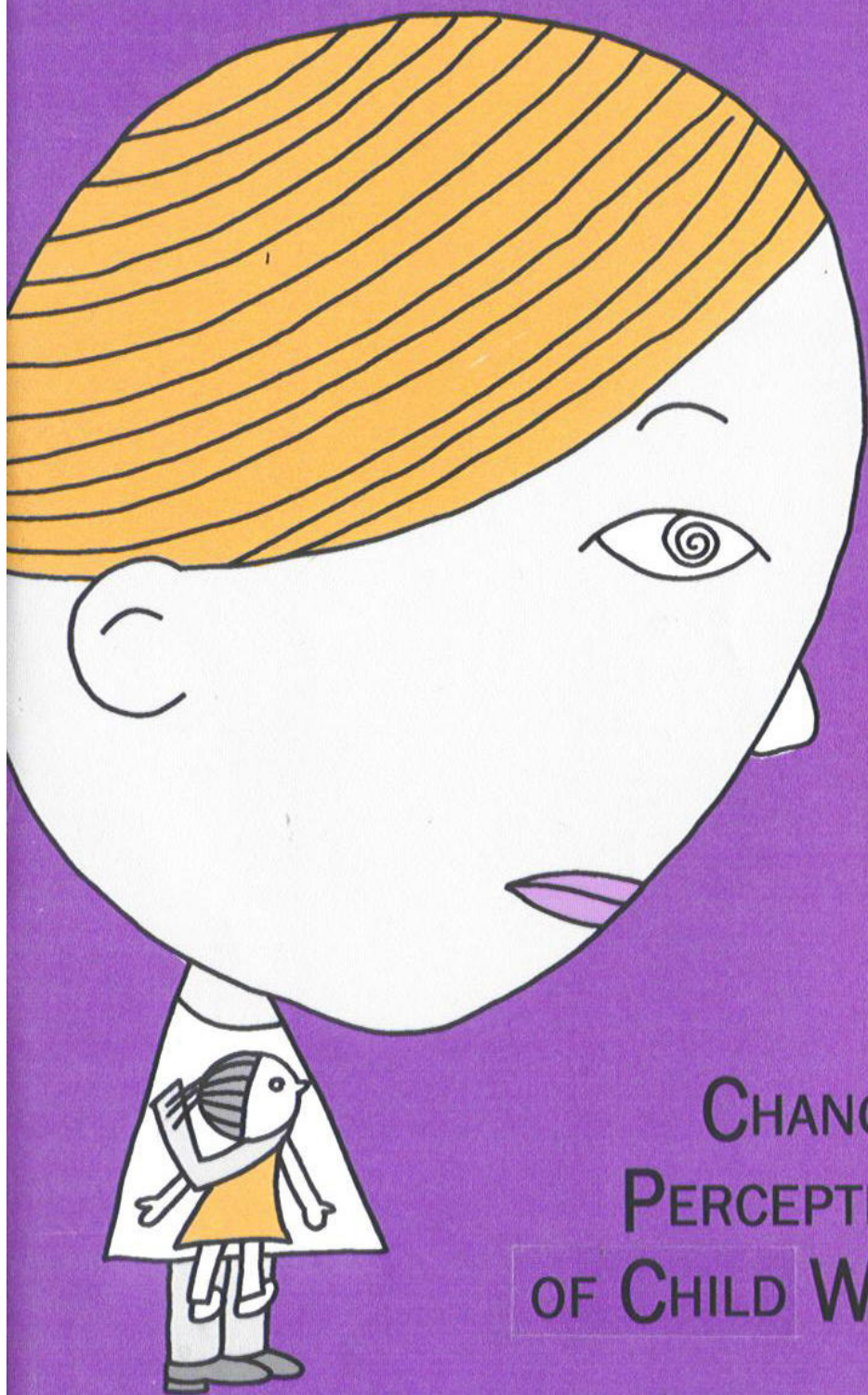


Childhood & Child Rights Study Series



CHANGING
PERCEPTIONS
OF CHILD WORK

AGNES ZENAIDA V. CAMACHO

The Changing Perceptions of Child Work

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Foreword

The Childhood and Child Rights Study Series is a joint initiative of the Psychosocial Trauma and Human Rights Program of the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS PST) and Save the Children-UK (SC-UK) Philippines under the Programme for Abused and Exploited Children (PAEC). It aims to bring together academicians, child rights workers, program planners, policy makers, children, and young people in an engaging discussion on burning issues concerning childhood and child rights. It also aims to discuss issues concerning child abuse and exploitation in the Philippines in order to understand their impact on policies, approaches and program work.

The series tackle such topics as *Household Adjustments and Child Welfare: Lessons Learned from the Asian Financial Crisis*; *Beyond the Home: Child Abuse in Church and School*; *Improving the Referral of Child Abuse Cases in the Philippines*; and *Changing Perceptions of Child Work*.

The topics were chosen based on dilemmas and issues faced by child rights practitioners in the field. Working papers were developed based on research and consultation sessions with children and young people, concerned agencies and organizations, which were presented in round table discussions. In the process, the papers were further enriched by the sharing, feedback, and inputs of the participants.

The monographs document the richness of the discussions in the study series. They highlight the issues in current practice as well as the implications on policy, research and advocacy work. Recommendations and action points are also identified for the different stakeholders in child rights work.

We hope that the monographs will help initiate praxis, a process of reflection, action, and reflection among our policy makers, planners, and practitioners. We hope that they will analyze these issues from a rights perspective, taking into consideration the views, experiences and the sociopolitical and economic context of the children. Lastly, we hope that we can all take the challenge of becoming more strategic and active in addressing children's issues and concerns.

Maria José da Veiga Coutinho

Programme Director

Save the Children (UK) Philippines

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The Changing Perceptions of Child Work

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An overview of the discourse

A review of selected social science materials on child work produced in the last two decades reveal the changing trends and increasing diversity in the understanding of child work. Such changes and diversity of ideas are reflective of the disparate array of stakeholders and their varying, and sometimes contradicting, views on the subject. This part discusses what I consider as the dominating themes in the discourse on child work in the Philippines based on a review of selected social science materials produced in the last twenty years. It is my contention that the dominant conceptions of child work, as these also relate to conceptions of children and family, shape policy and programs for working children. The perspectives presented are by no means comprehensive and detailed but contribute further to the development of the child work discourse by choosing to take what has come to be known as the child-centered approach. This new child-centered perspective on child work will hopefully find its way into policy and programming work for children.

Child work as part of socialization

Child work has traditionally been regarded as arising from the division of labor in the family and community. Children are trained and prepared for their future role as responsible and productive adults through their gradual initiation into adult routine life. This process is referred to by social scientists as achievement and responsibility training, underscoring its contribution to cultural transmission. This theme is evident in the descriptions of child-rearing practices contained in the early ethnographic studies of the Filipino family in rural, farming communities (Jocano 1968, Guthrie, 1968, Bello 1972).

Children when they are young are valued for the help they provide within the household and in the farm. As early as four years of age, children are given light tasks such as bringing messages or things to relatives and neighbors. By the age of seven or eight, they begin to assume some responsibilities around the house. For example, they take care of younger siblings, gather firewood, or fetch water from the nearby spring. By nine to 12 years of age, children are introduced to more serious tasks. The allocation of activity based on sex becomes emphasized, with the boys learning from their fathers and the girls from their mothers. Boys help their fathers build fences or plow the farm while the girls help their mothers prepare the food or wash the clothes. By the time they are 14, they assume as many responsibilities as adults.

But more than the functional contribution of the children to work at home and in the field, children are valued as gifts of God, as sources of happiness and companionship, as necessary to maintain the family lineage, and as security of parents in old age (Guthrie 1968, Bulatao 1975, Go 1992, Jocano 1998). Children are the essence of a Filipino family such that they give it its “form and structure”. A man and a woman living together with the blessing of God do not make a family (*mag-anak*). Until the birth of their first child (*anak*), they are simply referred to as “*mag-asawa*” or a married couple (Mendez and Jocano 1984 in Medina 1991). Clearly, children are the



raison d'être of marriage in the Philippines and couples who have many children are considered blessed.

Filipino parents are generally protective, indulgent, affectionate and nurturing towards their children (Church 1988, Medina 1991). While these are positive traits, these are also interpreted as engendering a sense of vulnerability and powerlessness in children as indicative in the Filipino concept of the child as “*walang malay*” (with little awareness), “*walang muwang sa buhay*” (without much knowledge about life), and “*alagain*” (in need of nurturance and protection) (Bautista et al. 1999). Culture prescribes that training for competence and assumption of responsibility should not be hurried because children are “helpless and lovable innocents who gradually grow up” (Nurge 1965).

Needless to say, this socialization process takes place primarily in the family, considered as the most important element in the appropriation of roles and in the construction of identity of a Filipino (Nurge 1965, Jocano 1968, Medina 1991, Go 1992, Jocano 1998). The primacy of the family in Philippine society is such that the activities of its members are strongly oriented towards the goals of improving the economic welfare of the family and enhancing the prestige of the family in the community. Parents (or adults in general) are given the responsibility of helping children adapt to and internalize society's rules, norms and values so that the children can meaningfully participate in it. Meanwhile, children are treated with love and indulgence as they gradually learn the economic skills and lore of their community.

This view of children in a “forward-looking way” (Corsaro 1997) or in relation to what they would become as adults has been met with resounding criticism. This view reinforces the notion of children as immature, incompetent, passive beings and as such cannot as yet make significant contributions to society. Being so, children occupy a subordinate position in society. Incapable of meaningful thought and action, children cannot as yet be considered

a fully functioning member of society. The children are simply “there” because adults do not see how children play significant roles in the social settings of which they were part.

Child work as a labor problem

There is a consensus that the involvement of children in exploitative work is not new but its recognition as a social problem is (del Rosario, V. 1986, Lopez-Gonzaga et al. 1990, Apit 1996). Under the Spanish colonial rule, children rendered labor as payment for their families’ debts or as replacement for the adults conscripted into the colonial armed forces. Under the American colonial rule, there were accounts of children working in cigarette factories without pay, and of children, predominantly male, recruited in sugar plantations in Hawaii (Kerkvliet 1992 in Apit 1996). However, images of child work in rural, farming communities, secure and protected in the family environment, have crystallized in the popular mind and may have shaped the dominant conceptions of childhood and work.

The increasing participation of children and young people in the labor force prompted government to intervene. Early national legislation regulating the employment of children were based largely on relevant instruments adopted by the International Labor Organization. It set the minimum age for employment at 15 years but it was common knowledge that violations existed (Tidalgo and Teodosio 1981, del Rosario, V. 1986). Concern for the working children became great in the mid-80’s, no less spurred by the declaration of 1979 and 1985 as the International Year of the Child and the International Year of the Youth, respectively. The adverse economic conditions in the 1980’s drove young children to seek extra money to augment family income and/or to support themselves. They were found engaged in varied forms of economic activity, covering a broad spectrum within the formal and informal sectors of the economy (Rivera 1985, del Rosario, R. 1986, Torres 1990, Reyes-



Boquiren 1996). The conditions under which they work were found to be detrimental to their growth and development. Many were forced to stop from schooling as they increasingly found it difficult to combine working and studying. For those in the street trade, many were exposed to or engaged in illegal activities such as picking pockets, prostitution and extortion, prompting the government to 'rescue' them from the streets.

Faced with contradicting images of child work, social scientists grappled with definitional issues. What emerged as the most convenient and (still) acceptable way to resolve the contradictions was to refer to work that is part of the child's socialization as 'child work'. These are work activities that are usually done in the home under the parents' supervision and largely considered as beneficial to the child's development. Work with an element of exploitation, whether in the formal or informal sector and which is hazardous to the child's health and development, was referred to as 'child labor' (Bautista 1986, Barile 1990, Apit 1996). Del Rosario, V. (1986) pointed out that these conceptual and definitional issues "derive(s) mostly from culture and varying social and economic meanings attached to them." How these issues were resolved has shaped our understanding and our approaches to the problem of child labor.

Filipino social scientists had earlier on criticized the conceptual inadequacy of distinguishing 'child work' from 'child labor'. Literature on child labor was found to emphasize 'paid work', most often outside the home. Policy was geared towards regulating the paid employment of children. With the country reeling in economic crisis, working children were seen as competition for scarce jobs. As Dogramaci (1985) has put it,

"Every child working means one less adult working. By the same token, the low wages paid to children keep overall wages for unskilled adults at rock bottom levels. So the very existence of child labor is self-perpetuating, encouraging the poverty conditions of the family which makes it necessary."

Citing this rationale, Bautista (1986) raised the need to change labor policies, so that “adults would replace the children in the factories and more and more of our children would go back to their homes and schools.”

Emphasis on paid work rendered many working children invisible since most frequently, children were engaged in unpaid work whether as farmhands or assisting their parents in home-based industries. It also rendered domestic work of children as unproductive. It was not reflective of the reality that working children, especially the girl-child, are not spared their tasks at home. Their household work was often as burdensome as their work outside. This lack of concern for the children’s domestic chores reflects an ingrained attitude that work in the home setting does not pose any danger to the well-being of the child and that exploitative relations do not exist within the family. As Rivera (1985) has put it, “The sociological characteristic of child labor is the very difficult delineation between the economic and domestic roles of children.”

The dominant conception of child work was no longer of parents training their children for their future roles in adulthood, but as a family’s mechanism for coping with the poverty situation (Rivera 1985, del Rosario 1987, del Rosario, R. 1986, del Rosario, V. 1986, Lopez-Gonzaga et al. 1990, Go 1992). The notion of children as “economic investments” (Jocano 1998) or as “economic security” (Bulatao 1975) was stretched beyond the confines of the household. This notion was no longer interpreted in terms of division of labor in domestic chores and family farm work, but in terms of parental expectation of children on one hand, and children’s felt obligation on the other, to contribute to the survival of the household. Filipino parents were said to value children “to the extent that they are able to give financial contributions to the household” (Bulatao 1975 in Torres 1990). This is related to a widely held belief that the more children there are in the family, the more hands there are to augment family income.



On the part of children, they see it as their duty to help in the family's survival. Children are brought up to believe that a good child is obedient and respectful, fully recognizing the importance of filial responsibility. They earn social approval if they are able to meet the social criteria of a good child. In impoverished communities, a good child is a working child. In a study of child labor in the garments industry, del Rosario (1987) found that,

“while they do not enjoy working per se, due to the stringent working conditions and terms of employment, the idea that they are somehow (no matter how little) helping the family leads to eventual satisfaction at work. The feeling of being considered responsible and already young adults elates them.”

Given the considerations above, cautions were raised against declaring all forms of child labor as exploitative, and hence should be eliminated. Policies and programs should consider the complex interaction between political and economic policies and the deeply entrenched social and cultural factors in dealing with the problem of child labor. Del Rosario, V. (1986) raised the need to identify the types of child labor which are really exploitative and which therefore should be eliminated instead of lumping all forms of child labor together. Lopez-Gonzaga et al. (1990) saw the phenomenon of child labor in the province of Negros “more of a strategic response to poverty than a problem to be addressed.” In the same light, Rivera (1985) considered work in the informal sector as a coping strategy and an important part of childhood and socialization. Moreover, she found it necessary to debunk the “western notions and moralistic assumptions about childhood as a period of innocence and dependence” in understanding children at work. She argued that this ideal of childhood is “definitely inconsistent with the objective conditions of poverty in the country.”

Child labor as an issue of abuse and exploitation

Del Rosario, V. (1986) had earlier on warned against the tendency to equate all forms of child labor as ‘exploitation’. She observed that this tendency was manifested in the many articles written on child labor with highly emotional overtones. While she acknowledged that this strategy was effective in raising public awareness on the issue, a unitary perspective of child labor could mask a lot of issues which should be uncovered for a better understanding of this phenomenon “especially in less developed countries where the role of child labor in their economies is increasingly appreciated.” This caveat was raised during the time when stakeholders were beginning to seriously look into the problem of child labor. However, this perspective of child labor as an issue of exploitation and abuse became dominant, or as Jenks (1996) has put it, ‘normalized’ in everyday language, in the following years. It is my contention that social policy and legislation played a crucial role in the dominance of this thinking.

The Philippine society prides itself as caring and nurturing of its children and young people. In fact, the saying “Ang kabataan ang siyang pag-asa ng bayan” (The youth are the hope of our nation) had time and again been invoked by various groups as their rallying slogan to mobilize resources for children. The call was to care for our children today if we are to take care of our country’s future. At the height of the political and economic crisis during the Marcos years, the view of children as the measure of the worth of a society was effectively used in protest. As Rivera (1985) has phrased it, “Children are a mirror of the level of development of a country. Children are also a mirror of the crisis in a country. ... The Philippines reflects the neglect of children in the Third World.”

Vowing to be different from its predecessor, the government under President Corazon Aquino (1986-1990) pledged its support for the Filipino children. It was one of the first to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It came out with a



Philippine Plan of Action for Children which set as a target the banning of children in hazardous occupations and the protection and rehabilitation of reported abused and exploited children. A landmark legislation was the Republic Act 7610 (Special Protection Against Child Abuse, Exploitation and Discrimination Act) which contains comprehensive provisions for the protection of children in various circumstances of abuse, including the working child. This was the government's main policy framework for the protection of children in especially difficult circumstances (CEDC).

The child-focused non-government organizations, for their part, were quick to embrace the CRC as a guiding framework for their research and action. The CRC served as an impetus and a potent weapon for the children's rights movement to establish for itself an identity and dynamism separate from the vibrant women's movement and the stalwart human rights movement. There was a flurry of programs and services for upholding and protecting the rights and welfare of the Filipino child. However, children's rights consciousness was heavily slanted towards children's protection and survival, at least in the initial years. Advocacy was centered on mobilizing resources for the protection and rehabilitation of children in especially difficult circumstances. Other terms were formulated to draw up public support and sympathy. The CEDC's were considered as 'children at risk' or 'children in crisis'. They were 'vulnerable children'. They were 'abused and exploited'.

The issue of child labor became inextricably linked to abuse and exploitation. No discussion of the situation of working children was complete without harrowing accounts of their exposure to hazardous work environments and susceptibility to illnesses and injury. They were diagnosed as suffering from learning disabilities, low self-image, extreme depression, suicidal or self-destructive tendencies, rejection, fear, and relationship problems. Child labor was decried as a gross violation of the rights of the child. Situation analyses of child labor in the Philippines more or less echoed the following lines found in

the foreword to the Indicative Framework for Philippine-ILO Action (1997). It stated,

“Today, however, we also find hundreds of thousands of Filipino children being deprived of the opportunity to share in the prospects of development. The door of opportunity is closed on them because their childhood is wasted in premature work rather than nurtured in school and at play. Deprived of an opportunity for education and of appropriate social, cultural, physical and psychological development, their capacity to contribute to society as adults is seriously being jeopardized.”

White (1999) contends that “most public discourse and policy intervention on the child labour problem” has started from a set of assumptions “which define(s) the problem (in this author’s view incorrectly) as one of work itself rather than of the various kinds of abuse or harm that may stem from children’s involvement in work.” Simply put, the assumption is work is anathema to the experience of a normal and healthy childhood. Scholars attribute this thinking to a globalized ideal of childhood being a safe, happy and protected stage of development (Boyden, 1997, James and Prout 1997, Boyden et al. 1998), one based on ‘the sanctity of the family on one hand, and the school on the other, as the only legitimate places for growing up’ (Nieuwenhuys 1996 in White 1999). This view of childhood became explicit in international children’s rights legislation (Boyden 1997).

The preceding discussion has shown how the thinking of child labor as an issue of abuse and exploitation can be attributable to the influence of CRC, or more appropriately, to how it was interpreted and implemented by the stakeholders. Focus on the protection rights interpreted in the frame of the Western ideal of childhood reinforced a pathological model of work harming development as echoed in Article 32 (Woodhead 1999). Other scholars offer a different interpretation. By referring to the right to protection from economic exploitation and other work that is harmful to the child’s growth and



development, “it sets the focus on the right to protection from exploitation, rather than criminalizing work itself” (Miljeteig 1999).

The CRC is also credited for bringing about dramatic changes in research and action on child labor. One can single out the participation rights of children (Article 12) but which were accepted with much ambivalence. It is important to note that, at the onset, no one argued with the principle of children having the capacity to form their own views and the right to express their opinion in matters affecting them. However, the cultural assumption equating age with wisdom and experience (Jocano 1998) posed an obstacle or deterrent to realizing the right to participation of children. This could be especially difficult in the family setting where respect for one’s elders is a strongly emphasized value.

The avenue where the participation rights of children were effectively realized was in advocacy and social mobilization. Working children were in the forefront of campaign activities, giving testimonies, joining mobilizations and protest actions, talking to policy-makers, and holding children’s congresses. But de la Cruz et al. (1999), in their review of literature, state that “presently, the concept of child participation still needs to be clarified.” More importantly, I contend that the practice of child participation needs to depart from standard forms and avenues which limit children’s involvement in what Milne (1997) refers to as “playground projects” which clearly undermine children’s capacities in the construction and determination of culture and their own social lives.

Towards a child-centered perspective of child work: considerations for programmes and policy

The understanding of child work in the Philippines has been dominated by the thinking that a) child work is part of socialization, b) it is a labor problem, and c) it is an issue of abuse and exploitation.

These perspectives are echoed in the framing of national legislations on child labor and in the design of interventions for them. Having noted their inadequacy, researchers and practitioners have advocated for a child-centered approach to programming and policy work on child labor. One main feature of the child-centered approach is the respect for the capacity of children to make valuable contributions to society (Karunan 1999). Placing the child in the center of policy and programming work, this new perspective takes into account children's realities and aspirations, and lets them take an active role in negotiating for solutions and in improving their own lives. But as noted in a recently concluded workshop on child labor (ISCA 1999), advocating this perspective raises the question of what "child-centeredness" actually means in practice.

This part attempts to contribute to the understanding of the child-centered perspective by looking into how this perspective is realized in research and action on child labor in the Philippines. I will attempt to identify the key ingredients of this new perspective as can be learned from the Philippine experience. Much of the examples are taken from our research on childhood and child rights at the Program on Psychosocial Trauma of the University of the Philippines' Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS-PST) and from my participation in the activities of the child rights movement in the Philippines.

Recognition of childhood as a social construction and children as social actors

For us to define child-centeredness as placing children's well-being as a top priority in policy and programming would be inadequate. This is not considered a challenging task especially in our country which prides itself as being child-centered. It would be wrong to accuse practitioners and researchers as not being child-centered for not taking into account children's realities, capabilities, and aspirations, for they sincerely do. The inadequacy rests primarily in the tendency



for adults to construct an understanding of children's reality guided by the conception that children are passive, vulnerable and helpless beings, and that childhood is a time for play, rest and recreation. For a long time we had been guided by the dominant frameworks in the study of childhood which advance a universalizing notion of childhood as a period of extended dependence, protected innocence and rapid learning enhanced through universal schooling, with family and school as the only legitimate places for growing up. Thus by implication, to let children work is to deny them the experience of a normal and healthy childhood.

The recognition of childhood as a social construction and of children as social actors is important in taking a child-centered perspective of child work. This is the overarching ingredient of the child-centered perspective, along with the recognition that children have rights. Its features would be expounded in the discussion of the other key ingredients of the child-centered perspective. But unlike the child rights perspective which has been widely accepted and used as a guiding framework, this ingredient has yet to become explicit in research and practice on child work in the Philippines. Thus it deserves special mention in this paper.

Our program's research on children in prostitution (Protacio-Marcelino et al. 1998), to my knowledge, is the first study in the Philippines to explicitly state that children are social actors, active in the construction of their own social lives and affecting those around them. Viewed in this frame, we do not see children in prostitution as innately passive victims but as agents continuously acting to evade or resist abuse, capable of creating a sub-culture together with the other children, in order to cope with and survive the violence of their world. In recommending policies and programs, they were not regarded as merely passive objects of protection measures and services, but as active participants in negotiating for solutions to their problems and needs. Our program's succeeding researches are guided by a similar assumption: Bautista et al. (1999) examined the narratives of abused

and exploited children from the lenses of resiliency and indigenization; De la Cruz et al. (1999) sought to understand the children's perceptions of abuse and its causes and consequences. These researches are proving to be instrumental in 'normalizing' this ingredient in the child rights movement in the Philippines.

Recognition and assertion of the notion of children's competency and resiliency

Before the explosion of interest on children's competency and resiliency, our image of working children was that of pitiful victims of circumstances coerced to engage in stressful work environments. Working children, most especially those who were not in school, were considered "at risk" or in "especially difficult circumstances," if not constructed as deviants or most at risk of becoming deviants. Thus the approach was the removal or "rescue" of children from the workplace, which, as experience has shown, does not necessarily work for their best interest.

However, research and experience have established that in most cases, it was the children's decision to work, in consultation with their parents. In my research on child domestic workers, the children readily recognize the beneficial aspects of their work, notwithstanding that they are separated and work away from their families. They see it as their duty to work and feel proud that they are able to help their parents and siblings. A child-centered approach to child work, therefore, would be to "begin from a position of respect for the children's persons, for the contribution they make to their families and communities, and for their right and capacity to shape their own lives" (Bautista et al. 1999).

There are likewise strong evidences in research and practice that only a minority of children exposed to serious life difficulties suffer from long-term debilitating mental health problems. This require us to abandon our fascination with exploring the many factors in the environment that place children at risk or personality variables which make them vulnerable to stress and trauma. This is a radical departure



from studying the ‘grim aspects of realities’ to understanding the inner strengths and competence of children to recover from and grow from adversities and other negative experiences in life. But Banaag (1997), in understanding resiliency as revealed in stories found in Philippine streets, qualifies that “resiliency involves a process of interaction between individual and environmental factors, not fixed attributes or traits within an individual.”

Banaag’s study offered an exposition of resiliency based on the individual and environmental factors identified by Turner et al. (1993) as reducing individual vulnerability and increasing individual resiliency. He categorized individual factors into ‘internal strengths’ (e.g. self-efficacy, sense of direction, social problem solving skills, realistic appraisal of the situation, easy disposition), ‘externally directed traits’ (e.g. leadership skills, empathy), and ‘something bigger than oneself’ (e.g. sense of morality, religion). Environmental factors include family protective factors (e.g. sense of family responsibility, family traditions and rituals, positive adult modeling), and community protective factors (e.g. agency intervention, community involvement, supportive school climate).

Our program’s research on resiliency (Bautista et al. 1999) did not start from a pre-determined criteria of resiliency traits but evoked ‘themes of resiliency’ from the narratives of children who have gone through difficult life circumstances. The more recurrent resiliency themes found were “acceptance and adjustments to the demands of difficult situations,” “competent functioning in the presence of major life problems”, “ability to maintain sanity in the face of traumatic experiences,” “ethical mind,” and “finding happiness despite a difficult life.”

A similar sense of competence and resiliency permeates the life stories of children in prostitution (Protacio-Marcelino et al. 1998). When we sought to understand their lives not in the frame of victimization or vulnerability, it became easy for us to consider the fact that they are active agents constantly trying to preempt, evade,

or modify violence and abuse in their lives. We called this the children in prostitution's "strategies of resistance."

Given the competence and capacity of working children to survive and even grow from adversities, there should be no doubt about their capacity to be involved in the design, implementation, and evaluation of efforts addressing their situation with due consideration to their rights as children.

Starting with children's experiences and recognition of the diversity of their experiences

To be child-centered is to gain an understanding of how children see themselves and how they interpret or construct meaning of their experiences. Understanding the experiences of children from their own points of view corrects a major bias that trivializes children's activities and thoughts, or interprets them from our standpoint as adults in society. It is only when we remove these blinders that we allow ourselves to see children as full members of the social, political, and economic worlds.

In our research work, we consciously utilize approaches and methods that are effective in collecting, categorizing and examining the multitude of children's voices. Our methods enable us to gain access to children's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in our words as researchers. This is important in the study of children and childhood because it veers away from the centuries-long practice of ignoring children's lives or muting children's voices by having adults speak for them. As adult researchers (or advocates) we cannot speak for children but we can, and we must, speak out for them. And this we could only do by listening to our children's many voices and accepting their diversity.

In our research on children in prostitution, the life story interview method enables us to start with children's experiences and understand them from their own points of view. But there is more to it. The life



story interview method is described as a “spiritual endeavor” that could bring countless benefits to both the teller (children) and the listener (researcher) (Atkinson 1998). As children tell and retell, recall and reframe their stories, they are able to construct a clearer understanding of themselves and discover deeper meanings and create new interpretations of the events and experiences in their lives. By listening and guiding the children in telling their stories, and in the process enabling the children to have a renewed sense of perspective for the future, we become integral to the process of self-discovery and recovery. By listening to the children’s narration of their lives, we are likewise able to reflect on and construct new meanings about our own experiences. This makes the telling of and listening to stories a powerful and mutually empowering experience.

We also find creative and participatory processes as effective modes of interaction with the children. In our research on the definition of child abuse, the children’s understanding of what constitutes abuse was evolved through participatory sessions described as “a combination of show-and-tell activities, role-playing and small group discussions” (de la Cruz et al. 1999). By participatory, we also expand the role of children from being sources/tellers of experiences to having a combined researcher/subject role, or to being part of the research team. In the same research, eight street and working children assisted in the research process by facilitating and/or documenting group discussions, taking field notes, writing journals, and following up children selected for the case study. Prior to their membership in the action research team, they underwent training on the research process and on doing research with children.

To understand children’s experiences and recognize their diversity, it is important to be cognizant of the communication norms and repertoire of the Filipino children’s culture and subculture. We therefore utilize methods discovered and developed from the naturally existing patterns of the Filipino (and the Filipino children). Foremost

of these methods are *'pagtatanong-tanong'* (asking questions) described as “participation in a conversation through which the researcher and respondents alike can ask questions about a topic or several topics based on the research objectives,” and *'pakikipagkwentuhan'* (exchanging stories) which refers to “the narration, in the form of a story, of the past events in the lives of the ‘respondents’ and researchers” (see Pe-Pua 1982). Research and practice have proven the effectiveness of these methods, which range from the unobtrusive and observational to the obtrusive and participatory, in striking a relationship with children that is based on mutual trust and acceptance.

Recognition and assertion of children’s participation

Until recently, child participation was skewed towards structured participation or activities that are largely initiated and determined by adults initiated on their behalf. Working children were pushed into participating in activities to protect and assist them. This only generated ethical questions of children being used to advance the coffers of an organization. For abused and exploited working children diagnosed as suffering from mental health problems, questions were raised on their psychological preparedness. For those who have recovered from trauma, letting them recall and speak about their experience might open old wounds. These ethical concerns were raised, discussed and dealt with without the conscious participation of children and without their appraisal of the situation in order to come up with solutions that are truly beneficial for them.

Another inadequacy in the way children’s participation was realized and which until recently was a taken for granted reality, was for adults to define situations and problems of children, and just let the children participate in activities designed to protect and assist them. The assumption was that children were incapable of critical appraisal of their situation instead of recognizing them as protagonists capable of telling, constructing meaning, and interpreting their



experiences. Adults merely interpreted the situation for the children and took bits and snippets of their views to support an evolving theory. This was never questioned.

In order to overcome these inadequacies, it is important to seek children's perception and understanding of concepts that concern them. An example is children's participation. In a series of workshops organized for the International Young People's Participation Conference, children and young people were asked to define children's right to participate. What emerged is an understanding that is so complex and tuned to their realities. They defined children's participation as (a) an expression of their capability to think for themselves, share their ideas, feelings, opinions, and make their own decisions, b) being able to stand up for what they believe in, c) a process by which they can grow, d) a right that all young people should enjoy, e) involving understanding and respect of others, f) young people's realization and internalization of their responsibility to improve themselves, work for their future, for the future of society and the next generation, g) a process of consultation and empowerment through education, h) involving interacting with people, i) being part of decision-making in families and communities, and j) not being conflict with the child's other rights (ECPAT International et al. 1999).

Recognizing and asserting children's participation implies the utilization of conscious participatory processes and restructuring social relations. This is manifested in the increasing use of ethnographic and participatory methods of research with children (ICCB 1996, Protacio-Marcelino et al. 1998, Bautista et al. 1999, Camacho 1999, de la Cruz et al. 1999). But for ethnographic research with children to become child-centered, the standard of interaction between the adult and children must consider children as peers, accepting them as equals, and treating them with respect and dignity. We have to admit that this process is quite difficult primarily because we have to deal with social roles that have been influenced by "age,

cognitive development, physical maturity, and acquisition of social responsibility” (Fine and Sandstrom 1988). The process becomes even more daunting when pervasive in the worlds of children (e.g. children in prostitution) are constraints which make access to and telling of experiences extremely difficult. At the very least, adults must transcend age and authority boundaries, and must possess the fine ability and desire to listen to children not from the usual adult-centric mind-sets.

Adults have the daunting responsibility of building an enabling environment for children’s participation. De la Cruz et al. (1999) mentioned “allowing children to obtain enough and appropriate information and avenues for discussion with concerned individuals and groups so that they can develop their views on issues ... and take action to address issues that concern them.” Other processes include the formation of working children’s organizations with the aim of promoting the responsible role of children in the organization of civil society, and institutionalizing their representation in development activities and governance.

But more than having cognitive and social requirements, i.e. allowing children access to information and avenues for participation, children’s participation requires reflective and formative traits. In our work to recognize and assert children’s participation, we often overlook processes needed to enable both children and adults to continuously and reflexively attend to prevailing notions about children and childhood that hinder participation. It is in this sense that we should view children’s participation in conjunction with the notions of competency and resiliency. Children have to recover their self-esteem and self-efficacy. They have to believe that they have the capacity to perform certain life tasks and the ability to act for themselves and for others. Without this, their capacity to critically appraise their situation would be compromised. Moreover, children have to work with adults in creating awareness among the different sectors and institutions about the value of children as active agents. This would enable the



creation of social processes that reinforce resiliency and enable children's participation. This is the best way to ensure that children's participation would exert a positive impact in our lives.

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