through workshops on specific techniques, such as photovoice (Arief et al., 2022; Boonekamp et al., 2020; Halliday et al., 2019), and on research processes such as data collection, data analysis and dissemination of results (Halliday et al., 2019). Sometimes the authors state that their choice of research methods is based on children's lack of scientific formation (Cense et al., 2020). In these articles, children's capacity for action and decision-making is delimited by their experience as researchers, even though they are considered experts on their environment, context and lives. Another element identified in this literature review is related to research phases, in which awareness raising or training activities for children is incorporated into the research, after which they participate in the other research stages.

The use of participatory research techniques is notable in studies that involve children as informants, (Hemy & Meshulam, 2020; Howley et al., 2021; Sprague et al., 2021; Thomas, 2020). Photovoice appears as a technique used to collect children's perceptions and visions of certain phenomena that affect their lives (Abma & Schrijver, 2020; Banyard et al., 2022; Machado & Silva, 2021; Shah et al., 2021; Trott, 2021; Trott et al., 2020). The participation component focuses on the possibilities for creation and reflection offered by the chosen techniques, and not so much on the roles that children assume as co-researchers or their decision-making power within the research. As a result,

spaces for reflection on the phenomenon studied take precedence over a focus on the research process itself. This was the case with studies carried out on climate change (Trott, 2019), sexual health (Samir et al., 2021; Le & Yu, 2021), healthy environments (Wilderink et al., 2021), environmental sustainability (Dunlop et al., 2022), racial identity (Sackett & Dogan, 2019), waste consumption and disposal (Meirinho, 2020) and the construction of community spaces (Núñez et al., 2021). These studies adopt a view of children as experts on the settings they inhabit and inexperienced in terms of scientific research processes, as mentioned in the previous section. In this group of studies, the participation of children is limited to data collection, data analysis, and reflection exercises (Ruiz-Morales, 2021). As informants, the recognition of children's voices allows them to contribute to transformative processes (Caetano et al., 2020).

Recognition of children as co-researchers facilitates their active participation in different research stages. According to the authors of the articles analyzed in this literature review, these are collaborative research processes (Bertoli, 2020) in which the time and interests of the children involved are respected. Investigations also create spaces for dialogue that go beyond data collection processes and involve children in activities such as the preparation of questionnaires, selection of the population that will be interviewed, analysis of the information obtained and the definition of categories (Anselma et al., 2020; Caetano et al., 2020; Fernández, 2021; Shearn et al., 2022). Children are positioned as advisors to the project through these activities, providing feedback to adult researchers about the process (Cuevas-Parra, 2020). This in turn empowers the participating children because they do not feel that their involvement is consultative or tokenistic (Pickering et al., 2022). It is important to note that this group of studies highlights the leadership of the adult researcher, who is always present through their accompaniment of children in the different activities (Crook & Cox, 2022). It is observed that some initial and final decisions continue to be the exclusive domain of adult researchers (Anselma et al., 2020). There are studies that reflect on the participation of children in research as an evolving process in which they are initially called upon as informants or have specific roles, but as the process progresses, their involvement in decision-making increases to the point of leadership (Dantas-Whitney, 2020; McMullan & Sutherland, 2020).

Finally, there is a group of studies in which children participate as co-creators, sharing interests and decision-making with adult researchers based on their experiences of the subject being researched (Smithson & Jones, 2021). Ethical aspects are addressed in an ongoing manner and not due to an external requirement (Whittington, 2019). This

type of work recognizes children as peers in the research, respecting their right to express ideas about what affects them in accordance with Article 12 of the *Convention on the Rights of the Children* (Hedegaard-Soerensen & Penthin, 2020). As part of this approach, children are involved in all stages, including those related to analysis and research writing, while also reflecting on their role as co-researchers (Barley, 2020).

Research methods and techniques used

This literature review affirms that children participate in qualitative research. Only one of the 57 papers describes a mixed design (Trott, 2021), although when examined more closely it shows that the participation of children was exclusively in the study's qualitative component. It can be inferred that there is a special sensitivity to valuing children as co-researchers among adult researchers who design ways of knowing the world using naturalistic and interpretative perspectives. It seems that the viability of the presence of children in research is linked to the construction of knowledge in the interpretative and critical paradigms of scientific research, and not through positivist or empirical-analytical paradigms (Vasco, 1990). There seems to be interest among adult researchers in integrating children into qualitative initiatives that are aimed at understanding or transforming realities. However, adult researchers do not consider it viable for this population to participate in projects involving quantitative methodological designs with empirical-analytical approaches.

In terms of the research methods used in the studies covered by this literature review, three trends stand out. The first is the use of participatory action research as a method that focuses on children taking political and ethical positions for action in school, health promotion, community and global settings, with the consequent expectation of transforming micro or macro social realities (Antunes, 2022; Caetano et al, 2020; Cuevas-Parra, 2020; Díaz, 2021; González-Arriero & de Manuel, 2022; Gutiérrez & Soler, 2021; Halliday et al., 2019; Hedegaard-Soerensen & Penthin, 2020; Hickey, 2020; Lems et al., 2020; McGillivray & Mahon, 2021; McMullan & Sutherland, 2020; Paracha et al., 2019; Smit et al., 2020; Shearn et al., 2022; Thomas, 2020; Trott, 2019; Vásquez- Guevara, 2021; Whittington, 2019).

The existence of two variants is recognized in the field of participatory action research. Some studies refer to youth participatory action research (YPAR) to emphasize the leading role of children's actions in research projects in which they tend to act as leaders (Abraczinskas & Arrett, 2020; Anselma et al., 2020; Crook & Cox, 2022; Dejaynes & Curmi-Hall, 2019; Dejaynes et al., 2020). The other variant is the so-called photovoice

methodology in which children are involved in taking photographs and discussing them, following protocols based on a combination of art, creation and science, and then generating solutions problems that affect their lives or that can be enriched through children's perspectives (Abma & Schrijver, 2020; Banyard et al., 2022; Boonekamp et al., 2020; Hemy & Meshulam, 2020; Howley et al., 2021; Meirinho, 2020; Miller et al., 2021; Pickering et al., 2022; Sackett & Dogan, 2019; Sprague et al., 2021; Le & Yu, 2021; Trott, 2019; Trott, 2021; Trott et al., 2020; Wilderink et al., 2021). In the literature reviewed, photovoice is considered a form of participatory action research that positions children as agents of change for themselves, their families, friends and communities. In one example, this was achieved by visualizing behaviors that contribute to the reduction of pollution and promote environmental sustainability (Trott, 2021). Photovoice also facilitates the emergence of children's voices to disrupt legitimized power relations. This is the case with students observing their teachers and using cameras that help them narrate what changes they want in their schools (Hemy & Meshulam, 2020), as well as the use of this methodology with girls from ethnic minorities (Le & Yu, 2021).

The second trend is associated with the collaborative ethnography method, with studies that consider children as allied researchers who collaborate in the construction of knowledge. In some cases, ethnographies integrate children as observers and preparers of exhibitions, shows and fairs (Dantas-Whitney, 2020; Ruiz-Morales, 2021). In other cases, the ethnographies presented in articles suggest that children participate in this research by providing information to ethnographers through interviews, discussions, conversations, observations, workshops and campaigns. In this approach, the participation of children is primarily conceived as contributions that help co-construct knowledge, using a distributive leadership perspective (Spillane & Ortiz, 2019). The focus of this leadership is the interaction between adult researchers and child co-researchers and not the isolated actions of each actor (Alegre & Gandulfo, 2020; Barley, 2020; Bertoli, 2020; Fernández, 2021; Machado & Silva, 2021). The authors of studies included in this literature review observe that initiatives developed as part of research generally emerge from an adult perspective and less so from children's perspectives.

The third trend includes studies described as qualitative with participatory approaches but do not detail specific methods. Instead, these articles allude to the ways in which children are consulted, interviewed, observed, asked to participate in workshops or training spaces, and invited to propose or develop research and engage in creative activities. In this type of study, we find children narrating their projects and activities through

the use of media to develop audiovisual stories, produce e-books, write letters and create autoethnographies, maps, graffiti, posters, theater plays and proposals for libraries and cities (Arief et al., 2022; Dunlop et al., 2022; Esteban et al., 2021; Fine et al., 2021; Guardia, 2021; Núñez et al., 2021; Samir et al., 2021; Smithson & Jones, 2021; Shah et al., 2021; van Blerk et al., 2019; Williams & McEwen, 2021).

The research techniques employed in the reviewed articles are varied and generally include observation, interviews, focus groups, conversations, narratives and workshops. Action-research techniques are also used, including artistic and photographic creation and the design of proposals and projects. These techniques are designed to incorporate how children think and feel about themselves and their realities into scientific research.

Methodological, ethical and political challenges with involving children as co-researchers

Although the authors of the articles analyzed in this literature review agree on the epistemological relevance of including children as active actors in the research process, the vast majority also note that co-research involves a number of challenges. A first group of these challenges is related to methodological issues that are both logistical and technical and include: identifying the most suitable place to carry out research, as some researchers wondered whether conducting their research in a school context had an impact on the voluntary nature of children's participation (Crook & Cox, 2022); whether conducting research in a school might limit children's participation, with decisions made by leaders of the institution prioritized over ideas from participants (Arief et al., 2022); whether the school setting affects the voluntary nature of children's participation (Crook & Cox, 2022); and if research conducted in schools reinforces adult power relations over children, which are regularly assumed to occur in school contexts (Hedegaard-Soerensen & Penthin, 2020; Hemy & Meshulam, 2020; McMullan & Sutherland, 2020). Yet from a logistical point of view, the authors recognize that conducting research in school spaces minimizes costs and allows them to meet with students in what is an already familiar and safe setting (Shearn et al., 2022).

Another consideration is related to the sample size of participants. Several of the studies discuss whether working with small, homogeneous groups and in spaces limited to schools, clubs or youth collectives could represent a limitation in terms of making a real commitment to co-research and diversity (Banyard et al., 2022; Crook & Cox, 2022; Shearn et al., 2022). Other methodological challenges include: fieldwork schedules; the possibility of monitoring participants; creating lasting relationships and achieving long-

term learning with participating children (Abraczinskas & Arrett, 2020; Trott, 2019); difficulties with aligning research schedules with participants' school timetables and family commitments (Esteban et al., 2021); and how to overcome the digital/connectivity gap so that children can share materials (Boonekamp et al., 2020).

A second theoretical trend is related to ethical and epistemological challenges when co-researching with children. Authors reflected on the weight given to the discourse produced by children who are considered "still not adults" and lack the maturity to effectively participate in research (Bertoli, 2020). This suggests the need to continually review and deconstruct these assumptions at all stages of the research (Dejaynes et al., 2020). There is also a need to recognize the inherent tensions of positioning children as producers of knowledge (Dejaynes & Curmi-Hall, 2019).

The papers evidenced a constant ambivalence between participation and protection when attempting co-research with children (Cuevas-Parra, 2020). This ambivalence is not just limited to the scope of adult consent regarding the right to participation for children (even at the expense of their wishes or opinions), but also with the issues that adults may or may not consider to be within children's capacities. These often end up limiting opportunities to listen to this population about issues that affect them (Whittington, 2019).

A third trend involves challenges with ensuring the necessary contextual conditions to carry out co-research. Several of the authors agree that the objectives initially established for research projects are often not achieved due to the contextual particularities of the participating children or unforeseen circumstances. These can include: differences in individual literacy levels in the same group (Miller et al., 2021); linguistic and cultural diversity when working with migrant children and children from different countries (Alegre & Gandulfo, 2020; Caetano et al., 2020; Sackett & Dogan, 2019; Wilderink et al., 2021); difficulties with understanding abstract topics or instruments when conducting research with very young children (Miller et al., 2021; Wilderink et al., 2021; Williams & Lindsey, 2021); distrust displayed by adult caregivers towards adult researchers who are seeking to work with children (Núñez-Patiño et al., 2021); differences between the thematic interests of co-researching adults and children (Gutiérrez & Soler, 2021; Machado & Silva 2021); and the impossibility of maintaining the motivation of participants or avoiding attrition among child co-researchers (Fine et al., 2021; McGillivray & Mahon, 2021; Shah et al., 2021).

Several articles also note that there are challenges related to the rhythms and timeframes involved in co-research processes (Barley, 2020). Authors recognize that for chil-

dren to play active roles in different stages of the research, they need sufficient time to provide them with training on how to use research tools (Boonekamp et al., 2020). It is suggested that researchers should make their work routines and rhythms more flexible so that children can feel part of the entire research process.

This literature review has identified that using participatory methodologies doesn't automatically mean that it will be a meaningful process for participating children. This is because collaboration and shared knowledge are required at each stage of the process to achieve this goal, meaning that adult researchers' practices, rhythms and schedules need to be adjusted.

Discussion

This document presents a systematic literature review of investigations carried out during the last four years that include the participation of children as co-researchers. The findings show that this emerging research practice is more common in Anglo-Saxon countries. Co-research involves the use of participatory methodologies with children in which they are recognized as subjects of rights, experts regarding their own environments and capable of actively participating in the co-construction of knowledge with adult researchers (Shabel, 2014).

Across the four year period selected for the literature review, there was a higher number of scientific articles published in 2020 and 2021, with a majority of the studies conducted in the United States, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. In Latin America, co-research with children is occurring in countries such as Argentina, Mexico and Colombia. It should be noted that only research articles published in the Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar databases were selected for this literature review. This omitted different types of scientific literature from the study, such as student theses, newsletters and popular magazine articles, all of which have been published in Latin America. This trend demonstrates a growing interest in participatory research approaches with children across the region. However, in Latin America researchers disseminate their work through channels that do not comply with international standards. In terms of disciplines in which these studies are centered, many inter and trans-disciplinary studies focused on the field of education, followed by social sciences and public health. The key words chosen by the authors of these articles refer to the methodologies used as well as different child participation instruments.

In terms of the qualitative aspects examined in this literature review, a detailed reading of the articles evidences the different names given to the presence of children in scientific research: active participants, youth researchers, key informants, co-researchers/co-creators of knowledge, experts on their environments, co-producers, active agents and dialogue partners. Given that the vast majority of the research described in these articles was conducted in school settings, children's clubs and organized community spaces, the child and youth participants were generally students. As a result, in most cases adult researchers expected children to have literacy skills and prior understanding of how instruments such as surveys and tests worked. From the outset, this raises questions about exclusion when there are specific literacy requirements for the participation of children. On many occasions, this approach ends up limiting research with children who are younger, have functional difficulties and/or inhabit differential literacy contexts.

Within this context, co-research practices with children are constructed not just on the basis of representations of child participation, but also on what is considered research. The question then arises as to how far scientific research is molded by and reflects the genuine interests of children.

In accordance with this position, the results of the literature review generate concerns about how children's participation in scientific research is being problematized. Even though the results are usually encouraging, what child participation actually means in research differs from one case to another (López-Ronda & Pineda, 2013), given that the studies present a wide variety of interpretations and practices regarding co-research with children. There is limited reflection on the epistemological, ethical and political elements of co-research. It is possible that this is because research papers were chosen for this literature review instead of reflective articles. As a result of this decision, the discussions are centered on the thematic results of projects rather than exploring methodological issues.

Another issue highlighted in the analysis is the role of children in co-research projects. This challenge coincides with the position of Liebel and Markowska-Manista (2021), who state that co-research studies are generally the result of academic and adult intervention proposals and do not directly reflect the concerns, questions or motivations of children. This invites us to think about how we understand scientific research with children. On occasions, it seems that adult researchers want to involve this population in the academic logic of this scientific practice, and not based on their own understandings and experiences of research, which may be different to those of adults. The position of Brinck et al. (2022) is relevant as they invite us to reflect on the roles assumed by the different actors in the research process through activities that analyze their levels of freedom.

This discussion drifts towards an assessment of initiatives that promote child participation in scientific research. It begins with what research means for children, transcending the categorizations or definitions of ideal participation that have been established by adults, and questioning the contributions made by Liebenberg et al. (2020), Milstein and Guerrero (2021) and Smit et al. (2020).

Far from romanticizing child participation, the studies included in this literature review note how the scientific research space contributes to the construction of this involvement. Involvement in investigations offer children opportunities to access learning and knowledge that in many contexts transcend school. This provides significant alternatives for children and contributes to the construction of their citizenship and childhood. The literature review evidences that research is a setting that favors intergenerational dialogue — even with its inherent obstacles — which in itself can be valuable for strengthening participation. The co-research process challenges adults and children to recognize and make themselves mutually visible through their voices, silences and even resistance (Reygadas, 2014).

Based on the above, it is important to ask about the expectations we have constructed regarding the participation of children in scientific research. Even though this should not be trivialized, it should also not be romanticized to the point of validating or invalidating initiatives. It is perhaps more appropriate to ask ourselves about the different and subtle ways in which children can engage with research.

It was observed that the use of participatory methodologies with children is frequent. However, this does not necessarily imply that they assume the role of co-researchers. The expertise of children in regard to their settings and lives is widely recognized, as well as the possibilities they have to influence and transform their realities. This does not necessarily imply that they have a role as co-researchers, which would mean that they have power in decision-making processes for research projects. Similar to López-Ronda and Pineda (2013), the literature review shows a certain level of dispersion and very little reflection on the title given to participating children. Both the roles they assume and the research stages they participate in are variable and, in some cases, not very precise.

Qualitative approaches and participatory methodologies prevail in co-research with children, with a particular emphasis on photovoice. The growing use of collaborative ethnographic approaches is also notable, especially in studies carried out in Latin America, where there is a commitment to actively involve children in the research process. In these studies, children are positioned as co-creators, collaborators and builders of knowledge,

recognizing the power of their agency and engaging in active reflection regarding their role in the study.

Finally, some of the methodological, ethical and political challenges are related to the position of children in the social sphere and the power relations between them and adults (Liebenberg et al., 2020). This implies modifications to a fieldwork schedules, interests, topics and methodological approaches that in many cases follow an adult-centered/institutional logic. Co-research with children is an emerging research practice and a result of the social, political and cultural transformations mentioned at the beginning of this article. It can broaden perspectives for the construction of scientific knowledge on topics that affect and are of interest to children.

The heterogeneity found in the names given to children participating in studies, as well as the scarce or non-existent definition of their roles, confirm the difficulties highlighted by Liebel and Markowska-Manista (2021). This situation invites us to question the conditions in which co-research with children is carried out, further problematizing our understanding of this approach. Far from pretending to establish an ideal of how children and should be integrated into research teams, we believe that it is important to take an in-depth look into how articles disseminating the results of these studies emphasize the description of procedures and research findings without any major focus on the agency of the co-researchers. This lack of reflexivity evidences the need to continue to generate understanding about co-research with children as an emerging practice, while child participation should continue to be recognized as a category that is still under construction. According to the articles included in this literature review, opportunities for this reflection seem to be primarily related to inductive inquiries, creative explorations of participation devices and training on research (not scientific education), and are not as focused on how children can learn about, understand and collectively transform their own settings and environments.

This literature review has certain limitations, which are described below. The study only selected open access research articles published in the last four years, which omitted other publications such as book chapters, theses, monographs, etc., in which there is an increased presence of investigations carried out in Spanish-speaking and Latin American countries. This selection criteria also omitted reflection articles that problematize and provide an in-depth examination of the political and ethical implications of involving children in research. The articles reviewed were primarily in English and Spanish, which creates a bias for the findings. Finally, criteria 6 and 7 of the paper selection process required the elimination of research that did not exclusively involve and young people under 18 years of age. This meant that the intergenerational approach could not be included in this

literature review, which would have made a further contribution to the discussion of this research practice.

Finally, in terms of future research studies, it may be of interest to analyze this phenomenon based on children's perspectives, as well as extending this review to include other research approaches and methods. It would also be interesting to go beyond the social sciences and examine other fields of knowledge where co-research with children and may be occurring.

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