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Children as Research Collaborators: Issues and Reflections from a Mobility Study in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract This paper reflects on issues raised by work with children in an ongoing child mobility study in three sub-Saharan African countries: Ghana, Malawi and South Africa. There are now 70 school pupils of varying ages involved in the project, but the paper is particularly concerned with the participation of those children 14 years and under. We examine the significant ethical issues associated with working with younger child researchers, and linked questions concerning the spaces open to them in African contexts where local cultural constructions of childhood and associated economic imperatives (which commonly drive family and household endeavour) help shape the attitudes of adults to children's rights and responsibilities and inter-generational power relations.

Keywords Child researchers · Africa · Ethics · Mobility · Transport · Power relations

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Introduction

This paper offers reflections on a series of issues around working with children as researchers in Sub-Saharan Africa. It is still relatively rare for children to take the role of researchers, as opposed to the "researched," although interest in collaborative work with children is growing. A serious discussion of some of the very complex and thorny ethical dilemmas around working with child researchers is thus required. Here, we begin to grapple with some of these issues, including adults' responsibilities to protect child researchers from harm (including long-term harm possibly arising from disruption of education), questions of remuneration and managing expectations.

Background to the Child Mobility Research Project and Its Child Researcher Component

This paper draws on ongoing research from a three-year study of children's mobility and associated transport issues in three sub-Saharan African countries, Ghana, Malawi and South Africa [www.dur.ac.uk/child.mobility/]. The project focuses on the mobility constraints faced by girls and boys in accessing health, education, markets and other facilities, how these constraints impact on children's current and future livelihood opportunities, and the lack of guidelines on how to tackle them. Our principal project aim is to provide a base of evidence strong enough to substantially improve transport- and mobility-related policy and programmes for children and young people, with important developmental implications in terms of improved educational and health status.

We are utilising an innovative two-strand child-centred methodology, involving both adult and child researchers.

In addition to a more conventional interview-based study with children, parents, teachers, health workers, community leaders and other key informants, conducted by the academic researchers and their adult research assistants,[1] there is a complementary component of research conducted by child[2] researchers (facilitated by adults). Work from an earlier pilot study suggested that children interviewing their peers might uncover issues that would not be raised directly with adults, either because of embarrassment or perceived insignificance of problems. Such issues include pedestrian children being frightened by drivers hooting their horns or young female passengers being harassed by taxi drivers.

One could arguably obtain a strong data set on child mobility issues based on the child researcher component alone, without an adult researcher strand. However, previous experience (Porter & Abane 2008) had led us to the conclusion that a substantial multi-region research programme would need to incorporate more adult input for several reasons. First, some research work entails skills that require substantial prior training (such as statistical data analysis). Second, combining insights from both children (as community "insiders") and adult academic researchers (outsiders), enables the juxtaposition of insider and outsider perspectives. Third, children face particular logistical constraints: they are usually restricted in their travel opportunities by educational and other family concerns. Moreover, the pressures on children's own time in an African developing country context (discussed below) are often very considerable, given the widespread need for children to help contribute to family livelihoods.

As the academic adult researchers in this project, our aim in the paper is to explore the significant ethical issues associated with working with young child researchers in sub-Saharan Africa. This involves two interlinked components:

1. Questions of power relations and compliance in collaborations between adult and child researchers.
2. The specific complexities associated with supporting child researchers in African contexts.

Interactions involving adult and child researchers working together are still fairly uncommon, but interest in collaborative, child-focused research is growing (e.g. Cahill 2004; Hart 1997; Nieuwenhuys 1996; Witter &

Bukokhe 2004). This interest tends to be linked to attempts to redress the power imbalance between adults and children in the research process, to protect children from covert or exploitative research, and to give due recognition to their rights (Alderson 2001; Jones 2004; James 2007; Kellett et al. 2004; Roberts 2000). James (2007) suggests that this can have a more powerful and practical policy impact than more conventional types of research done by adults.

However, child researchers' involvement may itself be exploitative or inappropriate (James 2007, citing Roberts 2000), and predicaments of representation exist. When the research involves cross-cultural interactions, further complications in terms of power imbalances may be anticipated (Lykes 1993). We have minimised these, because our in-country research teams (with the exception of one collaborator) are composed of country nationals. Nonetheless, the potential power imbalances between established urban-resident academic research collaborators, their younger but still relatively privileged university-educated research assistants, and our child researcher collaborators based in their communities cannot be ignored.[3] Nor can the association of the project with overseas funding.

These components thus bring to the fore in a particularly critical form some of the ethical issues associated with citizen contribution to research partnerships and the need to build more democratic participation between client communities and professional researchers. These issues, raised in this journal well over a decade ago by Walsh-Bowers (1993) and Serrano-Garcia (1994), remain highly pertinent today.

All the adult project collaborators in this study, both African and European, favour participatory approaches to research and acknowledge the importance of transforming norms of knowledge production and power. Yet, supporting child collaborators has raised especially complex challenges, not least because of the specific African context. Children's lives commonly vary greatly from those of their Western counterparts, due to the economic imperatives that drive family and household endeavours: children are widely expected to provide labour and other support within the extended family, including care of the sick, particularly now in families affected by HIV/AIDS (Andvig 2000; Bryceson 2006; Chant & Jones 2005; Robson 1996). Pedestrian load carrying (of water, fuelwood, produce, groceries, etc.) represents a substantial daily task for many young people (Porter et al. 2007). The nature of work duties and the extent to which these are gender-specific varies, according to local agro-economic and socio-cultural

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[1] The adult research strand will be considered in other, separate publications.

[2] The term child/children is used to refer to all the young people involved in the project. This might seem an inappropriate or awkward word, especially when referring to older teenagers (Alderson 2001), but when we discussed the issue with the young participants at our inception workshop they informed us that they were comfortable in being referred to as children.

[3] These issues were explicitly considered in our project ethics review, approved by the funder and our respective universities prior to the start of this study.

contexts, but there is a widespread tendency for girl children to experience the greater burden.

All our child researchers are sufficiently privileged to attend school, but they were recruited from relatively poor settlements. All are expected to contribute substantially more to household reproduction than would be expected in a Western context (notably carrying water, cleaning, cooking, collecting firewood, especially but not only in rural areas). In all three countries, some of the child researchers—boys and girls—must also contribute directly to family livelihoods through work performed outside school hours (for instance, herding animals in South Africa's Eastern Cape). This work often makes an essential contribution to school fees or associated schooling costs such as uniforms and books. Thus it is unsurprising that, even despite the modest remit of the child researcher programme, one very enthusiastic young child researcher in Ghana (a girl of 14) reluctantly had to withdraw after the training week because she was required to contribute to her family income by selling cassava, and she could not cope with the additional demands of the research.

Despite the weight of children's labour responsibilities, African cultural constructions of childhood tend to emphasise children's—especially girls'—lowly position in family hierarchies and the importance of respect for elders (for example, see Coker-Appiah & Cusack 1999; Lamptey 1998; both re Ghana). Delayed school starts and schooling interruptions caused by economic misfortunes and family responsibilities mean that young people may still be completing primary school in their late teens. For males especially, "youth" as a social category can extend into the late 30s: i.e., until the time a man is able to support his own family (Chant & Jones 2005). In South Africa, inter-generational relations are complicated by the key role youth played in the anti-apartheid movement. Here and elsewhere, especially in urban Africa, youth have started to enter into political space in complex ways. Images of youth as unruly and potentially destructive thus cross-cut with images of political manipulation of youth by those in authority (Durham 2000).

We are working in a political arena in which our focus on children's needs (for transport and mobility) and views is per se likely to be perceived as a suspect—even dangerous—approach by some adults within the study communities (Durham 2000; Riger 1989). Power moves among actors and different social positions (including adult to child as well as child to child), being produced and negotiated as social interactions progress (Christensen 2004). That we had recruited children to our research team could thus well be viewed as an even greater cause for concern, subverting the traditional view of children's proper role as supporters, not leaders. Encouraging disruption of the innate techniques of power in society that operate (in a Foucauldian sense) to induce youth to maintain appropriate forms of conduct in a self-regulatory way will inevitably be perceived as dangerous. This is an issue to which we will return.

In line with the theme of this special issue, the paper focuses particularly on the younger child researchers in our project (those 14 years and under), who represent over one quarter of the total child researchers (twenty out of seventy). However, we have incorporated material from the wider age range where this adds substantially to the argument, whether by supporting or contrasting with the observations related to younger children. Following a discussion of methodology, we review age- and gender-related patterns of interaction within the project and then consider some of the ethical issues that have arisen as these interactions unfolded.

Method

As noted above, our project has both adult and child researcher strands. It is the latter strand that is the focus of this paper. This strand commenced early in the project as we wished to draw on the child researchers' findings in designing the adult qualitative and quantitative research enquiries.

Recruitment and Training

Our child researchers are all in-school children, many of whom have a good grasp of English. Country collaborators recruited child researchers by contacting local schools in two regions in each country (Cape Coast area and the Sunyani region in Ghana, Blantyre and Lilongwe districts in Malawi, Eastern Cape and NorthWest Province in South Africa). Attempts were made to recruit children of diverse ages between ten and eighteen from schools in a mix of settlement types: urban, peri-urban and rural. In urban areas we focused on poorer neighbourhoods where transport barriers were expected to be particularly great. Where schools approved the project concept, the collaborators usually visited to present the project to the pupils, who were asked to volunteer to participate. An essay on transport/mobility was sometimes set to help select children with a clear interest in the research issue. Parental and school approval for the training and subsequent research period was sought in all cases. The children were encouraged to conduct their research only in locations where they live or are at school, to minimise travel needs and to enable them to utilise their local understandings and social networks. Once the children had indicated where they would conduct their research, country collaborators, teachers and/ or the child researchers themselves visited the relevant

community leaders to explain the studies and their potential value to the community and to obtain permissions.

Selecting and Employing Research Methods

Although the overall project was designed by adults, children were involved at an early stage in refining the shape of their own strand. Nineteen children (11 Ghanaian, 4 South African and 4 Malawian), joined adult researchers at the project inception workshop in Blantyre, Malawi, to discuss research plans and draw up a preliminary set of ethical guidelines. Afterwards, six individual child researcher training workshops were held, two in each country, facilitated by the research collaborators and, in most cases, locally appointed research assistants. At these one-week workshops, the children were introduced to the project in more detail, taught a range of research methods that could be used to explore transport and mobility patterns and needs, reviewed the project's ethical guidelines, and decided in groups on the research methods they would use and the timeframe within which they would work. The majority of groups chose the following research methods: one-week activity and travel diaries, photographic journals of children's travel to school and at work (using disposable cameras), in-depth one-to-one interviews with children and accompanied walks (with mapping or narrative description). Some children also undertook focus group discussions, ranking exercises, counting loads (along routes where heavy loads are commonly carried), and weighing loads carried by children. All methods were focused at improving understanding of the places children of varying age, gender and schooling status go, how they travel there, and the transport problems they face.

Data Analysis and Application of Findings

The child researchers were taught some simple data analytic techniques at the workshop, based around observation, interview analysis, counting and ranking. Efforts were made to encourage the children to discuss their findings with each other and to plan further steps in their research as they went along. They were helped to write up their findings as the field work progressed. The child researcher groups have now completed their research, and their findings have fed into and helped shape the wider ongoing adult research programme. These findings range from children's widespread fear of dogs and snakes on pedestrian journeys to the sanctions imposed by parents and elders when children travel to places that have been designated out-of-bounds (such as video halls and bars) or arrive home late at night. Many child researchers have presented their findings at school assemblies and some have reported and discussed their findings directly with policy makers and practitioners through meetings set up within the project.

Modes of Operation and Support

There are in total seventy young researchers, the majority aged between 10 and 18 years. Table 1 shows the size, age and gender composition of the groups in each country. Mostly the children worked independently or in pairs over a period of 3 weeks to 2 months. Where children worked in pairs, they were usually friends of similar age who lived nearby. Country collaborators and their research assistants (henceforth termed RAs) provided support for the child researchers following the training. There were four to eight RAs per country, in all cases a mix of males and females. Most collaborators and/or RAs visited the child researchers weekly during the research phase or, where long distances prohibited this, kept in touch between visits by regular phone calls.

Monitoring and Assessment of the Child Researcher Component

The child researcher component, including field experiences, child-adult researcher relationships and data produced, has been under constant review by country collaborators and their RAs. During monitoring visits, the

Table 1 Size, age and gender composition of child researcher groups

Country and zone	Total no. of child researchers	Girls 14 years and under	Boys 14 years and under	Girls 15+ years	Boys 15+ years
Malawi: Blantyre	12	2	0	4	6
Malawi: Lilongwe	12	0	0	6	6
Ghana: coastal	8	1	1	2	4
Ghana: forest	8	1	0	2	5
South Africa: Eastern Cape	18	7	2	2	7
South Africa NorthWest Province	12	1	5	5	1
Totals	70	12	8	21	29

UK-based lead researcher interviewed individually every participant child researcher contactable at that time to learn their views on the project, their experience of using the methods they had selected, the support they had received from in-country project staff and any things they thought might be improved. A total of 41 child researchers were interviewed: 12 in Malawi (Blantyre zone only), 11 in Ghana (5 Sunyani zone, 6 Cape Coast zone), 18 in South Africa (10 Eastern Cape, 8 North West Province). In Malawi and Ghana the child researchers all spoke sufficient English for the interviews to be conducted in English by the UK researcher, but in South Africa's Eastern Cape it was necessary to employ a Xhosa interpreter. RAs were similarly interviewed separately and in confidence, to gain their views on the child researcher component, on the support they had given, on any difficulties and possible improvements.

Child Researchers' Interactions with Others

Interactions with Adult Researchers

In this post-fieldwork review, the child researchers (of all ages) in all three countries were encouragingly positive about their interactions with their adult partners, especially where regular face-to-face contact was feasible:

> It helps to see people regularly, to advise us and to make us to be strong. … I liked working with adults. They changed my way of asking questions – not to be in a hurry. (Florence,[4] 15 years, Malawi).

Not one child had anything negative to say about their interactions with adults in the project. Arguably this could be because of the highly unequal power relationship with adult academics and fears of retribution, but in the review interviews by the UK researcher every effort was made to pick up potential issues in confidential conversations with the individual children and, where possible, their teachers and parents. Child researchers often emphasised the consideration and support provided by RAs and research collaborators in solving project-related problems (such as where to weigh the child porters' loads).

Young RAs (mostly in their 20s) were co-opted as friends and confidantes. Phone calls, office visits, and occasionally emails were made by the child researchers to particular RAs (usually of the same sex) in every country. This was especially true for older children who possibly had more resources (some had their own mobile phones) and confidence to build personal links to people they clearly felt were interested in their lives, of importance to them, and not

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[4] We have used pseudonyms wherever individual children are cited directly throughout the text.

so much older. Nonetheless, even some of the younger ones clearly felt they had made significant friendships:

> XXX [female RA] came to my home to say hello;..[she beams, obviously very happy about this]… she talked to me about individual interviews – and she asked my problems. I said shortage of fees and sometimes I go to school with no breakfast. [prompt] She didn't ask me research problems. It was easier to talk to XXX. (Beatrice, orphaned girl, aged 14, rural Malawi).

Though the RAs all had prior experience of living with younger children in their own families and were positive about their contact with children overall, they varied by age, gender and personality in their ability to work with particular children. Being on first-name terms from the training workshops onwards helped set the tone of communication, but the male RAs in South Africa and Ghana said they found it harder to communicate with the younger children and found those children less open when problems arose (such as difficulties operating the disposable cameras). However, they were amazed at the diligence with which the younger children got on with and completed their research. Men found it hardest to communicate with young girls: "with boys it was easy, you could just talk, but the girls could be very shy, look down. I had to keep asking…." (male RA, mid-20s, South Africa).

In all three countries it was generally observed that children from rural areas were shyer than the urban children in interaction with both their (urban) peers and the adults. However, many subsequently produced very good work. Some of the rural children in Eastern Cape, South Africa, observed that through interviewing, they had learned how to talk to people:

> The project has shaped me to be able to talk to people nicely. (Nokhululekile, 14 year old girl).
> It was easy and research taught me how to talk to people and now we can research on other things. (Xolelwa, 14 year old girl).

The conclusions of the RAs are well summarised by the comment of a Ghanaian male RA: "it has been challenging, stressful, and good!" A Malawian male RA who has substantial experience of field research pointed to what he saw as the benefits for adult researchers of working with children:

> Children know the social networks…and things beyond the adult eye, or which we'd overlook. And these children [are] giving us a fair view of their lived life because they know the politics and dos and don'ts of the community, so it's very important to incorporate them in the research process.

In their own reviews of the child researcher component, the academic collaborators have similarly mostly been positive, though the time-consuming nature of the support required, the responsibility they felt, especially for the younger children, and the vital importance of regular contact has been widely observed. One collaborator reported at times feeling ambivalent/uncomfortable, especially about whether the children cast the adult researchers in a teacher role and were not really freely volunteering to participate:

Despite the rhetoric of participation I think the child researchers did as they were told/asked because of overwhelming cultural/social constructions and expectations that children do what adults (especially powerful, well-educated adults of authority) tell them... I think we need to avoid a one-sided positive upbeat assessment – it is much messier and complex when dealing with very unequal power relations between adult academics (some from overseas) and African school children. The children's motivations to participate may well be much more to do with perceived benefits and (perceived) harsh consequences of not complying.

Although our focus here is on age and gender as axes of difference, indications of other differences (ethnicity, wealth and education) inevitably emerge, adding further complexity to the patterns and power relations we describe. The fact that the project has overseas funding and the involvement of European researchers (notably in Malawi) may have encouraged schools' interest in the project, it may have also encouraged some teachers to push children into participation, although we have no specific information to this effect. Probably more significant has been the dominant involvement and visibility of local academic staff and research assistants who demonstrate materially the opportunities that education can offer children. In Ghana, for instance, many of the child researchers and participating schools seem to view the link with Cape Coast University staff as an important connection on which they hope to be able to build (in the form of assistance with university entry). Local and overseas collaborators have been approached on occasion by school teachers and child researchers of all ages and both genders looking for additional financial support or employment, but the emphasis generally appears to be rather more towards building associational power (Arendt 1958) through construction of longer-term social networks rather than expecting immediate financial gain.

Child Researcher Interactions with Their Respondents: Age and Gender Perspectives

Interactions between child researchers and their respondents of varying ages presented an interesting picture of age and gender relations. A majority of both younger and older child researchers in all three countries found that it was easiest to interview children of their own gender about travel and transport problems. Being shy of the opposite sex is a common theme, especially for younger adolescent girls and boys, as the following quotations illustrate:

It was easier [interviewing] with girls than boys, because I'm afraid, I'm shy of boys. (Ntombekhaya, 14-year old girl, South Africa).
I did accompanied walks with children of 12 and 13 – they were all boys. I just didn't like going with girls [laughs] I'm probably a bit shy. (Sibulelo, 10 year old boy, South Africa).
Girls wouldn't agree to be interviewed because some are raped before they come to school when walking through the bushes, so they wouldn't want to be exposed about what has happened [in the interview]...The girls, very few were interested. (Chumani, 13 year old boy, South Africa).

Age of potential respondents was also clearly a major consideration in all three countries, particularly where boy respondents were concerned:

I mostly interviewed people the same age or younger. It's easier with people the same age as they don't undermine me, think I'm making a fool of them. I'm scared of the older ones...the youngest I interviewed was 9, a boy. (Chumani, 13 year old boy, South Africa).
Only one person, a boy about 16 was uncomfortable. I asked him too many questions and he didn't understand. He thought I was undermining him because he's older than me. (Beatrice, 14-year old girl, Malawi).
Interviewing older boys is very hard – the hardest. (David, 14-year old boy, Ghana).

Essentially, younger children are likely to "give respect," whereas posing questions to older children was perceived as being rude and likely to cause resentment, "undermining" the elder child's status (especially in the case of older boys), so that some tried to make fun of the research or demand money for taking part. The aggression occasionally encountered by older boys, in particular, from adults or other boys was of particular concern. Younger children seem to have largely escaped difficult situations, perhaps because they approached older children and adults relatively rarely, with great trepidation and careful attention to courtesy.

Some of the older children were also evidently sceptical about the ability of younger ones to cope with the questions they wanted to ask. Rebecca, a 14-year-old Malawian girl did not interview younger children because she thought

they were likely to be shy, but many more of the child researchers of all ages considered such young ones unlikely to understand the issues being discussed, especially if they were being interviewed about health-related journeys:

It was easier [working] with the older ones about [travel to] the clinic as the younger ones didn't understand as they only go to the clinic accompanied [by older people]. (Xolelwa, 14 year old girl, South Africa).

I didn't try younger children because I thought they'd give me a problem. For example if you ask how long does it take from school to home, they wouldn't understand measurement of time. Someone eight years could know time but around here children up to about 12 years don't know time. (Nomaphelo, 16-year old girl, remote rural South Africa).

Older children are easier to interview. Younger children give problems, they don't talk with confidence – children under 10. (Hetty, 18 year old girl, Ghana).

Some child researchers clearly made little effort to try to consult younger children, despite the emphasis at the training workshops on conducting research with a diversity of child respondents (by age, sex, income, schooling status, both with and without disabilities). This bias against younger child respondents, based on their perception that younger children were unlikely to understand, is indicative of how prejudices about children's abilities can be adopted at a fairly early age and emphasises the importance of including younger child researchers.

The Ethics of Collaborative Research with Younger Children: Avoiding Exploitation and Other Harm

Fieldwork Hazards

Here we reflect on the complexities of working with younger child colleagues: our responsibilities as facilitators of the child researcher activities, the need to be available to assist but not to direct, and the need to keep to the project time-frame but not impose this on children who face competing demands on their time. Can and should we protect child researchers from those many problems that also beset adult researchers, or is it simply part of the job (as our Malawian student RAs reportedly advised child collaborators during discussions in the field)? How can we best prepare enthusiastic children for the abrupt refusal of potential respondents to be interviewed, the demands of respondents who want to know exactly how things will change if information is provided, occasional insults, even demands for money or the threat of physical violence?

During training workshops, we worked through various scenarios concerning potential field problems, principally

through role play, drawing on experiences from earlier pilots in Ghana and South Africa and on the adult researchers' own experiences of fieldwork. As the project progressed, the children encountered a range of problems. Sometimes the children dealt with problems immediately, individually or with peers; sometimes they went to the school-teacher who had attended our training workshop. Where significant difficulties arose, these were usually discussed with the RAs and collaborators, underlining the importance of regular contact.

In some cases the problems were technical ones, particularly regarding disposable cameras (flash not working, concerns about getting the camera wet during rain), especially among the younger ones: "The worst thing was the camera: I couldn't use it [the camera] sometimes. Sometimes I forgot where I have to press to shoot" (Simeon, 11 year old boy, South Africa). In Ghana, where the children weighed loads, the scales occasionally caused difficulties. In other cases it was a matter of accompanied walks being too long (especially collecting firewood in Malawi), ferocious dogs or snakes encountered (rural South Africa), getting wet and muddy in the rainy season, trying to write down a respondent's answers at speed, or the practicalities of dealing with group interviews. All of these were relatively straightforward issues that brought some immediate confusion among the younger children, in particular, but were easily resolved and apparently caused no longer-term problems.

Of more concern were the (few) difficult encounters with community members experienced in all three countries during the research process. For some children these caused anxiety, despite our best efforts to help them prepare for this eventuality in the training workshops. These were generally interactions with adults or older children who posed awkward or aggressive questions about the research, in a few cases advising their children not to participate. The post-fieldwork interviews with the younger children suggest that they faced less hassle than their older (15–18) counterparts, were more assiduous about avoiding trouble, or were less willing to talk about it. Only three, all from Eastern Cape, South Africa, referred to specific problems. One had trouble with adults in the village: "[They] were saying this is nonsense and even swearing at us" (Ntombekhaya, 14 year old girl). A young boy was troubled by a drunken man who threatened to take his camera. Another young boy observed:

The young ones had no problem [with my questions] but the parents had a problem because they thought I'd want personal information about income and sleeping around and such and the young children would tell. So I had to talk to the parents first. (Chumani, 13 year old boy, South Africa).

When asked explicitly about troubles they faced, it was mostly older boys who talked of encounters with difficult people (other older boys or parents), again predominantly from Eastern Cape, South Africa:

The older ones made fun of me – it happened quite a lot, especially those 18 years and over. Even the adults wouldn't listen- they were defensive and would say I was making fools of them. [Prompt – How did you resolve this?] I just stayed and kept trying till I got respondents. … I didn't bother anyone [the RAs]. At home they gave me the support I needed. There is a lady I attempted to interview. She came to my house to say I had asked about rape questions. My parents explained to her but she didn't continue the interview. She was really angry when she came to report this, called me 'silly boy.' (Likho, 16 year old boy, South Africa).

This may reflect a widespread concern among adults in post-apartheid South Africa about the activities of young men, but probably also reflects the larger number of child researchers from this area (Table 1). Older boys in other regions also experienced difficulties:

Some parents weren't happy so they refused because they said the government had come and promised but never brought anything so I had to convince them. (Peter, 18 years, Ghana).
The adults asked questions, not the children, "why is it important?" – sometimes they accuse you – "it's no need to ask questions like that"… but I could cope, I didn't need advice from Cape Coast [University]. (Charles, 16 year old, Ghana).

Taking photographs also raised difficulties on occasion, especially if the child researchers forgot to ask permission first (as they had been trained to do), though for older children, in particular, this was often the project work they enjoyed most. In Ghana some children seem to have been frightened at the prospect of having their photo taken, even by another young person: "Sometimes the children worried and said 'if you take my picture you will send me to juju' so I had to convince them, but I got 27 pictures" (Peter, 18 years). He was advised by the RAs to ensure he had the parents' permission first, before approaching children, and reported that this generally worked. In South Africa, there was one report of similar concern, this time from one of the younger child researchers:

Some children didn't understand properly, though I explained. So they'd think I'd give the pictures to someone who steals children. I also wanted to take pictures of old taxis, but the taxi drivers didn't agree. But it would have been a good subject. (Adriaan, 13 year old boy, North West Province, South Africa).

In the same region, some older girls reported that young children—especially boys—refused to be photographed as they were fetching water because they "told me I wanted to advertise poverty" (Marinkie, 19 year old girl). Elsewhere, so long as requests for permission were made first, the photographic component seems to have been mostly considered good fun and to bring some very interesting issues to the fore.

Demands for payment for both photos and interviews were made to child researchers in all three countries, but seem to have been directed only to the older ones. In southern Ghana, in particular, several older girls and boys faced persistent demands from parents for gifts:

If I asked them for permission they said, can I give them money as they haven't eaten, and some wouldn't let their children talk to me… (Patience, 18 year old girl, Ghana).

By contrast, our younger child researchers did not report any requests for payment, whether for photographs or interviews. In South Africa, for instance, twelve year-old Lorato observed: "Interviewing was best because we're asking people about their problems… no-one refused me interview or photo—they liked it." She reported no requests for money. Presumably, these young researchers were considered unlikely to have funds available to make payments, in contrast to their older colleagues. Even those older children who faced demands, however, did not view them as a major problem, but merely requests which had to be declined. Their initial response in the case of refusals was to explain the project in more detail, and to work in pairs, to avoid meeting problems alone:

Working with XXX was good because we didn't face challenges- as two we were helping each other. (Florence, 15 year old girl, Malawi).

Most of the child researchers of all ages found it hard to accept that respondents have the right to refuse, despite the workshop training provided in ethical principles. They were concerned about gaps in information and were disappointed when people failed to appreciate properly what they were doing and why. Fortunately, in all cases such encounters were overwhelmingly outnumbered by more friendly, cooperative and interested responses.

The various difficulties that the child researchers occasionally experienced during fieldwork need to be considered both in terms of inter-generational and broader community relations. Whereas the research activities of younger children and girls seems to be mostly viewed by adults as non-threatening, those undertaken by boys, especially older boys, may raise concerns among elders and other community members as to whether this represents a prelude to trouble of some sort. In South Africa, the spectre

of youth disruption could be particularly threatening in communities where the anti-apartheid struggle led to independent action by youth and youth violence; here a generational cleavage has arguably emerged (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999). It will clearly be important to ensure there is adequate feedback of our findings to both youth and adults in communities so that they can appreciate their value and are open to future research activities by young people.[5] An emphasis on "*power with*"—associational power between youth and adults in the community for positive development across the community—as opposed to "*power over*" (exercised by youth taking control) will be crucial (Rowlands 1997).

Fitting the Project Round School and Home Life

Difficulties also arose because of our project time frame, which had scheduled children's research at an early stage to enable their observations to help shape the wider project. In both Ghana and Malawi, our project cycle led to either training workshops or subsequent children's research being conducted in school term-time. Although schoolteachers and parents had agreed to the timeframe, and did not flag it as a serious issue, in retrospect it put too much pressure on the older children at senior secondary school. Arguably, the pressure was not imposed directly by the project, as the children had set their own timeframe for the research, but it clearly set up stresses among diligent children who wanted to do their best in both the project and school. Although all emphasised that they enjoyed their project work and would do it again, a few in Malawi and Ghana observed that they would rather wait till after the examinations! The junior/ junior secondary schools, by contrast, were able to provide sufficient time in breaks for the child research activities. Some schools also used school assemblies to publicise the project, which helped with subsequent activities. Younger child researchers were under less pressure from school work, were consequently able to devote more time to the project and possibly gained most from it. In any similar future work, we would ensure that the balance of children's time commitments to the project, school and home is addressed more explicitly prior to commencement of training.

Another issue relates to household work. As discussed above, most of the child researchers have substantial regular household duties assigned to them, especially those living in rural areas. Some younger children, especially girls, faced difficulties of project work conflicting with housework:

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[5] In the case of one community in South Africa, in collaboration with community leaders and a local NGO, we have obtained funding for support of a pilot walking bus project.

Yes [there were problems with a clash with house work] because when I wanted to do it [the project] they'd say I must do housework first…. But I managed it and finished everything in time. (Xolelwa, 14 year old girl, rural South Africa).

One young girl in Ghana, as noted earlier, had to withdraw from the project because her work input provided an important economic resource for the family. Household work also affected the time their respondents had to give, especially in the case of out-of-school children:

The hardest was interviewing because the children run away, they don't have time for you. Especially out-of-school children keep saying "allow me to go." (Mary, 14 year old girl, Ghana).
I found the younger ones [13-14] OK to interview if you give them plenty of time. But parents call them to do things so you have to be patient. But I got what I needed. (Augustina, 17 year old girl, Ghana).

However, for most child researchers, mothers or siblings helped with household chores:

My juniors did the work instead, but they were fine about it because I had been selected. (Simon, 18 year-old boy, Ghana).
My duties at home are collecting water and firewood with a borrowed donkey and cart but the project never interfered with the housework. My brothers and sisters helped because I explained to the whole family about the project and they were very proud of me so they knew when I needed to do the work. (Khanyile, 15 year old boy, South Africa).

Time spent by collaborators and RAs building rapport with parents was clearly essential to the project. Many parents were apparently very keen to support the study:

My parents were reminding me to do the project, checking I'd done things. (Nokhululekile, 14 years, South Africa).

Parents may also perceive the project as an opportunity to develop networks with the local researchers, perhaps hoping that this will aid their children's future and bring benefits to the community. Expanding local networks of support is commonly employed as a strategy for individual and family advancement in many African societies (Mitchell & Mitchell 1969).

Benefiting from Participation: Remuneration and Other Issues

Another issue is remuneration to the child researchers; should this include monetary reward, especially in contexts

where child researchers forgo paid work to participate in the project, and where the child uses work pay to contribute to schooling costs, common in both Ghana and Malawi? The literature concerning questions of payment to respondents has not tackled the issue of paying child researchers, probably because adult-child researcher collaboration is so rare, especially in low-income countries. Early debate on the question of modes of payment at the project inception workshop raised concerns about contravening local labour laws and questions of harmonisation between countries. We reached a unanimous decision that children should receive benefit for participating as researchers, particularly if asked to undertake work specifically for adult researchers.

A problem arises over involving children for this research work below the minimum age of employment (15 in South Africa and Ghana, and 14 in Malawi). This arises even if the children are not paid for their work. Article 2 (1) of the ILO Minimum Age Convention (1973), on which much national legislation is based, states, "no one under that age shall be admitted to employment or work in any occupation" (p. 1). Payment is irrelevant to this prohibition. Indeed, recommendation 146 that accompanies this convention specifically refers to fair remuneration for children's work and the principle of equal pay for equal work (Article 13,1,a). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child asserts the right of children to be protected from economic exploitation (Article 32,1). If children were to contribute without pay to work for which adults are paid, it would be hard to classify this as anything other than economic exploitation. It is insulting and denigrating to the children and their contributions to suggest that they, unlike adults, can be adequately compensated for their work by receiving training, experience, acknowledgement in publications, and token gifts.

Should this kind of work be covered by a minimum age for employment? The ILO Convention 138 "does not apply to work done by children and young persons in schools for general, vocational or technical education" (article 6). Although this research work contributed to the education of the children involved, it was undertaken primarily to collect data, not to provide training. Incorporating such work into the school curriculum is difficult, particularly in resource-poor contexts, where children are less able to forego rightful income. The Minimum Age Convention also allows national laws and regulations to permit children up to 2 years younger than the minimum age of employment to undertake "light work which is (a) not likely to be harmful to their health or development; and (b) not such as to prejudice their attendance at school or other training" (article 7, p. 3). While the research work for the project fits these criteria, there remains the problem of employing children younger than 13 (or 12 in Malawi), who, as we

have noted, managed the research well and in some cases had less problem fitting it in with schoolwork than had older children preparing for examinations.

There are a number of possible responses to this thorny problem, in which different kinds of rights come into direct conflict. One is to argue that the research of children is not really work or employment, not therefore covered by minimum-age legislation, and accordingly should not be fully remunerated. This does not do justice to the children and their contributions, or to academic integrity. Second, we could refuse to employ children not formally allowed to work by the standards of the Minimum Age Convention. This would deprive some children of the substantial benefits they might otherwise derive from participating in the project, diminish the chance of young children to be heard on matters that affect them (which is a right), and would lose some valuable perspectives and information for the project that might benefit younger children. Third, we could refuse to discriminate unjustly against children, either by denying them payment or by denying their fundamental human right to undertake appropriate and beneficial work (1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 23).[6] In this project, we noticed that in several cases the research work was competing with significant income-generating work of the children. We agreed on a compromise position based on the belief that children would benefit in many ways from this work and that they should receive some payment related to local labour rates and the quality of the work produced. In all three countries, at the end of fieldwork, the child researchers received a small sum in cash,[7] irrespective of age, but with some recognition of individual effort.

The project provided the child researchers with other benefits besides monetary payment. Children were trained in specific research and communication skills at a residential workshop where work and play were interspersed in a pleasant environment and regular meals and small treats (sweets, films) were provided. On completion of the training workshop, children earned a certificate of attendance. Children also received a wristwatch (to enable time calculations to be made during the project but also for future personal use) and a copy of the pictures taken with the disposable camera provided to each child. Although a possible danger arises of watches and photographs being

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[6] For a critique of international and universal minimum age standards, see Bourdillon, M. F. C., Myers, W. E. and White, B., forthcoming, "Reassessing working children and minimum-age standards", *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*.

[7] The actual amounts paid varied between children, based on: amount of work completed, local wage rates and the children's individual circumstances. For reasons of confidentiality, we do not disclose the actual amounts paid here – interested readers may contact the authors for more information.

construed as paternalistic gestures, in all three countries they seem to have been recognised and appreciated by child researchers of all ages as necessary tools of the research and valuable mementos after its conclusion. We believe that the benefits of participation for children of all ages have included a growth in knowledge, critical thinking and problem solving, and developing skills in speaking, listening, writing, and leadership. In interviews, a number of them reported that participation in the project had helped them acquire confidence, knowledge and specific research skills. Children may also feel more able to shape their future, and acquire a sense of responsibility. In all three countries there is a large NGO sector where the skills our child researchers have acquired will be valued; it is not unrealistic to suggest that some may eventually find employment there.

There are other potential rewards for participation: the acknowledgment of the individual children's contributions to our work, and helping to give them a voice in advocacy and policy. Both of these components are important, but the practice of implementation needs careful consideration. Firstly, how do we acknowledge the input of our child researchers in written project outputs? We agreed that the child researchers would be acknowledged in all major project outputs; but should we identify each individual by name (given that there are 70 children participating)? Is acknowledgment sufficient or should we include the children as co-authors? If so, they would need to see and agree each document and have the opportunity to reshape the draft. The logistics alone are considerable and daunting! When undertaking the interviews for this paper, the UK researcher explained that the information they provided would be used to tell people elsewhere about the challenges and the positive aspects of the work they had done. We have included all participant child researchers by name in the acknowledgments. Some of the Malawi children's work was submitted (with their enthusiastic permission) and accepted for a publication on children and transport around the world (Peace Child International, 2007). We hope also to be able to help the children produce a book of their own work in each country, but this is dependent on securing funding.

The second issue concerns advocacy. To what extent should the child researchers be encouraged to take an advocacy role based on their findings? How do we balance the advantages of the "novelty and immediacy" of children's research reports (Alderson 2001), against the potentially exploitative use of that novelty? Black (2004) has warned about the dangers of over-burdening children or allowing them to become professional child advocates on a "child participation star circuit." There are related questions to consider concerning the privileging of articulate children whose experiences and views may be different from others in their communities (O'Neill 1989).

In some situations children have been able to influence policy. However, there are crucial questions concerning the spaces open to them in African contexts where varying local cultural constructions of childhood and associated economic imperatives (discussed earlier) help shape the attitudes of adults to children's rights and responsibilities. For instance, despite the fact that Ghana was the first country to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child and to set up a National Commission on Children (Chant & Jones 2005; Lamptey 1998), it has no well-established structure of children's organisations for advocacy. Indeed, as Lamptey (1998) has observed, "a great deal of sensitization and advocacy is needed at all levels … if children's participation is not to be seen as an imposed Western concept (p. 87)."

Very careful groundwork was necessary in order to implement our initial pilot project. In Ghana children are widely expected to know their place—to be seen but not heard—and even child rights are generally perceived as an issue for adults, not youth! In South Africa and Malawi the adult researcher strand and the child researchers' experiences indicate that similar attitudes prevail widely (see also Bryceson 2006). In South Africa adult disquiet about youth rights can also be linked back to youth movements in the apartheid struggles. Young people were deeply involved in the struggles to change the political system, and images of youth as unruly and potentially destructive, as noted above, have been remarkably persistent (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999; Durham 2000).

In all three countries the transport context of our work raises particular challenges, given there are very entrenched attitudes among most transport engineers in Africa (with a few notable exceptions) to the incorporation of social issues in transport planning (Porter 2007).[8] The information collected in this study is an essential first step to improved planning, but it is likely to take concerted long-term efforts to ensure knowledge is transformed into action, especially within the transport sector.

Throughout the study we have been keen to ensure the child researchers do not hold unrealistic expectations about the impact of their research. This is not to say that the child researchers' work will be in vain, or that they should not be involved in advocacy, but rather that advocacy strategies involving children need to be planned with great care to ensure child researchers are not ignored nor spurned, ridiculed or accused of arrogance. The power relations involved are clearly very sensitive. We aim to support the child researchers' own advocacy, primarily through their

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[8] Child participation in planning is certainly relatively rare and limited in degree in Western contexts despite the promotion of social issues in transport planning over many years (see Barker, 2003, regarding children's exclusion from participation and decision-making in a UK travel context).

inclusion in our project consultative group meetings (held approximately six monthly with policy makers from relevant ministries, key youth NGOs, schoolteachers, etc. who are now well sensitised to our aims and methods). With strong support (but not interference) from the local collaborators and RAs as they make preparations prior to the meetings, we believe the children will be able to make convincing presentations that will be taken seriously. The first CCGs with child researcher presentations have taken place in Zomba and Lilongwe, Malawi. The attention given to the child researchers' presentations and ensuing debate at those meeting was very promising, also visibly helping to enhance the children's sense of ownership in the project.

Conclusions

Participatory action research with children is an exciting yet potentially perilous adventure for both the adults and the children who take part; for all parties it requires patience, trust and a willingness to take risks. Although our discussion is specifically focused on an African context, our experiences of data collection by children and the broader ethics of working with children may provide a useful starting point for researchers contemplating similar studies elsewhere. Adults' responsibilities to protect child researchers from harm (including long-term harm possibly arising from disruption of education), questions of remuneration and the management of expectations are likely to present common challenges.

In an African context the challenges of working with child researchers are particularly daunting, as inherent acceptance of child researchers as independent, rights-bearing citizens, in accordance with universal rights, norms and interests, may clash with the realities of children's place in local socio-cultural life and structure. Discussion has highlighted a range of issues associated with the complex networks of power relations we have observed operating in different areas of our project space.

Building working relationships across the ages has been a particularly important process throughout our research, and both children and adults seem to have grown more appreciative of the contributions of the other. Nonetheless, not surprisingly, a majority of younger people found interactions with their own age and gender most easy to accomplish. When difficulties arose during the children's research activities—refusal of interviews, photos, etc.—it was usually associated with an attempt to interview "up" to those older and more senior in the community concerned. It might have been advisable from the outset to encourage child researchers to work primarily with those of around their age or younger. The prejudices we found among many older children regarding interviewing their younger peers, however, confirmed our decision to include younger child researchers in the project. Although we acknowledge that it has sometimes been difficult to prepare enthusiastic younger children for the difficulties and disappointments of field research, children of all ages coped remarkably well with refusals, demands for payment etc. from potential respondents. Fortunately, the majority of the children's research encounters were positively friendly and brought interesting, often new information and insights.

Our child research component was conducted within the constraints of both school and household work commitments. When working with children, the balance of time commitments to the project, school and home need to be addressed and resolved very explicitly. It is particularly important in an African context to recognise the very substantial burden of work placed on younger children in many households. We have also raised ethical issues surrounding financial remuneration of child researchers. Our decision to make payments to all child researchers, irrespective of age, seems to have been widely perceived by the children and their families as an important recognition of the value of the children's contribution.

Recognition of the value we place on the child researchers' work is implicit in the structuring of our project, in which their findings help to shape the complementary adult research strand; it is explicit in our declaration of intent regarding acknowledgment of their contribution in written outputs and in our commitment to help them disseminate their own findings through the project Country Consultative Groups, school assemblies and other potential routes. Feeding information both through the County Consultative Groups (which include policy makers and practitioners) and through the child researchers' own communities is crucial if improved transport policies for youth (and consequently for the future) are to be promoted at national and local level. Such feedback should also increase recognition of, and confidence in, young people's potential to contribute positively to local and national development: an essential counter to negative images of youth as unruly and potentially destructive. We have an ongoing duty to ensure that the information the child researchers collected is used to the full; that we have neither wasted their time nor denigrated their efforts.

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