

Chapter 7

Children's Quality of Life in the Caribbean: A Qualitative Study

María Dilia Mieles-Barrera and Graciela Tonon

7.1 Introduction: The Methodological Challenges Involved in the Study of Children's Quality of Life From a Qualitative View

The study of quality of life is a serious issue, considering the constant individual and general concern that has historically existed, in the long quest for gratifying forms of existence for human beings.

The concept has acquired great relevance in contemporary theoretical discussions in the fields of philosophy, economy, political science, sociology, and psychology, regarding the preoccupation about people's expectations, potential activities, freedom, justice, recognition, personal fulfillment, individual and collective prosperity, the influence of the daily life context, the establishment and personal experience of subjectivity, and human development as a whole, among other aspects. Likewise, it is considered a central theme of public policies regarding people's access to possessions and services, which includes the rules and actions oriented to resolve and find answers to multiple needs, interests and preferences of the groups and individual

The present article invites reflection, through the selection of relevant aspects of the methodological process developed in the doctoral thesis by María Dilia Mieles Barrera: *Quality of life of young middle-class boys and girls: case study carried out in Santa Marta, Tourist Cultural and Historic District, Colombia*, directed by Dra. Graciela Tonon.

M. D. Mieles-Barrera (✉)
Universidad del Magdalena, Santa Marta, Colombia
e-mail: mariadilia61@gmail.com

G. Tonon
UNICOM, Faculty of Social Sciences, Universidad Nacional de Lomas de Zamora, Lomas de Zamora, Argentina
e-mail: gracielaTonon@hotmail.com

CICS, Faculty of Social Sciences, Universidad de Palermo, Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, Argentina

persons that form a society, and to create instruments to make a practical assessment of the conditions which may produce satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

Thus, the assessment of quality of life becomes one of the most important indicators of human development in a society, for it attaches significance to the people's daily experiences, beyond the conditions labeled as "adequate" by experts (Casas 1996). The exploration of life experiences reveals deficiencies and potentialities, as well as the relationship between the individual and the social spheres—the latter being vital to the field of public policies, for it calls for prevention and promotion with an inter-disciplinary, inter-program, and inter-sector focus which will promote quality of life and lay the foundations for a positive social change. According to Tonon (2006), the studies on quality of life offer a new theoretical outlook oriented to working on potentialities rather than deficiencies, with a psychosocial anchorage in the community which includes an analysis of the socio-political context.

Thus, embracing the knowledge on quality of life involves an attempt at understanding, in complex detail, the way in which people's lives are affected by external conditions (economic, cultural, socio-political, educational, environmental, among others) which may either favor or hinder their freedom, the display of their capacities, and their chances of being actors—in other words, the perspectives of human development. Furthermore, it involves the study of the bearing these and other aspects (related to life projects, values, emotional ties, aspirations, interests, wishes, and personal biographies), have on people's perception, as well as the satisfaction or dissatisfaction they experience in the various aspects of their own lives, expressed in statements, and positive and negative emotional states present in their daily lives—as a manifestation of their subjectivity. (Mieles and Tonon 2012).

These circumstances give the concept of quality of life an interpretive character, and turn it into great potential for the comprehension of the lives of individual people and of groups of humans in certain contexts, as well as a reference in the assessment of daily experiences. In this perspective, the research on quality of life has been oriented towards the shaping of basic dimensions founded on people's valuation of what they consider essential to the fulfillment of an existence that will allow the display and enjoyment of all their human dimensions. In fact, when asked about their quality of life, it is noticeable that the latter represents something different to each subject: material issues are more relevant to some, while others regard them as the least of their priorities, since they privilege the satisfaction of being surrounded by their loved ones; occasionally, it is related to happiness or, alternatively with achieving some sort of balance between aspirations and achievements—the unattained being always in sight, thus investing quality of life with a strongly temporal character which transcends the present (De Pablos et al. 2009). These personal perceptions are, in turn, permeated by cultural and psychological patterns, social structures, demographic characteristics (age, gender, religious beliefs, among others) which have an incidence on the diverse valuations people make of themselves and of the public and private institutions, in the contexts they live in (Lora 2008; Ferris 2006).

Quality of life is considered a dynamic, multidimensional, multi-disciplinary concept, indirectly measurable and universal. (Setién 1993; Allison et al. 1997;

Campbell et al. 1976). Its dynamic character is related to its constant evolution and re-conceptualization; it is multi-dimensional for it comprises the multiple facets and dimensions in the development of people's daily lives; it is multi-disciplinary because it requires the approach of its contents from the point of view of a diversity of concepts and theories originated in sciences such as psychology, economy, medicine, political science, ecology, sociology, and anthropology, among others; it is indirectly measurable for it may only be explored through the accounts people offer of themselves; and it is universal considering that, in spite of its multiple approaches, it has been a source of concern to people and whole societies from the beginning of time.

The acknowledgement of this complexity, the same complexity that characterizes the human beings whose quality of life is under study, has allowed for reflective work regarding research approaches and methodologies, seeking to advance towards a conception of the person as a whole, and to find an answer to our need "to live rather than survive, which requires another kind of knowledge, a comprehensive and intimate knowledge which, far from placing us at a distance, will bring us into close personal contact with our object of study" (Santos 2009, p. 53).

It is worth mentioning that, in the course of 82 years—since the first allusion was made to this concept by Pigou—diverse instruments for the measuring and assessment of quality of life were devised, most of them constructed from a quantitative epistemological point of view. These endeavors have given invaluable fruits in the design of public policies which have contributed to the improvement of the quality of life of citizens all over the world—though failing to account for the daily lives and sense of welfare constructed by the people thus calling for the inclusion of a qualitative perspective, as stated by Casas and Bello (2012).

In embracing the knowledge of quality of life, we are attempting to understand in a complex manner— the way in which people's lives are marked out by external economic, cultural, socio-political, educational, environmental conditions, to mention a few, which may favor or hinder the enjoyment of their liberties, the display of their capacities, and their scope of action, considered as perspectives of their overall development. We are, likewise, devoted to the study of the incidence of these and other aspects related to a life project, values, emotional ties, expectations, interests, desires and individual biographies, on the perception people have of their own lives and their satisfaction or dissatisfaction in different contexts of their lives, expressed in the form of opinions and positive and negative emotional states, as a manifestation of their subjectivities.

The development of qualitative studies implies "the recovery of subjectivity as a space for the construction of human life, the vindication of daily life as the basic scenario for the understanding of the socio-cultural and historical reality, as well as inter-subjectivity and consensus as vehicles to the acquisition of valid knowledge on human reality" (Guardián-Fernández 2007, p. 112).

Moreover, qualitative research as proposed by Taylor and Bogdan (1994) is characterized by being: inductive, more related to discovery and findings than to proof or verification; holistic, for it assumes the situation or scenario from a total perspective, as an integral whole, responding to an inherent logics of organization,

operation and signification; inter-active and reflective, for its researchers are sensitive to the effects they may cause on the persons participating in the study; free, for no visions or perspectives are pre-imposed; open, for no antagonistic data gathering or analysis are excluded due to their valuable perspectives—all scenarios and persons are worthy of study; humanistic, seeking different means of access to privacy, to personal experiences, detecting perceptions, concepts and actions of the protagonists; rigorous, for the researchers must resolve the problems of validity and trust through exhaustiveness (detailed and deep analysis), and through inter-subjective consensus (shared interpretations and meanings).

In this perspective, when we focus our research on comprehension/interpretation, we are acknowledging the discovery of new and better states of being and relating with others and/or finding more potentialities than deficiencies in the world (Ricoeur 2003). We, likewise, make reference to “dialogic events in which the speakers run similar risks, and which produce a change in them; they understand each other so long as they are understood within a third horizon they cannot dispose of, but rather are disposed by” (Vattimo 1991, p. 61). Moreover, we refer to the “interpretive character of all forms of knowledge and to the fact that all forms of human understanding are based on a previous comprehension, i.e. on its possibility” (Herrera 2009, p. 159). Thus, it is important to highlight that comprehension is vital to existence and the scenario of human experience, which explains why social sciences have been reflecting on the comprehensive-interpretive character of their work, since the interpretive turn that took place in the 60’s (Gadamer 1997).

Apart from the need to move forward towards the consideration of new forms of research, the studies on quality of life should also transcend the adult look for, although it is a highly popular concept which has been studied in different populations and fields of application, the studies on quality of life in young boys and girls have, in most cases, considered the boy or girl as a mere object of study; for it is the adults—parents, teachers, baby-sitters, or siblings—who voice those children’s reality, ignorant of the political sense of this concept which implies the participation of the subjects involved (Casas 1998). Studies have, likewise, been developed by using scales, questionnaires, or surveys, with all the inconveniencies that they involve when it comes to accounting for the sense and perception that young boys and girls construct day by day, and their special susceptibility to give the researcher the “desired” answer, intimidated by the adult’s “power” or by the situation of being assessed by a strange person in a strange context. (Cummins and Lau 2004).

In this respect, it should be considered that the studies embracing the relationship quality of life-infancy and adolescence are relatively recent. Taking an interest in these people’s lives implies an advance in the comprehension of this population group, independently from the figures which reflect demographic characteristics—school attendance, morbid-mortality, nutrition, risks—thus making it crucial to include their own perspective in the concrete assessment of their living conditions. This new outlook may be situated in the late 1980’s, as expressed by Huebner (2004) who, in his careful study, reports 30 research studies developed between 1980 and 2003, centered in the assessment of satisfaction in the lives of children and adolescents in developed countries.

Research work on the quality of life of children and adolescents began with the use of scales, and has developed steadily for three decades through the construction and validation of new scales, questionnaires, and surveys. This tradition, which has succeeded in obtaining a closer look into the lives of children and young people, still shows certain limitations, for it does not account for the experiences and perceptions that children construct on a daily basis, and overlooks their special susceptibility in giving the researchers the “desired” answer, intimidated by the adults’ power or the fact of being assessed by an unknown person in an unfamiliar environment (Cummins and Lau 2004). Likewise, in the “studies on population welfare, it has been demonstrated that the answers to the different scales do not coincide with the typical statistic normality curve (Gaussian bell curve), most people’s answers tend to be above the neutral point of any bipolar scale” (Casas and Bello 2012, p. 28), which evidences the existence of a slant that may distort positive and negative aspects of people’s lives, a situation which may be accentuated when working with boys and girls due to their difficulty in quantifying their perceptions. Regarding this question, Casas and Bello (2012, p. 22) have stated: “we are conscious that, in the future, a more qualitative focus is pending; this will allow us to achieve a deeper comprehension of what boys and girls actually understand by welfare”. This paper aims at making a contribution to the abovementioned challenge.

Twenty-four years after the enforcement of the International Declaration of Children’s Rights, we are still a long way away from putting them into practice in the daily lives of boys and girls, as part of their subjective constitution as rightful subjects. Research on quality of life is closely related to the fulfillment and comprehension of these rights and to the consideration of children as active citizens and members of the social structure—participation being regarded as inherent of the political significance of this concept. This implies a creative construction of spaces and work forms which may propitiate the actual participation of boys and girls in the assessment of their own satisfaction or dissatisfaction, and the construction of alternatives which might boost their full development as human beings.

7.2 Remember Children’s “Place” in Social Sciences Research

It is important to consider that the consideration of childhood merely as an “object of study” has not been only an omission in the research on quality of life, it has been a generalized tendency in the social sciences due to the dominating conceptions regarding children’s lack of capacity to construct an inherent sense of their lives and the surrounding global and local circumstances, which would enable them to participate in the public sphere, and even “make use of their sound reason”.

Hirschfeld (2002), referring to anthropology, points out that this absence of children as subjects of research responds to an impoverished view of cultural learning which overestimates the role played by adults and underestimates the children’s contribution to cultural reproduction, together with lack of awareness regarding the scope and force of child culture.

Likewise, in the field of economy, children (boys and girls) usually appear in statistics as figures which conceal the reality they are faced with in their daily lives, and the abysmal inequalities and injustices they undergo. From the sociological perspective, there has been a similar omission regarding the studies carried out with young boys and girls, for there has been a tendency to confuse them with pre-social beings or incomplete social agents, thus leading to underestimation of their role as active constructors of their surrounding social space, as well as of their internalized interpretations of the way social life operates, i.e. “children are merely considered from the perspective of reproduction of the social order” (Neustadter 1989 p. 200). Ambert (1986), further points out that the absence of children in sociology is tied up with the factors which have excluded women and their gender, i.e. a masculine bias which attaches little importance to child-care, and still less to the activities carried out by children.

Authors such as James and Prout (1997) put forth that the root of the problem is not so much in the omission as in the silence surrounding it. In fact, anthropology had an early interest in the study of child-breeding practices, considering them vehicles of the transmission of culture (Mead 1930) yet, even these studies gave little attention to childhood itself, as well as to the active influence boys and girls exert on their raising processes.

Nevertheless, this tendency has been recently reverted gradually, as aforementioned, due to the interpretive turn in social sciences during the 60s, which allowed the acknowledgement of greater agency in the social subjects, as well as an aroused interest in the conforming of subjectivities. There are several outstanding papers which make a systematic analysis of the considerations of childhood as a socially constructed historical category, and are concerned with their own right to the understanding of the ideas, activities, and daily experiences of children (Saporiti and Sgritta 1990; Caputo 1995; Stephens 1998; Nunes 1999; Gaitán 1999, 2006a, b; Hirschfeld 2002; Cohn 2005; Enriz 2006; Tassinari 2007; García y Hecht 2009; among others). As is pointed out by James and Prout (1997), as members of the social structure, boys and girls are social subjects actively involved in the construction of their own lives, the lives of those who surround them, and of the societies they live in.

In fact, researches with children have shown that the latter tend to be more mature, more rebellious, or more active in their own process of socialization than we have expected, “we have no evidence of studies that may prove that children are more immature or “childish ” than may be expected” (Fine and Sandstrom 1988, p. 72). Testimonies such as these give way to a new paradigm on infancy which, though variable in content, may be characterized as such, in-so-far as it includes a series of typical characteristics such as:

(a) it propounds that boys and girls should be subjects of study per se; (b) that they should further be considered observation units; (c) they should be allowed to voice their own experiences; (d) childhood should be contemplated as part of a given social structure; (e) boys and girls should be studied from a dimension in the present, not only as future adults; (f) childhood should be contemplated as an inter-generational perspective (Brannen and O'Brien 1996). James and Prout (1997)

have added to the preceding, (g) childhood should be characterized as a social construction or as a structural and cultural component of society (without denying its biological and natural character); (h) there should be an acknowledgement of the existent relationship between childhood and other sociological categories such as gender or social classes; (i) boys and girls should be considered active agents in the construction of their social lives; (j) qualitative methods should be rendered proper for the study in question; and, finally, (k) the presence of a “double hermeneutics” is required in order to relate this new paradigm to the task of reconstruction of childhood in modern societies (Rodríguez 2007).

This new outlook on childhood recognizes children's potential agency, normalizing them as subjects of research in relation to adults. Still, it must be admitted that children are not comparable to adults, as subjects of research. In most cases, this peculiarity is expressed in the form of three great challenges: (a) those derived from their own cognitive and discursive capacities, (b) the unavoidable question that the researchers should take up an asymmetrical position before the children, owing to their condition as adults, (c) the consideration of the child population as a preserved or protected group (Rodríguez 2006).

Fuhs (1999, quoted by Rodríguez 2006) slightly amplifies the question of asymmetry or generation gap as instrumental in research with children. According to this author, this is a problem which may branch off in the following ways:

- The generational axis turns out to be impossible to bridge, since it takes a bearing on all theoretical or methodological initiatives. Even though research may be focused “from the point of view of childhood” it, in fact, only offers an adult reconstruction of the children's perspective (Honnig 1999, quoted by Rodríguez 2006).
- On the other hand, the assertion of the children's capacities as social agents (“agency” of the young ones) should not lead us to overlook the fact that children live their childhood in a network of adult social relations which exert a significant influence over their socialization processes and their personal development.
- Direct contact with children is not possible for researchers, for it depends on the issuing of duly authorized permits in virtue of a system of child protection which is, in turn, anchored to a generational axis. Those circumstances will, very often, trigger the possible interference of adult figures in the research process—something “less probable” when working with adults. In that respect, it is vital to consider that adults are also influenced by other adults of their acquaintance when taking part in research process and that their answers are, in many cases, circumscribed to their personal or social interests.
- To conclude, we must not underestimate the way in which a researcher's own childhood memories may affect the research practice, for they may leak into the analysis of the particle of reality they are studying. The problem is that adults have already gone through childhood and, therefore, believe themselves to possess a vaster knowledge on the subject than they actually have.

All of the aforementioned exposition on the implications of doing research with children of both sexes is sure to be common knowledge to researchers; yet little has

been said regarding the actual ways of approaching this question, i.e. the types of research, techniques, or instruments used. Perhaps it may be considered that there is an ample variety of techniques, yet when it comes to putting them into practice—in other words, the types of research, techniques or instruments that ought to be used—there is little information on the subject. The variety of techniques may be considerable, still, a mere adaptation of techniques would be insufficient, for boys and girls are worthy of particular considerations.

According to Rodríguez (2007) to a great extent, the difficulties already implied may be resolved by orienting the research towards the convention of children's rights, considering the three "P's": provision (offer the participants adequate conditions and the necessary resources that will put them at their ease); protection (always avoid unnecessary risks), and participation (allow them to be heard).

7.3 The Project

Recognition of the active role played by boys and girls within a social structure, of their capacity to reflect upon their own lives, the consideration of their closest and their more global environments, of their right to participate, and that their perceptions, expectations, and wishes be taken into account in the construction of public policies or other projects related to their lives; the need to generate knowledge about the population of children in a city which has traditionally rendered them invisible; the urgent need to overcome the conception of boys and girls as projected to the future "when they become grown-ups", rather than attending to their present need for welfare and integral development; in fact, the consideration of the concept of quality of life as an organizing principle oriented to the improvement of the present society, will allow the construction of the research project "Quality of life in middle-class boys and girls from the city of Santa Marta".

This project is an approximation to the understanding of the dimensions and aspects related to the quality of life of middle-class boys and girls between 7 and 10 years old residing in the city of Santa Marta, Tourist, Cultural, and Historic District (Colombia); as a pioneer project in this city, it attempts to respond to new epistemological and methodological proposals of the social sciences, moving away from the tendency that traditional studies have on this topic by giving it a qualitative approach which seeks to make progress in the comprehension of the sense and significance boys and girls confer to their quality of life in their daily existence.

At this point, the reasons for the study of quality of life in boys and girls may be clear, but the decision of studying children who specifically belong to the middle-class in this city, was not taken at random. These children, like so many others, feel the need to be heard and regarded as visible, yet most of the participations and research is oriented towards children of a lower socio-economic status and, even though this treatment is no more than fair, there are powerful arguments in favor of assigning a leading role to the middle-class. In the first place, this social class is considered to comprise between 40 and 60% of the population (Minujín 2008),

likewise, this population plays a fundamental role on the generation of income, consumerism, and the eliciting of public opinion. On the other hand, it is a population which has of late been undergoing a process of impoverishment and diversification as a result of the macro-economic policies derived from the neoliberal focus, which have reverted the experience of progress and growth in this population in the XX century (Minujín 2008).

Consistent with our purpose of dealing with positive and subjective aspects of QL, and promoting participation in our study, we have adopted the qualitative approach, the case study being our methodological design, since it allows us to probe into certain aspects which might not be accessible through other methods for, quoting Stake (1998), the case study is the study of the peculiarity and the complexity of a singular case, in order to be able to understand its activity in major circumstances. Out of the three modes described by Stake (1998), This research responds to the *instrumental* type, for a particular case is examined in order to contribute ideas to the tackling of a problem, or to refine a theory, and is therefore deeply probed into, its contents examined, its ordinary activities detailed with a perspective of clarifying the problem in question. The case may or may not be regarded as typical of other cases, its choice responds to the expectation of making progress in the understanding of theoretical and practical interests beyond the specific case.

The study was developed in four phases or momentum:

In the first place, the case was constituted. In this first phase, contact was made with seven educational institutions in the city, situated in different sections, and whose population of students mainly consisted of boys and girls belonging to strata three and four¹; school-heads' and teachers' permission was obtained for the presentation of the project to boys and girls in order to determine their degree of interest in the research; a conversation was held with those who displayed interest, in order to probe into their motivation and capacities regarding oral and written skills, followed by an interview with their parents with the object of updating them on the project and obtaining their express consent. Thus, a case was formed, as an intentional sample (Hammersley and Atkinson 2001), consisting of six boys and six girls (12 in all), who fully complied with the pre-established criteria for their inclusion: that they should belong to the middle-classes (socio-economic strata three and four), interested in taking part in the research, and certain oral and writing skills.

In its second phase, which took up the greatest amount of research time, (approximately 6 months), the field work and analysis of the information were carried out. These two processes were connected at all times, i.e. the process of analysis gradually determined the field work, in other words, the latter was not pre-established but was constructed on the basis of the need for further probing, which naturally came up whenever a better understanding of the subjects and the object of the research were required to assess QL.

Considering the reduced number of components in the group of subjects under study, and with the purpose of conferring greater force to the information obtained

¹ Article 102 from Act 142 passed in 1994, in which six socio-economic strata are defined for Colombia: 1, low-low; 2, low; 3, low-middle; 4, middle; 5, high-middle; 6, high.

through it, three focal groups were formed with boys and girls who shared the features of the initial group (15 boys and 15 girls), with whom we socialized, discussed, and complemented the information obtained during the research process.

This latter process was likewise submitted to rigorous analysis and comprehension which allowed the consolidation of the categories of analysis that constituted the results of the research.

7.4 Participation as One of the Principles of Field Work

Before carrying out a detailed development regarding the working techniques for the field work contained in the research model for the study of QL that we are putting forth, and which results from the aforementioned study, it is important to consider the underlying principle of this design, and the engine of each of the strategies and phases of the research: “participation”.

In order to describe the role of participation in this research model, it is necessary to establish the concept of participation in the context of childhood. According to the Committee for Children’s Rights and, according to UNICEF, participation is a key principle, a “facilitating” right, which means that its fulfillment is instrumental to the fulfillment of all the other rights. It is not just a means for an end, or a simple “process”: it is a civil and political right for all children and is, therefore, an end itself. Thus, UNICEF considers that participation must be respected not as a mere aim, but also as a strategy to fulfill other aims. (Rojas 1998).

Certain criteria have been established in the research, in order to guarantee the exercise of this right, thus:

- During the research process, the only feasible information to be taken into account in the comprehension of the quality of life of boys and girls should be provided by them, in other words, adult informers have been excluded from the entire design.
- The children’s participation in the research was their own decision, they were provided with all the necessary information for that purpose, moreover, their decision was corroborated by their parents’ consent.
- Apart from facilitating the boys’ and girls’ free expression, each and every one of the techniques used in collecting the information implied a promotion and training in the skills required for their participation, thus enabling them to communicate their ideas and feelings with greater fluency.
- The participation of boys and girls was not only taken into account in the process of collecting information, but they were also consulted during the process of comprehension and wording of the final report thus validating, or not, the interpretations of the research group.

Doubtlessly, the consideration of these aspects has given way to one of the most important products in the research process, i.e. the act of transcending mere inquiry in order to make progress in its transformation; thus, participation in a research

not only creates background reference to create strategies for the solution to problems, but the research process itself also produces positive changes among the participants. Hence, during the development of the field work it became evident how the boys and girls improved their capacity to express themselves, developed critical thinking by expressing very sensible thoughts about issues in their own lives, school, family, city, personal recognition, etc., and generated ties of friendship, solidarity, and cooperation with their mates of both sexes.

A determining element and permanent challenge in the achievement of this kind of results as part of a research process is to succeed in maintaining the boys' and girls' motivation during the course of the research. Meeting this challenge required the consideration of certain vital aspects, such as:

- Provision; in other words, the boys and girls were guaranteed adequate welfare conditions, which was achieved by offering the parents the transfer of the children to the venue in secure and comfortable means of transport, providing the latter with healthy food and beverages during each day's field work, and taking them to places they would consider interesting and appropriate for the development of the planned activities.
- The creativity displayed in the course of the research in the development of the field work: design of work-shops, round tables, daily activities, consulting the participants about their interests, and taking into account the capacities shown and yet to be developed.
- Empathy between researchers and participants, i.e. the capacity of a person to stand in another's place, and thus be able to understand his point of view, his reactions, feelings (Eisenberg 2000), which is evidenced in the growing friendship that developed in the course of the research process, the joy that arose from each encounter, and the affection and fraternity which has united the group and which still lasts.

In general lines, as expressed by Apud (s.f), the development of child participation implies children and adults learning to provide each other with feedback, which is the best way of expressing their mutual acknowledgement as rightful subjects.

7.5 Methods and Techniques

Different techniques were used: ludic-reflective workshop, round table, personal diary, semi-structured interview, and focal group. Each of these techniques will, herein, be explained in detail.

Ludic-reflective workshops in this research, is conceived as a collective space constructed in order to allow the development of certain abilities through personal experience rather than mere transmission. It involves learning through games, which is gratifying for knowledge is acquired in a concrete and practical way, while carrying out an activity related to the formation required through a methodology of participation. It further promotes the development of various aspects of knowledge:

cognitive, operational, relational (learn how to listen, plan with others, accept the opinion of others, take collective decisions, summarize, tell the difference between relevant and non-relevant information...). It is based on the participants' experience, moreover it is an integrating activity which unites intellectual and affective processes, is centered in problems and interests common to the group, and requires active participation of the group members. Diverse techniques may be used, especially debating. (Careaga et al. 2006). Workshops have played a very important role in the development of the field work for this research, since they guaranteed the boys' and girls' participation and motivation, due to the fact that they allowed a display of creativity on the part of the research team. Four workshops were carried out to explore different aspects of children's daily lives. The first one was called "Getting to know myself", and its object was to recognize boys' and girls' appreciations and perceptions about themselves and about the way they are perceived by others. The second one, called "How I express my emotions and feelings", aimed at encouraging the participants to express their most frequent emotions and feelings, and to identify situations and behaviors associated to them. The third workshop, "A day in my family's life" sought to probe into the way boys and girls live through certain situations, emotions, and feelings in their daily lives with their families and to explore relationships and how the family is composed. The fourth one called "The city I live in" explored the boys' and girls' perceptions of their city and the life they lead in it. No doubt, workshops play a major role in the purpose of transcending mere enquiry—for though it may appear not to be as efficient as an interview or a focal group when it comes to collecting volumes of information and saving time—it allows us to make progress in achieving the very aim of every research, namely, transformation which, for the purposes of this research, has been reflected in the boys' and girls' growing capacities to participate, express their ideas and thoughts, share with others, get to know themselves better, reflect upon their city, their families, their feelings and emotions, thus assuming themselves as agents of their own daily lives.

In spite of being inscribed within the discursive genre, round table is conceived as a valid research instrument for working with children, in the sense that it creates pleasant collective spaces with an atmosphere of freedom in which they socialize their productions (written and graphic narratives), the participants' opinions and beliefs, always respecting the privacy of the information as well as the individual capacities and differences. In the research experience on children's quality of life this technique was used in order to collect information obviously derived from reflections, discussions, disagreements, or agreements related to aspects, common to all participants. Four round tables were held. The first one, "My school", sought to obtain the opinions and appraisals that boys and girls had of their school, their routines, their spaces, social relations, tasks, rewards, punishment, pleasant and unpleasant aspects, among other issues. This turned out to be the one with the highest degree of participation and the information obtained was vital to the comprehension of the school as a scenario which permeates a large part of the children's lives, constituting a fundamental aspect in the perception of their quality of life. The second round table explored "The leisure-time activities", and it allowed us to identify the

games, recreation, most frequented places, persons they share with, among other aspects. Finally, the last two tables sought to collect information on “*gender and culture*” and “*children’s commonest problems in the city*”. Their purpose was to attempt to understand what it means to boys and girls to belong to a certain gender or culture; and to identify their opinions and perceptions regarding issues that affect them in the local context. Though this technique plays an important part in the research design, it was not simple to achieve the ultimate aim of the round table i.e. promoting discussion by raising arguments, for boys and girls are not used to debating and speaking freely in public, which explains the option of their presentation as television programs in which each member was a qualified guest; or rehearsal in small groups, previous to the public expositions.

The personal diary is a technique which allows an approximation to the participants’ subjective view or representation of their lives as well as of the outer world, in general. The fact that it is a free narrative of the participants’, it offers a closer observation of facts and makes it more reliable, for it guarantees a more accurate connection between the facts written in the diary and the cognitive structures of their authors, at the time when they are being recorded. This implies that a prolonged use of the diary may succeed in reflecting, not only the subjective vision of a particular moment, but also globally embrace the time elapsed while the narrations were being made. In our research experience on quality of life in children, participant boys and girls were asked to keep personal diaries for which purpose they were handed a note-book, in which to make a daily record of their different activities, routines, personal experiences, feelings, and thoughts, either in writing or through drawings. The information obtained from these diaries has been extremely valuable in order to become acquainted with their different daily situations related to meals, use of their spare time, school routines, relationships with friends and with their close and extended family circles, their perception of their homes and home facilities, among other things. It was, likewise relevant in order to capture major events and circumstances which might have been overlooked by using other techniques, such as for instance some pleasant or unpleasant event, their preferences in music, fashion, their hobbies, entertainment, rewards and punishment at home, their daily feelings and emotions, to mention a few situations. Yet however useful they have been to the research process, diaries showed some limitations: in the first place, it was difficult to induce the children to acquire the habit of making daily entries—taking into account that adults were asked not to interfere with the process—which explains why, at this age, children’s habits and responsibilities are planned by their parents. On the other hand, these boys and girls found it very hard to have a view of themselves, maybe because the educational system and the social context they are immersed in offers them few opportunities to express their opinions, their feelings, causing this practice to become some kind of “homework”, a circumstance which was eventually overcome in the course of the research process. Furthermore, some boys and girls manifested “aversion to writing” for they were compelled to practice cursive handwriting at school, to a certain degree of perfection, which was quite difficult for them, while they found script much easier. In this case, they were allowed to either write or draw freely in their diaries.

Owing to the major role we intended to assign to the subjectivity of the participant boys and girls as a fundamental dimension of QL—as well as the importance of considering phenomena within the context in which they occur—the semi-structured interview has acquired great relevance, the research interview being regarded as a fundamental space for the subjects' encounters to allow the disclosure of their subjectivities (Tonon 2009). Quoting Alonso (1999, p. 228) through the gathering of a set of private information, the semi-structured interview aims at the construction of the social sense of the individual behavior of the interviewed subject, or that of his reference group; it thus allows access to a communicative portion of reality in which the spoken word is the main “vehicling” vector of a personalized, biographical, and un-transferrable experience. These interviews were individual and approached aspects of the subjects' private lives, family, school, among other topics, and probed into different issues tackled through other techniques, namely life in the city, education, health, environment, security, fulfillment of rights, social recognition, use of leisure time, relations with the TIC, etc., attempting to reach higher levels of comprehension of the different dimensions already studied. Owing to the great amount of peculiarities to be tackled, the aforementioned interviews were held in several sessions, anticipating the fact that the boys and girls might feel too exhausted to keep up the empathy required for their free expression.

The focal group technique, according to Korman (1978, quoted by Aigner 2002, p. 2) is “The gathering of a group of individuals, selected by the researchers to discuss and elaborate, from their personal experience, a theme or social fact which is the research object”. This technique becomes an actual interchange of experiences since, when the subjects interviewed perceive that their interviewer has had a similar personal experience, or possesses information on the issue in question, they usually have a positive reaction; furthermore, this communicational situation boosts their interest. The characteristics of the focal group lead to the decision to apply this technique in the final phase of the field work and—after a preliminary analysis of the collected information, in order to complement it—achieve an adequate saturation of the themes and sub-themes thus enlarging the comprehensions reached, so far. Three focal groups were organized in different educational institutions, constituted by 30 boys and girls (ten for each group, five boys and five girls), selected according to the criteria established for the research. These spaces have sought to create an appropriate environment for discussions on themes which had not been sufficiently explored—such as gender and culture—in order to reach better understanding of the significance that being a member of a certain sex or culture has to the boys and girls under study; or, in turn, the exercise of their rights, social recognition, and participation in the public sphere. Apart from the discussion of themes that called for greater enlargement, questions related to the interpretive hypotheses of the research group were included, such as themes related to school and family for, though there was enough information on those issues, it was deemed important to count on the opinions of other boys and girls, in order to avoid misinterpretations. Apart from constituting a space for child participation, the focal groups played an important role in the processes which lend scientific rigor to the qualitative research, as is the case of triangulation and saturation—the former being

regarded as the combination of different methods of information gathering, or of data sources within the same study. According to Taylor and Bogdan (1994), triangulation is a form of protection from the researchers' biases and of submitting the informers' accounts to a reciprocal control. Moreover, other criteria were applied to strengthen the qualitative research, namely: credibility, the possibility of confirmation, saturation, contextual significance, the existence of recurrent patterns, and the possible transference to similar cases (Leininger 2003), thus excelling the criteria of reliability and soundness inherent of the quantitative approach. The participant boys and girls enjoyed each and every one of the activities developed in the course of the research, for the latter always involved dynamics and free games that allowed the children to interact more confidently, have fun, and explore new spaces—something uncommon in their everyday lives. In their own words “*they felt freer and taken into account*”; “*they did not want the research to end, even if they had to get up early on Saturdays*”, i.e. the day appointed for the field work.

7.6 Thematic Analysis as an Alternative for the Processing of Information

The analysis of information, or data processing, plays a major role in the scientific results obtained from it, regardless of the type of research used. From a qualitative research approach, we might define analysis as the process through which we transcend the information in order to gain access to comprehension/interpretation of the phenomenon under study; it is the process through which the researcher expands the data beyond the descriptive narrative. However, this definition may seem too broad, which has led different authors to put forth alternative proposals, yet failing to achieve consensus either on the meaning of this term, or of its techniques and strategies.

In spite of this lack of consensus regarding the analysis of information and its procedures, it is clear that it is a rigorous process which must be consistent with the epistemological-methodological focus of research, as well as with its aims, the context in which the research is developed, the participant subjects, and the resources that support its process.

The aforementioned has led us to the choice of thematic analysis as the procedure to analyze the information gathered in the research on quality of life in boys and girls, since this research fits the social phenomenological proposition made by Alfred Schutz (1967), regarded as a comprehensive and interpretive theory of social activity which explores subjective experience in the everyday world of people who are deemed to possess “common sense”. This proposition considers that people living in this everyday world are capable of giving significance to a situation; thus, it is the subjective significance of the experience that constitutes the focus of study. Schutz (1973) proposed three essential postulates to be followed during the research process:

- The postulate of logic consistency: the researcher must establish the utmost clarity in the conceptual and methodological background and in the methodology applied which must, in turn, follow the principles of formal logics.
- The postulate of subjective interpretation: the model must be based on the subjective significance that the “actors” confer to their actions, the nature of the data being the actual experience expressed by the participants in the study—whether past, present, or anticipatory—and these data must be recorded and transcribed in text.
- The postulate of adequacy: there should be coherence between the typified constructions made by the researcher and those found in the common sense experience; the model must be recognized and comprehended by the “actors” in everyday life.

These postulates are conceived from a thematic analysis, defined as a method for the processing of information in qualitative research, which allows the identification, organization, and detailed analysis, as well as the report of patterns or themes based on a careful reading and re-reading of the information obtained, in order to infer the results leading to the adequate comprehension/interpretation of the phenomenon under study. (Braun and Clarke 2006). Identifying, establishing, and reporting on themes and structures, allows the researcher to reveal, not only the experiences, signification, and realities of the subjects, but also to examine the circumstances in which those events realities, signification, and experiences are a product of the discourse of society.

The analysis of information in this research was carried out taking into account the six phases of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), namely: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generation of categories or initial codes, (3) research of themes, (4) theme revision, (5) definition and denomination of themes, (6) production and final report.

Phase 1: Familiarization with the data (information).

This first phase, parallel with the field work, consisted in the literal transcription of the information obtained, and identification of the elements of the preliminary analysis, all of which was the result of the reading and re-reading of the information. The transcriptions were numbered according to the order in which the information was obtained and, as in the former case, conventions were applied in order to protect the identity of the subjects.

Phase 2: Generation of initial codes.

Once the familiarization with the data was achieved, the codifying process began. It consists in organizing the information into groups of similar significance, which requires the fragmentation of the information into short quotes which are, in turn, codified. The work involved two types of coding: theoretical and inductive, i.e. some codes were previously established as a result of the familiarization with the theory, while new codes came up during the process of analysis of the information.

Phase 3: Research of themes.

Once the information was classified in codes, we proceeded to carry out a research of themes, in other words, to generate broader categories under which to group the codes, thus giving sense and structure to the information.

Phase 4: Theme revision.

Since the process of analysis is not linear, some exercises were carried out with the aim of recoding the information, a necessary task considering the extent of the themes and the need to limit the contents in order to avoid digressions.

Phase 5: Definition and denomination of themes.

Once defined, the themes were categorized to allow a global interpretation of the research theme.

Phase 6: Editing of the final report.

The writing of the report was carried out through a process of interpretive triangulation in which the object of study was gradually constructed; in other words, the comprehension of the boys' and girls' quality of life voiced by three actors: the research subjects, represented in the textual quotes; the researchers, through their descriptions and interpretations; and the theoretical and investigative research bases, all of which allowed the comprehension of the collected information within a more global context.

7.7 The Most Significant Results

Approaching quality of life, in the light of this research, implies a more integral and complex outlook on childhood, for it considers aspects of their daily lives, and is not only concerned with the causes that lead to welfare and happiness in boys and girls but also with those deriving in their discomfort and pain. This knowledge should be oriented to visualize the circumstances surrounding children's lives—taking into account the successes that enrich and strengthen them, together with the inequities and injustices that affect them. The aim is to generate a new individual and collective awareness of the reality experienced, yearned, planned, desired, enjoyed, and endured by boys and girls, today—regarding the fulfillment and exercise of rights and the need to improve quality of life as vital elements in the construction of a society where the imperatives of justice, autonomy, liberty, dignity and equality of opportunity, are possible for every human being.

The process developed with boys and girls has corroborated the fact that in their daily lives, interrelating with their peers as well as adults, they internalize and construct significance in their lives as well as in the reality of which they are part, by giving shape to meanings, challenges, practices which constitute them as unique, unrepeatably different, singular human beings (subjectivity). On the other hand, their opportunity to interact makes boys and girls aware of what they have in common, which allows for dialogue, deliberation, self-knowledge, and recognition as subjects carrying a discourse and capable of transforming action—issues which are ignored or disregarded in family circles, schools and social circles, thus accentuating the individual and collective position of inferiority, dependence, or incapacity of boys and girls. The results of this research shed light on children's enormous potential to attend to their own lives, reflect upon them and produce knowledge which will aim at improving the conditions in which they construct their own biographies.

This research reveals that boys and girls relate their quality of life with: living conditions, family, friends, school, public life, rights, use of technology, and global satisfaction. These themes make allusion to the two dimensions through which this concept may be studied: objective and subjective, articulated in daily experience.

The objective dimension has been traditionally more often considered in the assessment of quality of life; it refers to material possessions and service a person may have access to, and is characterized by the fact that the information it offers may be corroborated by external agents. When making allusion to this dimension, the boys and girls under study showed a clear comprehension of the economic and labor situation of their parents, since they assume it as a determiner of their living conditions (food, housing, education, recreation, among others), and as a conditioning factor in the construction of their projection of the future.

In spite of the evident preoccupations of the middle classes to guarantee a worthy existence for their families, and of their great efforts to cope with basic needs, more than half the population of mothers and fathers of boys and girls participating in the research show signs of labor vulnerability and instability which derive in the persistence of problems related to health (common recurrent illnesses); nutrition (unhealthy menus, frequent consumption of junk-food or fast-food); habitation (not owning a house); quality of the education received (the latter being generally considered low, according to State testing); and recreation (short periods, deteriorated and insecure recreation spaces, or complete lack of them). This brings on negative consequences for the human development and welfare perception of children experiencing situations of inequality and uncertainty. On the other hand, a more encouraging situation is experienced, in some respects, by children whose parents have succeeded in achieving labor stability and more stable incomes.

Likewise, there is a similar concern about the conditions which must be guaranteed by the State—such as, security, enjoyment of recreation spaces, playing and interacting with other children, health and environment—for the latter show serious deficiencies in a city which the children perceive as adverse, since they are forced to remain prisoners in their own homes, behind the railings surrounding their homes and screens, unable to carry out physical activities, and forced into an interaction restricted to the members of their families and the school community, for the prevailing situation outside their homes is considered threatening.

The subjective dimension, seldom approached in the studies on quality of life yet deeply explored in this study, is understood as the result of the global balance people make of their vital opportunities; of the course of the events they must confront; and of the emotional experience derived from it. On account of these peculiarities, it possesses a strong incidence on the satisfaction or dissatisfaction experienced in their daily lives and in the significance people give to their own lives and to the environments in which they develop.

Though the following list does not necessarily point to a certain hierarchical order of precedence, the boys and girls under study perceive their welfare as:

- The love, care, attention, and company of their parents and other members of their families.

- The support they receive from their parents or other people when complying with their school tasks.
- Their parents' economic and labor stability.
- Time for playing and sharing with their friends.
- Acknowledgement of their families, school and town.
- Obtaining high grades and taking part in cultural, sports, or artistic activities at school.
- Enjoying school breaks.
- Kind relationships and fair treatment on the part of their teachers.
- Having a good relationship with their school-mates.
- Outings, not only to shopping malls, or visiting their families, but also to recreation places; contact with nature (the beach, the riverside), among other places.
- Owning a house and having their personal space in it.
- Material possessions such as clothes, toys, school things, etc.
- Having access to technology (television, computer, video-games).
- Not being ill.
- Being satisfied with their physical appearance, weight, height.
- Experiencing values such as respect, sharing, responsibility, and helping others.
- Having someone in whom to entrust their most intimate experiences.
- Dissatisfaction is associated to the following:
 - Quarrels among their parents on issues related to child-support among others.
 - The absence and lack of support on the non-cohabitating parent.
 - The death of someone close.
 - Insecurity, slovenliness, disorder, and traffic problems in their cities.
 - The lack of public spaces for recreation, sports' practice and cultural activities.
 - Problematic situations undergone by boys and girls in the city.
 - Punishment and ill-treatment received from their parents or teachers.
 - Conflicting situations or bullying on the part of their classmates.
 - Their parents' economic and labor difficulties.
 - Not being owners of their houses.
 - Being ignored by local authorities or by other significant adults, such as politicians or teachers.
 - Having insufficient opportunities for recreation, playing or taking part in interesting activities.
 - Their lack of participation in decision-making related to their family lives, their schools, and their city.
 - Unfavorable conditions at school, lack of hygiene, reduced spaces, short recesses.
 - Being unable to participate in community groups or activities.
 - Boredom derived from having nothing to do and being cooped up at home for too long.
 - Moments of loneliness experienced in the course of their daily lives.
 - The low quality education they receive and the un-dynamic and uninteresting strategies adopted by their teachers.
 - Having few friends and little time to share with them.
 - Feeling sick.

The above list of aspects, regarded by boys and girls as indicators of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, involve values, hopes, assessments, preferences, and needs, especially related to their family, school, and social and physical environment.

The relationship with their families is a source of affection, security, company, help, recreation, and satisfaction of needs—so long as the family atmosphere is favorable; otherwise, it becomes a significant source of suffering and frustration (quarrel between parents, absence of the non-cohabiting parent, long absences of the parents from home owing to work, solitude, boredom, etc.). These situations—with a clear bearing on the construction of the children's personality, identity, comprehension and appreciation of the different aspects of the human relationships—have deep implications in the formation of their subjectivity, considering the role played by parents as significant models in the construction of filial relationships.

Through the relationships with their peers, children experience social roles, learn to control their aggressiveness, settle conflicts, earn respect and friendship, learn to acknowledge diversity and become conscious of the needs and feelings of others. Thus, on the one hand, limitations in their interaction with their peers in the acts of sharing and playing or, on the other hand, being the target of aggressiveness have serious repercussions on the children's personal, moral and social development.

The school—conceived as a privileged place for the strengthening and display of people's capabilities, as well as a space for the citizens' formation for public life—is showing deficiency in the eyes of boys and girls who feel trapped in routine, in the exercise of different forms of violence and despotic relationships which hinder participation and the exercise of their rights. This leads to the neglect of potential talent; the meager development of citizens' values and principles such as justice, autonomy, and liberty; and to a perception of the school as related to duty and obligation rather than to pleasure. The value they find in it lies in that it is a meeting place with their peers where they may have access to knowledge which will, in turn, allow them to make progress at higher levels of education and eventually, to obtain a position in the labor field.

The city, as a wider social and physical environment, far from becoming a place of encounter and interchange as well as enjoyment of its natural beauty, has become a hostile place, lacking in hospitality, contaminated, violent and chaotic, with leaders who show indifference and negligence towards a large portion of citizens—boys and girls—whom nobody has taken into consideration in the development plans, in the generation of opportunities to develop their potential talents, or in the construction of spaces and forms of gratifying and more harmonious cohabitation. Still, there is a glimmer of hope since, in the last two years, reference has been made to turning Santa Marta into a city which aspires to place boys and girls in the foreground of attention—at least in the development Plan: *Equidad para todos, primeros los niños y las niñas/Equity for everyone, boys and girls first* (Alcaldía de Santa Marta 2012).

Another theme emerging from research, which permeates children's lives, is their long daily exposure to television, computer and video-game screens as a means of occupying their leisure time, chances of recreation, and even company. Thus, together with quality formative games, they also gain Access to violent, low quality video-games which offer a crude aspect of reality. Likewise, through these

media, boys and girls become gullible to advertising which, by exposing them to consumerist pressure, turns them into consumer-persuaders of their parents. Many of these situations occur in an environment where dialogue and reflection with adults is absent. It seems as though fathers/mothers were only concerned with their sons/daughters being busy, oblivious of the consequences this might have in their development as human beings—considering that, though some research has been done on those themes, there are no conclusive theories regarding their incidence on cognitive, affect, and social aspects. However, there is greater certainty regarding the side-effects of sedentary lives and consumption of unhealthy food.

Our research shows signs that children have difficulty in relation with (a) body or physical health: (adequate health, nutrition, and habitation); (b) physical integrity: the capability to move freely from one place to another; feel protected against violent attacks or domestic violence; (c) senses, imagination, and thought: receive education which will allow them to develop their capacities in an atmosphere of freedom to express their likes and beliefs; be able to enjoy pleasant experiences whilst avoiding unnecessary pain; (d) emotions: capability of loving themselves and others, of being included in the diverse forms of human association; (e) practical reason: make a critical reflection when planning their own lives; (f) affiliation: the capacity to live with and for others, to acknowledge and show interest in other human beings, to participate in a diversity of social interactions, to stand in the other's place, to be respected not discriminated; (g) other species: the capacity to live a close and respectful relationship with animals, plants, and other species in the natural world; (h) play: the capacity to laugh, play and enjoy recreational activities; (i) control over their own environment: the capacity to actually participate in political decisions, have the right to political participation, and to be protected by freedom of expression and association.

The wide knowledge obtained, directly and feasibly, in this research through the diverse accounts of the participant boys and girls, offers a broad and genuine understanding of the perception they have of their lives, and has allowed us to focus our attention both on the satisfaction and dissatisfaction they experience. This offers important clues to more global public policies of promotion and prevention, both coherent and efficacious, which should be promoted by the States; but it also proposes challenges in the transformation of child-raising practices, school life, and living conditions in the city—for it is precisely during childhood that the foundations of a good quality of life are laid, by developing their capacities, creating opportunities for valuable functioning, and turning them into agents of their own life projects.

Listening to boys/girls, taking their thoughts into consideration “here and now”, acknowledging them as protagonists—in keeping with the political sense of the concept of quality of life—not only lead to the achievement of a facilitating right (the right to participate), but also to contribute information on the fulfillment of the rest of the rights contemplated in the Convention. Children's welfare, their quality of life, must no longer be considered a future aim, or an altruistic concession made by adults, it is a right inherent of their condition of human beings, which must be closely contemplated at a family, school, and community level, and become a priority in the field of public policies, which should be oriented to a fairer and more equitable treatment of childhood.

In order to contribute to these purposes it is necessary to make widespread the information obtained in the diverse studies, with the object of sensitizing fathers/mothers, teachers, public opinion, authorities and public representatives, thus urging them to assume responsibilities and take the necessary decisions to guarantee the children's right to construct the rest of their lives on firm bases, considering the present global crisis.

Since a good or bad quality of life is associated to interrelated social, economic, political, cultural, environmental, and educational phenomena, it turns out to be multi-cause, and is therefore impossible to tackle with partial or isolated proposals; this implies the need for policies, programs, projects, and inter-disciplinarian strategies, inter-program and inter-sector coordination in order to incite the participation of civilians, the private and public sectors in the achievement of common objectives.

The middle-classes, to which the boys and girls in the research study belong, though decisive in the development of all countries—for they generate income, consumption, and opinion—require public policies which take into consideration their peculiarities and vulnerabilities in overcoming crucial problems related to work, health, education, recreation. In a society with inequalities in terms of income distribution, human development, and broadening of *capabilities*, the vigorous incorporation of the middle-classes to the country's development process, guarantees better opportunities for their off-spring (with the consequent enlargement of this segment of society), greater collective prosperity, thus enabling the construction of citizenship, the exercise of rights and actual participation in public spaces—vital to the lives of young boys and girls—with the perspective of broadening and consolidating a more democratic society.

In the sphere of research and participation in childhood issues, it is necessary to overcome stereotyped visions and beliefs deeply rooted in adults, for they set up barriers which obstruct the outlook on different and often unexpected situations positively or negatively assessed by children, due to the fact that they are regarded through the eyes of adult power or authority, very frequently overlooking their own gratifying or painful childhood experiences, which are easily set behind. In this respect, curiosity, attention, sensitivity, and simplicity are greatly required in adults and, above all, the conviction that boys and girls have a lot to say and offer. Thus, it is imperative to encourage them to wish, invent, to make propositions and contributions.

Another contribution of this thesis paper is the “visibilization” of the city's infant population by recognizing them as its major actors and giving way to the construction of work forms which allowed boys and girls to internalize their own discourse on quality of life, thus generating an impact in the formulation of public policies in favor of childhood.

The development of studies on boys and girls contributes to empower them as research subjects *per se*, in the perspective of overcoming theoretical and methodological vacuums evidenced by the social sciences regarding child population. Research makes us conscious of the need for broader studies, the design of more sensitive research instruments and techniques, the inclusion of boys and girls as actors in every phase of the process, and the need to develop in them greater research capacities in order to make their dialogues with adults more fruitful.

The abovementioned requires the researchers to have an open and pleasant interchange regarding the construction of theoretical and conceptual backgrounds, based on research developed with boys and girls—who will account for themselves in the present social context—thus considering them permanent members of the social structure and highlighting the significance they attribute to their own lives, through the consideration of coexistence in diverse stages of infancy.

It should be underlined, in this matter, that research on child population does not require the creation of outrageous or complex methodologies; the point is to acknowledge people's lives and social realities as complex and diverse, therefore calling for a plural epistemological and methodological study inherent of social sciences, dispensing with dogmatism and improvisation, faithful to scientific rigor, with the aim of constructing a wide, profound, and truthful knowledge of the person or group considered as research subject.

This research work shows that the boys and girls under study have taken their participation very seriously, showing themselves spontaneous and honest in their semi-structured interviews, participating in focal groups and in work-shops, writing and drawing in their diaries, thus allowing observation and participation in their activities and natural dialogue with the researchers. That is possible when the proper conditions and atmosphere are created to that effect and, above all, when genuine importance is attached to their right to participate and credibility of their contributions.

Research on boys and girls is a gratifying and exhilarating task, though not without difficulties, not only in the research process proper, but also in practical matters such as the difficulties derived from obtaining consent, putting limits to the incidence of adults, taking care of emotional and physical integrity, protecting the right to intimacy and confidentiality. Hence, the ethical considerations which must rule all research work involving human beings should be considered before, during, and after the research; furthermore, considering the factors of vulnerability present in the children's lives and the responsibility we must embrace, as adults, in order to avoid any sort of risk.

It is, likewise, important to be aware of the differences between the boys and girls and the adults carrying out the research work. Thus, vigilance and reflection should pervade the whole process, on account of the preconceptions, memories, or prejudices present in the interaction, which may distort the procedure and the collected information. Moreover, it is vital to acknowledge the fact that, though relationships based on fraternity and trust may be established, there are ethical and role limitations which invariably influence the process and the collected information.

7.8 Final Reflection

Quality of life assessment is one of the major indicators of human development in a society for it attaches importance to people's life experiences, apart from the conditions defined as "adequate" by the experts. The exploration of life experiences sheds light on deficiencies and potentialities as well as on the relation between the

individual and social spheres—vital in the field of public policies, which involve a closer consideration of prevention and promotion from an inter-discipline, inter-program, and inter-sector focus that may promote quality of life and lay solid foundations for a positive social change.

By uniting the perspectives of human development and quality of life, boys and girls are conceived as subjects of permanent potential change, with the right to develop their capacities and abilities to the fullest, thus becoming entitled to the utmost enjoyment of their essential rights and liberties. Development is conceived as a permanent process which enhances welfare and quality of life, in justice and equality.

Research with boys and girls makes sense and acquires importance insofar as it helps to empower them as subjects entitled to the exercise of rights, and generates knowledge that contributes to the transformation of parental and social practices which have a negative effect on their existence; and furthermore creates more gratifying and enriching life environments, thus encouraging the development of their capacities and their condition as agents.

This requires an open and pleasant academic dialogue on the construction of renewed theoretical and conceptual backgrounds based on the research carried out with boys and girls—together with the construction of new methodologies and research techniques that may define them in the present contexts—regarding them as permanent members of the social structure and highlighting the significance they attribute to their own lives, by considering the coexistence of diverse infancies.

This production of knowledge and methodologies enriches the social sciences by integrating this traditionally “invisibilized” population, and shows the need to develop inter-disciplinarian work in order to shed light on the complexities of infancy and generate public recognition of boys and girls as protagonists in research processes.

Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that the research on child population does not require the invention of outrageous or complex methodologies; it simply calls for recognition of the lives and social realities of people, regarded as complex and diverse realities, who ought to be studied within the epistemological and methodological plurality that characterizes the social sciences, leaving dogmatism and improvisation aside, being true to scientific rigor, and in the perspective of constructing a comprehensive, profound and faithful knowledge of a person or group taken as a research subject.

On the other hand, it is necessary to become conscious of the differences between the boys and girls and the adults doing the research, which requires the whole process to be characterized by permanent vigilance and reflection, since there are preconceptions, memories, prejudice, that may be present in the interaction and thus distort the procedure and the collected information. It is likewise vital to admit that, though fraternal, trustworthy relationships may be established, there are ethical and role limitations which invariably influence the process as well as the collected information.

This research work has corroborated that boys and girls take their participation very seriously, giving spontaneous and honest answers in the semi-structured

interviews, participating in focal groups, work-shops and round tables, writing and drawing in their diaries, allowing observation and participation in their activities, and holding natural conversations with the researchers. This is possible when the proper atmosphere and conditions are created to enable this and, above all, when genuine importance is given to their right to participate, as well as to the credibility of their contributions.

Doing research on boys and girls is an exciting and gratifying task, not without difficulties both in the process proper, and in the difficulties resulting from obtaining consent, limiting the adults' incidence, protecting the children's emotional and physical integrity, as well as their right to intimacy and confidentiality. Thus, the ethical considerations which should rule all research work involving human beings must be taken into account previous, during, after the research; more so, considering the diverse factors of vulnerability which are present in the lives of the children and our responsibility, as adults, to avoid any kind of risk.

The research on the quality of life of boys and girls from the perspective adopted in this research paper is coherent with the political significance that this concept has acquired, for it calls for the participation of those involved and a deep probing into the objective and subjective conditions that have a bearing on individual welfare or dissatisfaction. Children's welfare, their happiness and their harmonious development are no longer a challenge for the future, they are a challenge of the present which we as adults should understand and assume not only from the consideration of their rights, but also through a necessary transformation of our relationship with boys and girls which involves an acknowledgement of their capacities and potentialities as well as of the diverse problems that affect their lives. The research work on quality of life may contribute knowledge and comprehension of what boys and girls expect and require from their families, school, government, and society as a whole.

It is essential to continue to make progress in the development of research work that may reflect the daily lives, living conditions, activities, human relations, behavior, and subjective construction of boys and girls—to mention a few issues—acknowledging them as research subjects *per se*, in the perspective of overcoming the theoretical and methodological voids evidenced within the social sciences, as far as children's role in society is concerned.

This calls for an open and friendly academic dialogue surrounding the construction of new theoretical and conceptual backgrounds based on research developed with boys and girls, and the construction of new research methodologies and techniques to account for their place in the present contexts, considering them permanent members of the social structure, and privileging the significance that they give to their own lives, considering the coexistence of diversity in childhood.

This production of knowledge and methodologies enriches the social sciences by integrating this population—which has been traditionally “invisibilized”—and evidences the need to develop inter-disciplinarian work that may expound on the complexity of childhood, and generate the empowerment and public recognition of boys and girls as protagonists of the research processes.

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