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To cite this article: Kate Hampshire , Gina Porter , Samuel Owusu , Simon Mariwah , Albert Abane , Elsbeth Robson , Alister Munthali , Mac Mashiri , Goodhope Maponya & Michael Bourdillon (2012) Taking the long view: temporal considerations in the ethics of children's research activity and knowledge production, *Children's Geographies*, 10:2, 219-232, DOI: [10.1080/14733285.2012.667921](https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2012.667921)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2012.667921>



Published online: 24 Apr 2012.



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Taking the long view: temporal considerations in the ethics of children's research activity and knowledge production

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Children are increasingly engaged in the research process as generators of knowledge, but little is known about the impacts on children's lives, especially in the longer term. As part of a study on children's mobility in Ghana, Malawi and South Africa, 70 child researchers received training to conduct peer research in their own communities. Evaluations at the time of the project suggested largely positive impacts on the child researchers: increased confidence, acquisition of useful skills and expanded social networks; however, in some cases, these were tempered with concerns about the effect on schoolwork. In the follow-up interviews 2 years later, several young Ghanaian researchers reported tangible benefits from the research activity for academic work and seeking employment, while negative impacts were largely forgotten. This study highlights the unforeseeable consequences of research participation on children's lives as they unfold in unpredictable ways and underscores the temporal nature of children's engagement in research.

Keywords: Ghana; child researchers; participatory research; research ethics; child rights

Introduction

It is now commonly accepted (in theory at least) by researchers and other organisations that children are not merely passive recipients of adult knowledge, but actively create, interpret and produce meanings, understandings and 'knowledge'. Children's right to have their views heard and taken seriously is enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights on the Child (UNCRC) (OHCHR 1989). Specifically, Article 12 states that

the child who is capable of forming his or her own views has the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

Article 13 states that 'The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds...'.

However, the practice is often less straightforward, and many attempts to elicit and integrate 'children's voices' and children's knowledge have been criticised for tokenism (see James 2007).

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Christensen and Prout (2002) identified four contrasting perspectives that underpin current research with children, reflecting Hart's (1992) well-known 'ladder of participation'. Traditionally, most social science research has cast children as 'objects': acted on by others, vulnerable, in need of adult protection and insufficiently competent to participate in research. Knowledge about children is, therefore, generated largely from parents, teachers and other adult caretakers. The second perspective acknowledges children as persons with subjectivity, but attempts to use children as 'informants' are strongly conditioned by judgements about their cognitive abilities and social competence. The third (relatively new) strand extends the recognition of children's subjectivities to see children as social actors in their own right: effective research respondents, no less *inherently* competent than adults.

Finally, there is a small but growing interest in children becoming *researchers in their own right*. Mirroring earlier feminist arguments about research for and by women (e.g. Oakley 1981), it has been argued that knowledge about children's worlds is best produced *by children*. Advocates of this approach claim that it leads to better quality research since 'children are the primary source of knowledge about their views and experiences' (Alderson 2001, p. 151). In our child mobility study (see below), we noted that child researchers were better able than adults to elicit children's emotional and corporal experiences of movement and travel and to uncover instances of physical abuse (Robson et al. 2009, Porter et al. 2010). But research by children is not merely about the quality of research outcomes; it is widely portrayed as part of a wider 'political struggle for recognition, representation and equality' (Jones 2004, p. 114), helping to redress adult-child power imbalances in the research process (Kellett *et al.* 2004), and a way of 'rescu[ing] [children] from silence and exclusion, and from being represented, by default, as passive objects' (Alderson 2001, p. 142).

However, bringing children into research generates a number of practical, epistemological and ethical questions, many of which relate to more general critiques of participatory research (Christensen 2004, Hampshire et al. 2005, Gallagher 2008). First, much child-centred research has been criticised as being tokenistic, failing to really challenge generational hierarchies (Kellett et al. 2004, James 2007, Schäfer and Yarwood 2008). Power differentials, which shape adult-child interactions and thus research outcomes, may be downplayed or even ignored (Christensen 2004, James 2007). Such research, based on crude and superficial notions of 'empowerment', risks manipulation and promotes a form of 'ethnographic ventriloquism' (Geertz 1988, p. 145, cited by James 2007, p. 263), in which adults' views are expressed 'through' children and thereby receive an artificial sense of authenticity. A second, related, point is the risk of representing 'children's voices' as an authentic, unproblematic 'truth'. As we have noted, 'it is a naïve and dangerous form of essentialism to attribute uncritically particular rapport, or connection, to the biological attribute of age' (Robson et al. 2009, p. 475, see also James 2007).

Third, there can be a serious risk of privileging the views and perspectives of certain children over those of others. Although it is widely noted that children do not constitute a homogenous group with a common body of 'knowledge' and a common set of experiences, needs and desires (e.g. James 2007), the conceptualisation of 'children's knowledge' (like 'indigenous knowledge'; Sillitoe 1998) risks glossing over the diversity of children's lives and experiences. Indeed, the UNCRC itself, which sets out the rights of 'the child', risks doing the same. Differences between children, based on age, gender, class, wealth, disability, family situation and personality (among other things), are bound up in complex relations of power (Christensen and Prout 2002, Schäfer and Yarwood 2008, Crivello et al. 2009), which shape the nature of knowledge that might be produced from 'child-led' research, highlighting particular voices and representations while obscuring others.

Finally, there are serious ethical questions about children's research engagement; it is these that we focus on here. How does being a child researcher impact on children's rights? Is it

always in children's best interests to participate in research? Roberts (2000, p. 238, cited by James 2007, p. 268) observed that

the reasons why a child or a young person should choose to participate in research are clearer in some studies than others . . . we cannot take it for granted that participation in research and the development of increasingly sophisticated methods to facilitate children's participation is necessarily in their best interests. (See also Schäfer and Yarwood 2008, p. 124)

As noted by Pyer (2008), research carried out with the best of intentions can have unintended consequences. In our child mobility study, we had lengthy debates (with children and adults) about whether the participation of child researchers might infringe their rights to education and protection from exploitation (UNCRC Articles 28 and 32; see Robson et al. 2009, Porter et al. 2010); we expand on these concerns below.

Almost all evaluations of the impact on children of participation in, or conducting, research have been carried out during or immediately after the research activities (although see Johnson 2010 for a notable exception). Numerous potential benefits have been identified, including increased self-confidence, research/communication skills and self-efficacy (Alderson 2001, Kellett et al. 2004, Porter and Abane 2008, Schäfer and Yarwood 2008, Robson et al. 2009, Johnson 2010, Porter et al. 2010), alongside some potential costs: social, economic and others (Porter and Abane 2008, Robson et al. 2009, Porter et al. 2010). However, little is known about what happens *after* the project has finished and the adult researchers have gone away. Are any of the supposed benefits to children sustained or do they diminish over time? Might short-term benefits, such as increased confidence and aspirations, turn into long-term difficulties, as aspirations are not met and new-found status diminishes? And what about the costs – do they translate into long-term disadvantages or not?

This paper offers a small contribution to addressing these questions. We draw on our child mobility study conducted in Ghana, Malawi and South Africa (www.durham.ac.uk/child.mobility), which involved child-to-child, and adult-to-child, research. During the 3-year project, we evaluated the process and its impacts on the child researchers (Robson et al. 2009, Porter et al. 2010). Two years later, a sub-sample of children in Ghana were re-interviewed to find out what had happened to them since and what (if any) had been the impact of the project on their subsequent lives.

The child mobility study and child researchers

The aim of the child mobility study was to understand mobility constraints faced by girls and boys and how these might impact on livelihood opportunities and wellbeing. This involved exploring children's lived experiences of moving around their neighbourhoods, on daily journeys to school, to markets, to fetch water and firewood, to farms, to friends' homes and to other places where they needed or wanted to go. The research was conducted in three phases. Phase 1, which we focus on here, entailed recruiting and training child researchers¹ in each country to conduct research into mobility among their peers in their own communities. These findings were used to inform phase 2, in which adult academic researchers conducted qualitative research in eight field sites per country. In phase 3, a questionnaire survey was administered (by adults) to 3000 children to test the hypotheses arising from phases 1 and 2.

We have described elsewhere in detail how the child researcher phase of the project was conducted (Robson et al. 2009, Porter et al. 2010); the key points are summarised here. Adult academic collaborators in each country recruited child researchers through local schools in urban, peri-urban and rural settlements. In some cases, the selection process involved pupils being

asked to write an essay on transport/mobility. Consent to participate was sought from the children themselves and from parents/guardians and school heads. All the child researchers were in-school children and were identified (by their teachers or via the essay) as being academically able enough to undertake the training and research.

Although the overall project was designed by adults, we tried to ensure that the child researchers planned their own part. Nineteen children (from all three countries) participated in the inception workshop, where research objectives and methods were refined and ethical guidelines drawn up. We adopted a participatory approach to ethics (Pain 2008): child and adult researchers working together developed a 12-point Code of Practice, which stated that ‘Children should benefit from being researchers’ (Robson et al. 2009). This was followed by six training workshops, each about a week long (two per country), facilitated by adult academics, in which children were introduced to the project in more detail and were taught a range of relevant research methods. In groups, the children then decided on their specific research topics (within the overall transport/mobility theme), methods and time frame for conducting the research. The most popular methods were activity and travel diaries, photo-journals, accompanied walks and individual interviews, with some children also choosing to run focus group discussions, and ranking and counting exercises.

Altogether, 70 young researchers (YRs) (most aged 10–18 years) conducted fieldwork over periods ranging from 3 weeks to 2 months. They worked mostly in pairs, mainly within their own settlements and neighbourhoods. In-country adult researchers provided support via regular (usually weekly) visits and phone calls. The child researchers were also taught some simple data analysis techniques and were encouraged to discuss and reflect on their findings. They received small financial payments for their work and were allowed to keep various fieldwork materials: wristwatches (for timekeeping), folders, notebooks and copies of photographs.

At the final project workshop, 19 YRs (12 Ghanaians, 4 Malawians and 3 South Africans) produced a short book, drawing together their findings and those of their colleagues (available online at http://www.dur.ac.uk/child.mobility/children_mobility_book_webversion.pdf). Four thousand copies have been printed and presented (by child and adult researchers) in Ghana and Malawi (funded by the Africa Community Access Programme) to governmental and non-governmental stakeholders, including the child researchers’ schools and communities. All the 70 YRs were awarded certificates of workshop attendance.

Impacts of being researchers on the children: immediate findings

During the project, the UK-based lead researcher interviewed every child researcher available to elicit his or her views and experiences associated with the research. Forty-one child researchers were interviewed across the three countries: 12 in Malawi, 11 in Ghana and 18 in South Africa; the findings from these interviews have been published: Porter et al. (2010). Another publication described the experiences of the Malawian child researchers during the project: Robson et al. (2009). Here, we summarise those findings to provide a point of comparison for the follow-up work presented below.

Positive experiences

During the project, all the child researchers interviewed were generally very positive about their experiences. They all claimed to find the work interesting, enjoyable and informative. Prominent in their accounts was increased self-confidence, particularly in communicating with others. As one 14-year-old rural South African girl put it, ‘The project has shaped me to be able to talk to people nicely’ (Porter et al. 2010, p. 219), while 17-year-old Samuel² from Ghana commented

that 'It helped me about talking in public, meeting new people'. This increased self-confidence was evident to the adult researchers: at the inception workshop, the children were generally quietly spoken and many were afraid to voice their opinions; by the final workshop, all the child researchers present contributed enthusiastically and vocally to discussions, even when being filmed for Ghana national television.

Child researchers also commented positively on their interactions with the adult academics and research assistants (RAs), who were co-opted as friends and confidantes. Several made phone calls, office visits and occasional emails to particular RAs (Porter et al. 2010, p. 219). This opportunity to build personal networks with (possibly powerful and influential) adults outside their home communities was an important part of the project for some and was influential in widening horizons and opening a new sense of possibility, especially for the older children: 'It's the first time I've had interactions with professors and lecturers and the university campus and it made us aware we too can come here' (Kofi, 17 years, Ghana). Several children thought that they had learned skills from the adult researchers which might prove useful in the future. For example, one 14-year-old South African girl commented that 'The research taught me how to talk to people and now we can research on other things' (Porter et al. 2010, p. 219), while 16-year-old John from Ghana remarked that 'I liked working with adults. It makes you more learned'.

Finally, payment was important for the child researchers. This issue generated substantial debate among the adult research team, balancing the need for fair remuneration (to avoid exploitation), with labour legislation requirements and consistency between countries (Robson et al. 2009, Porter et al. 2010). While the sums paid were not large, children clearly valued these highly and put them to good use. One 16-year-old Malawian boy, for example, told us that 'the money which I was given has helped me to buy text books for school' (Robson et al. 2009, p. 473), while another 15-year-old Malawian boy reported using his earnings to buy fertiliser to contribute to household food production.

Negative experiences

While all the child researchers evaluated their experiences positively, some also pointed to difficulties. Most prominent were the time/opportunity costs of attending workshops and conducting research. The logistical difficulties of coordinating a three-country study meant that some workshops and research activities took place during school term time for some children. Although the timetables were agreed upon in advance with the children, parents and teachers, some secondary-school children, in particular, worried about the impact on their schoolwork. As one 15-year-old Malawian girl put it, 'What I did not like about doing the research is when we are doing our meetings or research while our friends are learning and I do not want to miss my classes' (Robson et al. 2009, p. 471). Indeed, one Malawian child was not granted parental permission to participate because of concerns about missing schoolwork. Some secondary-school pupils in Ghana, particularly girls, expressed similar concerns: 'it was difficult combining with school work. I'd prefer the holidays' (Florence, 16 years); 'it was a problem about school work a bit; it would be better in the holidays or weekends' (Rebecca, 16 years).

For some, research work also limited the time available for domestic work or income-generating activities. However, most parents valued and supported their children's participation in the project, and other household members sometimes helped with household chores to free up the child researcher's time, as Florence (16-year-old, Ghana) explained: 'My parents were very happy about it – working with the University of Cape Coast. My sister took over household chores from me'. To what extent this impacted negatively on the workloads and wellbeing of siblings is unclear, although this should be recognised as a possibility. For others, balancing time for

research with other demands was more difficult: ‘Yes [there was a problem with a clash with house work] because when I wanted to do it [the project], they [parents] would say I must do household first . . . But I managed it and finished everything in time’ (14-year-old South African girl; Porter et al. 2010, p. 223). One Ghanaian girl had to withdraw from the project because it was incompatible with her selling cassava, which provided vital household income (this was the only case of a YR withdrawing from the project).

Child researchers, like adults, can face difficulties and sometimes unpleasantness: abrupt refusals from potential respondents, occasional rudeness, demands for money and even the threat of physical violence. During training workshops, we worked through various such scenarios. Very few children reported problems dealing with respondents, but there were some exceptions. One South African girl said that ‘They [adults in the village] were saying this is nonsense and even swearing at us’ (Porter et al. 2010, p. 221), while a 16-year-old Ghanaian boy commented that ‘[Some of the adults] asked questions . . . “why is it important?” Sometimes they accuse you – “it’s no need to ask us questions like that”’ (Porter et al. 2010, p. 222). Demands for payment for photos and interviews were occasionally made to children in all three countries, which they understandably found difficult to handle.

Finally, there are the more mundane, but nevertheless real, day-to-day fieldwork hazards, such as illness, adverse weather conditions, transport difficulties and other practicalities. Long accompanied walks in the rainy season, which involved getting wet and muddy, were mentioned by some, as well as fears of ferocious dogs or snakes encountered during fieldwork:

the worst was the accompanied walk because you don’t know where they are going and when you’ve finished you have to accompany them to wherever else they are going. (Kofi, 17 years, Ghana)

Some others encountered unforeseen research expenses, which they had to meet out of pocket, such as transport costs or – in the case of one Malawian boy – soap to get clean after a long muddy walk home from fieldwork (Robson et al. 2009, p. 473).

Long-term evaluations and experiences of the child researchers

The evaluations discussed above reflect the experiences of child researchers during or shortly after their fieldwork. This has led us (and others) to speculate optimistically about the potential future benefits to children participating as researchers, ‘which we believe are immense and far reaching’ (Robson et al. 2009, p. 478; see also Schäfer and Yarwood 2008, Porter et al. 2010). How far are these speculations justified?

Since the project ended, we have maintained contact with many of the YRs in all the three countries, and several have actively kept in touch with us (as we encouraged them to do at the final project meetings). In Ghana, follow-up interviews were conducted with as many YRs as could be contacted in October–December 2009 (2–3 years after completion of fieldwork and 12–14 months after the final workshop). Eight of the original 16 were interviewed face to face; two more were followed up by telephone. To minimise potential bias, the interviewer was an adult unknown to the young people. Interviews were semi-structured and covered various themes relating to experiences of the project (training workshop, conducting the research and analysis, attending the final workshop and writing the book) and their subsequent personal and professional lives. Summary information about the eight interviewees is given in Table 1.

All eight YRs were keen to be re-interviewed and spoke enthusiastically about the project. All described positive impacts on their subsequent lives, ranging from self-confidence to new career or educational opportunities. The final workshop was a particular highlight for several:

Table 1. Summary information for Ghana ex-YRs in September–December 2009.

Name	Current age	Age at the start of the project	Sex	Location	Current activities
Rebecca	19 years	15 years	F	Cape Coast	Completed SHS ^a , working in a shop while attending computer literacy classes; hopes to read law at university
Mercy	19 years	15 years	F	Cape Coast	Completed SHS, not currently working
Kwesi	20 years	16 years	M	Cape Coast	Completed SHS, currently attending Cape Coast Technical Institute; hopes to become a military officer
Samuel	20 years	16 years	M	Sunyani	Completed SHS, studying for BSc in Agricultural Engineering at KNUST (Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi)
Kofi	20 years	16 years	M	Sunyani	Completed SHS, studying for BSc in Natural Resource Management at KNUST
Florence	19 years	15 years	F	Sunyani	Completed SHS, currently teaching children (3–4 years) in kindergarten; applied for tertiary education – nursing qualification
Abena	19 years	15 years	F	Sunyani	Completed SHS and pre-university diploma in IT; plans to do a 3-year journalism degree
Elizabeth	16 years	12 years	F	Sunyani	Currently in second year at SHS; wants to study nursing after completion

^aSHS, senior high school.

It was very exciting, I liked everything! The building, the people, everything! The workshop was good – everyone's idea was accepted. The visit to the castle was very good – everything! ... [Re training workshop] I loved it – I wanted to stay even longer! (Florence)

Self-confidence, pride and status

One of the strongest themes to emerge from all the follow-up interviews was an increased sense of self-confidence from conducting research and participating in workshops. Several commented that this had been of enduring benefit, enabling them to communicate effectively in new situations:

At first I was a very shy person, but because of skills in interviewing, I can approach people and talk to them freely. ... This project ... has taken my shyness away. Now I don't feel unnecessarily shy as I used to be and I think this will stay with me forever. The project has made me more confident in what-ever I do. The confidence alone can open opportunities for me ... If it were those days [before the project], I could not even look straight into your face during the interview, but now, even though it is my first time of meeting you, I am comfortable to speak freely to you. (Mercy)

The skills have given me the confidence to talk to people. Initially when I wanted to talk to an adult, I became a bit tense up but now, as you can see, I can talk freely without shyness or tension. ... The confidence and patience that I acquired throughout the project are going to be with me throughout my life. ... This makes it really easy for me to fit in any place I go, no matter who I meet. (Kwesi)

Contributing to this self-confidence was an enormous pride in their achievements, particularly producing the book:

I have written a book! I didn't know it would be so easy to write a book! I am the author of a book! (Florence)

This book will be seen by people all over the world and it has my name on it. When anyone buys it they will see my name! (Abena)

This sense of pride came out far more strongly in the follow-up interviews than in the earlier ones, possibly because the book had not yet come out, so the results felt less tangible. All the interviewees had kept copies of their research work, and three brought the copies, along with their certificates, to the interviews:

I still go through all my notes – it makes me proud. I've brought all my notes from the project to university with me, I've told all my friends here about the book. (Samuel)

For some, participation in the project had led to elevated status within their communities:

Now people [from home town] respect me a lot. The UCC [University of Cape Coast, the local collaborating institution] bus came to pick us up. They [neighbours] thought I'm a big person! Now people in town come to ask me for advice. (Kofi)

Personal contacts and networks

Another very prominent theme in the follow-up interviews was the new friends made: other YRs in Ghana, academics from UCC³ and children from Malawi and South Africa:

The workshop in Mankessim was a wonderful experience because I made a lot of friends from different parts of Ghana and Africa. For example, I met a friend from Malawi – Ali. He taught me some words in his native language and I also taught him some words in my language. . . . The next day I drew a cartoon of Ali and I showed it to him . . . He became very excited and we became friends from that moment. (Kwesi)

[Biggest impact of the project is] how we related to each other. People from Malawi, South Africa, we all came together. We are all at one level . . . It was the first time I ever saw a South African face. Before that I thought they were all whites. (Florence)

Many of these contacts had been sustained. All eight interviewees reported being still in touch with other Ghanaian YRs, as the accounts given below illustrate:

After the project, I used to contact [X] and she called me frequently. Nowadays we do not contact each other so frequently. . . . But these friendships are important to me and even now I know that any time I go to Sunyani⁴ I have a friend there. (Mercy)

I am still in contact with Samuel and Abena, and I see them sometimes. (Florence)

I still see Cyril – he is here at KNUST⁵, and I've been calling Mercy. (Samuel)

Almost all were still in touch with adult RAs, who continued to give them advice about their studies and other matters. These relationships were highly valued, both affectively and instrumentally, for providing sound advice and as a possible route to future university admission:

We had a good relationship with the adult researchers because they were very friendly. After the project, [X] used to call me frequently to ask me about my school and the progress in my studies. [Y] also used to call me to advise me to study hard. In fact, all of them became our friends. (Mercy)

I visited [X] at UCC – we went out for lunch. And I keep in touch with [Y]. I phone him. He gives me advice – how to study well. (Samuel)

Fewer had stayed in touch with YRs from overseas, but Samuel said that he occasionally phoned one of the South African YRs after the workshop, and Abena had kept up a written correspondence with a Malawian YR. Lack of phone credit was reported as an obstacle to maintaining international friendships, as was keeping correct contact information:

After the workshop, I could not contact him because the telephone number he gave me could not be reached. But he also gave me his email address and so I will try it one of these days. (Kwesi)

Interestingly, none of the YRs reported any negative impacts (e.g. jealousies) of their research participation on relationships with friends, siblings or others, even when asked a direct question about this.

Academic and career-related impacts

The biggest downside of the project identified by YRs at the time of the research was the time costs and associated impact on their schoolwork. When asked specifically about negative aspects, three re-voiced these concerns:

The only negative thing is that I had to miss lessons in class in order to participate in the project. Sometimes I found it very difficult to catch up with my colleagues when it comes to the lessons I missed, and I would be too tired to study in the evenings when I came back from fieldwork. (Kwesi)

[If doing the project again] we would stagger the work – we need to be given more time. We were at school, so the only time we had to work on the project was after school. (Kofi)

The only problem was time. Because we did the research on schooldays, and we did the interviews after school, and got harassed and embarrassed at school for not doing our homework. (Abena)

However, with a couple of years' hindsight, all the YRs thought that their research experience would help them in their future studies, and some were already using their skills for university work:

Now the skills [learned in the project] help me to seek information from other people. In the future, I want to study law, so I think the research skills will help me to collect information from people. (Rebecca)

At first, my friends thought I would be wasting my time [doing this project]. They said instead of learning, I would be moving from place to place, which could affect my studies negatively. After the project, my friends are now happy that I took part ... they realised my involvement in the project was a good thing. (Mercy)

[The research skills] help with field trips that we do with our university courses. ... It also helped me find out about the admissions process here [KNUST]. (Kofi)

All the YRs also believed that their knowledge, experiences, skills and having the certificate would help them in their future careers (see also Schäfer and Yarwood 2008):

The project has taught me to be a good listener and also to become more patient with people. I want to be a military officer and I believe that being a good listener will help me handle people effectively. (Kwesi)

I have had my certificate laminated. I am going to be a journalist. I have learned so many things how to interview people, how to get their story. Because when a journalist comes it is after the incident has happened, so you need to know how to interview the person, how to ask questions. ... I can do these

things. I will show them [prospective employers] my certificate and they will see, oh, she has been to a workshop, she knows how to do these things. . . . The certificate, it will help me. If I have that and another person doesn't, the employers will choose me. (Abena)

When you show them this certificate, they cannot say you are just small-fry! . . . That certificate will help me in nursing. In nursing you have to talk to people and do research. (Elizabeth)

Moreover, four YRs said that they had already used their experience and/or certificates to help gain employment or other opportunities:

I used the certificate when I got a [temporary] job as a school-teacher. I showed it to the headmistress in the interview. (Abena)

I went to work in a hospital before I started university. I showed them my certificate and I put it on my CV. (Kofi)

I have become the Welfare Officer in my department [at KNUST] because I told them about the research. I try to solve the other students' problems. (Samuel)

At the interview for the teaching job [currently nursery teacher] I told the headmistress about the research. (Florence)

Discussion

The follow-up interviews suggest that the YRs' evaluations of their research experiences were more unequivocally positive a couple of years down the line than at the time. Problems identified during fieldwork (missing school, lack of time for homework or domestic chores, problematic respondents and practical difficulties) had been largely forgotten or were no longer considered substantial issues. The three interviewees who mentioned clashes with schoolwork did so only in response to a direct question; it was not mentioned spontaneously by any. And, with hindsight, none thought that there had been any lasting damage: the issue was more the short-term pressure of catching up with schoolwork when they were tired or the embarrassment of incomplete homework than the long-term negative impacts on academic performance.

We should perhaps not be surprised at the YRs' successes since completing the project. Although they lived in resource-poor settlements, they were all in-school children selected, at least in part, based on their academic abilities. They may well have gained university admission or formal-sector employment without participating in the project. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that their concerns about the negative aspects of participating in the project were relatively short-lived.

We are not suggesting that long-term evaluations of research participation necessarily matter more than immediate ones. The stress of having to catch up with school work, fears of ferocious dogs or unpleasant refusals from prospective participants are very real and can be extremely distressing, even if they do not carry lasting detrimental consequences. However, our work does imply that the full impacts (positive, negative or neutral) of engaging children in research cannot always be known at the time and that there may be important things to learn from following up over a longer period.

If we continue to follow up the YRs over coming years, the picture may change again. As noted above, they were extremely proud of their certificates and had very high hopes of their instrumental value. While three interviewees had apparently used their certificates to gain employment, it remains to be seen whether these will indeed be useful in their quest to obtain permanent jobs as journalists, military officers or nurses. If these expectations and aspirations are not met, will that lead to later disillusionment? The perhaps unrealistic nature of some aspirations was

evident in a couple of off-the-cuff remarks: Kofi, only half-joking, commented that with his certificate, he would be able to get admission to UCC, while Abena's mother (whom we contacted in order to find Abena) asked (again, half-joking) why her daughter could not gain admission to a UK university with her certificate.

In an earlier publication, we argued that Article 3 of the UNCRC, which states that 'In all actions concerning children . . . the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration', is highly problematic in its interpretation (Robson et al. 2009). First, the identification of 'best interests' involves resolving often conflicting values among both adults and children about the importance of, for example, formal education versus informal learning experiences. Second, there is a difference between 'best' in an ideal world and 'making the best' of a messier set of economic and social realities in which children find themselves. We have argued that "'best" has to be seen in relative rather than absolute terms – the best of what is realistically possible or available under specific economic, technological and social conditions' (Robson et al. 2009, p. 470–1). A similar point can be made in relation to 'protection from exploitation', which is rarely grounded in the children's lived experiences and may overlook the role of wider structural inequalities in shaping children's work (Robson et al. 2009; see also Bey 2003, Nieuwenhuys 2005). In other words, we and others have argued that interpretation of children's rights needs to be situational rather than absolute, making the best of the messy and often non-ideal realities of children's lives, which may involve complex negotiations of competing and priorities and interests. This is not an excuse for ethical sloppiness; rather it is an attempt to work towards what Christensen and Prout (2002, p. 492) described as 'a practical, value-oriented ethics' (see also Horton 2008, Pain 2008).

Here, we take this argument a stage further, suggesting that the interpretation of children's rights must also adopt a *temporal* perspective. Although the UNCRC acknowledges that rights and responsibilities shift with 'the evolving capacities of the child' (Article 5), the impression given is one of linear and predictable change over time. In practice, 'best interests' and 'exploitation' are dynamic concepts, and perspectives on what constitute either of these may shift in unpredictable ways over the course of, and beyond, childhood. And because the shifts are not predictable, it is difficult to weigh up the relative importance of immediate and possible long-term impacts. If a child feels upset after an unpleasant encounter with a potential respondent, or misses out on earning extra household income as a result of undertaking academic research, to what extent should these experiences be offset against the future, necessarily uncertain, possibility that increased confidence and skills acquired will enhance future opportunities and well-being? With the benefit of hindsight, it became easier for the YRs in our project to identify which impacts were lasting or fleeting and which made a material difference to their lives.

The main focus of this paper has been to apply a temporal lens to the ethics of children's research participation. However, it is also worth reflecting on the extent to which our work has addressed other criticisms levelled at some children's research initiatives, highlighted in the introduction. These are part of a 'wider ethics' that relates not just to individual researchers' experiences, but also to how children's views are represented and communicated to policy-makers in the context of inter- and intra-generational power relations and concerns about social justice.

Most obviously, perhaps, selecting child researchers based (partly) on their academic abilities has inevitably meant privileging the views and perspectives of these children at the expense of others. The rationale for this was largely practical: the time and resource constraints of the project meant that children had 1 week (the training workshop) to acquire the necessary skills to conduct semi-independent research, which entailed grasping some quite complex concepts quickly. This highlights another issue about children's research: the extent to which it must fit within an 'adult' research paradigm. In order to be valued by the academic community and policy-makers, the children's research had to fit a particular model, using well-established

methods (interviews, focus groups and various other techniques that now comprise the participatory research canon). We thought that the process of socialisation into this research paradigm would be easier and quicker for children who had already demonstrated their ability to 'achieve' in adult-valued ways through academic success. This observation raises another series of questions, which we are not able to address here, about whether young people's research can offer the opportunity to rethink research paradigms: whether their contribution can only be valued if they conduct research as 'proto-adults' or if new approaches to doing research and establishing validity and authority might be possible.

Our research design, which combined child- and adult-led research, helped us to address the related criticism of children's 'voices' being accepted uncritically as authentic representations of 'truth'. At the planning stage, we agonised about whether it was necessary to incorporate adult-led research: what would adults be able to find out about children's lives that children could not? Our decision to use adult researchers was based partly on practical considerations: the children's time constraints, combined with logistical and safety issues entailed in them conducting all the research in 24 field sites, precluded this possibility, due to the size and scope of the project. However, there were also epistemological considerations at stake. Were the views and experiences that the child researchers uncovered any more 'real' or 'true' than those identified by the adult researchers? Our analysis of the resulting research materials leads us to suggest that each can offer different *kinds* of insights. As noted above, child researchers elicited much more detailed accounts of children's emotional and corporal experiences of movement and travel and uncovered some instances of physical abuse (Robson et al. 2009, Porter et al. 2010). However, the adult researchers were able to draw out a wider range of perspectives from both children and adults on, for example, mobility constraints in different settlement types. Indeed, it was often at the intersection between the insights generated by the child and adult researchers that more nuanced understandings of the complex, negotiated and embodied nature of children's mobilities emerged.

The design of the child mobility study also helped us to address some accusations of tokenism often apparent in child-led research. Because the adult research component was premised on the findings from the children's research, the adult researchers had to engage actively and critically with these. Of course, inter-generational power differentials were not eliminated in this process; however, we believe that doing the child-led research first, so that it could shape the rest of the project rather than being an addendum, was important in redressing them.

Conclusion

This is a very small-scale study, based on follow-up interviews with 10 YRs in Ghana. It is possible that the six Ghanaian YRs who were not contactable might have had different views; for one thing, none was still in touch with the adult researchers. However, neighbours and acquaintances said that they had gone away to study or work, so there is no reason to suppose that their experiences were significantly worse than those we interviewed. The subsequent experiences of the Malawian or South African YRs might also have been different from those of their Ghanaian counterparts, although *ad hoc* news from them suggests that they too are, by and large, doing well.⁶ In Malawi, for example, several of the YRs are now in higher education or formal-sector employment. Three that we know of are at university in Malawi. A fourth gained a university scholarship in Sudan, and another moved to South Africa with her husband, both of them obtained their passports through the project. However, some are just 'sitting' (not in employment or education), while one has just had to suspend his tertiary education for lack of fees.

It is not our intention, therefore, to draw general conclusions about the directions in which young people's experiences of research participation might change over time. Children's lives unfold in nonlinear and unpredictable ways, which make it impossible to foresee the full future

consequences, positive, negative or neutral, of being part of a research project. Instead, we invite other researchers to take the temporalities in the ethics of children's knowledge production seriously.

What does this mean in practice for adult researchers trying to work in collaborative ways with children? First, we must expect that things will change, during and after research projects in unknowable ways: in the words of Agnew (2006, p. 4), we must be open to 'being . . . surprised by what the world throws up', and be ready to respond to the ethical challenges that this generates. We should not expect that ethical guidelines drawn up at the start of a project will continue to apply unproblematically; instead, we should be prepared to re-visit and re-negotiate these as the often messy realities of people's lives unfold. As Bauman (1993, p. 12, cited in Horton 2008, p. 368) observed: 'human reality is messy and ambiguous – and so moral decisions, unlike abstract ethical principles, are ambivalent. It is in this sort of world that we must live'. Even over the course of the project, as the YRs faced important examinations, changes in family situations and other unforeseen events, we had to continually rethink, on an individual basis, how to achieve the aspiration, enshrined in the project Code of Practice, that 'children should benefit from being researchers'.

Second, our work underscores the point that participatory research is not a one-off event, whose effects are frozen at a single point in time. If participation achieves its goal of being an empowering, and therefore potentially life-changing, experience, we should not expect that changes will all happen overnight. Any of us who gets involved in participatory research with children must, therefore, recognise that we are in it for the long haul. We cannot simply do the research, leave and hope that things will turn out OK. Moreover, the rapid expansion in the availability of mobile phones and other communication technologies sets up a facility for, and often an expectation of, sustaining research-generated relationships far beyond the end of a project. As Coleman and Collins (2006, p. 5) have noted, 'in a world of inter-connections, we never leave the field'. While we may not always be in a position to continue to provide emotional and other kinds of support to ex-child researchers once a project has finished, by sticking around, at least on the end of a phone or email, we can at least continue to observe how things turn out, insights that may help us to become more sensitive to the dynamic, temporal and 'evental' (Horton 2008, p. 365) nature of children's knowledge production in future work.

Notes

1. We acknowledge that the term 'child' is problematic and culturally contingent (Dehne and Riedner 2001). However, at the opening workshops, the 'child researchers' agreed that this was the term they wanted to use. Two years later, at the final workshop, their consensus had shifted towards 'young researchers'. Here, we use these terms interchangeably.
2. Pseudonyms are used throughout.
3. University of Cape Coast, Ghana.
4. Sunyani is a large town, 8 hours' bus journey from Cape Coast, where Mercy lives.
5. Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi.
6. Tragically, one of the South African young researchers has since died.

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