Adult Attitudes towards Children’s Participation in the Philippines

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**Abstract**

This paper 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 adults' ideas 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 adults' attitudes are both obstructive and facilitative. A deeper understanding of the range of ideas held by adults 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. 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 United Kingdom, 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’ (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 Hill et al, 2004; Matthews, 2001; Badham, 2004). 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).

In the Philippines, policy suggests that children’s participation is indeed valued as a normative principle. Filipino policy and practice around children’s participation has progressed further than in many other countries. A range 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). Yet in the Philippines, as elsewhere, adults attitudes are identified as a barrier to children’s participation (Balanon, Puzon and Camaco, 2003: 57-58). Precisely what ideas adults hold towards children’s participation is, however, rarely the subject of analysis, either in the Philippines or elsewhere.

This article explores the ideas about children’s participation held by adults working on children’s issues in the Philippines. As is well documented, the nature of children’s participation varies widely and takes place in a range of contexts (Hart; Lansdown 2001; Ennew and Hastadewi; McNeish). McNeish identifies four distinct contexts within which children’s participation occurs: (i) in individual decision-making about one’s own life; (ii) in community initiatives; (iii) in planning, delivering and shaping services; (iv) in influencing public policy (1999: 194). Here, I focus on the participation of children in the formation, implementation and evaluation of policy
and services. The article is based on interviews and surveys with government officials from the Council for the Welfare for Children, the primary policy-making body for children, and representatives of children-focused non-government organisations. All research participants are directly engaged in policy-making, program and project development, or service delivery for children. Each organisation identifies the promotion of children’s participation as a primary objective. It should be noted that this study included twenty-eight 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 organisations 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.

The Importance of Ideas in Policy-Making

While there is considerable debate about precisely how ideas shape public policy, there is a substantial body of empirical evidence demonstrating that ideas do matter (see Goldstein and Keohane 1993; Sikkink, 1991; Stone, 1989, Abrar, Lovenduski and Margetts 2000). Chadwick describes ideas as an ‘inescapable fact of political life’ (2000: 283). Howlett and Ramesh suggest that receptiveness to new ideas is a key determinant of the nature of policy-making processes and policy outcomes (2003: 466-82). Fischer argues that ‘all social actors…use normative concepts and images as the basis for formulating their actions. Ideas, as such, constitute the world as individuals know it, understand it, and guide their actions’ (2003: 24). Goldstein and Keohane, 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’ (1993: 20). Goldstein and Keohane 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 suggest that ideas have the broadest impact on human action when the take this form. Principled beliefs are normative ideas that stipulate right from wrong. Causal beliefs are based on understandings of cause and effect (1993: 8). Here I use this typology of ideas to examine the basis of ideas about children’s participation.

Ideas supporting 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 United Nations on the 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. 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. This paper focuses on principled and causal beliefs about children’s participation.

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 twenty-five years, the 1974 Child and Youth Welfare Code identifies children’s responsibility (not right)
to ‘[P]articipate 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 organisations (defined as organisations of individuals under the age of twenty one 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. 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 organisations 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 institutionalise 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 appropriates 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 emphasises 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 institutionalise 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 institutionalising children’s participation in policy processes.

The 1991 Local Government Code established Katipunan ng Katabataan (youth assemblies) in each barangay (local community and lowest level of governance), which include all citizens aged between fifteen and twenty-one 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 and give them opportunities to freely express their views and opinions’ (State of Filipino Children 2002: 71). The Sangguniang Kabataan is the active body of the Katipunan ng Katabataan 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:

- Organising 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.

(Anonymous, 2002b: 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 formulating. Elected representatives from fourteen 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 programs for children more focused’ (Anonymous, 2000: iii), Child 21 requires ten key agencies to integrate relevant programs along with specific performance indicators into their annual budgets. Local Government Units are also tasked with allocating funds to Child 21 related activities and programs (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’ (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 point out that “the impact of some sets of ideas may be mediated by the operation of institutions in which the ideas are embedded’ (1993: 20) Howlett and Ramesh point out that understandings – or ideas – about the nature of public problems are ‘remarkably durable’, and once in place, difficult to change’ (2003: 157). In the Philippines ideas that conceptualise 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.’ (Anonymous, 2000: 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 Qvortrup, 1994; Lee, 2001). 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 United Kingdom 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’ (2001: 299). A similar conceptualisation 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 eighteen years, or those over eighteen 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 have linked ‘myths’ about children’s correct place within the family to violence against children within the family (2004). 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 emphasises 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 fostered. On the other is the normative idea that children occupy a social and familial position that is secondary to adults. Socially institutionalised 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 for 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 which has 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.
Adults’ Attitudes to Children’s Participation

So far this article has focused on the ways in which ideas about children’s participation have influenced policy-making 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 ideas held by adults directly involved in making or implementing policy for children. It draws on research conducted with government officials from the Philippines Council for the Welfare of Children (CWC) and large children-focused Filipino non-government organisations.

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%) of CWC employees agreed with the statement that adults’ attitudes are the greatest barriers to children’s participation. Adults’ preconceptions about children’s capabilities and competencies were considered 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 amongst research participants that beyond a relatively small group (within and outside of 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. There is a view that commitment to children’s participation within the education system – where the majority of children spend a good portion of their time – remains shallow:

> 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 policy area do not necessarily extend across government.

While support for children’s participation was based on principled beliefs among the research participants, ideas about cause and effect were 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 per cent of research participants agreed with the statement ‘when individual children express their views, they are more likely to be protected from harm and abuse’. Seventy per cent agreed with the statement ‘when children's views are considered in policy making, all children will be better protected from harm or abuse’.

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, interviews suggest that other factors are at play. The majority (70 per cent) of research participants agreed with the statement that children’s participation is not well defined, while 90 per cent felt that the concept is not well understood. The lack of clarity and understanding reduces receptiveness to ideas about children’s participation and inhibits change in existing rules and norms.

**Views of Children as Decision Makers**

Mathews, Limb and Taylor (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 adult’s 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 viewed 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 in 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. There is a fine line that often 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 Freeman, 1992; Bessell, 1998).

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, discussed earlier, must be aged between fifteen and twenty-one. There are, however, opportunities for younger children to participate. The child representative on the National Anti-Poverty Commission is often aged seventeen or eighteen years, although younger children have held this position. Barangay-level Councils for the Protection of Children include children as young as ten years. Nevertheless, participation of younger children is a vexed issue, and issues of competency and capability tend to become more confronting and controversial.

Interviewees 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 per cent of interviewees agreed with the statement that children under the age of ten are not able to participate effectively. Views on the age at which children can participate ranged from birth to older than ten. Child 21 identifies participation strategies throughout the life cycle, beginning with education about children’s rights and child friendly practices for prospective parents (2000: 62).

Beginning with pre-natal strategies for children’s participation, Child 21 adopts a broad interpretation of children’s participation. For example, participation strategies for children aged between birth and two years are:

- Educate families on how to encourage children to express their feelings and opinions

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 to 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’, while only 40 per cent of NGO representatives agreed. It is significant to note here that attitudes are mirrored in practice. The NGO representatives tended to view the involvement of children in adult fora 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 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 the while the organisation had experienced children being overwhelmed by the experience of participating in formal meetings of adults, most coped well. The children involved in these fora 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 fora, 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 form 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 CWC raised three problems that the Council has faced in actively promoting children’s participation. First, child representatives on councils or at other ‘adult’ fora 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 ostracised 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 (local community) 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 traumatise children.

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 conceptualisation of children as lacking in competence and capability is the equally problematic romanticisation of children as fully equipped to assume complete responsibility and to act in unfamiliar environments without support. Finding a balance between these polarised 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 forms of participation that result in meaningful and positive participatory experiences 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 accuracy. Indeed, the majority of participants in this research agreed with this claim. Nevertheless this claim is 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 organisations 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; concerns about negative consequences.

First, ideas about respect for elders and the expectations 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 organisations of children) as well
forms of participation that have been criticised 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 organisation. 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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