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## RESEARCH NOTE

# RESEARCH WITH AFRICAN ADOLESCENTS: CRITICAL EPISTEMOLOGIES AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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### ABSTRACT

Whereas much research with adolescents in Africa engages them mainly with respect to issues limited and explicitly related to youth, this research note makes epistemic and methodological arguments for engaging adolescents more broadly in our research about Africa. I present a practical application of research design and methods based on these arguments through a study with adolescents in a secondary school in Ghana in which I engendered their enthusiastic participation in the research process. Through this, I demonstrate how taking a critical approach to epistemologies and methodologies in research with young participants can expand and enrich our knowledge of and about the continent.

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### *Introduction*

SIXTY PERCENT OF AFRICANS—MORE THAN 800 MILLION PEOPLE—ARE 25 YEARS OLD OR YOUNGER. Of this number, nearly 80 percent are people younger than 18 years old. However, outside of Youth Studies disciplines and beyond research that falls under the themes of ‘youth’ and ‘childhood’, the perspectives, thoughts, and opinions of young Africans, particularly

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adolescents, are rarely sought and included in studies of the continent.<sup>1</sup> The typical interlocutor, source, or informant in studies of Africa in many disciplines is an adult over the age of 18 years. Basing the bulk of academic study predominantly on adults' thoughts and experiences in Africa leads to the question: What have we been missing by overlooking the knowledge of younger Africans in our political, historical, and social research on Africa? In an introduction to virtual issues published by *African Affairs*, George Bob-Milliar discusses processes of knowledge production in and about Africa, stating that these processes 'must, out of necessity, include ... multiple ways of knowing'.<sup>2</sup> By making an argument for including adolescents' 'ways of knowing' in broader studies of the continent, this research note aims to contribute to discussions around knowledge, knowledge production, and critical epistemologies in the study of Africa.

I make two main arguments in this research note. First, I make an epistemological argument that young people have knowledge and experience in their own right that can only enrich knowledge production in and about the continent. This is an argument about engaging adolescents in research beyond youth-specific topics and youth studies disciplines in which they are predominantly featured and adopting critical approaches to epistemology that seek to include all the different ways of knowing and being on our vast continent.<sup>3</sup> I note that there are practical and ethical considerations specific to working with adolescent participants which tend to discourage their inclusion in research, such as more elaborate ethical clearances, background, and consent checks. Stemming from broader ideas about young people's status in society, standard consent and approval checks are often directed more towards adult guardians than adolescent participants. Second, I make a methodological argument about engaging adolescents in research in a way that engenders their 'enthusiastic participation' by going above and beyond the minimum ethical requirements of informed consent. I define enthusiastic participation as eager and willing participation and illustrate it as a case of 'I want to be here, I want to participate', as

1. For the purposes of this research note, I use the term 'youth' in reference to literature from youth studies and related disciplines and fields. Following Gill Jones, *Youth* (Polity, 2009), I use it to denote those considered to be 'the part of the life course between childhood and adulthood', noting the subjective nature of those categories. I also do not call the people I work with 'youth(s)', but when I refer to the specific groups I worked with, I use the terms such as 'young participants', 'young people' and 'adolescent(s)', which although also subjective, is a more accurate category in the context of my research by virtue of mine and my participants' ages and social positioning as not children, but also not perceived as fully adult, or old.

2. George M. Bob-Milliar, 'Introduction: Methodologies for researching Africa', *African Affairs* 121, 484 (2020), pp. e55–e65.

3. For a discussion of a range psychological studies on young people's ways of knowing, see Barbara K. Hofer and Paul R. Pintrich, 'The development of epistemological theories: beliefs about knowledge and knowing and their relation to learning', *Review of Educational Research* 67, 1 (1997), pp. 88–140.

opposed to 'I do not object, I will go along with this', or 'I am supposed to participate'. This is not an argument about bypassing guardian approvals where guardians are present. It is about taking power dynamics and socio-cultural contexts into account and ensuring that the research process is valuable and enjoyable for young participants rather than solely extracting information.

I present a practical example of my epistemological and methodological arguments in action based on my research project, which examines nation-building, modernity, and social class in Ghana through a study of the politics of secondary school building(s). Through analyses of school buildings (the products), the building of schools (the processes), and schooling (the experiences), and drawing on extensive archival and field research, my study explores secondary schools as sites in space and time where, among other things, social status and hierarchies are formed and consolidated. My fieldwork comprised interviews and focus group discussions with research participants and informants ranging in age from 14 to 90 years. This included 2 months of ethnographic fieldwork in a secondary school in Kpando in the Volta Region of Ghana. In working with my mainly adolescent student participants, I sought to engage with them as much as possible in the same way as I engaged adult informants and participants—as knowledge holders in their own rights—keeping in mind the sociocultural and institutional milieu in which we were situated and the power differentials between researcher and research participant.

This research note stems from my experiences designing and running the after-school club that I used as a primary research tool. Because most research participants in the after-school club were adolescents from the ages of 14 to 19 years, some of these arguments may not apply to much younger children.<sup>4</sup> In the same vein, although my epistemological argument applies to a broad range of young people, my methodological suggestions are likely to be more relevant to studies with young people in settings such as schools where they are primarily under the control and supervision of adult authority figures. Furthermore, my positionality as a young Ghanaian woman who shared experiences of studying in a secondary school in Ghana and being marginalized due to my gender and perceived youth with my young participants, combined with my status as a 'fellow' (doctoral) student based in the UK had some effects on the way they perceived me and thus related to me.

As a young 'researcher-at-home' in Ghana, more broadly and specifically in a town I was familiar with due to familial ties, in some things, I almost had an 'insider' status. My adolescent participants found in me a

4. Only one out of my 18 participants fell outside of this age range. That person had just turned 20 years.

person who understood many of the issues they were facing due to my ties to the town and the fact that I, too, had been a student in a Ghanaian secondary school. Additionally, because of my status as a young person, my experiences of adolescence in Ghana, and my personal beliefs about the importance of taking young people's opinions and perspectives seriously, I was generally sympathetic and willing to listen to their accounts and feelings of being dismissed on account of their being young. Yet, in other ways, I was, to some extent, an 'outsider'. This was initially due to my status as a PhD student and later due to my lack of fluency in the Ewe language and need for translations at times, and the fact that I have been living in the UK for several years. My somewhat contradictory positioning of being 'at home' and being an 'outsider', an 'outsider-at-home', is in line with ideas about the nuances of positioning and oversimplification of insider/outsider dichotomies that Anna Wiederhold, Christina Chavez, and Justice Medzani have previously demonstrated.<sup>5</sup> Rather than a disadvantage, I considered this positioning of outsider-at-home as a unique point of view that I brought to my research design and this research note.<sup>6</sup> This positioning informed my approach to interpreting and analysing my findings, and the visual and participatory methods I employed as 'a means of making the familiar strange'.<sup>7</sup>

Although applicable to young people more generally, the focus of this research note is on adolescents; which I define demographically as people from ages 10 to 19 years 'in the second decade of life' and conceptually as 'a distinct phase of development within African social ontogeny... between... childhood and... full social integration into adult life'.<sup>8</sup> This definition accounts for the fact that although the category of adolescent can be demographically defined, it is also socially constituted. In various African contexts, as Bame Nsamenang has theorized, 'adolescence... is not an ambiguous stage... but a distinct phase of development within

5. Anna Wiederhold, 'Conducting fieldwork at and away from home: Shifting researcher positionality with mobile interviewing methods', *Qualitative Research* 15, 5 (2015), pp. 600–615, p. 603; Melanie Greene, 'On the inside looking in: Methodological insights and challenges in conducting qualitative insider research', *The Qualitative Report* 19, 29 (2014), pp. 1–13.

6. Wiederhold, 'Conducting fieldwork at and away from home', p. 6; Christina Chavez, 'Conceptualizing from the inside: Advantages, complications, and demands on insider positionality', *The Qualitative Report* 13, 3 (2008), pp. 474–494; Justice M. Medzani, 'Positionality statement on studying male victims of intimate partner abuse in Zimbabwe: A research note', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 24, 3 (2021), pp. 387–392.

7. Wiederhold, 'Conducting fieldwork at and away from home', p. 4.

8. World Health Organisation, 'Guidance on ethical considerations in planning and reviewing research studies on sexual and reproductive health in adolescents' (World Health Organisation, 2018), p. 1; A. Bame Nsamenang, 'Adolescence in Sub-Saharan Africa: An image constructed from Africa's triple inheritance', in B. Bradford Brown, Reed W. Larson and T. S. Saraswathi (eds), *The world's youth: Adolescence in eight regions of the globe* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002), pp. 61–104, p. 69.

African social ontogeny' in which an adolescent 'takes on the adult roles for which... they are being primed', but yet do not 'automatically attain... full adulthood status'.<sup>9</sup> In my study, I found that although many of the adolescent participants lived fairly self-sufficient lives at home in that they worked or were expected to work to cover their own costs of education and upkeep, they were not considered full adults, especially by authority figures in settings such as their secondary school. Some of them had already taken on 'adult roles' such as caring for relatives, farming on a commercial scale, and taking on responsibilities in their families. Yet as secondary school students, they were considered too young in ways that did not match up with their realities outside of term time. Thus, the term adolescent captures both their ages and their perceived social positioning as not (yet) adults.

The rest of the article is structured as follows. The next section lays out my epistemological argument for engaging young people in broader research about Africa. However, research with young people, particularly those below juridical ages of consent, requires different considerations of ethics and power relations from that research with most adult groupings. Thus, the following section makes a methodological case for engendering meaningful, enthusiastic participation in research with adolescents regarding the social and cultural contexts in which they are situated. In the final section, I present a practical application of the arguments and suggestions I make through the example of the after-school club that I used as a data collection tool in my field studies. I conclude by reflecting on the applicability of my approach and methods to other research contexts.

### *Critical epistemologies and knowledge production*

The bulk of studies that include adolescent participants in Africa can be found in childhood and youth studies, reproductive health, and related disciplines in which there is much emphasis on taking the knowledge and perspectives of young people seriously in research.<sup>10</sup> However, adolescents are not often situated more centrally in broader research about and in the continent outside these youth-specific subjects and disciplines. In this, there are some parallels to the situating of other historically minoritized groups of peoples—such as women, colonized peoples, Black people, Queer people, and several other marginalized groupings of people—in various contexts of academic knowledge production where categories such

9. A. Bame Nsamenang, 'Adolescence in Sub-Saharan Africa' p. 70.

10. See for instance, Mamadou Diouf, 'Engaging postcolonial cultures: African youth and public space', *African Studies Review* 46, 2 (2003), pp. 1–12; Nadine Schäfer and Richard Yarwood, 'Involving young people as researchers: Uncovering multiple power relations among youths', *Children's Geographies* 6, 2 (2008), pp. 121–135; Constanze Pfeiffer, Matthis Kleeb, Alice Mbelwa, and Collins Ahorlu, 'The use of social media among adolescents in Dar Es Salaam and Mtwara, Tanzania', *Reproductive Health Matters* 22, 43 (2014), pp. 178–186.

as male, white, heterosexual, metropole, or western are positioned as central, and all else is peripheral.<sup>11</sup> Scholars and theorists in fields such as post-colonialism, feminism, and queer studies have advanced the collective nature of knowledge and knowledge production and how deliberate and inadvertent epistemic suppressions, exclusions, and peripheralizations occur.<sup>12</sup> For instance, as Nancy Tuana points out, ‘our theories of knowledge and knowledge practices are far from democratic, maintaining criteria of credibility that favour members of privileged groups... criteria that feminists have demonstrated to be imbued with the prejudices of sexism, androcentrism, racism, classism, ageism, and ableism’.<sup>13</sup> And while ageism is often cited as excluding those considered to be too old, it can also be excluding those considered to be too young. In the context of this research note, the ‘privileged groups’ are the fully adult typical interlocutors in Africa research, and the excluded are adolescents whose knowledge is made peripheral in research topics and disciplines not explicitly about youth.

And yet, young people are both the future of and essential to our contemporary understandings of society and politics in Africa. They are often at the forefront of creation and drive in sectors such as fashion, music, mobile phones, and digital technologies.<sup>14</sup> They have also been at the forefront of massive social and political movements such as the 2020 End-SARS protests in Nigeria and the 2021 protests against former president Idriss Déby and the Transitional Military Council that replaced him in Chad. In electoral politics, they are frequently central to manifestoes and key targets of campaign messages. Access to secondary education was one of the ‘two major topics (that) dominated the 2012 election campaign’ in Ghana and eventually contributed to the victory of the New Patriotic Party (NPP) in 2016.<sup>15</sup> Yet, despite all this influence they wield and the agency

11. Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting words: Black women and the search for justice* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1998); Kimberle Crenshaw, ‘Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color’, *Stanford Law Review* 43, 6 (1991), pp. 1241–1299; Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas, *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement* (The New Press, New York, NY, 1995).

12. See Kristie Dotson, ‘Conceptualizing epistemic oppression’, *Social Epistemology* 28, 2 (2014), pp. 115–138. for her ‘three forms of epistemic oppression’.

13. Nancy Tuana, ‘The speculum of ignorance: The Women’s health movement and epistemologies of ignorance’, *Hypatia* 21, 3 (2006), pp. 1–19.

14. Thilde Langevang, ‘Fashioning the future: Entrepreneurship in Africa’s emerging fashion industry’, *The European Journal of Development Research* 29 (2017), pp. 893–910; Susan Shepler, ‘Youth music and politics in post-war Sierra Leone’, *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 48, 4 (2010), pp. 627–647; Mwenda Ntarangwi, *East African hip hop: Youth culture and globalization* (University of Illinois Press, Chicago, 2009); Ebenezer Forkuo Amankwaa, James Esson and Katherine V. Gough, ‘Geographies of youth, mobile phones, and the urban hustle’, *The Geographical Journal* 186, 4 (2020), pp. 362–374; Bruce Mutsvairo (ed.), *Digital activism in the social media era: Critical reflections on emerging trends in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2016).

15. Sarah Brierley and George Oforu, ‘The presidential and parliamentary elections in Ghana, December 2012’, *Electoral Studies* 35 (2014), pp. 382, 384.

they exercise, prevailing discourses constantly position and engage young people with respect only to being young rather than more broadly about society and politics and the importance of their opinions, knowledge, and experience in this regard. And when said young Africans are minors, their relegation is even more pronounced.

In spite of the essential roles they often play, and although the study of young people in Africa has come a long way, when we encounter adolescents in African social and political research, it is usually in limited, often pigeon-holed ways.<sup>16</sup> We often encounter them via the amorphous category of ‘youth’, refracted through sociocultural and sociopolitical generational lenses of transformation and transition, conflict and crisis, or disadvantage and vulnerability.<sup>17</sup> In these encounters—more often than not with heterosexual, visibly abled, male urban dwellers—even when ‘youth’ is not the main subject or theme, young people typically enter the discourses as affected but marginalized constituencies who sometimes exercise agency. ‘Youth’ as an analytical category is constructed as constituted predominantly by a vulnerable, marginalized, and underprivileged generation and positioned both as an almost amorphous, vague, and socially-constituted category, as well as groupings of human actors with great potential to generate social friction and to cause conflict due to their transitional status, disenfranchisement, and exclusion.<sup>18</sup> While these are essential aspects to understanding the lives of young people on the continent, it is only one part of the picture.

Although the idea that young people in Africa often exercise some agency is not much disputed, there are limits to how this agency is acknowledged and studied in different African contexts. Lorenzo Bordonaro and Ruth

<<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S026137941400016X>> Seidu Alidu and Evans Aggrey-Darkoh, ‘Rational voting in Ghana’s 2012 and 2016 national elections in perspective’, *Ghana Social Science Journal* 15, 1 (2018), pp. 98–121.

16. Kristen Cheney, ‘Children and young people in Africa’, *Oxford Bibliographies Online* (2014); Alcinda M. Honwana, *The time of youth: Work, social change, and politics in Africa* (Kumarian Press, Sterling, VA, 2012); F. K. Klouwenberg and I. Butter, ‘African ‘Youth’ since independence: Notes on a bibliographic overview, 1990–2005’, *Africa Development* 36, 3–4 (2011), pp. 55–66.

17. Tatek Abebe and Yaw Ofosu-Kusi, ‘Beyond pluralizing African childhoods: Introduction’, *Childhood* 23, 3 (2016), pp. 303–316; Lorenzo I. Bordonaro and Ruth Payne, ‘Ambiguous agency: Critical perspectives on social interventions with children and youth in Africa’, *Children’s Geographies* 10, 4 (2012), pp. 413–426, p. 365; Deborah Durham, ‘Youth and the social imagination in Africa: Introduction to parts 1 and 2’, *Anthropological Quarterly* 73, 3 (2000), pp. 113–120; Joschka Philipps, ‘Dealing with diversity: African youth research and the potential of comparative approaches’, *Journal of Youth Studies* 17, 10 (2014), pp. 1362–1377.

18. Jon Abbink, ‘Being young in Africa: The politics of despair and renewal’, in Jon Abbink and Ineke van Kessel (eds), *Vanguard or vandals: Youth, politics, and conflict in Africa* (Brill, Netherlands, 2005), pp. 1–33; Durham, ‘Youth and the social imagination in Africa’; Jon Abbink and Ineke van Kessel (eds), *Vanguard or vandals: Youth, politics, and conflict in Africa* (Brill, Netherlands, 2005); Thomas Burgess, ‘Introduction to youth and citizenship in East Africa’, *Africa Today* 51, 6 (2005), pp. vii–xxiv.

Payne's concept of 'ambiguous agency' addresses the manifestations of agency considered appropriate for young people in social milieus, policy interventions, and academic discourse.<sup>19</sup> As they put it, 'it is mostly in categories of children considered to be "at risk" to themselves and wider society that researchers have searched for and identified evidence of agency'.<sup>20</sup> But the agency of young people does not only come out in contexts of risk, crisis, or conflict, and young Africans do not experience life and participate in society only in circumstances of transition, marginalization, exclusion, and disenfranchisement. Even when they do, as Alcinda Honwana has shown, the state and space of being young, whether characterized as transitional or in 'waithood', is one in which young people participate fully in society and exert agency, sometimes in unexpected ways.<sup>21</sup>

Lorraine Young and Hazel Barrett have noted that 'traditional social science research methods... rarely involve children'.<sup>22</sup> And as critical race theorist Dolores Bernal has argued in an article about students of colour in formal Euro-American educational institutions, young people are 'holders and creators of knowledge; but often have their knowledge and experience devalued'.<sup>23</sup> But if adolescence is 'central to the developmental process and the constitution of a mature sense of identity', then understanding the thoughts and perceptions of adolescents on topics related to social and political identities is critical.<sup>24</sup> Subjects such as identity formation and nation-building, for instance, I suggest, are quite incomplete without considering the primary constituency of people being formed and built—young people—as (future) citizens. Even historians, as evident in the example I detail below of how my adolescent student participants solved the mystery of the location of the first building constructed on a school campus, could benefit from the perspectives and memories of young people.

An example of an outcome of a critical approach to epistemology that positions adolescents as knowing things beyond the subject of youth and acknowledges their agency outside of risk and conflict comes out of my fieldwork experience. A set of stories handed down from one generation of students to the next led to my locating a historically important but long-lost building. As many researchers of African histories know, it can be challenging to access and use conventional historical sources such as archives. And

19. Lorenzo Bordonaro and Ruth Payne, 'Ambiguous agency'.

20. *ibid.*, p. 367.

21. Honwana, *The time of youth*; Diane Singerman, 'The economic imperatives of marriage: Emerging practices and identities among youth in the Middle East' (Social Science Research Network, SSRN Scholarly Paper, 2007).

22. Lorraine Young and Hazel Barrett, 'Adapting visual methods: Action research with Kampala street children', *Area* 33, 2 (2001), pp. 141–152, p. 142.

23. Dolores Delgado Bernal, 'Critical race theory', *Qualitative Inquiry* 8, 1 (2002), pp. 105–126, p. 106.

24. Tanja R. Müller, "'Memories of paradise": Legacies of socialist education in Mozambique', *African Affairs* 109, 436 (2010), pp. 451–470, p. 453.



those of us who study histories of architecture and the built environment where there are no longer any architectural remnants visible often feel like we are chasing ghosts. What felt like a fruitless search for the location of the first building constructed on the campus of a school I was studying was rescued by students who had immortalized it in a story that they had been told by past students. Before that, I relied on fragments from archival sources, held at the Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD) in Accra and the British Library in London, and oral histories from community elders to find the spot. However, because the first school building's exact location was not deemed essential to those recollections and documentation, it was missing from the accounts. Instead, it was the adolescent student-led and student-sustained effort of recording, recounting, and transmitting histories of their school that preserved this small but important piece of information.

For the students, preserving and transmitting the histories of the various buildings and spaces of their school was an essential part of what I describe as school myth-making through which stories were preserved and retold to remind each generation of students about the 'sacrifices' that previous students had made for the school, and the duties they as current students and future alumni had to ensure the 'development' of the school.<sup>25</sup> Many of those stories were not known to the teachers, school authorities, and even older alumni at all, and the few that were known to them were known in different ways. Read together, all the different aspects of knowledge made for a much different, richer picture than any one set of perspectives analysed in isolation would have made. In the same way, our understandings of issues and trajectories around sectors such as architecture and governance will only be enriched by acknowledging the perspectives of young people in those industries who hold relevant knowledge of their own.

Once we accept that adolescents have knowledge and experiences worth studying in their own right—not just about issues of youth—the question is, how do we include them in our studies and enquiries given the legal, ethical, and sociocultural concerns around working with young people? These sociocultural factors, legal, and ethical considerations are important and valid and must be addressed with research participants who are legal minors or under guardianship in ways that do not typically apply to fully adult participants. As Lorenzo Bordonaro puts it, there is 'an unresolved tension between the acknowledgement of children's agency in social research and

25. Via Peace Ibala Amala, 'The dialectic of myth-making in contemporary African novel: The example of Ayi Kwei Armah', *Journal of Economics and Sustainable Development* 4, 16 (2013), pp. 172–178; Various discussions with students, A.I.R. Club, Kpando, Volta region, Ghana, October to November, 2019.

the conundrum of children's participation and full citizenship in society'.<sup>26</sup> So, what could it look like to engage adolescents in research with this 'unresolved tension' in mind? And how can research design and methodology from a critical epistemological standpoint that considers adolescents' agency in light of sociocultural contexts be undertaken?

*Engendering enthusiastic participation of adolescents in research*

Processes of obtaining ethical approvals for conducting social science research with young participants below legal ages of majority tend to be more involved than those for research with adult participants, for good reason. They are also either entirely aimed at or skewed more towards various adult guardians than the young people themselves, reflecting general ideas about the status of young people in societies.<sup>27</sup> These approaches do not always sufficiently account for the sometimes controlling or coercive structures in which adolescents are situated. Although continuous informed consent from both guardians and adolescent participants is the minimal standard and typical practice for researchers who work with young people, in this section, I argue for an approach that builds upon and goes beyond these minimum requirements rather than around them. This is a methodological argument about engendering the enthusiastic participation of adolescent participants, which, as stated earlier, I define as their eager and willing participation on top of the approval of their guardians. In aiming for the enthusiastic participation of young participants, we gain their continuous informed consent in ways that are meaningful in their sociocultural contexts and cognisant of power dynamics. Aiming for enthusiastic participation also ensures that the research process becomes more than just extracting information and is valuable, beneficial, and even enjoyable to the young participants.

These standard approaches to obtaining continuous informed consent from adolescents in institutional and otherwise controlled sociocultural settings can result in participants who feel pressured or coerced into participating in studies despite the best intentions of the researcher. On the other hand, taking the sociocultural and institutional contexts in which both researcher and participant are located and designing research methods to benefit them engenders their enthusiastic participation. Developing

26. Lorenzo Bordonaro, 'Agency does not mean freedom. Cape Verdean street children and the politics of children's agency', *Children's Geographies* 10, 4 (2012), pp. 413–426, p. 415.

27. Legally in certain jurisdictions such as South Africa, only parental consent is required for research with minors, although assent is encouraged and obtained by most researchers. The World Health Organisation's 'Guidance on ethical consideration in planning and reviewing research studies on sexual and reproductive health in adolescents' (2018), p.13 notes that, minors 'can only assent to research participation until they are old enough to provide legally valid consent'.

research methods for their specific contexts is imperative when working with young people because of the typical power imbalances between researcher and researched. It is even more important with young people in institutional settings because institutions have and exert additional power and control over them. This sometimes plays out in young people feeling overtly and covertly pressured to participate because their guardians have already consented. Thus, one approach for researchers seeking to be even more sensitive to their adolescent participants' wishes would be to design additional opt-in and opt-out mechanisms for their adolescent participants. This approach, I argue, results in enthusiastic participation. In my study, the additional opt-in and opt-out mechanism I employed was using the optional after-school club that I discuss in detail later on.

Youth studies researchers who work with marginalized and vulnerable young people, such as street children or teenagers who head households, regularly deal with issues around obtaining informed consent from minors in situations when there are few or no adult guardians present. For instance, Lorraine Young and Hazel Barrett, in their work with 'Kampala street children', developed 'mutual trust relationships' with the children, which 'allowed (them) to take control of the process without imposing adult influence'.<sup>28</sup> In Southern Africa, Nicola Ansell, Elsbeth Robson, Flora Hajdu, and Lorraine van Blerk, while working with 'AIDS-affected young people' who 'had experienced the chronic illness or death of an adult household member', also sought consent from the communities in which the young research participants lived.<sup>29</sup> A challenge they faced, reinforcing my previous points about the participation of young people being sometimes affected by coercive social structures, was the presence of 'insider(s)...local interpreters' who were familiar to the children, 'older and better educated', and thus 'deferred to' even when they contradicted the memories of the children. The researchers addressed this by subsequently appointing 'outsider assistants' who were unknown to the children, thus addressing some of the power relations between researcher and research participants.

Although these studies creatively addressed issues of consent and participation of young participants, they are more relevant to situations with limited adult guardian oversight where young people are more or less independent. Working with young people who have guardians present, especially in institutional contexts, presents a different set of considerations around power dynamics, institutional culture, and hierarchies. Power in these contexts can be overtly and directly expressed where authorities in institutions command or coerce young people to participate in activities.

28. Young and Barrett, 'Adapting visual methods', p.142.

29. Nicola Ansell, Elsbeth Robson, Flora Hajdu, and Lorraine van Blerk, 'Learning from young people about their lives: using participatory methods to research the impacts of AIDS in Southern Africa', *Children's Geographies*, 10, 2 (2012), pp. 169–186.

But there are also less direct, subtle power dynamics in these institutional contexts where young people feel obliged to participate in activities so as not to offend the adult authorities. The key conceptual difference, then, between working with adolescents who have no adult guardians and those that do, is the factor of control that those adult guardians knowingly or unknowingly exert.

To illustrate, at the start of my study in the secondary school, even though I was given full permission to interact with students during standard class hours, I elected to interact with them primarily through an after-school club during a free period in the school schedule. I explained to the authorities that this was because I wanted student participation to be as voluntary and enthusiastic as possible. I wanted the students to participate of their own volition and in their own time rather than in places and times where they were required to be. To that end, when I was given the opportunity to introduce myself and invite participation in the club at a general school assembly, I made sure to emphasize the non-compulsory nature of the club. Even then, the first club meeting had a number of students who told me that they were asked by teachers to attend because, in the words of one of the teachers, they were 'intelligent' and thus could be of more 'help... with [my] research'.<sup>30</sup> Conversely, I overheard teachers discouraging a student from speaking up at that same meeting. When I asked why he was discouraged from participating, I was told that 'he [was] not serious'.<sup>31</sup> This vignette from the field illustrates the subtle coercions that may occur when working with young people in institutional settings despite the best intentions of authorities and researchers. The next section looks at the mechanics of this after-school club in greater detail.

*The A.I.R. Club: Designing enthusiastic participation with a critical epistemological approach*

In this section, I present a practical application of my epistemological argument about engaging adolescents more broadly in our research about Africa and my methodological argument about engendering the enthusiastic participation of my adolescent research participants. In thinking critically about epistemologies, ethics, participation, power, and positioning, I sought to design this portion of my study in a way that would engage with my adolescent participants as much as possible in the same way as I engaged the more adult informants and participants: As knowledge holders in their own rights. In designing my research, I considered the sociocultural and institutional milieu in which we were situated, the power differentials

30. Field Notes, Kpando, 6 October 2019.

31. Field Notes, Kpando, 7 October 2019.

between myself as researcher and my research participants as adolescent students, and how the research process could benefit them as well. The idea of doing this through an optional after-school club as a primary research tool was borne from this approach.

This after-school club came to be called the Architects, Investigators, and Rapporteurs (AIR) Club, named by the students without my prompting in a demonstration of their ownership and enthusiasm for the club and its activities.<sup>32</sup> Although my initial plan was to have a 2-h session each week in a free period after lessons had ended for the day, the club ended up meeting 3 days each week upon the student members' insistence and direction.<sup>33</sup> Although situated in the school, the club functioned as a space that allowed freedoms, from strict regulation and hierarchies, for students that were otherwise not possible in other school spaces and times. In addition to exploring and discussing school architecture experiences and perceptions for my study, we also had student-led discussions of issues that interested them. Through the AIR Club, which ran with my presence for 2 months, the secondary school students researched and produced histories and stories of their school, multimedia content about being in the school, and maps of the school environments and experiences.

The epistemological approach to my study, being predicated on treating the knowledge and experience of young people as significant beyond the subject of youth, meant that the students of the AIR Club were one of many groups in my general pool of informants and sources about the architecture of education in Ghana. The themes and questions I explored with them were essentially the same as those I explored with my other adult and elderly research participants. And just as with other participants, I sought their knowledge, opinions, and experiences of nation-building, citizenship, social class, modernity, and secondary schools in Ghana. The only adjustments I made were to the methodological tools of the after-school club I used, which accounted for their sociocultural positioning and institutional context by allowing them more freedom to opt out or into the study through choosing to join and attend. Taking this epistemological approach led to a more fully rounded view of the themes I was investigating than I would have gained from any one group of sources and informants. Apart from the example of locating the position of an important historical building that I have detailed in the first section of this research note, my adolescent

32. These terms were selected by the club to stand for the different activities and subjects that the students and I were interested in exploring.

33. It was one-hour sessions for two of those days, but on Fridays, we had a two-hour session.

student participants had unique perspectives that, put together with perspectives from other participants and other data sources such as archives, led me to different insights.<sup>34</sup>

One set of insights had to do with questions around Ghanaian social status and hierarchies relating to which secondary school a person attended. While most of my more adult participants answered questions about how they were perceived as a result of which secondary schools they attended in often euphemistic and subtle ways, responses from my adolescent participants were more direct in relating their experiences of being treated as less than on account of their school background. The students freely and directly shared experiences of students from ‘high-class’ schools that ‘looked down on (their) school’ because students from those other schools perceived their school to be ‘low-class’ even though they were, on paper, an ‘A-School’.<sup>35</sup> They would agonize about imagined future situations where they would go to ‘functions’ and meet other former students from those ‘high-class schools’ who would refuse to interact with them because their school was ‘not popular’.<sup>36</sup> Issues about social class, status, and hierarchies in Ghana are not typically freely and easily discussed among adults in my experience. In some cases, adults had forgotten some aspects of their secondary school experience, whereas the adolescents were actively living through them. Thus, the direct responses of my adolescent participants, possibly because they have not yet encountered reasons to be euphemistic about these things or that they have not yet suppressed or forgotten them, not only helped me better understand gaps in the narratives of my other informants but also helped me adjust the wording of some interview questions to elicit different memories and responses.

My methodological approach included ensuring that membership of the AIR Club was purely voluntary and open to all students. When I introduced the club to the entire school at a Monday morning assembly, I endeavoured to be transparent and honest with them, explaining that it was for my PhD project—which I explained was like an intense ‘end of studies’ assignment since few students had heard of a doctoral dissertation—and telling them I needed their views and input to make sense of education and schooling

34. In this research note, I draw selectively on a small number of insights to illustrate my epistemological and methodological arguments. The substantive findings of this research are the subject of my dissertation, Kuukuwa O. Manful, *The architecture of education: Nation-building, social class, and modernity in Ghana*, (SOAS University of London, forthcoming PhD dissertation).

35. ‘A Schools’, ‘B Schools’, and so on are official categories of secondary schools in Ghana by the Ghana Education Service. See David Baidoo-Anu, Kenneth Gyamerah, and Timothy Chanimbe, ‘Secondary school categorization in Ghana: Silent plights of students and implications for equitable learning’, *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 1, 18 (2022), pp 2–17.

36. Discussions with students, A.I.R. Club, Kpando, Volta region, Ghana, 7 October to 7 November 2019.

in Ghana. I stated it was for people who were interested in talking to me about architecture, history, and research in general, and made it clear that it was open to all who were curious or interested, and not only students who were doing courses directly related to those subjects. Importantly, repeat attendance was not required, and students were informed at the morning assembly and all club meetings that they could withdraw consent simply by leaving a club meeting if they were not comfortable telling me and not joining any future sessions—no questions asked. The first meeting drew more than 60 students, but some had been encouraged to attend by their teachers but were not really interested, as I have previously mentioned. As we discussed what we would all like to study and research, I repeated several times that they need not attend if they were not interested. For the next meeting, there were about 40 students and around 30 students for the next. By the time the club membership had settled, we were at 18 active members. Although this was by no means a randomized selection, which might be an issue for researchers with different aims, it suited my purposes as I was not aiming for a randomized sample of students for this part of my study. This is because I utilized the club in combination with other data collection sources both outside and inside the school, such as observation and one-off interviews with randomly-selected students who were not club members about some of the same themes and questions.

This approach—of making sure the students participated because they wanted to, rather than feeling like they had to and designing activities around their interests resulted in enthusiastic and sustained participation in the club and research activities. After naming the club and identifying the projects they were interested in pursuing, the students also elected one of their fellow students as the club president and appointed two teachers as patrons. My role was undefined by them, and I did not push for one but acted more as a facilitator than a leader, guiding sessions, teaching when asked, and supplying discussion prompts and activities. The aim of the club was to study and document the architecture, histories, and myths of their school using tools and techniques such as creative writing, photography, videography, architectural drawing, mapmaking, model-making, and art. The persistence of the club after I had completed that part of my fieldwork and left the school was an unexpected but affirming outcome that further proved how engaging and valuable the process had been to them, even though I knew, and they repeatedly told me, how exciting and enjoyable the club was for them.

To encourage their enthusiastic participation and sustain the interest of the AIR Club members while gathering the data I needed for my study, I utilized a combination of pedagogical and methodological tools and techniques. These ranged from designing each meeting session to match my

participants' interest levels and understanding to using exciting and engaging activities such as photo walks, student interviews of town elders, and videography. Although most of the club sessions were designed and structured in advance, I was careful to be flexible and adaptable to match my student participants' needs to mine. For a few of our sessions, I even gave the students the option of setting the agenda. In one of these sessions, they asked me to teach them how to make and understand architectural drawings. In another, they opted to discuss romantic relationships. At other times, they would tell me a discussion was getting 'boring' and ask that we move on to something different.<sup>37</sup> If it were something I was particularly interested in, I would try to reframe the discussion in a way that might be more interesting to them, but most times, I would just let it go. As I later discovered, when they would bring up issues later in the group setting or in one-on-one chats, some of this was not just about whether they were interested in a topic but also about trust and vulnerability and what they felt comfortable saying in front of their peers or a visitor to their school. These pedagogical and methodical techniques engendered their enthusiastic participation and resulted in their sharing of perspectives which led to some of the unique insights I share throughout this article.

As some of them told me later on, as we got to know each other better, the club and I were like nothing they had ever experienced in a school setting before. Doing hands-on projects, having discussions and learning in the context of the AIR Club did not feel like a chore or something they had been prodded to do but rather an exciting opportunity that they were fully invested in. In the words of one of my student members, 'I like my dancing club because it is fun, but I like AIR Club too because it is another kind of fun'.<sup>38</sup> The AIR Club, to them, became a place where they could discuss issues of interest, take part in informative, entertaining activities, and learn new skills, all the while feeling like their opinions mattered as they explained their views on various topics such as schools and education, governance and the state, and even international politics. Often, they would relate school politics to national politics, drawing on restricted access to parliament, for example, to explain to me why first-year students could not use certain spaces that senior students used. Much of this directly fed into my research, and the images, written articles, models, comics, and videos they produced and elected to share with me also form part of my research data.

Through the format of the club, the way we addressed one other, and the overall structure of our interactions, I also addressed some of the potential issues stemming from my positionality and power relations. One of the

37. Discussion with students, A.I.R. Club, Kpando, Volta region, Ghana, 30 October 2019.

38. Discussion with students, A.I.R. Club, Kpando, Volta region, Ghana, 6 November 2019.



most important of these, informed by my self-awareness of my identity as a young Ghanaian woman doing research in Ghana and weighed against wanting to have as equitable an engagement as possible, was to invite the students to call me by my first name. In that setting, this sort of familiarity can be perceived as a sign of disrespect by observers and even an invitation to disrespect. 'Even form ones [first-year students] have to add "senior" to my name before they can talk to me' one worried final year student told me in concern.<sup>39</sup> Although I was unsuccessful in getting all of the students to use my first name, the process of attempting this, and the reasons some of them gave for not wanting to further enriched my insights into school hierarchies. Adult figures of authority are positioned above students and, regardless of their actual ages, students in higher years are senior to students in lower years and are thus referred to by their honorifics. Hence, even though some of them assumed I was nearer their age than not, it was difficult for them to refer to me in familiar terms. By the end of the study, only a few directly used my first name, and even then, almost never in front of their teachers. For the majority of them, using the 'sister/auntie' prefix was as far as they would get they could be comfortable with.<sup>40</sup> Although I was committed to flattening the research–researcher relationship between myself and the students who insisted on referring to me with honorifics as much as possible, I also accepted their discomfort around calling me by my first name. The difficulties of breaking out of certain sociocultural norms and habits, such as using sister/auntie as a sign of affection and respect, was an experience that I shared with them as a fellow Ghanaian, Ewe, former secondary school student.

Being a young Ghanaian woman with some connections to that particular secondary school made some aspects of this work easier, but I was encumbered in other aspects.<sup>41</sup> For example, developing camaraderie with the students was not difficult, but I also had to work to maintain some boundaries because of this familiarity. In a conversation I had with some of the club members just after our last session, they revealed that they had put my age at around 22 years. For context, the oldest student was 20 years old, and I was about a decade older. In hindsight, this assumption on their part, coupled with my casual mode of dress, possibly contributed to the easy trust and group dynamics that developed among us, even as it contributed to making maintaining some boundaries difficult. In this, my positionality came into play in the ways I perceived and positioned myself and also in how my research participants perceived and situated me.

39. Discussion with students, AIR Club, Kpando, Volta region, Ghana, 10 October 2019.

40. 'Sister' or 'Auntie' in this case was more from affection and respect, than implying a family relationship.

41. A relative of mine was a former student, and this was a point around which we developed camaraderie, although I attended a different secondary school in my time.

*Conclusion*

In this research note, I have argued that adolescents in Africa should be engaged more broadly in research about and on the continent rather than mainly with respect to youth-specific subjects because they are knowledge holders in their own rights. Noting the specific ethical and practical considerations that come with doing research with younger participants, I have also argued that research with adolescents should aim to engender their enthusiastic participation by accounting for their interests and going beyond the basic requirements of informed consent by accounting for the specific institutional and sociocultural contexts in which they are situated in. I have presented a practical example of conducting research through the after-school AIR Club using this epistemological and methodological approach to working with adolescents. In so doing, I suggest that knowledge production on and about the continent will be enriched and diversified, allowing us better understandings of broad social and political issues of interest.

African adolescents should be engaged in social and political research as the knowledge holders they are. This is both because they are in the process of being socialised and enculturated into social and political structures and processes and because they already currently participate in society and politics. Young Africans participate in, exercise their agency and exert influence in society, and thus the knowledge they hold brings much to bear to all studies of the continent. Thus, relegating their perspectives and knowledge to youth studies contributes to incomplete or skewed knowledge about broader society and politics in Africa. Based on a critical epistemological approach that draws on feminist and decolonial epistemologies, I have called for expanding who we include as interlocutors and informants in broader studies about and of the continent.

Regardless of the different positionalities of different researchers, these methodological approaches to research with adolescent participants can be applied and adapted. Not every researcher can, or should, form their own after-school club, but fortunately, not every researcher needs to. There are many existing clubs, societies and organisations for young people across African countries, both within and outside the context of educational institutions. The majority of these are actively youth-led, and researchers can quite easily approach these groups on more or less equitable terms to work with or solicit the views of young people and, in so doing, gain the advantage of working with groups that are already organised around relevant interests and activities, and that also have leaders and sometimes even adult patrons who can act as guardians, interlocutors, or facilitators.

Outside of club or society settings, researchers can also design their research process to account for institutional contexts and possible sociocultural factors that might affect young participants' abilities to opt in and out of studies freely. For example, a research project about religion that aims to gather data from adolescent participants attached to a particular religious institution could account for the constraining pressures of the said institution by holding interviews and discussions outside of the physical space of the religious institution. Additionally, researchers could allow participants to choose if and when they would like to participate outside of rigid institutional schedules rather than engage young participants during times when they are required to be in a particular place. Doing this, as I found with my secondary school students, gives them a sense of control that they do not feel they have with other activities which take place in strict schedules. Finding creative ways to engage young Africans as knowledge holders, and not just about subjects of youth and being young, holds exciting possibilities for critical epistemology and knowledge production about Africa.