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What is the Life We Value? A Capability-Participatory Approach to Well-Being among Young Chileans

Pablo Cheyre Triat

pcheyre@ucsb.edu

University of California, Santa Barbara

Research Article

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Abstract

Understanding children's well-being has become a central concern globally, yet frameworks remain dominated by Global North contexts, inadequately reflecting children's experiences in Latin America and other regions. In Chile, a society with deep-rooted socioeconomic disparities, well-being measurement continues to rely on adult-reported, household-level indicators that fail to capture young people's own perspectives. This article introduces a capability-participatory framework, integrating the capability approach with social studies of childhood, to examine young Chileans' well-being opportunities. Through participatory research with 32 young people aged 10–14 using visual-creative methods, the study co-constructed four valued capabilities: security, life project, community, and recognition. The research operationalises conversion factors analysis—examining how socioeconomic status (SES) and social constructions of childhood (SCC) systematically constrain opportunities to achieve these capabilities.

Findings reveal that SES operates through segregation mechanisms (residential, educational), constraining security and life project capabilities. Conversely, SCC operates through misrecognition mechanisms (institutional exclusion, age-based paternalism), constraining community and recognition capabilities regardless of socioeconomic position. By positioning SCC as a conversion factor analytically equivalent to SES, the study demonstrates that age-based subordination constitutes structural inequality requiring policy attention comparable to class-based inequality. The research contributes theoretically by operationalising conversion factors analysis empirically; methodologically by demonstrating that participatory approaches are epistemically essential; and practically, by revealing that achieving well-being equality requires addressing structural mechanisms—segregation and misrecognition—rather than merely providing resources or protection. Current Chilean approaches, dominated by resource-based measures and protection-oriented policies, cannot address these structural barriers constraining young people's opportunities to live well.

1. Introduction

Children in Chile live in a society where the wealthiest 20% of the population controls 70% of the national wealth (Martínez & Uribe, 2017; OECD, 2020), highlighting deep structural inequalities that shape young peoples' well-being opportunities. Yet current approaches to assessing their well-being rely predominantly on adult-reported household indicators through instruments like the Encuesta de Caracterización Socioeconómica Nacional (CASEN) (see MDSF, 2021), treating children as family extensions rather than individuals with their own perspectives (OCEC-UDP, 2021). This measurement gap reflects a broader problem: despite growing global attention to children's well-being (Ben-Arieh, 2008; Casas & Frønes, 2020), conceptual frameworks remain grounded predominantly in Global North

contexts that inadequately address how structural inequality shapes children's lives in highly unequal societies (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014).

Chile's reliance on household income measures through CASEN proves particularly problematic given the country's extreme socioeconomic stratification. Despite widespread recognition of this severe inequality (e.g. Larrañaga, 2016), its specific effects on young people's well-being remain undertheorized. Research elsewhere shows that measures emphasizing only objective, monetary indicators fail to capture young people's subjective experiences and their understandings of what constitutes a good life (Main, 2019; Roelen & Gassmann, 2008) —a limitation magnified in contexts of extreme inequality (Rees et al., 2010).

Moreover, existing measures fail to address a fundamental limitation: children with comparable material resources frequently experience substantially different well-being outcomes (Main, 2014). Traditional approaches measuring only resource availability or achieved outcomes prove insufficient for explaining these disparities (Roelen & Gassmann, 2008). Hence, understanding children's well-being inequality requires shifting analytical focus from what children possess (resources) to the opportunities that derive from those resources. In this context, a capability's understanding of well-being emerges as an interesting scope, emphasizing what young people can do and be (capabilities), examining the structural mechanisms that enable or constrain the transformation of resources into actual opportunities (Robeyns, 2017).

This study develops a capability-participatory framework integrating the capability approach (Robeyns, 2017; Sen, 1999) with the social studies of childhood (James et al., 1998; James & Prout, 1997) to discuss young Chileans' well-being opportunities. Through participatory research with 32 young people aged 10–14 using visual-creative methods (Clark & Moss, 2011) —such as drawing, LEGO Serious Play, and game creation—, the study co-constructed four valued capabilities: security, life project, community, and recognition. These capabilities underpin a conversion factors analysis examining how socioeconomic status (SES) and social constructions of childhood (SCC) constrain young people's opportunities to realise them.

This study advances child well-being research through three interconnected contributions. Theoretically, it operationalises conversion factors analysis empirically, demonstrating that SES constrains security and life project capabilities through segregation mechanisms (residential, educational, healthcare), while SCC constrains community and recognition capabilities through misrecognition mechanisms (institutional exclusion, age-based paternalism). Importantly, by positioning SCC as a conversion factor analytically equivalent to SES, the research reveals age-based subordination as a structural inequality demanding policy attention comparable to that of class-based inequality—an insight not

previously established within capability or childhood studies literature. Methodologically, the innovative use of LEGO Serious Play as a participatory analytical tool engages young people actively in preliminary data analysis, highlighting that participatory approaches are epistemically essential rather than merely ethically desirable.

2. Theoretical Framework: The Capability-Participatory Approach

As previously introduced, this study employs a capability-participatory framework integrating the capability approach (Sen, 1985, 1999) with social studies of childhood (James et al., 1998; Wyness, 2022). This integration addresses both economic inequality and age-based subordination while examining how these structural forces intersect to shape young people's well-being opportunities. Crucially, the framework positions young people as active participants in defining well-being dimensions rather than passive subjects of adult-constructed measurement.

2.1 The Capability Approach: Well-Being as an Opportunity-Based Concept

The capability approach shifts focus from what people have (resources) or achieve (outcomes) to what they are genuinely free to do and be—their capabilities (Sen, 1999). This opportunity-based framework distinguishes three interconnected concepts essential for understanding well-being. *Functionings* are actual achievements—the various things a person succeeds in being or doing. For example, being a university student, being healthy, or having supportive friendships are functionings. *Capabilities* are the real freedoms or opportunities to achieve valued functionings—what Sen (1992, p. 38) terms "the choices that the person in fact have" based on available resources. Capability refers not to whether someone achieves a particular functioning but whether they possess genuine freedom to achieve it should they choose. As Robeyns (2017) summarises, whilst capabilities are opportunities, functionings are actual achievements of those opportunities. *Resources* are means (income, education, healthcare) that enable capabilities but do not guarantee them. Consequently, a capability perspective recognises resources' importance not as ends in themselves but instrumentally, because of the outcomes they enable (Robeyns, 2005).

This distinction is pivotal for understanding inequality. The capability approach allows exploring well-being as an opportunity-based concept, going beyond the value of resources by themselves to examine what young people can actually achieve from those resources (Robeyns, 2005; Sen, 1999). Though two young Chileans may have access to similar material resources — comparable household incomes, educational facilities, and

healthcare access — they may experience vastly different well-being outcomes. A household may possess adequate income, yet the relationship between income and well-being proves complex (Main, 2019). Structural barriers—such as residential segregation, discriminatory social norms, or limited educational access—can prevent that income from converting into genuine well-being opportunities for the children within that household (Roelen & Gassmann, 2008).

Hence, inequality is not solely about resource distribution but about the conversion of resources into valued opportunities (Sen, 1999). The capability-participatory approach emphasises capabilities over functionings as the proper evaluative space for well-being because it focuses on what enables or inhibits resources becoming real opportunities (Robeyns, 2017). Understanding this conversion process is fundamental for analysing well-being inequality in highly unequal societies like Chile.

2.2 The Analytical Power of Conversion Factors: The Missing Link

A key contribution of the capability approach is its identification of *conversion factors*: personal, social, and environmental characteristics that influence individuals' ability to convert resources into capabilities (Robeyns, 2005). Conversion factors explain why individuals with similar resources achieve different capability sets, with structural conditions facilitating or blocking conversion.

Robeyns (2005, 2017) identifies three types of conversion factors. Personal conversion factors pertain to individual characteristics (metabolism, physical condition, literacy, intelligence) affecting resource conversion. Environmental conversion factors relate to geographical, climate, or physical infrastructure variables individuals cannot control but which influence conversion. Social conversion factors involve policies, institutions, legal frameworks, social norms, and power relations mediating the transformation process.

The conversion factors framework addresses critiques of the capability approach's individualistic tendencies (Srinivasan, 1994; Comim, 2001) by directing attention to structural conditions enabling or constraining capability development for entire groups rather than focusing on individual choices. It highlights structural resources—education systems, residential environments, healthcare infrastructure, institutional frameworks—that shape young people's opportunities. This structural lens maintains analytical rigor by focusing on freedom of choice rather than exclusively on access to resources or outcomes.

This study focuses on social conversion factors, understood as specific social structures that influence young people's agency and affect their opportunities to develop and achieve a life they have reason to value (Yousefzadeh et al., 2019). These types of conversion

operate at structural levels, shaping opportunities for entire groups and are amenable to policy intervention.

Two critical social conversion factors prove particularly significant in this study for young Chileans: socioeconomic status (SES) operating through segregation mechanisms, and social constructions of childhood (SCC) operating through agency misrecognition and age-based subordination that limits their social participation. These conversion factors mediate the link between resources and capabilities, explaining systematic disparities in well-being opportunities among those with comparable resources.

2.3 Social Studies of Childhood: Recognizing Children as Social Agents

Social studies of childhood is the second key theoretical framework within this study as it reconceptualises how childhood is understood from a sociological standpoint. This paradigm advances two foundational claims. First, children are competent social actors who actively shape their lives and social worlds rather than passive recipients of socialisation (James & Prout, 1997). This does not deny developmental-biological differences but rejects viewing children as incomplete adults, recognizing them as persons whose current lives matter independently of their futures (N. Lee, 2004; Mayall, 2013). Second, childhood constitutes a permanent structural feature of societies—shaped by economic, political, and cultural forces rather than merely a biological developmental stage (Qvortrup, 2009; James & James, 2012).

This perspective is vital to analyse well-being inequality. Just as economic systems create class-based advantages and disadvantages, age-based social organisation creates childhood as a structurally subordinated status (Qvortrup, 2009). Dominant constructions of childhood—institutionalised in laws, policies, and everyday practices—systematically constrain young people’s agency, participation, and decision-making power (Wyness, 2018).

While individual children vary in capabilities, childhood as social structure imposes systematic constraints across the population. This structural understanding disrupts developmental frameworks that naturalize adult control as appropriate, revealing it instead as a form of domination requiring justification and limitation (Mayall, 2013). Recognizing childhood as a structural axis of inequality is crucial for understanding why constrained participation is a justice concern demanding structural transformation, not merely enhanced protection (Bessell, 2021).

2.4 Integrating Capabilities and Childhood Studies

The capability-participatory framework synthesises these theoretical traditions, integrating the capability approach's analytical precision in examining inequality with childhood studies' critique of age-based social organisation. This synthesis addresses limitations in each framework and enhances explanatory power.

The capability approach provides analytical tools—capabilities, functionings, conversion factors—for examining inequality rigorously and identifying structural mechanisms (Robeyns, 2017). However, it has paid limited attention to the role of age-based social structures. Conversely, childhood studies illuminate how age shapes advantage and disadvantage but provide less systematic analytical tools for inequality mechanisms.

Integrating the two frameworks enables an enriched analysis of how economic inequality and age-based subordination intersect to shape well-being opportunities. This approach reconceptualises children as social actors (childhood studies) while analysing structural conversion factors limiting those opportunities (capability approach). Collectively, it foregrounds children's perspectives through participatory research while maintaining a focus on structural inequality.

2.5 Epistemological Stance

The capability-participatory framework embraces a participatory epistemology that recognises knowledge as co-produced through experiential and active participation (Clark & Moss, 2011; Heron & Reason, 1997). It positions young people as essential knowers about their own lives, challenging adult-centric perspectives that often overlook dimensions of well-being salient to children themselves. This stance acknowledges that well-being concepts inherently carry value judgements about what constitutes a good life; such judgements should be grounded in the values and experiences of those whose well-being is assessed (Alkire, 2005; Sen, 1992). Through this lens, valuing children's voices is epistemically essential rather than merely an ethical imperative. This epistemological commitment frames the participatory research design and interpretation of findings.

3. Context: Chile as a Critical Case

Chile offers a critical case to examine how structural inequality shapes children's well-being opportunities. As previously introduced, it ranks among the most unequal countries globally, with the wealthiest 20% controlling approximately 70% of national wealth (Martínez & Uribe, 2017; OECD, 2020). Simultaneously, Chile's institutional frameworks to children and young people remain dominated by protection-oriented policies (see, for instance, MDSF, 2024), despite rhetorical commitments to children's participation, illustrating how social constructions of childhood constrain young people's agency regardless of material resources.

3.1 Socioeconomic Inequality and Segregation

Chile’s contemporary inequality stems from market-driven reforms in the 1980s, featuring privatisation, consolidation of private property rights, and reduced state service provision (Foxley, 1988; Garretón, 2012; Larrañaga, 2016). While poverty rates have declined significantly, wealth concentration and inequality remain deeply entrenched across housing, education, and healthcare sectors (Valdés & Garcés-Sotomayor, 2017; Valenzuela et al., 2008).

In this context, segregation emerges as a valuable analytical tool to explore well-being inequality by exploring the relationship between access to structural resources (beyond income) and well-being opportunities. According to Rodríguez Vignoli (2001), segregation exhibits two fundamental dimension

s: a social dimension, concerning the lack of interaction between social groups, and a geographical dimension, linked to the unequal distribution of these groups within a specific area. Various types of segregation are explored in the literature, including those tied to race, gender, religion, and ethnicity (see Lee & Orfield, 2005). This study investigates segregation derived from socioeconomic status, acknowledged by experts as one of Chile’s most relevant segregation types (Valenzuela et al., 2010).

Numerous studies have demonstrated that segregation influences the participation of disadvantaged communities in various aspects of society, including access to the Chilean labour market (e.g., Garreton, 2017; Sabatini, 2001), disparities within education (Bellei et al., 2019) and within the healthcare system (Goyenechea, 2019). While these studies have explored the impact of inequality by focusing on segregation within the adult population, less evidence exists concerning its effects on young people’s well-being opportunities. Consequently, the capabilities-participatory framework explores the influence of young Chileans’ SES on their well-being opportunities by examining the impact of residential (also known as socio-spatial) and educational segregation.

Residential segregation manifests spatially, with clear geographical separation between wealthy and poor neighbourhoods. Place of residence directly correlates with access to public services, quality of municipal infrastructure, exposure to crime and environmental hazards, and access to opportunities (Garreton et al., 2020; Ruiz-Tagle, 2013). Chilean municipalities depend primarily on local property tax revenues to oversee the well-being of their residents, creating dramatic resource disparities between wealthy and poor communes (Ruiz-Tagle, 2016; Uttamchandani Mujica, 2020).

Educational segregation operates through Chile’s three-tiered school system: state-subsidized public schools (34%), state-subsidized private schools (54%), and fully private schools (9%) (MINEDUC, 2019). This system emerged from 1980s voucher policies

promoting school choice, but deprived families face constrained choice due to limited resources and schools' power to select students (Canals et al., 2019). The result is dramatic quality differences between school types, with private education providing superior academic preparation and, critically, superior social capital formation opportunities (Bellei & García-Huidobro, 2003; Valenzuela et al., 2008).

Healthcare remains similarly segregated: wealthier citizens access private insurance (ISAPRE) and healthcare, while the majority rely on public healthcare (FONASA) (FONASA, 2020), characterized by longer wait times, limited resources, and restricted specialist and mental health access. Out-of-pocket costs pose significant financial stress, deterring care-seeking and heightening health disparities (Benítez et al., 2019).

3.2 Current Approaches to Child Well-Being: The Measurement Gap

Chile employs two primary approaches to assessing child well-being. The objective approach relies on the Encuesta de Caracterización Socioeconómica Nacional (CASEN), measuring poverty through household income and multidimensional indicators (MDSF, 2023). However, CASEN relies exclusively on adult-reported data about household resources, treating children as family appendages rather than individuals with their own perspectives. No child-specific well-being indicators exist.

The subjective approach notably employs the International Survey of Children's Well-Being (ISCWeb), a pioneering instrument developed by that measures life satisfaction through rigorously designed quantitative scales (ISCWeb, 2019; Oyanedel et al., 2015). By incorporating children's self-reports, ISCWeb represents a significant advancement in placing children's voices at the centre of well-being research. However, while offering invaluable comparative insights across countries, the instrument's conceptual framework has been primarily developed in Global North contexts. Consequently, in Chile, the survey reflects predominantly adult-derived priorities and predetermined dimensions, limiting opportunities for young Chileans to define the aspects of well-being most meaningful to their lived experiences. This observation suggests that enriching ISCWeb's framework with localized, participatory approaches could enhance its cultural relevance and explanatory power.

This measurement gap carries important consequences. Without culturally grounded measures that reflect young people's actual experiences and priorities, policymakers may lack critical insights into where well-being deficits are most pressing, and which interventions would be most effective. Current measures, while informative, risk suggesting progress while overlooking dimensions that children themselves consider central to their quality of life.

Moreover, this gap reflects a deeper issue of epistemological colonialism (Nieuwenhuys, 2013; Quijano, 2000), where dominant Global North paradigms impose adult-centred, universalized concepts of well-being, often marginalizing local voices and context-specific understandings. Addressing this issue calls for decolonizing well-being measurement by integrating the perspectives and priorities of young Chileans themselves through participatory and culturally sensitive approaches.

3.3 Social Constructions of Childhood: Paternalism and Exclusion

Chile's institutional frameworks derive primarily from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, most recently operationalised through the Política Nacional de la Niñez y Adolescencia 2024-2032 (MDSF, 2024) alongside Law 21.430 (MDSF, 2022). This updated policy conceptualises well-being as fulfilment of rights for individuals under 18, emphasizing survival, development, protection, and participation across ten strategic objectives. However, despite enhanced rhetorical commitments and participatory consultations with young people in policy development, Chile's prevailing approach remains oriented toward protection and control rather than recognizing children as autonomous social actors (Munchmeyer et al., 2020). Budget allocations reveal participation as dramatically under-resourced compared to protection (UNICEF, 2022).

Although Chile ratified the UNCRC, its Constitution does not recognise individuals under 18 as rights-holders or citizens (Sola-Morales & Campos Garrido, 2019). This constitutional absence creates fundamental ambiguity about children's legal and political status. Chilean children possess some recognised rights but lack constitutional foundation, and they face expectations for responsibilities while being systematically excluded from participatory citizenship (Cabrera et al., 2005).

Research documents that adults in Chile often fail to genuinely listen to children, informing them of decisions rather than involving them in decision-making (Vergara et al., 2015) (Vergara et al., 2015). Educational institutions demonstrate particular deficits, with students perceiving insufficient opportunities to be heard by teachers and limited genuine participation in school decisions (Albornoz et al., 2015).

3.4 Why Chile Matters

Chile's interplay of extreme socioeconomic inequality and subordinated constructions of childhood creates ideal conditions to analyse intersecting structural inequalities shaping well-being. This case illuminates' dynamics conceivably present elsewhere—albeit less visibly—in contexts marked by inequality and protection-dominant childhood policies.

Understanding SES and SCC as conversion factors in Chile offers insights transferable across Latin America and potentially to Global North settings, where similar structural forces operate differently in intensity and expression.

4. Methods

4.1 Research Design

This study employed participatory qualitative methods, positioning young people aged 10-14 as co-researchers in knowledge production about their well-being (Clark & Moss, 2011; Holland et al., 2010). The research design comprised two interconnected stages: (1) co-constructing a capability list through participatory analysis with young people, and (2) analysing how SES and SCC function as conversion factors constraining these capabilities. This approach aligns with participatory epistemology, which recognises knowledge as relationally constructed and regards participants' experiential perspectives as essential sources of insight (Heron & Reason, 1997).

4.2 Operationalising the Capability-Participatory Framework

This study operationalises the capability-participatory framework via two interconnected analytical processes. First, it employs participatory research with young Chileans aged 10-14 to identify capabilities they value, constructing capabilities bottom-up from young people's articulated priorities rather than imposing adult-derived lists (Biggeri et al., 2006). This participatory process yielded four capabilities central to young participants: security, life project, community, and recognition.

Second, the study conducts a conversion factors analysis examining how SES and SCC constrain opportunities to achieve these capabilities. This operationalisation demonstrates how theoretical concepts are translated into concrete empirical analysis, revealing specific structural barriers constraining well-being opportunities. This methodological approach also lays the groundwork for developing context-sensitive well-being indicators that reflect children's own conceptualisations, contributing to ongoing debates about child well-being measurement (Ben-Arieh, 2008; Casas, 2011).

4.3 Participants and Sampling

Thirty-two young people aged 10-14 (18 girls, 14 boys) participated in four focus groups conducted in two regions of Chile (Metropolitana and Araucanía. Purposive sampling ensured diversity across socioeconomic status and geographic location. Groups were categorized as high-SES (n=2 groups, 16 participants) or low-SES (n=2 groups, 16 participants) based on: (1) school type (private fee-paying versus public municipal

schools), (2) Educational Vulnerability Index scores (JUNAEB, 2023), and (3) neighbourhood socioeconomic profiles verified through municipal poverty indices. This sampling strategy enabled examining how structural position shapes well-being opportunities while maintaining sufficient homogeneity within groups to facilitate peer discussion.

This sample size aligns with qualitative focus group research standards for theoretical saturation (Guest et al., 2017; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022) which was reached after the fourth group when no new capability dimensions emerged across SES contexts. Four groups (two per SES level) provided comparative power across SES contexts while ensuring homogeneity for peer dialogue, aligning with purposive sampling standards (Ritchie et al., 2003) and the study's intergenerational framework (Wyness, 2012).

4.4 Data Collection

Focus Groups with Visual-Creative Methods

Focus groups served as the primary data collection method, chosen for their interactive nature enabling collective meaning-making (Kitzinger, 1994; Morgan, 1996). Following the mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2011), the focus groups incorporated multiple visual-creative techniques: life mapping, neighbourhood mapping, board game creation, and LEGO Serious Play (Kristiansen & Rasmussen, 2014). This integration of diverse creative methods was purposefully designed to accommodate varied modes of expression, engage young participants with different strengths, and deepen shared reflection on well-being concepts. The use of tangible, metaphorical activities enabled participants to engage with complex and abstract ideas in accessible and meaningful ways (Literat, 2013). Furthermore, to address intra-participant dynamics (group conformity, dominance, minority inhibition), facilitation techniques included turn-based LEGO presentations, strict timekeeping, and visual prompts for quieter voices (Hennessy & Heary, 2005; Gibson, 2007). Moreover, individual construction preceded discussion to reduce conformity bias.

Each focus group met six times over a period of 3–4 months, with sessions lasting 90–120 minutes. All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in Spanish. The sequence of activities was as follows:

1. **Activity 1:** Introduced participants to LEGO model building through a playful tower-building exercise, serving as an icebreaker and fostering creativity and early group cohesion.

2. **Activity 2:** Engaged participants in drawing and reflecting on personal life maps, capturing significant past experiences and anticipated future events to elicit personal narratives crucial to identifying well-being dimensions.

3. **Activity 3:** Instructed participants to map their neighbourhoods, identifying significant environmental resources and challenges, situating well-being within socio-spatial contexts.

4. **Activity 4:** Participants collaborated to design and create a Snakes and Ladders board game, provoking discussions of barriers (“snakes”) and facilitators (“ladders”) to child well-being, fostering collaborative problem-solving.

5. **Activity 5:** Represented a key methodological innovation by using LEGO Serious Play as an analytical tool. Participants first reviewed visual data created in previous sessions (life maps, neighbourhood maps, board games). Each participant then constructed a LEGO model representing the three most important dimensions for young people to live well, drawing on patterns across the group’s collective data rather than only personal experience. This activity repositioned participants as co-analysts, empowering them to contribute actively to preliminary data interpretation. The tangible and metaphorical nature of LEGO modelling enriched the data through embodied reflection and collective synthesis. As illustrated in Figure 1, participants labelled their models with post-it notes and presented them, explaining the significance of each element.

6. **Activity 6:** Focused on validating and refining themes, inviting participants to assess preliminary findings and contribute to the co-construction of the final framework, enhancing credibility and authenticity.

This multi-modal, participatory approach ensured richness and depth in the data while fostering participant agency and ownership.

LEGO as Participatory Analytical Tool: Methodological Innovation

This study’s use of LEGO Serious Play as a participatory analytical tool provides a distinctive methodological contribution. While LEGO has been frequently employed for data collection (Gauntlett, 2014; McCusker, 2020), its innovative application here involves engaging young participants as active analysts of their experiences, moving beyond their traditional role as informants. This approach embodies participatory epistemology by recognizing children’s capacity to interpret and synthesize collective data meaningfully.

By involving participants in constructing LEGO models that symbolize key dimensions of well-being, the method enriches data richness through metaphorical and embodied reflection. This tangible engagement democratises analytical power, inviting participants

into preliminary data interpretation and fostering deeper ownership over research outcomes.

Across the four groups, similar dimensions emerged consistently: family/pets (security), future goals (life project), friends/community (community), and respect/voice (recognition). These co-identified themes formed the foundation for the researcher's subsequent framework analysis. This approach offers several advantages: democratisation of analytical power, access to complexity through metaphorical representation, bridging individual and collective interpretation, transparency through tangible models, and enhanced participant ownership over findings.

4.5 Data Analysis

Framework Analysis (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994) guided systematic data analysis through five stages: familiarisation, thematic framework development, indexing, charting, and interpretation. This matrix-based approach enabled systematic comparison across groups while maintaining transparency (Ritchie et al., 2003).

Initial thematic categories emerged from two sources: (1) preliminary themes identified by young people during Activity 5 LEGO-based analysis, and (2) deductive categories drawn from the capability approach's procedural method, which selects valued capabilities based on participants' bottom-up, subjective preferences (Byskov, 2018). These categories were iteratively refined through line-by-line coding of transcripts and analysis of visual data.

The final framework comprised four valued capabilities: security, life project, community, and recognition, each with multiple sub-dimensions. Conversion factors analysis then examined how SES and SCC constrain these capabilities by comparing systematic patterns across high-SES and low-SES groups and tracing constraints to specific structural mechanisms (segregation, misrecognition).

Several strategies enhanced analytical rigor: young people's preliminary analyses provided initial thematic categories grounded in participants' own interpretations; validation occurred during Activity 6, where participants reviewed and refined researcher interpretations; the lead researcher maintained a reflexive journal documenting analytic decisions; and preliminary findings were discussed with academic supervisors experienced in qualitative child research.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

The research received ethical approval from the relevant institutional ethics committee. Multiple consent levels ensured voluntary participation: schools, parents/guardians, and

young people themselves all provided informed consent. Participants could withdraw at any point without explanation or consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through pseudonyms and removal of identifying details from visual materials. Data are stored securely on encrypted university servers.

Power dynamics between adult researcher and child participants were addressed through emphasizing young people's expertise about their own lives, using accessible creative methods, allowing participants to guide discussion content within broad topics, and involving participants in data analysis (Activity 5) and validation (Activity 6). However, the researcher acknowledges that full equality was not achieved, as the researcher retained ultimate control over research questions and final interpretations—a limitation inherent in adult-led participatory research with children (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008).

4.7 Limitations

This study has three primary limitations. First, its geographic scope covers only two of Chile's 16 regions (Metropolitana and Araucanía), limiting transferability to rural southern or northern contexts. Second, while group settings enabled rich collective meaning-making, social desirability and peer conformity may have influenced individual expressions despite facilitation strategies. Third, the adult researcher's ultimate interpretive authority represents an inherent limitation of adult-led participatory designs (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008). Future research could involve youth co-researchers in earlier stages of the project and broader geographic sampling to enhance transferability. These limitations do not undermine core findings, which demonstrate robust consistency across SES-stratified groups.

5. Findings: Young Chileans' Valued Capabilities

This study identified four capabilities fundamental to well-being: security, life project, community, and recognition. These capabilities represent young people's conceptualisation of "the life we value," with socioeconomic status shaping both their meaning and accessibility.

5.1 Security: Living in Tranquillity and Calmness

Security encompasses young people's ability to live in tranquillity, free from harm and endowed with essential material resources. Participants consistently identified security as the foundation upon which other well-being capabilities depend. This capability comprises physical safety, material comfort, and health.

Physical safety proved heavily dependent on neighbourhood environments, revealing pronounced socioeconomic disparities. Low-SES participants described regular exposure to violence—gunshots, fireworks, neighbour fights—yet exhibited what was described as “normalized insecurity,” acknowledging dangers without expressing overt fear. High-SES participants, despite living in objectively safer neighbourhoods, expressed considerable anxiety about potential threats such as dog attacks, worry about robberies that had not occurred, and discomfort with loud noises. This suggests that subjective feelings of safety are more consequential for well-being than objective exposure, revealing how security is socially constructed through SES as a key factor shaping it.

Material comfort held different meanings across groups. Low-SES participants emphasized basic needs often taken for granted by their higher-SES peers, including sufficient food, reliable transportation, and essential household items. As one participant stated, “Money is important because without money you can’t have a house, you can’t eat, you can’t do anything.” In contrast, high-SES participants focused on housing quality and desirable goods beyond essentials.

Health access barriers also varied by SES. Low-SES participants emphasized financial barriers, with family members delaying or foregoing care due to costs. High-SES participants, facing fewer financial constraints, emphasized mental health more prominently, suggesting socioeconomic status shapes which health dimensions young people prioritize.

5.2 Life Project: Freedom to Pursue Valued Aspirations

Life project refers to young people’s freedom to pursue valued career aspirations and educational goals. In this context, education and employment emerged as critical components, though participants framed their importance differently by socioeconomic status.

All participants valued university education but conceptualized it differently. High-SES participants regarded university a natural step in their lives. They expressed confidence about admission, viewing it as an expected milestone rather than an aspirational goal. Conversely, low-SES participants viewed university as their sole avenue for social mobility through personal merit—emphasizing that earning a degree would allow them to secure employment supportive of their families. However, they also expressed significant anxiety about admission despite strong academic performance.

Moreover, parental support proved pivotal in shaping young people’s life project but often shifted to pressure limiting agency. High-SES youth described parents steering choices to maintain status—pushing traditional professions to preserve social position while

prohibiting riskier paths (e.g., “being a footballer”). Conversely, low-SES participants highlighted intense mobility pressure: success measured by elevating family circumstances, enhancing social mobility through personal achievement—as one student claimed, “I dream of having my mum in a mansion.” Youth across groups noted that “parents try to live through their children” rather than authentically supporting aspirations. This tension reveals life project as relational process—balancing individual dreams against familial expectations. Hence, participants sought autonomy in career choices, rejecting imposed trajectories while valuing parental emotional investment and support in their career aspirations.

5.3 Community: Building Supportive Relationships

Community involves young people’s freedom to cultivate supportive relationships with friends, family, and pets. Participants across groups highly valued friendships, though with varying meanings. High-SES participants described friends as lifelong companion’s integral to identity, maintaining these connections through technology and family resources. Low-SES participants valued friendships more situationally, emphasizing fun.

Family relationships provided fundamental emotional and material support. Participants emphasized unconditional love as central to well-being, yet many expressed frustrations at the lack of voice in family decisions. Several recounted unwelcome family relocations or major decisions made without their consultation, which disrupted friendships and impacted well-being. One participant shared: “We moved cities and no one asked me if I wanted to leave my school and my friends.”

Remarkably, pets were consistently named as valued community members. Participants described pets as “part of the family,” offering companionship and emotional support comparable to human relationships. One participant explained: “My dog doesn’t judge me; he’s always happy to see me.” This expands traditional adult-centric conceptions of community to include significant animal-human bonds.

Across these relational contexts, participants stressed the importance of autonomy and agency in choosing friends, highlighting tensions with adult-imposed controls.

5.4 Recognition: Being Heard and Valued by Adults

Recognition refers to young people’s opportunities to be heard and valued by adults, particularly in decisions affecting their lives. This capability encapsulates both having a voice and receiving support aligned with one’s actual needs, rather than adult assumptions.

Participants articulated persistent frustration that adults—parents, teachers, extended family—often dismissed their opinions or made unilateral decisions impacting them. One participant stated: “They never ask us what we think. They just decide.” Another remarked: “My parents say I’m too young to understand, but it’s my life.” This exclusion was framed as stemming primarily from age-based discrimination rather than individual capacity: “They think because we’re kids, we don’t know anything, but we know about our own lives.”

Participants further emphasized that meaningful recognition requires genuine listening as a prerequisite for appropriate support. They contrasted situations where adults solicited input and offered aligned assistance, with examples where adult assumptions led to unhelpful or unwanted interventions—for instance, parents changing schools “for my benefit,” despite a participant’s wish to stay with existing friends.

Recognition thus reveals young people’s experience of structural childhood subordination. It extends beyond emotional validation to encompass decision-making power and agency. The systemic denial of recognition based on age emerges as a core structural constraint on well-being, affecting youth irrespective of socioeconomic background.

6. Discussion: Structural Forces Shaping Young Chileans’ Well-Being Opportunities

6.1 SES and Segregation Mechanisms

As previously stated, young people’s neighbourhoods are central to their capability to live secure and in tranquillity. Safety emerged as a critical dimension affecting this possibility, yet perceptions of safety differ significantly based on the socioeconomic context of neighbourhoods. Residential-spatial segregation thus acts as an essential mediator shaping young Chileans’ opportunities to inhabit safe environments.

This study’s data shows that SES influences not only exposure to objective risks such as crime and violence but also subjective perceptions of safety. Low-SES youth often experience frequent exposure to dangers—including gunshots, fights, and drug-related activities—but normalize these risks and may not perceive their surroundings as particularly dangerous. Conversely, high-SES youth living in safer neighbourhoods frequently report heightened feelings of insecurity and anxiety about potential risks, such as dog attacks or hypothetical robberies, shaped less by direct experience and more by social narratives of danger.

Chilean municipalities hold responsibility for local public service provision, including maintenance of public spaces, lighting, and community safety (Fernández Richard, 2013; Uttamchandani Mujica, 2020). However, budget allocations and resource availability are

closely tied to residents' income levels, creating systemic inequalities. Low-income neighbourhoods often suffer from limited resources and poorer services, which restrict people's opportunities for safe living conditions (Cortés, 2021; Ruiz-Tagle, 2016).

Loud noises significantly impact young people's sense of safety. High-SES youth report disturbances from music and social gatherings, while low-SES youth contend with gunshots, fireworks, and fights, often linked to Chile's "narco culture" (Cuneo & Medina González, 2022). In poorer municipalities, limited capacity to control such disturbances exacerbates disparities, leading to heightened emotional distress and compromised physical safety.

Exposure to crime disproportionately affects low-SES urban youth. Although frequently exposed to crimes such as robberies and drug-related violence, these youth often do not perceive their environments as unsafe. Conversely, high-SES youth, despite minimal exposure, express greater fear and perceived insecurity (FPC, 2022; Olavarría-Gambi & Allende-González, 2014). Thus, perceptions of safety are socially conditioned and influenced by socioeconomic factors beyond objective risk.

Infrastructure issues such as poor street lighting, malfunctioning roadways, and urban debris disproportionately affect low-SES urban youth, who limit nighttime outdoor activities due to safety concerns. Furthermore, green spaces—parks and natural areas—are critical for safe social and physical activities yet are unequally distributed. Low-SES urban neighbourhoods notably lack sufficient green areas compared to affluent neighbourhoods, limiting essential opportunities for well-being (Alfaro-Inzunza et al., 2019; Reyes Päcke & Figueroa Aldunce, 2010).

Relationships with neighbours shape safety perceptions variably by SES and geography. Urban low-SES youth emphasize community cohesion and mutual support, while high-SES youth focus more on peer social connections linked to social capital accumulation. Rural youth's sense of safety differs, with distance fostering protection for low-SES but feelings of isolation for high-SES adolescents.

Interactions with unknown dogs further illustrate SES disparities in safety perceptions and environmental realities. Low-SES youth frequently encounter stray dogs—part of the community yet posing sanitation and attack risks (Garde et al., 2022; SUBDERE, 2016). Despite these risks, low-SES youth generally do not perceive stray dogs as safety threats, contrasting with the fear expressed by high-SES youth encountering mainly owned dogs.

Educational Segregation and Life Project

Young Chileans consistently identified the pursuit of a valued life project—primarily through university education and subsequent formal employment—as central to their well-

being. While a minority mentioned alternative career paths such as social media influencers or professional athletes, the emphasis was on obtaining a university degree as essential for securing a stable, well-paying career. This finding aligns with broader cultural expectations in Chile wherein higher education is viewed as a natural and necessary life progression (Puga Rayo et al., 2017).

However, within the highly segmented Chilean educational system, characterized by stark disparities in quality between private, subsidized, and public schools, students' socioeconomic backgrounds critically shape their educational trajectories and career opportunities (Bellei & García-Huidobro, 2003; Stillerman, 2016). Private schools, typically attended by high-SES youth, offer superior academic resources and foster vital social capital, positioning students advantageously both for university admission and future employment (D. Contreras et al., 2019; Otero et al., 2021).

Academic performance remains the key criterion for university access, and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds face acute pressure to excel under challenging conditions (Rodríguez Garcés & Padilla Fuentes, 2016). Although university enrolment rates have risen nationally (Aguirre & Matta, 2022), Chile lags behind OECD peers in attendance and graduation, with financial constraints and inadequate preparation contributing to significant disparities in outcomes (Amo & Santelices, 2017; OECD, 2019; Soto Hernández, 2016).

However, beyond academic credentials, social capital plays a decisive role in Chile's labor market. The unequal distribution of social networks and connections reinforces SES-based inequalities, often outweighing meritocratic considerations in job placements (Barozet, 2006; Undurraga, 2019). High-SES youth benefit from family support, private tutoring, and privileged peer networks, which facilitate smoother transitions to desirable careers (Espinoza & González, 2013; Sepúlveda & Lizama-Loyola, 2022).

These structural dynamics were reflected in participants' narratives, where high-SES students prioritized social aspects of schooling and anticipated a relatively obstacle-free path to university and employment. In contrast, low-SES students focused more narrowly on academic achievement as the key to overcoming economic barriers yet expressed significant concerns about affordability and access.

Participants' differing perceptions of money also underscore SES effects: for high-SES youth, money symbolises sustaining lifestyle and personal interests, while for low-SES youth, it represents basic survival and a measure of success tightly linked to career viability. While theories of adaptive preferences argue that deprivation can shape aspirations downward (e.g., Halleröd, 2006), participants in this study universally expressed sustained, optimistic aspirations for higher education and career success.

This finding is consistent with a capability's perspective emphasizing the complex interplay of objective circumstances and subjective well-being factors (Robeyns, 2017). Furthermore, it aligns with the Chilean literature, which suggests that most secondary students, regardless of their SES, aspire to pursue a university degree (Sepúlveda and Valdebenito, 2014). Consequently, this study's data suggests a notion of adaptive expectations or aspirations as a more suitable approach to examine the influence of SES on Chilean students' opportunities to develop their life projects, where socioeconomic disparities more significantly affect the realisation of aspirations than the aspirations themselves.

Finally, power to choose and control over life projects merge with community and family influences, creating complex interactions shaping young people's well-being opportunities. This perspective emphasises that the community plays a fundamental role in shaping and supporting students' career aspirations. Families from higher SES tend to provide extensive support and expectations for personal growth and social fulfilment, whereas lower SES focus more on essential resource provision and education as a pathway out of disadvantage (Aedo Henríquez, 2010).

Healthcare Inequalities

Health emerged as a critical dimension within young Chileans' security capability, encompassing both physical and mental well-being. While Chilean policy guarantees healthcare as a right for all children (MDSF, 2022), demographic realities reflect a segmented healthcare system that affects the quality and accessibility of services experienced by young people across socioeconomic strata.

Chile's dual healthcare provision consists primarily of the public system (FONASA), attended by the majority of lower to medium-SES populations, and the private system (ISAPRE), serving a smaller, predominantly high-SES segment (Becerril-Montekio et al., 2011; FONASA, 2020). The key disparities lie less in nominal access and more in differential quality, availability of specialized services, and timely treatment provision.

Socioeconomic inequality remains a dominant social determinant of health (Frenz, 2005; WHO, 2008), well-documented among Chilean adults (Arteaga et al., 2002; MINSAL, 2012), yet underexplored among youth. Chile's healthcare system faces chronic resource shortages—from health professionals to hospital beds and medications—that disproportionately affect low-income populations, manifesting in constrained well-being opportunities for low-SES youth (Benítez et al., 2019; Goic, 2015).

Young participants' narratives highlighted pronounced SES-based disparities in healthcare experiences. Low-SES youth emphasized financial barriers to treatment and medication affordability, often linking illness directly to employment disruptions and household

income instability. Public system users frequently expressed feelings of financial vulnerability (Aravena and Inostroza, 2015). Additionally, residential segregation further limits timely access to medications, with low-income neighbourhoods having fewer pharmacies in close proximity and greater price variability (Correa-Parra et al., 2020; Saavedra et al., 2018).

Mental health surfaced as a pivotal concern across all socioeconomic groups, but with marked differences in focus and access. While high-SES youth foregrounded mental health as integral to well-being, low-SES youth faced amplified barriers to mental health services and treatment availability. Public healthcare waiting lists are long, especially for specialized child and adolescent mental health professionals, contributing to substantial unmet needs compounded by pandemic-related challenges (Santa-Cruz et al., 2022; UDP, 2022).

A novel contribution emerging from the data analysis is the identification of financial stress as a distinct factor influencing young people's mental health and overall security. This phenomenon aligns with the Family Stress Model (Masarik & Conger, 2017) and underscores how economic hardship permeates daily experience, limiting well-being possibilities—especially for low-SES youths who explicitly connected financial insecurity with their quality of life.

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified preexisting health and social inequalities, with low-SES youth facing amplified challenges such as limited access to technology, constrained study environments, and disruptions in social interactions (Quiroz Reyes, 2020). High-SES youths reported greater frustrations with restrictions on socialisation and learning quality but were comparatively insulated from material deprivation. Post-pandemic increases in youth mental health problems reflect these inequities, further impacting well-being opportunities (Cifuentes-Faura, 2020; Larraguibel et al., 2021).

6.2 SCC and Misrecognition Mechanisms

While SES operates through segregation affecting security and life project capabilities, SCC operate through misrecognition mechanisms constraining community and recognition capabilities regardless of socioeconomic position. This represents the study's most significant theoretical contribution: demonstrating empirically how dominant Chilean constructions of childhood function as conversion factors creating structural inequality analogous to class-based inequality—addressing a gap in capability approach applications that Robeyns (2005) and others have noted regarding insufficient attention to power relations and social subordination.

Constitutional and Institutional Misrecognition

Chilean institutional frameworks present a striking paradox: while Chile ratified the UNCRC and positions children's rights centrally in policy rhetoric (MDSF, 2024), the Constitution does not recognise individuals under 18 as rights-holders or citizens (Sola-Morales & Campos Garrido, 2019). This constitutional absence creates fundamental ambiguity about children's status that cascades through institutional practices. As Cabrera et al. (2005) argue, citizenship comprises both legal statuses acknowledging individuals as rights-holders and effective participation enabling community engagement. Chilean children possess some recognised rights (education, healthcare, protection) yet lack constitutional foundation, and face expectations for responsibilities while being systematically excluded from participatory citizenship.

This ambiguity manifests in policy contradictions. Budget allocations reveal participation as dramatically under-resourced compared to protection (UNICEF, 2022). Despite rhetorical commitments, Chile's prevailing approach remains oriented toward protection and control rather than recognizing children as autonomous social actors (Munchmeyer et al., 2020), reflecting what Qvortrup (2009) identifies as the systematic subordination of childhood as a social structure.

Notably, Chile's most recent Política Nacional de la Niñez y Adolescencia 2024-2032 (MDSF, 2024), developed under the 2022 Ley de Garantías and through extensive participatory consultations with young people nationwide, still reflects these structural tensions. While the policy rhetoric emphasises participation as one of ten strategic objectives and documents youth input in policy development, institutional arrangements and resource allocations continue demonstrating protection-dominance. This persistence illustrates how SCC operates at structural rather than merely rhetorical levels—even well-intentioned participatory processes cannot overcome deeply institutionalized constructions of childhood as requiring adult control rather than recognised agency.

Age-Based Paternalism and Constrained Participation

Beyond constitutional ambiguity, Contreras and Pérez (2011) note that adults' discourses about children in Chile commonly acknowledge them as passive, incapable, and immature. Gómez Urrutia and Jiménez Figueroa (2015) further add that young people are often conceptualized in the public discourse as individuals who need constant care and supervision and lack an active role within their families. Furthermore, in policy discourses, young people are often portrayed as vulnerable subjects needing protection and control by adults (Herrera-Seda and Aravena-Reyes, 2015; Olivares Espinoza, 2022).

This paternalist SCC of childhood in Chile may be closely intertwined with the invisibility and lack of recognition of childhood as a social structure, requiring critical to examine how these dominant conceptualisations of childhood shape young Chileans' agency and spaces of participation concerning their well-being opportunities. Drawing on Lundy's

(2007) framework, this study found systematic participation constraints across four dimensions: voice (capacity to express views), space (opportunities to express), audience (being heard by decision-makers), and influence (having views acted upon). This framework proves particularly valuable for analysing how participation rights translate—or fail to translate—into actual participation opportunities.

Participants across all groups expressed frustration about not being listened to by adults. They described how adults—parents, teachers, family members—frequently dismissed their opinions or made decisions affecting them without consultation. One participant stated: “They never ask us what we think. They just decide.” Another described: “My parents say I’m too young to understand, but it’s my life.” Participants emphasized their exclusion stemmed explicitly from age rather than individual capabilities, with one stating: “They think because we’re kids we don’t know anything, but we know about our own lives.”

This systematic denial of recognition based on age emerges as what Fraser terms “institutionalized patterns of cultural value” that prevent people from “participating as a peer in social life”—structural misrecognition rather than individual prejudice (Fraser & Honneth, 2003, p.29). As these authors argue, recognition is not merely about feeling valued emotionally but about having decision-making power over one’s own life. Several participants described situations where adult assumptions about children’s needs led to unhelpful interventions—parents changing schools “for my benefit” despite preference to stay with friends, or family relocations decided without consultation despite significant impacts on well-being. As one participant stated: “We moved cities and no one asked me if I wanted to leave my school and my friends.”

Community and Recognition Capabilities Constrained

These misrecognition mechanisms constrain community and recognition capabilities in ways that affect all young people regardless of SES—what Qvortrup (2009) identifies as childhood’s structural position creating systematic constraints independent of individual circumstances. For the capability of community, participants emphasized choosing their own friends as important, yet described frustration when adults attempted to dictate friendships. As Mayall (2002) argues, adult control over children’s social relationships reflects broader patterns of age-based subordination. Additionally, participants described pets as significant community members providing unconditional support, yet adults often dismissed these relationships as less important than human connections—reflecting adult failure to recognise young people’s own conceptualisations of valuable relationships (Casas & Frønes, 2020).

For recognition, participants emphasized that being heard constitutes a prerequisite for receiving appropriate support—aligning with Lundy’s (2007) argument that voice without

influence proves tokenistic. They contrasted situations where adults listened and provided aligned support versus situations where adults imposed support based on assumptions. This reveals how young people experience their structural position as children: systematic exclusion from meaningful participation in decisions affecting their lives, justified by age-based assumptions of incompetence.

Drawing on Fraser's recognition theory (Fraser & Honneth, 2003), this study reveals that misrecognition of childhood operates as institutionalized cultural pattern preventing participation, creating a form of structural injustice requiring not merely better protection or services but fundamental transformation of how childhood is constructed institutionally and culturally. As Bessell (2021) argues, achieving children's well-being requires addressing not just material resources but recognition and participatory parity.

6.3 SES-SCC Interplay: Compounded Disadvantage

While SCC positions all young people as subordinate to adults, how this subordination manifests varies systematically by SES. Low-SES young people face not only age-based dismissal but also class-based stigma. Low-SES young people experience what might be termed as a double misrecognition, where their knowledge claims face both class-based and age-based delegitimisation. This point is represented by Figure 2, in which a student reflected upon the question of what well-being is: "*I don't know [what well-being is], but I do know that some people hold the money and power, and the rest are prisoners of them".*

Within that student's discourse and representation of well-being, an overarching sense of injustice emerges, stemming from the perceived limitation of their well-being by dominant elites. The representation of faceless individuals in subordinate positions, chained and seemingly invisible, juxtaposed with a minority holding money and displaying a smile, symbolises the unequal power dynamics perceived by low SES students that ultimately constrain their possibilities to live following their aspirations. This powerful image encapsulates their frustration with entrenched inequalities in opportunities for well-being and their profound distrust of Chile's political and economic system, where a small minority wields disproportionate power over the majority.

In this context, the connection between well-being and social justice becomes evident. Such a finding resonates with Garretón and Cumsille (2002) who claim that inequality is perceived by young individuals from low SES as a form of social injustice and an abuse of power, leading to feelings of frustration and helplessness. Similarly, Baeza Correa (2011) further argues that the lack of trust among Chilean youth can be attributed to the unequal distribution of wealth in the country. Hence, indifference or silence in low SES students is not exclusively linked to a lack of skills and knowledge inherent to the educational system deficiencies, but to a nuanced interpretation of their surroundings.

For low-SES young people, age-based subordination compounds class-based disadvantage to create particularly severe exclusion. Participation barriers affecting all young people prove particularly challenging for low-SES youth. Their families lack resources, time, and social capital supporting participation, meaning nominal opportunities for youth voice effectively exclude those most disadvantaged reflecting what Fraser (2009) identifies as the need to address both redistribution and recognition dimensions simultaneously. SCC-based exclusion from decision-making processes means those most disadvantaged by current arrangements lack power to transform them. Conversely, SES-based segregation reinforces age-based subordination by limiting low-SES young people's access to resources and knowledge enabling effective advocacy.

This conversion factors analysis reveals that young Chileans' constrained well-being opportunities stem not from insufficient resources or inadequate protection alone, but from structural mechanisms—segregation and misrecognition—that prevent resources and rights from translating into genuine capabilities. Understanding these mechanisms proves essential for designing interventions addressing root causes rather than merely managing symptoms of inequality.

7. Conclusion

This study asked: what is the life we value? Through participatory research with 32 young Chileans aged 10–14, four capabilities emerged as fundamental to well-being: security, life project, community, and recognition. However, the more critical question became: why do young people with similar resources experience vastly different opportunities to achieve these capabilities? The research revealed that socioeconomic status (SES) and social constructions of childhood (SCC) operate as conversion factors—structural mechanisms that systematically constrain young Chileans' well-being opportunities.

SES operates through segregation. Chile's extreme residential and educational segregation means socioeconomic position determines not merely what resources young people possess but fundamentally what opportunities those resources can generate. Low-SES young people face normalized insecurity despite objective dangers, while high-SES young people construct anxiety about hypothetical threats in safer environments. Educational segregation means high-SES students accumulate social capital through elite networks while low-SES students must rely solely on individual merit. These segregation mechanisms constrain security and life project capabilities, reproducing inequality across generations.

SCC operates through misrecognition. Chilean society's dominant construction of childhood—institutionalized in constitutional exclusion, protection-oriented policies, and everyday practices—positions young people as immature and incapable, requiring adult

control rather than participation. This structural subordination constrains all young people's opportunities to build autonomous communities and gain recognition, regardless of socioeconomic position. The systematic denial of recognition based on age operates as structural injustice comparable to class-based inequality yet remains largely invisible in current policy frameworks.

This study reveals that young people need not merely resources or protection but recognition and genuine opportunities. Recognition—being heard, valued, and granted meaningful participation—emerges as prerequisite for well-being. Without recognition, other capabilities become difficult to pursue. Young people cannot feel secure when their perceptions are dismissed, cannot develop valued life projects when adults dictate their futures, cannot build autonomous communities when adults control their relationships, and cannot achieve well-being when systematic misrecognition denies their competence and agency. Achieving justice for young Chileans requires fundamental transformation of structural conditions currently constraining their opportunities to live well according to their own values and aspirations. Young people's well-being depends fundamentally on recognizing them as competent social actors whose perspectives must shape research, policy, and practice—not as rhetorical commitment but as structural reality.

Declarations

Author Contribution

P.C.T. conceptualised the study, collected/analysed/interpreted the data, wrote the manuscript, and approved the final version.

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Data Availability

The data supporting this study's findings are available in the PhD thesis "What is the life we value?" by Pablo José Cheyre Triat (University of Leeds, 2024), repository: https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/35084/. Raw data (transcripts, visuals) are not publicly

available due to ethical restrictions on child participants but available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and ethics approval.

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Figures







Figure 1

Students' representation of well-being using LEGO[1]

1. The first image represents "mental health, economic stability and affective relationships". The second image represents "home, security, and vegetation". The last

image shows “companionship, health (not just in yourself but also in your environment, including plants, animals, friends family...) and love”.



Figure 2

Low SES student representation of well-being[2]

2. “I don’t know” would be a translation of “no se”.