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Children's discourse on public issues from a critical perspective

Discursos infantiles sobre problemáticas públicas desde una perspectiva crítica

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Abstract

This article aims to understand how the discourse of boys and girls from a rural school in the Ñuble Region is shaped regarding public interest issues, such as social movements, social inequality, public safety, and migration. The study employs a qualitative methodology. Data were collected through focus groups with students from fifth to eighth grade. The analysis was conducted using discourse analysis grounded in the theory of discursive heterogeneities. The findings show that the discourse of children is influenced by their immediate environment and by the information they receive from various sources, particularly social media. Moreover, it was observed that topics with axiological load, such as inequality and migration, reveal the presence of heterogeneities among students from fifth to seventh grade, while in eighth grade, discourse production was denser and more critical, indicating a more constitutive heterogeneity. In conclusion, the study acknowledges that boys and girls can express concern about public issues, drawing on ethical, moral, and normative resources that shape their daily lives.

Keywords: Citizenship, civic education, childhood, social representations, discourse analysis.

Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es comprender la configuración del discurso de niños y niñas de una escuela rural de la Región de Ñuble respecto a los temas de interés público; tales como movilizaciones sociales, desigualdad social, seguridad pública y migraciones. La metodología es de tipo cualitativa. La producción de datos se desarrolló a través de grupos de discusión con estudiantes de quinto a octavo básico. El análisis se efectúa por medio del análisis de discurso basado en la teoría de las heterogeneidades discursivas. Los hallazgos reflejan que los discursos de niños y niñas están influenciados por su entorno inmediato y por la información que reciben a través de diversas fuentes, en especial las redes sociales. Asimismo, se evidenció que los temas con carga axiológica, como desigualdad y migraciones, reflejan la existencia de heterogeneidades mostradas en los estudiantes de quinto a séptimo básico, mientras que, en octavo, la producción de discurso fue más densa y crítica, reconociéndose una heterogeneidad más bien constitutiva. En conclusión, se reconoce que niños y niñas son capaces de expresar su preocupación sobre temas de interés público, poniendo en juego recursos éticos, morales y normativos con los que les toca vivir en la cotidianeidad.

Palabras clave: Ciudadanía, educación cívica, infancia, representaciones sociales, análisis del discurso.

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Introduction

The neoliberal economic model, established in Chile during the military dictatorship, has permeated every sphere of society. The transformations it brought about have fostered a form of radical individualism linked to consumption, market forces, and competition, thereby contributing to the weakening of democracy (Báez Urbina, 2020; Squella, 2018).

According to Báez Urbina (2020), the consolidation of the neoliberal model and the rise of the individualistic subject occurred over the two decades of post-dictatorship governments, a period marked by profound global changes. Within this context, structural inequality has tended to persist due to an unequal opportunity structure. At the same time, however, poverty and extreme poverty have declined, making Chile an attractive destination for international migrants seeking a better quality of life for themselves and their families—a phenomenon commonly referred to as South–South migration.

The hope of achieving greater prosperity and an improved quality of life remains limited to a very small segment of the population. Meanwhile, international migration places increasing pressure on the provision of health care, education, housing, and other public services. Over time, this situation has contributed to a loss of public trust in institutions, culminating in the social unrest of 2019, which reflected the political class's inability to respond effectively to citizens' demands (Jouannet Valderrama, 2020). Moreover, the very concept of citizenship has come under strain and undergone transformation. Citizenship is increasingly understood not merely in terms of the objective conditions of its acquisition through *jus soli* or *jus sanguinis*, but also through its subjective dimensions associated with a renewed democratic culture. This perspective provides a more appropriate framework for analyzing how individuals gain access to their rights and how contemporary social, economic, political, cultural, and environmental demands are addressed (Cárcamo Vásquez, 2019).

Beginning in 2016, with the enactment of Law No. 20,911, educational institutions were assigned a more prominent role in citizenship education, involving the entire school community in this process. Through

formal education, the State seeks to promote the development of responsible citizens. As Cárcamo Vásquez (2019) notes, the concept of citizenship inherently links the State, civil society, and politics. However, conventional approaches to citizenship have reinforced an adult-centered conception, according to which active participation in society and decision-making are reserved exclusively for adults (Duarte Quapper, 2012; Defensoría de la Niñez, 2022). In this regard, the Office of the Children's Ombudsperson (2022) reports that four out of every ten adults believe that children and adolescents should not have the right to participate in social protests or public demonstrations. Furthermore, two out of every ten adults believe that children and adolescents should not be free to choose their political orientation, while seven out of every ten believe that they should not be allowed to vote in elections.

These findings reveal a social representation that denies children and adolescents recognition as political subjects capable of reflecting on and critically engaging with the present and the future based on their own experiences and social contexts. In other words, adult citizens—who are formally recognized as holders of citizenship rights—generally participate in forums where they can express their views on matters of public concern, whereas children are often excluded or, one might say, silenced. Consequently, this study seeks to understand how the discourse of boys and girls attending a rural school in the Ñuble Region is constructed with regard to issues of public interest. To address this objective, it is first necessary to establish a general theoretical framework.

General Theoretical Considerations

The construction of the political subject is shaped by various dimensions that contribute to its development. According to Cárcamo (2016), these include the temporal dimension (synchronic and diachronic), the spatial dimension (public and private), the relational dimension (the self and others), and, finally, the dimensions intrinsic to the subject (ideal and empirical). Understanding these dimensions provides access to the experiences that children encounter in their everyday environments. Traditionally, however, scientific research has approached these dimensions

from an adult-centered perspective, relegating children to a position of invisibility and overlooking their lived realities. As a result, children have been constituted as oppressed subjects, both within educational settings and across the diverse life worlds in which they develop (Apple, 2018).

Although Chile's current legal framework promotes holistic development, critical thinking, and active citizenship education, numerous studies argue that, in practice, education continues to be oriented primarily toward preparing students for the labor market, thereby reproducing a form of citizenship that is functional, disciplined, and adaptable to the demands of the prevailing neoliberal model (Apple, 2018; León, 2015). Consequently, the education provided to children within the various institutions of society is not directed toward emancipation, as proposed by Habermas (1999), but rather toward reproducing the existing social order.

For subjects to achieve self-emancipation, they must be able to question their surroundings, understand how they function, and assign meaning to what they observe. From this perspective, Habermas (1999) argues that issues of public interest become especially significant, whether they concern matters of immediate relevance or those that are more distant in temporal or spatial terms. Accordingly, access to reality is understood as the articulation between the social system (the institutionalized world) and the lifeworld (the world of everyday experience). This articulation enables individuals, including children, understood here as political subjects, to problematize social reality through their capacity for dialogue. Such dialogue is mediated by the social environment in which the individual develops.

Contemporary Society

Contemporary society is characterized by the rapid circulation of information. Much of this information is disposable and superficial; rather than contributing to personal development, it tends to destabilize individuals by reducing their capacity for reflection and turning them into mere consumers of transient data (Han, 2023). Television—and, in particular, social media—plays a significant role in this process by disseminating simplistic and superficial discourse that

gradually numbs society and diverts attention from issues of genuine public concern (Lipovetsky, 2022). This dynamic undermines individuals' capacity for critical thinking by eroding the symbolic framework necessary for higher-order thought, reflection, and emotional engagement (Han, 2023).

In the political sphere, political representatives are increasingly perceived as incomprehensible and opportunistic. As a result, citizens experience growing disenchantment with and distrust of politics. This indifference is reinforced by an increasing emphasis on satisfying individual needs—particularly through commercially driven forms of leisure—which, paradoxically, only deepens public disappointment (Lipovetsky, 2022).

The conditions described above contribute to a growing insensitivity toward one's social environment. The mass media encourage the routinization of violence and the sensationalist dissemination of trivial or low-value information, thereby fostering the suppression of social sensitivity. Bauman (2002) refers to this phenomenon as the adiaphorization of society and mass culture.

The Configuration of the Political Subject

Various dimensions contribute to the formation of the individual as a political subject. One of these is the cognitive dimension, which shapes an ideal subject based on the principles of Western moral thought. Another is the empirical dimension, through which the subject expresses themselves in everyday life (Cárcamo, 2016). From this perspective, the individual's responsibility lies in deciding how to relate to others and in recognizing the effects that their actions produce in both the public and private spheres (Cárcamo, 2016). This understanding of subject formation can be complemented by Habermas's (1999) view, according to which the subject and its configuration are the result of a historical and political process in which the concepts of subject and subjectivation converge (Cárcamo, 2016; Arendt, 2009).

For Arendt, action is inherently political. It is not merely a historical or social phenomenon; rather, it transcends these dimensions by giving meaning to

social existence. The political actions of citizens are what shape and give significance to a community. Therefore, *"to act politically does not mean simply to behave; for if action is reduced to a network of behaviors, it runs the risk of becoming mere conformism"* (Botero Marino & Leal Granobles, 2015, p. 55).

Methodology

This study was conducted within the interpretive paradigm, as its purpose was to examine the phenomenon from the perspective of the participants themselves (Beltrán, 2018). The emphasis was placed on understanding the process through which children, as political subjects, construct and express their discourse. Accordingly, the study sought to access the subjective perspectives of boys and girls enrolled in the second cycle of primary education. Consistent with the nature of the research object, a qualitative methodology was adopted, drawing on the theory of discursive heterogeneities (Montero, 2014; Pastene Labrín, 2019).

The study pursued the following objectives. The general objective was to understand how the discourse of boys and girls attending a rural school in the Ñuble Region is configured with respect to issues of public interest. The specific objectives were: (1) to describe the ways in which agents of socialization contribute to shaping children's discourse; (2) to identify how children express themselves regarding issues of public interest; and (3) to analyze how students reproduce public-interest discourses.

Context and Participants

The study was conducted at a rural school located in the municipality of San Carlos, in the Ñuble Region of Chile. The school's surrounding area is home to the principal sources of local employment, including lansa, a national sugar producer, and Comfrut, a company specializing in the freezing and export of food products.

The school is publicly funded. Until 2023, it was administered by the Municipal Department of Education of San Carlos. At the beginning of 2024, administration was transferred to the Punilla Cordillera Local Public Education Service (Servicio Local de

Educación Pública Punilla Cordillera) following the implementation of Law No. 21,040, which replaced municipal governments and municipal education corporations as the entities responsible for public education. The school enrolls 184 students, ranging from Transition Level 1 (kindergarten) through eighth grade. In 2023, it had a School Vulnerability Index (SVI) of 95% and operated under a full-day school schedule.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure the structural variability of the study population. The inclusion criteria included boys and girls enrolled in fifth through eighth grade who attended the selected school and whose parents or legal guardians provided informed consent for their participation. These criteria were intended to ensure internal homogeneity within each group while maintaining heterogeneity across groups. Access to participants was facilitated through key informants, namely school administrators and teachers.

The number of participants was determined by two considerations: the technical feasibility of conducting the focus groups and participant accessibility. A total of four focus groups were conducted:

- Fifth grade: 10 participants (5 boys and 5 girls), aged 10–11 years.
- Sixth grade: 9 participants (2 boys and 7 girls), aged 11–12 years.
- Seventh grade: 8 participants (5 boys and 3 girls), aged 12–13 years.
- Eighth grade: 12 participants (6 boys and 6 girls), aged 13–14 years.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using focus group discussions, as this technique provides access to an understanding of how discourse is constructed within specific social contexts (Barbour, 2013). The data collection instrument consisted of a semi-structured interview guide designed to elicit children's perspectives on issues of public interest.

To facilitate discussion, the researchers employed photo elicitation, presenting images depicting social situations related to matters of public concern. The

topics addressed included social movements, social inequality, public safety, and migration. These themes were selected because they have dominated Chile's public agenda over the past five years, as reflected in the media, public opinion surveys, political debate, and the government's policy agenda.

The interview guide underwent expert validation. Initially, it was reviewed by a scholar with expertise in the substantive topic and by a specialist in qualitative research methods. After incorporating their recommendations, the instrument was revised and submitted to a second round of validation by a subject-matter expert (Flick, 2015).

The focus groups were conducted face-to-face and lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Data were recorded through audio recordings, video recordings, and field notes.

Data Analysis Technique

The data analysis process began with the verbatim transcription of the audiovisual recordings, ensuring consistency between the spoken and written text (Gibbs, 2012). A coding matrix was then used to perform a systematic reduction of the data, applying codes derived from the theory of discursive heterogeneities, with particular attention to constitutive heterogeneity and manifest (displayed) heterogeneity (Montero, 2014).

Constitutive heterogeneity refers to elements within an individual's discourse that reveal the presence of other voices in the formation of subjectivity. These elements reflect the symbolic order that contributes to shaping the individual's representations of the object under discussion.

Manifest (displayed) heterogeneity, by contrast, refers to explicit linguistic expressions through which speakers reproduce or quote the voices, opinions, or viewpoints of others concerning a particular topic.

These discursive markers made it possible to understand how children construct and express their discourse on issues of public interest.

Ethical Considerations

To recruit participants, the researchers prepared an informed consent form addressed to parents and legal

guardians, following the ethical standards recommended by the international scientific community (Flick, 2014). In addition, assent was obtained from the participating children. To protect participants' identities, all individuals were identified in the study by their initials only.

Results and Discussion

Students' Discourse on Issues of Public Interest

Social Movements

Protest is a form of individual or collective action intended to express ideas, dissenting values, opposition, denunciation, or demands for social change (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, 2019). Analysis of the students' discourse revealed four key themes: sources of information, evaluations of protest, motivations for protest, and the exercise of power.

Students readily identified the sources from which they obtain information, particularly traditional media and social media, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

I: You see that a lot—they show it on television and on the Internet.

C: Also, in the newspaper. (Fifth Grade)

Regarding their evaluations of protests, students across all grade levels consistently associated demonstrations with the damage they may cause when they involve violence (Squella, 2018), as illustrated below:

A: It depends on what they do there. For example, if they make a big mess, or if someone damages something, then it's wrong. They cause harm, including to the other people who are there protesting. But if they're protesting for the country, for education, or for health care, I think that's fine.

M: It's wrong because the police are the ones who protect us.

C: They're damaging public places that are used by them and by many other

people who have nothing to do with what they're protesting about. (Eighth Grade)

This emphasis on the damage caused by protests may be explained by the widespread dissemination of images and videos highlighting episodes of violence and confrontation, often without providing context regarding the underlying reasons for the demonstrations (Han, 2023).

With respect to the motivations for protest, participants generally expressed positive views that legitimized public demonstrations, as reflected in the following excerpt:

S: *Demonstrations are necessary from time to time (...).*

A: *They're very necessary, for example, for political issues, to reach agreements, or to express opinions on important matters such as Women's Day.* (Sixth Grade)

Participants viewed demonstrations as opportunities to bring important issues and situations of injustice or abuse into public awareness.

Finally, another noteworthy theme concerns what may be conceptualized as the exercise of power. Although this was not a dominant pattern across all participants, identifying the arbitrary use of power as a motive for protest is particularly significant (Habermas, 1999), especially given that the participants were children attending primary school.

V: *They're protesting because something bad happened. If it were something good, everyone would be happy.*

K: *For example, against the government.*

T: *They're protesting against something that people in power have done—the president or the government.* (Seventh Grade)

As this excerpt illustrates, students establish a direct association between power and political authorities, particularly the government, while making no

reference to power exercised within the private sphere (Cárcamo, 2016).

With regard to the identification of discursive heterogeneities, the discourse contains evidence of constitutive heterogeneity, particularly in the statement that *the police provide protection*. This reflects a discourse that is widespread in contemporary Chilean society. Following the social unrest of 2019, conservative political sectors increasingly positioned themselves as defenders of the national police after widely publicized reports of attacks against police officers and clashes with the so-called *primera línea* ("front line") protesters. At the same time, news media have increasingly focused on crime reporting, in which the Carabineros de Chile frequently appear because of their role in law enforcement.

It is also important to note that, from an early age, students in Chilean schools are socialized into republican civic values, which include respect for the armed forces and for public order and security institutions. Consequently, students reproduce a discourse of respect toward the Carabineros, consistent with the republican institutional framework of the Chilean state. This tendency is reinforced by the police force's sustained involvement in community outreach and its visible presence in many aspects of everyday life.

Social Inequality

Social inequality can be understood in three interrelated yet analytically distinct dimensions: economic, social, and political. From the perspective of classical functionalist theory (Blau & Duncan, 1967), inequality is regarded as an inherent feature of a differentiated system of social positions based on meritocratic principles within a society characterized by an open opportunity structure. The following excerpt illustrates the presence of this meritocratic principle:

I: *That's because inequality happens when some people work much harder to get what they have. Others are lazier and don't achieve as much.*

G: *I think it's normal for there to be inequality because some people make more of an effort than others.*
(Fifth Grade)

Similarly, eighth-grade students expressed comparable views:

T: *Maybe it depends on how hard people work.*

I: *Maybe they've worked harder than the others to have those things.*
(Eighth Grade)

Although these excerpts reflect a tendency to naturalize inequality, they also suggest a nuance: inequality is not viewed solely as a naturally occurring phenomenon but rather as the outcome of individuals' efforts and personal resources. This perspective is evident in the following exchange:

AC: *Some people do work harder than others.*

S: *Yes, but not enough to earn that much more.*

A: *There are also families who are powerful, so to speak, because they have money. They've been raised that way—they were born into comfortable circumstances.* (Sixth Grade)

The students' discourse on inequality reveals a consistent emphasis on values closely associated with neoliberal ideology (Báez Urbina, 2020), particularly radical individualism and the meritocratic ideal. This is illustrated in the following excerpt:

T: *It's not really that bad. If everyone had the same social status, everything would just be average—no rich people and no poor people. Then poor people wouldn't have jobs because there wouldn't be anyone to pay them.*
(Seventh Grade)

In this passage, the student implicitly accepts the existence of social classes, thereby legitimizing inequality. Likewise, the discourse assumes a hierarchical relationship in which those with greater economic power employ and remunerate workers.

This reflects a conception of labor relations in which workers remain dependent on employers to satisfy their basic needs, a view that resonates with the notion of labor alienation.

At the same time, the discourse reveals an absence of any notion of emancipation as a means of social transformation. The following excerpt illustrates how inequality is justified through an economic rationale centered on employment:

T: *Yes, inequality is necessary so that rich people can give poor people jobs. For example, here the owners of IANSA are rich. What would happen if the people in lower positions... let's say they were all given enough money to end up with the same social status? IANSA would go bankrupt because the bosses wouldn't have enough money to pay people anymore, they'd end up in the middle too.*
(Seventh Grade)

In this regard, Toretta Zen and Donizetti Sgarbi (2019) argue that this type of neoliberal social relationship reflects the historical limits imposed by capitalism through processes of alienation and the degradation of social life as a whole. Similarly, Bauman (2002) maintains that the poorer people become, the more unattainable the social models presented to them appear. Consequently, individuals are encouraged to emulate these models, even as living standards decline and wage inequality increases within an economic system characterized by deregulation and an increasingly unrestricted laissez-faire approach.

The discourse produced by the students regarding social inequality is therefore closely linked to the internalization of meritocratic beliefs, according to which success is achieved exclusively through individual effort. Those who attain greater wealth are assumed to have worked harder, whereas those who do not succeed are perceived as lacking effort or being lazy, as one student explicitly suggested. This perspective closely resembles the popular belief that "the poor are poor because they choose to be."

From the standpoint of discursive heterogeneity, this discourse constitutes an example of constitutive

heterogeneity, since meritocracy has become deeply embedded in contemporary society. As a result, children are able to perceive, internalize, and reproduce these dominant social discourses as part of the symbolic framework through which they interpret social inequality.

Public Safety

One definition of public safety is provided by Pérez de Armiño (2013), who describes it as a condition in which individuals are free from threats to their personal integrity and are able to live with dignity. This conception encompasses two dimensions of freedom. The first refers to freedom from fear—what in Chile is commonly understood as the perception of insecurity. The second refers to freedom from want, that is, having one's basic needs adequately met.

With regard to public safety, students' discourse focused on three principal themes: the perception of insecurity, the causes of crime, and measures to prevent or reduce crime. In other words, their discussion centered primarily on the first of the two dimensions outlined above. Across these themes, students identified shortcomings in police staffing and police authority, while also assigning responsibility to the national government, often drawing on personal or family experiences:

L: Public safety isn't very good. Anyone can break in and steal. Besides, the security cameras are black and white, so you can't see things clearly.

I: The police never come. If someone calls them, they don't show up. One time, a man was robbed in my aunt's store.

J: I think it's all Boric's fault. Public safety was already bad before he became president, but not this bad. (Fifth Grade)

Among sixth-grade students, similar views emerged. In this instance, students referred to police corruption, suggesting that bribery allows offenders to escape prosecution. Although such situations are not commonplace, they have received considerable

public attention in Chile through high-profile cases involving political and business figures.

S: It's wrong. I think it's because of corruption. For example, someone who steals pays part of the money to the police, and then the charges are dropped.

G: But having more police officers won't solve anything because people don't respect them anymore. Police officers carry guns, but they aren't allowed to use them, whereas criminals have guns and do shoot them. (Sixth Grade)

This excerpt reflects a widely circulated public narrative claiming that the powers of the Carabineros have been restricted, particularly regarding the use of their service weapons, which may now be used only under exceptional circumstances. Students also referred to what they perceived as an insufficient number of police officers.

T: There aren't enough police officers because they're all busy and spread across every region. The smaller towns are always short of them.

N: There aren't many police officers because they risk their lives for other people. You can see almost everything the police are doing nowadays. (Seventh Grade)

Students were also able to identify factors that, in their view, contribute to criminal behavior. While there was broad agreement on this issue, some differences in emphasis emerged.

J: That's really bad because some people start stealing when they're very young. (Fifth Grade)

G: Some people also learn to become criminals. They learn to steal from a young age by watching members of their own family. (Sixth Grade)

Participants also identified social vulnerability as a contributing factor, particularly the poverty experienced by many offenders. León (2022) argues

that one widespread social representation constructs poor people as inherently delinquent, atavistic, and primitive. Elements of this representation were evident in the students' discourse:

F: But that also happens because people don't have enough food or resources. It might be because of inequality—it could be out of necessity. (Sixth Grade)

This excerpt explicitly links crime to social inequality, highlighting the lack of opportunities faced by disadvantaged individuals within a consumer-oriented society that tends to marginalize and criminalize poverty. From this perspective, poverty ceases to be treated primarily as a matter of social policy and instead becomes framed as an issue of criminal justice (Bauman, 2002). In a similar vein, León (2022) argues that perceptions of insecurity associated with violence are typically projected onto "the other," thereby generating distrust and fear.

N: Some people in Chile don't have anything, so they have to steal to get what they need. (Seventh Grade)

In the following excerpt, the student not only identifies a perceived cause of crime but also proposes a possible solution:

T: Most of the people who steal are young people who don't have enough money, for example, to stay in school. It would be good if university were free because then they'd be motivated to have a future instead of stealing. (Seventh Grade)

Another proposed solution appears in the following excerpt:

J: People break into stores to steal, and that's also related to weapons. Business owners aren't allowed to buy guns. They should be able to buy them legally, with the proper permits, so they can defend themselves against robberies. (Fifth Grade)

This statement reflects the notion of civilian self-defense, a concept frequently promoted within the

discourse of Chilean conservative political sectors. Here, firearm ownership is presented as a means of combating crime and reducing feelings of insecurity. This perspective incorporates normative and ethical assumptions that are often used to justify public policies aimed at enhancing security and protecting rights, even though the theoretical foundations of such arguments remain contested and are frequently instrumentalized for political purposes (Squella, 2018).

Students also proposed other measures to improve public safety, including enhanced surveillance systems, increased police staffing, and stricter enforcement.

Moderator: *How could public safety be improved?*

C: First, the government should help by installing more cameras, alarms, automatic doors, and hiring security personnel.

S: The police are also poorly distributed. There are more officers in safe places than in areas where robberies actually happen.

A: I think there should be more police officers on patrol. Around here you hardly ever see them, but we really need them.

(Sixth Grade)

T: We need a safer system.

V: More inspections. People shouldn't be carrying illegal drugs.

(Seventh Grade)

Pérez de Armiño (2013) argues that human security can only be achieved through the transformation of existing economic and political structures and is therefore fundamentally incompatible with neoliberalism. Along similar lines, León (2015) contends that urban growth and industrialization produced a new form of marginality, in which working-class populations became associated with dangerousness—a condition generated by the

capitalist economic system itself. It is also important to recognize the historical roots of insecurity. The stigmatization of poverty as a source of criminality is not a recent phenomenon but has developed over time, with the mass media playing a central role in its production and dissemination (León, 2022).

In summary, the findings reveal that students reproduce a discourse on crime and public safety that is already firmly established in both the media and broader public opinion. Consequently, this discourse constitutes an example of constitutive heterogeneity. Statements such as *"the country's lack of security is President Boric's fault," "there aren't enough police officers," "people should be allowed to carry firearms,"* and *"we need more security cameras"* form part of the contemporary social imaginary and closely reflect narratives disseminated through the mass media. Likewise, the analysis reveals the influence of conservative political discourse, in which public safety occupies a central place on the political agenda.

Migration

The International Organization for Migration (IOM), an agency of the United Nations, defines migration as the movement of people away from their usual place of residence to a new place of residence, either across an international border or within a country. During the past decade, Chile has experienced a substantial increase in immigration, particularly from Venezuela, a phenomenon that has frequently been portrayed in the media as a "migration crisis."

With respect to this issue, the children expressed critical but nuanced perspectives, grounded in their understanding of migrants' search for better living conditions, concerns about crime, and a degree of self-reflection. The analysis indicates that participants' perceptions of migration are largely shaped by the information they receive, which they relate to the perceived motivations of migrants for coming to Chile (Novaro, 2011; Skliar, 2017). In the following excerpt, a fifth-grade student distinguishes between different types of migrants, associating migration with both poverty and criminality:

J: It depends. There might be criminals who don't have documents, so they

could commit crimes freely until they're caught. But there are also people who have problems in their own countries and have to leave. When they arrive, they're discriminated against. Some of them have even lost their homes and have nowhere to live. So, it all depends, because you can't really know what other people's intentions are. (Fifth Grade)

Similarly, sixth-grade students differentiated among types of migrants, while revealing familiarity with media narratives portraying Venezuela as an unsafe country:

A: It depends on the kind of people they are. Some people are fleeing. For example, Venezuelans came to Chile because of what happened with the elections. They want to be somewhere safe where they can work. But there are also others who came here and are stealing, killing, and trafficking drugs. (Sixth Grade)

This pattern continued among seventh-grade students, although their discourse incorporated a greater awareness of migrants' basic needs:

T: Some people do bad things and others don't. Some come here to steal money, but others come because they want a better life, since they're suffering from hunger and other hardships. (Seventh Grade)

This excerpt reflects a greater sensitivity toward migrants' quality of life. Although Bauman (2002) argues that contemporary society is characterized by adiaphorization, that is, a weakening of moral sensitivity, is noteworthy that the seventh and eighth-grade students displayed both critical thinking and empathy toward migrants.

N: It's wrong not to let them come here because they also want a better way of life.

V: *But not everyone comes for the same reason. Some people just want to live here and have a better life.*

K: *I think it's okay because they want to build a better future. Maybe democracy has gone wrong, like what's happening in Venezuela.* (Seventh Grade)

In the case of the seventh-grade class, it is worth noting that, during the 2024 school year, Haitian students joined the class; the same occurred in sixth grade. Combined with the increasingly critical perspectives expressed by these students, this experience suggests a heightened sensitivity toward issues of public interest. In this regard, Habermas (1999) emphasizes the importance of context and everyday experience in shaping individuals' understanding of public issues. Here, daily interaction with migrant classmates appears to have influenced students' perspectives.

The sixth- and seventh-grade groups also reflected on the challenges of establishing social relationships with children from a different cultural background. These interactions involved the process of adapting to what was empirically unfamiliar to them, leading to processes of enculturation (Novaro, 2011). The following exchange illustrates students' experiences with Haitian classmates:

Moderator: *You have a Haitian classmate. What has the experience been like?*

G: *Bad.*

S: *Bad—well, kind of.*

AC: *We've had problems with aggression.*

A: *He tried to hit me.*

S: *If you tell him to stop talking or correct him, he starts pushing or hitting you.*

AA: *He likes touching people a lot. He's always touching other people.*

S: *Yes. When I was coming here today, he grabbed my arm.*

G: *But they're not all like that. His cousin in seventh grade isn't like that. He's much quieter and keeps to himself.*

A: *Maybe it's because of the life they've had. Maybe that's just how things are in their country.* (Sixth Grade)

This interaction illustrates the importance that students attach to migrants' country of origin when evaluating migrant populations, as argued by Novaro (2011). Perceptions of migrants' countries of origin contribute to the formation of preconceptions that shape encounters with others. At the same time, differences of opinion among students suggest that age-related differences in critical thinking and access to information may also influence how these experiences are interpreted.

Among eighth-grade students, the discourse became more sophisticated and comparative, particularly regarding people from European countries and those from other regions of the world. Students reflected on the role of skin color and national origin in shaping social judgments, recognizing that these characteristics are often assigned negative meanings and become grounds for implicit discrimination (Novaro, 2011). Their discussion demonstrated a critical awareness of social prejudice.

Moderator: *If a German person and a Peruvian person came here, would you treat them the same?*

Group: *Yes.*

Moderator: *You wouldn't make any distinction?*

Group: *No.*

A: *I think people have different values, and not everyone is the same. But a German, an American, and a Peruvian should all be treated in the same way.*

Moderator: *Does that actually happen?*

Group: *No.*

Moderator: *So, you're saying there is discrimination...*

A: *Because of skin color.*

Moderator: *Why do you think that happens?*

C: *People may have prejudices based on someone's skin color or appearance. They judge them and form general ideas about everyone. (Eighth Grade)*

Students also identified discrimination as a significant issue. Although they were familiar with the concept of racism, they expressed self-critical reflections regarding the treatment of foreigners and acknowledged that people's place of origin and skin color often influence how they are treated.

L: *We also treat people from other countries badly.*

I: *We're a little bit racist.*

E: *But it always depends on the individual person. (Fifth Grade)*

The statement *"it always depends on the individual person"* is consistent with Herranz de Rafael's (2008) argument that judgments are grounded in experience, and that experience is interpreted through each individual's process of enculturation. As people's experiences change, so do their judgments. Nevertheless, the author also emphasizes that the social environment in which individuals develop may promote the belief that certain ideas or actions are superior to others. Consequently, the context in which children grow up plays a significant role in shaping both their understanding of the world and the opinions they express.

Regarding migration as an issue of public interest, the findings reveal evidence of constitutive heterogeneity, since the participants' discourse is strongly influenced by narratives disseminated through the mass media. Foreigners are frequently stigmatized in media coverage. Extensive attention has been devoted to the Tren de Aragua criminal organization, as well as to the opening of Chile's borders to Venezuelan migrants in response to that country's political and social crisis.

Consequently, children are inevitably exposed to these narratives. Nevertheless, participants also demonstrated the ability to distinguish between migrants who engage in criminal activity and those who migrate in search of better opportunities and an improved quality of life. This important nuance appears to stem from the participants' own experiences interacting with migrant classmates.

Conclusions

The findings of this study underscore the importance of education in the formation of the political subject from early childhood, highlighting the central role of the family, the school, and the mass media in shaping children's discourse on issues of public interest.

The results indicate that children's discourse is strongly influenced by their immediate environment and by the information they receive from a variety of sources, including social media. The literature describes these influences as forms of symbolic exchange among social actors, communicators, and audiences—in this case, children. The analysis suggests the existence of a contemporary mechanism through which prevailing discourses circulate and contribute to shaping modern ways of thinking.

The findings further reveal that topics with a strong axiological dimension, particularly social inequality and migration, were characterized by manifest (displayed) heterogeneity among fifth- through seventh-grade students. In contrast, the discourse produced by eighth-grade students was considerably richer and more critical, reflecting predominantly constitutive heterogeneity. These results demonstrate that children are capable of expressing informed concerns about issues of public interest by drawing upon the ethical, moral, and normative frameworks that shape their everyday lives.

A clear progression in discursive competence was observed across grade levels. Although fifth-grade students were able to express their opinions, they generally lacked the conceptual resources necessary to construct highly abstract arguments. By contrast, eighth-grade students demonstrated stronger argumentative skills, supporting their viewpoints with evidence and well-developed reasoning that reflected

the influence of interdiscourse. Overall, the findings suggest a developmental progression in the formation of the individual as an ideal–empirical political subject situated within a broader collective context.

This study opens new avenues for future research on the formation of political subjects during childhood by highlighting the importance of socialization processes that connect the diverse life worlds inhabited by children. It also suggests the implementation of teaching strategies aimed at developing argumentative skills from an early age in order to strengthen critical thinking.

Moreover, the findings point to the need for educational programs that foster the development of critical discourse in the classroom by creating opportunities for students to express their ideas and engage in discussion about socially relevant issues.

Finally, strengthening citizenship education from the beginning of formal schooling would contribute to the development of a more democratic and inclusive society in which all voices, regardless of age, are taken into account in collective decision-making. The findings also highlight the need for continued research into the ways in which different agents of socialization influence the formation of discourse and how schools can become key spaces for promoting active citizenship among children.

Author contributions

Yesenia Figueroa: Conducted the literature review, collected the data, analyzed the data, and prepared the first draft of the manuscript.

Héctor Cárcamo: Defined the initial scope of the study, participated in data collection and data analysis, and reviewed the first draft of the manuscript.

Data availability

The data generated during this study are stored in digital format. Access to these data is restricted in order to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants.

Peer review comments

This article underwent an anonymous peer-review process in accordance with the journal's editorial

transparency policy. The reviewers who participated anonymously in the review process consented to the publication of their review comments.

Reviewer 1: After evaluating the manuscript, I consider it suitable for publication once the suggestions indicated in the attached annotated version have been incorporated.

Reviewer 2: The findings are very interesting and are generally well presented, although the organization could be improved. The use of conceptual diagrams or graphic organizers might make the findings clearer and more revealing.

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