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To cite this article: Franziska Fay (2018) The impact of the school space on research methodology, child participation and safety: views from children in Zanzibar, *Children's Geographies*, 16:4, 405-417, DOI: [10.1080/14733285.2017.1344770](https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2017.1344770)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2017.1344770>



Published online: 26 Jun 2017.



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# The impact of the school space on research methodology, child participation and safety: views from children in Zanzibar

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## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the impact of school environments as research spaces on participatory research methods, children's agency and safety. The article draws on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork on children's perceptions of protection programmes in state and Qur'anic schools in Zanzibar Town. Working with 'draw & write' and photovoice approaches disclosed issues with children's safety in schools and highlighted limitations of participatory research in educational spaces. Drawing on Zanzibari children's perspectives, I suggest that to improve fragile theoretical ideals about children's participation in participatory approaches in educational settings, research processes need cultural sensitization and conceptualization in relation to the intersecting notions of place and personhood. This, as the paper shows, needs to guide and can help develop a respectful understanding of children's lives. This paper contributes to discussions on childhood research ethics and constructions of 'safe research spaces'.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 24 June 2016

Accepted 2 June 2017

## KEYWORDS

Schools; participation; safe spaces; child protection; personhood; Zanzibar

## Introduction

In line with Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), childhood researchers and development practitioners emphasize the need for consultation and participation of children in matters of 'child protection' programme planning and policy-making (Bourdillon and Myers 2012). The right to participation without a safe space in which it can be realized may enable or even reinforce inequalities and forms of power children might wish to critique but are unable to if there is threat of reprimand. In this article, I demonstrate how in Zanzibar the aim of supporting children's agency and participation as knowledge producers conflicted with ideas about their personhood, or more precisely with the less agency-centred, obedient and restrained role commonly expected of them. Following Retsikas' claim that 'place by itself makes no sense, irrespective of those who dwell in it' (2007, 970), I argue that notions of place and personhood are critical factors when planning and conducting research with children in educational settings – especially researching sensitive matters like protection and punishment in schools. Acknowledging how place impacts on children's processes of being and becoming limits the harm child rights-based participatory approaches may cause and contributes to more effective implementation.

A focus on the spaces in which children's voices are recorded, heard and listened to has remained largely neglected in child protection research agendas and programme evaluations. In this paper, I draw on Zanzibari children's views and experiences of state primary and Islamic religious schools as research spaces to illustrate obstacles 'child-led' consultation can encounter. My argument here is for the absolute need for a culturally sensitive approach when children are consulted in accordance with

Article 12 in order to mitigate potential harm. Their perceptions and my own observations at six school research sites reflect how children's educational environments directly impact on research method application, their ability to participate and on their safety while taking part. My methodological framework, as well as children's agency and protection within it, was influenced by this research space.

Since the 1990s, childhood studies' thinkers promote more equal, non-hierarchical ideas of childhood and adulthood (James and Prout 1990) and acknowledge children's agency by treating them as interlocutors in their own rights. Shifting 'from a focus on adults mediating children's worlds and in the process muting children's voices to children's perspectives being central to the research field' (Wyness 2012, 429), children are now seen as constituting agents instead of merely passive objects of research (Morrow 2008). Through this paradigm shift, child-centred research methods gained popularity with academics researching children's lives.<sup>1</sup> Considering school spaces where such methods are applied challenges assumptions that children's participation is always in their best interest (Rogers, Labadie, and Pole 2016). Critically reflecting on spaces of well-being and young people's sociality in Zanzibar Town, I explore how their agency and safety came to be at stake and discuss how participatory research methods challenge the overall research process.

My exploration is set against the backdrop of child rights organizations' recent attempts to reduce physical punishment in Zanzibari schools aiming to improve children's safety. It engages with methodological trends in childhood research and questions assumptions about schools as safe spaces for child-focused research by interrogating the complexities inherent in spatial power dynamics. Identifying how methods, participation, agency and protection are contested in these situations, I suggest that discussions about children, safety and spatiality ought to relate closely to the intersecting notions of place and personhood, viewing both people and methods as embedded in social relationships. I conclude that to improve fragile theoretical ideals about children's participation and to develop a respectful understanding of children's lives, research processes need to be culturally sensitized and conceptualized in relation to place and personhood. This paper contributes to discussions on constructions of 'safe research spaces' and to improving methodological pathways for ethically researching children's lives in and beyond the 'Global South'.

This research was conducted in Stone Town, Zanzibar, a half-autonomous island state off Tanzania's coast, as part of doctoral fieldwork over a period of 18 months between January 2014 and July 2015. I followed an ethnographic qualitative methodological framework centred around the themes of childhood/personhood, manners/discipline, punishment and safety. My core group of research participants consisted of 60 children aged between 9 and 16 at 4 state primary schools and 2 community-run Qur'anic schools (*madradas*) in the 'Zanzibar Urban/West' (*Mjini/Magharibi*) district. Other research participants included teachers, parents, religious leaders (*sheikhs*) and institutions, community leaders (*shehas*), child protection policy-makers (Save the Children, UNICEF), Zanzibar government officials, and university students of the Diploma in Child Rights Protection at Zanzibar University (ZU).<sup>2</sup>

## Contextualizing childhood and schools in Zanzibar

Zanzibar's social and cultural context defines how childhood is experienced in the archipelago and how child protection interventions<sup>3</sup> are conceptualized. The complexity of the Muslim-majority population's adherence to Islamic values is reflected in Zanzibar's dual legal system that combines Common and Sharia Law. This determines, for example, that child protection programmes in mainland Tanzania, where the socio-cultural makeup of society is less defined by Islam, are coordinated separately to the Zanzibar programme.

*Adabu* (discipline) and *adhabu* (punishment) are central to constructions of childhood and children in Zanzibar. *Adabu* – which includes a display of courtesy, obedience and respect – is desired of children and inculcated in them during their young years through the means of *adhabu*, usually physical chastisement, as a form of correction. The inculcation of *adabu* through *adhabu* – where

discipline is re-established through chastisement – is considered to make children reach and possess *utu* (personhood), and is regarded as necessary in making them fully social people. The importance of *adabu* showed in children's photographic depictions which displayed, for example, children greeting each other and older people, carrying bags for elderly people, or cleaning. One child's explanation on the back of their drawing of a child and an adult states that having manners (*kuwa na adabu*) is 'when you are sent somewhere [such as a shop] by an older person to get something for them' (Girl 12). Another photo shows a girl and a boy shaking each other's hands, the explanation reading 'the child has to greet the one that is older than him, she has good manners' (Girl 14).

While children's rights-based participatory approaches build on the notion of children as 'beings' only – 'as a social actor actively constructing childhood', Zanzibari understandings of children emphasize both notions of children as 'beings' and 'becomings' – as also 'an adult in the making' (Uprichard 2008, 303). In Zanzibar, young people are considered human but yet incomplete for their perceived lack of full social personhood before reaching adulthood. It is important to surpass this dichotomy by viewing children and childhood as necessarily both being and becoming to increase the agency of children, 'as the onus of their agency is in both the present and future' (Uprichard 2008, 311). Acknowledging this relationship between place and personhood, particularly how it plays out in the constraints of social expectations, surveillance and interpersonal relationships, can limit the potential risk of rights-based participatory approaches.

Discipline and punishment play a central role in the loci of childhood explored in this article. In Zanzibar, as elsewhere, children's lives take place in multiple locations with schools being one of many ubiquitous spaces. Across children's spaces childhood is continually negotiated through constant contestation and appropriation of roles and meanings. Researching in schools allowed me to observe the daily encounters, challenges and processes that constitute children's lives. Additionally schools are key intervention sites for 'child protection' programmes aiming to improve children's safety through regulating the use of corporal punishment. Conceptualizations of children, childhood and school are essential points of departure for evaluating how notions of protection and participation, as outlined in vernacular and internationalized standards, align with local experiences. Acknowledging a disconnect between these ideas in participatory research frameworks and within Zanzibari society is necessary to improve young people's experiences.

Corporal punishment research in other contexts such as Ghana (Twum-Danso 2009) has noted the impact of 'culture' and local values on the success of participatory research with children. However, there remains a need to investigate further how the *spaces* in which participatory projects take place, be they the school, the home or the wider community, shape the realization of participatory tasks (Chakraborty's 2009). The discussions of this article consequently have implications for participatory research with children beyond Zanzibar.

### *Schools as potentially safe research sites and contested places of childhood*

Schools have the potential to serve as spaces where children feel safe, and hence may help children feel protected during research participation. Nevertheless, schools are more than 'just' isolated field sites and remain physical and cultural environments embedded in wider society. They are places of childhood – locations entangled with meaning and sociality – where children's roles, relations and expectations in society are debated and manifested. They are social worlds often reflecting wider societal tendencies within their walls. Schools, as on-going places that shape and contest social relationships, consequently raise methodological and ethical difficulties (Anderson and Jones 2009). In my research in Zanzibari schools, this resulted in continuous renegotiations of method and access so that participatory research became 'a social intervention', where methods reflected social relationships and affected the impact that could be achieved (Kirby 2001, 76).

Engaging in this social intervention required obeying a social code of conduct, as did the children in and outside their schools. Hierarchical power relations relating to age and social position were expressed through appropriate greeting, silence, patience and modest dress. Heightened levels of

in-school surveillance aiming to ensure conformity to rules caused further difficulties. Although schools were potentially ‘safe’ research sites in their familiarity, the need for social conformity and accompanying surveillance also made them potentially ‘unsafe’ for research participants. Additionally, schools were sites for international child protection scrutiny where anti-corporal punishment programmes were piloted at the time of research and potentially spaces of physical harm and abuse. School research spaces are never neutral or detached from the meanings inscribed on them but are formed both through the students and teachers inhabiting and co-creating them and their subjection to local and sometimes international gaze. As such they are ‘nodes of material connections to places near and far’ (Ansell 2009, 1999). Therefore, attempts to establish safe research spaces within schools are constrained by the influence of wider societal attitudes towards children that find expression in the school setting.

### *Child punishment and protection: the socio-legal situation in Zanzibar*

In 2009, a Violence Against Children (VAC) study identified corporal punishment as the most common form of violence that children experience on an everyday basis in schools in Zanzibar (UNICEF 2011). Following this, international organizations began collaborating with the Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar to make schools safer places for children. Child protection programmes in educational spaces aim to decrease the ordinary use of corporal punishment as an accepted disciplinary tool and intend to improve the quality of children’s lives by restricting practices that are considered harmful or abusive as per the CRC. In Zanzibar, there is no legal prohibition of corporal punishment and recent efforts to regulate it remain vague suggestions left to individual interpretation. Despite Article 14 of the Zanzibar Children’s Act (2011) stating that children should not be ‘subjected to violence, torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment’, it still allows parents to ‘discipline their children in such manner which shall not amount to injury to the child’s physical and mental well-being’. The Zanzibar Education Act (1988) also includes special Regulations for Corporal Punishment that limits the administration of caning by the headmaster to three strokes.

The embeddedness of child disciplining practices in cultural and religious values *and* in ideas of social personhood is often overlooked in protection programme planning. Even though a children’s rights perspective considers caning as VAC, ‘violence’ as a category usually takes a more multi-faceted, ‘culturally normative’ (Wells 2014, 263) shape. Therefore, substituting concepts of manners, morality and punishment with CRC-based ideas of child rearing and discipline locally comes to be considered as counter-productive. Within development programme, frameworks that work towards the elimination of corporal punishment schools are often imagined as ‘safe spaces’ dismissing vernacular ideas of what these comprise, unintentionally compromising rather than contributing to young people’s safety. In Zanzibar, child protection efforts face scepticism and rejection by teachers, parents and children for their limited coherence with vernacular understandings of being young and growing up and for the often socially disrupting nature of their real-life applications. Therefore, “‘protective’ intervention that disrupts a child’s relations with family and community needs careful evaluation” (Bourdillon 2014, 500).

### *Data collection methods*

Considering children as social agents within processes of child protection and corporal punishment, I follow approaches of anthropologists who qualitatively explored child maltreatment (Kavapalu 1993; Korbin 1981; Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987) building on claims like Mayall’s, that ‘children’s own experiences and discourses tell us about their understandings of the rights and wrongs of their daily lives’ (1994, 2). Data were collected through two participatory research tools: a draw and write approach<sup>4</sup> and photovoice. To find out how children felt about (inter)national development programmes that urge teachers to use alternative forms of discipline to caning, I chose this approach hoping it would allow children to express their opinions and experiences (Beazley et al. 2009). To

minimize the 'danger of bracketing all children together as a group in opposition to adults, and overlooking diversity among children' (Punch 2002, 338), I refer to these methods as 'participatory', while also questioning this concept's implications. Considering the importance of Zanzibari children's display of manners (*adabu*), I hoped these methods would allow research participation without compromising their *adabu* by contradicting the restrained behaviour valued of them and provoking *adhabu*.<sup>5</sup>

My central research methods – draw and write, and photovoice – emphasize children's often sidelined voices and intend to offer the opportunity to take leading roles in a research project (Wang 2006). Both methodologies centre on visualizing children's realities and understanding young people's views of their environments and worlds.<sup>6</sup> Photovoice is a participatory action research method in which individuals 'use cameras to photograph their everyday [...] realities, thereby focusing on issues of greatest concern and communicating these issues to policy makers' (Baker and Wang 2006, 406). It is assumed to provide a safe engagement space for children who may be reluctant to contribute in group discussions or interviews and may 'feel more autonomous and in control if asked to take their photographs' (Darbyshire, Macdougall, and Schiller 2005, 423). The 'draw and write' technique is premised on the assumption that drawing is 'an enjoyable, participatory activity in which children of all ages can take part' and drawings 'have been used as indicators, to reveal information that was deemed too difficult for the child to talk about or to facilitate adult/child communication' (Bckett-Milburn and McKie 1999, 389). The technique 'provides children with a choice for imparting information in ways that might be familiar to them' (Angell, Alexander, and Hunt 2015, 19).

All research activities were conducted in empty classrooms at the primary schools and madrasas during 30-minute time slots that teachers identified as suitable regarding children's availability, with only the researcher and the research participants present. Each research group consisted of 10 participants, with an equal gender distribution.<sup>7</sup> During the sessions, I distributed disposable cameras, paper, pens and crayons, explained the research themes and gave the children two weeks to produce stories, poems, drawings and photographs. After collecting their creations and analysing them in search for common themes, I facilitated focus group discussions with the children around these themes for them to elaborate on and explain their works.

Access to the schools was established in cooperation with a Ministry of Education and Vocational Training employee who arranged introductory visits. These helped to obtain permission from head teachers before starting research activities and enforced my official status as a researcher. This further helped teachers to feel free to participate in the project and to allow students to do so too.<sup>8</sup> Informed consent was obtained from both parents/guardians and child research participants through signed informed consent letters. All research participants were informed about research themes and intent prior to the activities' beginning and were ensured of confidentiality and their right to opt-out at any point. Data were analysed in cooperation with the young researchers in semi-structured group discussions that followed research activities. Co-analysis helped to assure the children's own interpretations of their productions were given highest priority. Qualitative thematic analysis was used to bring out key themes that emerged from the various data, aligning them with the guiding research question of the study: How are children's and adults' ideas about corporal punishment and child protection embedded in social relations, connected to age and gender, embodied and affective and subject to discursive hierarchies?

### **Inside Zanzibar's schools: considering the impact of school spaces on methodological application, research participation and child protection**

Choosing educational spaces as research sites influenced and compromised how research methods could be applied, how young people participated in them and how they were protected during involvement. Children's right to participation, without a sufficiently safe space for their engagement, was put at stake for a lack of focus on ideas about their processes of being and becoming

– their personhood. A focus on how place relates to personhood puts into perspective rights-based participatory research approaches. Data from an evaluation of my project with the 60 young key researcher participants, as well as their drawings and photographs offer insights into how method, participation and safety were affected by school spaces as research locations. Even though the children gave more extensive positive feedback on my research project here, I focus on their critical assessments as it more fully demonstrates how approaches to research with children can be improved.

### *Methodological challenges*

Children's limited familiarity with drawing as a task of self-expression was a central challenge. Much like Mitchell (2006), who criticizes the assumption that children everywhere perceive drawing as an adequate means of expression, this was seldom the case. What happened instead was that more meaningful or relevant responses were 'simply not being drawn or written down by the children because the act of drawing them is, in some ways, just as emotionally or practically problematic for the child as would be the act of speaking them' (Backett-Milburn and McKie 1999, 394). Some images offered great insights into how children viewed the research themes, particularly if they included added explanations. More frequently though, and rather in opposition to freely imagined creative drawings, children produced images traced from other images, reflecting their limited familiarity and confidence with creative arts or assumed expectations of having to do things 'right'. Such expectancy is inherent in a Zanzibari learning approach that rewards for learning things by heart and includes neither arts nor music classes, for these are considered *haram*<sup>9</sup>, and hence incompatible with a Muslim society's values.

Furthermore, instead of drawing themselves or characters that resembled their appearances to explain their daily routines, many children drew 'western'-looking or fictitious characters such as cartoon heroes, possibly indicating a discomfort or unfamiliarity with putting themselves at the centre of their images engaging in everyday activities like doing chores or washing themselves. Many children appeared to feel more at ease with depicting strangers in place of themselves. Other images were rather random and not related to the themes I had asked them to keep in mind while drawing, indicating the difficulty of clarifying the purpose of the task. Therefore, the drawing part of the research activity only offered partial perspectives onto children's viewpoints and could not be considered an adequate 'substitute for children's voices' (Mitchell 2006, 69) but merely an addition. The young researchers' (negative) evaluations of the methods I applied help to understand the difficulties they faced:

I would have preferred to go somewhere to visit instead of taking pictures. (Female 14)

I didn't like the drawing and writing. (Female 13)

The research brought some difficulties because of the pictures. Many elders didn't want to be photographed by their children. (Female14)

To take photos on these themes is not nice. (Male 14)

Instead of participating at school, children would have preferred to be involved in different spaces, would have chosen other methods over drawing and writing, found it difficult to take photographs on sensitive themes and faced adults' rejections towards working with these methods. Following this, it is necessary to complicate the assumption that participatory research methods are inherently 'child-friendly' or particularly suitable to working with children. As such methods are frequently based on assumptions of what children in the 'west' are accustomed to, they should not be applied without caution when conducting research in 'non-western' places. Instead as Punch (2002) cautions, innovative research methods should be described as 'research-friendly' or 'person-friendly' rather than 'child-friendly' because 'preferences and competencies vary from child to child in the

same way as they do from adult to adult' making it 'impossible to find the ideal methods for research with children' (Punch 2002, 337).

The school space's impact on my methodological approach is visible in the limitations children felt regarding the expression of their views through drawing or photography in the school context. School-based research presents the danger of children saying 'what they think adults want them to say' (Fargas-Malet et al. 2010, 178) or 'present a "correct" response to adult questions' (Angell, Alexander, and Hunt 2015, 21). It is further complicated when adults 'expect children to model norms of classroom behaviour such as putting a hand up for permission to speak, sitting still, having one person speaking at a time and speaking only when asked a question' (Darbyshire, Macdougall, and Schiller 2005, 428). Such localized 'rules' impact on the way research in schools can be carried out.

Gallagher contests an adult-child dichotomy of powerful and powerless actors and unmakes the trope of researchers being able to 'give' power to children through participatory research approaches. Building on the established claim that participatory techniques 'may reinforce rather than challenge hierarchical power relations' (2008, 137), concluding that such techniques cannot transcend games of power (147). Moreover, the 'attractiveness' of participatory approaches promising 'to access the perspectives of the children being researched' can conceal limitations of these approaches (Gallagher and Gallagher 2008, 499).

### *Children's agency and participation in research*

Children's ability to exercise their agency is relational to their environments. The ways in which school spaces restricted children's capacity to actively participate in the research were evident in their evaluations. In response to being called out of class to engage in research activities students wrote:

She [the researcher] called us when we were studying, so while our friends were learning we missed class. I advise her to call us during our break or during a time when people don't study. (Male 13)

Not so good was that sometimes the teacher was teaching and the topics are hard to understand. Even when she explained them you could not understand. (Female 12)

Despite discussing with teachers that their students should only participate when they were not in class, this, as is evident from the children's feedback, was not always the case. Understandably, my research participants were concerned about missing lessons when called to participate in my research. Whereas my intention had been to increase their agency by providing an alternative space for them to voice their experiences. Nevertheless, none of the participants ever complained to me in person about this. If school staff members give consent for research to take place, 'children might find it difficult to decline to take part' as 'researchers may be perceived as in a "teacher" role' and hence research considered as school work thereby distorting its independent nature (Fargas-Malet et al. 2010, 178). Only post-research did I learn that this had occurred, reiterating the restraint of *adabu* (manners), the adherence to which is perceived by children to be necessary to avoid *adhabu* (punishment), but constrained my attempts to understand their perspectives.

The impact of the school space on children's participation and agency was most visible in their extreme shyness to speak their minds, especially in a critical way. In schools, where a lack of *adabu* or other forms of misbehaviour are immediately corrected through physical chastisement, the use of research methods that contest an adherence to this set of manners is inevitably influenced and restrained by the space and its rules. This was also reflected in limitations in the use of photovoice where the unequal power relations between adults and children, and the hierarchy underlying this, constrained the extent of its application.

This echoes Arnstein's writings on public participation in decision-making processes, where 'citizen participation' is understood as the 'redistribution of power' that empowers those excluded from political and economic processes (1969, 216). Arnstein differentiates between 'going through the

empty ritual of participation and having the real power needed to affect the outcome of the process' (1969) – critically at my research site, the former was more true for my young research participants despite adopting 'participatory' research approaches commonly used with children. Thus, participatory research – similarly to participatory development – may be considered to facilitate a form of 'tyranny' through 'the illegitimate and/or unjust exercise of power' (Cooke and Kothari 2001, 4), enforcing a promising but not very meaningful framework upon children. The ideas of 'independent agency' and 'participation' as implied by and crucial for using participatory methods contradicted the local expectation for children to be passive at the bottom of Zanzibari society's hierarchy.

Despite participatory research's potential to give room to children's voices and to have an 'empowering' effect on marginalized positions, the circumstances under which it takes place and the limitations that pertain in these contexts remain to be considered. When participatory methods are adopted 'to maximize children's agency in the research process' (Ansell 2009, 193), they may also do the opposite and constrain it. While teachers always assured me that students had time to take part in my activities, this was obviously not true. Nevertheless, the young people did not speak up about this and due to wider societal demands of appropriate behaviour, my participatory research approach eventually rather limited than increased their agency. In this regard, school spaces as locations for carrying out research with young people affected their potential to actively participate and exercise their agency to the extent that they did not feel they could speak out against adults' orders to do things at inconvenient times.

My own experience concurs with Fielding (2007), that the 'voice' metaphor for student engagement has limitations, as "'voice" has too much about it that smacks of singularity, of presumed homogeneity' (306). Thinking 'beyond' concepts of 'voice' and 'agency', Krafl echoes these hesitations and critiques mantra-like calls by researchers who, without much reflection, press for more 'participation' by children and emphasize children's independence from and agency separate of adults (2013, 14). This kind of independent adult-detached 'agency' and empowering 'participation' is, as I have shown, not possible.

### *Children's protection and safety*

Finally, my research participants' safety and protection were compromised by settling on schools as my key research settings. Working with methods such as drawing, writing and photography in schools also challenged children's safety. Instead of helping to create 'safe' research spaces in schools such methods introduced new tensions and complexities that made clear the approach's limitations. An excerpt from my fieldnotes visualizes this:

Today the children chose the photos they wanted to include in the research. While they were busy selecting and writing explanations on the backs of their images a teacher I hadn't met before came into our classroom. He grabbed some of Nassir's photos and skimmed through them without particular interest. Nassir seemed terrified but continued writing without looking up. Trying to get rid of the teacher I told him that we were about to finish our session and that he could use the classroom after. He ignored my suggestion and instead asked me whether he should bring me a cane: 'Nikuletee bakora?'. I told him I didn't need one and asked him why he thought I did. 'Well, are they doing what you want them to do? I'm sure they will do much better if you hit them a little bit.' At that point all the kids had dropped their pens and curiously waited for our conversation to continue. 'I don't hit', I told the teacher, assuring him that the students were doing a fantastic job and exactly what I wanted them to. Seemingly not satisfied he just repeated my words and finally left. (Stone Town, March 2015)

Children's participation in my research activities compromised their safety. The threat of being physically punished was omnipresent and did not exclude the realm of research in which they were involved while participating. The excerpt shows how a teacher's presence alone affects student behaviour, particularly in a normalized system of physical punishment where teachers might have an intimidating impact on students. This is relevant not only concerning Zanzibar but all school-based research where previous negative relationships or experiences between students and teachers

influence students. The teacher stressing his support of corporal punishment in front of the students participating in my research put all social relations involved in this situation at stake.

Similarly, children were worried about forgetting to bring their cameras when I came to pick them up to take them to get developed. Sitting with them they told me quietly that they had forgotten the cameras, asking me not to tell their teacher, fearing punishment for failing to do so. Another example from children's views expressed in the research evaluation stresses:

Some children don't want to tell us about the way they are brought up at home (*malezi ya nyumbani*) because when they tell us, they will get difficulties (*watapata shida*). (Male, no age)

This opinion reflects a more general fear of negative consequences that openness about sensitive matters might have. Avoiding getting 'difficulties' being punished for acting in ways disapproved by adults became an inevitable challenge for many research participants involved in completing research tasks. Of course, I had not intended such consequences but these 'difficulties' illuminates the challenge of predicting and avoiding harm in research situations. This becomes particularly pressing when researching complex matters such as corporal punishment in schools which, as fluid research sites, are always influenced by the wider locale in which they are embedded.

A critique of the dangers of a 'spatialized approach' or an 'islanding of children' (Hart 2012, 476) in the context of child protection equally applies to research approaches that insufficiently contextualize their interventions and portray groups in society, that is, children, as homogeneous entities separable from their social networks in society. Therefore, I see both the need for 'greater contextualisation of globally-defined approaches' to child protection (Hart 2012, 483) and locally sensitive methodologies for research with children within their everyday learning environments and beyond. In particular, the tensions between 'protection' and 'participation', enshrined in universalized child rights frameworks as well as child-focused research practices, must be related to cultural and social constructions of childhood (Morrow 1999, 149).

The safety of schools as research settings for working with children relies not only on diminishing possibilities of physical harm to research participants but equally on children's general freedom of expression in these settings. Working with creative methods in a context where creativity is little supported in the education sector poses a challenge. Applying participatory research methods in school systems with a common 'culture of punishment' means working in a parallel system within which 'mistakes' – such as forgetting to bring your camera – are punished according to school rules which cannot be outplayed.

Despite intentions of working within a participatory research approach that would support children's views and positively influence unequal power relations to benefit them, all different research stages and spaces were mediated by and negotiated through adults. The above examples call for greater sensitivity in the use of participatory research methods and show the inseparability of the methods from adults, despite methodological aims of prioritizing children. Children's participation, despite using sensitive research approaches, is restrained and biased by the impact adults have. Thinking about participatory methods, particularly with children, we tend to identify participants as the only influential actors. But children's lives are tied in social networks with the adults around them. It may be somewhat naive to assume that the only one participating in participatory data collection is the intended child. Just as children are embedded in the webs of social relationships, so too are our methods.

### Re-approaching (safe) spaces through personhood

Having considered school spaces' impact on the application of research methods, children's agency and their protection in those spaces, I suggest a focus on the notion of personhood as a helpful tool for reconsidering (safe) research spaces. As evident from my examples, place as a location of remarking ideas about childhood and carrying out research was inevitably intertwined with ideas of personhood, of being a young person and a social being in a particular setting. Strengthening children's

voices through participatory research methods did not agree easily with local adults' feelings about the irrelevance of consulting children and lead to endangering their safety in their learning environments.

My research site was more complicated and less 'safe' than anticipated yet the school remained the only easily accessible place where the same group of children could be consulted long-term without continually re-negotiating access. Nevertheless, the compatibility of the notions of participation and protection proved to be fictitious outside theoretical frameworks. Within Zanzibari society, children's opinions are seldom prioritized regarding matters concerning their own life situations. Aiming to support children's agency and participation as knowledge producers conflicted with this restrained, obedient and less agency-centred role that was commonly expected of them.

Zanzibari children's experiences demonstrate a need to look closely at locations and 'cultures' in which research methods are situated without assuming, that because certain methods are presented as being more 'friendly' to a particular group, this must automatically be the case everywhere. Following Strack, Magill, and McDonagh (2004), I agree that 'it is important to consider youth's roles in society; how much power do they really wield, and thus, to what extent can they be empowered' (56)? These power relations, so closely intertwined with place and personhood, need to be incorporated in situational assessments regarding the suitability of research methods in research settings.

Choosing schools as research locations brought to the fore ideas about the characteristics of the place itself as well as about childhood and children's roles in Zanzibari society. Following Retsikas' (2007) claim that place and personhood are mutually constituting and that people create place and vice versa, this kind of remaking occurred while collaborating with my research participants. How children ought to behave in schools and what it means to be a child in Zanzibar more generally showed during research. In participatory childhood research, there is a tendency to assume that children are physically and emotionally separable from their wider environments (Hart 2012). Such approaches deny the influence of social networks that define children's lives and consequently disregard the contexts children live in. Not adapting participatory methods to societal constraints and expectations that fall on children reveals a tacit assumption that children can detach themselves emotionally from the affective systems they remain part of during participatory research. Presented as less emotionally disturbing or less problematic for children to use, the reverse may be true in contexts where photography or drawing is not considered an acceptable task for children (Backett-Milburn and McKie 1999).

The contexts and networks that define how children are constrained or negotiate agency within their everyday spaces of childhood should not be dismissed when debating the suitability of research approaches for working with children in particular places. Abebe and Bessell emphasize this, arguing 'an ethic of care needs to recognize that research takes place both within a context of broader social relationships and personal connections' (2014, 130). This echoes that, more than being individual social agents, children are agents within networks of sociality that consist of adults – parents, teachers, development workers, researchers – expectations of children and the roles assigned to them. Put differently, knowledge production in research situations is 'shaped by children's social relationships' (Lomax 2012, 114). Eventually, 'children are caught in tension between aspirations of the global model of childhood and youth imagined in neo-liberal policies and local experiences and environments' (Morrow 2013, 267).

Viewing children as rights-holders and active participants relies 'on particular western notions of childhood and child protection' (Imoh 2013, 473). Hence, engaging children in 'participatory' research activities depicts them as full social 'people' whose views can be taken seriously. This is opposed to how they are commonly viewed in Zanzibar – where children's opinions are often side-lined in everyday life and rarely considered important in the public sphere. Places that children dwell in, such as schools, cannot be separated from ideas that adults have about children as people and therefore need to be considered when involving children in research activities or programmes that aim to contribute to their well-being. Participatory methods create tension and shift power relations associated with child and adult roles in societies (Abebe and Bessell 2014) and have an

impact on the social relations that constitute children's lives. As Holloway acknowledges, the 'insistence that we listen to children does not always sit easily with relational understandings of the subject' (2014, 382), and hence echoes the importance for understanding children 'not as individualized subjects, but in relational terms' (Ansell 2009, 205).

It remains to recognize the disconnect between vernacular childhood constructions and those claiming a universalized, global perspective in order to understand how school spaces can impact differently on young people's agency, safety and research engagement. Social relationships between children and their peers, between adults, and between children and adults – and hence also participatory approaches – must be viewed 'within a wider set of social relations operating within and beyond school boundaries' (Pike 2010, 276). There is a continued need to contextualize participatory projects with children through careful examination of adult-child interactions understood through a society's social and cultural values (Twum-Danso 2009, 388).

## Conclusion

In this article, I have drawn on Zanzibari children's views to reflect on how school spaces impact on the application of participatory research methods, children's participation in them and their safety during this process. I have argued that a better understanding of the relationship between place and personhood contributes to effectively conducting rights-based participatory methodology that reconciles the researched society's socio-cultural realities with universalized rights aspirations (Twum-Danso 2009). Only through recognizing the intimate link between place and personhood can truly 'safe' research spaces be identified that fully secure children's 'right to participation'. Place, being mutually constitutive of personhood, is key to fully understanding the social webs in which 'safe spaces' emerge and are embedded. Doing research with children must build on this relational approach that recognizes them as situated beings and becomings in order to understand how the use of participatory approaches might put children in conflict with expected social roles and adults around them.

Children's experiences show that schools are not immediately safe spaces, neither as physical places nor as realms of research, and raises questions of the universal appropriateness of participatory research methods in societies that demand children's passivity. This article demonstrates the need to account for broader social networks and processes that establish children as 'persons' within their communities. Otherwise, research frameworks may put at stake children's 'right to be properly researched' by failing to assure that children are 'protected from harm that might result from taking part in research conducted by researchers' (Beazley et al. 2009, 370). Looking further than 'feel-good participation in research' (Beazley et al. 2009, 376) by recognizing that 'creative visual methods do not in themselves provide a fail-safe shortcut to children's experiences' (Lomax 2012, 114) allows for more careful approaches in the exploration of sensitive matters such as protection and punishment. Truly child-friendly research methodology needs to think beyond and across social groups and relations to avoid causing preventable harm or conflict.

## Notes

1. 'Child centred' is often used interchangeably with the terms: 'child-led', 'child-focused', 'child-friendly' or, more generally, 'participatory' research methods.
2. Alongside my research, and 'in return' for my affiliation, I lectured on the Diploma in Child Rights Protection at Zanzibar University, volunteered with and consulted for Save the Children on physical and humiliating punishment and child participation.
3. Child protection interventions on the islands are led by Save the Children and UNICEF who work in cooperation with the Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar.
4. This approach also involved story and poetry writing.
5. In this article, I do not discuss how children indeed felt about these child protection programmes but instead focus on how the space in which I worked with them to gain their insights – their schools – impacted on the application of my methods, their participation in them and their protection while being involved.

6. Particularly photovoice turned out to be a valuable research tool as children produced personal insights into worlds I as a researcher would otherwise not have had access to. The children's photographs documented situations less biased by my direct physical presence in the moment and enabled them to show everyday situations as they encountered them.
7. This was particularly important as both boys and girls are affected by physical and other related punishments at school and beyond.
8. These steps were particularly helpful regarding the two madrasas, which had never received researchers or foreign visitors and where, therefore, access was particularly sensitive and in constant need of re-negotiation, partially regarding my status as a female non-Muslim researcher.
9. Forbidden according to Sharia/Islamic law.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to the children who participated in this research.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Funding

This work was supported by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and the British Institute in Eastern Africa (BIEA).

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