Challenging Power Dynamics and Eliciting Marginalized Adolescent Voices Through Qualitative Methods

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Abstract
Eliciting adolescents’ voices through qualitative research necessitates research methods which challenge the power dynamics that marginalize young people and thus inhibit them from sharing their perspectives. In lower- and middle-income countries where younger adolescents in particular are often discouraged from expressing their voices, this is especially important. Methodological tools which are adaptable, interesting and create space within the research process for participation and freedom of expression are critical when eliciting the “voices” of young people aged 10–14 years, who are often less visible or accessible and thus marginalized both socially and within research processes. For example, adolescents with disabilities or those out of school may require methodological adaptations to ensure meaningful participation.

This article focuses on the ethical, practical and data quality issues that emerge when engaging with young adolescents that are marginalized both in research and within their own communities, and the need to ensure complementarity between the process of the research and its broader objective of expanding adolescent capabilities. Bearing in mind these challenges, this paper reflects on the methodological toolkit developed by the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) research project as a means for eliciting a diversity of adolescent voices and ensuring that socially excluded adolescents are not “left behind,” nor included on a merely tokenistic basis. We suggest that the strengths of the GAGE methodological toolkit lie in its grounding within broader research objectives vis-à-vis expanding adolescent capabilities and challenging structures and norms which marginalize young people. The flexibility, reflexivity and importantly the enjoyability of these methods led to adolescents both feeling at ease, able and willing to contribute their voices to the research—as well as empowered to use their voices in other areas of their lives.

Keywords
adolescent, gender, marginalized, voices, qualitative methods, global South

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Introduction
This article explores the tension between process and outcomes in research that seeks to engage with the voices of marginalized adolescents in lower- and middle-income countries. Drawing on literature on participatory methods, and taking into account debates around power and representation, we reflect on some of the challenges around the participation of marginalized adolescents in research, focusing on younger adolescents and particularly those out of school and with disabilities. We identify a number of gaps in understanding about the strengths and weaknesses of various qualitative research methods in reconciling these tensions and producing robust research, while also engaging with young people as agents in their own right, in ways which they find meaningful and stimulating. We present an overview of the adaptable and innovative methods used by GAGE, a 9-year longitudinal research project on gender and adolescence across multiple low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), which we suggest have been able to elicit a plurality of adolescent voices, including those at the younger end of the...
spectrum of adolescence and those with various disabilities. We assert that including adolescents who tend to be overlooked in research is an ethical imperative for development research which seeks to “leave no-one behind.”

Challenges in Conceptualizing and Representing the Voices of “Marginalized” Adolescents

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), signed 30 years ago this year, enshrined a far-reaching set of rights that young people under the age of 18 are entitled to in a range of areas. In doing so, it also laid the foundation for what adults’ relationships with younger people should be. Article 12 has particular relevance to research that seeks to engage with young people’s “voices.” It states that under-18-year olds have the right to be consulted on matters which affect them; and that adults must seek out and engage with their views in order to meet their responsibilities to young people. The emphasis on youth participation has seen a strong uptake within international development, which since the 1990s has pursued a broader participatory agenda in response to increasingly vocal critiques of “top-down” development and the failure of large-scale economic interventions under structural adjustment (Chambers, 1997). Participatory research methods can help address the structural and relational marginalization of groups of people whose voices tend to be unheard (Alanen & Mayall, 2003; Kellett, 2010), by promoting an awareness of power differentials and a politicization of processes for generating data (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Groundwater-Smith et al., 2014).

During the same period in which participatory approaches became more popular within international development, what is now referred to as the “new social studies of childhood” emerged (James, 2007; Katz, 2004; Prout & James, 1990). Historically children have been constructed within discourse as inherently passive and voiceless; a framing which reinforces inequalities and justifies their exclusion from participating in research in more active ways (Tisdall & Punch, 2012; Wood & Leibenberg, 2019). Countering this, the new social studies of childhood paradigm emphasizes that younger people are actors in their own right who have the agency and capacity to construct and determine their social lives (Prout & James, 1990). With its emphasis on agency, research with rather than on younger people is integral. As James (2007, p. 262) puts it, “the whole question of voice assumes, implicitly, children’s active participation in the research process.”

Much of the research undertaken within this paradigm has therefore drawn on a participatory epistemology to explore younger people’s perspectives, challenging generational and cultural notions of power and control (Alanen & Mayall, 2003; Kellett, 2010; Lundy, 2007). Straightforward, one-off interviews between adult researchers and younger people can inadvertently reinforce hierarchies (Alanen & Mayall, 2003; Mayall, 2000). Participatory work with younger people has moved from being something only done in specialist academic circles, to an increasingly popular practice to engage the views of young people in a range of disciplines (Kim, 2016). In this framing, younger people are not seen as different and in need of particular methods on the basis of their biological age (Christensen, 2004); rather, addressing power relations is the central concern when designing methodology.

Participatory methods have become particularly popular in research with marginalized and vulnerable younger people because they name and seek to address power inequalities—both between children and adults, and among young people themselves—that result in certain types of knowledge being the only types that are legitimized and recognized by adults (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2018). Participatory methods are often seen as inherently “youth-friendly” because they are generally more enjoyable. Yet meaningful participation should attend to power dynamics and ensure that marginalized voices are represented and included. In the same way that some adult voices are paid less attention or obscured within dominant narratives, so too are the voices of some adolescents. Simply seeking to engage with “adolescents” as a group may miss important vectors of marginalization, allowing only certain views and experiences to be represented. Our understanding of “marginalization” in this paper is informed by work on vulnerability as a socially constructed phenomenon dependent on power relations between certain groups in society (Tisdall & Punch, 2012; Von Benzon & van Blerk, 2017). Such vulnerability is context-dependent; and thus without due attention, research processes themselves can position certain people as “vulnerable” (Von Benzon & van Blerk, 2017).

Participatory methods should not be seen as a panacea to these challenges. Several critiques of “participation” have emerged in recent years within anthropology and development studies, including the argument that participatory methods can themselves constitute an exercise of power (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). White and Choudhury (2007) suggest that the structure of the development industry itself can result in the co-option of young people’s voices into a pre-established agenda, often in ways that reinforce rather than challenge class and racial divides. Even though participatory research seeks to challenge power dynamics between adults and children, the influence of adults and norms around what constitutes logical responses may still impact whose voices are listened to (Kraftl, 2013; Tholander, 2007). Adolescents, who are in a liminal stage between childhood and adulthood, are often excluded from decision-making if they are deemed to be behaving in ways which are not sufficiently “adult”; yet they are no longer “children” and inhabit a very different social world from those who are younger. Attending to the power dynamics at work in determining who can participate and under what conditions is key to understanding adolescents’ agency and capabilities.

Power dynamics in society are also at work in the framing of certain groups as “marginalized.” Wood and Leibenberg (2019) suggest these terms can reinforce inequalities between researchers and communities and top-down research processes (Wood & Leibenberg, 2019). They call for more critical engagement with terminology like “marginalized” in academic
outputs, and emphasis not only on the challenges facing certain groups, but on the positives and opportunities identified by the data. This echoes Thomas-Hughes (2018), who argues that researchers working with socially excluded groups must take care not to reproduce marginalization in the research process.

It is also important to be mindful of how young people see and define themselves, rather than imposing adult categories and expectations on them. For example, young people who adults may consider to be vulnerable may not consider themselves to be vulnerable; labeling them as such could even exacerbate any stigma they face (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2018; Woodgate et al., 2017), so the process of targeting certain groups to participate in research must be undertaken with caution. Targeting may also overlook vulnerabilities within groups that may not be considered to have specific needs, such as young men. In this vein, research by the GAGE programme has identified how the gendered experience of adolescence can harm boys, such as through a heightened risk of accidents, physical injury and peer violence (Jones et al., 2019). Assumptions about which adolescents face risks and why also tend to lead researchers to focus on spaces like school or other public spaces younger people are presumed to occupy; this means the views of out-of-school adolescents may be inadvertently excluded.

Yet including marginalized young people is important not only from an ethical perspective, but because understanding more about how they experience inequalities can help to improve policy and programming to become more inclusive (Bonevski et al., 2014). This is integral for global policy agendas which seek to “Leave No One behind.” The majority of research guidance on how to include children and adolescents has been generated in higher-income countries; yet as Marsh et al. (2019) point out, the greatest burden of inequality falls on those living in lower-income countries. This paper recognizes the socially constructed nature of such terms, and the power dynamics at work, while also asserting that adolescents with disabilities and younger adolescents stand to gain (and lose) the most from policy and programming changes, so it is essential that their voices are represented in research that seeks to overcome inequalities.

Chappell et al. (2014) argue that young people already have voice—they just need to be supported to exercise it. In line with the concerns expressed by Kraftl (2013) and Tholander (2007), James (2007) warns against the notion of children’s “voice” in the singular, as it implies a homogenous experience of childhood—most probably one that aligns with adult expectations of “childhood.” Tay-Lim and Lim (2013) suggest that regarding young people as the experts in their own lives carries with it the simultaneous need “for researchers to be experts in developing and employing appropriate strategies that can effectively elicit the insights that children can bring to a research topic” (Tay-Lim & Lim, 2013:66). Kellet (2010) suggests that involving young people as active researchers enables a rich insight into their perspectives that would not be gained from “adult-led” research alone. To have influence, young “voices” must transcend the boundaries of childhood and “negotiate a shared understanding in the adult world” (Kellett, 2010: 96). However, the onus should be on adults—those with power and agency over regimes of representation—to create space for and facilitate young people’s expression; and listen to and act on views where appropriate (Lundy, 2007). A key challenge with which this paper seeks to engage is therefore how research can be undertaken in a way which includes adolescents who tend to be left out of typical research programming in ways which affirm and expand their capabilities, rather than “target” them as marginalized groups and potentially reinforces this marginalization.

**GAGE Qualitative Methods and Eliciting “Adolescent Voices”**

Creating space for young people to express themselves on their own terms is integral to the realization of empowerment (Warshak, 2003). Designing a methodological toolkit that would enable researchers to explore the lives of young people, who are marginalized within their own communities (as well as being under-represented within academic research on young people), is a key objective of the GAGE programme. GAGE is a 9-year research programme exploring the gendered experiences of adolescents aged 10–19 in six LMICs. Qualitative longitudinal research such as this has much to offer in understanding how adolescents exercise agency as it can capture changes in young people’s lives and the strategies they develop to overcome adversities which arise by exploring the dynamics which leads to particular outcomes in a much more effective way than can be captured in survey data alone (Morrow & Crivello, 2015).

Given that the GAGE programme sought to include the experiences of out of school adolescents and young people with disabilities, it was necessary to develop methodologies that enabled them to participate in research. In 2016, GAGE undertook formative research in Ethiopia and Jordan with colleagues from national research institutions and in local languages to pilot different methodologies and explore what worked in different contexts; these tools were then adapted and nuanced, resulting in a set of instruments which reflect the programme’s conceptual framework. The GAGE conceptual framework focuses on three C’s: capabilities, change strategies and contexts (GAGE Consortium, 2017). It positions adolescents as having multidimensional capabilities, which differ on the basis of age, gender, (dis)ability, marital status and location; it explores the change strategies adopted by adolescents and the actors who shape their lives to make the transition between adolescence and adulthood; and it seeks to understand the broader social, economic and cultural variables that constrain and enable adolescents in their daily lives.

In general, despite increasing attention to adolescents as a target group for development interventions, research tools for use with adolescents tend to be underdeveloped (Viner et al., 2015). Finding ways of centering young people in research and practising “negotiation not imposition” (Hill et al., 1996; Morrow & Richards, 1996) has encouraged a move away from traditional approaches that center on questionnaires and surveys. These require a degree of literacy, are often devoid of
context, and are often simply not engaging for young people (Smith & Barker, 1999).

Research with adolescents in both Jordan and Ethiopia has often inadvertently overlooked certain subsections of adolescents because they are less accessible or visible. Firstly, research tends to focus on older adolescents—and younger adolescents are included in research which targets “children” (Igras, 2014). Grouping younger adolescents in with children in this way insuffciently recognizes both the rapid developmental changes associated with adolescence in particular (Patton et al., 2016), but also their evolving capacities as adolescents, such as having an expanded understanding of the world, heightened self-awareness, and increasing pursuit of autonomy (Lansdown, 2005; Santelli et al., 2017). If we recognize both that adolescence comes with particular challenges, but that there are differences between the experiences of adolescents across this decade of life, then it is essential to develop methods which can draw out the strengths of a diversity of young people and attend to the drivers of marginalization. Tools which are interesting and engaging for younger adolescents however are likely to be different from those which work well with older adolescents, who inhabit different social worlds.

Secondly, adolescents with disabilities are often excluded from research. With some exceptions (see Kembhavi & Wirz, 2009, who draw attention to this aporia), the role of institutional support and resources is also often not considered in methodological design; but this is an important consideration in relation to understanding how to include adolescents with disability in LMICs. Disability is social in nature; rather than being an inherent quality, disability emerges through interactions between impaired bodies and ableist norms, institutions and practices that exclude certain people (Barnes & Mercer, 1996; Bailey et al., 2015). A critical approach to disability draws attention to the intersectionality of bodies, social meaning and technologies in different settings, which can result in enhanced or reduced capabilities (Gibson et al., 2016). For example, one researcher for GAGE interviewed an adolescent whose mother volunteered to translate for him using the sign language they had created at home; yet she was unable to translate most of the research questions because the words involved were simply not words the family had developed signs for—illustrating the socially contingent nature of disability. In Ethiopia, qualitative research suggested that teachers for “special needs” classes had only very rudimentary signing abilities, reflecting a lack of investment in their training. This constrains the options for expression available to young people. Thus, being able to switch to methods within a toolkit which do not rely on questions and answers is key in such settings to being able to involve as broad a range of young people as possible. The research discussed in the following section led to the development of “new methodologies of representation” that enable young people to communicate through alternative means.

A lack of adaptation in research tools can lead to the tokenistic inclusion of marginalized groups ed without actually ensuring their “voices” are able to emerge (Chappell et al., 2014; Jones, Presler-Marshall, et al., 2018; Wickenden & Kembhavi-Tam, 2014). In many LMICs, there are not the same provisions made within education systems for adolescents with disabilities to participate as there are in minority world contexts. Indeed, many adolescents with disabilities may drop out of school because it is not seen as a valuable pursuit for them. This produces multiple, intersecting vulnerabilities that contribute to deeper marginalization. For example, deaf young people who are in school are at least able to access social networks of peers, and there may even be teachers who can assist them with learning local sign language. If deaf youth are not in school, they will find it much more difficult to engage with researchers because any sign languages used are likely to have been developed by their own families and therefore their responses may not be able to be independently verified. One of the limitations in how “voice” is often conceptualized in methodological approaches is that it implicitly assumes an ability to verbalize, which may not be the case for some young people. Therefore, their perspectives may be excluded even during participatory research processes. Avoiding means of participation that are based on measures of competence (defined by adults) that give primacy to a young person’s ability to verbalize their experiences on the researcher’s terms, and instead creating space for expressions through other means, is key to hearing a diversity of “voices.”

Quality of data produced is also an important consideration when developing methods, as is justifying the resources, time and energy that young people as well as funders of development research expend. While it matters that young people are able to communicate their perspectives through the research, the quality of the content that can actually be elicited through different research tools varies greatly, as discussed below. Yet the practical adaptations necessary to undertake research with young people with disabilities can actually often be more inclusive of and elicit a greater range of perspectives from non-disabled young people too. This is because they are by necessity flexible and create space for the research to go at the pace and lead of the young person rather than the researcher (Wickenden & Kembhavi-Tam, 2014). Presenting adaptations to research processes and having a variety of methods to accommodate the needs of young people with disabilities as well as others who may be deterred from participation can encourage those who might otherwise decline to get involved (Fayette & Bond, 2017).

Drawing on these ideas, Tables 1 and 2 show the main GAGE tools used in each country and their use with adolescents with urban and rural adolescents, those in and out-of-school and adolescents with disabilities in the 10–14 age range. In the subsequent discussion we reflect upon some of the strengths and weaknesses of four of these methodological tools in relation to the process of using the activity or exercise itself in regard to eliciting adolescent voices, as well as the quality of the data generated.
A Few of My Favorite Things

The “My Favorite Things” tool emerged as a way to actively ensure that the emancipatory research objectives that lie at the heart of the GAGE programme were not limited to its outcomes but became embedded within the process itself. This method—originally developed in the UK for exploring the trajectories of pregnant young mothers and, subsequently, their children (Thomson et al., 2011; Thomson & Hadfield, 2014)—starts by asking adolescents to think of a favorite object and uses this as a way to explore its significance in their lives. This tool was able to be adapted for use in urban and rural settings, and with adolescents of varying abilities. It was complemented by an exercise to explore social support systems for adolescents from their perspectives, and a “worries and accomplishments” exercise in which adolescents reflected on achievements that are meaningful to them (rather than externally defined) and discussed their future aspirations (Jones, Camfield, et al., 2018).

The process of using this tool allows young people to focus on what matters to them while at the same time being able to explore broader aspects of their lives, because adolescents themselves are able to direct the conversation to their own interests and values. Because of this, there are very few adolescents with whom the tool cannot be used; it is not reliant on literacy, which means that out-of-school adolescents and adolescents with visual or hearing impairments can still participate. For adolescents who are very poor and have very few possessions, the tool may need more explanation by the researcher—but can instigate poignant conversations about what truly matters in their lives.

One of the shortcomings of the process was that parents would at times seek to influence the choice of an adolescent’s “favorite thing.” This was often the case if adolescents were asked to bring something with them to the interview. This raises an issue not usually referred to within the literature: that parental influence might affect research processes even in settings where they are not present. One of the solutions researchers found was to instead ask young people to draw or describe their favorite thing (for the researcher to draw as a visual prompt during the interview) rather than bring the actual item. This meant that adolescents had to come up with something without thinking about it in advance, thus avoiding their being influenced by other family members about the item they chose.

The data generated through this method was powerful. The items adolescents chose when questioned about their favorite things without prior knowledge of what they would be asked were often unpredictable, highlighting their vulnerabilities in moving ways. One impoverished out-of-school adolescent boy in an urban Ethiopian research site chose a water glass as his “favorite thing” because he could parch his thirst after a hard day of wage labor at a construction site. Another adolescent from a rural pastoralist community in Ethiopia identified a small leather pouch used for churning butter, because of the adult-like responsibilities it conferred. A young but already married adolescent girl in a peri-urban Ethiopian research site chose a small table because it was the only piece of furniture owned by herself and her spouse conferring her marital status, and because it is where they eat and discuss their respective days, bringing welcome respite to her otherwise isolated day. For a deaf Ethiopian adolescent girl, dependent on weaving baskets for income, the colored cane she used in this process was the starting point for a conversation about her livelihood. And for a Syrian refugee girl in Jordan, the necklace given to her by her brother who was killed during the Syrian conflict was her only tangible reminder of his protective role in her life before displacement.

In short, the “My Favorite Things” tool can produce fascinating insights if used effectively; but this is contingent on certain conditions. It takes an experienced researcher to make the often lateral links between the “favorite” items and the

| Table 1. GAGE Jordan Qualitative Data by Adolescent Cohort and Tool Type. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Tool | Host | Camps | Informal tented settlements | In school | Out of school | Disability | No disability | Total number |
| Body mapping | 4 | 6 | 4 | 10 | 4 | 0 | 14 | 14 |
| Community mapping | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | - | 3 | 3 |
| Friendship circle | 15 | 10 | 5 | 20 | 5 | 5 | 25 | 30 |
| A few of my favorite things | 52 | 46 | 22 | 102 | 18 | 33 | 87 | 120 |

| Table 2. GAGE Ethiopia Qualitative Data by Adolescent Cohort and Tool Type. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Tool | Urban | Rural | In school | Out of school | Disability | No disability | Total number |
| Body mapping | 9 | 12 | 18 | 3 | 1 | 20 | 21 |
| Community mapping | 4 | 12 | 14 | 2 | 4 | 12 | 16 |
| Friendship circle | 8 | 24 | 18 | 14 | 2 | 30 | 32 |
| A few of my favorite things | 36 | 157 | 132 | 61 | 18 | 175 | 193 |
breadth of the capability domains that GAGE is interested in exploring. Ensuring consistency in quality of discussions is an ongoing challenge for any research programme in which there are multiple researchers, working in multiple contexts and across diverse countries. Providing ongoing training which touches on these issues is key to developing these skills among researchers who may have less experience.

Community Mapping

A tool that was easily adapted for adolescents with varying abilities was participatory mapping of their communities. Community Mapping allows adolescents to define what matters to them in their communities. It also works in diverse contexts; it has been used by GAGE in capital cities, urban slums and remote rural settings, with no challenges in transference. The mapping activity is undertaken in groups, so that adolescents can come together and discuss what spaces and services they feel are “adolescent-friendly” and which pose risks or present access barriers. Because community mapping is usually a visual exercise, it can work well with adolescents who are non-literate and also with young people with hearing impairments, but can also be adapted for use by adolescents with visual impairments (although in the latter case, the mapping itself is done by a trained facilitator).

The main challenge when using this tool with regard to eliciting adolescents’ voices is that like any qualitative method, the researcher needs to use a degree of probing to get beyond superficial answers and encourage adolescents to reflect more deeply on why they have access to some services and spaces and not others, and how this may differ from peers of different backgrounds. Reflecting on deeper meanings can make participants feel vulnerable, and this is likely to be particularly the case with adolescents, for whom peer groups are points of significant social meaning. Yet discussing these topics can also be opportunities for new perspectives to be shared and considered, with positive effects for adolescents who may be marginalized within general social contexts but who, when given space and opportunity to speak, can introduce their peers to new perspectives and educate them about their experiences.

This dialogue can spark the development of critical consciousness among young people (Clark & Seider, 2017), which is key to challenging oppressive social forces (Freire, 1970; Lewis, 2012). For example, in a Syrian refugee camp in Jordan, GAGE researchers initially sought to work with adolescents of a similar age, but found in some cases that when younger peers were included (based on their own demand) that more revealing insights emerged. For example, younger peers were more forthcoming about adolescents’ approach to circumventing divisions among people living in the camp—in effect for security purposes—and ways in which friendships were maintained and information exchanged. More candid discussions about teacher violence initiated by younger participants also led to more in-depth discussions about the role of violence in driving school dropouts—a subject that older adolescents were initially more self-censoring about given the power differentials between Jordanian teachers and refugee households, but which has important policy and programming implications.

With adolescent girls with hearing impairments in Ethiopia, a conversation around safe and non-safe spaces in the community—and especially distances between the special needs education schools they were attending and their rural home villages—led to participants sharing concerns about physical insecurity and in several cases revealing experiences of sexual harassment and abuse by community leaders supposedly in positions of trust. While the conversation was emotionally charged, it subsequently led to a conversation with school authorities about the challenges young people with disabilities are facing and better support mechanisms being established to mitigate against these risks.

Community Mapping can generate highly useful and relevant data if done in a way that allows nuances to emerge. Adolescents are highly observant and competent social actors, with many opinions on the world around them. Working in groups, adolescents can map out services in their communities. They can also be asked to identify (e.g. through color coding) differences in accessibility—physical, social and economic—by age, gender, disability and household background. Yet while this can provide a good overview, there is always a risk that without the probing and exploration described earlier, outputs may fail to provide in-depth information about services and community social norms that shape access and uptake. This is particularly the case when adolescents may know of services e.g. police and justice services, but have not used them, or only marginally engaged with them. Community Mapping should thus be considered as a complementary exercise when it comes to engaging with adolescents’ voices. Its main strengths are processual, in terms of the opportunities it can give for new ideas and perspectives to emerge among peer groups, and then to explore further through other tools.

Body Mapping

Body mapping was a tool used specifically to aid understanding of how girls and boys perceive their lives as gendered; how they experienced pubertal changes; the activities they do and do not undertake; how they thought and felt; and the risks they faced on a regular basis. Body mapping was originally conceived of as a narrative process through which women living with HIV in South Africa could explain their experiences of the illness. As such, it was designed to be a therapeutic as well as exploratory and reflective process (Solomon, 2002). Solomon (2002) also specifically identifies the method as a way for people of different generations to talk to one another to deepen understanding of their lives and interconnectedness. Regardless of the context and usership, the aim of body mapping is to draw connections between minds, bodies, feelings, thoughts, experiences and social interactions (Skop, 2016).

In the GAGE process for using this methodology, a pre-drawn outline of a boy or girl was provided on a large piece of paper. Next, groups of between six and eight participants were asked to collectively develop an identity for an adolescent
of the same gender who might be found in their community. They were then to respond to questions about each part of the body. These questions were designed to promote a reflection on each part of the body and its significance for young people in their community. When considering the hands of the drawn figure, adolescents were asked about the activities and work that young people did; regarding the head, they were asked what people their age and gender thought about. Questions also attended to changes and transitions that took place—not only physically, but socially too. Examples included questions about how adolescents might face changing mobility restrictions or dress expectations, especially in the case of adolescent girls; or have to shoulder new responsibilities like income generation or observation of religious rites such as fasting, as they age. The different stages of adolescence could also then be explored, and the positive and negatives associated with them, as well as what helped adolescents feel better about the challenges they might anticipate.

There were various strengths identified in this method for eliciting adolescents’ voices. Asking questions related to a fictitious but contextualized character and initially keeping questions abstract—for example “what do girls or boys do, think, and feel” in situations described by the adult researcher helped to minimize embarrassment which might be caused by asking younger adolescents such questions more directly. This was especially pertinent in questions related to puberty and menstruation for girls which in both the Ethiopian and Jordan contexts are highly stigmatized and often a source of considerable anxiety. For example, a 12-year old girl from an urban Ethiopian research site explained in one body mapping discussion how her lack of good information on sexual and reproductive health led her to confuse the onset of menarche with psychological violence: “When my first menstruation came, I was screaming… I told my cousin “I don’t know when but they raped me.” My cousin laughed.” Another girl of the same age noted that she mistook menstrual blood for a serious illness: “I saw the blood on my sister’s cloth, I thought it was HIV/AIDS.”

For younger adolescents, it is not only embarrassment which might prevent disclosure, but the fact that in Ethiopia and Jordan younger adolescents are discouraged from volunteering their opinions to adults; as one Ethiopian adult told researchers, “a child and a shoe’s place is under the bed.” The tool also helps to simultaneously maintain anonymity for participants, while making their experiences literally visible (Gastaldo et al., 2012).

The focus on embodied experiences also enabled probing around different vectors of marginalization such as disability. Body mapping can be used to non-verbally express “experiential states” such as pain, frustration and discomfort that might otherwise be hard to vocalize in more personal ways which do not ascribe to medical models of what bodies can and can’t do (Mitchell, 2006). Adolescent girls with physical disabilities in Jordan, for example, focused on their frustration of not being consulted and being rendered generally incapable. As a 13-year old Syrian adolescent refugee participant girl with cerebral palsy in Jordan noted: “I rarely get to decide anything…I wish someone would ask me questions…” Opening up space within research for embodied experiences that transcend the vocabulary which may be available—either through communication techniques used by deaf adolescents, or by simply providing an alternative mode of expression, is key for eliciting “voice.” However, as with any visual methods, the inclusion of blind and partially sighted adolescents was more complex and relied on facilitators’ explaining the concept and then recording the findings from the discussion on the paper outline.

**Friendship Circle**

With this tool, we invited adolescents to bring two friends to discuss the history of their friendship, what they enjoy doing together, what they discuss together, what their aspirations are as well as any activities or issues they avoid as a peer group. Adolescents who were less forthcoming in individual interviews, often proved much more active in these peer conversations and inspired to speak out because they were among close peers with whom they enjoyed high levels of trust. We found this format worked especially well in discussing the challenges that young out-of-school adolescents face, especially those who experience high levels of household poverty and family violence or breakdown, and who may currently or in the past have spent significant amounts of time living and working on the streets.

This tool allowed us to explore the relative significance of peer networks in the lives of young adolescents, and the ways in which young people are affected by peers in shaping their interactions with the wider community. A friendship circle of Palestinian refugee boys from Gaza Camp spoke, for example, in detail about how they advised one another on how to negotiate family, peer and community violence in their neighborhood. “We discuss that someone had a fight during the day…if I hit someone or he hit me… and what to do if there is a lot of blood or someone injured their head… but they advise me not to create a problem with him… if they are relatives then we don’t make a problem, it is easier to solve…”

In another Friendship Circle exercise with out-of-school street connected 12-year old boys in an urban Ethiopian site, participants were candid about the effects of family breakdown on their wellbeing and future aspirations. They shared details of their lives that had not emerged through individual interviews, possibly due to self-censorship with adult researchers they did not know well, but together with their friends they were more willing to share their struggles. “My mother is a commercial sex worker… my father and uncle live on the street. I live with my grandmother… my grandmother is poor and can’t afford to buy me exercise books and uniform so I’m not learning… And in my case my mother is dead… she was living with someone when she died but he went back to his village when she died… We are living in one village as friends… we ride bicycles together… if he rents a bicycle he lets me ride it, and when I rent a bike I also let him take a ride…”
Where the tool was more challenging was in the case of adolescent girls who faced very tight mobility restrictions and had very limited, and in some cases, no peer networks outside of their siblings, and in the case of some adolescents with disabilities, who especially in the case of girls, were effectively home-bound.

**Discussion: Methods that Leave no One Behind**

Innovative tools such as visual methods, mapping and drawing—all of which can form part of a participatory toolkit—can be an effective way of promoting the “voices” of marginalized adolescents. Yet there are a number of cautions around undertaking such activities in an ethical as well as efficacious way. At the heart of many of the problems identified with research processes with young people is the question of reflectivity. Centering young people through research methodologies requires not just attention to young people’s own practices, but also reflexive consideration of how adult engagement might be experienced by young people as potentially interfering, overpowering or intimidating. As Christensen (2004, p. 169) observed, when adults join in young people’s activities, they often take over and reorganize. This is a particular risk when researchers have limited time available to spend with young people and can neither spend it building a rapport or creating space for young people to lead the process at their own pace. Ensuring that researchers understand and are able to use these methodologies effectively is therefore integral to these tools being inclusive. Indeed, researchers who have used the GAGE qualitative toolkit have had positive experiences of using the above four tools because of their adaptability for use with different adolescents in diverse contexts.

Adolescents who are marginalized in multiple ways—for example, someone who is both displaced and physically impaired, or a girl who is deaf—are least likely to participate in everyday life and exercise their right to express their voice and opinions on matters that affect them. This is exacerbated by living in places where adolescents are traditionally not encouraged to talk or make decisions on things that matter. The inclusion of these adolescents in GAGE research, where they are encouraged to share their perspectives and are listened to by both adults and their peers, can itself be an extremely positive process and help improve their confidence. The longitudinal nature of the programme also means that they are not asked questions once, but know that their perspectives are valued over a longer period of time by researchers who will return and take care to check in on how they are progressing.

Effective use of participatory methods like these also necessitates a thorough understanding of the social context in which marginalized adolescents live, which experienced local researchers can offer. Ensuring that methodologies reflect the context in which they are being used can enable marginalized young people, including adolescents with disabilities, to reflect on and engage with research questions. Young people are better able to engage in discussion when any examples used reflect their own experiences (Barter & Renold, 2000). While centering the perspectives of young people should be a key objective, often this contextual information can be built up through conversations with other actors and wider observation of the environments in which young people are situated; such as the example given earlier of the deaf adolescent boy at home whose mother struggled to explain the research questions (Teachman & Gibson, 2013).

While the diverse capacities of adolescents may be ostensibly recognized, whether or not they express their voices in a meaningful way remains dependent on the social networks they are embedded within, as these may limit or facilitate expression (James & James, 2004; Lam, 2013). GAGE research, being premised on a socio-ecological model of capabilities, not only explores adolescents’ perspectives but also those of their peers, communities, caregivers, policy-makers and service providers. This generates a comprehensive understanding of the structural dynamics that shape young people’s lives and mediate their opportunities for agency and voice. In particular, methodologies such as Community Mapping (discussed earlier) create spaces for collective analysis and the expansion of adolescents’ collective capabilities. Viewing participation as a process and not just as an outcome is integral to embedding a diversity of voices in the research data and supporting young people in expressing themselves on their own terms.

Being judged competent as a research participant does not mean that young people’s voices are truly being listened to. Data from adolescents should be subject to critical engagement in just the same way that the opinions of adults should be (James, 2007). Discourses of age-related (in)competence may shape how adolescents see themselves, but social norms around gender or disability may be reproduced through young people’s own narratives. These narratives thus provide a lens through which young people see themselves and their abilities or inhibit what they feel able to express (James, 2007). One way of ensuring critical engagement is by not just “listening” but by observing the context and relationships in which adolescents’ voices emerge. The socio-ecological and relational model of capabilities in GAGE’s conceptual framework provides a foundation for this in the research process, which also engages with adult caregivers and adolescents’ peers. Indeed, the research process itself—in which adolescents who are typically marginalized and ignored find themselves being listened to and engaged with over a period of several years—can be a hugely positive experience in term of adolescents’ self-esteem and sense of self-worth. However, understanding the ways that vectors of marginalization may shape adolescents’ self-perception requires researchers to understand local norms and be able to identify and challenge them appropriately.

Ensuring that quality data is produced through these interactions is also vital for generating the policy impact that marginalized adolescents deserve. Some participatory processes may feel to young people more like an obligation than something they genuinely want to do; making activities accessible and meaningful is a way of avoiding reluctant involvement. Yet we should recognize a tension here with the desire to make sure
that methodologies are “fun” (David, 1992; Smith & Barker, 1999). There has been a strong focus in research emerging from the new social studies of childhood paradigm on research methods that are enjoyable for young people. While this is important, critical attention needs to be paid to the content that can actually be elicited through different research tools. It matters that research is not stressful or upsetting for young people, but the drive to use methodologies which promote having a “nice time” rather than producing rigorous data is disrespectful to the time and energy requested of adolescents when they agree to participate in research, and to young people more generally who have only relatively recently gained recognition as important interlocutors in international development spaces. Leaving no one behind means ensuring that research data itself says something significant about adolescents’ lives.

Conclusion

What is clear from the above discussion is that no individual tool is a magic bullet for exploring adolescent capabilities across a range of abilities. When used in a way that is complementary, the tools described here and used by GAGE can bolster each other and elicit aspects of adolescents’ experiences that may be overlooked or obscured when generating data via a single tool or approach. This is particularly important when looking at younger adolescents, for whom marginalization on the basis of age comes from both their communities and from research which targets young people. These tools help in working to make sure that their experiences are represented—particularly when they may experience other forms of discrimination and exclusion on the basis of markers such as disability or their out-of-school status. It is however important not to assume that all methodologies are equally effective, especially when engaging with adolescents from marginalized social groups. The quality of data generated will often depend on the researcher’s probing skills, their being cognizant of the assumptions they bring to the table, and ensuring that findings are interpreted within a detailed understanding of multi-layered contextual factors.

Taking a relational and contextualized approach to engaging with younger adolescents is key to allowing an authentic diversity of voices to emerge, and across a breadth of content areas. This can shed more light on—and help to promote—adolescent wellbeing in a given context. The representation of adolescents whose perspectives are often obscured is integral to ensuring that policy and programming with young people which is informed by research addresses inequalities and other obstacles that prevent the realization of a full range of capabilities for all.

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Notes

1. The Leave No-One Behind Agenda is an overarching objective of the Sustainable Development Goals 2030, which recognizes that high and rising rates of socio-economic inequality are an impediment to development progress and commits countries to inclusive strategies for progress and transformation.

2. See www.gage.odi.org.uk and Jones, Baird, et al. (2018).

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