Making the Transition to Adulthood in Zambia: a Comparison of the Experiences of Caregiving and Non-Caregiving Youth

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

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1. Introduction
This PhD thesis examines how youth experience and negotiate their socially expected transitions to adulthood in Zambia. It is a comparative study of youth with and without caregiving responsibilities for a sick or disabled parent or relative, to establish how the responsibility of caring influences their transitions in comparison to their non-caregiving peers. Studies of ‘young carers’ have multiplied in recent years. In the global North it has been increasingly recognised that many children take on responsibility at home for parents or relatives with chronic illnesses or disabilities (O’Dell et al, 2010, Aldridge, 2008, Dearden and Becker, 2004). As a result research, policy and practice has started to move towards addressing this, increasing knowledge of the issue and providing support to those affected (O’Dell et al, 2010, Aldridge, 2008). In the global South it is the effect of HIV on the ‘middle’ or ‘working’, and therefore parenting, generations that has brought increased awareness of the number of children and young people who take on increasing responsibilities in the home, including caring for sick parents, relatives or siblings (Evans and Becker, 2009). This focus on HIV has also meant that little research has been done on other disabilities and impairments in sub-Saharan Africa which increase the responsibility on young people to provide care for family members.

In addition to this the literature has tended to focus on children and the day to day experiences of caring, rather than on older youth and how caring roles both influence and impact on their futures and life transitions – although there are exceptions to this (see Evans, 2013; 2012a; Evans and Becker, 2009). The role of older youth has therefore been neglected in discussions of care-giving, despite evidence from the global North which suggests that ‘young adults’ (aged 18-24) are more likely than children to undertake informal care work within the family (Evans, 2010). This is argued to reflect a general focus in geography on the 7-14 age group while the “discipline has been slower to consider young people on the cusp of childhood and adulthood: those aged 16–25” (Valentine, 2003: 39).

In a globally interdependent world, increasing emphasis is placed on educational outcomes (Ansell, 2004; Kabeer, 2000). Young people in Zambia and elsewhere are under increasing pressure to obtain a good education and employment to support their families, and make ‘successful’ transitions to ‘adulthood’, whilst in some instances also having to cope with the loss of parents and care for relatives with little external support. Few studies have explored caregiving and youth transitions in Africa or investigated how ‘‘successful’ transitions to adulthood, such as completing education, migrating for work opportunities or achieving the financial means to marry and support their own families, could be delayed or restricted because of young people’s caring responsibilities” (Evans, 2012a: 834). As a result it has been suggested that ‘young people are caught in a liminal position between discourses of childhood and adulthood, unable to make socially expected transitions linked to their age and lifecourse stage’ (Evans, 2012a: 834).

This thesis discusses the experiences and perceptions of young people's transitions to adulthood and how these may be shaped by their familial responsibilities and care work. It focuses on socially expected transitions, such as completing education and entering the labour market, in addition to more unpredictable events and family changes, such as parental illness/disability and death, parental divorce and separation and moving to live with relatives in foster households. The study is part of the growing research field ‘the geographies of children, youth and families’ that acknowledges young people are important social actors
(Evans, 2008) that influence, and are influenced by, place and space. It recognises young people are actively engaged in shaping their social worlds within the constraints that influence them (Evans and Becker, 2009; James et al, 1998). The study of children and young people in Sub-Saharan Africa has become an increasingly important element of this growing academic field. Zambia has received less attention in terms of work on youth, transitions and caregiving compared to countries in East or Southern Africa, particularly Uganda, Tanzania (Evans, 2013; 2012a; 2012b; Evans, 2010; Evans and Becker, 2009), Lesotho (Robson and Ansell, 2000), Malawi (Robson et al, 2006) and Zimbabwe (Robson 2004a; 2000). It is this lack of research that informed my decision to work within Zambia to further knowledge and understanding of the ‘critical moments’ (Thomson et al, 2002) that young people negotiate on a daily basis, within increasingly challenging social, economic and political circumstances.

2. Research aims and objectives
The aim of this research is to investigate how youth experience and negotiate their socially expected transitions to adulthood in Zambia. It is a comparative study of youth, aged 14 to 30 years old, with and without caregiving responsibilities for a sick or disabled parent or relative, to establish how the responsibility of caring influences their transitions. The study seeks to link this evidence to wider concepts discussed in the literature by offering unique insights into the lives of Zambian youth from their own perspectives, as well as from the perspective of the wider community. In doing so the thesis contributes to knowledge in the areas of geographies of youth, transition and caregiving. It also provides insights into the roles of young people’s relationships and support networks, as well as their aspirations for the future, as they negotiate their pathways to adulthood. The research takes a broad approach to young people’s caring roles and life transitions in a range of familial contexts where there is a need for care, including parents and/or relatives with a chronic illness and/or disability. The research includes young people from both urban and rural areas.

A number of objectives and research questions were investigated. Firstly the study sought to investigate local understandings and perceptions of youth, transitions and caregiving in Zambia. Secondly the thesis sought to explore young people’s experiences of socially expected transitions to adulthood. Thirdly the thesis sought to identify the social relationships and support networks available to young people and how these influence their transitions to adulthood. Finally the research the research sought to understand the dreams and aspirations of young people, both with and without caring responsibilities, and to identify their hopes and ambitions for the future. By investigating these questions, the study aims to provide a better understanding of what it is like for youth growing up in Zambia and the socially expected transitions they have to negotiate from the perspectives of the young people themselves.

3. Methodology
Semi-structured interviews and life mapping methods were conducted with a total of 35 young people (aged 14-30 years)1; comprising 15 young people who were caring for a chronically sick or disabled parent or relative (9 female, 6 male) and 20 who did not have

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1 The Zambian Government defines ‘youth’ as young people between the ages of 18 and 35 (MSYCD, 2006). However, it also recognises the UN definition of youth as 15 to 25 years (UN, 2007). Pilot research revealed that few people identified themselves as ‘youth’ after the age of 30 as they were usually employed, married and had children. The age of 30 was therefore used as the upper age limit, while the slightly lower age limit was used in recognition that many young people have significant responsibilities at a much younger age than age-based understandings of transitions assume.
specific caring responsibilities for a family member (9 female, 11 male). Five young people cared for their sick or disabled mother, two were caring for their brother, two for their grandmother and two for their uncle, while others cared for their father, grandfather, sister, aunt and niece. Several young people were also responsible for other family members who were not sick or disabled but still needed financial support and emotional guidance, such as younger siblings, nieces and nephews. When information about illness or disability was volunteered, four family members reported HIV-related illness, although the chronic illness of several other family members was also likely to be HIV-related. Other conditions reported included stroke, blindness, spina bifida, cerebral palsy and hydrocephalus, epilepsy and amputation. Many young people had witnessed the death of parents or family members earlier in their lives, often from HIV-related illnesses. Of the 35 young people in the study, twelve were aged between 14 and 17, nineteen were aged 18 to 24 and four were aged 25 to 30. Approximately half of the young people lived in urban (17) and half in rural areas (18).

Individual semi-structured interviews with young people focused on their living arrangements, family histories, social relationships, understandings of childhood, youth and adulthood, their social, cultural, educational and employment transitions, previous and current challenges, the support they received and their aspirations for the future. Interviews were complemented with a life-mapping activity where young people developed a timeline of their lives to map “self-defined ‘fateful moments’ of transition” (Worth, 2009: 1052) from their past and that may occur in the future. This method provided an opportunity for young people to provide a visual account of their lives and the significant events that had occurred, and that they expected/hoped would occur in the future. The lifemap was then used as the basis of a discussion to understand the young person’s interpretation of the significant events that they had highlighted and to contextualise events, especially those that may be painful or difficult to talk about (Worth, 2009). Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with 12 parents or family members, 8 of whom were being cared for by one of the young people. Interviews were also conducted with 14 key informants from NGOs, support institutions and government departments working across the areas of disability, HIV and children and youth.

The interviews were conducted in English where possible and transcribed by the first author and conducted with a translator in a range of local languages when English was not spoken. The non-English interviews were transcribed and translated into English with research assistance. The transcripts were reviewed to identify commonalities in young people’s transitions to adulthood, as well as differences between those with and without caregiving responsibilities. The data was thematically analysed using inductive coding in order to identify and develop the themes (Thomas, 2003). Ethical issues were of paramount importance throughout the study. All the participants gave informed consent to take part and their accounts have been anonymised to protect their identities. The small purposive sample does not aim to be representative of the population of young people or of caregiving youth in Zambia, but rather provides qualitative insights into the diverse experiences of young people with and without significant caregiving responsibilities who lived in rural and urban areas.

4. Findings
4.1 Local perceptions and experiences of youth, transitions and caregiving
This thesis contributes to understandings of how children, youth and adults are perceived in urban and rural areas in Zambia and the complexities that arise in defining at what point a young person makes the transition to adulthood. From my interviews it became apparent that ideas about who youth are and when and why young people progress from childhood to adulthood were multiple and often contradictory. It was indeed possible to be a child, a youth
and an adult all at the same time within different contexts. The study identified that it was possible to hold multiple positions in society depending on young people’s personal situations, linked to both the completion of socially expected transitions, generational relationships to others, and the acquisition of roles and responsibilities. This was particularly evident for those young people undertaking the roles associated with ‘adults’ from much younger ages, thus supporting other studies in Africa by Evans (2011, 2010) and Punch (2002, 2001).

Global notions of youth and transition have been adopted into policy and practice in Zambia in line with western understandings of youth as an in-between phase between childhood and adulthood and a time of preparation for adulthood. My research demonstrates that the term ‘youth’ in Zambia is now widely recognised and used to describe young people, but with little consideration for how this relates to their lived realities. It fails to recognise that many Zambian young people take on ‘adult’ responsibilities, including caregiving, within the household from much younger ages than notions of childhood, youth and adulthood would suggest. The adoption of global understandings of youth and transitions in Zambia also contrasts with traditional understandings of the pathway young Zambians undertake from childhood to adulthood, based not on age, but on biological markers and the ability of an individual to manage their own life and care for others. The Zambian government has tried to combine these two understandings by adopting the broad definition of youth as being 18 to 35 years of age. The life of an 18 year old, however, is very different to that of a 35 year old, supporting Chigunta’s (2007: 11) observation that “extending the definition beyond 25 years can make the category so loose as not to be analytically useful”.

The study explored in detail young people’s experiences of the socially expected transitions to adulthood. This included their experiences of education, employment, initiation and marriage, and how these differed by both gender and their rural or urban location. While some young people had direct experiences of these transitions, others expected to and aspired to follow these pathways in the future. None of the young people had ‘successfully' completed all the transitions they described, however, and were very much in the process of still becoming ‘adults’ according to both local and international definitions. While roughly half the young people in the study were caring for a family member at the time of interview, all the young people had faced unpredictable events over their lifecourse which had had significant impacts on their ability to navigate their pathways to adulthood according to wider social norms and expectations, including having to take on more responsibility at home and contribute financially to the household.

A significant finding was the perceived importance of education as the key transition young people should complete on their pathway to adulthood. Completing education was seen by young people and professionals as the enabler of other socially expected transitions, such as gaining employment, marrying and having a family. This was despite the significant difficulties young people had to negotiate to attend school, such as the availability (particularly in rural areas) and cost of secondary education. While improvements in Zambian education policy meant that many more young people had some access to education than ever before, the proportion of young people successfully completing secondary education was still very low, with demonstrable imbalances according to both gender and rural or urban location. This focus on education also affected more traditional social transitions, such as initiation and marriage practices. Initiation, for young women particularly, had reduced in occurrence and importance and been thought by many to have become outdated and un-modern. Where it did occur it was said to have been adapted to
encourage girls to stay in school, preventing the tradition of ‘early marriage’ (marriage at puberty) from taking place. Marriage and having children, while still seen as an essential precondition for adulthood, were also delayed so that a young person could complete their schooling. If they could not complete school, marriage was still recognised as the main way through which a young person would achieve adult status. The study argues, however, that while education can prolong the period of youth (Christiansen, 2006; Cruise-O'Brien, 1996; and Honwana, 2012), it is usually only possible for those who can afford it.

Young people’s transitions were influenced by the economic challenges that young people had to negotiate. Poverty was a feature in all the young people’s lives, often brought about after a ‘critical moment’ (Thomson et al, 2002), such as parental death or divorce, had occurred. This made transitions such as education and marriage difficult to obtain and impacted on a young person’s ability to find employment. All the young people had faced disruptions to their education and many, particularly the young men, were working alongside their education to both raise the money to be able to go to school and to support their families. Poverty also impacted on whether ceremonies such as initiation and marriage could take place. Many of the young men described delaying marriage as they were not in an economically secure enough position in which to support a wife and children. The research highlighted that ‘transitions’ were also occurring within wider social and political processes outside of the young people’s control. A high youth population, combined with few jobs and high unemployment, meant that education was not seen as a panacea to young people’s problems and it was widely recognised that even with educational qualifications finding employment was difficult, if not impossible. While these challenges continue, many of the young people appear unable to achieve adulthood in a normative sense (Hansen, 2005).

A significant finding was that caregiving was often the result of other critical moments in the young people’s lives, and therefore one of many influences that impacted on and interrupted their transitions to adulthood. All the young people had faced bereavement, family breakdown, poverty and disrupted attendance at school, and it was these factors that often led to young people’s involvement in care work. None of the young people had ‘chosen’ to care (Milligan and Wiles, 2005), but found themselves predisposed to caregiving as a result of their situations. Due to the gendered nature of caregiving and women’s assumed ‘natural’ roles as nurturers, young women were more likely to be drawn into care-related tasks for a sick or disabled family member compared to young men (Milligan, 2000). However, young men also had considerable caring responsibilities, although the nature of their caregiving was more focused on providing financial support to their families (Day and Evans, in press). Both of these types of familial caregiving responsibilities impacted on young people’s ability to complete socially expected transitions to adulthood, especially education and employment, which are regarded as increasingly important in a globalising world. Those who were not caring for someone sick or disabled, however, still had significant responsibilities at home, often to provide for older and younger relatives, such as siblings and grandparents. These young people also chose to delay completing certain transitions to adulthood, such as marriage and migration, in order to remain taking care of their families. This study argues, therefore, that young people’s caring responsibilities took place within all four phases of the ethic of care (Tronto, 1993). Caregiving was not just the physical act of looking after someone, but the taking responsibility for others by providing for them and caring about their health and wellbeing generally, often over and above the young people’s own needs.
The study also identified that caregiving was rarely recognised as an issue affecting Zambian youth, or seen as being over and above the responsibilities young people are expected to hold within the household. Young people in Zambia, in common with youth in other eastern and southern African countries severely affected by the HIV epidemic (Skovdal, 2011; Evans and Becker, 2009; Robson et al., 2006), are taking on increasing caring responsibilities for parents and relatives living with HIV, as well as for those with disabilities and other chronic illnesses. There was still an underlying expectation, however, that care would be undertaken by ‘adult’ family members. This was despite acknowledgement that household structures are changing, HIV has had a significant impact on the ‘middle generation’ and young people are increasingly heading households consisting of young siblings or elderly grandparents, who may require physical care as well as financial support. Where concern was raised about young people’s caregiving responsibilities, it focused on ‘children’ in line with global notions of childhood as a time of innocence free from adult responsibility (James et al, 1998). This was despite recognition that young people in many African communities take on an increasing number of household responsibilities as they grow from children to young adults in preparation for one day having their own homes, as well as in support of the family (Solberg, 1997; Punch 2001; Katz, 2004, 1993; Miller, 2005; Ridge, 2006; Evans and Becker, 2009). Youth were assumed, because of their age, to have developed a wider skill set and network of resources that would help them to cope with their caregiving responsibilities better. Young people often saw their caring role as ‘just part of what they do’ as part of their family obligation, and therefore not worthy of additional attention. This reflects social understandings that care is founded on love, emotional attachments and reciprocal kinship responsibilities (Becker, 2007) as well as reciprocal rights and responsibilities as part of an ‘intergenerational contract’ to provide care and support during sickness and old age (Evans, 2010; van Blerk and Ansell 2007; Laird 2005).

4.2 Young people’s social relationships and support networks
The findings of this study highlighted that youth in Zambia, as active agents in creating their own lives, are part of a wide range of social networks including their immediate and extended families, communities, social and religious groups as well as wider structural agencies such as the government and non-governmental agencies. Access to these networks can vary, however, and they can have both positive and negative impacts on a young person’s transitions to adulthood. The study identified how support, or sometimes the lack of it, influenced young people’s ability to successfully cope with the critical moments that occur in their lives, including bereavement, divorce, migration and family separation, and the responsibilities they assume as a result; particularly caregiving. It also identified how the level of support available to young people could vary depending on a host of factors including proximity to the source of support, economic (in)security, stigma and discrimination, familial obligation, gender, as well as the young people’s awareness of the sources of support available to them and their willingness to turn to them for help when needed.

The research identified that young people’s transitions to adulthood were occurring within a context of changing discourses about the family. Family networks in Zambia are being renegotiated and reconstructed in a changing socio-economic context. Young people who assume responsibility for income generation, whose families are affected by sickness and disability, those in poverty, those struggling to achieve education and those who have lost parents or siblings, are all operating within reconstructed familial environments in which they live not only as individuals, but also in relation to the other social contexts which they are exposed to each day. While recent literature has highlighted the increasingly prolonged
nature of 'youth' in contemporary African societies (Cruise-O’Brien, 1996; Christiansen, 2006), described by Honwana (2012) as 'waithood', as young people struggle to achieve socially accepted markers of adult status within a highly compromised socio-economic and political context, this study reveals the importance of understanding African young people’s family lives and responsibilities to others as they navigate these complex and protracted pathways to adulthood (Day and Evans, in press).

The research demonstrated, in line with research conducted by Robson et al (2006), that the extended family, clan and kinship systems were the prime sources of assistance in times of illness and death. Immediate and extended family members provided essential emotional and material resources, particularly to those who were younger or female, which supported young people’s transitions to adulthood and helped them to cope with the challenges they faced. For the majority of young people these relationships were mutually supportive, with all members undertaking tasks to support each other and maintain the running of the household, including, where possible, those who were sick or disabled. A significant finding, however, was that families could both enable young people’s transitions and prevent them, depending on a number of factors including the relationship to the young person, financial resources, cultural beliefs as well as physical wellbeing. Many of the young people had experienced tenuous and unpredictable relationships with family members, particularly following bereavement and loss or divorce and separation of parents, which had led to disinheritance of assets and property grabbing, migration and mobility between different relatives’ homes and poverty. Most importantly it impacted on young people’s ability to attend school and maintain an and complete their education.

The study argues that peer relationships play an important role in the young people’s lives, but on different scales depending on the young person’s situation. The young people emphasised the importance of supportive friendship groups, particularly seeking relationships with young people living in similar circumstances to themselves, who might be able to understand their lives and sympathise with their situations. Friendships offered emotional and material support as well as respite from challenging home situations. Friendships were often influenced by the level of responsibility young people had at home, however, and therefore the time available for young people to develop their peer relationships. The young men and women caregiving, or who had significant income-generating responsibilities, reported having few friends as a result of having limited free time away from familial and household obligations. They were also less likely to confide in the friends they did have about their responsibilities, fearing stigma or isolation, or just that their friends wouldn’t understand. My research demonstrates young caregivers often wanted to separate their identity as a caregiver from their identity as a ‘youth’, choosing to hide their responsibilities in order to normalise their lives in line with the lives of their peers. The study also showed that it became more difficult for young people to maintain friendships when peers were perceived to have successfully completed more transitions to adulthood than the participants had. This indicates that completing transitions is important within young people’s own understandings of the stages they must complete on their pathway to adulthood, as well as what is socially expected.

Wider support groups, such as neighbours, could be important sources of emotional, practical and sometimes economic support to young people. The research found that this could vary, however, depending on the individual young person, their need, and how long they had been living in the community, as well as the resources available to neighbours to be able to offer support. The study identified that neighbours usually provided more support for young women than they did for young men, as well as for those caregiving. Contrary to
wider literature that recognises the stigma and discrimination that people caring for sick or disabled parents or relatives can face (Evans and Day, 2011; Evans and Becker, 2009), the study found that none of the young caregivers had been subject to, or reported, this.

A significant finding was the importance of the church as both a source of support and a way in which young people developed resilience to the adversities they experienced. The church was a place where young people sought spiritual guidance and an inner strength to cope with the challenges in their lives and to maintain a hope and faith that things would get better in the future. It appeared as if using their faith helped them to not only justify their current situations, the unfairness of them as well as the opportunities they had provided, but that by doing this the young people could place responsibility for their lives on someone else. The church also provided respite, a social space away from home where young people could meet their peers, somewhere they could pray for themselves and their families as well as being something they enjoyed. In contrast, the research identified that support from governmental and non-governmental agencies was limited for young people, and what was available focused on children rather than youth. There were no specific services available for young caregivers in the study locations.

Not surprisingly, the young people’s support needs focused on their need for material and financial support to improve their own and their family’s current lives. In line with the increased importance of education, young people primarily wanted support for themselves, their siblings and other young people in the community to complete their secondary education. They also wanted support to secure employment and improve their employment prospects. Those who were caregiving understandably wanted more support for their sick or disabled relatives. There was little consensus on where this support would come from however, and few of the young people had any faith that the resources they needed would come from the government.

4.3 Young people’s dreams, aspirations, hopes and ambitions for the future
The study identified that aspirations for the future featured in all the young people’s lives and included the key socially expected transitions as outlined in the literature – education, employment and marriage, as well as additional aspirations such as migration and the ability to care for and support their families. Aspirations were generally high and almost all the young people had an ideal of what they would like to do in the future, reporting career goals that would almost all require higher level education to achieve. This was despite the fact that few of the young people had completed secondary education, many were no longer attending school and those that were attending school had often experienced in the past, or were currently experiencing, many disruptions to their school attendance and attainment.

In line with research by Evans and Becker (2009) continuing, or returning to, education was the main aspiration of all the young people, primarily in order to improve their employment prospects in the future. Education was viewed as the main route to success and independence (Stokes and Wyn, 2007). This also impacted on young people’s intentions to delay marriage and having children until they had completed school and gained employment, reflecting how Zambian young people’s aspirations have become increasingly influenced by wider global expectations focusing on youth as a time of learning and preparation for adulthood. The research also demonstrated how aspirations were adapting to the challenging socio-economic and political context. Delaying marriage was partly choice, but also partly a reflection that young people could not afford this transition until they had gained employment, thus prolonging the period of youth, as discussed by Christiansen (2006), Cruise-O’Brien (1996) and Honwana (2012).
Young people’s aspirations were rarely based on personal hopes and dreams, but were centred on their **wider roles and responsibilities**. Ultimately, young people (both male and female and from rural and urban areas) aspired to care for their siblings and relatives through the economic empowerment achieved by completing education and gaining employment. Family obligations to care for those older and younger, in line with the intergenerational contract (Collard, 2000), were still very much a part of both young men and young women’s aspirations for the future.

A significant finding was the difference between **how far into the future the young people were willing to look, plan and hope for** depending on whether they were caregiving or not. Young people without caring responsibilities had plans often several decades into the future that included education, employment, marriage and children. In contrast, the young people caring were more likely to focus on the day to day responsibilities they had and the short term needs of their families, which they often prioritised over their own needs. The exception to this was the young people who were not ‘caregiving’, but still had significant responsibilities within their households to provide for their families. These young people were also hesitant to have too many aspirations and hopes for the future as they wanted to concentrate on their current challenges and not set themselves up to fail.

The study highlights, however, how for any young person there is often a **huge gap between what is dream and what is available in reality**. **Having aspirations, and achieving aspirations, are not necessarily the same thing**. Veenhoven (2000) describes this as potentiality and actuality; what are aspired life chances and what are actually achievable life results. Young people’s aspirations were often highly optimistic, often far beyond their current, and potential future opportunities and, for most, unachievable. Within another space, place and time where young people had better access to financial, educational and emotional resources, their aspirations could be possible to achieve. But within their current situation there were too many barriers to overcome. Many of the young people were aware of this and knew it was unlikely they would become the doctors, teachers and accountants that they dreamed of, yet still they had this dream. There is a need, therefore, to examine what role aspirations have in a young person’s life and whether they are useful. To have aspirations is acknowledged as a form of resilience (Newman, 2000), but at what point do dreams turn to despondency when the restraints of financial difficulties, lack of education or limited employment opportunities take over, alongside the realisation that in reality there is nothing to aim for other than just surviving on a day to day basis?

All the young people perceived **challenges to achieving their aspirations** in the future. The main challenge was being unable to complete secondary school, particularly for those in rural areas, and the impact this would have on their employment, marriage and family aspirations. One way of coping with the inability to achieve aspirations was to lower them. All the young people had an alternative plan if they could not reach their desired goals, often the polar opposite of what they actually wanted to do and not far removed from the income generating activities they were already involved in. Alternatively, the young people transferred their own aspirations to others. Those who were parents recognised they might not achieve their own aspirations, but wanted their children to have the opportunities they had missed out on instead. This was similar for those with younger siblings. The study highlights the need to consider the aspirations of those caregiving or with significant responsibilities within their households, for whom education and employment opportunities are being sacrificed in the present, and how this will impact what they can do and achieve in the future.
The study identified that in Zambia, ‘aspiration’ is missing from discussions about youth and from policy discourse examining and developing the role of youth in society, which focuses instead on the everyday concerns in a young person’s life. This fails to support any notion of young people having a future despite the fact young people wanted to look towards the future, as they wanted to believe that things would change for the better. In the global North governments talk about aspiration as something young people should have in order to motivate them; young people without aspirations are viewed in a negative light because they have no idea of the productive adult they could become. The youth in Zambia were hardworking and astute, with very clear ideas about what they would like to do with their lives and how their lives related to those around them. What they lacked, however, were the opportunities, the resources and the skills to reach their potential. The research therefore acknowledges Abbink’s (2005) suggestion that the overwhelming majority of young people in sub-Saharan Africa do not hold their futures in their own hands, as population growth and scarce resources mean young people remain dependent and powerless with their social mobility blocked.

As highlighted throughout this thesis, the challenges facing young people during their lives were many, whether they were caregiving at the time of the research or not. Parental bereavement, separation and divorce, poverty, HIV, low educational attendance and attainment, early pregnancy and lack of support had all influenced the young people’s lives and their transitions to adulthood. These challenges were likely to remain with the young people for some time to come and to continue to influence their lives on a daily basis. Young people recognised the level of uncertainty that surrounded their lives, yet few of them described worrying about the future. Their belief in their capabilities, as well as in forces outside of their control (such as God) meant despite their hardships they generally remained positive about the future and what it had to offer. There was a sense that if the young people could cope with the challenges thus far, they could cope with whatever else the future might hold. My question however, is whether it is right that these young people should have to continue to face challenge after challenge and what the impact of this will be on their ability to complete their socially expected transitions to adulthood?

5. Conclusions
While most studies of young caregiving in sub-Saharan Africa to date focus on the experiences of children caring for parents (Evans and Becker, 2009), of sibling caregiving in child- or youth-headed households (Evans, 2011; 2012a & b) or on those living in grandparent-headed households (Clacherty, 2008), this thesis has provided new insights into youth transitions and caregiving responsibilities in urban and rural Zambia. It reveals how older ‘youth’ seek to negotiate their pathways to adulthood, while managing their caring responsibilities and coping with significant family changes. While the study of children, young people and youth is inextricably intertwined (Evans, 2008), this thesis acknowledges how youth negotiate their lives within the place and space in which they live, in different ways to children. It highlights the importance of understanding African young people’s own personal experiences of transitions in relation to their family lives and responsibilities as they navigate their pathways to adulthood.

This thesis has shown that young people’s transitions in Zambia are not linear processes, whether they are caregiving or not. Young people in Zambia face unpredictable family events over their lifecourse, which often hinder their educational progress, reduce their employment prospects and delay other socially expected transitions. Using the concept of
‘transitions’ as ‘critical moments’ (Thomson et al., 2002) the thesis has highlighted how bereavement and loss of parents and other family members, disinheritance of assets and property grabbing, migration and mobility between different relatives’ homes, parental divorce and separation, as well as the onset of caregiving responsibilities, often have significant impacts on young people’s ability to navigate their pathways to adulthood according to wider social norms and expectations. Young people still aspire to reach adult status; to complete their education, find secure paid employment, have a home, spouse and children, but realise they must balance their aspirations with their caregiving and family responsibilities, as well as in recognition of the increasingly challenging economic situation in which they find themselves.

6. Policy and Practice Recommendations
This study has demonstrated how youth transitions, as well as youth that are caring for sick or disabled parents, have received significantly little acknowledgement within Zambian policy. The Zambian Youth Policy (2006) and Education Policy (2005; 1996) acknowledge the difficulties young Zambians face on their pathways to adulthood, but it is still expected that family and community structures will provide the diverse support young people need in order to successfully complete their socially expected transitions. This is despite acknowledgement that family structures are changing and young people are taking on increasing responsibilities for parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts and uncles. This thesis therefore suggests a number of ways in which policy in Zambia could be improved, as well as suggesting how support structures could also be improved, to accommodate the increasing number of young people facing adversity in socially, economically and politically challenging times:

- Government agencies and NGOs need to recognise the increasing number of ‘youth’ who are taking on significant caring responsibilities within their families. Young people are very committed to their caring roles and care out of love as well as duty. More funding is needed to develop services and support for this hidden, but increasing, group of young people who are largely unsupported in their caring roles. Increased family support, and expanding the remit of home-based care services, should be used to alleviate the burden of care placed on young people and allow them to focus on the completion of education and other transitions to adulthood, including finding employment, which will have wider benefits for the individual and their family in the long term.

- A significant finding of the research was the lack of awareness amongst young caregivers living in close proximity to each other of the similar responsibilities held by their peers. Few young people felt they had friends they could confide in about their responsibilities or turn to for support. Peer support groups for those who have significant responsibilities at home should be introduced to encourage young people to come together, share their experiences and offer support and advice.

- Young people have significant responsibilities at home to provide for family members, often in the absence of parents, and are increasingly delaying their own transitions to adulthood in order to support older and younger relatives. More recognition is needed not just for young people caring for sick or disabled parents or relatives within households, but for those responsible both emotionally and financially for their family members. Specialist and peer support should be developed to help
young people cope with their circumstances while also furthering their own lives and aspirations.

- Attending, and completing, secondary education is a major challenge for young people, yet all young people aspire to be in, or return, to school and to achieve at least grade 12. More opportunities are needed for young people to attend secondary school, on a regular basis, and achieve their potential, despite their difficulties at home. Many fewer students are currently accommodated in secondary school than in primary school due to the relative scarcity of school places at secondary level (Lloyd, 2005) and the significant costs attached. This is a policy area that needs addressing if young people are to be given the opportunity to acquire the qualifications they need to achieve the jobs, incomes and living conditions they aspire to.

- Alongside additional support for secondary education, more vocational training opportunities need to be created to engage those who are unable to attend education or seek an alternative method of gaining skills than going to school. Youth Resource Centres are highly regarded as they offer young people the flexibility needed to combine learning with their responsibilities at home. They also provide a holistic service that addresses young people’s health and emotional wellbeing as well as the transfer of knowledge. They are, however, few in number and places are limited. More centres are needed that provide vocational training across a broader range of subject areas than are currently offered by the secondary education system. Young people want to be productive members of society, but need more opportunities in which to develop the skills to do so.

- High unemployment levels in Zambia are a significant problem facing young people and there is a growing awareness amongst young people that completing education is no longer enough to secure, full-time employment. More capital is needed to support young people to start their own businesses. The Youth Development Fund is a step towards this. It only provides opportunities for a limited number of people, however, and fails to address the needs of those in greatest adversity. A community based scheme offering training, support and loans/bursaries to young people would make starting a business a more viable opportunity for young people. Continuing support would ensure the young people had the best chance at making the business a success and not be left to potentially fail.

- Alongside the creation of educational, vocational and business development opportunities, more partnerships should be developed within the business community for apprenticeships and training programmes that employ local Zambian youth. The Zambian economy is experiencing significant investment and development that many young people are being excluded from. The development of an apprenticeship scheme supported by the government would open up new opportunities for employment for young people who want to work, but do not know where to go to find the right opportunities.

- Not enough is currently being done to support young people who complete secondary education to find formal, paid employment. Careers officer posts should be developed in schools and vocational training centres to help young people look for employment,
be aware of the opportunities available to them and to help them apply for jobs or vocational training programmes.

- The government is currently unaware of the majority of young people’s opinions regarding their transitions to adulthood, and few mechanisms are in place to integrate the views and opinions of the youth population more coherently into policy and practice. More opportunities need to be created to hear the views of young people and address the issues as described by them. With young people making up such a significant proportion of the population, never has it been so important to hear what it is like growing up in Zambia from the perspectives of those who are negotiating their transitions. Forums, such as a youth parliament, should be created to hear young people’s experiences and concerns related to growing up in Zambia, from across all districts, genders and socio-economic backgrounds. This should not simply be a political forum, but a supportive space in which young people can contribute to policy as well as suggest ways in which their lives could be improved.

- The development of young people’s aspirations is currently missing from youth policy discourse, with a focus instead on the everyday concerns in a young person’s life. This fails to support any notion of young people having a future despite the fact young people want to look towards the future and develop opportunities to improve and develop their lives and the lives of their family members. More focus needs to be placed on young people’s desire to achieve and be successful according to their own wants and needs. Without this Zambia’s youth population are likely to become increasingly disillusioned with their lives, which could potentially lead to political and social unrest.

References


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