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CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN DECISION- MAKING IN THE PHILIPPINES

Understanding the attitudes of policy-makers and service providers

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This article explores the ideas about children's participation in decision-making held by government officials and non-government representatives engaged in promoting children's participation in the Philippines. It suggests that the ideas that policy-makers and service deliverers hold about children's participation are heterogeneous, diverse and complex. While adults' attitudes are often presented as serious barriers to children's participation, this study suggests that they are both obstructive and facilitative. A deeper understanding of the range of ideas held by adults, particularly policy-makers and service providers, may be the critical next step in progressing children's participation in a direction that is meaningful for children and influential in terms of policy outcomes.

Largely as a response to the ideational shift represented by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, policy-makers have begun to rethink the ways in which policy for children is developed and implemented. That children are competent social actors who actively engage with their social worlds is now an important dimension of theorizing childhood, particularly within sociology (see James and James, 2001; James and Prout, 1997; Mayall, 2000; Qvortrup, 2005). The view that children should be able to express their views on decisions that affect their lives has gained greater acceptance. Some have argued that children's participation is now valued as a normative principle by policy-makers (Katz, quoted in Hill et al., 2004: 82). Yet there remains, as Badham points out in relation to the UK, a 'gap between the high tide of rhetoric of participation and the low tide on effective delivery of improved services for those most socially excluded' (Badham, 2004: 153). Similar criticisms can be made of activity relating to children's participation around the world. Wherever analyses of children's participation occur, a similar theme emerges: adults' attitudes are the greatest barrier to effective participation

in decision-making processes by children (for example, Lansdown, 2001). These attitudinal barriers stem from perceptions of children's capacities, an unwillingness or inability to transform processes in ways that would foster children's participation, a desire to maintain respect from and authority over children, and concerns about protecting children (see Badham, 2004; Hill et al., 2004; Matthews, 2001). McNeish points out that a 'failure to acknowledge the beliefs and assumptions about children's competency and vulnerability is likely to exacerbate the hidden barriers to participation' (McNeish, 1999: 193).

This article explores the ideas about children's participation held by policy-makers and service providers working on children's issues in the Philippines. While the Filipino child participation policy framework is well developed, there remains a gap between the vision and the reality. In the Philippines, as elsewhere, adults' attitudes are identified as a barrier to children's participation (Balanon et al., 2003: 57–8). This raises two questions that are addressed in this article. First how do Filipino professionals working with children view children's participation in decision-making? Second, what do they identify as the obstacles and the barriers?

The importance of ideas in policy-making

There is a substantial body of empirical evidence demonstrating that ideas matter in policy-making (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993; Sikkink, 1991; Stone, 1989). Howlett and Ramesh (2003: 466–82) suggest that receptiveness to new ideas is a key determinant of the nature of policy-making processes and policy outcomes. Goldstein and Keohane (1993: 20) argue 'the use of particular ideas over time implies changes in existing rules and norms. Ideas have a lasting influence on politics through their incorporation into the terms of political debate'. They identify three types of ideas: world views, principled beliefs and causal beliefs. World views are the means by which individuals make sense of and interpret the world around them. Goldstein and Keohane (1993: 8) suggest that ideas have the broadest impact on human action when they take this form. Principled beliefs are normative ideas that stipulate right from wrong. Causal beliefs are based on understandings of cause and effect. I use this typology of ideas to examine the basis of ideas about children's participation.

Ideas about children's participation stem from a world view based on the importance and universality of human rights, whereby citizen participation is a fundamental right. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child reflects and has reinforced significantly this world view. Principled beliefs about children's participation are based on the idea that social justice is predicated on the equality and respect for all citizens, regardless of age. Children's participation is a matter of entitlement or human rights and justice. The reconceptualization of children from human beings to human beings (see

Qvortrup, 2005: 5), which has shaped social studies of childhood over the past two decades, is a principled belief – and one with important practical implications. Causal beliefs about children's participation identify a cause and effect between children's participation and the protection of children and/or better policy outcomes. Over the past two decades, casual views that value children's participation have been supported and shaped by theoretical work emphasizing children's agency (see James and Prout, 1997; Jenks, 1996) and empirical work demonstrating the extent to which children make choices about their lives, even in situations where options are limited (see, for example, Montgomery, 2001; Nieuwenhuys, 1994). This article focuses on principled and causal beliefs about children's participation among professionals working with children in the Philippines.

Methodology

The Philippines was chosen for this study because policy and practice on children's participation has progressed further than in many parts of the world. While children's participation remains contested in many countries, in the Philippines the policy framework suggests that children's participation is indeed valued as a normative principle – at least among policy-makers. An array of mechanisms for children's participation in decision-making at all levels of government has been instituted, ranging from the representation of children on high level advisory bodies such as the National Anti-Poverty Commission to national workshops of children facilitated by children and *Katipunan ng Kabataan* (youth assemblies) in every *barangay* (community). While the Philippines child participation framework is in itself worthy of analysis, the translation of policy into practice depends heavily on the attitudes and capacity of the professionals working within the system and the institutional framework within which policy is set. Thus, this study set out to explore how professionals working on children's issues view children's participation.

As is well documented, the nature of children's participation varies widely and takes place in a range of contexts (Ennew and Hastadewi, 2004; Hart, 1999; Lansdown, 2001; McNeish, 1999). McNeish identifies four distinct contexts within which children's participation occurs: (1) in individual decision-making about one's own life; (2) in community initiatives; (3) in planning, delivering and shaping services; (4) in influencing public policy (McNeish, 1999: 194). Here, I focus on the participation of children in the formation, implementation and evaluation of policy and services.

The aim of this article is not to examine the arguments for and against children's participation. Rather, I aim to explore the views of professionals working within organizations that articulate a strong normative commitment to children's participation, as a means of better understanding the factors that foster or hinder children's participation. The article draws on qualitative research with government officials from the Council for the Welfare of

Children, the primary policy-making body for children, and representatives of two children-focused non-government organizations (NGOs). The Council for the Welfare of Children is the focal agency for children's issues within the government of the Philippines. Its mandate includes the formulation and evaluation of policies for children, the coordination of policies and programmes between government agencies and monitoring the implementation of laws, policies and programmes for children. Each of the NGOs included in this study describes its approach to working with children as rights based and each espouses children's participation as a key principle.

The study commenced with preliminary, open-ended interviews with six individuals (three from government and three from non-government organizations). The aim of these preliminary interviews was twofold. First, to determine the vocabulary used to discuss children's issues generally and children's participation specifically within both government and non-government organizations. Second, the preliminary interviews aimed to identify some of the key issues around children's participation in the Philippines. Based on the preliminary interviews, two survey instruments were developed. The surveys were used as a means of identifying key issues, common themes and points of disagreement.

Finally, semi-structured interviews were held with the 28 participants. While the interviews were designed to encourage participants to determine and explore the key issues around children's participation, some structure was provided by the information gathered through the surveys. The staged approach of preliminary interviews followed by surveys followed by in-depth interviews was designed to maintain a focus on the key issues, while ensuring sufficient flexibility to capture the full range of ideas and approaches.

This study included 28 research participants, thus the ideas examined here are by no means representative of all government officials or NGO workers in the Philippines. However, given the influence that these organizations have for discourse about children's participation, the ideas held by employees are critical in deepening understanding of the opportunities for and barriers to children's participation. All research participants are directly engaged in policy-making, programme and project development, or service delivery for children. Each organization identifies the promotion of children's participation as a primary objective.

The policy framework for children's participation in the Philippines

While ideas valuing children's participation gained influence in a number of countries in the 1990s, the Philippines has a relatively long history of children's participation. Predating the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child by some 25 years, the 1974 Child and Youth Welfare Code identifies children's responsibility (not right) to 'participate actively in civic affairs in the promotion

of the general welfare, always bearing in mind that it is the youth who will eventually be called upon to discharge the responsibility of leadership' (Article 4(6)). The Code also establishes *barangay* (local community) Councils for the Protection of Children, which are to include 'a representative of the youth', generally interpreted as a young person (Article 87). Moreover, the Code stipulates that youth organizations (defined as organizations of individuals under the age of 21 years) 'shall enjoy the same rights and discharge the same responsibilities' as civic associations of adults (Article 100). According to a senior official from the Council for the Welfare of Children, the drafters of the Code saw children as 'an important source of information' that would assist in the formulation of welfare policies. Thus, the participatory articles of the Code were premised on a causal belief that providing children with a formal avenue through which to express their views would strengthen policy. This causal belief underlies many contemporary arguments in favour of children's participation, as discussed earlier. In the Philippines, however, it is long-standing and comparatively deeply entrenched.

The 1974 Child and Youth Welfare Code was introduced during the period of martial law, whereby state-sanctioned social organizations were a form of social control. Thus the objective of the Code was not the empowerment of children and young people, although it did effectively institutionalize a formal process through which (some) children could express their views. John Ruggie has pointed out that 'fundamental modernist concepts such as market rationality, sovereignty and personal privacy would not have been comprehensible before the development of appropriate terms of social discourse' (quoted in Goldstein and Keohane, 1993: 8). The social discourse within which children's participation is rendered comprehensible was constructed during the 1970s, rather ironically, a period marked by human rights violations in the Philippines. As ideas about children's human rights (including participatory rights) spread around the globe with the near universal ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the social discourse necessary to understand – and accept – ideas about child participation was already established. Unlike some countries, children's participation was not an alien concept in the Philippines.

The 1974 Child and Youth Welfare Code is not a rights-based document, but emphasizes issues of welfare and protection. With the transition to democracy in 1986, however, ideas about human rights gained support. A commitment to the value and universality of human rights included the extension of entitlements often considered to be the exclusive domain of adults to children. When the Philippines ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, the political environment was highly amenable to ideas about children's rights. Relevant articles of the Child and Youth Welfare Code were used as the basis of a policy framework to further institutionalize children's participatory rights embodied in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Pre-existing causal beliefs about the value of children's participation in

achieving positive policy outcomes coincided with emerging principled beliefs about the normative value of children's rights. The result was a commitment to institutionalizing children's participation in policy processes.

The 1991 Local Government Code established *Katipunan ng Kabataan* (youth assemblies) in each *barangay* (local community and lowest level of governance), which include all citizens aged between 15 and 21 years living in that locality (Section 424). The *Katipunan ng Kabataan* is designed to 'allow youth to participate more in civic and political affairs and give them opportunities to freely express their views and opinions' (*The State of Filipino Children*, 2002: 71). The *Sangguniang Kabataan* is the active body of the *Katipunan ng Kabataan* and has responsibility for carrying out its decisions.

In 1995, the Expanding Children's Participation in Social Reform Project was established with the objectives of:

- Organizing children as a sector and increasing their participation in public policy-making;
- Creating national and local coalitions to address issues affecting children;
- Lobbying for recognition of children's issues within the legislative process (Anon., 2002: 64).

The identification of children as a 'basic sector' is significant for children's participation in policy processes. Sectors are interest groups, which have a formal place in policy formulation. Elected representatives from 14 basic sectors – including children – sit on the National Anti-Poverty Commission, which is chaired by the vice-president and has considerable influence. One government official argues that 'the children's basic sector within the National Anti-Poverty Commission is critical – it is a forum for raising issues that are important to children'.

The Philippine National Strategic Framework for Plan Development for Children, 2000–2025 (Child 21) demonstrates the extent to which children's participation has been integrated into policies for children. Described as a 'road-map, a guide to make plans and programmes for children more focused' (Anon., 2000: iii), Child 21 requires 10 key agencies to integrate relevant programmes along with specific performance indicators into their annual budgets. Local Government Units are also tasked with allocating funds to Child 21 related activities and programmes (Executive Order 310). Thus Child 21 aims to link ideas about the importance of children's participation to the interests of key agencies and local governments. An explicitly rights-based strategy, Child 21 identifies participatory rights as fundamental to successful policies and interventions for children. The vision articulated in Child 21 is that by 2025 every Filipino child will be 'actively participating in decision-making and governance, in harmony and in solidarity with others, in sustaining the Filipino nation' (Anon., 2000: 5).

Contradictions and tensions

Both principled and causal beliefs about the importance of children's participation have strong salience in the Philippines. Each of these has been influential in policy. Nevertheless, tensions and contradictions remain, and despite the existence of an extensive policy framework, fostering children's participation in practice has proven challenging in the Philippines, as elsewhere. Goldstein and Keohane (1993: 20) point out that 'the impact of some sets of ideas may be mediated by the operation of institutions in which the ideas are embedded'. Howlett and Ramesh (2003: 157) point out that understandings – or ideas – about the nature of public problems are 'remarkably durable', and once in place, 'difficult to change'. In the Philippines, ideas that conceptualize children as incompetent and as subordinate to adults – and the institutions that these ideas are embedded in – militate against efforts to promote children's participation.

Competency, citizenship and the status of children

The Philippines National Framework for Children's Participation identifies a positive causal link between participation and good citizenship:

Children learn to respect the views of others if their views are respected. Children's participation prepares them to [*sic*] democratic processes. Children learn to be responsible citizens when they exercise their rights and involve themselves in matters not only for their families but also for their communities and society. (Anon., n.d.: 7)

Here, children's participation is justified as a way of strengthening democratic processes and producing responsible citizens. There is, however, some ambivalence between the representation of children *as* citizens and children *as future* citizens. Child 21 presents a case for children's participation couched in perceptions of children as human becomings (see Lee, 2001; Qvortrup, 1994). According to Child 21, through participation, children will be 'provided with basic life skills to function and survive in the community and society and to overcome threats to well-being and develop as a happy, competent, and responsible adult'. The notion of preparation for life as a *competent adult* raises issues that are at the core of perceptions of children and childhood. Adult competency is often measured against incompetency, with the opposite of the competent adult being the incompetent child. Childishness, immaturity, 'behaving like a child' are all terms of derision to remind both adults and children that their behaviour is inappropriate. This has important implications for the ways in which children's participation takes place and is valued. When participation is perceived as training for adulthood and future citizenship, it is less likely to be meaningful for children in the present sense. Rather than shaping policies and practices that have current salience for children (and for societies), the focus of participation tends to be on how one contributes

as a responsible citizen. Participation becomes an apprenticeship in adult competency rather than genuine political engagement.

This issue of competency is at the heart of many debates about the nature of citizenship. Turner, for example, argues somewhat controversially that competency is a requirement for citizenship (Turner, 1990). The issue of incompetence has particular salience for ideas about children's citizenship and their ability and entitlement to participate in public policy. Incompetence has been an important justification for the exclusion of children from the category of citizen. Hugh Matthews notes that in the UK children are often perceived as incomplete citizens, 'afforded the rights of protection and provision, but . . . in the company of lunatics and criminals in being denied political rights' (Matthews, 2001: 299). A similar conceptualization exists under Filipino law. Republic Act 7610 (on the Special Protection of Children against Child Abuse, Exploitation and Discrimination) defines 'children' as 'persons below the age of 18 years, or those over 18 years who are unable to take care of themselves or protect themselves from abuse, neglect, cruelty, exploitation or discrimination because of physical or mental disability or condition'. Thus childhood is considered to be a period of the human lifespan when vulnerability is acute and special protection is necessary. It is also defined as a time of incompetence. Childhood is not necessarily bound by age but by perceptions of competency and proficiency. This representation of childhood does not sit easily with representations of children as capable social actors.

Children as subordinates; adults as figures of respect

Related to the idea that children lack competence is the idea that children are subordinate to adults and should exhibit appropriate levels of respect towards adults. Carandang and Sison (2004) have linked 'myths' about children's correct place within the family to violence against children within the family. Protacio de Castro et al. (2002) highlight social and cultural importance attached to the family in the Philippines, noting the benefits this strong sense of familial belonging can bring to children. They also identify the strength of age-based hierarchies within families and society more generally. A consistent theme among those interviewed for this study was the emphasis placed on age hierarchy in Filipino society:

In the Philippines, there is a culture of children not talking back to elders – either within the family or in schools.

Filipino culture emphasizes respect for elders – children are not heard. Parents are also concerned about losing control and power over children.

Here we see a clash of principled beliefs about children's place in society. On the one hand, is the normative idea that children's views are valuable and participation is an entitlement that should be respected. This principled belief

informs much of the Filipino children's participation framework, as outlined earlier. It is also a principled belief espoused by all participants included in this study and one that shapes the organizational values of the agencies within which they work. On the other hand, is the normative idea that children occupy a social and familial position that is secondary to adults. This principled belief remains influential in Filipino social and cultural norms, and shapes the context within which the participants involved in this study work. Socially institutionalized age hierarchies have significant implications not only for familial relationships, but also for the practice of children's participation in public policy. As one interviewee explained:

There are workshops exclusively for children, where children can express their views. However, making children's views reach decision makers often proved difficult. Now children themselves are able to bring their views to decision makers. On Children's Day, children meet with the President and there is a day when children can meet with the Speaker and with legislators. When issues are raised with the Speaker or the President, they are directed to the relevant department. But this process needs to be strengthened. There is still the influence of adults and the time spent with legislators is quite short.

In the face of competing principled beliefs about the place of children, the Council for the Welfare of Children, the primary policy-making body for children, with responsibility for fostering children's participation, has developed strategic alliances:

There are 'child friendly legislators', who are concerned with children's issues. The Council [for the Welfare of Children] works with those individuals.

Despite these strategic alliances, there is a significant challenge in placing children's views, and the issues that they identify as important, onto a political agenda that is crowded with competing ideas, interests and priorities.

Children's participation: what professionals working with children say

So far this article has focused on the ways in which ideas about children's participation have influenced policy processes, resulting in a stated commitment to fostering participation and providing avenues through which children can express their views. I have also noted the tension that exists between competing principled ideas and competing interests which act to undermine children's participation. The ideas that shape policy-making processes do not exist in a disembodied vacuum, but are held by individuals who develop, draft and implement policy. This section of the article explores the ideas held by adults directly involved in making or implementing policy for children. As outlined in the methodology section, it draws on research conducted with government officials from the Philippines Council for the Welfare of Children (hereafter CWC) and two large children-focused Filipino NGOs.

Principled beliefs, causal beliefs and practical barriers

All research participants stated a commitment to the principled belief that children have a right to express their views. The majority believed that children are capable of making complex decisions. In other words, there was a strong principled belief in the value of children's participation among the research participants. There was also a significant view that this principled belief is not a universal value in the Philippines, nor does it always translate into practice.

All NGO representatives and the majority (72 percent) of CWC employees agreed with the statement that adults' attitudes are the greatest barriers to children's participation. Participants consider adults' preconceptions about children's capabilities and competencies to be a serious obstacle to fostering children's participation. One interviewee made the point succinctly: 'Children should not be limited to what adults think they can do, but often are.' There was a general view among research participants that beyond a relatively small group (within and outside government agencies) commitment to children's participation is limited. One interviewee noted that 'it is necessary to really push children's participation with agencies', referring to government departments with responsibility for the delivery of services to children. The participants in this study identified social attitudes that cast children as developing, passive and subordinate to adults as a major barrier to achieving their professional objectives of ensuring that children can fully participate in decision-making. Several participants singled out the education system as reflecting the socially dominant view of children as developing and subordinate. Commitment to children's participation within the education system – where the majority of children spend a good portion of their time – was identified as shallow. As one participant explained:

There have been efforts to foster children's participation in school, but teachers still tend to lead and make decisions. There are school newspapers written by children and there are student councils. But teacher training does not include anything on children's rights or participation.

The absence of children's participation in the teacher training curriculum is interesting, given the strong rhetorical commitment to children's participation found in policy documents. In part, it reflects the existence of policy silos whereby causal and principled beliefs that have infiltrated thinking and influenced policy in one area do not necessarily extend across government.

The participants in this study expressed strong personal and professional commitment to children's participation. This is unsurprising given the mandate and values of their organizations. There was a strong view among the participants, however, that their ability to realize their professional objectives, and those of their organizations, in promoting children's participation is heavily circumscribed by dominant social attitudes about children's place. These attitudes determine both the place of children within Filipino society generally and the institutional values and priorities of the education system

and government departments not explicitly dedicated to promoting children's right to participation.

One conclusion is that principled or causal beliefs that place positive value on children's participation are limited to policy documents and to those individuals working in agencies with a specific mandate to promote children's participation. However, this study suggests that other factors are at play. The majority (70 percent) of research participants agreed with the statement that children's participation is not well defined, while 90 percent felt that the concept is not well understood. While social attitudes that construct children as developing and subordinate are a barrier, a lack of clarity and understanding of the concept of children's participation reduces receptiveness to the idea and inhibits change in existing rules and norms.

Views of children as decision-makers

Matthews et al. (1999: 137) have noted that an argument against children's participation is 'the conviction that children are incapable of reasonable and rational decision-making'. All research participants in this study disagreed with the statement that 'children's participation is difficult because many children make bad decisions'. However, several participants provided examples of instances when children's decisions were at variance with adults' preferences, for example:

Sangguniang Kabataan are allocated funds and can use them for whatever they choose. It may be seen as preferable for them to use the funds for advocacy, but they may choose to build basketball courts.

While some adults may view the expenditure of funds on basketball courts (particularly in very poor communities) as an inappropriate or frivolous decision, the example was provided to illustrate not good and bad decisions, but different and legitimate differences of perspective that should be respected. In a similar vein, one interviewee defined children's participation as follows:

Children's participation means letting children speak about what they feel, learn about what is relevant for them, decide and take action to their own benefit, get together with other children and do something that is meaningful to them.

Within the children-focused agencies included in this study, there was a principled belief that children's decisions should be valued. This was coupled with a firm view that children need support and sometimes guidance if they are to participate in decision-making:

Adults have a responsibility to teach and guide children, as well as listen to their ideas and opinions . . . and to respect them.

Adults have a responsibility to guide and be open to children's views.

Children should not be forced to do things beyond their capacity.

Participants' attitudes about adults' responsibility towards children who do participate in policy processes were complex and the source of considerable

reflection. A fine line exists between support and protection, on the one hand, and paternalism and control, on the other. There was, however, a principled belief among the majority of participants that fostering children's participation should not equate to abandoning children to their rights (see Bessell, 1998; Freeman, 1992).

While support for children's participation is based on principled beliefs among the research participants, ideas about cause and effect are also significant. Eighty percent expressed a causal belief that children's participation leads to better policy outcomes, better social outcomes and better interventions for children. Ninety percent of the research participants agreed with the statement 'when individual children express their views, they are more likely to be protected from harm and abuse'. Fewer participants identified a direct causal link between children's participation – as a general practice – and child protection. Nevertheless, 70 percent agreed with the statement 'when children's views are considered in policy making, *all* children will be better protected from harm or abuse'.

How old is old enough . . . to participate in what?

As elsewhere, a good deal of children's participation in the Philippines takes place among older children or 'older young people'. Members of the *Katipunan ng Kabataan* (youth assemblies) and *Sangguniang Kabataan*, as discussed earlier, must be aged between 15 and 21. There are, however, opportunities for younger children to participate. The child representative on the National Anti-Poverty Commission is often aged 17 or 18, although younger children have held this position. *Barangay*-level Councils for the Protection of Children include children as young as 10 years old. Nevertheless, participation of younger children is a vexed issue, and issues of competency and capability tend to become more confronting and controversial.

Research participants were divided on the age at which children can effectively participate. Issues of competency and vulnerability tend to become stronger as the age of children decreases. Forty percent of interviewees agreed with the statement that children under the age of 10 are not able to participate effectively. Views on the age at which children can participate ranged from birth to older than 10. Child 21 identifies participation strategies throughout the life cycle, beginning with education about children's rights and child-friendly practices for prospective parents (Anon., 2000: 62).

Beginning with prenatal strategies for children's participation, Child 21 adopts a broad interpretation of children's participation. For example, its participation strategies for children aged between birth and 2 years are:

- Educate families on how to encourage children to express their feelings and opinions;
- Intensify child-to-child programmes to enhance children and youth participation (Anon., 2000: 63).

This broad interpretation was embraced by a number of interviewees and has had an influence on principled beliefs not only about age but also about the nature of participation:

Children's participation is more than policy and governance – they also participate in the family and in the community.

Children's participation means that children are able to contribute to decision-making processes in all spheres – with much consideration of their context and situation.

Children's participation means having power to create changes in their own lives and in the lives of other children and adults.

Interestingly, there was a remarkable degree of similarity in the ideas expressed by NGO representatives and government officials on most issues. There was, however, one significant point of difference. While 70 percent of government officials agreed with the statement that 'children can participate effectively in meetings of adults', only 40 percent of NGO representatives agreed. It is significant to note here that attitudes are mirrored in practice. The NGO representatives viewed the involvement of children in adult forums as disempowering unless the way of operating is modified significantly. In contrast, the representation of children and young people on various boards is central to the CWC's mode of operating. Children's and youth representatives sit on the CWC board and on the National Anti-Poverty Commission. A senior CWC official noted that while the organization had experienced children being overwhelmed by the experience of participating in formal meetings of adults, most coped well. The children involved in these forums were described as 'articulate and empowered'. CWC officials did note, however, that the style adopted at adult meetings is not always conducive to the genuine participation of children:

Discussion often continues on and then representatives remember to ask the children for their views.

This suggests that while children may be able to participate meaningfully in adult forums, there is significant potential that their involvement will be tokenistic or decorative (see Hart, 1997), even when the adults involved hold a principled belief in the value of children's participation. Thus, the barrier to children's participation most commonly identified in the literature – adult attitudes – does not necessarily result from a lack of normative commitment on the part of adults, but to a failure to reshape the processes and institutions within which those ideas are embedded.

Reservations about children's participation

While all research participants expressed a strong principled belief in the value of children's participation and the large majority expressed causal beliefs, a number raised concerns about the negative side of children's participation. A senior official from the CWC raised three problems that the Council has faced

in actively promoting children's participation. First, child representatives on councils or at other 'adult' forums often spend considerable amounts of time away from school, either participating in or preparing for activities. This has potentially deleterious implications for those children's academic performance and social life. A second, and related, concern is that child representatives may be seen as different from other children, forming an 'elite' group who may be ostracized as a consequence. Third, the selection of child representatives can be problematic and difficult to resolve. There are issues of who chooses or votes for the representative and challenges around gaining informed consent from children, parents and schools, which can be time consuming and resource intensive.

An NGO representative raised concerns about the excessive burden that some forms of participation place on children. By way of illustration, children sit on *barangay* Councils for the Protection of Children. As noted earlier, some of these children are quite young. The Councils have broad responsibility for the welfare and protection of children, ranging from promoting health and fostering wholesome education to protecting and assisting abandoned and maltreated children (Child and Youth Welfare Code Article 87). In some *barangay*, enormous responsibility falls to the Council's child representative. For example, if a child is removed from a situation of abuse, the child representative may be called upon to make hospital visits or accompany the child to the police station. Some NGO representatives expressed concern that this level of responsibility and involvement has the potential to overburden and traumatize children, who sit on Councils but are not trained or supported adequately to fulfil such roles. In some cases, NGO representatives argued, children may be simply too young to be expected to provide support to others in difficult and violent situations. This concern raises important issues that are seldom adequately addressed in discussions of children's participation, which often focus not on younger children (pre-teens) but on adolescents or young people.

The reservations about children's participation expressed by research participants were captured concisely by one interviewee who noted:

When children make decisions it is not necessarily always good; it depends on the information they have and how they arrived at the decision.

The misgivings expressed by a number of participants in this study suggest that the converse of the problematic conceptualization of children as lacking in competence and capability is the equally problematic romanticization of children as fully equipped to assume complete responsibility and to act in unfamiliar environments without support. Finding a balance between these polarized views of children remains a challenge. The failure, in some instances, to establish a middle-ground that is workable in practice is a barrier to participation that is meaningful and positive for children.

Some conclusions

This study suggests that in the Philippines the oft-made claim that adult attitudes present the greatest barrier to children's participation is at least partially accurate. Indeed, the majority of participants in this research agreed with this claim. For participants in this study, the attitudinal barriers are not their own beliefs or those of their immediate colleagues, but community and cultural attitudes that shape and constrain the broader institutional and social context within which they work.

Nevertheless, appeals to adults' attitudes are insufficient as an explanation of the barriers preventing children's participation. To progress efforts to promote children's participation, it is necessary to explore the complexity of adults' attitudes towards children's participation. We need to ask which ideas facilitate and which obstruct children's participation, why and how. This study suggests that adults working in organizations that promote children's participation attach to it considerable normative value. This value does not necessarily extend beyond a relatively small group of policy-makers and NGO staff. Consequently, adults attempting to promote children's participation themselves face attitudinal barriers, constructed by other adults' beliefs about childhood. Moving the children's participation agenda forward requires the unpacking of the notion that adults' attitudes are a significant barrier. This study suggests that four factors are particularly significant: institutional context and procedural requirements; cultural and social norms; lack of clarity about children's participation; and concerns about negative consequences.

First, ideas about respect for elders and the expectation that children assume a submissive role shape the context within which children's participation occurs, or does not occur. These ideas are strong in the Philippines, as they are in most societies. Counter-ideas that emphasise children's citizenship and empowerment challenge deeply held norms and threaten the power and privilege that seniority can bring, but are nevertheless valued by some adults as either principled or causal beliefs. The complexities of the resulting ideational battles are worthy of greater attention in analyses of children's participation.

Second, as Goldstein and Keohane (1993) point out, ideas play out within institutions. In the Philippines, we find examples of innovative children-centred approaches to participation (such as child-facilitated events and organizations *of* children) as well forms of participation that have been criticized elsewhere as adult-centred, such as the inclusion of children on boards or advisory groups (Matthews, 2001). The form of participation favoured by (adult) participants in this study is a reflection of principled and causal beliefs that shape values within each organization. Importantly, however, the form of participation adopted is also shaped by the broader structural and institutional restrictions within which individuals work. Adults, like children, are bound not only by their social context (ideas, norms and values) but also by institutions and procedures. In the case of government officials in particular,

there is a tension between a belief in both the intrinsic and instrumental value of children's participation and the strictures of process and hierarchy within which they operate. Establishing avenues through which children can participate in decision-making is challenging, but innovative approaches have been developed by both government and non-government agencies in the Philippines. A greater challenge for those who value children's participation is the question of how children's views can significantly influence policy and practice within the constraints of budgets, policy cycles and competing priorities. Changing these processes is rarely within the power of those engaged in promoting children's participation. Thus, there is a disconnect between the Filipino children's participation/children's rights policy framework and broader institutions and structures of governance. This disconnect is by no means unique to the Philippines, but appears particularly stark because of the well-developed nature of the participatory framework.

Third, despite progress in promoting children's participation in the Philippines, this study reveals a lack of definitional clarity and a strong view that the concept is poorly understood. This suggests that attitudinal barriers stem not only from concerns about the redistribution of age-based power, but also from confusion and uncertainty about precisely what children's participation means. Finally, participants in this research, while valuing children's participation, held some reservations about the ways in which participation occurs and the potential negative outcomes for children. Rather than being understood only in terms of paternalistic barriers to children's participation, these reservations – if heeded – have the potential to provide foundations on which pathways to more meaningful participation can be built.

Over the past decade, scholarly analyses of children's participation have increasingly reflected children's views and experiences. This is a necessary and welcome development that has deepened conceptual and practical understanding. Alongside vitally important children-centred analyses, there is also a need for greater understanding of the complexity and diversity of adults' views and experiences. This may be the critical next step in progressing children's participation in a direction that is meaningful for children and positively influential in terms of policy outcomes.

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